



Loose Id

# CAITLYN WILLOWS

## BUDDY SYSTEM

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Caitlyn Willows

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This book contains explicit sexual situations and graphic language.

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## Chapter One

Pam Donaldson scissored her crossed legs while she casually flipped through a three-month-old issue of *Good Housekeeping*. At least she hoped it looked like she was being casual. Waiting like this fired her up until it was all she could do to sit still. She wondered what Declan Trent's prim little secretary -- oops! admin assistant -- would think if she jumped up and started pacing a mean streak back and forth across the burnished-gold carpeting.

*Probably call the paramedics to have me hauled away.* Pam suspected it wouldn't take much to freak Trish Wallace out. She'd die on the spot if she knew why Pam was really here.

The woman sat on the edge of her seat, perched over her computer keyboard as if she had a pole up her ass. Hair spray welded every strand of her shoulder-length blond hair in place. No wave, split end, or frizz dared disobey. Her cotton-candy-pink suit was just the right length, just the right size, and just the right shade to match her perfectly manicured nails. *Real* nails, not acrylics. How many women would kill to have nails that perfect? Pam's nails were nice, but they weren't *that* perfect. With her light blue eyes, Trish looked like a china doll someone would seal behind protective glass, pretty to look at, but nothing you were allowed to touch or, heaven forbid, play with.

Pam wondered if that was a façade Trish showed to the world. If behind the hands-off automaton exterior lay a woman of wild and uninhibited passion. It was hard to reconcile that picture with what Pam saw here.

Trish kept her desk perfectly ordered, not one folder out of place. Pam had been tempted a time or two to link all the paperclips in Trish's lead crystal bowl together just to see how the woman would react. She certainly had the opportunity. Each time Pam visited, Trish would go to the ladies' room at precisely eleven-twenty. At heart, she couldn't be that cruel, no matter how much the woman's idiosyncrasies grated on her nerves.

So Trish was obsessive-compulsive. Why should Pam care? In fact, she was in the perfect occupation to seek counseling for her problem if she wanted. As psychiatrists go, Declan Trent was one of the best. For all Pam knew, maybe Trish *was* a patient, especially if two diverse personalities existed in that prim and proper mind of hers. If so, Declan sure had his work cut out for him. Pam had never seen anyone so uptight.

She wondered if she should tell Declan that Trish actually raked the footprints out of the plush carpet each time the waiting room was vacant. Pam had caught her in the act shortly after she'd started seeing Declan. That's when Trish's little habits started to burrow under Pam's skin.

*Little Miss Perfect.* Pam knew from experience the woman was most probably a ticking bomb. She'd seen it too many times in her line of work -- women for whom perfection was a lifestyle, a religion. However, it was never enough to keep their husbands from straying or their children out of trouble. Problem after problem pounded against the illusion they'd created, slowly loosening each brick until the foundation crumbled and they were staring down at the blood-splattered butcher knife -- or smoking gun -- in their shaking hands.

Just the week before, Pam had responded to a homicide at just such a house, an art deco mansion perched back from the winding curves of the Hollywood Hills. The wife made the 9-1-1 call in perfect, orderly fashion. "*I've just killed my husband and would appreciate it if someone would stop by to remove him.*" They'd arrived to find her mopping up the crime scene, rubber gloves and a bucket full of Mr. Clean at her side.

Pam would hate to see Trish turn out that way. She was a good person, pleasant and sociable to all Declan's clients, and very efficient. All Declan needed to do was think about it, and Trish had it done. Pam wanted to snatch her up by the shoulders and give her a hard snap-out-of-it shake. The last thing she wanted was to arrive at a homicide call and find Trish on her hands and knees cleaning up blood spatter.

She tossed the magazine to the glass-topped table beside her. Trish jumped at the loud *smack* it made. Then, like clockwork, she pushed away from her desk for her eleven-twenty trek to the ladies' room.

"I'll just be a moment, Detective Donaldson," she said in a smoothly cultured tone that never varied; neither did the words.

Pam gave her a nod as she walked by. Even her shoes were pink.

*Just let it go,* she told herself. She was here for one reason and one reason only. *That* should be her focus.

She crossed her arms and slowly rocked her leg back and forth. Without panties, the action gently rubbed her moist labia over her swollen clitoris. Every part of her was primed for her visit with Declan, but if she didn't pace herself, she'd wind up coming right here.

Pam forced her legs apart. God, she could smell her arousal! Maybe going without panties wasn't such a good idea. She tugged her black pencil-skirt to her knees, then adjusted the cuffs of her smoke-gray silk blouse. The skirt and the three-inch black heels were a

departure from what she normally wore to work, but she considered it more appropriate since she had to testify in court this afternoon -- *with* panties, of course. Besides, she really liked the naughty feeling of coming to see Declan bare-bottomed.

The thought made her smile. What would he do when he found out? A shiver wiggled through her. Trish's return shattered her reverie. Pam shifted her focus to studying the waiting room.

Cream-colored walls brightened the place. Matching leather chairs cradled visitors in comfort. Watercolors of varying landscapes -- rolling hills, seashores, deep forests, mountains -- helped create an aura of tranquility. No music flooded the room, just the soft, steady click of Trish's keyboard.

Pam cocked her head to one side. Maybe that was it. Maybe Trish was part of the illusion of order in the turmoil of some clients' lives. She'd never thought of it that way. In retrospect, it made perfect sense. Perhaps it was by Declan's design that Trish behaved as she did. Pam had just let the horrors of her own job spill over. She wouldn't be the first cop to become jaded by the discouraging vicissitudes of life.

The door to Declan's office swung inward. "Now remember, Carol, the group session for tomorrow night is cancelled. I'll be at a conference."

The buxom redhead glanced up at him with wide brown eyes. "Oh, dear. I'd forgotten." She draped her fingers over his bare forearm as she stepped into his personal space. "What will I do?"

Declan gave her a soft smile -- the one that always turned Pam's insides to mush -- and placed his hand over that of the redhead's. "You'll do wonderfully. You'll see. I wouldn't go away if I thought otherwise."

Pam smiled when the woman's face lit up. That's one of the things that was great about Declan. He instinctively knew what to say to patients to bolster their self-confidence, or when a gentle touch would ease their concerns and give them hope. Sadly, it was that bedside manner that had ruined his marriage. Connie Trent lived and breathed jealousy and had made Declan's life a living hell in the process. Despite that, Declan remained friendly and compassionate toward others.

"Yes. Yes, I *will* be fine. Thanks to you." Shoulders back, Carol walked to Trish's desk to schedule her next session.

Pam's gaze remained riveted on Declan. Even after six months, he still had the power to take her breath away. His dark brown hair scuffed the collar of his white dress shirt. Long fingers smoothed down his blue-striped tie as he raked his gaze over her from head to toe. A smile lifted one corner of his mouth, brightening his golden-brown eyes. She could scarcely breathe. Then he shut the door.

She forced herself to sit still, to wait until Trish called her to go in. Did he realize what he did to her? Of course he did. It was all part of the game.

She tucked her arms tighter over her chest. Already her nipples were poking their little noses against her bra, making their presence fully known to anyone who'd care to look. God, how they ached! Had it really only been fourteen hours since she'd had sex? It felt like forever.

As Carol left the office, Trish's intercom link buzzed. She lifted the phone in what felt like slow motion.

"Yes, doctor?"

Jeez, her voice actually sounded like a purr. Pam was definitely more than little oversexed today. But that's what being with Declan did to her.

Trish smiled as she replaced the receiver. "Dr. Trent is ready to see you now."

And Pam was more than ready to see him. She flashed Trish a smile and forced herself to walk, not run, to the connecting door. The knob turned easily under her hand. The door opened on silent hinges. The pale gold, vertical blinds were closed against the California midday sun, but brass candlestick lamps on the white pine tables cast a welcoming glow. Declan sat behind his oak desk, chin resting on the points of his fingers as he quietly perused her from the huge black leather executive chair.

Pam shut the door behind her, then leaned against it as she let her shoulder bag slide to the floor. The soft, black leather landed with a *plop*. Her heartbeat thudded with the rush of her heated blood. All she could see, all she could think about was him. That half smile lifted one corner of his mouth again. His gaze mentally stripped her clothing away.

"Detective Donaldson." His voice drifted over her, beckoning, caressing like fingers against her hot skin.

She maintained her position. "Dr. Trent."

Two could play the waiting game. The rewards were still the same. She twisted the lock closed on the door. The click echoed in the room.

"Are you armed, detective?" he asked.

"Yes. My weapon is holstered and in my bag. And you? Are you armed?"

"Cocked and ready, ma'am."

Pam tried not to laugh, but the giggle came out anyway. "Oh, really?"

Declan leaned back and tugged the knot loose on his tie. "Yep, I've been hard as a rock since I saw your name on the schedule this morning."

"I couldn't let you go away to a conference without a proper send-off. And I know how you like surprises."

"I do."

"How fortunate you can find room in your schedule to accommodate me."

"I'm always willing to squeeze in you."



Pam parked her hands on her hips and laughed. "Stop that. This is supposed to be a seduction. I can't do the come-hither look and fuck-me walk if you have me laughing."

He tossed back a laugh of his own. "Sorry. Proceed with the come-hithering and fuck-me stuff."

"Thank you." She took a step toward him.

He held up his hand, halting her progress. "No closer, Pam. You know the rules. You know what I want."

Damn it, he knew how to fire a woman up. "Refresh my memory. Tell me."

He pressed his lips together, then licked them as he pulled the tie free. It whispered against his shirt, a soft sigh that wiggled deep into her core. He twined the length of silk through his long fingers, tying a knot every inch or so in it as he pondered his next move.

"I see you're wearing hose today. And I love the heels."

"A concession for court."

He tsked. "And here I thought they were for me."

She mirrored his earlier smile. "Well, the hose *are* thigh-highs and --" She dropped her tone to a sultry purr. "-- I have no panties on."

That earned her a big grin. "My, aren't we daring and naughty. That's almost like begging for a spanking."

"You have repeatedly assured me your office is soundproof."

"Indeed it is." He flicked open his belt buckle. Seconds later the leather hissed through its loops. Declan doubled it over and placed it on his desk, the knotted silk tie beside it.

Pam's knees quivered. So far they'd never gotten into the spanking thing here; just the threat was enough to turn them both on.

He truly was the best sex she'd ever had. Six months and she still couldn't get enough of him. If only ...

"Undo your blouse ... slowly," he ordered.

One by one, she slipped the tiny pearlized buttons through their holes. With each one Declan's breath became more labored. She knew what his desk hid -- an erection that would have made a horse proud. With the last button freed, Pam shrugged the blouse from her shoulders. It wafted to the floor behind her.

"And now the bra." His voice had deepened with his lust.

Pam reached behind her and undid the hooks. Rather than let the bra fall as she had the blouse, she looped her fingers around the straps and slowly pulled them down, caressing her flesh as she did so. Fully exposed, she dropped the undergarment and kneaded her breasts, plumping them together to form a deep cleavage.

"You want to fuck my tits, don't you?" she asked. "Nestle your cock into the warmth and pump away?"

“You’re determined to make me come in my pants, aren’t you?”

Pam laughed and twirled her nipples into elongated beads.

“Damn it, Pam. I *am* going to spank you.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Enough teasing. Skirt off.”

She sliced the zipper down, wiggled her hips free, and stepped out of the garment.

“Good girl.” He pushed his chair away from the desk. “Leave the heels and hose on and come here. You know what I want.”

Did she ever! She’d never been more in tune with a man. Sex was a wondrous adventure with Declan. Nothing was forbidden as long as they wanted to explore. Trust they’d built during their long-standing friendship had shifted easily over into this facet of their relationship. They were free to explore every sexual fantasy they’d ever had without embarrassment, risk of disease, or pregnancy. Who knew agreeing to be sex buddies would be so rewarding?

His wrinkle-free trousers did little to hide his burgeoning erection. If anything, the light gray color enhanced it. His cock was a long ridge behind his zipper and actually managed to cast a shadow from the lighting.

Hot fingers cupped her ass as she straddled his thighs. As she had her blouse, Pam slowly unbuttoned his shirt. Inch by inch the bronzed plane of his chest appeared. She loved to trace her hands against it, to dust her fingers through the light smattering of dark hair that nose-dived into his trousers.

Declan’s breath was ragged. So was Pam’s. She indulged her need to caress his strong shoulders as she peeled the shirt from him. His scent surrounded her, warm and laced with the hint of Old Spice. She leaned in, pressing her lips against his neck, dancing her tongue across his collarbone while her fingers flicked against his nipples.

His soft groan escaped on a gasp. Pam wiggled lower, grazing her teeth over his nipple while her fingers eased his zipper down. He lifted his hips, helping her tug trousers and shorts down. His erection fell against her breasts. She squeezed them together, cradling him, then bent her head down and lashed her tongue against the salty droplet that awaited her.

Declan cried out. Combing his hands deep into her long hair, he held her head in place, desperately seeking the full comfort of her mouth while he thrust between her breasts. Still she teased with feathery flicks over the slit and around the head.

“If you don’t suck me soon ...” A long groan cut off the rest of his words as Pam pulled him deep in her mouth.

He pumped her lips in wild abandon. She looped her fist around the base, giving him that extra squeeze and stroke he loved so well -- that touch that said, “I might let you come, but then again, I might not.”

More pre-cum salted her mouth. He was close. She wiggled her free hand between his thighs to massage his sac. It was the final push he needed. She felt the twitch on the underside of his cock that signaled his approaching orgasm. Still, the temptation to taunt him was too much. She gave an extra hard squeeze to the base of his cock.

“Nooo,” he cried out. “I swear I’m going to ...”

She sucked him hard, yanking the orgasm from him.

Declan shuddered as the release spurted into her mouth. She milked him until the wave subsided, then slowly released him with dotted kisses as the erection faded.

Panting for breath, he grabbed her around the waist and hoisted her to his desk. “Lie back and relax.”

She watched through hooded eyes as he picked up his knotted tie. Tightening it between his hands, he lowered it to her crotch and raked it over her slit.

Pam arched her hips off the desk as the knots rubbed over her clit. “Oh, God!”

He sawed back and forth, gathering momentum as she climbed higher to the peak. Her fingers flexed spasmodically on the smooth wood surface, desperate to clutch at something, anything to help her ride to the top. All she could do was take it. Each swipe swelled her to the breaking point.

*Almost there. Almost ...*

Her body was rigid with anticipation. Just when she saw the edge, Declan stopped.

“No!” She smacked her palms against the desk.

He merely laughed and thrust two fingers deep and high into her cunt. Pam reared upward with a gasp. A third finger burrowed into her tight ass. He lashed his tongue over her clit as his fingers pumped into her. She cradled his head with one hand while the other toyed with her nipple, tweaking it hard. Then he sucked her into his mouth.

Fire raced across her skin seconds before Pam’s orgasm struck. She quaked with the release, then collapsed against the desk.

Declan dotted kisses over her inner thighs as he gently pulled his fingers free. She’d never felt more relaxed. He always had that effect on her.

Grasping her hand, he helped her up. At least that’s what she thought. Before Pam realized it, she was facedown over his lap. The tinkle of his belt buckle alerted her to his full intent.

“How many, sweetheart?” He danced the leather over her bare ass. Just the feel was enough to turn her on once more.

“I want ... I want ...”

“To feel your warm ass the rest of the afternoon? To think about it when you’re sitting outside the courtroom while we wait to testify?” Over and over the soft leather caressed her.

Pam spread her legs a little wider. "You know what I want." He always knew, just as she knew for him.

"Indeed I do."

He started slow, warming her for the harder strokes to come. With each smack against her bare bottom, her clit swelled more, begging for attention of its own. She wiggled around until she could ride his knee. Declan pulled her gently back into place, wedging his free hand under and straight to her pussy.

The strokes came harder now, faster, her hips lifting of their own accord for each of them. She came quickly, only to be instantly back at the peak. Pam rode his hand while smack after smack heated her backside, and one orgasm after the other rolled through her.

Declan growled low in his throat and tossed the belt to the floor. Hauling her upright, he pushed her facedown on the desk. She raised her hips high, spreading her thighs as far as she could. A hard thrust seated him deep. He froze there for what felt like forever, the head of his cock plugged into her cervix. His fingers dug into her hips, shaking with the effort to maintain control.

Pam kept herself as still as possible, wanting the moment to be as supreme for him as it was for her. Finally, he pulled back, then in again. He shifted his fingers back to her clit. She rocked in rhythm with him, taking and giving back each thrust with equal fervor. Contractions rippled along the steel inside her.

"I'm going to come, Dec," she panted out.

He gasped. "Me, too."

And in that instant, they did.

They sagged together in the aftermath, both lazy and sated. Then, reluctantly, they pulled apart and wandered into his adjoining bathroom to clean up.

The tiny room was designed for function -- sink with mirror, toilet, tiny black-and-white tile -- definitely not for two people. Nevertheless, sharing the bathroom was part of their after-sex routine. Somehow, this snippet of bonding had slipped under their "rules" radar, along with cuddling. So far, neither had brought that violation to the other's attention.

"I owe you a tie," she said.

"I'll just send it to the cleaner."

Eyes wide, she jerked up her head and locked gazes with him in the mirror over the sink. "Don't you dare!" she said with a laugh. "They'll want to know what they're pre-spotting and ..."

His laughter cut her off. Tugging her against him, he dotted kisses along her shoulder. "I'll seal it in a brown paper bag and toss it in a Dumpster five miles away."

"After you burn it and stir the ashes. Better yet, I'll take it and destroy the evidence."

"Deal." He stepped away to pee.

She plucked several paper towels from the receptacle, wet them, and cleaned away the evidence of sex.

"You'll be gone the rest of the week?" How could she begin to tell him how much she was going to miss him during that time? It wasn't supposed to be like this. They'd set rules. And yet ...

"Yeah, I'll be back late Friday. Want me to call or just come over?"

Pam smiled as his reflection reappeared in the mirror. "Coming over is fine. Doesn't matter how late." She didn't have plans. Hell, she hadn't had plans since they'd started up.

"Good. I'll come right over, then. Stinky from the drive and everything." He smiled back and patted her butt as he slipped the wet towels from her fingers to use on himself.

*That's* what she called bonding. "And I'll have a hot shower and a hot woman waiting for you."

"Every guy's dream come true." He bent forward as if to kiss her, then pulled back. "Sorry. I almost forgot."

Pam wished he had forgotten and kissed her. That was one of the rules they'd agreed on when they decided to be sex buddies -- no kissing. Where the hell had her head been? It seemed a great idea at the time: no kissing, no dating, no spending the night. How in the world could she have possibly thought she could have great sex with a man and not have emotional involvement? Her hormones had obviously been running her life then. And now?

Well, they were still running her life, but her heart was demanding some equal attention. Which left her with quite a problem. Did she risk what they had going and tell Declan she'd made a mistake? That she wanted to move up to the next level and actually have a romantic relationship as well?

They'd been adamant, both of them. Once badly burned, twice shy. Bad marriages had that effect on people. But that was then, when they were both so horny they couldn't bear it. When teaming up with a trusted friend for sex seemed a better solution than throwing themselves into the treacherous world of dating where your heart was sure to be trampled on.

"So I'll see you then."

Pam snapped her thoughts back to the present. "Yes, Friday."

Declan laughed. God, she loved his laugh. "Well, yes, Friday, but I was talking about this afternoon at the courthouse."

She blinked. "Yes, of course."

"Were you a thousand miles away just then?" He wrapped his arm around her waist and hugged her against him.

Pam forced a smile she suddenly didn't feel. "Looks like."

She didn't have the courage to tell him. They had a good thing going. Why risk it by telling him that at some point during the last six months, her heart had ignored the sex buddy rules and fallen truly, madly, deeply in love with him?

## Chapter Two

Declan struggled with the knot on his dark red tie. This was his fourth attempt to get the damn thing right. He could hardly concentrate beyond the admonishment running through his head.

*You should have kissed her. To hell with the rules. You should have kissed her.*

He wanted to so badly. Wanted to taste her mouth and explore it as thoroughly as he had her pussy. Wanted to imprint himself on her so she'd never want for another man, ever.

Declan had never met a woman quite like Pam Donaldson. She was easy to talk with, had a great sense of humor, and could be professional as hell on the job. She was, in a single word, impressive. They'd met five years before when they were both embarking on what turned out to be marriages from hell. What Connie was so fond of accusing of him, Hank Donaldson had actually done to Pam. The man never appreciated the gem he had at home. He'd fuck anything on two legs. No surprise both marriages ended in divorce.

However, his and Pam's friendship remained constant and grew. They'd meet up for drinks, the occasional dinner, each bemoaning the lack of sex in their lives, and their unwillingness to go hunting for it for fear of ... well, another disaster.

He couldn't say whose idea it had been to be sex buddies. Hell, maybe they'd both said it at the same time. Then the rules came, that little list of things they'd calmly created to avoid romantic entanglements. In hindsight, it was the stupidest thing he'd ever done. But that was before, when he was so horny he was jacking off day and night, before he realized just how wonderful Pam really was, how compatible they were in everything.

He'd always appreciated her beauty. As a police officer, Pam had taken great pains to keep in shape. Lean muscles defined her structure, but didn't detract from her curves. She fit in well as one of the guys, but she also wasn't afraid to be feminine. At work, her long

brunette hair was tucked into a neat French braid. At play, it drifted down her back like a silk cape shot with gold and red highlights. She had a laugh that gave a guy a hard-on guaranteed to bring him to his knees. And sex?

Declan loved to watch her come, loved how she wasn't afraid to explore her sexuality. He trusted her enough to tell her his deepest fantasies and then play them out, just as she had with him. They matched perfectly in bed, completely in tune with each other. Nothing was forbidden if they wanted to try it. Both knew they were safe in each other's arms.

However, while they gained mind-blowing sex, they'd lost something as well. All because of those stupid rules. They could still have public drinks and dinner, but only in a group setting. They still talked and shared, but only in the privacy of each other's home. No dating, no kissing, no spending the night unless it was for sex only -- no sleepovers.

*Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*

Declan yanked the tie off and shoved it in his pocket. She'd barely walked out the door, and all he could think about was hauling her back in here and kissing her until their lips fell off. He'd do just that if he wasn't so afraid he'd lose what they had. He couldn't bear the thought of never having her again. How much longer could he keep these feelings to himself? He loved her. Flat-out loved her, and he wanted the world to know it.

He sank into the beige faux-suede sofa next to his desk and buried his face in his hands. They'd agreed to not be exclusive, that each could date others. Nevertheless, there hadn't been anyone for either of them since they'd started having sex six months ago. Hell, even long before that. There wasn't a night that went by without them being together. Just the thought that she might consider seeing another man wrenched his heart. She was everything he wanted.

"Shit, I don't have time for this." He shoved to his feet, hauled on his jacket, snatched his keys from the desk, and marched toward the door.

Trish just about snapped to attention when he whipped the door open.

"I'm nearly late for the courthouse," he told her as he hurried by. "I'll be going on to the conference straight from there. Enjoy your time off. In fact, you should call it a day. Take off early. You deserve the break."

"Wait!" She jumped to her feet, shooting her chair away behind her. It stopped just shy of hitting the wall.

"Your tie!" She pointed to his trouser pocket.

Declan glanced down. The tip of the red tie dangled down his thigh. He'd forgotten. The chances of him getting the knot right were still zero. He just couldn't get Pam out of his mind.

"I'll take care of it when I get there." With luck, by the time he got to the courthouse he'd have the presence of mind to knot the fucking thing. If not, Pam could do it for him.



Warmth slithered over his skin at the thought of her so close. Her scent, forever imprinted on him, would tease his sense of smell. She'd be near enough he could wrap his hands around her waist and let the world see ...

"Let me." Trish snagged the tie and slowly pulled it free. Smiling, she looped it around his neck, under his collar, and whipped it into a precision Windsor that came pretty close to choking him. It'd take dynamite to get it undone. She topped it off by smoothing the jacket lapels flat against his chest.

"There you are. Right as rain, as my grandmother would say. See you Monday, doctor."

"Thanks, Trish. What would I do without you? Enjoy your time off." He gave her a wink and left.

She was a godsend. Declan had never met anyone more efficient. With Trish around he never had any concerns. She handled everything: appointments, insurance claims, billings, ordering. All he had to do was worry about his patients. He was happy she'd decided to take advantage of his absence and take a little time for herself. She'd more than earned it.

A person didn't go full speed without eventually crashing. Declan didn't want to see that happen to Trish. He tried to monitor her for signs of burn-out. So far, she seemed fine. He hoped she stayed that way. If she wouldn't take vacation, he'd just have to find more ways like this to see she had time off here and there.

Elevator doors opened as he neared. Now if he could only get the traffic lights between his office and the courthouse to cooperate. He nodded to the couple stepping out, then tried not to think about how much he'd love to get Pam alone in an elevator. The things they could do to each other between floors. The thought put a smile back on his face.

A ding alerted him he'd reached the parking garage. He stepped out the instant the doors parted. Though shaded by the building towering over it, the garage still managed to suck in the heat from outside. August in Southern California was a killer. Today an inversion layer and smog made it doubly so. Already sweat trickled down his back.

Declan pressed his remote key. His Lexus purred to life, cooling the interior while he walked the last several yards. When he opened the door, air-conditioned comfort swirled around him, beckoning him like a genie freed from her lamp. San Francisco was going to be a welcome break from this heat. The only thing that would make it perfect would be if Pam was with him.

As he pulled into traffic, he daydreamed about walking the Embarcadero with her by his side. They'd wander through the shops on Fisherman's Wharf, eat clam chowder out of sourdough bread bowls, make love in the room with the drapes open while they watched the fog roll in. *If* they were a couple.

Declan chewed the inside of his mouth. Something had to change; he just needed to figure out how.

He made it to the courthouse with ten minutes to spare. Sparse traffic, green lights, and a parking spot opening up just in time all blessed his journey. There was spring to his step as he hustled inside. Good luck like this didn't happen every day, perhaps he should throw caution to the four winds and give it a shot. Seeing Pam seated outside the courtroom, long legs crossed, seemed to cinch it. Then he saw Mark Roberts.

His friend and colleague sat in the chair beside her, half turned her way while he put the move on her. Even from this distance, he could see the humor dancing behind the other man's dark blue eyes. Not too many women resisted his charm. Was Pam one of them?

Dread seeped into Declan's gut. He quickened his step. No one, especially not Mark, was going to encroach on his territory.

They looked up when they heard his footsteps coming down the corridor. Both smiled, but while Pam's backlit her bright brown eyes, Mark's was awkward, like he been caught with his hand in the cookie jar -- Declan's cookie jar.

"I was beginning to wonder if you'd make it on time," she said as he slipped into the chair beside her. "Traffic bad?"

"No, I had tie problems."

A blush covered her cheeks. She pressed her lips tight to keep her laughter from spilling out. The bailiff saved her when he stepped out.

"Detective Donaldson, they're ready for you."

She snapped to her feet without hesitation and followed him back inside. Declan admired her backside as she went. The high heels enhanced her killer legs and tightened her butt. Someone else noticed too. Didn't Mark have enough women? There was a different one every time he blinked. Why this one?

Declan shifted to the seat she'd just vacated, pulling Mark's gaze back his way. "So, why are you here?"

He leaned his dark head against the wall and groaned. "Torturing myself. I've been after that woman for months. Months! She won't budge. Won't even let me take her for a drink. There are times she'll barely give me the time of day. When I saw her sitting here all alone, I thought for sure I finally had her cornered. And still nothing!"

Declan kept his smile and the cheer that went with it inside. "Maybe she's just not interested."

He jerked his head up. "Duh, ya think? I don't get it. I'm a friendly guy, good-looking ..."

"And that's why you're here? Sniffing her out?"

Mark cut him a glare. "I'm here because defense counsel wasn't happy with your assessment of the accused's mental state. Therefore, they hired me. Unfortunately for them, I concurred with you. The DA found out about it, and here I am. Running into Pam was a side

benefit. At least I hoped it would be. Here I finally get her alone for the first time in weeks ...”

“Cut the lady some slack.”

“Aw, man, you don’t understand. She’s hot!”

Declan could give lessons on how hot Pam was, along with all the things she could do to a man’s libido. “Let it go. She’s not for you.”

“That’s it, analyze me.”

“Cut the crap, Mark.” He sliced the air with his hand. “I don’t recall you wallowing in self-denial all these months because Pam refused you. In fact, you’re with a different woman every week. She’d just be another notch in your bedpost. You know it and, more importantly, *she* knows it. You think she’s going to put up with crap like that after all the playing around Hank did while they were married? Hell, no. If she wanted a player, she’d still be married to Hank. She wants stability and faithfulness. So stay the hell away from her.”

Mark jerked to the edge of his seat so fast the back legs came off the floor. They smacked back down with a loud crack that turned the heads of people waiting down the hall.

“Oh, my God, you’re fucking her!” The words came out in a rushed whisper.

So much for that little secret. Declan couldn’t even dredge up a denial.

His friend tossed back a silent laugh. “Oh-my-God!” He smacked his shoulder. “Why the hell didn’t you say something? Why didn’t *she* say something?”

Declan scrubbed his hand down his face. “Because it’s personal, it’s private, it’s no one’s business, and it’s not what you think. It’s just sex.” It was so much more than sex, but Mark already knew more than he should, and the chances of him keeping quiet were zero.

He leaned closer. “You’re telling me you’re just fuck buddies?”

God, he made it sound dirty and sordid. “Something like that.”

He laughed harder. “You? That’s something I’d do. In fact, I’ve got a little twinkie now to help me over the dry spells.”

Mark wouldn’t know a dry spell if he were stranded in the Sahara.

“It’s not like that,” Declan said. Mark was really making him mad. He couldn’t -- wouldn’t -- sit here and let him carry on as if they were in high school. The whole story spilled out.

For all his antics, Mark had that aura about him that made a person want to bare their soul. He listened without interruption, carefully weighing every detail.

“And somewhere along the way, you fell in love with her.” Mark summed it up nicely. So nicely, he didn’t wait for Declan to confirm. “Then tell her. You’re a great man. She’s a great woman. You’ve just said it’s the best sex you’ve had in your life -- which kills me to

hear, by the way. However, I understand that's one of the sure signs of love. Not that I've ever experienced it."

"And what if I lose her in the process?" Just the thought got him all choked up and dropped his heart into the pit of his stomach.

Mark squeezed his shoulder. "Neither of you have bothered to look at another person since this business started. What do you think? Tell her."

The courtroom door opened with Pam's exit. "Well, that's always fun to do. You gentlemen enjoy. I have to get back to work."

He stood and caught that sly little smile she gave him as she walked by. The heat of it flushed his skin. Turning, he walked her bottom twitch away.

"Tell her," Mark whispered in his ear.

District Attorney Remy Sanchez shot from the courtroom. "Pam, hold up."

She did an abrupt about-face and hurried back, heels clicking on the marble floor with the precision of a supermodel's. Remy met her half-way, walking with her back to the men.

"Defense called a recess," he said as people started pouring from the courtroom. "I need you to stick around just in case I have to recall you. So ..." Beaming a smile at them, Remy scuffed his hands together. "The wedding's Saturday. You'll all be there, right?"

They shared a collective groan as they cast their eyes heavenward.

"Good God, yes," Mark spit out. "Dec and I are driving back Friday night for the sole purpose of attending your wedding."

Remy smirked. "Just in time for the tail end of the bachelor party to escort the stripper home?"

Mark splayed his hands against his chest. "Someone has to make the sacrifice."

Pam slugged him in the arm. "Pig." Then she touched Remy's shoulder. "Don't worry. Only a fool would miss the wedding of the year. Everyone who's anyone will be there. Some sections drew numbers to see who goes and who stays behind to cover shifts."

"Yes!" He pumped his fist in the air with glee. His mood turned more solemn, and he curled his fingers around her upper arm. "I'm sorry about Hank, Pam. I didn't know what else to do." He glanced up at Declan. "And Connie, too. You understand, don't you?"

"Don't worry," he said. "We understand it couldn't be helped. It's not going to hurt us to spend a couple of hours with our exes." If Remy could overlook Mark's brief past with his bride, Declan and Pam could certainly put up with Connie and Hank.

"And besides," Pam added, "there'll be so many others there, we can easily avoid them."

That put the smile back on Remy's face, but as the defense attorney sidled up, a mask of professionalism quickly replaced it.

"We need a sit-down," he said.

Remy nodded, then motioned him down the hall with a sweep of his arm. His opposing counsel retrieved his client and walked with him. A guard dogged them all the way.

"Sounds like they want to plead out," Pam said as she watched them walk away.

"That must have been one heck of a testimony you gave," Mark said.

She shook her head. "Most probably they freaked out when they saw you sitting here and realized they were screwed."

"Oh, the power." He lifted hands and eyes heavenward.

She curved an eyebrow. "Indeed. Don't let it go to your head -- either of them."

Declan snickered, but kept his mouth shut. Mark merely smirked and admired a petite blonde as she walked down the hallway. He might be an excellent psychiatrist, but when it came to women, Mark was a walking, talking penis. The prospect of sharing a ride to San Francisco no longer held much appeal. However, the commitment had been made. Declan couldn't back out now, especially when he was doing the driving. He was doomed to listening to six hours of Mark checking out "that hot chick" wherever she might be.

In less than five minutes, the attorneys and accused headed back their way. Defense and client skirted them quickly and ducked into the courtroom.

Remy waited until they were out of sight. "He's going to plead out. You can all go. See you Saturday." He hurried on to the courtroom.

"Okay, definitely back to work for me," Pam said. "Looks like this worked well for you two. You'll be able to get an early start to San Francisco."

Mark shook his head as he absentmindedly checked text messages on his cell. "Not me. Now that I'm free, there's something I need to take care of first." He snapped the phone closed and looked up. "Just go on without me, Dec. I don't mind driving up on my own."

A reprieve granted by the gods. "I don't mind waiting. I can keep myself occupied until four like we'd planned." He cursed himself for playing nice-guy, but the words were already out there. He couldn't take them away.

"Sounds good." Long strides carried Mark down the hall.

Just like that, he was on the hook once more. Declan wanted to kick himself.

He pressed his hand against Pam's lower back. "Come on. I'll walk you to your car."

"I really have to get to work, Dec," she said as they fell in step.

"I know. I'm just walking you to your car, not planning to ravish you on the hood. Although ..."

Giggling, she jabbed her elbow into his ribs.

"So, what did you do with the evidence?"

Pam jerked to a stop. "Oh, no! It's still at your office! If someone ..."

"It's okay." He tried to soothe her worries by rubbing small circles against her spine with his thumb. "I'll go back and get it."

She clutched his arm. "Hurry, please. I'd die if anyone ..."

"I've got it. Don't worry. See you Friday." He hurried away before he gave in to the urge to kiss her good-bye.

His nagging conscience scolded him during the drive back to the office. This time the traffic lights weren't so cooperative. It was almost as if they wanted him to think long and hard about what he'd just done, or didn't do. Someone had even taken his parking space at the garage. The elevator took a good five minutes to reach him and then stopped at every floor to pick up or deliver a passenger. He finally got to his office, only to find the door locked.

Muttering curses, he fumbled for his keys. So what if Trish had decided to leave today instead of tomorrow. He was the one who'd suggested it. He really had no call to be upset by a small inconvenience. It was probably best she was gone. He really didn't feel like tripping over his tongue trying to explain to her why he'd come back.

The tie was right where he'd left it -- on the floor beside his desk. He shoved the now stiff and dried silk deep into his pocket and hurried away while what little luck he was having remained.

Declan spied the Dumpster as he was leaving the parking garage. His first instinct was to toss the tie in there and head out. Another thought trickled into his brain.

*Why not?*

Smiling, he headed for Pam's house.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How'd it go?"

Pam glanced up at her partner as she slipped behind her desk. "The accused pled out when he finally realized he didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of being found not guilty."

Gloria Rodriguez kicked back and propped her booted feet on the edge of her gray metal desk. "Remy will be ecstatic!"

She shuffled through the files and paperwork stacked between the two desks. They'd purposefully butted them together so they'd have more surface space. That space was nearly gone.

"I don't see how it's possible for him to be any happier than he already is. All that man wants is you."

Gloria smiled. "The feeling is mutual. I'm so excited I can hardly stand it. He doesn't know yet."

Pam glanced up under her brows. "I can't believe you managed to keep it a secret. He'll insist you stop working, you know."

She shrugged. "He's been insisting since I was shot last year."

Pam closed her eyes against the horror, the blood, the fear she'd lose her partner and best friend. It all happened so fast and all because the arriving officer had forgotten to clear the scene. The gunman burst from the closet, catching Gloria alone. A single shot at close range.

He was dead a second later when he ran into Pam. She stepped over his body and kept her hand over Gloria's wound to staunch the blood until paramedics arrived. Officially, Pam was declared fit for duty after the officer-involved-shooting inquiry. Unofficially, she was a mess. Thankfully, she had Declan to help her through it.

"I've got it all planned," Gloria was saying. "There will be chilled apple cider at the hotel rather than champagne. While he's puzzling over that, I'll tell him my last day of work was Friday. Then I'll hit him with the news that I'm pregnant."

"You'd think he'd have figured that out with all the puking you do in the morning."

Gloria waved the thought away. "You know men, one-track minds. He's been focused on two things: this trial and the wedding. He can't process new information right now."

"But the trial's over."

"It's just four more days. I'll keep him distracted. I know, I'll tell him we're having trouble getting the mariachi band he wanted."

"Better not. He'll yank out the breach of contract stuff and go all bad-ass-lawyer on them." They laughed at the image of a frantic Remy, then Pam sobered. "I'm sure going to miss you."

"We'll still see each other."

But they both knew it wouldn't be the same.

"I'm sorry about Hank coming."

Pam shrugged it off as she sat and rearranged the paperwork in priority order. "It couldn't be avoided. They work in the same office. Remy did the right thing. Office politics can be a bitch."

"True. So, you still coming alone?"

"Everyone we know will be there, so I hardly think of myself as being alone."

"Not the same as being partnered up. I know a handsome psychiatrist who'd be more than happy to be at your side."

Pam snorted. "Yes, Mark has made his interest very apparent."

"Pish. Mark." She feigned a spit. "After my brief and frustrating hook-up with the man, how could you think I'd want that for you? He's just another Hank. He doesn't like to hear

the word no. Each woman is just another toy to break and move on to the next. 'Find 'em, feel 'em, fuck 'em, forget 'em' ought to be tattooed on their dicks."

"Not enough room on Hank's for all that. You might as well just put '4Fs'. Or just the four, since that would say it all."

Gloria howled with laughter. Curiosity brought the men wandering their way. Everyone loved a good joke; it helped ease the tension. However, there was no way in hell Pam was sharing this.

She waved them back. "Girl talk. Period stuff."

They slinked away, pulling more laughter out of Gloria. "Oh, God, I never realized." She dabbed her eyes clear. "Do you suppose that's why they do what they do?"

She shrugged a shoulder and continued shifting through her files. "I guess they have to prove their manhood some way, since it's so hard to find."

Gloria dissolved into more hysterical tears.

Had to be the hormones.

Finally, she wiped her cheeks clear, swung her legs to the floor, and leaned as close to Pam as the desks allowed. "You know who I mean."

Pam felt her cheeks heat and knew they had to be red.

"Don't deny it," Gloria warned. "You light up like a bulb when he's around."

That might be, but she sure wasn't going to get into that discussion here. "Anything happen while I was out?"

"Hmph. So that's how it's going to be. Okay, I'll play for now. I've had my laugh for the week. I'm good." She lined up her own folders. "Everything's been quiet for a change. It's a good day to catch up on our paperwork."

"Good, it'll get the captain off our backs. After all, we don't want him holding you hostage on your wedding day."

They passed the rest of the afternoon quietly working, except for the occasional snicker each time Gloria replayed their bawdy conversation in her mind. Pam tried not to get drawn in, though the more she thought about it all, the funnier it seemed. At least it helped keep her mind from wandering and made the time pass quickly, maybe a little too quickly.

"Jeez, look at the time!" Gloria jumped up and snagged the backpack she called a purse all in one motion. "Remy and I are supposed to take our moms out to dinner tonight, and I'm thirty minutes late. Want to come?"

While the offer did have appeal, Pam was reluctant to intrude on a family event. At some point, she was going to have to deal with the fact that Declan was gone for three days and not a phone call away.



"Thanks, but I'll just grab some sweet and sour chicken on the way home." That, a pay-per-view movie, and a glass or two of wine would help her through the night. She'd worried about tomorrow night when it came.

Within the hour, Pam had turned down her tree-lined street on the last leg of her journey home. Driven to hunger by the scent of food, she'd devoured the egg rolls on the way home. Fading sunlight played peek-a-boo with the California black oaks towering overhead.

Her parents questioned her choice in buying a house in this section of town. The tunnel of trees was quaint, but the ancient roots tore up sidewalks, house foundations, and played havoc with septic systems. Pam didn't care. There was something peaceful and reassuring about the area -- a little part of residential history among the urban sprawl. She'd fallen in love with her house the second she'd seen it.

The place was huge and definitely more house than she needed. With three bedrooms she at least had room for company, should anyone visit. The kitchen was a chef's dream. Stainless steel appliances were complemented by brick-red and black décor and Spanish tile. A work island divided the kitchen from a dining room she would never use and funneled visitors directly to a breakfast alcove set with a big bay window. On weekends when she had a quiet moment, Pam could sit there and watch the birds in her backyard.

A brick patio narrowed to a small walkway that circled the house. Beds of irises, freesias, and the wayward tulip hugged it. Gardenias guarded the perimeter of the property as well as sidewalks that spoked from the house. The previous owner had replaced grass with portulaca -- not a wise choice in drought-stricken California -- but Pam had yet to find the funds to have it replaced with sod. Besides, it was pretty when it bloomed in the spring.

She focused her attention and budget on the interior of the place, making sure everything was as she wanted it before she spent a dime. Consequently, furnishings were sparse. She was comfortable and content, that was all that mattered. She could wash away her day among a sea of bubbles in her garden bathtub. Sink into the heaven of her king-size four-poster bed. Pass the time watching the birds torment the squirrels. Or curl up with a bowl of popcorn and watch TV until all hours.

It was perfect ... perfectly lonely. She'd tried to convince herself it was just sex she craved. She'd wanted so much more and had been too chicken to admit it to herself. She was where she'd sworn she never wanted to be again -- in love. Too bad she hadn't bothered to tell Declan that her heart had changed the rules on them. Somehow, she had to take that leap of faith and move this beyond what they'd originally planned. Fear of losing him called back that yellow streak down her spine. They couldn't keep this game up forever. Something had to change. For the life of her, Pam didn't know how to go about it.

As she pulled into her driveway, she spied the neighbor's big orange cat swatting at something on the handle of her front door. He was a frequent visitor, hunting birds but only brave enough to catch crickets, which made Pam wonder what had managed to garner his

attention this time. The cat was so engrossed with play, he didn't notice she'd come home until she shut the car door. The cat screeched as if shot and leaped three feet straight up before blasting off in mid-air for home.

Pam laughed so hard her sides ached, tears streamed down her face, and her bladder threatened to lose its contents. Wiping her vision clear, she followed the curve of her walkway to the door, stopping every so often to pinch a spent bloom from the gardenia bushes that lined it. When she finally reached her destination and saw what had enthralled the cat, she doubled over again. It was Declan's blue-striped tie, very nicely draped around the door knob in a slip knot.

"Boy, do I have plans for you." She tugged the tie free and unlocked the door. She'd wash it and tuck it next to the pillow that still bore Declan's scent from the night before. That ought to cure her lonelies, or make her ache for him all the more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan stared at the ceiling of his lonely hotel room. What was the sense in having a great big bed and a breath-taking view of San Francisco if there was no one to share it with? He'd never felt more lonely.

He lay there naked and hard as a rock, and had been like that for two hours. Thinking about Pam always did that to him. Up until now, she was always just a phone call away. Three words would put him in her arms -- *I need you*.

Pam never hesitated, never said no. In fact, she'd called him more than a time or two as well. Now she was six hours away. He'd never felt more miserable, more lonely. In the six months they'd been seeing each other, they'd never been apart. And he didn't much like it now.

Declan swung his feet to the floor. If he hoped to get any sleep tonight, he was going to have to lose the erection. That meant jacking off, again.

He glanced at the phone and the digital clock beside it with glowing red numbers. Two A.M.

Traffic was murder on the drive up, and Mark had been almost an hour late meeting him. Declan was on the cusp of leaving without him when Mark finally dragged himself up to the car -- literally. He looked and acted as if he'd been run over by a semi. When pressed for an explanation, he'd snapped, "I made a stupid mistake, that's all. Just go."

It made for a tense, but at least quiet drive. Mark hit the bar the second they arrived, while Declan trudged to his room. He longed to call Pam just to hear her voice. The late hour discouraged that. He wished he had.

What was she doing right now? Missing him as much as he missed her? Indulging herself with his tie? Declan smiled. He rather like that thought. He would have loved to see

her face light up when she saw it waiting for her, to feel her unrestrained laughter wiggle through him, to have her hug him tight.

"Screw it." He snagged his cell phone off the table.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam hugged the pillow Declan used as she stared into the darkness. It was ridiculous to be this lonely. He'd never spent the night before so what the hell was her problem? Okay, maybe he had stayed the night before, but they'd spent it having sex or talking, not sleeping.

However, this loneliness was different -- he was six hours away and not where she could reach him. Maybe he'd found some cutie in the hotel bar and was snuggled up with her at that very moment. With Mark along that was a distinct possibility. Women flocked to him, and Declan was in the perfect position to catch the fallout.

She blinked away another rush of tears. The thought of Declan with another woman tore a hole in her heart.

"Stupid rules."

A blast from the phone jerked her upright. Her heart hammered. Phone calls at this hour of the morning generally weren't good news. Bracing herself for emotional impact, she lifted the receiver on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Did you get my present?"

Warmth suffused her body. "Dec," she breathlessly replied. "I was just lying here thinking about you."

His deep chuckle wiggled through her. "Me, too. Are you playing with it?"

She laughed. "I have two stories. You pick the one you like the most. Story one, I hand washed it, and once it's dry I'll press it and have it waiting on the bedpost for you. Story two, I hand washed it, tied tinier knots back in. Once it's dry I'm going to soak it in a jar of Vaseline so when you get back ..."

"Damn, woman, you're killing me. I've been lying here for two hours hard as a rock, and now you do this. The drive was a traffic nightmare, and Mark ... never mind. I just needed to hear your voice. I ... miss you, Pam."

Her spirits soared. "I miss you, too."

"I need you."

They plummeted back to earth. "I can't get time off. I'm so sorry."

"I know. I wouldn't expect you to drop everything to come up here. But there is an alternative. Talk to me, sweetheart. What are you wearing?"

Pam giggled. "Oh, my gosh! Phone sex! We're going to have phone sex! I'm a virgin, you know."

Laughter burst from him. She could almost see the devilment in his eyes. "Yeah, same here. We've un-virgined ourselves on other things, so let's just add this to the list. What are you wearing?"

"It's a hot night even with the air cranked up. I'm wearing a white cotton tank top with matching panties."

"If I were there, I'd peel them off and lick the sweat from your body ... after I tied you spread-eagle to those four posters."

Pam tucked her fingers under the waistband of her panties and into her crotch. It was slick with want for him, her clit hard. "I'm playing with myself now, but what I really want is your tongue teasing the orgasm out of me."

She heard him pull in a sharp gasp. "I've got my fist around my cock wishing it were your tight, hot cunt."

A shudder of desire coursed through her. "It wants you deep inside, pounding hard and fast."

"Get one of your toys from the drawer, baby. Put it where you need it most."

Her breasts quivered with each intake of breath as Pam retrieved a dildo from the nightstand. "Got it." She made sure he heard the low hum before she sank it deep inside.

"I'm so wet and slick, just like I get when you're here," she whispered. "My nipples are tight. They want your mouth."

"Twirl them. Pinch them for me."

Her gasp of pleasure let him know she'd done so. A deep groan answered her.

"I can't believe you make my dick so damned hard. Harder than it's ever been. I love to fuck you, to have your mouth around me. I love each of those sounds you make, the way your whole body clutches at mine when you come. Each stroke I'm thinking of you. I ..." The words choked off.

"I'm playing with my clit and thinking of how it loves your fingers, your mouth and tongue, your cock pounding against it. My cunt is full, but not as full as when you're inside. It wants you. Even my ass wants you in that slow, easy glide you pump me with there. I always come so good with you. Never better. Everything ... oh, Dec!"

"Are you coming, sweetheart? Soon? So am I. I'm so close, but I'm holding back for you, baby, just for you. I love to come with you. I love to fuck every part of you I can. I never get enough."

She flashed her fingers over her clit. *So close*. "Your ..." She could barely talk. "Your balls are tight and hard, just like your cock."

Declan groaned.

"They want to fuck me, too. They want in, too. I want it everywhere at once from you. Mouth, cunt, as ..."

“Oh, baby, I’m coming!”

She cried out with him, letting the sound of his release carry her over. “Oh, Declan,” she gasped out. “You are wonderful!”

His pants for air were as heavy as hers. “And you are fantastic! I’m going to call you every night while I’m gone.”

Pam smiled into the phone. “Oh, I would like that very much.”

“And when I get home on Friday night, I’m going to let you have your way with me.”

“Over and over again,” she added. “G’night, hot stuff. I’ll sure sleep better now.”

“Night, baby. I ... I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Declan plopped back onto the bed and tossed the cum-soaked towel to the floor. He was either a coward or the smartest man alive. *Declarations of love need to be in person, not delivered over the phone*, his wise self said. Then the coward piped up with, *But what if...*

No, there had to be a better way to handle this. Rather than storm the ramparts of their agreement, what if he tunneled his way under them? A little breach of the rules here and there, and before they knew it ...

Declan smiled. He *was* the smartest man alive. He hoped.

Pam hugged the pillow once more. Damn the rules. She was going to have her way with him all right when he got back. Declan Trent wasn’t going anywhere until she was done with him. And she didn’t anticipate that happening for a very long time. Before he realized what hit him, they’d have grandchildren on the way.

## Chapter Three

Pam watched Gloria stumble toward her desk. How could Remy not notice something was wrong? She was pale, had lost weight, and it took little to make her throw up.

In deference to her friend, Pam moved the other half of her cranberry scone out of sniffing distance and capped the lid back on her cup of Starbucks marble mocha macchiato. The treat was an indulgence to the soaring good mood that pulled her awake before sunrise.

“You look like shit.”

Gloria set her ever-present bottle of water down hard as she plopped into her chair. “I feel like shit.”

“Go home. No one will fault you.”

“With both our mothers and grandmothers there? No way. They’re driving us nuts. Between the four of them there’s enough food to feed five armies. The place stinks of food. Besides, I’m no slacker. I do my job.”

Pam couldn’t argue that. She caught movement from the corner of her eye and glanced toward the captain’s glass-walled office. One hand clutched the phone to his ear, the other motioned her to him.

“Buckley wants us.” She shoved away from the desk. Gloria smothered a groan and followed.

Josiah Buckley looked more like a mad scientist than a homicide captain. Strands of his sparse black hair sprung out in all different directions, defying every comb and brush the world made. He had the body of a bulldog, short and stocky, and the sad eyes to match. Every one of his six kids looked just like him -- poor girls.

“Got a homicide you need to roll on. Paradise Suites on La Brea.” He thrust the scribbled address their way while he tossed the phone back to its cradle. “Officers responding

say it has all the earmarks of a sex crime. Coroner is already at the scene. The crime unit is just a few clicks ahead of you."

He locked his gaze on Gloria. "You look like shit."

"Yes, sir," she mumbled.

"Pregnant?" He lifted his hand. "Never mind. I know the signs. I'll give you both fair warning; it's supposed to be an ugly crime scene. No one would fault either of you if you tossed your cookies."

"We'll make sure we don't contaminate the evidence if we do, captain." Pam had seen some bloody scenes since she'd started in homicide. A couple had been bad enough to give her nightmares, though she'd never confessed that to a soul, except Declan when she was trying to deal with the emotions wrought by last year's shooting. This scene must be bad if Buckley felt the need to warn them. She locked her mind into neutral and prayed it stayed that way when they got to the hotel. So far, that had never worked for her. Somehow her feelings always crawled to the surface. Fortunately, they'd never interfered with her doing her job.

She and Gloria paused at their desks long enough for Gloria to grab her bottle of water. Pam left the remains of her breakfast there. If she was going to get sick, the less she had in her stomach the better.

"So what has you so perky today?" Gloria asked once they'd settled in their unmarked police car -- a sleek, white Chevrolet Impala that Pam lusted after.

Pam cranked the engine -- smiling when it purred to life -- and flicked on the air. "What makes you think I'm perky?"

Gloria snorted. "You had a freaking cranberry scone and some obnoxious coffee drink on your desk."

"What are you? Part dog now? How could you smell all that clear across two desks?" She twisted around to back out.

"Stop!" Her partner clamped her fingers over Pam's arm, then wrenched open the door to throw up.

"That's it!" Pam tossed up her hands. "I'll handle the call alone."

"No," her reply was barely audible. "That's the last time. Promise." She swished out her mouth with a slug of water, spit it out, then popped a breath mint as she waved Pam on. "Go. I'm good. Pinky swear. That's the last of the omelet my grandma made me eat this morning. I never want to look at another green pepper again, much less taste it coming back up."

Pam winced and ordered her stomach to stay where it was. "Way too much info, Gloria."

"Sorry." Gloria sipped more water, then closed her eyes as she leaned against the headrest.

With each mile they put behind them, Gloria's pallor decreased. The woman obviously knew her body well. Sadly, the rookie who greeted them looked like he'd seen better days.

Officer McNeil's pale blue eyes were wide, his face had a green cast that clashed with his freckles, and the front of his dark blue uniform had caught the fallout from his retching.

He waved them to the service entrance behind the twenty-floor hotel, then trotted toward them as Pam pulled the police car into the nearest parking spot. A tech from the crime lab poked through the nearby Dumpster, searching for evidence.

"The maid found her this morning," McNeil spit out in a rush of breath the second they cracked their doors open. "She called the front desk, and they called a unit. We didn't go beyond the first couple of feet. The maid also backed out when she saw it. Management wants as little disruption to their other guests as possible."

"They always do," Gloria said.

In a business where security was paramount, news of a murder wouldn't go over well with patrons. The manager was either pacing the corridor waiting for word, or at the front desk pretending business as usual while fending off reporters and praying this was a domestic dispute and not a stranger killing.

"Did you clear the room when you got there?" Pam asked. Considering she and Gloria weren't the first on the scene, it was a stupid question asked from habit.

He jerked to a stop. "I ..." A flush covered his cheeks, adding to the cacophony of colors already there. "The sergeant did, detective. I threw up in the bathroom."

And flushed any evidence there down the toilet. Pam heaved a sigh against clenched teeth. Yelling would do no good. His sergeant would tear a piece off his ass later, if he hadn't already done so.

"First murder?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I thought I'd be prepared. I just never imagined there'd be *this*."

"What's he looking for?" Pam jerked her head toward the tech in the Dumpster.

"All we found in the room was her purse. He's looking to see if any clothes were tossed." He fell in step with them as they continued inside.

Gloria plucked her notepad and pen from the hip pocket of her jeans. "Tell us what you saw."

"Sergeant told me not to. Said it was best you saw it with fresh eyes. We haven't talked to anyone, just secured the perimeter as best we could. The coroner is here as well as forensics. The maid is in a vacant room across the hall waiting for you."

Pam punched the up arrow for the elevator. "We just want to have a vague idea of what we're walking in to."

"Blood, ma'am. A lot of blood."



They filed into the elevator, and he pressed the button for the twelfth floor. Pam hated surprises and braced herself for the worst. By the time the door dinged open, she had a tension headache pounding against the base of her skull. She and Gloria pulled in deep breaths and followed the rookie down the hall.

She studied the beige carpet and peach-colored walls along the way, looking for blood trace. Nothing. Other guests, possible witnesses, were starting to depart.

“McNeil, make sure you get the information of everyone on this floor. Talk to them as they leave. We need to know if they heard or saw anything or anyone.”

“But --” He glanced from her to the crime scene and back. “-- I’m supposed to show you to the scene.”

Gloria clapped her hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, but I think the flurry of activity around the door will help us locate it just fine. Failing that, we’ll look for the yellow crime tape across the door.”

Pam suspected it was the glower from his sergeant that propelled McNeil after the departing guests, rather than his embarrassment over his ineptitude. Whatever it took to make him aware, that’s all she cared about.

The sergeant stepped to one side when the women approached. Investigator Kowalski processed the scene behind him, meticulously sorting through what looked to be the meager contents of the victim’s purse.

Gloria peered over the crossed crime tape. “How bad is it?”

The sergeant shrugged. “I’ve seen worse.”

The words jerked up Kowalski’s tousled blond head. A frown tugged his pale eyebrows together. Crow’s feet bracketed his hazel eyes. “But it’s not pretty, either.”

After donning booties for their feet and vinyl gloves, they ducked under the tape and into the scene.

“Check it out.” Kowalski pointed to the bed where the coroner still evaluated the body. Dr. Adams did nothing more than grunt to acknowledge their presence.

Pam breathed an audible sigh of relief. There wasn’t as much blood as McNeil had led them to believe, although some spatter marred the walls and ceiling. She chalked up the report to rookie nerves. But it also wasn’t a pleasant scene.

The female victim was bound spread-eagle to the king-size bed. A gag had been duct-taped to her mouth. Long, dark hair tangled around her head. Lash marks scored her body, cutting deep. Most telling was the word carved into her forehead -- *MINE*.

Kowalski gestured to the parachute rope used to bind her. “Square knots.”

Pam felt her cheeks warm. She was intimately familiar with the knots, but she and Declan had never played this hard, nor would they. This was violence fully unleashed. “Did you find the whip?”

"Not yet. Judging from the restricted swinging room in here and the blood spatter, it'll be a small one, possibly a riding crop." He pointed to dresser where he'd dumped the woman's purse. "Her name's Darla Murray. Address is on her driver's license. We got a call earlier to an attempted suicide at that location. I have a team there now going over anything. Now, with this --" He jerked his head toward the deceased. "-- it could be murder/suicide ..."

"Or two murders," Pam finished for him. "Any relation between the two?"

"Not that we can tell off-hand. The other vic's name is Carol Phillips. Other than the purse, we can't find anything else here. Desk clerk indicates she checked in yesterday afternoon alone, but doesn't recall if she had luggage. He said it's not uncommon for guests to check in and then retrieve their luggage from their cars. I've got a man Dumpster diving. Ms. Murray was a frequent guest. Which is odd, considering she only lives five miles away."

"Could mean she was meeting a lover and didn't want him to know where she lived," Gloria said. "I'm surprised none of the other guests heard this."

Pam wasn't. Paradise Suites had a reputation for quiet. "Soundproof rooms for a sound sleep," she recited the motto aloud. "We'll get a subpoena for the hotel security tapes and have the records pulled for the phone in this room and her house, plus any cell phones we uncover."

"None in her purse," Kowalski said. "Someone obviously knows something. I don't suspect a ghost made the 9-1-1 call on Phillips."

Gloria shrugged. "Could be she made the call herself."

"Afraid I don't know any of the details from that scene yet. I'd just received word that she was unconscious and on her way to the hospital when this call came in. When I got here and realized the possible connection, I called Dwayne and told him they needed to do a full-on search of the Murray house."

The Phillips woman wouldn't be in much shape to talk today. Their best bet was to check out the house first.

"Any estimate on the time of death?"

Dr. Adams looked up over the rim of his glasses. His eyes were as gray as his hair. "Preliminary cause of death looks like it could be smothering. I found petechial hemorrhaging in the eyes. The pillow case with her face imprint in it seems to support that. The air was cranked to super-high when we arrived. This place was like a freezer. That's going to make TOD harder to determine. I won't know until I get her back."

"Looks like someone went to a lot of trouble to cover their tracks. We'll head over to the house after we interview the maid and see what we can dig up on these two. We can compare notes back at the lab." She peeled off her gloves as she walked to the door.

"Sounds like a plan," Kowalski called to her back.

Gloria paused by the sergeant at the door. "Have your partner continue to gather information from the guests on this floor. Maybe someone saw something."

They all knew the chances of that were slim in a hotel where silence was not only golden but its claim to fame.

The little Hispanic maid was still quivering when Pam and Gloria walked into the room across the hall. What little English she knew became trapped in her hysterical telling of what she'd found, and Pam and Gloria knew enough Spanish to get themselves arrested in Tijuana. All they could do was take down her personal information and release her back to work. A bilingual detective would contact her later.

They drove to the house in silence, each weighing their respective observations and the evidence they hoped to find as they always did. The square knots haunted Pam. Each time she thought of them and the battered woman they'd bound, her thoughts drifted to her and Declan. True, they considered it play and exploration, and they certainly had never taken it to this extreme. Pam doubted she'd enjoy playing tie-me-up-and-ravish-me for awhile, not with Darla Murray's image burned into her vision.

Pam's first impression of Murray's sprawling ranch house was "pristine." The lawn was meticulously trimmed with low hedges of pyracantha bushes against the house, sidewalk, and walkway. No trees shaded the green-tile roof. The white stucco sides blazed bright against the August sun. Latticed windows boasted a wide array of plants inside. The police and crime unit cars parked in front destroyed the illusion of peace.

The officer at the front door acknowledged them with a nod. "Female victim. Apparent suicide attempt. She'd lost a good deal of blood by the time we got here. No one else was in the house. No vehicles around. And, according to her driver's license, this isn't her house. And there wasn't much else in her purse."

"This is beginning to feel like a macabre scavenger hunt." Pam snapped a fresh pair of vinyl gloves in place. "Have a unit go over to her residence and check it out. We might have another victim there."

Puzzlement tugged wrinkles into his forehead. "A murder-suicide?"

While Gloria gave him the run-down on the other scene, Pam stepped inside. Order prevailed here as it did outside. The only blots were the large blood stain on the white carpeting and the growing sections of fingerprint dust as Dwayne Cummings twirled his brush over selected surfaces.

"Find anything yet?"

His glasses slid to the end of his nose when he glanced up. He shoved them back in place with his forearm. The lenses widened his already large brown eyes. "A hodge-podge of fingerprints to sort through. She'd used a butcher knife from the block on the kitchen counter to slice her wrists. It's bagged and tagged. She made the cuts horizontally, not vertically and was laid out in the center of the room as if she'd just gone to sleep. I swear not a hair was out of place. This wasn't her house, either."

Pam did a visual scan of the living room and the chrome kitchen just beyond. A computer was tucked in an alcove between the two. "We found the owner dead at the Paradise Suites. She'd been bound, whipped, and smothered."

He nodded. "That's what Ski said. You thinking crime of passion?"

"At this point I don't know what to think. Murray's driver's license led us here. Phillips's driver's license leads us to her home. If we find a body there ..." She shook her head. "I'm not liking this set up. If Phillips killed Murray, then came here to kill herself in a pique of remorse, where's her car?"

"Cab? Parked down the street?"

He had a point. Pam made herself a mental note.

Dwayne jerked his head toward the bedrooms. "Whoever lived here, it looks like they were heavily into bondage and discipline. Bobby found the closet in the master bedroom filled with paraphernalia. Could be you'll find the whip used in there."

Somehow she doubted it. "I'll check it out. Where's Bobby now?"

"Master bedroom looking for a suicide note or anything to tie this person to the one who lived here."

At the very least, they had to be friends, possibly sisters. Hell, maybe they were lovers. Whatever it was, it wasn't a coincidence that Carol Phillips was in Darla Murray's house. There was a link. They just had to find it.

She made her way to the bedroom. At first glance, it was just like any other she'd find. A four-poster California-king dominated the room, a haunting reminder of her own bed. White décor was offset by black lacquer furnishings: dresser, chest of drawers, two night tables.

Bobby Salazar rifled through what looked like a bound journal, frowning with every page.

"I take it that's not good news."

He glanced at her from under his black uni-brow. "There are pages missing, each carefully torn from the book. I found the same thing with her day planner -- selected pages missing."

She wandered toward the walk-in closet. "I heard you found bondage paraphernalia in here."

"Yeah, no figuring some people."

"To each his own. Any whips?"

"Is that how she died?" He set the journal aside and joined her at the door.

"Actually, the coroner believes she was smothered. But she was worked over before that."

"The question is -- was that part of her sexual ritual, or part of the murder?"

“Could be both. Maybe her partner got out of control. She was gagged, so if she had a safe word, she wouldn’t have been able to utter it. Of course, at this point we don’t know if she was willingly tied up or forced.”

Pam fingered the chamois flogger draped over the rod. Darla certainly did have a wide and varied selection. Things Pam and Declan had only joked about.

Bobby shook his head. “I don’t get how people can get off on the pleasure-pain thing.”

Pam stepped further into the closet when she felt the heat rise to her tattletale cheeks.

“From what I’ve read, it starts off with something small.” His voice level rose in what Pam could only call shocked outrage. “Then the rush wears off so they move onto something bigger, until that wears off, too. Before you know it, you have this.” He waved his arm around walls. “Eventually even that’s not enough.”

She forced a laugh. “You make it sound like an addiction.”

“It is. So much so it gets to the point where the participant can’t orgasm without the pain. What the hell kind of relationship is that where you’re constantly inflicting pain?” he snapped.

“Well, I guess it works for some people.”

He snorted. “Yeah, it worked real well for Darla Murray.”

The words hit her like a plunge into ice water. Was that the direction she and Declan were headed?

“There you are.”

Pam jumped at the sound of Gloria’s voice behind her.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. It’s not like you to be so deep in thought you don’t hear what’s going on around you.”

Inattention was what got a cop killed. Somehow, Pam had to rein her focus back to the job.

Pulling in a deep breath, she turned her back on the closet. “Just trying to absorb it all.”

Gloria passed a gaze over the array of gear. “It’s turning into a lot to process, that’s for sure. A patrol unit went to Carol Phillips’s apartment and detected a foul smell like decomp. The landlord let them in, but it was only a package of raw chicken left too long on the counter to thaw.”

In this heat, how long would that have taken? If the air conditioner was cranked down, probably only hours. Pam couldn’t see anyone putting meat out to thaw all day. Phillips might have put the chicken out, then gone to Murray’s. But why thaw food if you were contemplating suicide? Unless she decided to do so after reaching Murray’s house. In any event, this clue might give them another frame of reference to go by.

“At least there wasn’t another body.” Thank God.

"Yes, but we still have to connect the dots." She fingered the flogger just as Pam had. "Interesting. It would be soft against the skin, no more than a slight sting to bring up a blush."

Her evaluation was definitely a contrast to Bobby's heated dismissal. "You don't find it sick? Bobby said ..."

"Bobby." Gloria spit his name out. "Talk about straight-laced. Why do you think they call him Mr. Missionary?"

Pam clamped her mouth shut, embarrassed by her own naïveté. Until that second, she'd always thought it was a comment on his religion and charitable works that supposedly took up all his free time.

"This is quite a selection." Gloria dropped her hand. "Any whips?"

"I haven't looked yet." Pam brushed past her. "I'll let you take care of it. I'm going to search her computer."

It was mindless work scanning the multitude of files cluttering Darla Murray's computer. Her home and yard might be well-ordered, but the computer was a mess. Not that Pam's mind was any better. She couldn't get those conflicting views out of her head -- Gloria's and Bobby's. Once she'd stepped into that closet and realized the full extent of Murray's involvement in bondage and discipline, everything she thought she knew about herself came into question.

Pam didn't know how long she stared at the monitor before she realized nothing was filtering in beyond this new self-doubt. If she didn't get a lock on all this soon, her inattention to detail was going to screw this investigation.

"I can't make heads or tails of this. We'd better seize it and have the computer geeks look," she told Dwayne as she shut the machine down.

"That's probably best anyway." He stuffed the last of his supplies into his box and snapped it closed. "There's no telling what might have been deleted."

"I think Gloria and I will leave you to finish up. We'll head back and start on some of the paperwork."

As if by plan, her partner entered the living room. A simultaneous nod acknowledged the intent to leave, and they walked in tandem to their car.

Pam paused at the end of the sidewalk. "I think you'd better drive. My mind's not with me." She unlocked the passenger door and handed Gloria the keys.

"No problem." A quick stride carried her to the other side. "Anything you want to talk about?" she asked as she slipped behind the steering column.

God knows, she had to talk to someone. Logically that should be her best friend. Still, she hated the thought that Gloria would judge her harshly or think ill of her.

"I can tell you anything, right?"

Gloria shifted her way, resting her fingers on Pam's forearm. "Of course you can."

Despite the reassurance, Pam couldn't look her in the eye. "I've ... uhm ... being seeing someone for a while. About six months."

Gloria drew back. "And you're just now telling me?"

"It was just sex at first. We had this list of rules." Pam waved the thought away and forced her gaze to meet her friend's. "That's not the point. It was supposed to be just sex, but lately my emotions have been tugging me toward more. And now ... this."

"This?" Gloria frowned. "This what? This case?"

She gave a shaky nod. "He and I have been exploring. Up until today, it's been a real turn-on to find someone who likes to play and experiment, someone I trust won't hurt me. But after seeing this ..."

"Ohhh, I see. You think you're going to wind up like Darla Murray."

"Yes, in a way. After what Bobby said ..."

"Hmph, him again."

"*After* what Bobby said, I got to wondering. Maybe it is a growing addiction. Maybe it's not love I'm feeling, just the rush of the next level we'll go to. How do I know we aren't heading down *that* path?" She jerked her thumb toward Murray's house.

"That's easy." Gloria gave her arm a gentle squeeze. "You ask him. There's nothing wrong with a little slap-and-tickle, a little tie-me-up. There's nothing wrong with sexual play between two consenting adults. If you're concerned, ask him if you can back off on all that for a while. If he can't deal with that, then he's not the man you want in your life. It's as simple as that."

Pam nodded and leaned into the headrest as Gloria started the car. It was a simple solution, but poor Declan. He was going to call that night expecting everything to be the same as always, and she was going to have to deliver a long-distance blow that would either bring them closer together, or rip them apart.

She toyed with the idea of simply not answering the phone when he called. Just the thought of worrying him knotted her stomach. They'd never played head games before. She wasn't going to start now.

## Chapter Four

Declan's cell phone jiggled against his thigh. Not a soul around him bothered to glance his way when the telltale *bzzzt* insinuated itself into the speaker's lecture. Interruptions were commonplace and understood in his profession.

He slipped down the side aisle and into the adjacent hallway as he fished the phone from his trouser pocket. His answering service? At this time of day? Any calls for work should have gone directly to his office and Trish.

*Idiot. The office is closed and Trish is off,* he chided himself.

"Dr. Trent."

Declan felt his morale sag with every word his service passed. Carol Phillips was fine yesterday, in great spirits. What in the world could have happened to lead her to attempt suicide again? They'd made such great strides in the last several months. Yet, here they were -- right back where they'd started.

"I'm on my way, but it'll take a while. I'm in San Francisco. Please pass word to the hospital."

Traffic notwithstanding, it'd be about seven hours before he could reach Los Angeles. Hopefully, Carol would still be with them, maybe even conscious by then. With any luck, the magic words he needed to convince her this course of action wasn't wise, that she had much to live for, would have come to him.

Declan snagged his conference materials from the workshop and scanned the room for some sign of Mark. Leaving now put his friend in a predicament; he'd have to go with Declan or get a flight out. And since he couldn't see Mark anywhere in the room ...

"Emergency. I have to leave," he whispered to the colleague beside him. "Have you seen Mark Roberts today?"



The other man shook his head. "Haven't seen him since the bar last night. He didn't look too good. Maybe he's sick?"

Declan nodded. That was a possibility. Mark had looked a little like death warmed over yesterday. If he was sick, he might appreciate being able to leave now, if he was able to make the trip. Declan would simply have to insist. What were friends for if they couldn't take care of you when you needed it?

He hurried to his room to pack and noticed the flashing red light on the bedside phone. Somehow, he knew without checking what to expect. Sure enough, Mark had already gone. Claiming illness -- and from the labored tone in his voice Declan didn't doubt it -- Mark left first thing that morning and caught a flight back to LA.

"Good."

The instant he said that, guilt nudged him. The "good" wasn't because Mark had left; it was because Declan didn't have to wait for him. *Yep, I'm a great friend.*

He made a mental note to check up on him when he returned. It was the least he could do -- *should* do. Then maybe his conscience wouldn't nag him so much.

At least he'd get to see Pam tonight.

Declan smacked his forehead. Some doctor he was. A woman was lying near death, and all he could think about was being with Pam later. He needed to get his priorities straight right now, not his penis. Although just the thought of Pam ...

He forced away the image of her clutched to him in passion and dashed around the room gathering the items he'd so meticulously tucked away the night before. Within thirty minutes, his car was pointed toward LA. His mind still wandered wherever it pleased.

Should he call or surprise Pam? He'd love to see the light in her eyes when he showed up on her doorstep. Still, wouldn't a gentleman call first? Declan shook his head. He didn't want to be a gentleman. He wanted to barge into her house, sweep her into his arms, and kiss her until they melted together.

An erection pressed against his fly. He squeezed it into submission. Declan had an obligation to his patient first, his libido second. He'd be doing good to remember that.

Reciting the division tables aloud helped put things -- specifically his cock -- back into perspective. In control once more, he struggled for the right words to bring Carol Phillips back from this latest in a long list of brinks.

Everything had been said and discussed a hundred times. What more was there? She was a beautiful woman with a bright laugh and everything to live for: a successful career as a makeup artist with one of the studios, family and friends who loved her. And a long history of clinical depression.

He'd thought the meds and therapy were helping. Obviously not. Surely, she wouldn't have stopped using them.

Declan shook his head. He would have seen signs sooner. No, something had happened to devastate her since yesterday. He didn't have a clue what that would have been, except ...

He frowned as he maneuvered through the stream of traffic heading south. She'd been worried about him being gone, afraid she couldn't handle things on her own. Despite the fact she'd never contacted him outside of her twice-weekly sessions, perhaps she feared the distance and not being able to reach him should she need to do so.

It didn't make sense. All of his patients knew to call his office if there was a crisis. If Trish was out, the answering service picked up calls and contacted him.

He couldn't, for the life of him, figure it out. By the time he reached the hospital, a headache beat at his skull from trying to do so. The last person he wanted to deal with when he walked into the place was the first person he saw -- his ex-wife, just arriving for her shift.

Running into each other was unavoidable. He was a psychiatrist; she was a nurse there. Most times he could deal with it. Today wasn't one of them. A confrontation was inevitable. Connie would give him the third-degree about his life -- who he was seeing/dating/whatever, who his female patients might be -- just as she had when they were married, with a slight margin of subtlety now. At some point she'd launch into questions about his family -- how they were doing, did they miss her. Then she'd follow up with how much her family would like to see him again. Patience wasn't his friend today. Apparently, luck wasn't, either.

She'd already spied him. There was no avoiding her. Maybe a quick nod and he could walk by. The green eyes locked onto him said differently. He used to love those eyes. Her long, blond hair was pulled up in a French twist. He'd loved that, too -- running his fingers through the long waves when she let it down. How could so beautiful a woman turn into such an insane bitch?

"I thought you were at a conference," she said when they neared each other.

Declan bit back the demand to know how she'd come by that information. Divorced all this time and she still checked up on him. If anyone needed psychiatric help, it was Connie.

"I have a patient in crisis." He darted past her.

"Must be a very special patient," she called to his back.

Declan whipped around, cursing himself for letting her bait him. "All of my patients are important. When one attempts ..."

"Yes, I heard about her." She used that condescending tone he'd always hated. "Carol Phillips attempted suicide ... again. And you dropped everything to rush to her side ... again. But then," the corner of her mouth lifted in a feigned smile, "she was always extra friendly toward you. Too friendly, as I recall."

"Good-bye, Connie." He did an abrupt about-face and hurried inside. After all, someone had to be an adult and walk away. Sadly, it was always him.

As he exited the elevator on the psychiatric ward, the nurse on duty did little more than hand out Carol's chart. With a muttered "thank you," he snagged it, then flipped through the record as he walked on to the room indicated at the top of the page.

Carol's condition was listed as stable. She'd yet to regain consciousness, which was typical of the blood loss she'd suffered. What wasn't normal was the method of her attempt. She prided herself on her looks and never would have considered scarring herself, even if doing so meant the release she claimed she wanted. Her attempts in the past had always been carbon monoxide -- locked in the garage with the car running.

He was half tempted to turn around and ask the nurse if they had the right woman. Ten feet further on, he saw that they did. Carol's red hair was a distinctive feature on its own. Her skin tone matched the white sheet. Bandages swathed both wrists. An IV dripped with slow precision into one forearm.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see the doctor there. "Hi, Al. Got any information for me?"

Light gleamed off his shiny pate as the man shook his head. "Not much. She was found at the home of a friend. The wounds were superficial, as if she attempted but didn't intend to complete the deed. If she'd been conscious, she could have easily bound them herself and gotten help. She had a large concentration of zolpidem in her bloodstream."

"She must have gotten it from her friend. I hadn't prescribed Ambien for her."

Al Fletcher shrugged his skinny shoulders. "There's nothing to say she didn't have more than one doctor."

That was true. "Where was the friend when this happened?"

"No one came in with her, so I don't know. From what I've been told, someone made a 9-1-1 call from the residence. The police responded and found her. No one's been by yet. I suspect they're waiting until tomorrow when they know she'll be coherent. If she's willing to talk to them. Which is doubtful, as you know. It's not the first time she's been here, Declan."

"I know." They were standing over her bed just like this a year ago.

"I'd say she's just more determined this time. She took the Ambien, sliced her wrists, then made the call."

"Why make the call if you're determined to kill yourself?"

He shrugged again. "Who knows. So someone would find her? In any event, I don't expect her to wake up until morning. No sense you hanging around." He pulled in a deep breath. "But if I know you, that won't stop you."

"I'll stay for a little while, just in case." Declan hauled the overstuffed monstrosity of a green-vinyl chair next to Carol's bed, then slipped her limp hand into his.

"Sometimes I think you care too much, my friend." Al braced himself against the doorjamb. "If this one is so determined to end her life ..."

Declan sliced a glance his way. "Don't finish the sentence, Al. You know you don't mean it, and you'll regret you ever uttered the words."

He slowly shook his head. "I don't know about that. There's so many who want help. She doesn't." He pushed away and walked off.

The words haunted Declan long after he'd left. He sat there holding Carol's cold fingers, trying to will life into her just as he did each time they talked. He was out of words and solutions for her. Realizing that depressed him all the more.

He must have sat there for hours pondering all the mistakes he'd made with this patient. Calls to Mark were left unanswered. Declan hoped that meant his friend had turned off the phone to rest and not that he was in need of help.

His thoughts were interrupted when a figure moved into the door, then darted away. Unusual behavior on the psych ward was generally a cause for concern. Moving to the door he scanned the corridor, but saw nothing disturbing. Turning back to Carol, he realized the window on the other side of the room was black. It was dark outside. He was hungry, tired, and frustrated with what he saw as his inadequacies as a psychiatrist. There was only one person who could help pull him out of the dregs now.

Pam's arms offered comfort, shelter from the world. He needed that more than anything else, a reminder of life, not the imminent death that threatened here. With Pam he'd find the strength and answers he needed to face the world.

Still, he took the time to go by Mark's condo. But when he drove by and saw Mark's parking space empty, Declan simply shook his head. He'd been worrying all this time and Mark wasn't even home. Maybe Al was right; maybe he did care too much.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam paced the circuit of living room-kitchen in T-shirt and panties. Despite the air conditioning that hummed in the background, sweat trickled down her back. Her heart thumped against her ribs while she waited for Declan's phone call. This was one hell of a thing to throw at the guy long distance. She found herself torn between hoping he wouldn't call and wishing he would.

With each step she took, Pam thought of the night before, of every time they'd been together. Coupled with her racing heart, the memories helped soak her cotton crotch. Maybe she had to face facts; she was clearly already addicted to him and what they had together. But was it real or just sex?

She sank into the soft cushion of her serviceable brown couch and buried her face in her hands. It was supposed to be just sex. They agreed on that long ago. Who knew it would still tear her heart up like this? She loved the guy like crazy.

Tears she'd sworn she wouldn't shed dampened her eyes.

"No, no, no."

She smeared them away as they fell, damning her weakness. That's all she needed was to have him call and hear her crying. He'd think she was breaking it off.

A knock at the door snapped her upright. Who the hell would be coming to her house at this time of night? It was nearly ten. Slow steps took her to the door.

"Pam, honey, it's me."

Declan was here? "Dec?"

She wiped her eyes dry with the hem of her T-shirt as she hurried the rest of the way. The second she opened the door, he was inside, her face cradled between his hands. His lips covered hers without hesitation, pulling a whimper from deep within her soul as she caved under the gentle assault.

His tongue coaxed hers into a playful thrust and parry while his lips kneaded hers to life. There was no demand in the caress, just the invitation to bond, explore as they had from the start. Pam had never been kissed with such precision. Each stroke of his tongue sent shivers racing through her body. She was barely conscious of clutching his shoulders, giving all of herself over to him.

One hot hand slipped down her back, anchoring her against the erection that beat between them. Her breath hitched, then became labored. And still the kiss went on until every part of her was on fire. She wanted it to never end. To have him haul her into the bedroom, lips sealed, where he'd splay her across the bed, yank the crotch of her panties aside and fuck her hard, and never break this delicious kiss.

Just as she thought that, Pam was in his lap. Somehow he'd moved them to her couch, and she'd been too mesmerized by his kiss to realize it. He kissed her until she thought she'd weep from the emotion it dredged up. That's when she peeled her lips from his.

"Dec, I ..."

Whatever she was about to say was swallowed by another, impossibly deeper kiss. Pam sagged into his arms, eyes closed to the wonder as they stretched out. His fingers wandered under her T-shirt, toying with the hard nipple that begged for his attention. With each twirl between his thumb and forefinger, arrows of pleasure pulsed straight to her clit.

She draped one leg around his, trying desperately to snug her pussy against his thigh. Declan shifted. She heard his zipper slice down, then his hot erection fell to her bare belly. Pam hooked her toes around the waistband of his trousers and nudged them down.

Her panties were next, pulled down as far as her knees until she could yank her leg free and toss it around his hips. A muffled groan rumbled in his chest. He sealed them with a slow glide, then sighed as if he'd found heaven. Pam knew she had. When he moved again, it was to mimic the thrust of his tongue.

Declan shoved his hand between them, giving her clitoris the friction she needed. Pam felt welded to him, body and soul. How in the world could she destroy this by uttering those three little words? How much longer could she hold the secret in her heart?

She clutched at his back as her body tensed for climax. His dick was harder than ever, a rod of steel pounding into her. His lips froze on her, tongues still entwined as he fought coming. Knowing that, Pam soared to the peak and over, pulling his orgasm with hers. They quaked together, suspended in heaven before they feathered back down to earth. Only then did he break their kiss.

Pam sighed and traced her thumb over his face and the stubble of whiskers. "You're here." Her voice echoed the wonder of her words. "Did you miss me that much?"

"Baby, I missed you so much it hurt." He nuzzled his lips into her palm and traced a circle there with his tongue. "And I wish I could say that's why I came home."

Braced on forearms, he combed his fingers through her hair. "But make no mistake ... I need you like I need air to breathe, and that's definitely why I'm here."

It sounded like an admission of some sort, but Pam didn't want to corner him on it. "Why did you come back?"

"A patient in crisis. She attempted suicide last night. I want to be here if ... when she wakes up to help her through this again."

"It's not the first time she's done this?"

He slowly shook his head. "No, just the first time she's gone to such lengths to meet her goal. She apparently took a handful of sleeping pills and followed up with slicing her wrists. I have no idea where she got the pills. Probably from the friend whose house they found her in."

Pam pulled back as far as the couch allowed. It couldn't be, but yet ... "What's her name?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"What if I guess?"

He locked gazes with her, then gave a single nod. "All right. I'm intrigued."

"Carol Phillips?"

Now he pulled back. All the way. "Yeah. What? How? She was the woman who left yesterday before you came into my office."

Pam tucked her legs under her as he pulled up his trousers. Heaven only knew where her panties had wound up. "I didn't realize that." She sure would have if she'd seen the red hair. "I wasn't the first on the scene and hadn't seen her. I was going to wait until tomorrow to go to the hospital. Is she still out of it?"

Declan nodded. "Why are you interested in this case? It wasn't suicide, was it?"

"At this point we don't know what's going on."

"Dr. Fletcher indicated she was found at a friend's house?" He drew circles over her knee as he stared at the blank TV screen across the room.

"Yes." Declan could hold the key to this whole mystery. The question remained -- how much could he reveal? "Darla Murray," she finally replied.

"Ohhh ..."

"You say that as if there was something special to it."

He clamped his lips shut.

"Was she a client, too?" Pam asked.

Declan frowned. "You know she was. You saw her a couple of weeks ago."

She nodded slowly, even though she could barely make the connection. Pam met a lot of people in her line of work, and Murray's features weren't unique enough to make her stand out.

"She's dead."

Declan winced. "How?"

Somehow Pam suspected he already had a clue. "Why don't you tell me?"

He pulled in a deep breath through his nose and leaned back. "Darla engaged in a certain lifestyle."

"What kind of lifestyle?"

He flashed her a glare. "It almost sounds like you're interrogating me."

And he was starting to sound a little defensive. Pam kept that thought to herself and eased back. "Sorry, occupational hazard. I'm just trying to get to the bottom of this quickly. If you can provide any insight ..."

That seemed to smooth his ruffled fur. He went back to rubbing his thumb over her knee. "She was heavily into bondage and discipline."

"Like us."

His laugh held no humor. "*Nothing* like us. We play. We never cause each other pain. From what she told me, the more pain, the better. Then she'd feel guilty for it."

"Especially when she kept going back for more and more." When he nodded, she went on. "So, how does Carol Phillips fit into all this?"

"As far as I know, she doesn't. Darla thought Carol was everything *she* wanted to be. She thought hanging around Carol would help her overcome her proclivities, as she called them. And Carol," he snorted, "Carol thought that if she could manage to save Darla from herself, then Darla would love Carol as much as Carol loved her."

"Carol is a lesbian?"

He tilted his head as if to nod, then stopped. "I think I've revealed too much as it is. Doctor-patient privilege, you know."

Pam gave him a noncommittal grunt. It all made sense. Carol killed Darla in a jealous rage. Guilt ridden, she returned to Darla's, where she attempted suicide. Case closed. Once Carol regained consciousness ...

A dual blast from their respective cell phones cut through her thoughts. She and Declan answered in perfect synchronicity. Pam watched his expression sag while he most probably received the same news she did -- Carol Phillips was dead. What he wouldn't know was the word carved into her forehead -- MINE -- just like Darla Murray.

So much for case closed.

"Carol Phillips just died." Declan snapped his phone closed.

Pam hated to be the one to enlighten him, but he'd find out soon enough. Considering their relationship, it was best the news came from her. "Actually, Carol Phillips was just *murdered*."

Shock flickered across his face in the brief silence that followed. "I'll drive."



## Chapter Five

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

Pam silently echoed Declan’s sentiment. This had all the earmarks of a serial killer just starting a spree. She watched the headlights from oncoming traffic flash by with half attention while she tried to puzzle out this latest murder. The victims had two things in common: they were friends as well as being Declan’s patients. Of course, there was the obvious tie -- the murderer. Another patient, or someone Darla had met through her activities?

“What can you tell me?”

Declan’s question snapped Pam from her reverie. A better question would have been -- what could *he* tell *her*? That would come soon enough. They’d have to subpoena his patient files. Although with Darla and Carol dead that might not be necessary. But if something in those files pointed to another patient, there was no way Declan would give that record up without a court document. As for what she could tell him, word traveled fast in a hospital. Everyone from the board of directors down to the newest janitor would know by now that someone had carved that word into Carol Phillips’s forehead.

She pulled in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “It looks like the same killer. Both victims had the word ‘mine’ carved in their foreheads. Darla Murray was found bound to the bed at Paradise Suites. Lash marks covered her body, most deep enough to draw blood. She’d been smothered. At around the same time, there was a 9-1-1 call from her house. That’s where Carol Phillips was found.”

Pam rubbed at the ache growing in her neck. “At each location, only a driver’s license ID’d the victim. At first, it looked like a twisted scavenger hunt. We checked out Carol’s apartment, afraid there’d be another body. It was clean. We focused our search efforts on Darla’s house.”

"And did you find anything?" He stared ahead, hands clutched around the steering wheel, each word precisely uttered.

Pam had never seen him this tense before. This wasn't a random act of violence for him. These women were his patients. The shock, not to mention the personal loss, had to be twisting his insides. She wondered if his grip on the wheel was a parallel to the grip he tried to maintain on his emotions.

"Nothing that leaps out at us," she said. "The B&D stuff Darla had in her closet was a surprise. But given the lifestyle you said she lived ..."

"It was rough. No doubt about that. Half the time I didn't know what to say to her. She'd wear long sleeves and pants to cover the marks. Welts and bloodied lashmarks weren't uncommon for her." He shook his head, as if he still couldn't believe it, even though he'd been privy to her darkest secrets for apparently some time.

"So the condition we found her in wasn't unusual?"

He tilted his head to one side, yet still maintained that laser stare ahead. "Tied and whipped?"

"Yes."

"That's ..." Pam watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "She swore that's how she wanted, needed it. To be whipped. Then she'd come to see me, in tears that she'd 'fallen off the wagon.' She wanted to be punished for that alone. It wound up being a vicious circle for her."

"How long had she been a patient?"

"About a year. I was at loss on how to help her. I consulted with Mark about it ..."

"Mark knew Darla Murray?"

"With her permission, I briefed him on her situation. Each wasn't aware of the other's identity. Mark was as mystified as I was. We both agreed we'd have to do a little more in-depth research."

"How convenient that I happened along at the right time to assist you." Pam cursed her impetuous tongue, but the words were out before she could stop them. His response was just as quick.

"God *damn* it!" Declan whipped across two lanes of traffic and screeched to a halt at the curb. "What the fuck, Pam!" He turned toward her as much as the seat belt allowed. "How in the hell can you even compare what we do to that?"

She closed her eyes and leaned against the headrest. That whole conversation with Bobby Salazar still haunted her. "I ..."

"Damn it, Pam. Don't throw something like that out there, then shut me out. Look at me when I'm talking to you!" He smacked his fist on the console between them.

She jumped with her heart, but did as he ordered. Damned if he didn't have her close to crying. Why? Because of his anger, her sudden shame over sex she'd been enjoying the hell out of, or for fear she might lose him?

"Darla Murray liked to be *beaten*. Not spanked. Not paddled. Tied up hard and whipped -- bruised, scarred, and bleeding. When have we ever crossed that line? When have I ever so much as caused you a bruise, much less left a mark, permanent or otherwise?"

"Never," she managed to squeak out.

"How can you sit there and think that I would cheapen you and what we've got by using it for clinical research?"

Pam swallowed past her dry throat. "What we've got? What do we have besides sex, Declan?"

His anger seeped away. He flopped back into his seat, covering his eyes as he did so. "This is so not the right time to be having this discussion."

"And yet, here we are." She stared at the passersby who ogled them from the sidewalk: a combination of tourists in gaudy tropical prints, people hurrying from or to their evening shifts, and hookers out for a quick twenty. "What if we're headed down the same path as Darla?"

He rubbed his forehead. "Is that what you think? That we'll escalate until it's all pain in order to have a little pleasure? Are you afraid of me?"

Pam whipped around. "No! Absolutely not!"

"Then ..."

She curled her fingers around his arm. "Seeing her like that this morning just has me a little freaked. Just the thought of doing anything remotely ..."

"Then we just won't do it until we're comfortable with it. Easy enough." He slipped his hand over hers. "Isn't that what we agreed in the first place?"

Pam flipped her palm into his. "We agreed on a lot of things back then, Dec."

He brushed his fingers up her arm until he could cup her face. "That almost sounds like you have some regrets. Do you?" His thumb caressed her cheek.

This was it. Now or never. The timing sucked, but ... "That we're together? No. The sexual relationship we have? No. There are, however, points I feel need to be renegotiated."

Her heart hammered against her ribs while she waited for his response. It didn't help that his hand froze, then he dropped it back to his thigh. His gaze locked onto hers.

"I ... I'm almost afraid to ask what points." He pressed his lips together before continuing. "One of the things we agreed on was complete honesty."

Yes, they had. "Then here it is. I can't do the behind-closed-doors thing any more, Dec. I know we agreed on sex only, but I need more."

She watched a slow smile spread over his face. "Me, too. I want us to be a couple. I want the world to know it."

Pam couldn't help it. She giggled. "Well, considering the fact it's edging toward midnight and we're in the same vehicle five minutes away from a homicide investigation, I'd say we're about to out ourselves."

His smile widened. "I know. It was part of my master plan to sneak in under your defenses."

"I see. A grand master plan," she said with a laugh. "And here I go and yank the rug out from under your feet."

Declan cupped her cheek. "Sweetheart, I think you did that some time back."

Every cell in her body sang as he kissed her. There were a thousand million things she wanted to say, starting with those three little words. Pam kept them to herself -- no sense tempting fate. This was a nice enough start. As with everything else the last six months, they were still on the same wavelength.

He slowly pulled his lips from hers, then traced the bow of her mouth with his thumb. "You scared me. I thought you were getting ready to give me the I'm-breaking-up-with-you speech."

"I'll admit I'm not the smartest woman in the world, but I'm sure not stupid. I know a good man when I've got one." She flicked her tongue over the digit, smiling when he feigned a groan.

Declan patted her thigh as he drew back. "I'm only as good as the woman at my side."

"Or under you or on top of you or ..."

"Stop, please." He snapped up his palm. "We need to get going before the next cop who drives by has a different crime to investigate."

Pam lowered her voice to a sexy purr. "I'll just flash him my badge and tell him I'm undercover."

Declan pulled the car into the traffic. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall when you explained that one to Captain Buckley. Talk about outing us. We'd never live it down."

"No doubt this way is better." She snuggled into her seat. "Everyone's focus on the crime should redirect attention away from us. Maybe we can sneak it in under *their* defenses."

The look he flashed her said otherwise.

With each mile they put behind them on the short drive, the euphoria and playful banter faded. Focus shifted back to what they were about to face.

Declan pulled into the parking garage seconds behind Remy Sanchez's red Mazda. Looked like Remy and Gloria had opted the couple route as well for this investigation. Though why Gloria bothered when she was close to leaving was a mystery. Of course, Remy

still wasn't privy to that little surprise. Obviously Gloria had been called in as Pam was, since they'd handled the original murder. The hint of a serial killer would certainly thrust all of this to the forefront. The sooner the DA's office was in the loop, the better. Any reporters sniffing around the hospital for a news scoop would have glommed onto Carol's murder the second the coroner showed up, especially when the hospital party-line mentioned the mutilation.

"Looks like this is it." Declan pulled into a slot across from the other couple. "Judging from your partner's rush to reach us, I'd say we've been seen."

"She should be pleased." Pam shouldered her door open. "She actually tried to hook us up yesterday afternoon."

Declan glanced over his shoulder. "Then why do her eyes look like they're ready to pop out of her head?"

Maybe agreeing on complete honesty hadn't been such a wise idea after all. "Uhm ... after the issue with Darla, I felt the need to confide in her. She knows the what, just not the who until now."

"Ohhhh."

Pam tried not to laugh. She'd never seen Declan blush before.

Her partner smacked her forehead. "Right under my nose and I didn't see it. Some detective I turned out to be."

Hands braced on hips, Remy shifted a gaze between them. "I have to admit this works for me."

"Yes, yes." Gloria looped her arm through his. "And we all know it's all about you."

"It *is* all about me." His wide grin faltered. "Aren't you supposed to be at a conference?"

Declan dropped his hand to the small of Pam's back as they fell in step with the other couple. "I got called back for a patient earlier today. She's now your second victim."

Remy's attorney-mask slipped into place. "I see."

"Both victims were my patients."

That comment earned him a solemn nod. "Any clue what this is all about?"

"Not really. Of course, I'll give the detectives access to both victims' files."

They paused at the crosswalk, each locked into their own thoughts. Once the WALK sign flashed, they hustled across and toward the atrium elevators.

Remy punched his knuckle onto the UP button. "Did the women have anything in common?"

Declan waited until they were inside with the doors closed. "They were friends. Darla was engaged in a lifestyle that Carol longed to save her from."

"And what kind of lifestyle was that?"

"You saw the crime scene photos?"

Remy nodded. "I see. Nothing unusual there, then."

"Not from what she told me."

"You'd think someone would realize that if they played that rough ..."

The conversation screeched to a halt as the elevators doors opened. Pam couldn't say who was more surprised -- them or Mark Roberts -- when they saw each other. Most probably Mark, since his jaw worked but no sound came out.

"What are you doing here?" the question came from him and Declan simultaneously.

"Patient emergency." Declan left the explanation at that. "And you?"

Mark's shoulders sagged. His gaze darted everywhere but at them as he shuffled onto the elevator. "I did something really stupid yesterday. My neighbor's cat got stuck up a tree. I tried to play hero in order to impress her and wound up falling. My ribs are killing me." He cradled his sides.

"Which floor?" Declan asked, reaching for the buttons.

"I'm done. I'll just hang out with you guys for a bit while I wait for pharmacy to fill the script for my pain meds."

The doors sighed shut. "Why didn't you say something yesterday? You should have gone to ER then. You could have ruptured your spleen and ..."

Mark jerked up his hand, wincing from the effort. "Please, no lectures. I'm embarrassed enough as it is. I know I was stupid. I got a buddy of mine to X-ray me. No breaks or cracks, just bruised, along with my pride."

Gloria snorted. "I hope she was worth it."

He shot her a side-long glance. "Her new boyfriend came home just in time to pick up the pieces of my shattered self-esteem *and* coax her stupid cat down. Thing jumped right into his arms."

She tsked. "What a shame, rejected by two pussies in one fell swoop."

Mark's gaze turned cold. "Seems to be the story of my life since you decided Remy was a better catch than me."

That sucked the air out of the place. Pam couldn't believe Mark had played that card after all this time. He and Gloria had been history long before Remy, and it had been a very brief fling at best. All they could do was look at him while he stared down at Gloria. The elevator ding shattered the silence.

"Sorry." Mark poised himself against the doors to keep them open. "I don't know where that came from. I'm tired. I hurt. I'm embarrassed by my own stupidity. I'm honest to God happy for the two of you. I'll understand if you'd rather I not attend the wedding."

"Don't be ridiculous." Remy clasped his shoulder. "We know you didn't mean it." He added the semblance of a smile as an afterthought.

"Sure," Gloria followed up. "I took a cheap shot at you. Only fair you'd give one back. We want you at the wedding."

"Absolutely." Remy's smile softened. "And now that you and Declan are back, I'll expect you both at the bachelor party Friday night, too."

"Are you going to stand there all night long, or will I eventually have a detective on scene?" Captain Buckley's bark was backed up by his fists-on-hips stance.

When they stepped off the elevator en masse, he snapped his finger at Gloria. "Go home. You're off the case immediately. I need someone who'll be able to work the case start to finish. Same for you." He jerked his chin Remy's way. "Don't you have a honeymoon coming up? We already have someone from the DA's office on scene."

"Ten guesses who that is," Pam muttered to the others, "and the first nine don't count."

Sure enough her ex-husband poked his head out of the nurses' lounge. Connie Trent was right behind him. Pam should have known Hank would jump on this case. Nailing a serial killer would be quite a coup for an assistant district attorney, and Hank was as professionally aggressive as they came.

"Well, well." A grin split his sun-bronzed face. "The gang's all here. Feels like old times ... almost."

His gaze settled fully on Pam. She tried not to squirm, but for the first time in their lengthy relationship, those ice-blue eyes of his actually made her feel dirty, vulnerable.

"Excuse me, I have work to do." Pam skirted her ex, then did the same with Declan's. It was an obstacle course she'd never imagined having to navigate.

"Sanchez, go," she heard the captain say. "I'll take the cog with your partner."

Pam darted toward the crime scene. There wasn't much more to say. Gloria had two days before she left the force permanently. She had no business getting involved in a detailed investigation. As things stood, she was lucky Buckley remembered her resignation was supposed to be Remy's surprise. He was normally too focused on work to retain details like that.

She paused outside Carol Phillips's room while she tugged on gloves and booties. The coroner glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Same as before," Dr. Adams said. "Smothered. The word carved into her head."

Pam did a preliminary scan of the room, but even she knew the chance of finding forensic evidence was remote. Something had to click and soon, before someone else wound up dead. A single word from an interview, a piece of a clue during their search of her home, anything to draw the pieces of this growing puzzle together and lock them in place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan could feel the animosity prickle between Remy and Hank. Not that he blamed Remy. Hank was a first-class bastard and growing worse with every year that passed. He wasn't afraid or shy about who he stepped on or over to get what he wanted. And he had the skill to back up his ambition.

"Sleeping with a police scanner under your pillow now, Hank?" Remy asked.

The insult skidded over the man's moussed blond head. He was going to make one hell of a politician one day. He already had the look and demeanor down pat.

"I was visiting a friend here when word of the murder shuddered through the hospital. I just thought I'd check it out. Is there a problem?"

Mark sighed. "That definitely sounds like my cue to leave. I need to get my prescription." Miraculously, the elevator opened at his command, but it was Remy who wedged his arm in the space to keep the doors open.

"No problem at all. I do have other more important commitments. Coming, honey?"

She pressed her palm against his chest. "I'll be down in a few. I need to talk to Declan alone."

His eyebrow curved up with his smile. "I'm intrigued."

Gloria smiled. "Good." She waited until the elevator closed before turning back to Declan. "The nurse's lounge should be private enough."

Connie stepped into their path. "That's where your captain wants to interview the staff. The nurse who found her is already in there waiting for him, along with Dr. Fletcher. I don't want anything to delay this. I need to get back to my own floor."

Even as she mentioned it, Buckley and Pam were heading for the lounge. Hank wasted no time following. Declan tried not to laugh when the captain barred him from the interview.

He cupped Gloria's elbow and pointed toward the stairwell. "That good enough?"

She glanced around, then nodded.

"It's silly, really," she said softly as their footsteps tapped against the polished linoleum. Once they reached the exit, she crossed her arms and studied her toes. "I know bachelor parties are supposed to be men only. I also know Remy's brothers have strippers lined up."

Declan smiled. "The whole girl jumping from the cake cliché, I've been told."

Gloria flashed a shy smile. "Yeah. Declan, I want to be that girl. Could you help me sneak in?"

"A little role-playing fantasy game?"

That brought a bigger smile, but her gaze remained riveted to the floor. "I knew you'd understand. You'll help me?"

"You bet."



"Thanks. You're the best." She tossed a hug around him, then followed up with a kiss to his cheek. "I'm so glad you and Pam found each other. I hope you'll be as happy as we are."

He hugged her back. "Time will tell. Call me tomorrow at work when you're free, and we'll make some plans."

A final hug parted them. Gloria hauled open the door to the stairs and wiggled her fingers good-bye. "See you then."

"And what was that all about?"

Declan started at the sound of Connie's voice behind him.

"Haven't you heard?" He baited her with a smile. "I'm a heck of a nice guy."

"They're looking for you." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

He glanced in that direction and saw Pam watching them. A frown creased her forehead. Whether that was because Connie was hassling him or because Hank was hovering over her was impossible to tell -- probably a little of both. She ducked back into the room to let Dr. Fletcher and Buckley pass through, still absorbed in conversation. The floor nurse had already returned to her station.

Connie pivoted on her heel and hustled toward the elevator, rubber-soled shoes squeaking all the way. Declan waited until she was gone, then returned to the nurse's lounge.

Pam glanced up when he entered. "What was that all about?"

"Does it matter?" He hauled out one of the molded plastic chairs.

"Nope. I need to run to the ladies' room. I'll be right back."

Declan noticed she took her notepad with her. That was about the only way she could ensure Hank wouldn't help himself to the information. Refused entry into the interviews, the man paced a long circuit down and around the hospital corridors. Somehow he managed to be outside the lounge the instant Pam returned.

She didn't spare Hank so much as a glance -- or Declan, either, for that matter. She just sat down, plopped her notepad on the table, and flipped open the cover with the tip of her index finger before she started drumming her pen on it. Seconds later Buckley slipped into the chair beside her.

It was a subconscious psychological ploy, most likely bred into detectives from years of interviewing witnesses. The implications were clear -- you, us. Declan knew that and appreciated their need for clear lines, but it still grated on his nerves. These were people he worked with. That woman who so calmly scanned her previous notes was the same one who'd sucked his dick dry hundreds of times. He didn't like being treated as if he were just another in a long line of witnesses. It put him instantly on the defensive, and Declan resented the lack of control. Even Hank had the common sense to return to his pacing.

Pam flipped a page back. "You were the last person to see the victim alive."

Declan curled his fingers over her wrist. "Don't. This isn't just anybody you're talking to. It's me."

She eased back. "Sorry, second nature."

Buckley slouched in his chair. "We get locked into work-mode. I'm sure it's no different with you."

True enough. Declan pulled his hand away. "Yes, I sat with her for several hours, hoping she'd regain consciousness. At that point, we thought she'd attempted suicide. I wanted to be there in the event she woke up. But it got late, so I left." If he'd stayed, she'd still be alive.

"As far as you can recall, is there anything in either of the victims' files that would indicate they were in danger?" Buckley asked.

"Carol was a danger to herself, but had shown improvement. Darla's lifestyle might suggest an element of danger. But there was no one person who'd threatened them."

The captain pulled in a deep breath, flaring his nostrils. "What time did you leave?"

"Around ten."

He braced his chin on the points of his fingers. "So, after sitting with your patient for pretty close to four hours, you suddenly decide to leave."

Declan didn't like where this was going. Was he a witness or a suspect? Pam studied her notes, not offering him a lick of help. "Psychiatrists get depressed too, captain. I've tried many times to help Carol Phillips pull herself back from the brink. I kept questioning what I'd done wrong, what I could try next. It got to be too much for me and I needed to see my lady."

"So you have an alibi?"

Pam's gaze from under her eyebrows begged him to be quiet.

"Do I *need* an alibi?" he snapped back.

"Coroner places the time of death at around ten. An alibi wouldn't hurt, especially for this lady of yours. It wouldn't be the first time a doctor's woman got pissed off over the time he spends with a female patient."

Declan could write a book on the subject, and right now he did have two dead female patients.

"I understand your reasoning, but I'm quite certain my lady didn't have a hand in this."

"Can anyone ever be one hundred percent certain about anyone?" Buckley asked.

Declan gave a humorless snort. "In this case, yes."

The captain's expression shifted into that superior demeanor of one who thinks they know it all. "How can you be?"

Pam swiveled his way. "Because. The lady is me, sir."

Before he could give voice to the shock registering on his face, soft-soled footsteps beat a direct path down the hall to them. Gloria poked her head into the lounge, gasping for breath as she clutched her midsection. "The killer's still in the building. Caught me in the stairwell. Lights off." The words came out through pants.

The three of them rushed to her side, but it was Pam's arm she clutched as they led her to a small sofa against the wall. "Caught me from behind. Wrestled me down the stairs. I got a gut kick and a half-assed head butt in, and they took off. They didn't disarm me."

"You keep saying 'they,'" Buckley told her. "Were there two?"

She shook her head, wincing as she tightened her arms around her midriff. "They ... one ... don't know male or female. Get Remy. I need a doctor. I think ..." Tears started to trickle down her cheeks. "I think I'm losing my baby."

## Chapter Six

Declan hovered outside the examining room, ready to lend an ear and support should Remy and Gloria need it. With everyone else rushing around looking for the alleged killer, this was the one thing he could do. The potential task saved him from feeling so useless. Not that Remy or Gloria had called on his services. They were doing just fine on their own.

Thankfully, their baby had survived the fall, but the parents were a wreck, and rightfully so. Gloria and the baby could have been killed. Though why the murderer focused on her was a mystery. Unless he'd seen the opportunity to eliminate one of the detectives after him. If that was the case, the police might be closer than they thought. Not that Declan was privy to their investigation. It was just his assumption based on the facts as he saw them. Why else would someone put Gloria in the dark and then try to push her down the stairs?

Mark's obvious displeasure over the marriage quickly came to mind. It was no secret that Mark and Gloria had dated very briefly before she met Remy. They sure weren't together when she and Remy started going out. By that time, Mark was on his third or fourth girlfriend. Talk about someone who needed analysis. So why the hell had he brought it up? Was it in retribution for the pussy remark Gloria threw at him? Declan wanted to say no, that Mark wasn't petty. Yet the Mark he'd seen in the last twenty-four hours was pretty close to being a stranger. Even his looks had shifted, become more haunted. The Mark who'd left the courthouse yesterday afternoon was definitely not the same Mark who'd met him late for the drive to San Francisco. Something had happened during that brief space of time to change the man. Was it enough to make him cause harm to Gloria?

Declan glanced into the room. The couple clung to each other, heads bent in quiet conversation, neither bothering to hide their tears. Theirs was true devotion. That's what Declan wanted with Pam. As far as he was concerned, they were off to a nice start; a little bumpy, but promising. Although there were those few heart-pounding seconds before she told Buckley the truth. Declan wouldn't fault her for that. After all, they did have to shake

six months of secrecy. And while that didn't mean they could start dry humping each other in public, they would have to remember they could fully indulge in those subtle glances and touches that told the world they were a couple.

"How are they holding up?"

The question came from Connie. They were on her turf now -- ob/gyn.

"They're shook, but okay."

"Thank goodness all she has to show for it are bruises." She flipped through the papers on her clipboard. "Doctor says she can go home, but suggests she rest for the next twenty-four hours."

He liked her better this way -- official, conscientious. These were some of the qualities that had attracted him to her in the first place. Sadly, once the wedding ring was in place, the jealous beast had crawled out from its lair. The constant accusations and lack of trust had destroyed their marriage. She wouldn't take the news about him and Pam well.

"I'm sure between Remy and their mothers, she won't dare move for the next day."

Connie smiled. "She'll probably be the first bride wheeled down the aisle on a gurney." Her humor faded. "I can't believe we have a killer roaming the hospital. A very determined one at that. You must be out of your mind with worry."

Declan knew a baited comment when he heard it. His gut told him to let it go. It took every ounce of will he possessed to keep his mouth closed. His silence was lost on Connie.

"But it'll be all right. I've taken care of everything." She stared at the couple, then up at him. "I'm not bound by the same ethical considerations as you. I've told the police everything."

This didn't sound good. Declan was almost afraid to ask, since he had a feeling he knew what the answer was going to be. "What did you do?"

Connie smirked. "It's clear the death and the attempt on Gloria are all tied to you. Obviously you have a patient stalking you, one who doesn't take kindly to others displaying overt signs of affection toward you. I simply let the police know it's not the first time you've had a patient cross those lines."

"That's a lie and you know it." Declan curled his fingers into his palms to keep from clutching her shoulders.

"Is it?" Her smirk widened. "I told the police you'd say that. That you'd say and do anything to protect your patients."

All of his files would be subpoenaed. The implications weren't lost on Declan. With one "innocent" statement, Connie had managed to do what she'd sworn she would when they divorced -- ruin his practice.

He had to find Pam or Buckley before it was too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Talk to me.”

The words were a request, not a demand. Pam appreciated Captain Buckley’s consideration. He’d slipped into the role of partner and could just as easily have taken over. Clearly he intended an equal relationship. The problem was -- how could she put into words what was running through her head?

She turned up her palms in a shrug. “I don’t know where to begin. Are we dealing with one case or two?”

They simultaneously slid out chairs and sat across from each other. The nurse’s lounge was still the most private place they could find. The shut door ensured that privacy. It wasn’t much, but enough to dissuade Hank. Frustrated with what he called a lack of progress, he’d left before they’d interviewed Declan. Pam blessed her stars he was out from under foot.

“For what ever good it’s going to do, I’d like to have a look at the hospital surveillance tapes. We can compare those to the ones from Paradise Suites. If we find the same persons at both scenes, that might help narrow our field of suspects. Which is zilch right now.”

Buckley laced his fingers before him and locked full attention onto Pam. “Agreed. And the tapes from Dr. Trent’s building as well.”

Personal and professional lives were about to blur. Pam couldn’t help that. She had a job to do. “I wouldn’t put much stock into what Connie Trent has to say. She’s a woman with an axe to grind and an agenda of her own.”

“An agenda that wouldn’t be above murder?” Buckley’s gaze never faltered.

She hadn’t considered that. Connie had vowed to ruin Declan, but why wait until now? Patience wasn’t one of Connie’s virtues. “And she waited all this time to carry out her plan?” Pam shook her head. “I don’t buy it. I think she saw this as her chance to try to bring him down. She’s too volatile to methodically plan and execute murders this precise.”

“True.” He conceded the point with a barely perceptible nod. “But the attack on Gloria smacks of something a jealous woman would do. You saw what she did when Gloria hugged Declan. She didn’t waste any time hot-footing it over there. Gloria ducked into the stairwell. Connie made a beeline for the elevator. The murders were planned and carried out with calm precision. The attack on Gloria was one of opportunity and filled with rage.”

“That much I’ll agree with, but if Connie was going to go after anyone, it would be me.”

Buckley put one big hand over both of hers. “How could she know that? Until tonight, you’d kept it very quiet. Even now, no one would guess unless you’d told them.”

Funny how she could have lost sight of that fact. Just because she and Declan had decided to go public, didn’t necessarily mean the world would automatically notice. They hadn’t exactly been in a social environment tonight. Work always took precedence over personal, for both of them.

Pam hated to think that Connie would have done such a thing. If anyone had cause to behave out of jealousy, that would have been Mark -- an equally objectionable thought. But Mark had been with Remy the whole time.

"Then she should have physical evidence that ties her to the attack. Gloria didn't go down without a fight. We can't very well pull Connie into the station and order her to strip. Any fingerprints found in the stairwell won't help. She'll just say she's used the stairs before. I really don't like that she's shifted our focus."

Buckley leaned back. "Maybe she has, maybe she hasn't. Maybe she did methodically plan the other two murders. She did have opportunity and accessibility to kill Phillips. She thinks the way is clear, then sees Gloria hugging Declan and explodes."

Pam couldn't keep from laughing. "I can sure see the exploding part. I've seen Connie go off more than once in the last five years. But to wait two years to start offing Declan's female patients?"

"What better way to throw suspicion off yourself?"

She shook her head. "No. The attack on Gloria, possibly. The murders, no. Absolutely not."

"Look, Detective Donaldson, she's the one who came to us helpfully supplying information. Let's just haul her into the station and question her until ..."

"She breaks?" Pam couldn't believe her ears. How the hell did he get to be captain with tactics like that? "With all due respect, *sir*, what the fuck?" She jabbed her finger into the table. "I didn't get to be detective by going off half-cocked. While I can certainly understand and appreciate you relieving Gloria of duty, I will not sit back and watch you screw up this investigation. We do this by the book and with the proper evidence to back us up. We don't go hauling people in on a whim or because we *feel* that person *might* have done something. That's a sure way of fucking up everything we're working to achieve. I don't care who's involved or in what fashion. I'm going to conduct this investigation just as I have all the others -- thoroughly and by connecting all the dots and squares. And if you don't like that, then you can take me off the case right now and fuck it up all by yourself."

She'd probably screwed her whole career with that little tirade. Pam didn't care. This was her reputation at stake. Nothing was going to compromise that. She locked gazes with Captain Buckley, waiting, daring him to respond. To her surprise, the son of a bitch actually smiled.

"Good," he said, nodding slowly. "Considering your personal interest, I wanted to make sure that wasn't going to be a problem."

Pam's jaw tightened. Damn his hide. "I don't like tests, captain."

"And I don't like detectives who put their personal lives and feelings above their work. We have a job to do. I needed to make sure you were able to do it, especially considering how close your boyfriend is to the victims."

"I can do my job, sir," she said through tight lips.

"Good. Now tell me how you think we should proceed."

Before Pam could reply, the door swung open and Declan walked in.

"I think you may have been given some erroneous information. I want to set the record straight before things get out of hand."

The captain's chair creaked as he turned to face him. "By all means."

He indicated the vacant chair beside Pam. It looked like another game ploy on the captain's part. Pam wasn't in the mood to play. She shoved to her feet before Declan could sit.

"Have you been stalked by any of your patients in the past?"

He shifted a look her way, solid, unbreakable. "Never. The only person who has ever stalked me in any fashion has been my ex-wife. To my knowledge that ended when we divorced."

They both knew Connie's subtle harassment continued each time they crossed paths.

"Presently, you're the only common link for the murders and the attack on Gloria."

"I refuse to believe that any of my patients had anything to do with any of this. If I suspected any of them, I wouldn't hesitate to give you the information."

Pam didn't doubt that for a minute, but she also knew how protective he was of his clientele. His reputation depended on his discretion just as hers depended on her thoroughness.

"The only records we want to view are those of the two decedents."

Tension eased from his shoulders. "Thank you."

"However, if anything else occurs that even remotely resembles ..."

"Understood."

They simultaneously pulled in sighs and broke eye contact. The jingle of keys drew Pam's attention back to him.

"I know you have more work to do." He handed his car keys out to her. "You take the car. Remy will take me home."

Yet another test, this time of their relationship. She'd been independent for so long, Pam was stymied for the right response. If they were really going to go for this couple thing ...

"Actually, we're just about done. If you wouldn't mind waiting just a few more minutes."

"Good. I'll walk them out and meet you at the car."

Pam waited until the door closed her and Buckley back into their private cocoon. "I think the first step is the surveillance tapes from all three locations. While you work on that subpoena, I'll go to Dr. Trent's office and check out the files on Murray and Phillips. With



any luck, we'll find a link and the crime lab will turn up forensic evidence to back us up. And, of course, we'll need to conduct a more thorough search of Carol Phillips's apartment."

"Sounds good." His knees popped as he stood. "We'll talk in the morning, first thing. In the meantime, watch your back. I still don't trust Connie Trent."

"I didn't say I trusted her. I just don't think she's capable of murder."

"We'll see how you feel when she discovers her ex-husband is your new boyfriend."

There was no convincing him otherwise. Once Buckley got an idea in his head, it stayed there. Pam saved her breath and didn't argue. Then, as they stepped into the elevator, she saw what spurred Buckley's suspicions.

It was a chance event. A look so fleeting Pam might have missed it if she hadn't been looking right at Connie. Long fingers were wrapped around the handles of Gloria's wheelchair. Hatred steamed from her green eyes as Gloria laughed with the men flanking her sides. When she realized the elevator had opened, the look was rapidly replaced with one of bored indifference. Connie definitely needed watching, and Pam couldn't do that effectively if that rage was directed her way.

"Well, aren't you the little princess," she said to Gloria with a laugh.

Remy snorted. "It was either the wheelchair or have us carry her out. And she's a little weighty for that." He side-stepped the punch Gloria threw his way.

Pam squatted in front of her partner, resting her hands on Gloria's knees. "Is everything okay?"

She placed one hand over her belly and grasped Remy's hand with the other. Pam had thought Gloria was happy before -- her glow now doubled that.

"Perfect, except my little surprises didn't come out as planned."

"But still wonderful surprises." Remy bent to kiss her fingers. "A baby. My wife safe now."

The love in their eyes made Pam's tear up. "I swear if you two make me cry at this wedding ..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan prided himself on being able to read people. In his profession it was essential. In his personal life, it could be a curse. He'd never found the balance between the two. More often than not, he'd spent his off-time on guard, still analyzing what people said against their actions and expressions. The only time he'd been able to relax and just enjoy things as they were, were the last six months with Pam.

No, that wasn't entirely true. Once they began, he'd constantly second-guessed their buddy system, wanting more and afraid to ask, wondering how she really felt. Making the

move to couple-dom, realizing they both wanted it, should have eased his concerns. Yet here he was, still analyzing Pam along with everyone else.

Remy and Gloria's joy should have been contagious. It filled the elevator, surrounded them in a glow no one could deny. However, any pleasure gleaned from the others in the tight enclosure was surface only.

Connie didn't bother to smile. She kept her fingers wrapped around the wheelchair handles as if she were afraid Gloria would run off with the thing. She'd erected an icy barrier between her and them, completely professional and nothing more, and stared ahead to the sealed doors.

Josiah Buckley could have been in the adjacent elevator. While a smile remained plastered on his bulldog-looking face, he studied everyone from a distance. Analyzing, as Declan was? *Could be.*

Pam looked like she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders. Declan understood and appreciated the responsibilities she had. Putting killers behind bars wasn't child's play. Seeing frustration drag her into exhaustion, all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around her and give her some comfort from the world. In the lounge, Pam's actions indicated she wanted and needed that support. Now it was as if she'd slammed a steel door between them.

Not only did she stand as far from him as possible, she also refused to acknowledge him in any fashion. She wouldn't even look his way. The snub was beyond irritating. Declan wanted an explanation, and he wanted one now. Fortunately, he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. His parents didn't raise him to be stupid.

Connie shoved Gloria through the elevator doors the second they reached the ground floor. "Hospital regulations don't allow us to take you any farther than the curb."

She hurried along as if the devil was on her heels -- back ramrod straight, legs stiff, breath held.

Pam matched her step for step. "Do hospital regulations allow you to wait until one of us brings the car around, or are you supposed to dump her in the street?"

Connie jerked to a stop. Gloria had to grip the armrests to keep from falling out.

"Sorry. As you know, it's been a hectic night. I had to cover my floor as well as the other one, and we're short-staffed as it is. I'm just anxious to get back before something else goes wrong."

"Then we won't keep you." Gloria shoved from the chair. "Remy ..."

Buckley snapped his hand up before the man could move. "You stay here. I'll get my car, then drive everyone to theirs. If Detective Donaldson can bear my presence a little longer, I'll take her home so the two of you can go on."

He trotted toward the parking garage without another word.

Remy and Gloria hid their confusion with an embrace, but Declan saw it in the puzzled look the two exchanged. Pam acted as if nothing was wrong. Despite her insistence on having to get back to work, Connie stood there. That left Declan mentally scratching his head and asking himself what the hell was going on.

Gloria tucked herself under Remy's arm. "Under the circumstances, Declan, I won't be needing your help after all on Friday. The doctor suggests rest until the wedding, and that's what I'm going to do." She smiled up at her man. "Declan was going to help me sneak into the bachelor party so I could be the girl to jump out of the cake."

Remy faked a groan. "Oh, baby, the things you do for me."

Pam laughed. "So that's what that little hug and kiss was all about."

Was that why she'd distanced herself from him? She was jealous? The thought didn't sit well with Declan. He would *not* go through that a second time.

"There's your ride." Connie skidded the chair around. "I obviously don't have to remind you to follow doctor's orders." She added phony smile before returning to the elevator.

"My curiosity is killing me," Gloria said, once they were alone.

Pam pointed them toward the exit. "I'll explain in the car."

Buckley had the doors open and waiting for them. Remy guided Gloria to the front passenger seat, leaving the three of them to squeeze into the back of the compact. They'd barely got the doors shut when Gloria whirled around on her partner.

"Okay, what gives?"

"Are you certain you can't identify the sex of the person who attacked you?" Buckley asked.

"I'm ashamed to say I can't. It was dark, the attack sudden. I barely had time to defend myself. The person hit from above. I tumbled down the stairs. When I heard them coming, I kicked. Judging from the muffled *oomph*, I connected. But it wasn't enough to stop them ... him ... her." She flicked her fingers through the air. "Whoever."

"Hard enough to leave a mark?"

"Hell, yeah. That I'm sure of."

He and Pam nodded in unison. Declan was starting to see their line of reasoning. Connie was a suspect!

"No." He surprised himself by saying it. "Connie's a lot of things -- jealous bitch tops the list -- but she's not a murderer and she'd have no reason to go after Gloria."

"You didn't see the look ..."

"Yes, I did," he said, cutting Buckley off.

Pam touched his thigh. "I didn't agree at first, either, but I saw the glare she was giving Gloria when the captain and I got on the elevator. Captain Buckley's concern does have merit."

"Merit doesn't equal murder."

"True, but right now it's all we have to go on. Presently the only constant in all three cases is you. If that theory winds up being true, then everyone, every woman associated with you is at risk."

Including her. "I guess that explains your little charade back there." Declan hated that he sounded like a child, but the wall she'd thrown up hurt, no matter what the reason for it.

She kneaded circles into his thigh. "Don't be mad. I was trying to catch her off guard."

"And me in the process."

"That wasn't my intent. Look, whether it's Connie or not, we have to presume someone is watching you."

"If that was the case, then you would have been the target tonight, not Gloria," he said.

Remy shook his head. "No, the targets were Darla Murray and Carol Phillips. You were supposed to be in San Francisco. Both were targeted in your absence."

"No." Gloria twisted around as far as the seat belt allowed. "Murray was targeted. Carol wasn't killed until Declan showed up for a bedside vigil."

Which made Connie the suspect once more. "What do you propose? Haul Connie in and strip her naked to see if she has bruising on her torso?"

Gloria grinned. "As delightful as that would be ..."

"Not for you. You've officially resigned," Remy said.

"*They'd* need a good reason to bring her in," she continued on.

"Exactly." Pam punctuated the word by stabbing the air. "Let's presume this person knows you'll be at that bachelor party. I say we bait her."

"How?" The question came from all of them at once.

Pam tucked her arms over her chest and smirked. "I'll be the girl who comes out of the cake."

Despite the thousand naughty images that spawned and the delightful way they could play them out, Declan shook his head. "I am *not* letting my friends ogle and grope at my half-naked girlfriend."

She nudged his knee. "What if I wear a red wig and have a couple of fake tattoos? My target will be you and no one else."

"If he's being stalked, she'd have to come after you," Buckley said. "We'll set you up in a hotel room. You'll go there after the party. If she makes a move, we've got her."

"Personally, I think it's a waste of time. But," Declan shrugged his shoulder and danced his fingers over Pam's knee, "I suppose I could stand to play along."

"I bet you could," Remy said with a laugh. "There's my car."

Buckley pulled to a stop.

Remy jumped out and opened Gloria's door, then stuck his head back inside. "There's still a chance you'll be followed tonight. It would be best if we or Captain Buckley took Pam home."

"Absolutely not." He couldn't get much firmer than that. "If I'm being watched that closely, this person already knows. It's not the first time I've been to Pam's house or vice versa."

That's why this whole theory of theirs didn't work, and he told Pam that once they were alone in his car. She conceded the point with a nod, followed by a deep sigh.

"Two people dead, Declan. Gloria attacked. I just don't know what other direction to look in."

"Then just give it a rest and look at it fresh in the morning. Right now all I want to do is take you home, crawl under the covers, and fall asleep with you by my side."

"Hmmm, I'd like that, too." She snuggled into the seat. "And if you're real good, I'll let you cook me breakfast."

"I hope you like toast."

"I hope you like me half-naked with a red wig and tattoos."

"You keep that up, and we won't be getting any sleep tonight."

"Oh? Is it up?"

"Honey, it stays up whenever you're around."

"No rest for the weary." Her soft laughter morphed into a yawn. By the time he pulled into her driveway, Pam was asleep.

He awakened her with a kiss, then tucked her under his arm and led her inside. They stripped to skin, crawled between the cool sheets, into each other's arms, and closed their eyes. Sleep never felt so good.

## Chapter Seven

Pam smacked the alarm clock into silence, then curled toward the warm body she expected to be beside her. All she got was empty space, even the sheets were cool. As she was contemplating Declan's stealthy exit, the scent of fresh coffee and breakfast cooking pulled her upright.

A tendril of the aroma lured her to the kitchen. Intrigued, Pam swung her feet to the floor and stuffed her arms into her threadbare but oh-so-comfortable mint-green terrycloth robe. Finger-combing the tangles from her hair, she wandered to the bathroom to pee and brush morning breath away. A hint of steam lingered there. Declan had already showered and shaved.

A second set of sage green and gray towels hung beside hers on the towel bar. His blue tie dangled between them. She'd washed it the night before and draped it over the showerhead to dry. Declan had obviously moved it when he bathed. She could almost see his smile and the devilment in his eyes when he did so. Neither of them would ever be able to look at that tie again without thinking of what he'd done to her with it.

Pam's body tightened at the memory. She pressed her fingers against her clit to quell the sensation.

Declan's toiletry bag was open on the wide counter, but he'd already arranged several items next to hers in the medicine chest: razor, toothbrush, shaving cream. His comb and a small hairbrush were beside hers on the counter. It looked like he was moving in.

The thought made her smile. It felt right, him being here this way. A pity they hadn't seen that from the start, but their failed marriages had made them extra cautious. They'd been in perfect step with each other all this time, feeling their way, enjoying each other. Pam wouldn't have traded that time for all the money in the world. Or the phase they were moving into now -- a natural progression that felt as perfect as everything else they'd done.

She couldn't believe she'd actually allowed Bobby Salazar's ravings to make her question what her heart and body knew were right. It wouldn't happen again.

After flicking a brush through her hair, Pam let those yummy breakfast scents pull her onward.

Declan worked her kitchen like a pro. Dressed in white T-shirt and boxers, he dipped bread into a bowl of batter and transferred the slices onto the sizzling griddle. The small table in the alcove beyond was set to perfection -- napkins, dishes, silverware, all in their proper orientations. A vase containing one purple iris from her garden decorated the center. Small white bowls of cantaloupe floated on matching plates, waiting to be devoured. He'd even staged all the condiments they'd need to enjoy the French toast: butter, syrup, powdered sugar, and cinnamon. All she wanted was him.

"Ohmygosh, I'm involved with a nester."

"Like you didn't already know that." Declan smiled and flipped the bread. "I was wondering how much longer you were going to stand there."

"I'm just admiring the view. It's not every day a woman finds a good-looking man in her kitchen cooking breakfast. In underwear, no less. In fact, I can safely say it's never happened to me."

"Just trying to prove my worth as a mate. Think of it as the modern day equivalent of bringing home mastodon."

She slithered up behind him. "Bet I can guess where you have the trunk hidden." Pam shoved her hands beneath the waistband of his boxers. An erection blossomed into her fingers.

A groan rumbled in his chest. "You guessed my secret." He pressed her fingers around him, inviting her to stroke as he shoveled the bread onto the platter with the other servings. "You keep that up and your breakfast will get cold."

Pam parted her robe and rubbed her nipples against his back. "Not if you fuck me caveman-style." She smeared her thumb over the drop of pre-cum that suddenly appeared.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Hard, fast, and with no thought to anyone's pleasure but my own?"

Just thinking of it was enough to make her come. Wetness soaked the crotch of her panties. "Think you're *up* for it?"

"Why are you still standing? You should be on all fours presenting that sweet little ass to me." He thrust into her fist.

Pam nipped his shoulder through the cotton. "Is that how you're going to fuck me? Up the ass?"

"Oh, baby," he growled out. Grabbing her by the wrist, he hauled her to the table. "Get those panties off now, put your hands on the table, and spread 'em."

Excitement raised goose bumps all over her body. Pam shrugged the robe from her shoulders, then kicked it to one side with her panties. Only her camisole remained.

The clink of metal to glass pulled her head up as Declan cut a wedge off the stick of butter. Her clit swelled with heat. Legs wide, she lifted her ass. He smeared butter over the puckered hole and then tested the slickness with slow finger thrusts. Her hips pivoted of their own volition.

A gentle *slurp, slurp* told her he was lubing up, too. The heat from his thighs warmed hers. His cockhead probed. Her clit tightened, begging for attention. Pam curled her fingers around the edge of the table and raised her hips higher. Inch by inch, he slowly took possession of her, stealing a little more of her breath each time.

Finally, he reached the hilt. Fingers gripped her hips while he fought for control. The lazy circles his thumbs drew over her skin continued to destroy hers. Other than spanking, anal sex was the fastest way to make her come. The only caveat being that he had to come first, or it would hurt like hell. He knew her so well, knew that exact moment when his touch would bring them both intense pleasure.

Slow, shallow strokes grew to longer thrusts. Pam clutched at the table to keep from touching her clit. Waves of pleasure radiated outward only to zero right back to her pussy. He pivoted faster, rattling the dishes on the table with each plunge. Pam's groan matched his. Her arms quaked from the effort to keep them in place and not dive into her crotch.

"God, honey!" he gasped out.

He pushed deep and froze, long fingers ferreting out her clitoris as he did so. Deep contractions pooled in the recesses of her vagina. Rapid flicks against her clit released them with tsunami-like intensity. They shuddered together as orgasms ripped through them.

"I'm going to need another shower." He kissed the base of her neck and followed with more down her spine as he pulled free from her body. "And you're coming with me."

Declan gathered Pam in his arms before she could sag into a satiated heap onto the table. He covered her lips in a kiss that reached her toes, breaking it only when he placed her feet into the bathtub. He hauled off her camisole, then whipped off his T-shirt.

"Thanks for washing my tie," he said with a smile.

"If you hadn't already taken everything out of me for now, I'd suggest we put it to use. Instead, I'll iron it and you can wear it all day and ..."

"Daydream about tonight?" He gave her that killer smile Pam couldn't resist.

"Something like that."

"And here I was going to go into the office casual. I might have to rethink that."

"I'd hate to ruin a great plan like that. The more casual you are, the less I have to take off you tonight." She twisted on the shower. "Come on. You wash my back, I'll wash yours."

He jerked the shower curtain closed as he stepped in. "And my front, too."



Pam laughed. "Anything to please."

"Remember that when I have to nuke the French toast."

\* \* \* \* \*

She never realized after-love caresses could be so bonding. They'd soaped and rinsed every divot and curve of each other's bodies until the butter used to facilitate their earlier encounter was just a tingly memory.

Even warmed in the microwave, Declan's breakfast was the best Pam had had in a long time. She normally grabbed a bagel and coffee from Starbucks. If she had time to kill, a banana and cold cereal were considered treats. This she could get used to, and she didn't hesitate to let Declan know it, either.

"All part of my master plan to win you over." He shoved his empty plate to one side and crossed his forearms on the table. "Is it working?"

Pam pierced her last bite. "If I say yes, does that mean I won't get breakfast any more?"

"Nope, just means you'll get to wash the dishes."

That seemed a fair trade. "I can live with that." She popped the morsel into her mouth. "I suppose you'll be wanting your own house key now."

"Not to mention closet space, drawer space ..."

She loved how mischief turned his brown eyes golden. "What? No demanding control of the remote?"

"I'll save that for after we're married."

That dropped her jaw. Pam didn't know whether to call him on it or let it go. Since he started gathering dishes and toting them to the sink, she brushed it off as jest. She swallowed the last of her coffee and followed him.

"Do you have any patients coming in today?"

"Since I was scheduled for the conference this week, no appointments were planned. Why?"

Pam plugged the sink and added a squirt of dish soap under the running water. "We want as little interference to your schedule as possible. No need to alarm anyone."

"Especially if one of my patients winds up being the culprit." He braced himself against the counter.

"Anything is possible at this point. Even though Connie heads our list of suspects, it never hurts to continue to gather evidence."

"You don't think she did it."

"No, I don't." Pam plunged her hands into the soap suds and was surprised to see him snatch up the dish towel to dry. He sure was a change from Hank, whose idea of helping around the house was to put the toilet seat down, and he did that grudgingly.

"The murders appear to be coldly calculated and executed. Connie is prone to violent outbursts and actions."

Declan snorted. "That's for sure. In fact, they're legendary."

He was sure right about that. Pam couldn't count the number of times Connie had gone ballistic at parties. It got to the point where people quit asking Declan and Connie to come, or they'd find a way to include Declan and not his wife. She imagined that created its share of problems as well. Connie was a constant embarrassment. Pam had really felt for Declan at the time -- still did when she thought about all Connie put him through. Granted, her marriage to Hank hadn't been golden, but at least they managed to keep their arguments behind closed doors, more or less. A pity he couldn't have done that with his affairs.

"Care to clue me in on why you're smiling?" He reached for the plate in the drainer.

"Just thinking about our respective ex-spouses. Now there's a couple who deserve each other. Talk about a match made in hell."

Declan parked his hands on either side of her, framing her with his body. "You've got a mean streak, you know that?"

"All part of my charm." She arched her neck for the kiss he placed there.

"You have these all right? I need to get ready for work."

"I do." She wiggled her ass against his crotch.

"Stop that." He gave her a sharp swat that brought her clit to full attention.

"You are going to make me so late for work."

Declan burrowed into her neck. "Can't have that, can we?"

Pam ducked under his arm. "Pace yourself, big guy. If we're going to be co-habiting, we don't want to run out of steam too soon." She snagged a key from the rack near the refrigerator. "There's always tonight. And I will expect 'servicing.'"

Laughing, he curled his fingers around hers and the key. "I'll make sure I'm up to speed."

"Just make sure no lusty lady comes to visit you during lunch."

"If she does," he cupped her ass with his other hand and tugged her close, "I'll do my best to resist her considerable charms."

"Sounds like a challenge to me."

Girdling her waist with his hands, he set them apart. "What time do you think you'll be by to look at those files?"

Pam appreciated the shift to business. It was nice to know they could balance those facets of their lives. "I'm not sure. I'm going to run by the precinct first to see if anything new has popped up. Want me to call first, just in case you have a client?"

Declan tossed the key, then caught it in his hand. "No, it'll be fine. I'll be there all day. With Trish gone and no clients, it'll be a good opportunity for me to catch up on paperwork."

Pam watched him walk back to the bedroom to dress. She didn't know who he thought he was fooling. Miss Efficient was always up-to-date on office paperwork. He was going to spend the day searching client files for clues.

She decided to let him have the fib. As long as he was being cautious, that's all she cared about. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, Declan was in as much danger as those around him. Eventually the killer would turn that angst toward the subject of his or her obsession. If they couldn't find this person soon, Declan was as good as dead.

The thought choked her. Pam shoved her hands into the sudsy water, trying to drive the images out of her head. Just as quickly, she jerked back, wiping her hands on the seat of her black jeans.

"I know you're not a stupid man," she called out.

He stepped from her bedroom as he tugged a periwinkle-blue shirt over his head. "Thank you. My mother might argue that point on occasion."

Pam pressed her palms against the broad plane of his chest. The teasing glint in his brown eyes faded.

"With Trish gone and no clients due, you'll be in the office alone. I know there are hundreds of others in your building and people are in and out of it all day. Just do me a favor; keep the door locked. I'll call you before I show up."

She held her breath while she waited for some protestation of how macho he was, how he'd be all right, what a silly female she was to think a big, tough man like him could be in any danger whatsoever. When a half smile pulled up one corner of his mouth, she braced for battle.

Declan curled his fingers around hers. "I will. No sense being foolish."

Okay, she definitely was going to marry this guy.

"Bearing that in mind," he tapped her nose with his forefinger, "allow me the indulgence of being petty, possessive, with a trace of jealousy. I know you have a job to do. I know it might seem innocent, fun, maybe even daring and exciting. However, the last thing I want is to see the woman I ... my woman stripping in front of anyone other than me, even if it is for the job. Find another way, please."

She spanned her hands around his back, squishing her breasts hard against his chest. "I will or I won't do it."

"Thank you."

Pam tucked her head under his chin. "You're welcome." Oh, yes, definitely marriage material.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam's house key jingled with Declan's as he strode toward the office elevator. Her parting kiss still warmed his lips. They were off to a very nice start. It would have been better if he'd managed to drum up the courage to tell her how he really felt -- that he loved her like crazy.

He patted himself on the back for thinking to make breakfast. The joy on Pam's face made the effort worthwhile. The sex and shower afterward were an extra treat, not to mention that he'd taken a huge leap by asking her to alter her undercover plans. Well, asking was putting in mildly. Reviewing it in his head, it sounded more like a demand. But it was how he felt. If he couldn't continue to be one hundred percent honest with her, their relationship was doomed.

Declan smiled. The gamble, trusting his instincts, had been a good move. It was all he could do to keep from telling Pam how he really felt. They'd just moved from sex buddies to a couple; the last thing he wanted was to make her feel cornered, no matter how anxious he was to move forward.

One step at a time. Things felt pretty good for the moment.

Nevertheless, among that feel-good was the reality of what lay ahead -- finding a murderer.

He didn't want to think of Connie as the culprit. Yet that final night they were together kept flashing through his mind. Rage had twisted her face, making her more of a stranger than she'd already become. The butcher knife clutched over her head hadn't helped. Somehow he'd managed to disarm, then sedate her, and never told a soul.

The following morning he'd mentioned divorce and suggested counseling for her. Connie had quietly agreed to both.

He'd wanted to believe divorce had permanently severed their relationship. In the two years since they'd separated, there hadn't been so much as a hint ...

He punched the button to his floor, then scrubbed his hand down his face. There *had* been constant signs that Connie wasn't willing to let go. Every time he saw her, she interrogated him. How could he have not seen? How could he have thought divorce made him immune, safe? His tunnel vision had put the people who trusted him the most in danger -- his patients.

Now two women were dead, and an attempt had been made on a police detective's life. And *still* Declan needed to believe Connie was innocent, despite the killer look she'd given Gloria at the hospital. It didn't make sense that Connie would wait this long to do something like this. But then, when had anything Connie did ever made sense?

In the past, though, her anger had been directed toward him, never one of his patients. He couldn't believe that part of her would change.

No, there had to be something in Darla's and Carol's sessions he'd missed, some clue to tie their murders. He just needed to find it. As for where that left the attack on Gloria Rodriguez ...

Declan shook his head. One problem at a time.

He jangled his keys as he walked onto his office, trying to recapture the glow of his morning with Pam. It faded when he stepped inside.

The silence of the place was what hit him the most. Logically, he knew it was the present danger that made him feel so isolated. He'd been in the office dozens, hundreds of times without another soul here. He stood there, back pressed against the door listening, looking for any sign of disturbance.

Nothing looked out of place. Everything was as Trish left it each day: neat, orderly, ready for business. The door to his area was open, as was the door to the file room. Vacuum marks in the carpet showed the cleaning crew had been through on their nightly rounds.

Declan calculated the distance to the law offices to his left, the chiropractor to his right. Soundproofed rooms suddenly didn't seem like such a smart idea. Anything could happen within these walls, and no one would be wiser until the janitorial service did their nightly sweep of the place.

He twisted the lock behind him, realizing what a flimsy little device it was. What had his grandfather always said? Locks were designed to keep the honest people out. And there wasn't anything honest about murder.

Declan drew in a deep breath. He wanted to think it was caution rather than paranoia that led him to do a thorough search of the rooms. Maybe it was a little of both. He didn't care; better safe than sorry.

He ended his tour in the file room. Braced against the copier, he stared at the seven five-drawer filing cabinets. Records for every client he'd ever seen were contained within. Some were one-time visits, some weekly, some court-mandated. Then there were the lonely ones, those willing to pay a fee when they needed someone to talk with rather than risk making friends. Hundreds of files from thousands of appointments. And within them had to be the clue linking the crimes together.

Declan prayed he was smart enough to find it, but considering the monumental task staring at him, it seemed a lot to ask of himself. If nothing leaped out at him when Darla and Carol were killed, how could he hope to find something now?

He rubbed at the growing ache in his temple. All he knew was he had to try. He couldn't sit back and do nothing. Declan had to find evidence that Connie didn't do this. His peace of mind demanded it. The last thing he wanted to face up to was that he had left a murderer on the streets because he was too embarrassed to report that his wife had tried to kill him.

## Chapter Eight

Pam swept a slow gaze down Carol Phillips's nude body. Viewing autopsies wasn't on her list of favorite things to do. She avoided it like the plague, willing to wait for the coroner to supply her with the results. Captain Buckley had other ideas.

She couldn't fault his decision. Most probably, she would have come to the conclusion on her own. With two murders obviously perpetrated by the same person, the news media had jumped on it like a pack of feral dogs on roadkill. They'd even named the son of a bitch The Carver. Every politico was on their case to get this solved. Shit rolled downhill from the mayor's office, culminating in Hank now being in their hip pockets every step of the way. At least he had the good sense to be up Buckley's ass and not hers.

"Sure you're ready for this?" Dr. Adams snapped his gaze up over the rim of his glasses, nailing her in place.

Few were as professional as he was. The man lived and breathed his job. Once he started, he wouldn't stop for her. Her wonderful breakfast now felt like a lump in her stomach. If she'd known this was going to be her first stop, Pam wouldn't have eaten.

She met his steely gaze with one of her own. "I'd like to ask some questions first." Once the doctor began the procedure, he'd be recording his observations on tape.

"I presume this is about the other victim. I've completed that autopsy. The official report will be ready later today."

As backed up as they were at the morgue, he'd probably worked through the night to get it done. Higher-ups would be on his ass, too.

"Cause of death still smothering?" she asked.

"Yes, and from the bruising I found on her nose, it looks like the killer toyed with her first. Her nostrils were pinched shut."

With the gag duct-taped in her mouth, she wouldn't have been able to breathe. "She would have died. Why smother her with the pillow?"

"My guess is that he -- or she -- didn't have the stomach for it, didn't want to have terror-stricken eyes haunting him the rest of his life. Using the pillow was effective without having to watch her succumb. Ms. Phillips here doesn't have the bruising around the nose."

"Being in the hospital with discovery possible, he wouldn't have had the time to play with her. He would have wanted it done quickly."

"Or she was a witness he wanted silenced."

"True," Pam conceded the point, then added it another. "Or he'd perfected his method of killing -- Darla being the first."

Dr. Adams nodded. "The lash marks appear to be from a single-tail whip."

A short one judging from the lack of swinging room and blood splatter. "Was there other scarring on her? For instance, healed lash marks?"

"Many. Her buttocks were laced with them. Welts covered her from shoulder to ankle, as if he'd beaten her there first, then flipped her over."

So what Murray had confided to Declan was true. That begged the question of how she could physically contain such violent activity. If there were scars, there had to be blood cast off from a whip or something when the wounds were originally made. Did she police the area afterward, or was clean up part of the deal she made with the hotel? It might help explain why she chose the hotel over her own house. Pam made a mental note for her follow-up visit with the manager at Paradise Suites.

"And the weapon used to carve the word into her forehead?"

"Looks like a pocketknife."

A weapon of opportunity, something most men and even a few women carried. It could have come from Murray's purse.

"Tox screen came back negative," Adams said. "Nothing too unusual. She had zolpidem in her blood system."

That brought Pam's eyebrows up. "Interesting. How long?"

"Probably from the night before, judging from the level. Trust me, she was fully awake and coherent. She had consensual sex at some point. At least it appears consensual since I found no signs of trauma. Spermicide was in the vagina and anus. She'd had a wax job, so no pubic hairs of any kind."

A methodical perp who knew what he was doing. Or so it appeared.

"And this one?" She glanced down at Carol Phillips's body. Her large boobs sagged to the sides and were the only things out of proportion to her trim body. The red splash of curls at the apex of her thighs proved she was a true red-head, yet no freckles marred her ivory skin. The only imperfections were the slices at her wrists.

"No signs of sexual activity. No signs of trauma, other than the obvious. Nothing to show she'd fought her attacker. Petechial hemorrhaging in the eyes from smothering. Butcher knife used for the wrists, a pocketknife for carving. I doubt the autopsy will reveal much more. Sure you want to stick around?"

"It was requested that I do so."

"I understand," he said with a nod and pressed his scalpel against Phillips's skin to begin the Y-incision.

They both understood that someone else was pulling the strings now. No matter how well they did their respective jobs, no matter how frustrating it was to have others watching over their shoulders while they did those jobs, they had to play the political game, and try to catch a killer in spite of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan jumped when his cell phone cut the silence. He'd been deep in the files, one hundred percent focused, and didn't appreciate the jolt to his heart. He glared at the display, then smiled.

"You scared me. I thought the boogey-phone was out to get me."

Pam laughed. "That's okay. The big, brave police detective is coming up to protect you."

"I'll bet you carry a big gun, too."

"Only when you place it in my hands." The purr in her voice tickled down his spine.

"I love when you talk dirty to me. I'll meet you at the door."

"Do me a favor and wait until I knock. Allow me this flash of paranoia, and I'll deny you nothing."

"Uhm, you deny me nothing now. And what do we do about my paranoia? I'm quivering like a virgin bride."

"Oh, please!" She laughed hard. "There's nothing virgin left about you."

"I don't know. You might be surprised."

"Then we'll have to explore those options later. I can see I'm going to have to be more inventive."

"We can discuss it and see what comes up." Declan smiled when she groaned.

"You are so punny."

"Isn't that one of the reasons you love me?" The words were out before he realized it. Declan wanted to kick himself. Her silence didn't help. The knock at the door echoed in the phone before she disconnected.

He shoved the phone into his pocket with one hand and opened the door with the other.



Pam stood there smiling, unaware of the torment scoring through him. "Yes, as a matter of fact, it is."

She cupped his cheek and breezed by. Declan didn't know whether to call her on it, or let the whole topic die. He selected the coward's way out.

"Do you want to grab lunch when we're done here?"

Pam screwed up her face as she shook her head. "I've spent the morning at the morgue. I think I'm good until dinner. I'll just whip up something for us when we get home."

It looked like he hadn't screwed up. She'd probably taken his comment as a joke.

"I have those files in my office." He led the way.

"Anything leap out at you?"

He handed her the folders as she sank onto his sofa, then sat beside her as she opened Darla's. "I found it odd that both died as they feared: Darla from her lifestyle; Carol alone. That's either a very big coincidence, or the killer knew them well. These were presumably secrets they never dared share with another."

Pam lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "People are people. Chances are if they told one person their secret, they told someone else."

She was right about that. It was human nature. How the two of them had managed to keep quiet all these months was a small miracle.

"The tox report showed zolpidem in Murray's system, too. I don't see anywhere in your file that you'd prescribed it."

"I didn't. She never indicated any problems sleeping. If so, I would have noted it in her chart and referred her to her general practitioner for tests to make sure there were no physiological reasons for insomnia. I prescribed no medicine for her, but that doesn't mean she didn't get it from another doctor. As much as I'd like to believe otherwise, patients don't necessarily tell you everything, even if doing so is in their best interest."

"She'd apparently taken it within the last twenty-four hours. We didn't find any at either woman's house."

And both had it in their systems -- Carol in a dose meant to be lethal, eventually. "Have you been able to find anything yet?"

"Mostly more questions. There are similarities yet differences to each murder. Darla had sex prior to her murder; Carol did not."

"Is it possible the sex and the murders aren't related?"

She heaved a sigh and picked up the other file. "Anything's possible at this point. I'm not ready to rule anything out. Buckley and I are supposed to meet up this afternoon with forensics and then compare notes. Then he'll make a report to the DA, if Hank isn't already there panting for info. Everyone from the mayor's office down to the police chief has their panties in a twist over this. The murders are plastered all over the news."

"I missed the news this morning." Declan smiled when her cheeks flushed with her grin.

"I recall." Her smile faded. "They've named him The Carver. Freaks. The precinct's been flooded with phone calls."

Nothing like a suspected serial killer to put the public on edge, and some poor soul was going to have to wade through all the cranks, panic, and tips hoping to find one solid clue.

Pam tapped the page. "Carol *wanted* to be a lesbian? I thought she was one."

"No, she decided she would be one because she'd never had a good relationship with any man."

She snorted. "You don't just *decide* something like that. You either are or you aren't."

"It was like talking to a wall."

"And yet she felt the need to cozy up to you, touch you, lean into you until her breasts were against your arm. That should have been a clue to her. Did Darla behave that way with you?"

Was she asking as an investigator or as his girlfriend? Her tone made it difficult to tell. Declan didn't like where this was headed. "Just about all of my female patients -- and some of the men -- young and old, get tactile. Some mean something by it, while others are just the touchy-feely type of people."

"How well did Connie know these women?"

So, they were back to Connie as a suspect. At least that was better than thinking Pam was starting to get jealous, but not much.

"She and I separated two years ago. Both became clients after that. She knew Carol from the times she'd been admitted for attempted suicide. Darla may have visited her there."

"By her own admission, Connie is aware that your female patients get touchy-feely, as you put it."

"Yes." He couldn't dispute that.

"And she didn't like it."

"No." He wouldn't dispute that, either.

Her cell phone prevented further discussion. Pam snatched it from the pouch at her side. That's when he realized she was fully loaded for work: badge clipped her belt, weapon in a fanny holster, phone a grab away.

"Gotta go." She snapped to her feet and tucked her phone away. "They just found Carol's car and need me on scene. Buckley's still working her apartment."

Before he could stand, she leaned over him and sealed her lips deep into his.

"That ought to hold me until tonight." She gave a lazy stretch upward.

"See?" Declan walked her to the door. "I told you all the females get touchy-feely in my office." He damned his impetuous mouth.

Pam whirled around and cupped his crotch. His penis went from semi-flaccid to rock hard. “Now *this* is touchy-feeling, doctor. And when we get back home tonight, *this* better be just as hard.”

Declan cupped her ass and hauled her close. “Not a problem, detective.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby Salazar was already at the scene and processing when Pam arrived. Pam couldn’t believe her luck. Hopefully, this wouldn’t evolve into another dissertation on lifestyle choices. He strolled around the blue Camry, recording his observations on a small tape recorder. She’d never seen him without it.

A single head jerk acknowledged her. He snapped off his recorder and tucked it in a shirt pocket crowded with miniature tools, flashlight, pen, and notepad.

“Hi, I just got here minutes ago myself. The tow truck’s on the way. It’s locked with the keys inside. I’ve got a slim-jim, if you’d like to open it now.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to take a preliminary look. Just be careful not to break the window.” She dug a pair of vinyl gloves from her pocket.

“My family runs a locksmithing business. I trained from the cradle up. I know what I’m doing, detective.”

Why did he take offense to everything she said? Pam’s hackles rose. No wonder people steered clear of him.

“You know, Bobby, it wouldn’t hurt you to lighten up once in a while. Maybe even smile.” She tugged the gloves in place.

“I just like to stay focused on work, that’s all. Distractions make you sloppy.” He’d returned to the driver’s side, metal bar clutched in his now gloved hands. With barely a blink, he shoved it between the window and door. A flick and a yank unlocked it.

“Impressive.” Pam swore it’d taken him under ten seconds.

“Just skill and knowledge. I can open anything. No brag, just fact.”

“Then we’re lucky to have you on our side, instead of the other.”

“No luck about it, detective. I’ve always followed the straight and narrow. My family wouldn’t have it any other way.” He swung the car door open. “I’d say our perp has definitely been in here.”

That was a no-shitter. Blood stained the gray interior wherever the driver had touched. From what she could see, the prints were smeared, leaving nothing definable behind.

“Darn it. I just keep shedding. Soon I won’t have any hair left.” Bobby plucked a barely visible strand of short, black hair from the driver’s seat.

"Are you sure it's yours?" He was getting thin up top. The one eyebrow thing sort of distracted from that.

"I watched it fall." He dropped it behind him. "It's probably best I step away and let someone else process this at the lab. No telling what I've contaminated."

At least he had the presence of mind to mention it. He might not have a sense of humor or social skills, but no one could question his diligence. "Agreed. Although, if you're shedding that badly ..."

"I might as well shave it bald since I'm heading in that direction. The last thing I need is someone questioning my integrity. It's the only thing I've got that's mine. I won't lose it."

Pam didn't have the heart to agree with him. Before she could utter a word in his defense, Bobby strode back to his car for crime-scene tape to seal the vehicle. It was just as well. He'd twist anything she said into his own distorted version. Bobby was hard enough to deal with as it was.

"Are you looking forward to the bachelor party tomorrow night? I understand everyone's been invited," she asked, hoping to steer the conversation over to a fun topic.

Bobby stayed honed in on his task. "My grandmother would have a heart attack if she found out I went to such a thing. Naked women fawning over men, some of whom are married." He tsked. "It's disgraceful. I declined. And, before you ask, I declined the wedding invitation as well. It's not being held in a Catholic church. I wouldn't step foot in any other."

Yes, it was definitely better to keep her mouth closed whenever possible around him. *Where the hell is that tow truck?* The sooner she was away from him, the better. Pam couldn't believe she'd given any weight to what he'd said the other day. She definitely wouldn't make that mistake twice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam flipped through her case notes. They'd gotten as far as they could for the day. Now it was time to compare. Thankfully, she didn't have to report any higher. It would be up to Captain Buckley and Hank to keep their superiors in the loop. From what she understood, they were hugging the phones, waiting. Like a childhood game of gossip, she wondered how convoluted the information would get before it reached the top man.

As always, the news media would put their unique spin on things. Until this was resolved, reporters camped outside the precinct waiting for word. Pam hoped they didn't follow her home. She could always duck out the back, for what little good it would do. By now, they'd have the names and addresses of everyone involved in the case. The best she could hope for was that they would have the good sense to let them investigate without interference.

*Fat chance of that.*

Investigator Kowalski slipped into the room and shut the door behind him. "Sorry I'm late. I wanted to wait for these lab reports." He held up a small sheaf of papers as he braced himself against the wall.

Buckley winced as he slugged down lukewarm coffee. Hank tapped his pen on his steno pad. Patience wasn't one of his virtues. Not that he had any virtues.

"Let's start from the top and try to evaluate this in a logical order," the captain said. "If we can find an order that is logical."

"I'll start," Ski said. "We received a call yesterday morning at 8:07 to Paradise Suites. The housekeeping staff had just come on duty and were making their rounds. Room 1224, Murray's room, had the 'clean room' sign showing, so the maid went in and discovered the body. One of the responding officers became ill and vomited in the bathroom ..."

"Effectively destroying any evidence there," Hank snapped.

No one responded to the obvious.

Pam cleared her throat and picked up the thread. "Coroner places death at three-thirty the previous afternoon. She checked in at one. She was bound spread-eagle to the bed with square knots and parachute cord. She'd been whipped back and front with what appears to be a single-tail whip, causing lacerations on her torso. There were also old scars from previous encounters.

"Discussion with her psychiatrist and perusal of her patient file revealed she engaged in a BDSM lifestyle, so this activity was commonplace for her. She was a frequent guest at the hotel. The manager confirmed this and indicated nothing unusual had ever been reported about the room she'd used. As far as he knew, she was just another customer."

Hank snorted. "She has a local address and frequently stays there, and he was never once suspicious?"

Pam sighed. "He admits he thought she might be a call girl, but didn't consider that his business since she didn't flaunt it or approach the other guests. Anyway, the report reveals she'd had consensual sex, both vaginally and anally, prior to death. Spermicide was found in the orifices; no condoms were on the scene. Duct tape kept the gag in her mouth. He toyed with her by pinching her nose closed, then smothered her, and carved MINE into her forehead with what appears to be a pocketknife."

Hank leaned forward. "Is there any chance this could have been a sex act gone bad? Perhaps she was venturing into autoerotic asphyxiation. Her partner got carried away and killed her, then tried to cover it up with the pillow over the face."

"No," Kowalski replied. "DNA evidence found shows she was breathing when the pillow was placed over her face. This person was very meticulous. There is no physical evidence whatsoever. No fingerprints, no semen, no hair or fibers. He cleaned up very, very well."

"All he left behind was her purse with a few personal items inside and driver's license. Everything else was gone. We suspect he then went to the victim's house," Pam said.

Hank cocked his head to one side. "Why?"

"We think he was covering his tracks," Kowalski told him. "Pages of Murray's day planner and journal were ripped out. He'd attempted to wipe her computer. Lab's working on retrieval now. As with the hotel room, we found no physical evidence leading to the killer. Fingerprints found belonged to the victims, no one else."

Buckley's chair creaked as he leaned back. "We think our second victim, Carol Phillips, may have surprised him in the act. She may have known him. There was no struggle. The killer administered a heavy dose of zolpidem to her, then laid her out, took a butcher knife from the block and slit her wrists. A 9-1-1 call came in from that location shortly after the Murray call. Recordings indicate it was a woman saying she just couldn't live any more. The phone was left off the hook."

"So we could be looking for a woman as the doer?" Hank asked.

"It's starting to look that way, judging from ... Well, let's continue on first." Pam flipped a page and went on. "We believe that after the call, the killer took Phillips's vehicle back to where his -- or her -- vehicle was stashed. For the sake of discussion, let's just stick with 'he' for now. Bloody handprints were all over the interior on the driver's side."

She held up her hand when Hank drew a breath to speak. "He wore gloves. Again, no hair, no fibers. He took the time to remove any -- not even Phillips's were found -- but didn't have time to clean the blood."

"All the blood in the car belonged to Phillips," Kowalski added.

"He expected Phillips to die in the house, an apparent suicide," Buckley said. "When she didn't, he had to wait until there was opportunity at the hospital and finish the job."

Hank shook his head. "This doesn't work for me. Why carve her if she was merely a witness to the other crime?"

"It's a theory." Pam nudged his leg with her foot. "Don't get all high and mighty on us."

He scooted to the edge of his chair. "My neck's on the line, too. I can't have loose ends and speculation."

"Then let us finish our jobs before you demand we throw out suspect names," Buckley calmly replied.

"Fair enough." He leaned back in his chair. "Any common threads?"

"One." Buckley held up his finger. "The victims had the same psychiatrist."

"Declan Trent. I surmised as much since he was on scene last night." He opened his mouth, then clamped it shut.

Pam referred back to her notes. "Ambien was also found in Murray's blood at levels to suggest she'd taken it within the last twenty-four hours. There was no prescription found at the house. We're checking local pharmacies. Dr. Trent didn't prescribe it for her."

"Phillips's tie to Murray?" he asked.

"Friends," they replied together.

"Does any of this tie in with the attack on Gloria Rodriguez?" Hank asked.

Buckley shrugged. "At this point we don't know."

"We can't even be sure if the sex and the murder are related," Pam added. "We're trying to piece together what we have."

"Which is pretty close to nothing." Hank shoved to his feet, then rubbed the back of his neck. "Anything else? At least tell me you've got a little hint of a lead."

"We do," the captain said, "but we need to do a little more checking. We don't want any missteps, either, Hank. You know the media is on this like stink on shit. When we haul in a suspect, we don't want there to be any doubt."

"How soon can you let me know?"

"If our thread of a lead pans out, we should know by Saturday morning."

"I can live with that." He swung open the door, then turned back. "I still want an update tomorrow morning and afternoon, even if there's no progress."

"You'll have it," Buckley said.

They waited until he shut the door, crossed the squad room, and walked out the other door before they released a collective sigh of relief.

The captain snapped forward, forearms braced on his battered desk. "Okay, what do we really have?"

Finally, they could get down to business.

Pam shared what little information she'd gleaned from the patient files. Everyone agreed it was too big a coincidence. The killer knew the women personally.

Surveillance tapes from the hotel were a wash. They clearly showed Murray arriving. Everyone else on tape was accounted for coming and going. No one had left during the time frame in which Phillips was killed. That meant Murray had most probably let her partner -- and killer -- in through the stairs, which were emergency exits only and not monitored. Parking lot tapes showed no one who didn't belong. Again, her partner had walked in, most likely having parked elsewhere. So they were dealing with someone who had a lot of somethings to hide, or two someones.

The killer did a thorough clean-up of all crime scenes. That indicated a good knowledge of forensics. In this day and age of *Law and Order* and *CSI*, that could mean the perp watched a lot of crime shows. Or he could be an experienced killer who'd done this many times before.

“I’m running a check of other areas for similar crimes,” Buckley said. “Nothing yet. I contacted the FBI as well. They’d love to send us a profiler, but there are only so many to go around. If it escalates ...”

“Are we still going with our plan for tomorrow night?” Pam asked.

Buckley gave a slow nod. “It’s the only possible lead we’ve got. Maybe we’ll get lucky and this will all be over with, though I hate the thought that Connie Trent is the perp.”

Pam didn’t much like it, either.

Kowalski wrapped his hand around the door knob. “If there’s nothing else, I need to go. Anniversary. If I don’t get home, you’ll have another homicide to investigate.”

Pam stood. “I have plans, too.”

Buckley waved her off. She’d bet twenty bucks he’d still be sitting there come morning, in the same clothes.



## Chapter Nine

Declan returned to Pam's house a little later than he'd anticipated. He'd had little choice in the matter. Pam's call earlier was pretty specific -- she was working on a surprise and didn't want him walking in while she was setting the stage.

The husky lure in her voice fired up his libido big time. Curiosity and cock aroused, he couldn't concentrate on anything at that point. He spent his time working on a surprise of his own -- two, actually. Declan hated the edge-of-his-seat feeling every time he had to measure his words. It was time to put his heart out there. They ... *he* couldn't move forward until he'd done so. If she didn't feel the same way, he didn't know what he'd do at that point.

He pulled to a stop behind her car and cut the engine. His heart picked up speed at the darkened house. A killer was out there, apparently hunting down people close to him. He'd discounted that possibility the night before. They'd been seeing each other for months. If he'd been followed, surely this person would have targeted Pam before now.

But there sat the dark house, the knowledge that Pam had been alone inside for close to two hours. She'd cautioned him to stay behind locked doors. Did she think to take the same measures for herself?

*Relax. She just called fifteen minutes ago.*

A lot could happen in fifteen minutes. Carol's murder had occurred in less than five.

Pulling in a shaky breath, Declan shouldered his car door open. With each step up the walkway, he rehearsed his actions should he discover the worst. Don't fall apart. Don't contaminate the scene. Step back and out. Call 9-1-1. Don't fall apart. One thought kept intruding -- that Pam might be dead, and she'd never know how he felt. Another thought rippled through -- she'd died because of him, because of their relationship, because he didn't have the good sense to report Connie two years ago.

Declan reeled his mounting paranoia to a stop. He'd never had his imagination go shit-crazy before and didn't much like it. It gave him a good taste of what some of his clients went through. He could definitely relate now.

The door swung open before he could seat his key. Relief washed over him when he saw Pam's sensuous smile.

"'Welcome to my parlor,' said the spider to the fly." She swung the door wide, beckoning him into a room filled with candlelight. A path of red rose petals led him to the kitchen. Another path of white veered down the hall.

As he shut the door behind him, Pam stepped forward. "Would you like to slip into something more comfortable?" She held out a black satin robe. An exact match to the one she wore. "Consider it our first official couple thing. I couldn't resist. It feels like heaven against your bare skin."

Declan toed off his shoes and peeled the shirt over his head. "You would feel like heaven against my bare skin."

"You always know just the right thing to say." She held the robe out for his arms.

"No, not always. But I'm hoping I do tonight." He stuffed his arms in the sleeves, then pulled the blue velvet box from his trouser pocket.

Pam froze, eyes wide as she wrapped her hand around it. "What is it?"

"My heart. I love you, Pam. I have for months. I was afraid ... those rules ..."

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "I love you, too." Pam wrapped her arms around him and snuggled her head into his shoulder.

Declan held her tight, rubbing slow circles against her back while they absorbed the moment. Of all the things they'd ever done, this had to be one of the most sensual. If he tossed her to the couch and they fucked each other senseless, it still wouldn't mean as much as what they were doing right now.

"Open the box, honey." He kissed the top of her head.

"Okay." She eased away. "But first you need to catch up with me." She ran the back of her index finger down the ridge swelling his fly.

Declan didn't waste any time discussing it. In less time than it took to think about, the clothes lay in a pile by the door. He tugged the robe closed. His erection tented it.

"Your turn."

Pam lifted the lid. A laugh followed her gasp. "It's beautiful." She lifted the sterling silver keychain. A heart-shaped charm and his apartment key dangled from it.

"Check out the date on the charm. It's the date I first realized I loved you."

She turned it over. "Five months ago? Oh, Dec." Tears glistened in her eyes. "We've wasted so much time."

"No." He wrapped an embrace around her. "We've spent every day reaffirming it to ourselves, getting to really know each other in our own private world without others interfering."

"You're going to have me bawling any minute now. You know how I hate to cry."

"Then I might as well go for broke." He retrieved his trousers and pulled the second velvet box from the other pocket. Right palm over heart, he bent to one knee, opened the box with his free hand, and held it out to her. "Marry me, Pam."

"Ohmygod-ohmygod-ohmygod!" Squeezing her eyelids against tears, she fanned her face. "Damn you." She flicked away errant drops.

"Okay, is that a yes or a no? Now remember, if you respond positively, it must be in words we'll be able to pass on to our children when we tell them the story."

"Children?" Tears trickled freely down her cheeks. "You want children?"

"Well, I'm at that age, you know. Biological clock ticking. Parents getting anxious. I'd love to have a daughter as beautiful as you, or to see your smile and bright eyes in our son, or both."

"Oh, Declan." She fell to her knees and wrapped her arms tight around his neck. "Yes."

He was wrong. *This* was the most supreme moment. "Dinner smells wonderful." Declan wasn't going to admit he hadn't noticed until that moment. He couldn't decipher the specific menu, but did manage to pick out fresh baked bread. "It's probably getting cold."

Pam pulled away on a laugh. "And I doubt it will nuke as well as French toast." She reached for the ring.

Declan took the diamond solitaire from her. "Let me." He slipped the platinum ring on her left hand, then kissed it before they stood together. Arm in arm they walked the red rose path Pam had made; the white one led to her bedroom, where she'd closed the door.

Long, tapered candles cast a golden light off the glasses of chardonnay waiting for them; the bottle sat in a silver ice bucket at the edge of the table. She'd made dinner an event. Red lace tablecloth with matching napkins set off white place settings. Silverware beside each gleamed. She'd pulled out the very best for tonight. How ironic this would also be the night they became engaged. Declan blessed the Fates that had guided him.

Pam removed the covers off the food: pork loin all carved and waiting to be served, fresh asparagus, and tiny new potatoes flecked with rosemary.

"It looks and smells wonderful." He held her chair out and she slipped into her seat.

"I hope you enjoy it."

"I know I will." He lifted his wineglass after he sat. "To us."

Smiling, she mirrored his action. They clinked glasses, then sipped to his toast.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to wait until after Remy and Gloria's wedding to make any announcements."

"I agree." It was Remy and Gloria's time. Nothing should distract from that. "By the way, I never asked. How did you manage to slink out of maid-of-honor duties?"

"Sister trumps best friend. Thank goodness. Way too much stress and responsibility for me." She winked as she put a piece of pork in her mouth.

Declan did the same. It was so tender it nearly melted before he could chew. They should probably talk about this leap they'd made. Doing so felt like a mood killer.

"The robe does feel good."

"And I love the way your napkin sits on your ... uhm ... lap."

Declan tossed back a laugh. His cock wore the red lace like a scarf. "It's hungry, too."

"It'll get fed soon." She speared a small bite of potato.

"More surprises?"

"You have no idea," she purred. "We're going to do some exploring. Don't worry. I'll give you a little something to take the edge off after we eat. After all, I want to make sure you'll last the night."

So far it didn't take much. All he had to do was think about Pam and he got hard.

"Plus, someone's going to have to do the dishes. I don't want to get my new ring wet."

"I'd call that a fair exchange -- whoever cooks, the other one does the dishes. But let's not make a list of rules," he quickly added.

"I agree we work things out as we go. I think we're both grown-up enough to know how to cohabitate with another person."

"And mature enough to work through any issues," he said. They lifted their glasses, toasting to that.

He and Pam knew each other's likes and dislikes, as well as what the problems had been in their previous marriages. They'd been friends for years, lovers for months. A lot of people started off with a lot less going for them.

"Anything noteworthy happen at work today?" he asked, shifting into safer territory so he would at least last through dinner.

"Everyone's on edge. Mayor, district attorney, police commissioner are all demanding quick resolution. They seem to have lost sight of the fact that this just happened yesterday. Evidence gathering and evaluation takes time. No one seems to give a rat's ass that we get the right man, just that we get someone to throw to the wolves."

Typical political bullshit, people worried more about their jobs than doing the right thing. If any mistakes were made, the police -- specifically, Pam and Buckley -- would be the ones blamed.

"I'm surprised you're not pulling an all-nighter."

"So am I," she said. "But there really wasn't much more we could do tonight. There's no way we can rush certain lab reports. The commissioner seems to forget this isn't TV. DNA

takes longer than five minutes, not that we've found anything unique to jump on. From the way things look, it'll be Monday before we can find out who prescribed the Ambien for Murray."

"So you did determine it was hers?"

"We think so. The levels in her blood seem to indicate that."

"Someone else could have given it to her."

"We thought about that, too, since there was no prescription at the house. If the pharmacies draw a blank or we have a suspect by then, we'll move on to that. The surveillance tapes from the hotel showed nothing. We won't be able to get the ones from your building until Monday, if we can get them then. Several of the doctors in the building are balking; they claim doctor-patient privilege. Hank's going to hash that out in court tomorrow."

"Are we still doing the bachelor party thing tomorrow night?"

"Yes. We've got no other leads. Even though this is a poor one at best, the captain wants to carry it through. I'll be serving cocktails, still skimpy, but with strippers there I'll doubt anyone will notice me."

"Baby, they'd have to be blind to not notice you."

Pam smiled. "Aren't you sweet, and completely biased."

"Guilty as charged." They toasted again.

"And what about you? Did you have any luck today?" she asked.

Declan took his time chewing his asparagus while he thought of how he wanted to answer. The curve of her eyebrow told him his ploy was obvious.

"The women were in my Thursday-night group sessions. But I can't give you the names of the other participants without a subpoena."

"You'll have it." She kept that eyebrow arched and her gaze locked onto him as she finished her wine. "I presume you checked their files for information?"

"I did and nothing there rang any alarm bells. Again ..."

"You'll need a subpoena. Yes, I get it."

And she clearly wasn't happy about it. Declan didn't care. He had a job to do just as she did. Turning conversation back to them suddenly seemed an excellent idea.

Declan split the last of the wine between them. "Any thought to the type of wedding you'd like to have?"

"Small and private, only us if we can get away with it. A small gathering later on to celebrate should soothe hurt feelings."

He liked that idea and told her so. "When?"

She shrugged. "We're together so what does it matter?"

He didn't like that. "It matters to me. The sooner I make you my wife, the happier I'll be. I'm a little hurt you could simply shrug it off."

Pam had the nerve to smile. "I can tell. Your napkin's deflated."

"I'm serious, Pam. This isn't a joke."

"You think I don't care?" That damn eyebrow came back up. It was really starting to annoy him.

"I'm beginning to wonder."

She slid her chair back, then extended her hand to him as she stood. "Come with me."

He clasped her fingers and let her lead him down the white rose petal trail to her bedroom. The door opened with her gentle push and the scene before him took Declan's breath away. The stage she'd set for dinner paled in comparison. It had been a woman's room before, with lacy ivory curtains, pale peach bedspread, flowery percale sheets and blond wood furnishings -- all very nice, but designed for and by a woman. Now it was a sensuous den of elegance.

Blond furnishings remained. Pillars, tapers, and votives of black and gold lit every surface. Draperies matched the black velvet and gold satin bedspread, which was turned down to reveal gold-colored sheets. Gold rose petals shaped a heart at the foot of the bed. In the center, Pam had spelled out "I Love You" with them.

"I wanted this to be a night to remember." She hugged his arm. "Think this story will be good enough to tell our children?"

Emotion clogged his throat. All Declan could do was nod.

"Of course, they don't need to know what happens from this point on." She slipped the knot free on his robe, then raked it down his shoulders. "Lie down, facedown. Time to do some exploring."

He clicked his gaze down to hers. "What kind?"

Pam dropped her robe on a whispered "trust me," then dusted her fingers up his dick as she stretched on tiptoe to kiss him. She darted away before they could touch and waved her hand toward the bed.

Declan tugged the bedspread down. The satin underside made it slither to the floor. He smiled when he saw the gold sheets under it were percale; nothing was worse than trying to sleep on satin sheets. These were cool against his skin. Pam's bed was like resting on a cloud. The pillow-top mattress cradled him in comfort.

A sigh nestled his cheek against it. That's when he noticed Pam had arranged some toys on the night stand next to a split of champagne on ice and two crystal flutes.

She straddled his ass and scuffed her hands together. A delicate sent of almonds drifted to him. She was going to give him a massage. Just as the thought left him, she ran her hands up his back and across his shoulders.

Declan groaned. "Oh, baby, you know how I love when you do that. You're gonna make me fall asleep."

She bent to his ear, breasts squishing against his back. "I don't think so."

A gentle nudge with her foot told him to spread his legs. He didn't know what she planned, but his cock was on full alert, even if the rest of him was ready to melt into a puddle.

She worked every muscle he had from shoulder to foot until Declan swore he couldn't move if he had to. One by one, muscle groups caved to jelly under her deft fingers before she returned to loosen his spine. Tiny pops unlocked the vertebrae. She'd definitely missed her calling; she'd make one hell of a chiropractor. She drifted down his body, working toes, feet, calves, thighs, then kneading deep into his butt cheeks as she urged his legs farther apart.

A little more oil sent her wandering again. This time she played, reawakening what she'd nearly put to sleep. She tickled her fingers down his backbone straight to the tip of his coccyx and below. Feathered touches teased his anus.

"It's time to lose your virginity, Dec," she said softly.

He felt a push against his anus, widening it. His dick felt like fire beneath him. Fingers flexed into fists.

Pam stopped. "Am I hurting you?"

"No. God, no," he gasped out. "I never expected it would feel so ... so ..."

"Intense?"

"Yes," he hissed.

"Wait 'til you come."

There wasn't much waiting for it. He swore he could come just like this. His body craved to thrust into the sheets. Then she seated the little device and flicked it on.

Declan arched back, rubbed his dick deep into the mattress. A hard whack with his own belt put him back in his place.

"That was a warning," she said. "Don't make me have to spank you."

God help him, he wanted her to. Wanted to know how she felt when he did it to her.

"I ... I don't think I can be good. Maybe if you show me what will happen if I fuck the bed and come all over it ..."

"Hmmm." Pam crawled off the bed. "Just to make sure that doesn't happen, stand at the end and bend over."

He did as ordered. The plug in his butt sent pulses of fire to his erection. Pre-cum moistened the tip, threatening to spurt out at the slightest touch.

"Just in case." She nudged his arm, handing him a condom and a cock ring. "They should help keep you contained."

He shoved both on and bent over.

“How many, love?” She danced the leather over his ass as he had done to her so many times.

“You decide. You know what I need. But, trust me, it will be returned later.”

“I’m counting on it.” She lifted the belt, paused, then brought it down on him.

Slow, measured taps migrated to harder whacks. Declan couldn’t get enough. Every sense he possessed was alive. He wanted her hands, her mouth, her pussy all at once. He wanted more warmth from his ass to spread to his dick. And come. God, how he wanted to come right now.

Pam rubbed her hand over his butt, then swooped it down to cup his balls. “Back on the bed. I’m about to give you the fucking of your life.”

“I hope so,” he said, panting for breath. “I’ve never wanted to come so bad in my life.”

“Now you know how you make me feel.” She pushed him down, cock up, and straddled him backward. “My turn.”

Pam wiped oil down her crack and handed him another vibrating plug. Declan didn’t hesitate. One thrust seated it. A flick of his finger turned it on. She grabbed his cock and aimed it for her cunt. Grabbing her hips, Declan shoved himself deep inside.

Their moans echoed off each other. He’d never felt anything like this. Vibrations bookended his dick, sending it into hyperdrive. He briefly thought of warming her ass a little. His brain cut off when she cupped his balls and started to draw deep circles against his prostate gland.

Declan fucked her like a madman, his orgasm held in limbo by the tight cock ring. “God, baby, take it off! I need to come!”

Panting for breath, she did as he asked, then thrust down on him. Declan fumbled for her clit, but was too far gone to concentrate.

“Play with yourself, honey! I want you to come ...” Hot jets of semen seared from him. Declan jerked under the onslaught of his orgasm. He kept coming and coming, taking every bit of fluid in his body with it. Never in his life had he ever come so hard. Finally, he collapsed against the bed, weak and gasping.

“I hope you came because ...”

Pam removed the vibrators, tossed them to a bowl bedside the bed, and flopped down beside him. “Was that not the best sex you’ve ever had?”

He nodded dumbly. “Boy, I can’t do that every night though. It’d kill me. And, honey, you’ve completely unvirgined me from anything I might have ever considered. Although, I will admit I can’t wait to see what you’ve got planned for tomorrow night.”

She cuddled up close. “Anything special you’d like?”

“Surprise me.”



“Hmmm.” She drew lazy circles in his chest hair. “Maybe I’ll show up without underwear.”

“Do I have to show you again what happens to girls who go out without panties?”

Her sultry laughter filled the room. “I think you just might.”

## Chapter Ten

“How in the hell am I supposed to wipe my ass with these things?” Pam frowned at the ruby-red claws that now passed for fingernails.

“Relax.” Julia Holler pulled her hand back down. “You have to look the part.”

Pam had to give it to the women in Vice; they didn’t mess around. Nope, no half measures for them. Not only did they look the part of whomever they played, they lived it as well. Pam had no idea her disguise would be this involved.

She expected the skimpy outfit. This one resembled a tuxedo with a bowtie choker, a black halter top that pushed her breasts together and up, and matching tap pants that hugged her butt and bared her belly. Pam quietly blessed the stomach crunches and three-mile runs she’d endured all these years. Sheer black panty hose built into the pants would help keep her decent.

Pam fought a smile at the thought. She’d been reminded twice -- once the night before, then again over Declan’s knee at breakfast -- what happened to naughty girls who go without panties. She crossed her legs to quell the sudden ache the memory created and vowed marriage would not dull their sexual exploits.

“If you don’t stop fidgeting, we’ll never get done,” Julia told her.

“Sorry. I’m not used to all the foo-foo.”

Julia glanced up under her eyebrows. “It surprises me to hear you say that. You always look put together and drop-dead gorgeous.”

With praise like that coming from the mistress of disguises, Pam didn’t know how to respond. It humbled her. She’d always been in awe of Julia’s chameleon-like abilities. She could make heads turn her way as a high-priced hooker, or people shrink in disgust as an insane beggar woman. To think she’d even noticed Pam in the whirlwind of her life ...

"Well, thank you," she managed to say. "I have to admit I've placed you at hero-worship level."

"Aww." A pink flush covered Julia's cheeks. "I don't know what to say."

"That makes two of us."

Pam couldn't believe her luck in having Julia's help, not to mention access to her extensive collection of costumes. When Pam and Buckley approached Vice, and subsequently Julia, there wasn't the slightest hesitation on the woman's part. She'd offered up her disguises, her assistance in preparing, even the use of her apartment to get ready. The icing on the cake was that Julia was also going in with her as back up.

Going to her apartment seemed a great idea at the time -- a private place to plan and prepare. Then Pam stepped into the wardrobe Julia called home. Racks of clothing, wigs, shoes, and any other possible accessories lined every available space, leaving Pam gape-mouthed in awestruck wonder. Paths led to the kitchen, bathroom, and one bedroom. A section was cordoned off for a sleeper sofa -- opened and strewn with more clothing -- and two end tables piled with magazines and what looked like the remains of Julia's breakfast. A TV wobbled precariously on a rickety wall unit that shuddered each time a person breathed.

Pam had wondered if she should leave bread crumbs to find her way to the door as Julia led her through the maze of paths, pulling together the "perfect look." It seemed there was nothing the woman didn't have. Within minutes, Pam had been juggling a large assortment of clothes, shoes, and wigs to try on.

"Remember, the devil is in the details." Julia covered the last nail with glassy top coat she called "quick dry."

"I still don't understand why I had to have acrylics. There was really nothing wrong with my nails. Longer press-ons would have worked."

Julia heaved a weary sigh. "You have to look authentic. Besides, it gives me the rare chance to put my skills to use on someone other than myself."

"I doubt they'll notice."

"Trust me, people notice. Especially when a fake nail plops off into their drink. Guys at these things love long nails. Long nails lead to bigger tips. It's important to give them what they expect so they aren't left wondering what your deal is."

Julia had a point, and after all the undercover work she'd done in Vice, this was her field of expertise. Again, Pam counted herself lucky to have her help.

She dusted her fingers through a large plastic box of miscellaneous faux gemstones. Smiling, Julia pulled out a sparkly red gem. "This will look great in your naval."

Pam shook her head. "You are *not* supergluing that to my belly button."

"Relax. I have theatrical glue that's water soluble. We'll stick it in before we go." She set the stone to one side. "Now for the wig. This won't be comfortable."

"Want to place bets on which fails me first? My head or my feet?"

"Toss a coin. They'll both be killing you before the night's out." Julia tugged the wig cap over Pam's head. "You'll also have to guard your tits and ass. Men get grabby with all the women at these things. It doesn't matter if they're married or not, or what their profession is. They get a few drinks in them, and all the rules go out the window."

"I'll do my best not to slug them." Pam couldn't say how Declan or Captain Buckley would react. Chances were they'd both be taking names for later.

"There are a lot of ugly things about undercover assignments."

She winced as Julia tucked her hair under the cap.

"One is seeing the bad side of some of your fellow officers. That pretty diamond you're wearing won't be a very effective stop sign. Even wedding rings don't matter. Some view it as just another challenge."

Pam glanced at the engagement ring. She had to admit the longer nails enhanced it, making her look and feel elegant.

"Who's the lucky guy?" she asked.

They'd agreed to wait until after tomorrow's wedding. But since Pam's goal tonight was to lure the killer out by seducing Declan, she couldn't have Julia lumping her in with those officers she'd just mentioned. Even though the truth would eventually come out, Pam had to tell her now.

"Declan Trent."

"Ah." Her dark brown eyes brightened. "That's great. It will make the flirtation easy without any last minute attack of nerves." She jerked back. "I mean it's great that you're together, too."

Pam tried not to laugh. She couldn't fault the woman for being focused on the job. "That's okay. I know what you meant. I'm glad you'll be there to watch my back."

"Me, too. I can guarantee the men who are supposed to be doing it will be too blinded by boobies to do so."

Pam smiled. This was a person she could partner with. "I don't suppose you'd consider moving to Homicide."

"Now that's tempting. This is getting old, like me." She tugged the strawberry-blond wig on. A cascade of curls drifted to the center of Pam's back.

"Beautiful." She pointed Pam to the make-up table wedged in the corner between kitchen and living area.

"I swear the only thing missing in this place is the stage. I'm also afraid to ask what's in your bedroom." Pam eased onto the red velvet seat and flicked on the lights. A stranger stared back at her in the mirror.

"I sleep on the sofa," Julia said. "The bedroom is my sewing room. I really need a bigger place, but just the thought of apartment hunting drives me up the wall."

She twisted around. "You *made* all these?" The woman was one surprise after the other.

Julia lifted her palms in a shrug. "Everyone has to have a hobby. I've been making costumes since I was old enough to use a sewing machine. I did a lot of plays in high school and college." She snickered. "I had plans to be this great actress. Reality is a harsh mistress. So, here I am, fighting bad guys."

She winked and turned Pam back toward the mirror. "I'll let you brush it and do your make-up while I get ready. When you're done, if you'd like to search through the costumes for a wedding dress, help yourself."

Pam clicked her gaze up to Julia's in the mirror. "Tell me you're joking."

"I never joke about costumes." Her smile said differently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam did a visual scan of the banquet hall, noting exits and possible problem areas while Julia did a quick check on the halls. The hotel elves were going to have to work extra hard to turn this red and black spangled nightmare into a white and lilac dream for tomorrow's reception. Shimmering curtains protected the temporary backstage where the strippers waited. A runway, complete with pole, thrust out from there. Chafing dishes perched over flames from canned heat lined the back wall near the portable bar. The men wouldn't go hungry -- all one hundred of them.

Pam tried not to think about how she was going to carry off the guise of cocktail waitress. They'd done a quick dress rehearsal at Julia's, Pam balancing a heavy tray of drinks while walking in heels. It was going to be a long night.

She felt naked without her weapon. Not that she would need it. She hoped. If everything went according to plan, she'd simply leave with Declan after the party ended and the surveillance team would follow. They were already in place, watching the comings and goings from the hotel.

Julia glided back into the room. They could have been twins, except for the long fall of black curls now drifting down Julia's back. A single nod alerted Pam all was well. They met up at the temporary bar, where a swarthy hulk of a man whose nametag declared him Burt put out the last of the glasses.

"Captain Buckley caught me outside. The team's in place. The men are starting to arrive."

Pam nodded. It looked like all bases were covered. All she had to do was play her part. Following Julia's lead, she grabbed her serving tray and positioned her tip glass next to the note pad where she'd list the orders. Seconds later the men paraded through the door like a hoard of rowdy frat boys set loose for spring break.

"Men." Julia snorted. "They always lead with their cocks. I never met one worth a dime."

Pam arched an eyebrow her way. "Not one?"

"Nope." She shook her head. "I can kill my own spiders, thank you very much. The problems men cause just aren't worth the trouble." She glanced at Burt. "Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," he said with a blinding smile that flushed Julia's cheeks.

Pam leaned close to her ear. "Don't talk the talk if you can't walk the walk."

"Point made," Julia muttered.

They watched the men split off to the tables surrounding the runway. Pam recognized a good portion of them from work. The captain acknowledged her with a nod. Declan smiled and passed a leisurely gaze down her body. At the next table, Hank's eyes widened when he realized it was her. His loud guffaw pulled attention his way. Before he could share his revelation, Buckley grabbed his arm and silenced him with a glare. It wasn't quick enough to escape Mark's notice. At least he had the decency to look embarrassed after he'd ogled her.

The biggest surprise of the night was seeing Bobby Salazar show up wearing a designated-driver sticker. He'd either decided it wasn't so risqué to attend, or he felt he was doing his civic duty to see the men got home safe and sound.

"Okay, ladies." Burt scuffed his hands. "Looks like it's showtime. If any of them give you any grief, let me know. After all, they aren't spiders."

Julia's throaty chuckle accompanied them into the gauntlet. There was little doubt how that little by-play would end.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Damn, she looks hot.* Declan wanted to haul Pam astride his lap and wedge his dick against her.

"What are you gentlemen having tonight?" She leaned over, giving him -- and the other men there -- a shot of her cleavage.

Before anyone could answer, Hank grabbed her hips and hauled her to his lap. "Is there any hope I could have you, sweetheart?"

"Snowball's chance in hell." A sharp elbow to his ribs released her. "I'll take those drink orders now, gentlemen."

Hank leaned toward the rest of them when she moved on. "If she'd played dress-up more when we were married, we might have stayed married."

*Son of a bitch.* He really was an ass. "I'm sure your fucking around had nothing to do with it," Declan said.

He actually had the nerve to look wounded. "That was a cheap shot."

"And yours wasn't?"

Hank snickered. "Why should you give a fuck?"

Declan edged as close as the table allowed, shoving his face to within inches of Hank's. "I give a fuck because she's my girlfriend. I give a fuck because I'm going to marry that woman."

The man stared, then smacked his palm against the table as he laughed. "That's funny. You had me going for a minute."

That's when Declan realized -- Hank still loved her. Regret oozed from behind his smart-ass cackle. He'd had a good thing going with Pam and screwed it all up. Declan actually felt sorry for him. But he said, "Your loss, my gain."

Hank's smirk disappeared. "I don't believe you. Prove it."

All he had to go was go to Pam and ask her. Maybe he didn't really want the truth. Maybe he thought Pam would lie. Whatever it was, Declan didn't care. He settled back in his seat with a Cheshire-cat grin. "Don't worry. I will."

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam loved how Declan could make love to her with a look. In those golden-brown depths, she could see how much she meant to him, how treasured and adored she was. The knowledge warmed her inside and out, made her feel protected and safe from the world. She wanted to curl into his lap and feel his arms surround her as she nestled her head against his chest.

Respect was there as well. He might want to splay her on the runway and fuck her brains out, but that look never shifted into a dirty leer. His actions backed him up -- gently cupping her leg when she was near, doing nothing more than drawing circles against her with his thumb. Such a simple gesture, and yet it sent her pussy gushing. The flirting fired her up all the more, and from the fire banked in his gaze, Pam knew Declan was turned on as well. But she didn't dare let her eyes wander in *that* direction. If she saw Declan erect, she wouldn't be able to keep her hands off him. She'd either drag him off to the ladies' room, or give him a lap dance that would make the pros pale in comparison. Maybe both.

In any event, from the looks that passed between them, no one would be surprised when she left with Declan. That part of the plan was more than successful. Thanks to Captain Buckley, Hank and Mark had kept quiet about her identity. Maybe a little too quiet, now that she thought about it. Mark cast surreptitious glances her way while Hank glowered at her.

"Bunch of cheap bastards." Julia rattled the coins in her tip glass.

Pam had faired a little better, thanks to Declan. His tips forced the men around him to do the same.

"That's how it always is at bachelor parties." Burt dried a highball glass, set it aside, and reached for another. "They're saving their dollars for the strippers."

"I'm glad they're up next. My feet are killing me."

Pam quietly echoed that one. Heels she could handle. Walking on them constantly was another issue. She longed to kick them off, but knew if she did she'd never get them back on.

"If you ladies want to make a head call, now would be the perfect time." Burt jerked his head toward the exit.

Neither of them hesitated. In a few minutes, she heard Julia's sigh echo her own.

"Man, I get to pee *and* sit down."

They cut off their snickers when they heard the door open. Pam expected a quick charge into the restroom from one of the strippers, not the slow, measured step of a man. Her senses went on high alert. They were cornered and unarmed. Bracing her hands on the sides of the wall, she lifted her feet as he methodically began checking each stall.

She held her breath when the tips of his black loafers stopped in front of her, slowly releasing it when he moved on. Reaching the last stall, his leather soles ground into the tile as he pivoted forward.

"All right, Pam, I know you're in here. I saw you. We need to talk. Now."

*Hank. What the hell was he doing here?* The toilet flush covered her curse. It took superhuman effort to not bang the door when she came out. She parked her fists at her sides to keep from slugging him.

"Have you lost your mind? Don't you know better than to approach a cop when she's undercover?"

"Who is he?" Julia asked from behind her.

"Ex-husband," she said over her shoulder. "Go on. I've got this."

When the door closed, she whipped her laser stare back to Hank. "Well?"

A puzzled frown pulled his eyebrows together. "You're undercover?"

Pam jammed her fists on her hips. "We're trying to set a trap with the only lead we have -- Declan's tie to the victims. We're hoping to get a bite, unless you've just screwed things up. Who else have you told?"

"No one." Hank stepped into her space. "So all that stuff out there with Declan Trent is for show?"

He actually had the nerve to sound jealous. Pam didn't have the patience to soothe his wounded pride, and he sure as hell didn't deserve that consideration.

"Yes and no." She held up her left hand. His gaze zeroed in on the ring. "Declan and I are getting married. We've been together for six months."

His jaw clamped shut. She could hear his teeth grind. Anger like she'd never seen from him mottled his face.

"No!" He stabbed the air with the point of his finger. "You're mine!"

Pam took a back step toward the door. Hank snagged her arm and yanked her to him.

"I won't have it," he said through clenched teeth.



She wedged her arms between them and shoved. It was like pushing against stone. “*You* don’t have any say. We’ve been divorced for two years. You didn’t want me ...”

He squeezed her arm. “I *always* wanted you!”

“And everyone else, too.”

He released her then, staring down his nose at her. “You think Declan’s any better?”

She resisted the urge to rub the ache from her arm. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d hurt her. “I know he is.”

“And I’ll prove he isn’t.” Without another word, Hank shoved by her and out the door.

Pam sagged against the wall. She had to get back in there before he screwed everything up. God only knew what Hank would pull next. Maybe Buckley could get him out of here.

She felt the bass vibrating in the air long before she reached the banquet room. The stripper show was in full swing. Already one blonde in red-tasseled pasties with matching G-string had finished and was moving into the crowd. Men frantically waved their money in the hopes of a lap dance ... over the heads of their friends. That’s when Pam realized Hank’s intent; he held three twenties over Declan’s head.

Lured by the money, the woman wasted no time. She saddled up on Declan while Hank shoved the bills into the back of the floss stuck in her butt. Then he turned a self-satisfied smirk her way. Pam actually felt sorry for him.

After flashing her a deer-in-the-headlights look, Declan played along. After all, he was a man, and the woman was giving him a fairly good work over. But even he grew tired of the game soon and passed her along to Mark’s very willing lap.

Hank reached for his wallet, ready to peel off more money for the raven-haired knock-out next in line to leave the stage. An ear-shattering shriek split the air and brought everyone to a standstill. Pam saw a flash of black leather and blonde as Mark scrambled to his feet, shoving the stripper into Hank.

Trish Wallace snagged a beer glass from the nearest table and hurled it in Mark’s direction. “Son of a bitch! You lousy bastard!”

Music screeched to a halt. There was a new show in town.

Mark backed away, waving his hands in front of him. “Baby, I can explain.”

“Go to hell!” She whacked her palm hard against his chin.

Mark toppled into table, grunting when his ribs hit the corner.

“Hurts, does it?” Hovering over him, she reared back her glossy thigh-high boot. “I’ll show you hurt!”

Declan and Buckley grabbed an arm and pulled her away before she could carry the kick through.

Trish jerked free. “I swear to God I’ll make you pay, Mark Roberts! And as for you --” She whirled around to the stripper still sprawled on Hank’s lap. “-- f I ever catch you so

much as breathing near him again, I'll kill you!" She pivoted on her heel and marched to the exit.

Buckley gave Mark an arm up. "You want to press charges?"

Trish whirled around. "Yeah, go ahead. You press those charges. I dare you. Then we'll see who pays." Then she was gone as quickly as she'd come in, this time with Mark running after her.

"Okay, people." Burt clapped his hands over his head. "Back to the party. It's not nice to keep the ladies waiting."

The music started, bringing out a red-head in a plaid school-girl uniform that brought out the hoots.

Julia rolled her eyes, a motion that clearly said what she was thinking about men. Considering the present antics of a few -- standing on chairs and clutching their crotches -- Pam would have to agree.

It was going to be a very long night. It had already been quite interesting.

## Chapter Eleven

Declan watched the strippers work the room. As long as they stayed away from him, he was happy. It looked like Bobby Salazar felt the same way. His buddies tempted one lady after the other over to the poor guy. With each visitor Declan watched countless hours of sessions with Bobby go down the drain.

The man was frozen in his chair, eyes wide with fear as his mind replayed his childhood molestation. The boisterous chants around him added to that horrifying day. Declan didn't care if Bobby was a designated driver. He had to get him out of here. But he couldn't figure out how to do that without embarrassing him further and risk everyone realizing Bobby was his patient.

Requesting a ride home wouldn't work. Bobby would just return to the party to continue to do his duty. Plus Declan had to stay here to be "seduced" by Pam. Hank was a possible solution. If anyone needed a driver, he did. But what little trust Declan had in the man was gone. What was it suddenly with men regretting what they'd given up years before? First Mark at the hospital with Gloria, now Hank with Pam.

As far as Declan was concerned, Mark had a lot of nerve attending the wedding, much less coming to the bachelor party. More shocking was Mark's apparent relationship with Trish. And who knew she could be such a ball of fire? He'd never seen her as anything other than calm and collected. That black leather outfit screamed something. Declan just wasn't quite sure what. Still waters sure as hell ran deep in her. Considering her rage at finding Mark with a stripper on his lap, that made Mark's tale of rescuing a cat up a tree implausible at best. The only cat he'd tangled with was five-two and looked pretty capable of beating his ass. The only thing missing from her ensemble was the whip.

That sent a chill racing down his spine. Trish knew the women who'd been killed. Now he wondered how well. For a person who prided himself on being able to read people,

Declan had sure failed to see through Trish's façade. But then, she'd erected it with the same precision she applied to everything else in her professional life. Declan had to admit, especially after tonight's revelations, that he knew little of her personal life. Hell, he thought she was visiting her mother.

As much as he hated to, Declan knew he had to share his suspicions with the police. He motioned Buckley to the hallway, then ducked out the door and waited. He never knew silence could be so sweet.

"What's up?" Buckley asked as he swung through the door.

"I think you might have another suspect to look at. Trish Wallace, my admin assistant. She was the one who was just here."

Buckley's eyebrows shot up. He looked like he was going to laugh. "The one in the black catsuit with the thigh-high boots? Don't you recognize a lovers' quarrel when you see one? Considering how fast he went after her, I can't tag it as anything else."

"But she's always so prim and proper. Look how she was tonight. And she knew both victims."

"I'm sure a lot of people knew both victims, but we need motive to go with it. Does she have one?"

Declan had to admit she didn't, at least not that he could see.

"She hid her personal life," Buckley said. "Do I really need to mention the secret you and my detective have been guarding?"

"Point taken," Declan muttered.

The captain clamped his hand on his shoulder. "Besides, our other suspect's been here for the last hour. She's been watching us from the service entrance for most of that time. She went back to the parking lot during that little scene earlier. I want you and Pam to go outside and give her a little teaser to fire her up. I'll send Pam out to you."

Declan braced himself against the wall as Buckley rushed off. It didn't look good for Connie. Her being here seemed proof enough of that. He'd known how dangerous she was to him years ago and never did a thing about it. Now he and Pam were going into a semi-dark parking lot to make-out. For all they knew, Connie could have a gun.

Music poured from the room when Pam opened the door. Declan didn't bother to look up.

While Buckley notified his men to move closer to the suspect, Pam laced her fingers through his, hugged up against him, and kissed his cheek. Was she as nervous as he was?

"Okay, we're clear." Buckley tucked the cell into his pocket. "Cuddle like you're so hot ..."

"We get the picture," Declan said. He wanted this over now, not have to play this game all night waiting for something to happen.

Cupping Pam's ass, he hurried her out to the parking lot like he couldn't wait to fuck her -- which was the case ninety-nine percent of the time. He tried not to look for Connie's vehicle, to focus exclusively on the woman at his side. She did look hot in the cocktail waitress outfit, and that red sparkly in her belly button begged to be sucked out.

Pam yanked his golf shirt from his trousers and raked those long nails over his stomach. The muscles underneath quivered in response.

"You like that?" she said with a sexy purr.

"Oh, yeah." He swung her against the nearest car.

A muffled groan pulled them apart. Six cars away, Mark sat on the hood of his Miata, head buried in his hands. Trish was nowhere in sight.

"I suppose we should at least see that he's all right."

Pam's "hmpf" gave her opinion on the issue, but she walked with him anyway.

Judging from the condition of Mark's little convertible, he was lucky Trish's full rage hadn't been unfurled on him. Glass pooled in the large dents around Mark. She'd shattered every window before attacking the top. Fabric dripped in tattered banners from the skeleton of a frame.

"Are you all right?"

Mark peeked at him from between his fingers. "No. She sliced my tires, too."

"As mad as she was, you're lucky it wasn't your balls," Pam said.

"Yeah, tell me about it." He pulled up on a sigh. "God, what a mess."

An understatement at best. "How much did you drink tonight?"

"Too much to stop her. Not enough to make me not care." He brushed fragments of glass from his clothes; pieces clung to his hair.

"I'll get one of the designated drivers to take you home." That would also solve Bobby's dilemma.

"Thanks. I need to wait for AAA tow to show up, but that'd be great."

"And did you call the police?" he heard Pam ask as he walked away.

Mark's response was a muffled, "No. No police."

Declan filed that under "Mark's Business" and kept walking. Keeping his mouth shut the next time he saw Trish wasn't going to be as easy. Someone with this level of anger needed counseling.

Buckley jumped to his feet when he saw Declan re-enter the banquet room. Declan waved him down and continued on to Bobby. It looked like he was none too soon to save him. The first stripper was giving him a vigorous work-over. He'd recognized the type when she played him -- loved control and wasn't afraid to use sex as a tool to prove she had it.

The tendons on Bobby's neck bulged with his effort to keep from coming. The girl added moans as she thrust her crotch over his erection, but a little smirk lifted one corner of

her mouth. She reveled in her power and his humiliation. Around them men placed bets on how long he could last.

"I'm sorry. I need a designated driver." Declan waited until Bobby's eyes flashed open, then placed a hand on his shoulder. "Aren't you one?"

"Yes! Yes, I am." He stood up so fast, he dumped the girl to the floor.

Declan tried not to laugh. It served her right. "Thanks. He's outside. I'll take you to him."

Boos, hisses, and drunken complaints followed them to the hallway. Once there Bobby grabbed Declan's arm.

"Thank you so much, Dr. Trent. That woman ... She wouldn't stop. I felt like ... I kept remembering."

"It's okay, Bobby. She had me going, too. And, trust me, I wasn't comfortable with it, either. Want to come to my office Monday morning to talk about it?"

That made him smile, just the medicine Declan needed to pick up his flagging spirits.

"I'd like that, Dr. Trent. I'd like that a lot."

\* \* \* \* \*

Of all the designated drivers, why did Declan have to grab Bobby Salazar? Pam did her best to not look at the man straight on. Too many people had already breached her disguise. Bobby wore his feelings on his sleeve; everyone could see them. Out in the open like this, with a suspect watching, something like that would mean disaster. Better to have him retain the contempt that flashed in his eyes when he saw her standing beside Mark, than to have him recognize her and blow their plans.

Mark hadn't said much since Declan left. In fact, he hadn't said anything to her at all. Declan had barely gotten out of sight when a patrol car pulled up, most probably called in by the other officers hiding nearby. Mark refused to press charges or make a report. They left him pouting -- and there was really no other way to put it -- on the hood of his car.

Declan edged Bobby forward as he introduced the men. Pam put a little distance between her and them. That's when she saw Hank on the sidewalk watching them. If anyone needed a designated driver, it was him. And he was still mad on top of that. Just what they needed -- a pissed-off drunk.

Pam made a big show of checking her watch. "Sugar, I'm running out of time here. You're gonna need to make a choice -- me or your friends. I'm a working girl and gotta pay the bills."

"Sorry, sweet thing." Declan was at her side in two long steps and had his arm snaked around her waist. "Let's go. I promise I'll make it worth your while."

Bobby barred their way. Pam kept her head down, hoping the riot of curls would help hide her face.

"Surely you're not going off with this woman, Dr. Trent. She's beneath a man of your caliber." A sneer laced every word.

Declan patted his shoulder and side-stepped him. "I appreciate your concern, Bobby, but it'll be all right. Thanks for your help tonight." Then he hurried them toward his car.

"You *know* him?" she asked. "Is he a patient?"

His responding sigh told her she shouldn't have asked. Pam let it go. They'd already wasted enough time helping Mark.

Declan swung her against his car and wedged himself between her legs. The feel of his cock against her pussy took her breath away.

"Did you remember panties?" He reached between them to palm her breast.

Her nipple thrust its nose deep into his palm. "Yes," she breathlessly replied.

"I'm not sure if I trust you," he said with a smile, and dropped his hand to her crotch. He worked his thumb under her pant leg, seeking her clit, then smiling when he discovered it guarded by the hose. "Good girl. You deserve a reward."

Pam dug her fingers into his shoulder and fought back a moan as he brushed his thumb over her. The traitorous little nub actually had the nerve to demand satisfaction. Her damp pussy agreed.

"Oh, Declan, please, no, people are watching, people I work with, and I ..."

"Shh."

He silenced her with kisses rained down her throat, over her chest, then in a fiery trail to her belly. Fingers flexed in sensuous circles against her skin as he journeyed. He feathered his tongue around her navel, toying with the gem perched there, digging deeper and deeper as he sought to free it.

Pam furrowed her fingers through his hair, trying to desperately maintain some semblance of decorum for her fellow officers while Declan stormed her meager defenses. His chuckle drifted up to her. A final flick freed the faux ruby. Another chuckle shifted into a gasp.

Her eyes flew open as he struggled to cough up the gem. "Good God! Do you need my help?"

He made the universal sign for choking -- clutching his throat with both hands. Pam jumped behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and performed a Heimlich on him. The stone flew from his mouth, pinged off the hood of his car, then shattered on the asphalt.

"You scared the hell out of me." She squatted by his side, wrapping her arm around him. "Honey, are you all right?"

Pulling in deep breaths, Declan nodded. "You should know I'm not horny anymore."

"If I wasn't so scared, I'd laugh." She rested her head on his shoulder.

Footsteps pounded their way. "What the hell are you doing? Get off him!"

Before either of them could move, Bobby seized her arm and yanked her to her feet. "If you hurt him, I swear ..."

"No, no, no." Declan peeled his hand away. "It was an accident. I was choking on something. It's okay. We're heading back to the party. You just go help Mark."

"He doesn't need *my* help."

Obviously not, Stripper #1 was draped around him. The fool would never learn.

"Then you should help that man over ..." Hank was gone. A quick scan of the parking lot didn't reveal his car anywhere in sight, either.

"I'll be glad to take you home, Dr. Trent. You had a drink earlier."

"Thanks, but I'm staying awhile longer. I'll be fine."

Returning to their roles, Pam cozied up to Declan. "I'll make sure he gets where he's going. Come on, sugar, I gotta get back inside."

She felt bad about leaving him standing there, but there was little else she and Declan could do. As they passed by Mark, Declan offered him a veiled warning.

"Are you sure this is wise?"

Blondie flashed her cleavage. "Jealous? I can go two on one, if you know what I mean."

*Bitch.* Pam put herself between Declan and the woman. "Yeah, he gets it. Chill out. I got this one covered, if you know what I mean. You put a move on my man again, and I'll pull your pretty blond hair out by its gray roots."

"Why, you little ..."

"Enough, ladies." Declan wrapped his arm around her waist. "Save the cat fight for the mud or Jell-O or whatever it is you wrestle in."

"Was that really necessary?" Declan quietly asked as he steered her toward the door. "Or was that part of the act?"

She'd love to lie and tell him it was all planned. But the woman had pissed her off from the instant she hoisted herself onto Declan's lap. Blondie had worked him over like she had something to prove.

"She was poaching on my territory, and I didn't like it. I haven't liked it all night. It was time she was put in her place."

He glanced her way as he swung open the door. "Hmmm, I never pegged you as the jealous type."

"No one's more surprised than me." Pam dared a final glance before they ducked inside. Bobby hadn't budged, only the direction of his gaze had changed -- to the AAA tow truck pulling up behind Mark's vehicle. Mark and his stripper were glued together, her tongue slithering down his ear canal.



The party had calmed down a little during their absence. The strippers were done playing games and now posed for pictures with some of the men. Others picked up to go home, or divided up into groups to talk.

Julia's smirk greeted her when she retrieved her tray. "What happened to your jewelry?" She pointed to Pam's navel.

"Let's just say a certain someone went treasure hunting, then nearly choked on his prize. The Heimlich maneuver is very effective, by the way."

Julia's "Men!" was lost somewhere in her laughter.

Pam returned to serving drinks and prayed her feet would last the night. Buckley caught her halfway to her first table.

"We lost her," he whispered. "Some damn tow truck got between our men and her. She's gone. Stick to the plan. They're still watching your backs, but be on alert."

All she could do was nod.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan used Connie's disappearance as proof of her innocence. Buckley refused to listen. It looked like he and Pam had no choice but to play this game out tonight. But he sure as hell couldn't guarantee either of them would be able to stay alert.

His throat was sore from his earlier stunt -- it'd be a cold day in hell before he tried that again -- and a headache beat in time to the music still echoing in his head.

Fortunately, he and Pam had been able to leave before the party ended. Drink service cut off at midnight. It was still longer than either of them cared to be there.

Pam had changed into jeans, T-shirt, and tennis shoes. The wig remained and so did the headache it created. Her poor feet weren't doing much better. All they both wanted was a hot bath and a comfortable bed.

"Can you tell if we're being followed?" she asked.

"Isn't that the job of the surveillance team?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is." She yawned into her fist.

"Do we need to put on any type of show when we get to the room? Because, honey, it will be show tonight."

Pam laughed and dusted the backs of her fingers down his cheek. "I love how we're always in tune with each other. The way I feel, I'd just tell you to cover me up when you're done."

"Do we need to take turns sleeping? You can go first."

"No, someone's in the room next to ours watching. And we're on the tenth floor so no one can climb up from outside. We'll have the door bolted. We can sleep."

The phone in her duffel bag vibrated to life. Heaving a sigh, Pam pulled it out. "Maybe this is all cancelled and we can go home to our own bed."

He liked the way that sounded. Not his bed or her bed, *their* bed.

"Donaldson."

Declan could hear a voice on the other end. Male. Probably Buckley. He did all the talking. Pam stared at the road. When the conversation ended, she punched the end key and stuffed the phone away.

"They've got the room wired, too, just in case."

"Considering our relationship, Buckley probably thought it was a good idea to warn us."

Pam gave a light laugh. "Thank God he did. The last thing I'd want to do was give the guys stories to carry back to the precinct."

"God knows they've got a host of them after tonight." Declan hoped one of them wouldn't be about Bobby.

"Hank was a surprise. I didn't see that one coming. Where does he get off thinking ..." She waved the sentence away. "Forget it. He's not worth talking about."

"The Mark/Trish thing was a shocker, in more ways than one."

Pam twisted his way. "It's funny. Just the other day I was thinking Trish was a ticking bomb just waiting to explode. She's always been too calm, too precise, too in control. I remember thinking that I hoped I wouldn't make a domestic call on her one day. As for the thing with her and Mark, he's always after the next conquest, and Trish is a pretty woman. Maybe he considered it a challenge to tear down her pristine image."

"He got more than he bargained for this time. He's lucky she didn't try to kill him."

"Considering how mad she was, that could only be a matter of time. She destroyed his car. I'd bet her next stop is his condo, if she can get in. Ditto with his office. I hope he wasn't fool enough to give her keys."

No, but Trish knew where to find them. "Mark gave me an extra set to both places some time ago. They're at my office. Maybe I can get there before she remembers that."

"While you're at it, you should call a locksmith to come change the lock. This time of night it'll be expensive, but I don't see any other way."

Declan didn't, either. He sure as hell wasn't going to spend the night at the office. "I'll take you to the hotel, then head over there."

Pam retrieved her cell and punched in a number.

"Calling Buckley?"

"Nope. We've gone this far with this subterfuge, we can't risk it by having you leave the hotel after you drop me off. I'm going to call Julia and have her bring a disguise. Then we'll have you take a cab to your office so your car will stay here." She smiled. "Maybe I can

get Julia to spend the night. That ought to really rattle anyone who's watching us. Think you can handle two beautiful women?"

Declan laughed. "Tonight I can't even handle one. She better not snore."

"Like you'll be there to notice."

She was right about that. He'd be lucky if he got back to the hotel before sunrise.

"I'll bring breakfast back with me."

She winked, then spoke into the phone. "Hi, Julia, we need your services again. There's a comfy bed and breakfast in it for you. And bring something to help me take these blasted nails off."

## Chapter Twelve

Declan awoke sandwiched between two warm bodies -- Pam spooned against his front, Julia his back. When he returned to the room at five, they were parked on each side of the king-sized bed and dead asleep. His only choice had been the center of the bed. Neither budged when he crawled in, still dressed. But somehow, in their sleep, they'd migrated his way.

Thankfully, his erection was tucked against the right female, his fingers curled against the right breast, but the right hand wasn't wrapped around his cock. He'd longed for a chance like this in college. Now ...

"Uhm, ladies?"

Both stretched like lazy cats against him, doubling his predicament when Julia brushed a long stroke down his dick.

"Oh, my God!" She jerked away, taking the bedspread with her as she scrambled to the edge. "I'm so sorry! Oh, gosh! I'm sorry. Oh, geez, I'm sorry."

Pam eased away. "It's okay, Jules."

No, it wasn't. He had a hell of a hard-on and no way to hide it. He rolled to his stomach, burrowing his head into Pam's pillow.

"I stopped at Starbucks and got some scones for breakfast." The coffeemaker in the room would have to suffice.

Julia combed her fingers through her hair. "Do-do you guys want me to go into the bathroom for a while?"

Pam swung from the bed. "The room's wired. Poor Declan will just have to suffer." She bent down and kissed his cheek.

"I am suffering," he muttered. "Any word on anything?"

“Not a peep. And you?”

“Mark’s keys were still there. The locksmith took his time arriving and doing the work.” They’d expected no less.

“What time did you get in?”

He peeled his eyes open to the clock on the bedside table. “Two hours ago.” It felt like two minutes. “Can we end this and go home now?”

“I’ll jump in the bathroom real quick.” The bed bounced as Julia left it, aggravating his situation all the more. “Your cell phone’s flashing,” she said, then shut the door.

He’d put the thing on vibrate last night and left it on top of the blond wig Julia had foisted on him. Groaning, he pushed himself upright as Pam handed it to him. Four missed calls and one voice message, all from the hospital.

Who was in crisis now? Tired as he was, Declan was tempted to ignore them. Duty and conscience wouldn’t allow him to do so. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he retrieved the voice mail. His spirits and physical predicament deflated with the news; it looked like Trish had gotten to Mark after all.

Pam was by his side in an instant, wrapping her arm over his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

He punched the off key and let the phone dangle in his hands. “Mark was hit by a car early this morning. He’s in critical condition. No suspects. No real witnesses other than a 9-1-1 call from a neighbor.” However, there was little doubt who was responsible. Mark never should have left with that stripper. “Your office would have known about this. Why didn’t they ...”

Declan stopped himself. They’d had a ruse to fulfill, a killer to find, nothing would interfere with that.

“Come on. Let’s get going.”

She’d barely said the words when someone knocked on the adjoining door, then stepped through the unlocked door. Buckley.

“Sorry, but ...”

“No need to explain.” Declan snapped to his feet. “I understand. Did any of this do any good?” He waved his hand around the room.

Buckley shook his head. “No one followed you here that we could tell. I’d still like the women to go out in the disguises just in case. You can leave now. I know you want to get to the hospital. I did check. There’s been no change in Mark Roberts’s condition. He still remains critical.”

“He went home with the first stripper last night. You might want to check with her. Maybe she saw something.”

“We’ll do that,” he quietly replied.

Pam curled her fingers around his bicep. "Go. I'll leave with Julia, then meet you there."

Declan didn't argue. He merely popped a breath strip into his mouth, grabbed his small overnight duffel, and left. He could fix up in the hospital restroom when he reached the place.

He tried not to think about the wasted hours. At least one good thing had come of it; Connie was off the hook as a suspect, and his conscience was clear on that issue. His secret was safe. None of that helped when he finally looked down at Mark's battered body.

The list of injuries was a long one: skull fracture and concussion, internal bleeding, all major bones broken. He was lucky to be alive, although he sure wouldn't think so once he woke up. *If* he woke up. The pain was going to be tremendous, the months of physical therapy challenging in both body and mind. Declan would be there every step of the way for him.

"Yours was the only emergency number he had on him," the nurse said.

"He has no family remaining." Mark was born when his parents were up in years. Both had passed away. "He gave me power of attorney for medical decisions. The form should be in his records."

"Yes, his doctor has sent those. Presently, there are no decisions to make."

Declan prayed it stayed that way.

"There really is no need to stick around here, Dr. Trent," she said. "If there's a change in Dr. Roberts's condition, we can call you. You *will* have your cell phone on, won't you?"

"Yes." At this point he'd be afraid to leave it off.

A quick call to Pam let her know he was headed home to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam juggled her dress bag and overnighter to one shoulder as she punched the elevator button for Declan's floor. She had promised to wake him in time to prepare for the wedding. Hopefully he'd been able to sleep and not let worry drag him down. He sure wasn't going to like her news.

Trish was nowhere to be found. Calls to her mother in San Diego went unanswered. Buckley finally contacted the police department down there to do a check of the residence.

The agency that supplied the strippers refused to give out names and addresses without a subpoena. It didn't matter that she might be a witness to an assault. Buckley never should have mentioned that the woman had gone home with Mark. Red flags flashed in front of the owner. He feared they wanted her for prostitution and quickly disavowed any responsibility for her actions. His refusal to say another word without his attorney present came fast on the heels of his demand for the subpoena. All they could do was wait. It seemed they'd been doing a lot of that recently.

The elevator deposited her on the sixth floor. Beige carpeting cushioned her walk while her keys jingled in tandem with her footsteps. In the time Declan had lived here, he knew his neighbors well enough to nod when they passed each other. That was the extent of friendships here. Everyone pretty much stayed to themselves, or so he claimed.

Pam's experience said differently. There was always the person who peered out the peephole each time someone visited. Someone who monitored the comings and goings of every person. The trick was finding that individual witness. Hell, for all they knew, the stripper lived across the hall from Declan.

She laughed at herself as she seated the key. That would be funny -- to find her across the hall. Stranger things had happened. It would certainly explain why the woman was all over Declan last night. Of course, she was all over everyone. Money was a great incentive. Plus Pam suspected she also got off on the power the flirtation gave her over the men. She was in control, and they all knew it. How in control was she when Mark got her to his place?

Maybe she'd toyed with him, then just dropped him off and went on her way. Maybe he'd tried to block her from leaving and she'd run him over. Horrible as that scenario sounded, it was preferable to thinking Trish had done this.

Pam pulled in a breath and shut off the thoughts as she stepped inside Declan's apartment. It was hard not to like the place, especially since she'd help him do some of the decorating. Though she hadn't realized it at the time, everything was the perfect complement to her house. Their furnishings would mesh well together.

Declan's own touches were here as well. She'd never met a man who liked plants as much as he did. A ficus dominated one corner, while a schefflera stood in the opposite one. Spider plants, assorted ivy, and prayer plants vied for space in the window. On the small patio just beyond his kitchen, jade plants ringed the space. It'd take them a week just to move his jungle to her place.

Pam draped her dress over the sectional sofa, dropping her bag to the floor beside it. A peek through the bedroom door revealed Declan was still sound asleep. The poor guy lay sprawled crosswise over the bed. At least he'd managed to undress first, and now sported a very lovely erection hovering just above his navel.

"Now that would be a shame to waste."

She slinked toward her prey, leaving a trail of clothes behind her. Taking care not to wake him, she slithered onto the bed, straddling his body until she reached his dick. Pre-cum shimmered on the tip. Starting at the base, Pam feathered her tongue up the length.

Declan's hips lifted on a deep groan. "Oh, Julia! Yes!"

"You son of a ..."

Laughing, Declan caught her wrists before she could follow through with her punch. He rolled her beneath him, tucking his cock against her clit.

"Now, baby, you know you're the only woman for me."

“How long have you been awake?”

“Since you came in.” He nuzzled his whiskers against the curve of her neck. “Why else would I be sportin’ a hard-on? Just the thought of you ...”

“Or Julia?”

“Can’t take a joke?”

She squealed when he dug his fingers into her ribs. “Oh, Dec, no, please! You know I hate being tickled.”

“I know, sweetheart. I’m sorry.” He brushed his thumb over her cheek. “You truly are the only woman for me, the only one I want.”

“It’s a good thing, because I don’t share with ...”

He cut off further talk by claiming her lips in a kiss that reached down to Pam’s toes. She melted into him, draping her arms over his shoulders as his fingers sought her breasts, then her nipples. He toyed them into elongated nubs, twisting and tweaking until she writhed against the erection still parked in the cleft of her thighs.

Long sweeps of his tongue punctuated the glide of his penis against her. Pam couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think beyond the sensation, the feel of his body wrapped around hers. He sealed one kiss, only to knead first one lip, then the other before plunging back in to claim her.

She looped her legs around his, hanging on as he continued a slow thrust that raked his glans over her clit, making her slick, swollen, and damn ready to come. He slid his lips from hers, nipping down the column of her throat to that extra-sensitive curve just below her ear.

“I’m going to kiss your pussy just like that,” he said, then gave her a gentle bite that arrowed her body into his as she gasped.

Declan lifted her hands, placing them on either side of her head. “Can you be a good girl and keep them here? Or do I have to tie you up?”

Pam fisted the pillow as he suckled her nipple deep within his mouth. She lifted her knees, spreading wide for his attention between them. Instead, he took the other nipple. Long fingers kneaded the sides of her pussy, building the pressure, touching every place but where she most needed. Sweet torture.

She lifted her hips, not so silently begging for more with a whimpered groan. He moved downward, pausing to dig his tongue into the well of her navel. Electric shocks of pleasure shot to her crotch.

“I’m going to make you come with my mouth, sweetheart. Then I’m going to fuck you deep and make you come again.”

Her body quivered with anticipation. Her breath came in short pants as he shifted toward his goal and made good his promise to kiss her there.



He licked one side, then the other, deep in the valleys, before sucking her labia between his lips. He kneaded one slowly before moving to the other, over and over until she thought she'd weep with want, just as her pussy was now doing. Then he tunneled his tongue into her, fingers tickling her anus as he did so.

"God, Declan, please!"

"Please what, love? Do this?" He wiggled one finger into the tight opening. "Or this?" Two fingers burrowed deep into her vagina. "Or this?" He captured her clit between his lips and lashed it with his tongue.

Orgasm exploded through her. Pam rocked with the impact, crying out with the blessed relief it gave her.

Declan cradled her buttocks as she drifted back to earth, lifting them to his thighs as he knelt between her splayed legs. Pam watched him through lazy eyes. Guiding his throbbing cock in one hand, he slid it home, sealing them together with a deep thrust that stole her breath once more.

He stayed like that -- deep, hard -- the length throbbing against her walls. Then he pressed his thumb against her clit. Hard circles urged it awake. In response, her cunt squeezed his dick of its own volition. Jaw clenched, Declan pistoned long strokes into her, pressing her clit against his erection with each pass it made. She felt the first wave crest deep inside her belly. It moved outward with the force of a tsunami that engulfed them both.

She watched the pleasure twist his face, felt the rush of hot semen against her walls, then welcomed him into her arms in the afterglow.

"I swear I could fall back to sleep right now," he muttered against her neck. "But I doubt Remy and Gloria would appreciate us missing their wedding."

"And we will if we don't get moving."

Smiling, he levered himself to his forearms. "We can save time by showering together."

Pam laughed and draped her legs over his hips. "Somehow I doubt that, but I'm willing."

"I only have one regret about this wedding."

She nudged her heels into his butt. "What's that?"

He locked his gaze with hers. "I wish it was ours."

*Awww, what a romantic.* Pam blinked back a rush of happy tears. "It will be soon."

Soon as Mark was out of the hospital. Soon as Gloria was back from her honeymoon. Soon as this serial killer was caught. It suddenly felt like an eternity away.

"You know, we'll be dressed for it. If we hustle up, maybe we can find a place locally and do it before the wedding."

Declan beamed a smile over her. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

In hindsight it was an impetuous act -- rushing off like teenagers to get married. It seemed the universe agreed, since they couldn't find an available chapel nearby. The best they could do was schedule a slot for the following weekend.

Declan was philosophical about it, claiming it gave them time to find the rings they wanted, rather than settle for what they could find at the last minute. Pam tried her best to hide her disappointment. Once the decision had been made, she wanted to do it. Nothing had felt more right.

Still, sitting in a church packed with family and friends, Pam agreed waiting was for the best. This was Remy and Gloria's day. Nothing should detract from that.

"Sure you don't want a big wedding?" Declan asked in a low voice as people settled in the pews for the ceremony.

Pam dropped her hand to his thigh, smiling when the engagement ring caught the light. "I'm sure." *Been there, done that.* "But a small party later with family and friends would be nice."

"Where we can announce the upcoming birth of our first child?"

She smothered a snort. "I see married, barefoot, and pregnant."

"You hardly wear shoes around the house as it is."

She elbowed his ribs, then added a wink.

From the pew behind, Buckley poked his head between them. "San Diego PD found Trish Wallace. She denies any knowledge of any incident regarding Mark Roberts, but is returning on her own to help in any way possible."

She'd be smart to have an attorney present, too. "Did we get that subpoena yet?"

"Still working on it." He patted his pocket. "I figured the best place to find a judge was here. I got Traffic to give it to me to handle."

With an assistant district attorney as the groom, that was a safe bet.

"I've got a team from Traffic standing by to exercise it the second it's signed. In fact, I see my target two rows ahead."

Hunching down, Buckley skittered to the outer aisle where he darted up to sit beside Judge Larsen.

Hank quickly replaced Buckley behind them. "What the hell is he doing?"

"Getting a subpoena." Pam glanced over her shoulder, surprised to find Connie slipping in beside Hank. "Mark Roberts was hit by a car last night. He's in critical condition. He took one of the strippers home last night. She might be a witness or the doer. Her employer won't give up her name and address."

Boasting a smile, Buckley zipped toward the exit. Hank's gaze followed him all the way. "You people might want to think about rounding up your boyfriend's secretary, too."

"My people know their job, Hank. And Declan is my fiancé, not my boyfriend."

Connie's head snapped up like someone shoved a stick up her ass. "He's your *what?*" Her voice carried over the church. Pam swore it echoed back. People shot scowls their way.

Declan turned. Buckley's smile had nothing on his. "Fiancé."

Music saved them from a scene. Pam tried to focus on the ceremony, not the holes being stared into her back.

Clichéd as it sounded, everything was lovely: the church, the decorations, the flowers, the gowns, and, of course, the bride. She wasn't about to let the disgruntled couple behind her ruin it.

Declan slipped his hand around Pam's waist as they stood to watch Gloria float by. "One more week, and it will be us," he whispered.

She laced her fingers over his and leaned into him. "Honeymoon?"

He tightened a hug around her. "Haven't we been on one the last six months?"

"So we have. I hope it never ends."

"Not even when they lay me in the ground, honey."

Pam's eyes misted over. A poorly disguised snort from behind ruined the moment.

For the life of her Pam couldn't understand what their problem was. It wasn't like they'd all divorced the day before. There was no property or children between them. Hank had moved to his next conquest before the ink was dry on their marriage license. Yet he had the nerve to give her puppy-dog eyes over this news.

She supposed Connie's anger wasn't anything new. The woman never wanted anyone to have Declan but her. Her presence last night at the bachelor party screamed of obsession. Pam had news for her. If Connie took one threatening step toward her or Declan, she'd find a restraining order slapped on her quicker than she could blink. Pam would *not* have her children hurt.

Her children. The thought made her giggle. She was actually planning children, something she never entertained before now.

"What's funny?" Declan whispered.

"Kids. We're going to have kids," she whispered back.

"Barefoot and pregnant, sweetheart. Just say the word."

Connie jerked forward, teeth bared in a snarl. "How dare you flaunt this in my face."

Hank yanked her into her seat. "Don't you dare make a scene in front of me," he gritted out through clenched teeth. "I have a reputation to uphold. If you expect to be with me, you will honor that."

Pam managed to keep her mouth shut.

The ceremony was an hour long, filled with love and joy, candlelight and music, and the obligatory tears from the mothers. Anyone watching could tell this was a meant-to-be

couple as Remy and Gloria made their way back down the aisle. They'd meant every single word of the vows they'd taken. Sickness and health. Richer or poorer. Death do us ...

Pam craned her neck to look back at Declan. "We have two hours before the reception. Want to see if they can fit us in?"

His smile answered before him. Hand braced against the small of her back, he led her outside. It stayed there as they gathered on the steps to greet the couple once more before the wedding party began the tedious round of pictures.

With luck, she and Declan would be married when they saw the Sanchezes again. She could almost see Gloria's eyes widen in shocked delight when she told her.

She saw Buckley sidle up to her from the corner of the eye. He'd either missed the ceremony or hugged the back row to see it.

"Sorry to do this to you, Pam." He pressed his lips tight and shook his head. "There's been another murder."

Her gaze lingered on the happy couple, then slid up to Declan's. "I'm so sorry, but ..."

"Go. I'll run home, get you a change of clothes, and meet you at the precinct."

Pam stretch on tiptoe and kissed him. "God, I love you." That's when she really knew their vows wouldn't just promise forever, they would mean it.

"I love you, too." He surreptitiously rubbed her butt. "Go."

She swung away and slammed into Hank.

"I'm going, too. I want this done."

Buckley plucked her away from him. "Then stay out of our way."

He might as well have asked for the moon.

## Chapter Thirteen

Dread clenched a knot in the pit of Declan's stomach. Another one dead. He didn't want to think about who it might be this time. Hell, he couldn't have figured it out if he tried. He selfishly prayed it was random, not tied to him in any way. But in the back of his mind he couldn't help wondering where Connie had been the night before.

He glanced around. She was nowhere in sight. She'd taken off in her own car seconds after Hank followed the detectives. An admission of guilt? He couldn't begin to speculate.

As he waited for a chance to explain their sudden departure to the bride and groom, Declan wondered if he shouldn't have followed the others. If only to ease his mind, or seal his worries.

He pulled his cell phone from his suit pocket and called Pam. She picked up on the first ring.

"I need to know who it is."

"The stripper, Dec. Someone killed the stripper. Captain Buckley has a guard on Mark now, just in case."

Just in case of what? That someone would murder him? That Mark had murdered the girl?

"Thanks. I'll meet you at the precinct." There was little more he could do.

At least he could be relieved the victim wasn't a client. But the knot in his stomach had merely doubled. All three victims had another thing in common -- they'd all crossed paths with Trish Wallace.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We got her name and address from her boss the same time the call came in." Buckley wove through traffic, taking full advantage of the warning light he'd put on the hood of his personal vehicle.

"Are we sure it's the same doer?" This wasn't one of Declan's patients, so that theory was history.

"The same officers who responded to the Murray scene took this call, too. It's the same. I've instructed our people to try to hold Trish Wallace when she arrives."

*Trish.* Pam sagged against her seat. She knew the first two victims and had made definite threats against the stripper last night. "Maybe I should head there and begin questioning her about Mark."

"Not yet. I want her to wait on us, not the other way around. Let her stew and worry. Since you're the lead on these serial killings, you really need to view this new scene. The coroner should already be there. Bobby Salazar is on his way over to process."

Pam winced. "What ever you do, please don't mention last night's undercover gig. He didn't recognize me, and I don't care to enlighten him. The last thing I feel like hearing is one of his long-winded dissertations on the depths to which I'll fall to catch a killer."

"Agreed. I don't want to hear it, either." Buckley shook his head. "Talk about your ticking bombs. But he's a damn fine investigator."

She wouldn't argue with that. If there was evidence, Bobby would find it. "What's the vic's name?"

He snorted. "Kandi Kane."

She tried not to groan. Hopefully her driver's license would provide them with the real name. "Who made the 9-1-1 call?"

"Anonymous female voice asking for help and giving the address before hanging up. Officers secured the scene, and McNeil is canvassing the rest of the apartment building for witnesses."

Poor kid would either harden fast or quit after today. Once they arrived at the scene, Pam had a few doubts herself about continuing the job.

Kandi Kane's apartment building looked like a minor earthquake would send the structure to the ground in a pile of kindling. Paint peeled down to bare wood scoured deep by termites. Plywood-covered windows where the glass had broken out. The stench of urine permeated hallways of cracked linoleum speckled with roach crap. Pam wanted to vomit before they reached Kane's apartment, especially when the rusty aroma of blood drifted her way.

Yellow crime tape crisscrossed the doorway. The responding sergeant guarded it, snorting a Vicks inhaler to overcome the combination of stench. She and Buckley hesitated at the entrance, scanning first. *This* was a bloody crime scene.

The sergeant jerked his head toward it. "Coroner's in there. Forensics, too."

They covered their feet -- not so easy to do over her high heels -- and hands, then stepped inside. Bobby quietly recorded his observations of the scene in the corner of the room.

"I expected you to be farther along than this," Buckley told him.

He clicked off the recorder and stomped their way. "Some punk kids vandalized my car last night. I was getting my windshield replaced when I got the call. Don't worry. I'll get caught up. I know my job, captain."

Pam actually felt sorry for him. He'd been put on the spot at the bachelor party the night before, then found his car vandalized. Who wouldn't be defensive and on edge?

"It's okay, Bobby. We know you'll do a superb job as always." Pam touched his bicep, pulling back when he glared down at the physical contact. Obviously he wasn't in the mood to be comforted or supported. Pam should have known better than to try.

She put some distance between them and returned to her evaluations, while he retreated to the corner once more.

Kandi Kane might have lived in a dump, but she'd done her best to make the interior look decent. From what Pam could see through the blood, the furniture might be old and worn, but the place had been orderly and clean.

"His level of violence is escalating," Buckley noted.

"What kind of sick bastard is this?" Pam wondered aloud.

Bobby sucked in a breath. The recorder clattered to the floor. "Sorry. Thought it was a mouse, but it was a roach." He glanced at them. "A big one."

"Nothing wrong with that, Bobby. I probably would have squealed." She headed toward the bedroom where Dr. Adams was just finishing up.

"She's been dead a good twelve hours," he said, without looking up. "You smell like a breath of sunshine. Thank you. Vanilla Musk?"

Pam smiled. "Yes, I was at the Rodriguez-Sanchez wedding."

"I drew the short straw on that one and had to cover this shift." He pointed to the woman. "Very violent this time. Full rage. Out of control."

*Very.* Like Darla, she was bound with parachute cord and gagged with duct tape. But the word "MINE" was carved so deep into her forehead bone showed through. The lash marks were driven hard, leaving bloody stripes from breasts to ankles.

"If she's been dead that long, there's no way she made the 9-1-1 call." She made a note to check with dispatch when they returned.

"Check it out." Buckley walked in, holding Kane's driver's license high. He jerked to a stop when he saw the body. "Her name really is Kandi Kane," he quietly finished, then did an about-face and left.

"There's evidence of sex as well. I found semen."

That would match to Mark. "We expected that. We know who she left with last night. He was hit by a car very early this morning, most probably before this began. I think we can rule him out as a suspect." But not Trish.

Pam could see it all clearly. Trish plowed into Mark, then went after Kane. How that tied to the other two murders remained a mystery, but not for long.

She pivoted on the ball of her foot and followed Buckley. "I've seen enough. I'm ready to question the suspect."

Bobby's head snapped around. "You have a suspect?"

"For now let's just call it a person of interest," she replied.

"Who?" Eyes wide, he took a step closer.

Pam hesitated. The walls in this place were thin, when it was convenient to an eavesdropper. She didn't want this all over the news. "We'd rather not say for now."

"I'm ready, too," Buckley said and started for the door. He looked like she felt, pale and queasy.

Pam peeled the bloodied booties from her feet with the tips of her gloved fingers, then tossed everything into the small garbage bag just outside the door as she left.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Play that back for me again, please."

Pam hovered over the dispatcher, listening to a recording of the Kane 9-1-1 call. As they'd realized at the crime scene, Kane couldn't have made the call. A check of records revealed the call originated from a gas-station pay phone five miles away.

The caller was female, requesting assistance and giving her address before hanging up. Pam couldn't tell if it was Kane, even though she'd heard the woman talk the night before. "Last night she was bold and brassy. This voice is clearly frightened. It's hard to tell."

"Do you think Declan or Hank would do a better job?" Buckley asked. "Both were closer to her and had more interaction."

Too much in Pam's opinion. Both waited in the squad bay. Hank paced. Declan sat at her desk with a blessed change of clothes -- black twill slacks with a matching pullover cotton shirt and her low-cut boots. Right now only pajamas could have been more heavenly.

"I'll call them in." She strode to the door and motioned them both with a wave of her arm. Neither hesitated, or bothered to look at each other.

"We need you to listen to this recording and tell us if this is the first stripper from last night, or if you recognize the voice as being someone else." Buckley moved away to give them better access as the dispatcher replayed the tape.

They shook their heads in unison.

"She didn't do a lot of talking," Hank said.



“Just smirked a lot,” Declan added. “Last night was all about power for her. Why does she sound so far away?”

Buckley shrugged. “It could be the acoustics and background noise at the pay phone. I’ll have someone check out the gas station to see if there’s a surveillance video.” He shifted his gaze to Pam. “You get changed while I do that, then we’ll go question Trish Wallace.”

“I’d like to observe if I could,” Declan said.

Pam, Buckley, and Hank exchanged looks. Finally, the captain hiked his shoulder. “Sure, no interference, though.”

“None whatsoever,” Declan replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan stared at the woman on the other side of a two-way mirror. If he’d passed her on the street, he wouldn’t have recognized her as his put-together assistant.

Trish’s hair was mussed, like she’d just tumbled out of bed. Dark circles rimmed her red eyes. Her nails had been chewed down to stubs, and yet she still worked on them. She wore ripped jeans and a Chargers T-shirt two sizes too big. Her legs were in constant motion, jiggling in place. Her feet were shoved into well-worn Birkenstocks. The pink polish on her toes was chipped.

He slipped into one of the two molded-plastic chairs in the room. Trish had fallen hard and fast in the few days since he’d last seen her. He was almost afraid to hear how far. Loyalty to her and all she’d done for him, coupled with an intense curiosity to understand how this happened, caused him to ask to be here. Seeing her like this made him think twice about his request.

How could he have been so wrong, so misled by a person? There was never a hint of a woman on the edge in his daily dealings with her. Trish always had everything under control and well ordered -- herself, his office. Never a complaint. Never a concern. Had he been that blind, or had she been too clever? He pulled in a sigh. Maybe even she had been surprised by her rapid descent.

Hank breezed in and took the empty seat. He was still dressed in his navy-blue suit for the wedding. Declan had changed into khakis and a green pullover when he retrieved Pam’s change of clothes.

“So, how long have you been fucking my ex-wife?”

That was blunt and to the point. “I can’t see what business that is of yours, nor do I see why it should matter.”

The chair creaked as Hank tipped it on its back legs. Declan wished it would skid from underneath him.

“Did you fuck her while we were married?”

He was determined to have a confrontation. "No. Unlike some people, I was faithful in my marriage."

"Your wife wasn't. I fucked her."

Declan couldn't help but laugh. "Now I know that's a lie." If he had, all of Connie's focus, all that jealous rage, would have shifted from Declan to Hank.

Hank shrugged. "You caught me. Obviously you know your women. I'm fucking her now."

*Then God help you both.*

"We're more compatible than I expected." Hank rocked the chair. "We seem to have mutual interests that make partnering up beneficial."

Declan resisted the urge to ask what those interests might be. Frankly, he didn't give a damn as long as they left him and Pam alone. He couldn't think of a couple who deserved each other more.

The door to the interview room swung open. Seconds later Buckley and Pam walked in, notepad and tape recorder in hand. She looked no-nonsense in short boots and slacks with black shirt tucked in. Her badge was clipped to her waistband. Neither of them carried a weapon.

Trish dropped her hands to the table as she looked their way. Wide blue eyes followed their progress as they took the seats opposite her, eyes that shifted with hatred when they zeroed in on Pam. The animosity chilled Declan to the marrow.

"Ever watch Pam interrogate?" Hank didn't wait for a reply. "God, she's amazing. Especially when she goes in for the kill. Gives me a hard-on just thinking about it. Every time I watch her I want to run in there, toss her onto that table and fuck her like crazy."

Declan chewed on the inside of his mouth. The guy was really starting to get under his skin, which he knew was Hank's intent. He forced a smile.

"That should impress your new bed partner. Connie can sniff out if you've even walked by a woman. Expect the full gamut of interrogation -- questions hurled, accusations made, stalking, obsession, fits of jealous rage that know no boundaries. You've really bitten off a chunk this time, Hank."

"And you don't think Pam has jealous rages?" He snickered. "She lashed out at me with a wooden spoon. Locked me out of the house. Tossed all my clothes into the yard in a big pile and doused them with every bottle of perfume she owned."

No, he hadn't known about that. But ... "The big difference is that you deserved it, I didn't. You're playing with fire with Connie."

"No, *that's* fire." He jerked his head toward the glass.

"She'll turn on you, too, my friend," Hank pressed on. "She doesn't share. I'm sure she's told you that. It wouldn't surprise me what she would do to make sure of that this time."

For the first time since he'd walked in, Declan looked at Hank. "What are you saying?"

"Watch your back and guard your balls."

"You might want to take your own advice, *my friend*."

Hank opened his mouth to retort, then clamped it shut when Buckley clicked on the recorder and began the interview.

"Hey, Trish, thanks for coming in. We have a few questions to ask you."

Those blue eyes still glared at Pam. "Whore. I heard what you've been doing with Dr. Trent, your fuck buddy. Here all this time I thought you were having important sessions." She snapped to her feet, hands braced on the table as she leaned over Pam. "How dare you make a fool of me. Having sex while I was on the other side of the door! I hope you two had a good laugh over that one. I used to feel guilty. Not anymore. I'm glad I did it now."

"Wow," Hank mumbled. "Talk about taking off in a whole other direction."

Declan quietly echoed that sentiment.

"Did you really do Pam in your office? Hot stuff."

Declan ignored him and his snicker.

Standing, Buckley gently pressed Trish to her seat with his hand to her shoulder. "Please sit down, ma'am."

Pam steepled her hands before her. "What is it you did, Trish?"

She flopped back in the chair. "You know damn well what I did. Why else would I be here?" She snapped forward, eyes filled with fire. "But if that son of a bitch thinks I'm going to take the fall for this, he's dead wrong. If I go down, Mark Roberts is going down with me."

"Then to be fair, let's hear your side of the story." Pam eased back.

Trish's nostrils flared as she mimicked Pam's position. "It started out as a little harmless flirting. When that didn't open Dr. Trent's eyes ... Hell, all I ever was to him was a fucking secretary. He never once saw how much I wanted him. Then you breeze in. I guess if I'd spread my pussy open for him on the desk, maybe then I would have gotten some attention."

Declan scrubbed his hand down his face. *Jesus, who the hell was this woman?*

Pam never flinched. "You and Mark began an affair?"

"Yeah. You and Dr. Trent don't have rights on the buddy system, you know. I had needs Mark was fully capable of fulfilling. He said I was just who he wanted. He knew how I felt being rejected and all by Dr. Trent. Said he'd been kicked to the curb himself lately. It was his idea. The perfect way to get even. Hit Dr. Trent where it hurt -- his patients."

"You hurt his patients?" Buckley asked.

Trish rolled her eyes. "No. We stole them."

Hank laughed and slapped Declan on the back. "Yeah, you're a real good judge of people. Your secretary has the hots for you, and you can't see it. Then she and your best

friend steal your clients from under your nose.” He laughed again. “Real good judge. Watch your balls, man. Pam will rip them off and feed them to you.”

Declan sat there in shocked silence and listened to Trish lay out the simple procedure. She had access to the files and simply copied them and passed on the ones Mark wanted. He’d been blissfully ignorant of the whole scheme. Right now he wished he still was.

Here he’d been worried sick over Mark’s condition, holding power of attorney over his life, never once realizing the person he’d called friend was stabbing him in the back.

“So, what happened last night?” Buckley asked.

Tears swelled in Trish’s eyes. “He cheated on me.”

*Big surprise there.* Like Hank, Mark didn’t know the meaning of the word faithful.

“I heard about the party, but didn’t think he’d dare show up there, much less at the wedding. So I waited and waited for him at home. When he didn’t show up, I went looking for him and found him with that *woman* humping him in front of everybody. I could have killed them both right then and there.”

“But you smashed his car instead,” Pam surmised.

“It was the closest I could get to his penis. I’m sure it hurt just as bad.” She snapped her arms over her chest, crossed her legs, and started to swing the top one. “Is he pressing charges? Because I dare him to do so. I’ve had it with his games. I’ll ruin him. He wants to be the bad boy? I’ll show him what happens to bad boys.”

*Could this get any more surreal?*

Buckley stood up, stretched, and turned to the glass to hide his smirk. Pam was left to continue.

“And what’s that?” she asked. “They get run over by cars?”

Trish blinked, mouth agape. “What?”

“Did you run over Mark with your car?”

A single tear drifted down her cheek. “Mark’s been run over? Is he dead?”

“No, but he’s not far from it.”

“Where is he? I have to see him.” Trish’s chair skittered across the room as she stood.

Pam was on her feet a second later, reaching for a weapon she didn’t have. Buckley whirled around, doing the same.

“Sit down,” Pam demanded.

Sobbing, Trish retrieved her chair and sat. “You don’t understand. I have to see him. I-I love him.”

Declan watched Pam’s and Buckley’s shoulders relax as they resumed their seats.

“We can make arrangements for a visit later. *If* he’s able, and *if* you cooperate,” the captain told her.

Trish smeared tears from her cheeks. More flowed down to replace them.

"When was the last time you saw Mark?" Pam asked.

"Last night." She sniffled. "I went home after the thing at the party and waited for him to come by and beg my forgiveness. That's what he was supposed to do. Only this time he didn't. So I went to his house and found him in bed -- the bed where we had made love that afternoon!"

"And what did you do then?"

She jerked forward, hands splayed on the table. "What the hell do you think? I picked up a rock and busted the window. I told him exactly what I thought and took off. Last time I saw him was from my rearview mirror, chasing me down the street in his jeans and bare feet. I hope he ..." She clamped her mouth shut. Her shoulders drooped. "I hope he's all right."

"Did you see any other vehicles? Did you see the woman leave?" Buckley asked.

Trish shook her head. "I was too hurt and mad."

"And where did you go from there?"

"To my mom's in San Diego."

Buckley shoved to his feet. "We're going to need to take a look at your car, Miss Wallace."

"Help yourself. It's in the parking lot. When do I get to see Mark?"

"Soon." He strode to the door, motioning Pam to follow.

Hank was out the door like a shot. "Now what?"

They steered him back into the room and shut the door.

"We're going to check her car for damage," Buckley told him. "But I don't think we'll find any."

"In the meantime, we'll send a team over to Mark's to collect evidence. Kane was obviously at his house. Did she leave or was she taken?"

Hank jerked his arm toward the glass. "She could have taken her."

Pam shook her head. "No. As mad and out of control she is, Trish would have attacked her on the spot. I suspect she left and was followed home."

"By Trish."

"No." Her voice was firmer this time, as if she held tight to her temper. "There was rage in Kane's attack, but I really don't feel she did these murders. What reason would she have had to kill Murray and Phillips?"

Hank sliced a glare Declan's way. "Her attraction to him would be motive. I understand his patients are extra friendly toward him."

Extra friendly. Connie's words. Declan didn't like the weight that settled in the pit of his stomach. The stripper had been extra friendly last night. Connie hovered nearby, watching everything. Stalking, plotting.

"I might buy that if Trish didn't have this relationship with Mark, but not now," Pam told him.

"And I'd bet we'll find her alibi fits the timeline." Buckley reached for the door handle.

"So that's it? Back to nothing?" Hank's voice was just below a shout.

"We'll hold her while we check things out. But it's starting to look like she's not the one."

"Fine. I'm going for coffee while you have your little scavenger hunt." He shoved by and out the door.

Buckley sighed. "I really miss Remy Sanchez."

"I know." Pam clapped him on the back. "Let's go. The sooner we get Hank out of our hair, the better. I honestly don't know where to go from here."

"I think I do," Declan quietly replied.

They cocked their heads his way, looking at him as if he'd grown a second nose.

"You might want to go back to your first suspect. Connie ... Connie came at me with a knife once in a jealous rage."

"And you're just now telling us?" Buckley muttered a string of curses and took off.

Pam spared him a disappointed glance, sighed, and followed her boss.

Within thirty minutes, Connie had replaced Trish in the interview room. Trish had been excused and taken away to sit vigil by Mark's side.

Declan still couldn't believe the two had conspired to steal his clients. He didn't see where he had any choice but to report them both and file appropriate charges. Mark was going to lose his license. Trish would be looking for a new job. What else could he do? He'd made one mistake not reporting Connie; he wouldn't make another.

He stared at his ex-wife. She was more defiant than Trish had been, angry to have been brought in, angry with Pam, angry at the world for all he knew. Her long blond hair was twisted into place with a clip. She'd tossed on shorts, a tank top, and sandals. She would have been beautiful if not for the sour look pinching her face. Barely perceptible lines became caverns framing her features.

"Where were you last night, Mrs. Trent?" Buckley asked.

The name sounded foreign to Declan's ears. The only woman who had any right to the name was his mother and the woman facing Connie.

Connie smirked. "I was with a friend."

"You were seen sitting in your car outside Remy Sanchez's bachelor party." Pam made a show of flipping through her notes.

"My friend was inside. He knew he'd be drinking there and had asked me to give him a ride home."

Pam glanced up from under her eyebrows. "And the friend's name?"

A Grinch-like grin dug into her cheeks. "Confidential."

Buckley grunted. "We understand you once came after your ex-husband with a knife."

Her smile faded, replaced by disgust. "He had a thing for his patients." She shrugged. "Or maybe they had a thing for him. Who knows. Who cares. Water under the bridge."

"It didn't seem that way the other night at the hospital," Pam pointed out.

She conceded the issue with a nod. "True. Old habits die hard." The chair creaked as she leaned in. "Before this goes any further, don't you even think about pinning these murders on me."

Declan heard the door open behind him.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Hank demanded to know.

"They're following up on another lead." And Hank didn't need to know any more than that.

Connie's smile was back, gleaming with evil intent at Pam. "Maybe you'd better look a little closer to home, sweetie. Ever ask yourself who had the most to gain from their deaths? Ever ask yourself why Declan has this sudden desire to marry you right away? Maybe you need to look at him. Maybe you need to wonder if he's not marrying you to keep you quiet. After all, a wife can't be compelled to testify against her husband." Her grin widened. "Or maybe it was you. We all have our jealous moments."

Connie pushed back and to her feet. "I'm leaving now."

"I'll say she is." Hank strode from one room to the next.

Buckley and Pam started when he burst in.

"Connie was with me." He snagged her hand and pulled her against him. "We have a little arrangement of our own now. A mutually beneficial one."

Declan stared at Pam in the wake of their departure. She'd seen him with Carol Phillips and Darla Murray. Was jealousy hidden behind those passing glances? She'd made it very clear since they'd officially become a public couple that she didn't share. To what extent would she go to enforce that? She'd seen Gloria hug him, then Gloria was attacked. She'd seen the stripper all over him. Now the stripper was dead and he couldn't really verify Pam's whereabouts. She could have snuck out after Julia fell asleep. He was gone when Darla was killed and Carol first attacked.

He hated himself for the rambling thoughts, but at that point Declan couldn't be sure of anything anymore -- especially his own judgment of people. He'd been wrong about Connie, wrong about Trish and Mark. Maybe he was wrong about Pam, too.

## Chapter Fourteen

Connie's words burrowed beneath Pam's skin like a festering worm. She didn't want to believe them, much less lend them credence. Nevertheless, there they were, thrown out to catch her unaware. And they sure as hell did that.

The woman in love screamed denial. The woman scorned all those years ago listened. So did the detective part of her. While Buckley tried to soothe Hank's ruffled feathers, Pam sat at her desk, mentally shoving pieces of the puzzle in place. They fit with frightening accuracy.

All she knew of Declan's relationship with Connie came from him, not Connie. There were always two sides of a story. Pam was certain in Hank's telling of their marriage she hadn't come off very well, either. Declan's patients *were* extra friendly, using any excuse to touch him. Until this moment she'd always put that down to his compassion and their gratitude. What if it was more? What if Declan had cultivated and encouraged their attention? What if he slept with them?

The thought sickened her all the more, knocking a crack in her heart. If anyone learned he slept with clients, his career would be over. He'd worked hard to get where he was. Would he kill to keep his position? It wouldn't be the first time. Where did that put her?

Pam doodled circles and squares on her yellow tablet. She didn't want any of this to make sense. The knots binding Darla Murray and Kandi Kane to their beds forced her to look hard. How many times had Declan used those same knots in their sex play? While that wasn't enough to convict the man, when added to the fact that he knew all the victims in some capacity, it did give one pause.

She covered her eyes and fought back more misery. As each puzzle piece snapped into place her heart ached a little more. Declan had no alibi for the Murray murder. It had



happened the afternoon before he left for his conference. Ditto with the Phillips murder; he'd been alone at the hospital with her, then left to go to Pam's. He could have easily killed her before leaving the hospital. The nurse wouldn't have known until she went to check vitals. That left Kane.

Pam squeezed her eyes shut. He said he'd gone to meet the locksmith. Had he?

*Stop it!* her conscience yelled. His whereabouts could easily be verified. But God help her if he learned she was checking up on him. If he was guilty, she'd be his next target. If he was innocent, their relationship would be the next victim. He'd never forgive her for not trusting him, not when they'd both put such a high value on honesty with each other.

Pam jumped when she felt a body frame hers against her desk -- Declan. One hand braced on the back of her chair, the other on her desk. His heat surrounded her, tempting her to lean into the comfort he'd always offered. Suspicion kept her in place.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you. Are you about ready to go home?"

She couldn't be alone with him right now, not with so many doubts hitting her. "I'm going to be a little while longer. The captain and I want to run by Mark's for a look around before calling in Forensics. Bobby will plotz if he has to process yet another crime scene. So far Trish's story holds up. There's not so much as a scratch on her car. If she'd hit Mark, she couldn't hide it."

"I'll be glad to wait for you."

"No." Pam slid her hand over his. "You go back to my house. I'll meet you there later."

"Give me a call first, and I'll make sure to have breakfast waiting when you get there." He dropped a kiss to her lips, then left.

Pam blinked back a rush of tears. God, she loved him. She didn't want to believe any of this, but her mind and heart wouldn't rest until she investigated. She prayed Declan would forgive what she was about to do.

She waylaid Buckley as he walked back to his office. "I need to borrow your car for a bit."

He handed over the keys without a word. Judging from the tight line of his mouth, the battle with Hank had taken a toll. He'd need time to recover his calm, and to circle his wagons before the men upstairs heard what had happened.

In twenty minutes, Pam was standing before the door to Declan's apartment, the key he'd blessed her with clutched in her hand. The heart charm shone in the hallway light.

*It's the date I first knew I loved you.*

Five months ago.

She stared at the key -- a symbol of trust between them -- and then the engagement ring -- evidence of love, not a cover-up. Just like with Bobby Salazar's twisted views, she'd let another person poison her mind. Declan was a good, honorable, trustworthy man. She'd

known that for years. It was one of the reasons she'd felt safe having sex with him in the first place. Not once had he ever given her any reason to not trust him. Not once.

If she opened that door and searched his apartment, everything they had -- the honesty, the trust, the love, a future -- would be gone. She'd almost let Bobby's words ruin everything; Pam would be damned if she let Connie's actually do it.

Declan was innocent. Her heart knew it, and her heart hadn't led her astray yet with him.

Pam palmed the key and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan leaned against Pam's front door. What the hell was he doing? If Pam caught him snooping ... Whether she was innocent or guilty, the result would be the same -- they'd be finished. It wrenched his heart to think of losing her. He hated Connie all the more for sowing doubt in his mind. Hated himself for letting her words do so.

*I don't share.*

Those words haunted him, too. He'd been through too much in his first marriage to let them go unchecked. His peace of mind demanded he find something to exonerate the woman he loved.

Declan scanned the room. Where the hell did he start, what was he looking for, and what in the world would he do once he found it? He was a psychiatrist, for crying out loud. And at this point, he felt pretty inept at that job. He'd been so sure of his ability to read people, get beneath their outward façade. Now look at him. Two patients were dead. His best friend and assistant had ...

He shoved away the thoughts and moved into the room. Pam's essence and spirit surrounded him as did her lingering scent. Here he'd found comfort, serenity, friendship, and now love. She'd brought a little of herself into his home as well, long before they'd shared a bed. She was his friend, then his lover. Because with Pam, he knew he'd be safe in everything he said and did.

Declan sank onto the sofa and buried his head in his hands. He couldn't do it, couldn't destroy all they had. Connie thrived on hurting him. She'd threatened the ultimate revenge years ago. While her intent then had been to destroy his practice, he knew she wouldn't miss an opportunity to ruin his chance for happiness with Pam. He'd let her words add to his guilt in misjudging Trish and Mark. Let his perceived inadequacies feed doubt into his head.

Never again. His heart knew what it wanted, what it needed, and that was Pam. He quietly damned to hell anyone who tried to take that from him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The captain sat kicked back in his chair, feet on desk, eyes closed when Pam returned to the precinct. Thinking he was asleep, she crept in. His eyes flashed open the second his keys touched the desk.

"I released Trish Wallace." He swung his feet to the floor. "Far as I know she's at the hospital. I still have Mark Roberts under guard, though."

She didn't blame him. At this point anything could happen.

"You get taken care of what you needed to do?"

Pam nodded. "I went by Mark's house. The window's busted. Shards of glass are all over the bedroom floor. The bed's a tumbled mess, and there were multiple semen stains on the dark sheets. I found blood where they'd cut their feet leaving the bed. Mark's left a trail to the front door. Kane's led to the back. They ended on the driveway where she must have jumped in her car and taken off."

"Sounds like she hauled ass out of there."

She allowed herself a smile. "Wouldn't you if a pissed-off lover was after you?"

He chuckled. "I suppose I would."

"I also took a drive by Kane's apartment on the off chance she was the one who'd run over Mark. I couldn't find any damaged vehicles in the area. I'll run a DMV search for her car in the morning."

"This case is going to be a career buster if we don't find something soon."

"Tell me about it." At this point Pam didn't know where to turn. Every lead was a bust, and she absolutely refused to consider Declan. "Monday we should be able to get the surveillance tapes from Declan's building. I'll also get a subpoena for his client files. Apparently, Murray and Phillips were in the same group session. That might lead to something."

"But not to who killed Kane. She's the fly in the ointment."

Pam shrugged. "Or our missing link? Come on, enough of this. I'm sure your wife would like to see what you look like, and I could use a ride home."

Buckley didn't argue.

It was a quiet ride, too. Neither of them were inclined to discuss case issues they'd already dissected a hundred times, nor did Buckley bring up any hints of disciplinary action that Hank might bring down on them. Talking wouldn't solve anything at this point, except to keep them awake.

Pam thanked him when he pulled up outside her house. Declan's car was beside hers in the driveway. Light from the living room windows helped guide her path in the dark. The captain waited until she'd unlocked the door before driving off. Tired as he was, Pam hoped he made it home all right.

She eased inside, then smiled when she saw Declan sprawled on the sofa sound asleep. She tugged off her boots and stretched out beside him.

Declan's arms draped around her. "Hey, baby, you didn't call."

"Too early for breakfast. I just want some sleep. We should probably go to bed."

"Uhm, probably." He kissed her forehead. "I love you, Pam. More than there are words in the world to tell you."

Using his chest as a pillow, she cuddled into him. "I love you, too. Never doubt it." She wouldn't.

"Never ..." The word died on a soft snore.

Pam closed her eyes and joined him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan woke up hours later, Pam's back spooned to his front, to his cell phone vibrating against her hip.

"Believe it or not, I'm still too tired to even make a joke about that." Groaning, she pulled herself upright and stumbled to the bathroom while Declan tugged the phone from his pocket.

A glance at the display made him wish he hadn't -- the hospital. All things considered, he wasn't the right person to have power of attorney over Mark's medical needs. Not that he would cause him more hurt, but if something went wrong based on a decision he'd made ...

He pushed the talk button. "Dr. Trent."

"Mark Roberts is awake and would like to see you."

Mark could pound sand. "I'll make sure the police know."

"Uh, doctor, they're already here," the nurse said before he could hang up.

Of course. They were there for his protection; the most recent connection in a growing list of murders. By now they would have questioned him about the accident, if he had any recollection of it. Pam would be getting a call of her own any minute now.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

He pressed end, placed the phone on the maple table before him. He wanted to say that hell could freeze over before he'd ever talk to Mark Roberts again. But, damn it, the man owed him an explanation.

He'd just made it to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee when Pam's cell rang. She grabbed it up as she left the bathroom. Her snort quickly followed.

"We'll be there as soon as we can." The phone skittered across the counter where she tossed it.

"Mark?"

“Yep, won’t talk until he sees you.”

Declan shook his head. He hated being manipulated. Mark knew this was the best way to get him there quickly. Next would come the big forgiveness ploy. God only knew what other tricks Mark would try in his quest to win back his golden boy status.

“You’d think he’d be smart enough to request a lawyer first.”

“If Mark was smart, he wouldn’t have done all this in the first place.”

That was true. Stealing clients, playing Trish’s emotions. What next? A chill raised goose bumps on Declan’s skin. He didn’t want to think Mark was capable of murder. Mind games, yes? But murder? Still, twenty-four hours ago, he never would have guessed Mark capable of hijacking his clients, either.

“Let’s go. We’ll grab coffee on the way. I want this confrontation over with.”

Declan didn’t have a clue what he’d say when that event happened. He was furious, shocked. Both emotions left him mute. He refused to buy into Mark’s “poor me” routine, or to listen to any lies, which seemed second-nature to the man. Nothing Mark could say would make this right. No excuse in the world could condone what he’d done.

Buckley was just walking up to the hospital doors when they arrived. Without a word they marched inside and into Mark’s room.

Trish sat at his bedside, his hand folded between hers.

Mark gave a weak smile when he saw Declan, following it up with, “Hey, buddy.”

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yeah.”

Declan lifted an eyebrow. “Alone, I presume.”

Mark’s gaze shifted to Trish, who clutched his hand tighter. “No, that’s okay. We-we don’t need to be alone.”

“Good.” Buckley set the tape recorder on the bedside table and pressed record. “To avoid any miscommunications.”

Declan watched Mark’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “Aren’t any of you going to sit?”

“No. Who did this to you?”

His gaze slid back to Trish. “Just a moment alone, please. It’s being recorded.”

When she acceded to his request and followed Buckley and Pam into the corridor, Mark still didn’t speak. He just stared at the far corner of the room, all bleary-eyed. It had to be the drugs.

What little patience Declan had snapped. “Mark, a woman is dead.”

His face sagged as he shifted focus back to Declan. “Kandi’s dead?”

“Yes. What happened the last time you saw her?”

He closed his eyes on a sigh. "Trish found me in bed with Kandi, broke the window, took off. I ran after her. Kandi tore off in her car in the opposite direction."

"Who ran you down?"

There was another long sigh. "Bobby Salazar. He came out of nowhere, headlights off. I'll never forget that face, all twisted with rage and hate. Looked like something from hell."

"You should know."

That flashed his eyes open.

"I'm filing charges with the medical board against you, Mark." He clicked off the recorder as he grabbed it up, then started for the door.

"I never took them, Dec ... the patients. I wouldn't do that to you. You've got to believe me."

"Then give me something that will help me to do that."

Mark clamped his lips shut.

"Yeah, I figured as much," he shot back over his shoulder.

Trish bounced to her feet the second he stepped out.

"I expect your resignation on my desk first thing tomorrow morning."

Tears poured down her cheeks. She nodded, started for Mark's room, then did an abrupt U-turn and dashed for the ladies' room.

Declan walked over to where Pam and Buckley waited at the end of the hall. "It was Bobby Salazar."

The captain accepted the recorder. "He ran over Mark Roberts?"

"Yes, Mark identified him. And it's a pretty fair bet he killed those women, too."

"What?" they asked together.

He should have seen it coming. All the signs and triggers were there. Declan hadn't chosen to ignore them, just chosen to believe the counseling had been effective enough to forestall any repercussions. Yet another misconception on his part. At this rate, he might as well shred his license and start flipping burgers.

Buckley punched the elevator button. "Let's get back to the precinct and piece this together."

"I'd rather do this in my office. You're going to need his file." And that of any other possible victims, although it was anyone's guess who Bobby might target next.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the doors whooshed open, Pam locked her gaze onto the recorder in Buckley's hand. Another image flashed into her head -- that of Bobby recording his observations at crime scenes. He never went anywhere without it.

"He recorded their voices and played it back for the 9-1-1 dispatcher," she said, more to herself than the men.

The captain glanced down as they stepped inside. "Let's not draw conclusions." He shook his head. It was damn hard not to make assumptions and doubly hard not to run with them.

"We'll have to bring Ski in on this," he said. "Thank God it's Sunday. No chance of Bobby processing a case today."

No, he refused to work on Sundays. "At least we know why there's never been any evidence found at the crime scenes. He either cleaned it up or covered it up."

Pam remembered him plucking hairs off Phillips's car. At the time he passed it off as losing his hair. Now she knew better. Just as she knew the damage to his car wasn't a random act; it was incurred when he plowed over Mark. What she couldn't easily figure out was why. That answer would come soon enough from Declan.

She glanced up at him. He stared at the closed doors, most probably blaming himself for not realizing all this beforehand. He'd had one blow after the other the last couple of hours. It had her doubly grateful she'd trusted her heart and stepped away from his apartment. Pam was ashamed she'd considered searching it in the first place.

After leaving the hospital, they drove through McDonald's for Egg McMuffins and coffee, then on to his office. They'd said nothing other than to express their hunger during the drive. Pam had never seen Declan so beat down.

"None of this is your fault," she finally said. "You help all you can, but you can't truly know what's in a person's head. People can be experts at hiding what's inside, even from themselves."

"I know," he quietly replied. "But it doesn't change the fact that three women are dead."

"We don't even know that he did this."

"Yeah, he had a hand in this. I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

She gave a soft laugh. "Not even us?"

His lips flinched as he pressed them tight. Declan didn't say a word until he pulled into his office parking slot and cut the engine. Then he turned her way, draping one arm over the back of her seat while he rested the other on her thigh.

"I'm not going to have a lie between us, Pam. After Hank and Connie got through with their little mind games and innuendoes last night, I did have doubts. Serious doubts. I went back to your house with every intention of tearing the place apart looking for evidence of guilt or innocence. But I didn't. I forced myself to trust what we had, to trust you."

Pam pulled in a sigh and slid her hand up his thigh. "So did I. I stood at your apartment, key in hand, hating myself for letting someone else ruin what we have. I won't allow that to happen again."

"Me, either." He kissed her then, slow and sweet.

Buckley's tap on the window pulled them apart. Pam grabbed the tray of coffee while Declan took the bag of food.

"Please tell me there's enough for me," the captain pleaded.

Declan smiled. "There is."

Within minutes, they were settled around the coffee table in Declan's waiting room. Declan wasted no further time revealing what he knew about Bobby Salazar.

"He was just hitting puberty when a group of older girls attacked and raped him. He was rather a shy boy, raised in a strictly religious home. He'd been punished severely each time he was caught masturbating. Punished in ways ..."

Buckley lifted his hand. "I don't think I want to know the details."

"After the attack, he was blamed and punished by his parents. He was the male. It was automatically presumed to be his fault. He came to see me for help in dealing with socialization. Eventually all of this came out. Bobby's fear of a sexual relationship has kept him alone. He fears the loss of control, the shame of sex. His work has become his focus. And yet work requires some level of human contact. He doesn't know how to act around others naturally. The fear of attack is always prevalent if he goes outside his safety zone of work only."

"And look what happens when he does," Pam said. "His work buddies set him up the other night."

"Yes, they did," Declan replied. "And in the worst possible situation. That's why I used the excuse of needing him to be Mark's driver. However, I'm afraid the damage may have already been done. You saw how edgy he was. She was in control and loving every second of it. He was not. The only thing that seemed to calm him down was the promise of a session with me on Monday."

Buckley swallowed a half-chewed bite of his sandwich. "You're saying he killed Kandi Kane because she gave him a lap dance?"

He clicked his gaze toward the other man. "Yes. It was part of a series of escalating events that had begun at the last group session. I'd been trying to integrate Bobby into male-female interactions. The group seemed a good place to start, and he'd been doing well until Darla Murray came on to him. I caught her in the hallway as she'd cornered him. Like Mark, she likes a challenge and doesn't take no for an answer. I have no doubt she continued to pursue him."

Pam frowned. "Why the violence? Why the word carved in the forehead?"

"I can only guess he was trying to take back what he thought was his -- control."

Buckley shoved in the last of his sandwich, then leaned back with his coffee. "I can see where that would fit for Murray and Kane. But why run over Mark? Why kill and mutilate Phillips? And why attack Gloria -- if he even did that?"



“Those are questions only he can answer.”

“But he’s going to have to be caught first,” Pam said. “Any evidence is gone or compromised, except what Ski might have collected at the first crime scene, which was little.”

“Then we’re just going to have to bait him with another lascivious female.” The captain stared at the far corner of the room while he scratched his head. “You say he has a session tomorrow?”

“You’re not taping my session,” Declan quickly replied. “That’s a clear violation of ...”

Buckley held up his hand. “I was thinking more along the lines of throwing bait in front of him. With Trish gone you’ll need office assistance. Why not trot out the cocktail waitress from the party? Office work could be her day job.”

Pam laughed. “I might be able to fake serving drinks, but there’s no way I can fake working in an office. Besides, in daylight we run the risk of him realizing it’s me. Sounds like a job for Julia Holler.”

“Call her,” Buckley replied.

Pam waited until Declan gave his consent.

“All right.” He shoved to his feet and started for the file room. “See if she can come over today so I can brief her on what needs to be done to pull this off.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Declan had to admit Julia Holler was impressive. He recognized the wig as the same one Pam had worn the night before. Julia had it twisted up and secured with a small banana clip. The effect coupled with the beige pantsuit she wore helped sustain the illusion she was an office employee. No one watching the building would have a single doubt.

She did more than look the part she was to play -- she lived it. In less than five minutes Julia was locked into what her responsibilities would be while she was here.

"I don't suppose you'd consider leaving the police department and coming to work for me," he said.

Julia laughed. "My ego is certainly getting a fair amount of stroking lately. First Pam wants me to be her new partner in Homicide, now you want to hire me here. My head's swelling." She pressed her palm to her chest. "I am more than honored, but I'm content doing what I do. I doubt I'd be satisfied working in an office day after day. But thank you."

Despite the sincerity in her voice, Declan couldn't help but wonder if she had donned yet another persona. Julia definitely had many faces and didn't appear to be afraid of interchanging them as the need arose. He stopped short of analyzing what that might mean.

"There is one thing you have that I might want." She flipped her steno pad closed.

"What's that?" Declan sat on the coffee table in front of Pam.

"A not-so-little bird told me you two were getting married." She winked at Pam. "Said bird also informed me I needed a bigger apartment. Since the two of you will be combining households, I was wondering if your place would be vacant. I might be interested in it. Would it be possible to take a look at it?"

"Sure. Is now a good time? We're headed over there to get my clothes. But I have to tell you, there's probably a waiting list for the place."

Julia smiled. "Not if I sublet it from you. And now would be great."

"A master of disguise *and* devious." Pam nudged Declan with her toe. "Aren't you glad she's on our side?"

He arched an eyebrow back at her. "And that she uses her powers for good, not evil."

"Ha-ha. And yet I can't get a date, much less laid, to save my life." Julia braced her hands on the desk and pushed to her feet. "I'll follow you over there."

"Great. Let's go." Pam stood. "And if you're extra nice, we'll even let you haul stuff out to the car."

She snickered. "Such a deal."

The women had a good rapport between them. If Declan didn't know they'd just met days before, he would have thought they'd been friends for years. They'd make good partners, he decided. Each would have the other's back. He'd trust Pam's life with Julia. In her line of work, Declan needed that peace of mind, needed to know Pam was with someone who'd be there for her.

As they drove to his apartment, he caught glimpses of Julia in the rearview mirror and amended his evaluation slightly. She'd be a great partner for Pam *if* Pam took control of the driving and made Julia passenger. The woman multi-tasked like crazy as she drove -- whipping off the wig to fluff out her long brown hair, taking off the jacket to reveal a tank top underneath, wiggling in what he presumed was her removing her slacks. Then she sucked down a soda while she munched on a snack and did something with her makeup. In essence, she scared the living hell out of him.

By the time they arrived, a new Julia emerged from the car. Shorts and sandals had replaced heels and slacks. She was casual, relaxed. Declan still wasn't sure if this was the real Julia or another role she donned.

"I like the place." She looked around at the eucalyptus trees that towered around the periphery of the building. "Looks safe, guarded, quiet."

"It's all that," Declan said as he led the way. "The neighbors keep to themselves. In the two years I've lived here, there's been nothing more than nods in passing."

"Good." She nodded. "I don't like people in my face or my business. I don't like friendships forced on me."

"Don't be lulled," Pam said as she punched the button for his floor. "They might keep to themselves, but I've no doubt there are a few who know every coming and going in this place."

Julia cocked her head to one side. "So it's an older community? No children?"

"If there are children, they're well hidden. I'd say it's a good mix of professional people and seniors."

He'd often viewed it as a transitional residence; a place to stay while you moved from one phase of your life to the next. Just as he'd done when he and Connie divorced. That

begged the question what Julia was changing about her life. Fortunately, he managed to keep from asking it, but only because he clamped his lips shut as they exited the elevator.

"Here we are." He seated the key, then shoved the door open for the ladies to enter.

Julia crossed her arms and stepped inside. "Good God, you are freakishly neat."

A laugh burst out of Pam. "I'm going to leave that comment untouched."

"Good. I like a partner who knows when to keep quiet." She smiled and wandered further. "It's beautiful, lots of room. I love the big windows."

Declan listened with half attention. Something about the place felt "off." A glance around revealed nothing missing or out of order. It was the smell, lemony. Like someone had recently cleaned. He glanced around and noticed there was no dust on the tables. The carpet pile showed no footsteps from the day before.

While the ladies checked out the kitchen, Declan strode toward the bedroom, stopping short when he saw the bed made. He honestly couldn't remember if he'd done so before they left.

"What's wrong?" Pam dusted her hand over his shoulders.

"Did you make the bed before we left?"

"I'm pretty sure I did. Why?"

He marched over and whipped back the bedspread -- blue and yellow flowers. "These are not my sheets. I don't own flowered sheets. The ones on here were red and blue striped. Remember?"

"Yeah." Pam frowned. "I don't understand."

He didn't, either. "The whole place feels invaded. It's like someone busted in here and cleaned."

Arms tucked over her chest, Pam looked around. The crease between her eyebrows deepened. "Maybe your cleaning lady came in early."

That was possible, but ... "And put on sheets I don't have?"

She lifted her palms in a shrug. "Anything's possible. I doubt we have a gang of maids breaking in to do drive-by cleanings. If nothing's missing ..."

He shook his head. "Everything's perfect." He just felt violated.

Julia joined them, smile wide. "This is great. I'll take it. When will you be all moved out?"

*Not soon enough.* "Give me a couple of days and the place is yours."

Pam eased by him and remade the bed. "We'll even have the locks changed for you."

She waved the offer aside with a flick of her hand. "Oh, that's not necessary."

"I insist." After smoothing the spread, Pam straightened. A long blond hair was pinched between her thumb and forefinger. She released it to fall on the floor, then cast a quick glance that direction. That's when Declan saw -- someone was under the bed.

Julia swept him back with one arm, while she pulled her revolver from the depths of her leather tote bag. Pam did the same, retrieving hers from her purse. Each took a position on either side of the bed.

"Police officers," Julia snapped out. "Come out from under the bed. Slowly. We have weapons drawn on you and will use them if we have to."

"Hands first," Pam added.

There was a sigh from under the bed. Then a pair of hands with fingernails chewed to the quick poked out.

"Don't shoot," Trish whined. "There's been a misunderstanding."

Pam snagged her wrist and hauled her out. In one motion she had her facedown and cuffed.

"Please," she begged. "You don't understand. I was just trying to show you, remind you of how useful I am, Dr. Trent. How many times have you said you couldn't do without me? I just wanted ..."

"How the hell did you get in here?" he yelled.

Pam dragged her upright. "Jules, call it in."

Trish's bottom lip quivered. "When I had office keys made for me, I took the liberty of ..."

Declan snapped up his hand. He didn't want to hear any more. "I'm calling the locksmith. This could take a while."

"So could this." Pam tightened her hold on Trish, then steered her to the living room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan let the night air chase away the tension from the day, as the breeze gently rustled the leaves overhead. Ice tea by his side, he sat on the chaise lounge dressed in his boxers. Light from Pam's kitchen alcove bathed them in golden glow. She was stretched out in the other chair in underwear and one of his T-shirts. The remains of dinner, a cheeseburger pizza, sat on the wrought-iron table between them.

He couldn't shake the disgust of knowing Trish had been in his apartment. While a night in jail might make her think twice about the stunt she'd pulled, Declan kept wondering how many other times she'd done it. Had she hidden under the bed while he showered? Seen him dress? Heard him and Pam make love? It made him sick inside. And he'd thought he'd known her so well.

"More tea?" Pam lifted the pitcher.

"Sure." He listened to the ice cubes clink into his glass. "What good will pressing charges do?"

She shrugged, then straddled his thighs. "Probably none at this point. But you might want to consider a restraining order."

He swooped his fingers under the hem of the T-shirt until they girdled her ribs. "Did you really go after Hank with a wooden spoon?"

She chuckled. "Yeah. It was the first thing I could grab. He was screwing his boss's wife up against the refrigerator. They ran outside naked, then had the audacity to ask for their clothes." She smirked. "I gave them their clothes all right. In fact, I gave Hank every stitch he owned and followed up by tossing my bottles of perfume out with them. A couple broke. My only regret is that I wasn't able to toss a match on top of it all."

Declan smiled. Hank deserved worse. "He claims he and Connie are together now."

"Judging from the way he rushed to her defense at the precinct, I believe it. That's a disaster in the making. They deserve each other."

That they did. However, Declan didn't want to think about them any more, or Trish and Mark, or the murders. He wanted to end the night on a sweet note and not have to worry about what they'd face tomorrow.

He brushed his thumbs over her nipples, smiling when they hardened. "I've got something hard to match those."

Pam grinned. "Do you now?" She fished his cock from his shorts, then shoved the crotch of her panties to one side and eased onto him.

"That feels better. Now I feel whole again." He fanned his hands against her back and drew her into a kiss.

Their lips kneaded gently, tongues gliding in slow caresses. Every so often she would rock and he'd thrust. Despite its tameness, fire still raced in his blood.

It seemed they stayed joined like that for hours, drawing out the sensations for one another. He bared her breasts to his fingers, his lips, pulling, suckling, kneading until her pussy juices soaked them both. Digging one hand into her panties, Declan tickled the crack of her ass, gritting his teeth when she twitched on his dick.

Finally, he slipped his thumb against her slippery little clit, drawing circles over the hard little nub. An orgasm washed over her. His quickly followed.

"Hard or soft, fast or slow, straight or wild ... sex with you is marvelous," he muttered into her hair. "It sounds corny, but I really do feel complete when I'm with you."

"Hmmm," she sighed. "How many kids did we want?"

"Oh, baby, you're gonna get me all hard and excited again."

Pam laughed and pivoted on the erection blossoming inside her. "I've learned over the months that's a fairly easy thing to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam huddled in Declan's file room, waiting for Bobby to arrive. Declan had adamantly refused a wire for him or Julia. He also refused to have Pam hide in the bathroom adjoining his office. He'd finally relented in allowing her to stay in this room where she'd be on hand if needed. A portable radio at her shoulder put her in touch with the captain at the press of a button. Even Declan agreed someone needed to contact Buckley if something went wrong.

From the crack between the door and jamb, she had a good view of the waiting room. Julia sat behind the desk and fell into her routine. No one would ever guess this was her first day.

Eight came and went. By eight-thirty, it was pretty clear he wasn't going to show. Bobby was punctual to a fault.

"This is a wash," Pam said into the microphone.

Julia glanced up from the desk. Declan stood in the doorway between his inner and outer offices. They all waited for Buckley's decision.

"Come on in. We'll try another angle," he finally said.

"On my way."

"Something's wrong. Bobby is extremely punctual," Declan told her. "He'd call if he wasn't going to show."

Pam couldn't argue that. Bobby's dependability made him a doormat for his coworkers. They'd often foist their work or shifts off on him. It might have been one of the reasons he'd snapped now -- too much from too many people.

"He might have gotten suspicious," Julia suggested.

Pam didn't see how, but anything was possible. Hell, maybe Ski let the cat out after Buckley talked to him yesterday. "You stay here with Declan in case he shows. We'll see what we can find out."

The microphone at her shoulder crackled. "Detective Donaldson, wait one. More info's come through on the subject. A nearby unit's en route to the residence. We'll hold for a report."

"Roger that."

"That doesn't sound good." Declan sat on the edge of the desk.

Pam had to agree. Hostage situation was the first thought to burst into her head. He was a prime candidate -- childhood trauma, dysfunctional family, cornered serial killer. Most likely he'd hold the family at gunpoint. SWAT would be called in. A negotiator, too.

Declan might also be pressed into service to calm him down. His chances of success were anyone's guess. Failure could mean his life, too. That sent a chill straight to the core of her soul. Risks were expected in her profession, not his. Now she knew what must run through Declan's mind -- each time she went to work could be her last. Maybe following Gloria's example wasn't such a bad idea after all. Declan needed office help. She was a quick learner. How difficult ...

"We found him."

Buckley's voice so close to her ear made Pam jump.

"He's dead," he went on. "Self-inflicted gunshot to the head. Come on down, and we'll go to the crime scene."

"On my way, captain."

Declan's shoulders sagged with the news.

Pam wasn't sure whether to keep her distance or smother a hug around him. "I'm sorry."

He nodded. "At least it's over. I'll see you tonight." He forced a smile to Julia. "Thanks for your help."

"I've got the day. You've got clients. I've been briefed. I'll stay and help you." She turned back to the computer and resumed work.

His smile was still small, but more genuine. "Thanks."

Letting her instincts guide her, Pam wrapped her arms around him and planted a kiss on his lips. "I love you. I promise I'll be careful at work."

Pam swore she felt relief drift over his shoulders. "Thank you, honey. See you tonight."

Leaving him now was the hardest thing Pam had ever had to do. She squared her shoulders and forced one foot in front of the other. A desk job was looking sweeter every minute, she thought as she rode the elevator down. She'd never give Declan cause to worry. They'd marry and have ... He'd never said how many kids he wanted.

A flash of something caught the corner of her eye as she stepped into the parking garage. Reaching for her weapon, she crouched down and against the wall.

Relief oozed into her muscles. It was only the sun reflecting off the windshield of Buckley's car.

"You okay?" he asked when he pulled up beside her. "Something I need to know about?"

Pam shook her head and eased into the passenger seat. "Just a little paranoid, I guess."

"Can't say that I blame you." He drove off the second her seat belt clicked into place. "Having to work without your partner. One murder after the other. There's nothing wrong with being a little cautious. But take my advice, paranoia makes you sloppy."

"Noted." Pam prayed a lecture didn't come with the advice. She wasn't in the mood to hear it. "What information do you have so far?"

"Apparently Trish Wallace used her one phone call to call Bobby Salazar. He was at the jail early this morning to take her home. No one saw anything out of the ordinary. Just passed it off as two friends."

She'd know him from his sessions with Declan. Obviously, she'd cultivated a relationship with the man, one that didn't threaten Bobby's sense of self. Maybe he viewed



her as the victim. Once those pretty blue eyes of hers filled with tears, only the strongest could survive. Bobby wasn't one of them. Apparently, neither was Mark. Both men had succumbed to her female-in-distress routine.

"Any idea where Trish is now?" she asked.

"We're checking the obvious places -- her home, Mark's hospital room, her mother. So far nothing."

"There's still a guard on Mark?"

Buckley nodded. "Ski is on his way to the crime scene. He's blaming us, by the way. He didn't believe our theory for a second. Now that Bobby's dead, I don't know how we can redeem ourselves."

"Hopefully, the evidence will do that."

Twenty minutes later, Buckley pulled up to a house in the older part of town. The place buzzed with emergency vehicles. Crime tape crisscrossed the front yard. Reporters and neighbors lined up behind it.

The yard was bare of grass in most places. But the white clapboard house sported a fresh paint job. Tree roots from the single oak tree in the yard lifted the sidewalk into mismatched slabs. A chalk hopscotch game was scrawled on top of them.

As Pam and Buckley picked their way across a yard strewn with bicycles, baseballs, and one lone scooter, Ski's shadow darkened the open door.

"It's murder," he said, in a voice loud enough to carry all the way to the street. The murmur of voices drifted back.

"Come look." A wave of his arm urged them to hurry.

The white walls were spattered with red from the gunshot. Bobby's body was sagged in a heap against one. Blood ran down the wall and pooled on the shiny wooden floor beneath him.

Ski pointed to the wound at Bobby's temple. Stippling surrounded it, indicating the gun had been against his head when shot. Pam also saw a secondary pattern of stippling around that. He'd also been shot from a short distance away.

"I found two trajectories," Ski said. "The killer was probably hoping the second shot would mask the first. Looks like a nine-mil. The first shot would have scrambled his brain. The second ..." He shook his head, then clicked his gaze up to them.

"This crime scene isn't as pristine as all the rest. We've already found evidence. The killer wore latex gloves. A piece was torn off when the gun was fired. The weapon was by the body. I found blond hairs on Bob ... the victim. While that could be a consequence of his earlier association with Trish Wallace, I find it difficult to pass off as coincidence when I find the hairs on top of the blood pool. You find this woman, you'll find your killer."

"If she's eliminating conspirators, Mark Roberts could be on her list next." Buckley started for the door. "Let's get to the hospital and have a talk with him. Maybe we'll even get lucky and run into her."

Pam grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled him to a stop. "No, she'd know she couldn't reach Mark. She's gone after her real target -- Declan. We've got to get back there now!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan stared at the gun in Trish's outstretched hand. She wasn't shaking; she meant business.

Mr. Burnside, his ten o'clock agoraphobic, sat in a puddle of urine. If they survived this, Declan would never get the man to leave his house again.

"Who is she?" She jerked her head toward Julia, obviously not recognizing the woman from the day before. Declan blessed her disguise. Now all he could hope for was that her service revolver was within easy reach.

"The temp agency sent her over. I needed help."

"You had help," she snapped. "You had me."

"And you stole from me," he countered.

Julia shifted to the side.

Trish's gun jerked her way. "Away from the desk." She motioned her to one of the waiting room chairs.

Declan lifted his hands, scrambling for words to calm her down as Julia did what she'd ordered. The phone blasted out a ring. Trish snagged the cord in her fist and yanked it from the wall.

"No interruptions!"

"Calm down." His insides felt like they were in a blender. "Let's talk about this."

"I'm not one of your fucking patients!" Her knuckles whitened around the gun grip.

"No, but you were my friend. At least I thought so until recently. I think you owe me an explanation."

"I don't owe you shit. Open the door, then sit at my desk. I want to make sure your little whore sees you first when she comes in. That is, if she and her pet bulldog have been smart enough to figure it out."

Not losing sight of her, Declan slipped behind the desk. "Why, Trish? Just tell me why."

"You're the one who owes me the explanation, Dr. Trent. After all I did for you. It was all for you. And you never once noticed ..."

"I appreciated everything you did for me, Trish." Julia's bag was at his feet, her gun inside. If he could snag the handle ...

"But you didn't *notice* me! I loved you. I adored you. I worshipped the ground you walked on. And you never once noticed!"

He saw shadows in the hallway through the open door. They ducked against the wall. All he had to do was keep Trish occupied and focused on him so the police could take her down.

"But you had Mark," he tried to reason.

Her lip curled. "A diversion. A play toy. A temporary replacement for what I couldn't have at the time. At first I did it to make you jealous. But you didn't care. Then I realized I could take out all my frustration on him. He was so easy to manipulate, but then most people are when you know how." Her laugh chilled him. "And here all this time he thought he was the one in charge."

"Like Bobby Salazar? Was he another toy for you?"

"A tool. A necessity." She sauntered forward, putting more distance between herself and the door. "How dare those women put their hands on what was mine? Who did they think they were? I couldn't put up with it any longer. They had to be stopped, put in their place."

"And you convinced Bobby to clean up your mess."

Her smile gleamed. "He thought I was a victim just like him. He thought I was his friend. Amazing what a few tears will do. He even believed Mark was after me. That's why he ran him down."

"What about Detective Rodriquez? Did you shove her down the stairwell at the hospital?" Declan pushed away from the desk, hoping to lure her closer. There was movement in the doorway again, but he didn't dare glance that way to see who it was.

"She had the nerve to touch you. I couldn't allow that. I did what I had to do. It was a merely a warning. I'm glad she took it. And that stripper. I showed the little whore. I showed her good."

"You really do love me, don't you?"

The hardness in her expression faltered. "I do. I truly do."

"I see that now. I'm been such a fool. Come," he patted his thigh, "let me hold you. There's no need for any of this. I understand."

The gun dipped. Her blue eyes rounded. "You do?"

"I do." He stood and opened his arms to her. "I've been so stupid. You are such a treasure. How could I have not seen it before?"

Her gaze narrowed suspiciously. "What about Detective Donaldson?"

"She's nothing to me now. She doesn't even begin to compare to you." He widened his arms. "Come here, Trish. Please let me hold you, kiss you."

She took a step forward. "Can we make love in your office like you did with *her*?"

"Yes. It would be a dream come true. I don't have to pretend it's you when I'm with her. I never in a million years thought I had a chance with someone of your grace and caliber, Trish. Now ..."

The gun fell to the carpet with a dull thud as she tossed herself into his arms.

Declan anchored her against him as Pam, Buckley, and Julia rushed up.

"I'm so sorry, Dr. Trent," Trish cried. "I just don't like having to share you."

"Neither do I." Pam clamped the cuffs over her left wrist and yanked her arm behind her while Julia grabbed the other one.

Teeth gnashing, Trish lashed out with a kick that barely missed his crotch. It took all three detectives to wrestle her to the ground.

"In here now!" Pam shouted.

Two officers burst in to help hog-tie Trish, then hauled her outside. She spewed obscenities the whole way.

Declan glanced at Mr. Burnside. The poor man was curled into his urine-stained chair.

Julia squatted down beside him. "Come on, sir. I'll get an officer to take you home."

He nodded dumbly and followed her out of the office.

Pulling in a shaky breath, Pam nestled into Declan's equally shaky arms.

"You never said how many kids you wanted."

Declan managed a small laugh. "Two. Two would be nice."

"Then I suggest we get started."

"Yes, ma'am. Soon as I stop shaking."

"I hear you, big guy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Declan watched Pam exit the precinct. Lights in the parking lot guided her walk to his car. She looked as beat as he felt. He wanted nothing more than to sink into a hot sea of bubbles with her and wash the day away. There was still one more stop he wanted to make before they went home.

"Hey, baby. How'd it go?" he asked when she slipped inside.

Pam kissed him first. "Good. She's confessed to everything, and the evidence mounting up supports that. She's even got a bruise in her midsection from where Gloria kicked her."

Declan listened as he pulled into traffic.

“Trish played on the desires and fears of others, in a desperate attempt to clear a path to you. She played Darla and Bobby. Seeing a challenge and knowing the rage Bobby tamped down, Darla emailed him constantly trying to convince him to punish her for what those girls had done to him. Trish encouraged this so-called healing process. Once Bobby was through with Darla, Trish used the opportunity to kill her. Emails on Darla’s computer confirmed it, emails Bobby and Trish were frantic to delete along with any other evidence at Darla’s connecting them to her. Only, Carol interrupted their attempt.

“Again playing on Carol’s weaknesses, Trish told her they could give her the release from life she wanted. An overdose of Trish’s Ambien and a slice to the wrist didn’t do the job, so Trish had to finish it.”

“Which is when she saw me with Carol. She was the figure I thought I saw in the doorway of Carol’s hospital room, wasn’t she? The one I couldn’t find when I looked.”

“Yes, and it seems she snapped completely at that point. Carol was collateral damage until then, but your presence at her bedside infuriated Trish. She told us how Bobby recorded the victims’ voices and replayed it for 9-1-1. Bobby cleaned up the crime scenes. The whip was under a floorboard in his house. Good, solid evidence all the way.”

She stretched as far as she could. “Where are we going?”

“I need to see Mark.”

“Want me to go in with you?”

“No, this is something I need to handle alone. I won’t be long.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark’s head jerked toward the door when Declan walked in, tension slowly eased from his body.

“Afraid I was someone else?” he asked as he pulled the chair to the bedside.

“Why would you think that?” Mark sank into the pillows propped behind him.

“They arrested Trish earlier today for the murders of Carol Phillips, Darla Murray, Kandi Kane, and Bobby Salazar.”

His eyes widened. “Bobby, too?” He let loose a deep sigh. “How strong is the case?”

“Very. Mind telling me exactly what’s going on?”

Mark squeezed his eyes closed. Declan was surprised to see tears slip free beneath his lids.

“Trish was always so prim and proper. So efficient. It was a challenge getting her to notice me. A double challenge to get her to go out. I had to know if she was always so straight-laced.”

All this while he chased after Pam and every other woman he saw.

“And she was exquisite. The fire, the passion, devotion. Always available. I never for a minute thought it wasn’t about me. Until ... until that day we left for the conference.”

He stared up at Declan, eyes awash with tears. “I told her about you and Pam. Pillow talk. She shrugged it off and suggested a new game. I agreed and let her tie me up. Dec,” he swallowed hard, “she whipped the hell out of me. Took out all of her anger at you on me. Demanded to know how I could have failed her. She said it was bad enough I couldn’t distract Carol and Darla from you, that they still kept coming back to you ...”

“So, she sent them to you, then blamed you for stealing the clients?”

He nodded. “I was scared to death. I didn’t know what to do. I was afraid she was going to kill me. After ... after she was done beating me, she fucked me until I swore my dick would fall off. Afterward, she let me go and passed it off as role-playing. I got the hell out of there as fast as my poor body could take me. I was ashamed of, well, everything. And I hurt like I’d never hurt before. Once we got to the conference, I left. I just couldn’t face you again until I sorted things out. Then I heard about Darla, then Carol. Dec, I was scared shitless. She kept tracking me, warning me to be quiet, threatening to pin everything on me if I didn’t do what she said. When she showed up at the party ...”

Mark shook his head. “I ran after her. When I saw what she did to my car ... I thought I’d be safe if Kandi stayed the night. I never ...”

Declan clasped his hand. “She and Bobby did the murders together. She convinced him they were a threat to him, when she was really jealous and wanted them eliminated.”

“That’s why he ran me down. She told me, ‘I can always get you. You’d be smart to play my way.’ If there hadn’t been a guard posted outside, she would have killed me by now.”

“You’re safe now. I’ll see that Captain Buckley comes by later for your statement. You will testify against her?”

He nodded. “She scares the hell out of me, but yeah.” He tried to smile. “Don’t know of a good psychiatrist who can help me through all this, do you?”

Declan gave a soft chuckle. “I think I can scrounge one up. You might have to wait until he gets back from his honeymoon, though.”

Mark squeezed his hand. “Sounds like a deal to me. When’s the wedding?”

“Soon. It’ll be a small one.”

“Good luck trying to pull that off.”

\* \* \* \* \*

So much for a small, private wedding, Declan thought as he scanned the crowd of friends and relatives. Once word started to filter out that Declan and Pam were getting married, it took little investigative work to find out the when and where of it.

All he wanted was a little private time with his bride. They'd returned to a house filled with well-wishers and enough food and drink to feed two armies.

"It's rather nice to be so loved," she said as she cuddled under his arm.

"Yes, it is." He lifted his flute of champagne. "To my beautiful bride," he told the crowd.

They lifted their glasses in toast.

"Think they know I'm not wearing any underwear?" she whispered against his ear.

Glass halfway to his lips, Declan gave her a wink. "Neither am I."

"Oooo, aren't we the naughty ones?"

He tugged her close. "And we both know what happens to naughty boys and girls."

 THE END 

## **Caitlyn Willows**

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the erotica genre. Readers will find the same award-winning quality from “Caitlyn” that they have come to expect from “Catherine,” but the stories will be steamier and more over-the-top. Always they will be action-filled ... in more ways than one.

Visit Caitlyn on the Web at [www.caitlynwillows.com](http://www.caitlynwillows.com).