



DOGGY  
STYLE  
ASHLEY LADD

SUMMER  
SEDUCTIONS

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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Doggy Style

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**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

**Summer Seductions**



**DOGGY STYLE**

**Ashley Ladd**

## *Dedication*

To my daughters who so kindly let me borrow their computer after I killed both of mine, so that Sandy and Devon could come to life. I love you, Monica and Steph.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Cadillac: General Motors Corporation

Walgreen's: Walgreen's Co.

Frankenstein: Created by Mary Shelley

Codeine: Purdue Frederick Company

Superman: DC Comics

Linoleum: NaamlOOze Vennootschap

Brink's: Brink's Network Inc.

## Chapter One

Devon Barrett stared at the new team uniforms in disbelief and was loathe to wear them. He bared his teeth and growled back at the logo—a mean bulldog wearing a biker’s leather jacket and cap. Worse, he cringed at the name beneath the photo, *Doggy Style*. Only when he squinted could he read the fine print, *High fashion for your pooch*.

He balled the kelly-green jersey in his hands and marched up to Clay, the team manager. He shook the shirt like a rag in the man’s face. “What the meaning of this? I’ll be damned if I wear this one.”

Clay stroked his handlebar moustache and took the shirt. He held it out and shrugged. “It was either this or a picture of a poodle wearing a tutu. I figured you guys would prefer this one. But then again, the way some of you bozos flit around the field...” Pirouetting, he did an imitation of a ballerina.

Devon closed his eyes and tried to wipe out the terrible image he was afraid would haunt him the rest of his baseball career. “Why do we have to have either? Why not something more dignified?”

Clay screwed up his face and squinted at the Florida sun, still a scorcher in the early summer evening. “That’s what the new sponsor wanted. It was this or no sponsor. No sponsor and we gotta come up with more moola out of our own pockets. I figured you guys would want to squeeze a buck during these tough times. Live with it.”

Being on administrative leave while the hospital review board decided whether or not he’d be reinstated to his job as a nurse, Devon couldn’t afford to waste a penny. He’d been wrongfully accused of being negligent and letting a little boy die. His savings wouldn’t last long with groceries skyrocketing. Still, he shook his head in disbelief that a better sponsor couldn’t be found. “They must really be scraping the bottom of the barrel for sponsors.”

A stranger butted in and stuck out his hand to Devon. “Hi. I’m the bottom of the barrel, your new sponsor...and team mate, Sandy Falco.”

When the new sponsor closed his fingers around Devon's, lightning struck and an electric shock coursed through him. He did a double-take at the best-looking man he'd seen in years, a cross between Rob Lowe and Robert Downey, Jr. only better. *Woof!*

Hoping the cutie couldn't hear his heart pounding like a bongo drum, hoping he hadn't made an utter fool of himself, Devon shook the new guy's hand. "Sorry about that. The new team name threw me for a loop. I'm Devon Barrett, aka the third baseman."

The dreamboat let his hand linger longer than necessary and let his long, sooty lashes sweep up to reveal beautiful, sensual, ocean-blue eyes that set off his blue-black hair to perfection.

Mr. Gorgeous, aka the new sponsor, cracked a to-die-for smile showing off a dazzling smile. "No harm, no foul. I find the name gets people laughing and asking questions. It's good for business."

Clay threw Devon's jersey in his face and snorted. "My business should be so good. He's buying matching cleats and ball bags for the team, too."

The shirt smacked Devon in the face before he caught it. Screwing up his face, he muttered, "Thanks."

Sandy turned a comely pink and shrugged. His movements made the bulldog on his chest snarl with his big ugly teeth. "Advertising and goodwill are the way to go. Good for business, you know."

Devon nodded but wondered how a business that sold dog costumes and provided doggy services could be so good. It was a lot cheaper to bathe his dogs, and no way would he torture Lucy and Ethel by tying ribbons around their ears much less doll them up in weird outfits—not even for Halloween. He suspected his babies profusely thanked him for that. Still, he wouldn't turn down new equipment if the guy insisted on splurging. His old cleats were falling apart so badly they hurt his feet. "Well, thanks."

He realised he was still holding Sandy's hand and also that Clay wore a knowing smirk, so he reclaimed all five of his digits and tucked them into his glove. "Nice to meet you."

Sandy beamed, his smile dazzling. His teeth blinded Devon. "I can't wait to play ball."

Devon almost melted at Sandy's feet and felt tell-tale stirrings in his groin. The guy must be a master at double entendres or else he had a dirty mind. Either way, Devon was

going to keel over from a dangerously high fever that had nothing to do with the sweltering South Florida eve.

Devon hadn't been so physically drawn to a man so fast, and it bothered him that his cock could be so out of synch with his head. He didn't get the new guy on the team. Aside from being movie-star handsome, he looked normal enough if he didn't know better. The guy not only made his poor dog dress up in ridiculous costumes, he aided and abetted other dog owners in participating in the same criminal behaviour. Devon wondered if he did it because he was whacked or because he'd found a cash cow? Either way, he wasn't impressed and he didn't appreciate having to wear that silly uniform with the awful name. He dreaded the other teams barking at them and making lewd gestures. It was inevitable.

For a millisecond, the thought crossed his mind to walk off the field in protest, but he liked his teammates, and he was too addicted to the game to quit. It was the best thing in his life right now, the only thing that kept him sane with all he was going through.

At the same time, he wanted to dislike the sponsor on principle. The fact that the guy was so hot his blood simmered and his cock bulged in his pants, infuriated him.

Angry at the world, he punched the air. This was the first time in a long time he'd been attracted by someone so quickly but he couldn't allow himself to go for a guy who ran a place called *Doggy Style*.

Damn!

\* \* \* \*

Sandy Falco praised his decision to join the team. It seemed membership came with multiple benefits, not the least of which was the very hot and sexy Devon Barrett. He was the blue ribbon of people and reminded him of a blond cocker spaniel.

However he'd hoped for a better reception of the uniforms and his sponsorship. Personally, he thought *Doggy Style* apropos. He loved the logo and thought his bulldog, Spike, looked adorable in leather on the jerseys. It had taken a lot of convincing to get Spike to wear it. Spike had wanted to wear his Super Spike outfit for the picture.

His muscles tight, his nerves jumpy since meeting the third baseman, Sandy tried to work out the kinks in his legs by stretching. He put a foot up on the bench and leaned over,

extending the ham string then he flexed his shoulders. God, but he had to get back in shape. Too many hours doing administrative work at the salon while trying to make it a success was making him soft. Besides, as much as he loved his doggy clients and his staff, he was going nuts being around them twenty-four-seven. Soon, he'd start barking. He swore he could understand what the dogs were saying. They were much easier to understand than people.

Unfortunately, he hadn't played baseball in so long he was rusty. He'd been a decent player as a kid but had been sick with mono his senior year and had missed out on a scholarship. Instead of going to college, he'd used the small inheritance from a great aunt to start *Doggy Style* and he'd never regretted it. Life had been good if hectic, but now that he was on the downside of thirty, he realised work alone didn't fulfil him. If he didn't want to look as paunchy as Spike, he had to get out and shake his booty. So here he was.

When the other guys on the team began to trickle in, he shook their hands and introduced himself. Although they all seemed to be nice guys around his age, none made him zing like Devon had. He wondered why Devon seemed special, especially as he was the only one who seemed opposed to his sponsorship. The other guys laughed or made ribald jokes but didn't seem offended or put off.

Clay marched over, storm clouds in his eyes. The guy reminded him of a pit bull and should be muzzled. "Why are you pansies just sitting around? This isn't social hour," he roared, his face purpling. "Get your lazy asses out on the field and practise."

The coach turned his feral gaze to Sandy then jabbed a finger at him. "You, new guy. Practise with me. Let's see what you got. What positions have you played?"

The hair on the back of his neck bristling, his blood boiling, Sandy fought to keep his expression friendly. He grabbed his glove and followed the coach. "I used to pitch and I also played some first base."

"Blake's our main pitcher but let me see you try. It never hurts to have a good bullpen." Clay crouched in a catcher's stance behind home plate, opened and closed his glove. His eyes narrowed to mere slits and his bushy brows furrowed above.

Sandy grimaced. He wasn't warmed up at all so this wouldn't be a fair audition. His muscles were cold as ice and just as stiff. "I'm completely cold. I've not warmed up at all."

"That's okay. Just pitch a few. We'll get you up to speed."

Sandy sucked in a breath hoping he wouldn't suck, that his arm would remember the motions, that he wouldn't hurl the ball over the fence. He forced himself to calm, and he focused on the maw of the glove. Praying all the time, he sank a pitch into the glove and congratulated himself that he didn't trip over the mound and fall on his face.

"Not bad, Falco. Give me some more. Just like that." Clay regarded him with a hint of admiration and burrowed himself deeper into the dirt.

Sandy zinged a few more to the coach before the umps signalled it was time to start and before his arm really loosened up.

"Be ready to pitch if we need you. For now, trot on out to centre field." Clay marched off to the other side of the field to consult with the umpires.

## Chapter Two

Once the sun sank behind the horizon, Sandy enjoyed the cool night's breeze and the way halos glowed around the field lights. He felt like a star in their spotlight and his adrenaline pumped faster.

He'd spent far too much time indoors crafting his new line of designer doggy fashions. He wanted to make a good impression on the team, but mainly, he prayed he wouldn't totally suck in front of the cute third baseman. The cleats, new and tight on his feet, needed to be worn in and his feet ached. The lights blinded him when he chased a high fly. His glove felt loose so between innings he fiddled with the laces.

"Cute pooch," the umpire said, staring at his jersey.

Sandy slanted the ump a grin and beamed. "Spike's my baby. He's also a great spokesdog for my shop, *Doggy Style*. He's such a diva. He loves to model all the new doggy fashion."

"I have a toy poodle. Does your shop carry fashion for small dogs? Do you do grooming, too?"

The female ump reminded him of the shaggy dog with her mop of bushy brown hair bundled behind her neck and her thick, unruly brows over her black rimmed glasses. She wore her uniform baggy which made her shapeless.

His marketing Mr. Hyde emerged as excitement tingled through his blood. She also looked like a possible client. He loved to talk about his twin passions. A grin split his face. "You bet. I'd like to think we have the best selection of doggy styles in all of South Florida. I custom make dog outfits, and we have a fabulous line of fashions debuting in a couple weeks."

The shaggy ump fervently shook his hand. "I'm Sheila. You can be sure Toodles and I will be seeing a lot of you. She's such a little diva she has to have a different outfit for every day of the month. Most of my officiating earnings get spent on her. I don't remember the last time I bought an outfit for me."

Sandy liked this woman even if he was dying to pluck her brows and straighten her hair. Sweet and unassuming, she was his kind of person. "I'll give you my card before we leave. You can meet my baby, Spike, when you drop by." Spike was his number one model and inspiration. He'd even stopped a couple of thieves from stealing expensive outfits.

Sheila's broad grin lit her face. "Awesome. Will do."

Clay jabbed his watch and yelled, "Time. Are we gonna play gentlemen or stand around and scratch our balls all night?"

Trying to avoid more of the coach's wrath and embarrassed for Sheila's sake, Sandy slowly and carefully backed away into the dugout. Then he tripped and landed on a warm lap.

"I'd have moved over and made room if you'd said 'please'," a sexy voice drawled as large, gentle hands righted him.

Even before Sandy looked up, his heart catapulted into a disco beat. Instinct warned him whose lap he'd landed in, and embarrassed, he gulped. Worse, his body wouldn't behave and felt languid and too sluggish to move. It yearned to linger as long as possible and hoped to get an invitation to stay and play. But his self-respect finally came to his rescue, and he picked himself up and dusted off the orange clay clinging to him. "Not intentional, guy."

Devon shot him a provocative look from beneath his dusky lashes and squirmed on his chair. "No biggie. You all right?"

"Yeah." Except for a raging dose of infatuation for the hottie. He'd have to watch himself so he wouldn't drool or gush.

\* \* \* \*

After the game, Sandy stretched his sore muscles. He was tired, in a good way. He hadn't felt this content in months, not since his nephew had fallen then died...

Sandy closed his eyes and cursed himself. A tear slid down his cheek. Why couldn't he get through a day without thinking of Bryant? Without shedding tears?

God, he didn't want to forget his nephew, but he longed to stop hurting. He prayed his sister could go on. She was a basket case, and she worried him to death.

"We're going to celebrate over some brewskis. Would you like to join us?" Ryan asked as he draped his arm around his partner Drew's shoulders.

Drew played with the curly hair on Ryan's neck. "Every time we win, we like to celebrate."

Devon nudged Sandy and snickered then he covered his mouth with his hand and said in an aside, "And when we lose, we drown our sorrows. We're regular luses."

Ryan scrunched his nose and narrowed his eyes at Devon. "Speak for yourself." Then he turned to Sandy. "So, are you in?"

Sandy tried to hold it together, but a beer sure sounded good. He rubbed his chin and grimaced when he felt the beginnings of a beard. "Yeah. Count me in."

When he caught Devon giving him a quizzical glance, frissons of awareness stole into his heart. Wishing it was more than fantasy, he shot Devon the sunniest smile he could muster. Bryant would want him to go on, to be happy.

*Dear God, Bryant...* He missed the little boy so very much.

"Are you up to it? You don't look so hot." Devon clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

Sandy wasn't certain he was up to anything, but he desperately needed a beer. Lots of beers. "I'll be fine, but I'm thirsty."

He was mighty anxious to end the misery eating at his gut like acid. He cursed fate. He cursed a god who would let a small child die and the nurse on duty that awful night who'd neglected his duty. Tired as hell of pitying himself, he said, "Let's get outta here."

Drew linked his fingers through Ryan's with a twinkle in his eyes and pulled his lover to their sedan.

A little while later that night at the team's after-game get together, unable to stand the pain, Sandy guzzled too many beers to count. The more inebriated he became, the more his shyness evaporated. Spying an old-fashioned jukebox he ambled over, tilted his bottle to his lips and perused the selections. One of his favourite songs caught his attention. He fed the hungry machine then punched in the numbers.

When the romantic melody seeped into him, he swayed and softly sang along under his breath. He eyed Devon under the muted lights, his golden hair glowing like a halo. Sandy's

heart lurched. Girding his loins, crossing his fingers, he swaggered over to the handsome devil.

On fire, his blood boiling, Sandy wetted his lips with the tip of his tongue. His cock swelled, crowded his pants, and made it difficult to walk straight but he no longer cared. All he wanted was to slow dance with the blond, to take him in his arms and make him his for the night.

When he finally stood within hearing range, he huskily drawled, "Dance with me."

Devon's beer halted halfway to his lips, and his green-eyed gaze savoured him. It lingered provocatively on the bulge in his slacks and a slow smile dawned over his eyes. He set down his beer on the nearest table.

His heart swelling as big as his cock, he opened his arms and cradled the blond in his arms. For the first time in a long time, he felt almost whole. At least, he wasn't crying.

Devon felt and smelled so luscious, Sandy's hands couldn't help but roam over him, to drag him close enough to steal a kiss, to explore the lean hardness of his rippling muscles, especially the one straining against the front of his slacks. "I wonder if you know how exquisite you looked the first time I laid eyes on you. How you stole my breath and how very much I wanted to throw you over my shoulder and carry you away to my lair and make mad passionate love to you."

Devon moaned and rubbed his cock against Sandy's, as he, too, ran his hands down Sandy's back then squeezed his butt. He pressed his lips against Sandy's, and with his eyelids half lowered, he murmured in a dreamy voice, "What's stopping you, gorgeous? I don't see anyone protesting."

Sandy almost came he was so hot, but with supreme effort, he held back. He wanted to have his cock buried deep in Devon's sexy ass before he came. Instead, he plundered Devon's lips and drank deeply of his ambrosia.

A kaleidoscope of brilliant colours besieged him, and he lost himself in myriad emotions sweeping him. Needing Devon so much, Sandy slid his hands inside Devon's pants and massaged his ass.

"Oh, yeah." Devon emulated him and rubbed Sandy's butt.

Ready to rip off Devon's pants with his teeth, Sandy captured his lips again and moulded himself impossibly close.

"Get a room," a familiar but drunken voice said on a slur. A roomful of bawdy chuckles and catcalls followed. Ear splitting whistles sliced through the twangy country tune of heartache and despair.

In a daze, Sandy released his lover's lips and rested his cheek against the other man's, rough from being in need of a shave but oh so sexy. He loved the scrape of a five o'clock shadow against his thighs and along his cock. God, but Devon was so very macho, so extremely masculine. He made Sandy feel aware of himself and sexy.

"Sounds like a great idea." Sandy feathered kisses from Devon's mouth, along his jaw to the pulse point at the base of his neck. When Devon groaned and melted against him, Sandy had to have him. Not later. Now.

Just as he'd threatened, he hauled Devon over his shoulder, bowed, and blew kisses to his cheering crowd then stole away with his booty to his car. Drenched in silvery summer moonlight, his sedan looked like Cinderella's bejewelled chariot.

As he fumbled with his car keys, he cursed under his breath. So much for being dashing, suave and debonair, for sweeping his lover off his feet and making him his.

Finally, the door opened, and the car lit as if by magic. Cicadas serenaded them, and jasmine wafted around them, filling his senses.

Gently and tenderly, he laid his lover on the backseat and let his eyes adore the beautiful man. "God, you're stunning."

Devon licked his lips and crooked his finger at him. "So are you. Help me take off these jeans and fuck me."

In the parking lot? If they got caught, they'd get charged with indecent exposure. Instead of holding him back, the danger made it all the more irresistible. Smouldering, he shucked his slacks, threw off his shirt then stripped his lover. "You're mine. No mercy."

Devon curled his legs around Sandy's neck and when Sandy lifted his hips off the seat, he met Sandy thrust for thrust. They moaned together and fell into a hypnotic, bewitching rhythm. When a raucous country song burst into the musky night, they fucked to its beat until Devon pumped his cock and screamed, "I can't hold back. I'm going to erupt."

Ravenous to taste his lover, Sandy bent his head and opened his mouth wide as Devon's cum spurted up. He caught several shots of it and greedily swallowed. "God, that's the sweetest cum I've ever drunk. One taste will never be enough."

"I hope not." Devon panted but still ground his ass against Sandy's cock.

Sandy's fever skyrocketed and the earth quaked. Quivers shook him so hard he held onto Devon for dear life. Rapture as he'd never dreamed exploded through him and screams ripped from his throat. "Oh, God, yes. Oh, baby, I haven't felt this way in forever."

Wild and ragged, he drove into Devon with reckless abandonment and climbed closer to heaven with each thrust.

"Don't stop. I'm coming again." Devon rode his cock hard, bucking and grinding. Slick with musky perspiration, they slid against the seat and fell sideways. Mid-orgasm, Sandy's cock popped out of Devon and his cum spewed into the air. He became awkwardly wedged on the floor, and he struggled to breathe.

Devon scrambled to his knees and helped Sandy up. "Are you okay? Nothing's broken?" His concerned gaze adored Sandy's cock, and tenderly, he felt it.

Dazed, but getting his breath back, Sandy moaned as new waves of pleasure washed over him. "I'm more than fine, but maybe we're too old to be making out in the backseat of a car."

"Here here. But it's so much fun, so dangerous. I want a turn before we find a more sedate, old folks' bed. Get on you're knees and prepare for the best fucking of your life." Devon chuckled and playfully swatted Sandy's rear as he stood on his knees and massaged his long, hard, and throbbing cock.

Raw and overcome with desire anew, Sandy nodded and scurried to his knees. His cock throbbed and his balls swelled so big he ached to be one with his lover. When Devon worked his cock into him, his heavy penis swung like a pendulum, hungrily awaiting another turn. But when Devon fully penetrated, deeper and bigger than any other lover, fireworks burst and his cum pooled onto his seat.

## Chapter Three

A week later, smoke wisped out of the hood of Devon's car, and the engine light blinked. Then the engine sputtered and died. As Devon cursed under his breath, he flipped on his emergency flashers and tried to coast to the shoulder. Unfortunately, the car stopped short, and the vehicles behind him honked their anger. The Cadillac driver that had been behind him gave him the bird and others shouted obscenities as they passed him. Car problems were all he needed on top of his other trouble.

"Nice people," he muttered under his breath as he gave friendly waves, feeling like a dork. To look at how angry some of them were, they couldn't dislike him more if he was foreclosing on their homes.

When he got a big enough break in traffic, he slid out of his car and began to push it off the road. He was vaguely aware that another car had stopped behind him. Hot, sweaty and pissed, he waved for it to go around. Then he wondered if it was a cop going to give him a ticket or come to his rescue.

Instead it cut its engine then he heard a familiar voice. "Need a hand?"

Before he could reply, he saw a man's shadow out of his peripheral vision then a pair of tanned, powerful hands splayed across the trunk beside him blocking the sun that had been blinding him.

It was Mr. Gorgeous.

Devon's heart went into overdrive, and his knees threatened to buckle. He was glad of the vehicle's support so he wouldn't fall and look like a moron. Then he gulped in a lungful of the oily air and hacked, looking like a fool anyway. Where was a nursing mask when he needed one?

"Let me help. You get in and steer while I push." After Devon was in the driver's seat, Sandy bent his head, grunted, and pushed the vehicle off to the side.

Devon didn't know what to say but was grateful. "Thanks. These drivers are out for blood. You'd think they'd never had car trouble."

Sandy smiled and waved to a swearing driver who gave them the finger. "Pricks. Don't let them get to you. Just smile and go on. It really pisses 'em off."

Devon couldn't help but grin, and he liked the guy even more. "Yeah. I've met my share." The medical review board and in particular the head honcho. He didn't appreciate being a sacrificial lamb because the hospital was understaffed. It wasn't his fault if he couldn't clone himself and be in two places at once.

*That poor little boy... Damn!*

Devon's heart squeezed so tightly he couldn't breathe. He wondered for the millionth time if there was more he could have done to save both children in distress that fateful night. But he'd been saving one child, not knowing the other was dying until it was too late. Whoever had laid off too many nurses should be on trial not him.

Sandy banged the car and frowned. "Hey! Pop the hood and let me have a look-see."

Devon banished the thoughts and swiped a tear from his cheek. Then he swore not to let his professional life interfere with tonight's game, and he popped the hood then sauntered to the front of his car. He wanted to peek inside but got a face full of smoky oil so he backed off. He felt broiled in just that brief contact and coughs racked him again.

"Call your auto service to tow it to your garage, and I'll take you onto the game. After, I'll take you to check on it."

Devon checked his watch and scowled at the late hour. Game time was in less than thirty minutes. He doubted road service would get there in time for them to make the game, and Clay hated late comers.

He swiped at the perspiration gushing down his brow and pulled his soaked shirt away from his body to let some cool air refresh him. "We'll never make it. You go on. I'll be fine here."

Sandy looked around and grimaced. "I'd feel better waiting with you. This isn't the best neighbourhood."

Devon had to bite back a laugh. He wasn't some little girl who was afraid of the bogeyman. He'd been a pretty good wrestler in his college days as well as a baseball player, and he still maintained a lot of strength. He could defend himself. "I'm fine. Besides, road service shouldn't take that long."

Sandy stuck his finger in the air as if saying 'wait' then yanked his phone from his belt and flipped it open. "Clay? Devon and I might be late. We're having car trouble and we're waiting on a tow."

He listened for several moments, nodding here and there then added, "Sure thing. See you in a few."

Sandy turned to Devon and held out the phone. "Call your road service."

Devon declined the use of Sandy's phone and delved his out of his pocket. "The number's saved on mine." About twenty five minutes later, a tow truck pulled up and within forty, they were on their way to the game in Sandy's puppy mobile.

The air was thick inside the cab, even with the windows wide open and a good breeze flowing through. He was too aware of Sandy sitting less than two feet away, of his sculpted hands handling the wheel with such finesse, and he longed to feel those same hands finessing his body again. His cock swelled, and he silently cursed himself. Just because they'd fallen into bed that one night when they'd been drunk didn't mean they had a 'thing'. Since Sandy hadn't said anything about it, he wondered if the other man remembered.

To get his mind off sex, Devon asked, "Tell me about your business. Is there really that much interest in fashion for dogs?"

Sandy slid him a sly glance and chuckled. "You'd be surprised. *Doggy Style's* such a smashing success I'm selling franchises throughout the state of Florida and in three other states, California, New York, and Washington, plus I own four stores straight out and our internet business is booming."

"Who knew dressing up dogs like clowns would be so popular?" Devon wanted to kick himself the minute the words escaped his lips. To try to ameliorate his insult, he added, "Lucy and Ethel prefer rolling in the dirt to dolling up like femme fatales."

Sandy laughed and slid him an amused glance. One edge of his lip curled, and a dimple appeared in his chin. "Lucy and Ethel, huh? How'd you know? Did they say that?"

Devon saw no point in spending money on something that neither he nor the dogs would enjoy. As it was, the economy was too tough to waste a cent. "I know my Lucy and Ethel. They'd hate that stuff and tear it right off. I'm surprised people can afford luxuries like that in these hard times." To hear the women talk at work, they could barely afford to clothe their kids or buy a new outfit for themselves much less their dogs. They were scared to death

of being the next poor sucker to get laid off. He'd think dog clothing would be the first expense someone would cut out. Since when did dogs care if they showed their butts?

Sandy shrugged. "The bulk of our demographic is either wealthy or older folks who dote on their dogs as if they're their kids or they're teenagers who don't have a lot of bills. So far, we're zooming full speed ahead."

If the review board didn't see the truth, if they didn't vote in his favour, he might have to beg for a job pampering spoiled pups. His mind whirled and he asked, "How much is a franchise?"

He couldn't believe he'd just asked that. Would he really prostitute himself to the dogs and their owners? He couldn't see himself pampering spoiled pooches and kowtowing to their ritzy masters. Unfortunately, he'd developed a fondness for eating at least once a day.

Sandy blinked and regarded him with an assessing gaze. "A store front is fifty thou. If you're serious, I can give you an application with all the details."

Devon's eyes rolled back in his head. He only had a little more than sixty thousand saved, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to risk it all. Then again, his 401K had already lost twenty thousand in the past couple months, so a business might not be such a bad risk. "Let me think on it. I'm not sure."

"Give me your email address, and I'll shoot over some info to you. No pressure."

He worried how big a chunk of cash it was going to take to fix the car. He hoped it didn't need a new engine.

When they arrived at the game, Clay jogged up to them. "Falco, warm up. We need you."

Devon felt left out but shuttered his expression. Clay had never treated him like he did his exulted pitchers.

In amazement, Sandy stared at Clay and his fingers twitched. "You mean pitching?"

Clay scowled and rubbed his ear which was bright red. He played with the diamond stud, twirling it around. "No, I mean go-go dancing. Of course, I mean pitching!" he roared. "Get your cute ass in the bullpen. Wesley will catch for you. Show him your go-to pitch."

Wes, a lanky blond with hair falling across his eyes jumped up and stopped humming a show tune midstream. He snatched his glove, tilted his head at the pitcher's net and said, "It's just you and me, babe. Come on."

Sandy couldn't wait, but he was also nervous as hell. He hadn't pitched in years. "Where's Blake?" he asked, hoping for a reprieve.

Wes fell into a companionable step beside him, whistling under his breath. "He's stuck at the boxing studio. The guy who was supposed to replace him was rushed to the hospital with food poisoning."

Sorry to hear about the poor guy, Sandy pressed his lips together then he let his gaze skim over the rest of the team. "Who else pitches?" He didn't delude himself that he'd ever been more than a thrower. He only knew a couple basic pitches.

"Franklin, sometimes. Or Devon. But they really don't like to, especially not when Clay jumps all over their shit."

If Clay was going to jump on his shit, Sandy didn't want to pitch, either. His nerves jumped spastically, and he was afraid he'd let the team down.

Several pitches and a couple mosquito bites later, Clay put Sandy on the pitcher's mound. "Don't make me pull you out. None of these other bozos can pitch worth a darn," the coach added under his breath.

A growl rose in Sandy's throat as he dug around in the soft dirt and filled in the holes. A rep to protect and a name to make for himself, not to mention being pissed at the coach, he put his entire spirit into his pitches. When he lobbed the ball, he snarled at himself.

"Shake it off," Wes said then loped back to the plate and crouched. As he opened his glove wide to make a good target, he yelled, "You can do it."

Sandy couldn't help but crack a grin at the catcher's tone of voice, the same one he intonated when he praised, "Good doggy," right before Spike wagged his tail and slobbered all over him. Deciding Spike and his canine pals had the right idea, to take praise well, never give up, and never bite only growl, he polished the ball on his jersey and positioned his fingers on the laces. Ignoring the sweat dripping in his eyes, he replayed his lessons, stepped on his power line, held his torso straight then snapped his wrist upon release. When the ball winged straight into Wes' glove, he shouted, "Yes!"

It was a little harder to keep up his courage after he'd walked the first two batters and Clay swore at him and stomped up a dust storm by the dugout. Out of his peripheral vision, he caught Devon glare at the coach and his heart warmed. Devon cared. At least, he wasn't against him.

Sandy bared his teeth, focused inwardly, and adrenaline surging through him, hurled the ball. One, two, three, he struck out the next three batters as his team killed his ears with cat calls, whistles, and stomping.

They spilled onto the field in a joyous swarm and coated him with the orange dust cloud they created. "Sandy. Sandy. Sandy," they chanted.

He put his glove on his head like a hat and ate up their kudos, unable to contain his grin. Wanting to be good for Devon, knowing the third baseman had his gaze glued on him, he'd pitched almost all strikes. He wasn't sure what excited him more—leading his team to victory or knowing he would leave with the hottie tonight. Even if it was just to give him a ride to get his car, it would be more time alone. Craving it, his every molecule anticipated the pleasure and his every nerve sang. He crossed his fingers behind his back, hoping Devon would stick around for an encore of the other night's pleasure.

They'd slaughtered the poor bastards in the other dugout, and he suffered a pang of remorse as high on success as he was. He heartily pumped their hands and clapped their backs as he smiled and said, "Good game."

When he couldn't find Devon, however, and no one could remember if they'd seen him since he'd been benched after the last inning, his euphoria evaporated. Panic warred with disappointment, and he did his best to amputate both. He presumed the other man must've gotten a better offer and ditched him. But his heart refused to cooperate and flopped around in his chest.

Clay enveloped him in a bear hug and lifted him off his feet. "Keep it up, diva. You'll give Blake a run for his money."

Despite his worry, he flashed his teeth at being called a 'diva'. Was he being a prima donna? He'd been called worse.

Then his grin faded as his gaze swept the field and dugouts again. Still, he didn't spot the hot blond anywhere. "You see Devon lately? I was supposed to give him a ride home."

Clay shrugged as if unconcerned, and his gaze also perused the deserted fields. "He probably hooked up with someone and left already. He's a carouser."

The thought echoed his even if it made him wince. He wished he'd gotten Devon's cell phone number. Wondering just how big a 'carouser' Devon was, he tried to shake off his uneasiness, but it wasn't as simple to cast off his disappointment. "Yeah, probably."

\* \* \* \*

Devon's gut clenched and swearing, he kicked the locked door. He glanced at his watch and swore again. Some clown was playing a mean prank or the maintenance guy had had a hot date and locked up early without checking to make sure the men's room was vacant.

Only answering machines picked up when he called for help. The dim light on his phone read 10:23 PM and boasted only one bar of remaining power.

"Damn!" Was he going to be stuck in this stink hole all night without a soft place to rest and the only place to sit was either on the toilet or the filthy floor? Unhappily, he chose the best of the evils, the commode.

He'd hoped Sandy would come looking for him, send out the National Guard or someone, but he wasn't going to hold his breath. If their roles were reversed, he'd assume the other guy had found a ride home.

He was going to give the head of the park a good tongue thrashing come morning or whenever he got sprung.

Just in case, he left a message on a couple of his friend's phones and hoped someone would listen to their damned machine and send the search team. His skin crawled, and he couldn't wait to delouse and sterilise himself.

Another hour passed and a grating noise awakened him from a fitful slumber. When he heard a bolt click and the door swing open, he leapt up, suddenly wide awake, his heart racing. "Hey! I'm trapped in here. Let me out!"

He sprinted to the door to see Sandy silhouetted in the doorway beside a janitor and a cop. God, he'd never seen a more beautiful sight. Of course, he'd welcome his dogs wearing itsy bitsy teeny weenie yellow polka dot bikinis right now, too.

"Thank God you're okay, baby. I got your text messages so I brought the cavalry." Sandy pushed himself past his companions and hugged Devon so hard he thought his ribs would pierce his spine. Then Devon twirled around and the room spun and the other men divided into several more beings and he wondered if he was hallucinating.

*Baby?*

Devon gulped, not able to believe his ears, but God, he wanted to. The endearment must mean that Sandy remembered their special night. Did that also mean he wanted to repeat it?

His skin crawling, his hair sweaty, he longed to bathe. "Swear you're real. Get me out of here and take me to my shower — fast."

Sandy put him down and patted his back. "Sure thing, dude. I could use one, too." He raked his fingers through his hair and a mess of dust from the field flew about his head.

Devon's heart stopped, and his jaw dropped. Was that an invitation? Just the thought of being naked in a shower with the hottie, of soaping down Sandy's cock, of being soaped down by Sandy's artistic hands, made his dick jump up and demand release from its prison.

They rode home in companionable silence. The summer moon trickled through the window casting silvery beams across them, filling the car with magic. By the time they reached Sandy's house, he couldn't take it anymore. He had to kiss Sandy.

As Sandy unlatched his seatbelt and unlocked the car, Devon stilled his hand. "Thank you, my white knight, for coming to my rescue."

Sandy arched his brow, half turned in his seat and stretched out his arm along the back of the seat. "My pleasure, damsel in distress. I'm at your service."

Devon jerked back and blinked. Then a naughty grin spread across his lips, and he unlatched his belt then his pants. He whipped out his very big, very male cock and turned it so that Sandy had an excellent view. "Damsel? Look again, I ain't no dame."

Sandy's eyes glazed over with passion then he gulped. "I can see that."

Yearning to feel Sandy's intoxicating touch again, Devon inched closer. "Would you like to touch it, too? Go ahead."

Sandy licked his lips and scooted closer. Reverently, he stroked it, his fingertips so light he must have thought it was porcelain.

"It won't break. Squeeze it."

Sandy's fingers curled around it then gently pumped. As Devon climbed on Cloud Nine and gave himself up to the ecstasy, Sandy leaned over him. "You don't mind if I taste it, do you?"

Too choked up for words, Devon nodded as a strangled whimper escaped his throat. He sank deeper into his seat and spread his legs wide. When Sandy buried his face between his legs, Devon cradled his lover's head.

Sandy's tongue, soft yet rough, swept up, down, and around Devon's over-sensitised cock. When he took it deep into his mouth, Devon's fever raged. He buried his fingers in Sandy's silky hair as he pumped his cock deeper and faster, into the cutie's mouth.

Around his cock, Sandy huskily murmured, "God, I haven't been this randy since I was a teenager."

Devon chuckled throatily. "It must be the car. I haven't either."

Sandy's hand continued to pump the base of Devon's cock as his lips devoured the swollen head. "Or maybe we're meant for each other."

Devon's breath caught in his throat as he drove harder yet into Sandy's mouth. "We've just met. We hardly know anything about each other. This is only our second time together."

Sandy released his cock and with a sideways tilt of his head, glanced up with a seductive glint in his eyes. "Does that mean you want me to stop? Should I take you home?"

"Hell no!" Devon pushed Sandy's head back into his lap and thrust his cock at his mouth. No way would he wish this magical night over so soon.

A big grin turned up Sandy's lips. He lowered his head and lapped at the juice trickling out of Devon's cock. "I didn't think so."

"Ooh, that feels *so* wonderful. Don't stop. Ever." Riptides of desire pulled Devon under so that he couldn't escape. Screams ripped from his throat and completely mindless, he didn't care what time of night it was or who heard him. He couldn't stop now if the world itself was exploding.

Greedily, Sandy drank every drop of Devon's cum then kissed him long and hard. Sandy's mouth was a drugging mix of musky cum and the spearmint gum he always chewed. Against his lips, his lover murmured, "Take off your pants and get up on your knees."

Halfway back to his senses, Devon blinked at the darkness of the garage and didn't recall when Sandy had closed the door. They were cocooned in their own world even if they were in the car. "I thought we decided we were too old to keep doing this in cars."

Sandy rolled over the seat and stripped in the back seat. He slung his clothes over the steering wheel. Then he tossed a come hither smile to Devon and wiggled his finger. "Stop jawing so much and get your sweet cheeks back here."

Devon couldn't wait to be loved by the man of his dreams. He prayed this wasn't a dream, that falling in love with a virtual stranger wouldn't be his undoing. His professional life was going straight to hell, and he couldn't stand it if his personal one did, too. But he so needed love and support, he couldn't turn his back on it. He was a mere man, and Sandy could just be his salvation. God, he hoped so.

Eager to forget his worries, to drown himself in the love and affection of a good man, Devon kicked off his slacks and climbed into the back with Sandy. He got onto his knees and wiggled his ass. Tossing a wink and a smile over his shoulder, he crooned, "What are you waiting for, big guy?"

Sandy ran the tip of his penis, slick and hot, down the crack of Devon's butt making him shiver. Then he inserted a finger and worked it in. "It's a good thing I just happen to be a magician. *Voila!* Love gel."

Devon crooked his head, thankful for small miracles but not that gullible. "Did you plan this?"

Sandy lubed his cock then slipped two lubed fingers into Devon's ass. "Not exactly. But after the last time, I slipped some into my glove box, and earlier tonight, I put it in my pocket just in case."

The more Devon got to know this guy, the more he loved him. "You're amazing."

"All us white knights are. It's part of our credo."

Devon's breathing became more laboured, and he ground his ass against Sandy's fingers. When Sandy removed them, Devon moaned at their loss but yearned for Sandy's big cock. "Give it to me good."

Sandy swept his tongue across Devon's butt. "Are you really ready?"

The earth quaked, and Devon clung to the seat for dear life. In a breathy voice, he asked, "What do you think, tease?"

"I think you're horny as hell, that you can't get enough of me, that I can't get enough of you." With that, Sandy stood up tall, held onto Devon's waist and worked his cock into Devon then powerfully stroked in and out.

Bottle rockets sizzled and Roman candles burst in the heavens. Mesmerised, Devon watched his cum erupt from his cock onto the seat. Mere moments later, Sandy's fingers bit into Devon's waist as he flung back his head, howled and ground his cock into Devon's ass.

Rapture claimed them, and Sandy fell on top of him and nuzzled his neck. "That was totally awesome."

Unable to hold their weight, Devon fell to the seat and rolled over so that he was face to face with his man. He rubbed his nose against his lover's. "Um, it sure was. You're not going to kick me out now are you?"

Sandy scrambled off him and over the seat. He gathered their clothes and opened the door. "Shower time. Follow me."

\* \* \* \*

After awaking late after a night full of loving, Devon felt lonely in Sandy's empty bed. With the early morning sunshine blinding him, he put his hands over his eyes to better see. Nope. No sign of Sandy.

He pulled on his pants and finger combed his hair. Then he ambled around the house until he found Sandy hard at work in his studio. He leaned against the doorframe, crossed his arms and legs, and drank in the vision of the beautiful man. He still didn't get the fascination with dressing dogs, but he sure loved the way the man looked with his hair falling across his eyes. "You're quite the designer. Ever think of making clothes for people instead of pooches? Wouldn't that be more lucrative?"

Sandy looked up from his drafting table and, with a puzzled expression, cocked his head to the side. "Never. Why would I want to? Spike is my inspiration. Besides, the competition is a lot fiercer in that design world."

Spike pirouetted on his hind legs then lay on Sandy's feet. He licked his master's ankles until Sandy tapped him on the head and said, "Stop that."

Devon couldn't blame the dog. He'd been dying for another taste of Sandy himself. Only he wanted to lick something about four feet higher than his ankles, and something that was a lot hotter.

*Oy!* His mouth watered uncontrollably and his cock flexed.

*Down boy!*

But his cock didn't listen any better than his dogs. So he stuck his hands in his pockets and moved behind a rack, hoping he stood far enough away Sandy wouldn't notice his erection. The guy would think him a sex maniac which is exactly what he felt like around this gorgeous man.

He yearned to take Sandy in his arms again and forget real life, to chase away his demons. He didn't want to do it by means of liquor again or reaction to a scary ordeal, nor did he want to get addicted to the man.

Or did he?

As badly as he longed to ease his pain, to find something to make him forget it, was it fair to Sandy to drag him into it? He didn't think he'd be judged criminally negligent, but there was a slight chance...

Most likely, he'd be forever banned from nursing, humiliated and blacklisted. He'd be lucky to get hired to flip burgers for minimum wage, and he'd die a lonely, unloved pauper, bitter at the world. He'd use his dying breath to curse his bitch of a boss, Pamela, or wonder if he could have done something to save that boy...

He dragged in a ragged breath, his throat raw from far too many of them. Then anger, hot and furious cascaded through his gut. His pity should be for the poor child and his family, not himself. What a pathetic piece of crap he was bemoaning his petty woes.

He lifted a prayer for them then for his own forgiveness. He vowed to get over himself and focus on others, just as he'd long ago promised when he'd given his professional oaths.

Did getting over himself mean he should get involved with someone now? Or did it mean he should hide his heart and stick to himself until he was cleared? *If* he was cleared.

At war with himself, not sure if he was being the good or bad guy, he decided not to rush things. It wasn't like he'd never see the man again. They played on the same ball team. He knew where *Doggy Style* was. "Uh, I should be shoving off. I'll call a cab."

Sandy clicked off his desk lamp, pushed out his chair and stood up. He stretched up his arms and rolled his shoulders. Then he flipped his sexy fringe out of his eyes and gave Devon a piercing look. "No need. I'll give you a ride to your car like I promised."

Devon rocked back on his heels and fidgeted. "But you're working."

Sandy grabbed his wallet and fished his keys from his pocket and jangled them in his hand. "I could use a break and I don't renege on my promises." He looked down at the dog dressed as a race car driver in black, red and white stripes. "You've been dying for a ride, right Spike?"

When the dog heard his name, he did a jig and barked as if to say, "You bet!"

Conversation was stilted, and the car was claustrophobic. Devon wanted to hang his head out the window like the dog but held himself back. Instead, he rang his hands in his lap and stared out the window, anywhere but at the man he longed to take back to bed and ravish.

Luckily the car was fixed and the bill was only a couple hundred, more than he'd wished but less than he'd feared. He wasn't sure whether to give his rescuer and protector a hand shake or a big hefty kiss so he settled for a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, man. You're a lifesaver. I owe you one."

Sandy's cheeks turned pink, and he shuffled his feet. His long dark lashes swept over his eyes, leaving them in a shadow so that Devon couldn't read his expression. "No need to pay me back. Just pay it forward."

Liking the sound of that, Devon nodded. Tongue tied, he mumbled, "Yeah. Catch you at the game."

Sandy saluted, pivoted on his heel and strode to his car. Spike trotted at his heels, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. Their shadows mingled then were swallowed by that of their car.

When Sandy turned and waved a jaunty goodbye, Devon lifted his hand and forced himself to turn away instead of staring after him like a lovesick calf.

## Chapter Four

A murky, lazy lake with ripples so soft they were unnoticeable until Sandy sat by the water's edge mesmerised him.

A picnic table beneath a small hut, faded, full of splinters but clean, stood lookout over the lake inviting him to visit awhile. A roof but no walls shaded half of the area as plump black ants milled around with no obvious direction, also victims of the lazy summer day.

Sandy didn't feel a whit more industrious than the insects looked crawling around through clusters of bran-like seeds and the occasional twig littering the cement floor. He stretched out his long legs and sighed in contentment. What a perfectly romantic setting, one that would be perfect in the moonlight with wine and candles. He'd have to bring Devon here to romance him.

Overhead a granddaddy of a fern tree dipped its long, delicate fingers towards the lake. It splattered shadows across the grass dotted with the occasional yellow flower. When a butterfly landed on one of the petals and languidly fluttered its wings as if in ecstasy, Sandy couldn't tear his gaze away.

He longed to feel such ecstasy again and more. He wanted to feel it with Devon. Two nights would never be enough. One taste of those exquisite lips had addicted him, and he yearned for more. One touch from the man's fingertips had sent shock waves through him, and he felt like an earthquake waiting to happen. Just one more touch, accidental or otherwise, would set off seismological rapture.

Birds chattered all around him, and he wondered if they were courting or perhaps making fun of the silly human mooning over their lake. He knew he really should slow down more and enjoy life's blessings, like the lake, the birds and the butterflies. He bet Spike would love to romp out here and chase the dragonflies or just to roll around in the grass and soak up all the sun.

He'd not moved to sunny South Florida to cower indoors with the AC, had he? Joining the team had only been his first step in reinventing himself. Besides, his creativity needed some stimulus, and it wasn't getting it in the same boring scenery. Halloween wasn't far

away in designing terms, and that was his best season of the year so he needed inspiration and fast.

Two dragonflies joined in midair and did an intimate dance, not caring that they had an audience or maybe getting off on it. A voyeur, he watched in awe as they soared above the water, their tiny shadows distorted by the lake, and he envied them their carefree existence. They never had to tangle with a Boca babe trying to get free dog clothes by seducing him. They didn't have to deal with designing websites and ads and snippy, yappy dogs that were more stuck up than their snotty masters.

This was the closest he'd come in a long time to feeling like he could spread his arms and fly. Unfettered by his weekday cares, he would soar over the water and just be. He'd let himself go and forget everything—the recent loss of his beloved nephew, being behind schedule, losing the last game, his love life...

The rush of cars beyond the far side of the lake snapped him back to reality, and he glanced at his watch. At two p.m. on a Saturday, he'd normally be caged in his shop or behind his drafting table. Maybe he'd be knee deep in fabric scraps or pricking his finger with another needle.

"Just fifteen minutes more," he promised himself, torn in two by his longing to veg out here and the A-type side of his personality demanding he crank out more designs to make the Boca babes happy so they'd brag about his wonderful fashions to their friends and so he'd have to put up with even more demanding, bitchy Boca babes.

"Oh, stick it!" he murmured to his A-side and stretched out on the bench. The sun beating on his neck and the gentle breeze seduced him to relax. The birds sang a lullaby that coaxed him to sleep.

He awoke with a start under a blanket of stars romancing a fingernail moon. Disoriented, he jumped up and banged his head on the picnic table. "Ouch!"

As he rubbed the newly formed lump on his noggin, he looked around at the dark, spooky place and shivered. Then he wrapped his arms around himself, jumping when a frog croaked nearby.

"Where am I?" he muttered under his breath to no one in particular or maybe to the chirping crickets.

His memory returned. He was alone in the dark park. No one played ball on Saturday night. It had become the animal's domain, and he felt like the enemy.

No longer did the birds sound happy. A raven swooped in front of his face and startled, he jerked back.

"Whoa!" The creature reminded him too much of a Stephen King movie, and he couldn't wait to get back to civilisation and safety.

Ignoring the protest of his muscles, he pulled himself up and stiff, ambled to his truck parked a zip code away. When he got home, he swore at his image in the mirror. A bright red farmer's burn screamed at him. Although he barely pressed his fingertip to his throat, it left an angry white imprint and hurt like hell.

"Really smart, moron," he congratulated himself as he tore apart his medicine cabinet looking for the aloe. Then he remembered he'd thrown out an ancient bottle in his last cleaning frenzy and he didn't remember replacing it.

This time, he swore loudly and slammed the cabinet. Spike waddled up to him, licked his leg, and gazed up with adoring but commiserative eyes.

Feeling a little cheered by the bulldog, he scratched the canine's head. "You're master is a doofus. You're supposed to stop me from being such a dingle berry."

Spike's brows waggled, and his muzzle twitched as if asking, "How? I'm only a dog." Then he trotted from the room and returned with his favourite doggy outfit, the super hero cape, the tights that sported a big 'SS' on its back meaning 'Super Spike' and the mask to keep his identity secret.

Sandy couldn't help but chortle and said, "Get your buns over here, and I'll dress you."

Every minute movement stung, and he was breathless by the time Spike had been transformed. How he wished he could become a hero so easily. Somehow he didn't think a cape and skin-tight leotards would do the trick. Maybe he'd be Spike's super hero side kick for Halloween.

On fire, his flesh seemed ready to burst into flame. Not into masochism, he hooked Spike to his leash and mumbled, "Save me, Super Spike. Fly me to Walgreen's." Or better yet, he'd prefer if Spike would go and bring back the medicine so he could stretch out and not have to move again. It ached like hell.

Super Spike merely wagged his stub of a tail, tugged on his leash and ambled towards the door on his fat little legs. When Sandy didn't immediately open the door, Spike looked over his shoulder as if to ask, "What's wrong?"

"I said 'fly' not 'walk', you miserable mutt. Some super hero you are." Every step was torture. Excruciating pain sliced him with each turn of his neck.

Not only would Spike not fly him to the drug store, he couldn't jump into the truck so that Sandy had to bend and lift his heavy ass and dump him on the seat. "That does it. You're going on a diet and exercise regime." Upon closer inspection, he grimaced at the unsightly bulges made evident by Spike's leotard.

Fortunately, the drug store was less than ten minutes away even with getting stopped at a long traffic light. He left the windows open enough to give the dog a nice breeze but not enough to allow someone to doggy nap him, then he forced his aching legs to carry him inside.

The blast of AC made Sandy shiver and his teeth clatter. Feeling like he had the flu, not merely a sun burn, he started to hug himself. But his flesh screamed for mercy at his touch, so he walked bowlegged and with his arms held far away from his sides.

"What are you pretending to be? Halloween's not for three more months." A very sexy, very familiar voice asked from behind him.

Sandy jumped then he cursed himself when his flesh screamed in agony.

Why'd *he* have to see him at his worst? One glance in the mirror ahead and Sandy confirmed the super sexy voice belonged to Devon.

Turning slowly and clumsily, he felt like Frankenstein. Not sure how to respond, he finally quipped, "Just hanging out in the medicine aisle. What's better to do on a Saturday night in South Florida?"

Devon's eyes widened, and he whistled long and low under his breath. He approached slowly, as if he feared Sandy had the plague. "What in the world did you do to yourself? You look like a crispy critter."

Sandy scowled and longed for a nice, cool bed, lots of pillows, and a gallon of codeine. "Moron that I am, I fell asleep in the sun." So much for his loving sunny South Florida. Michigan and its mega blizzards sounded like nirvana right about now.

Devon clucked his tongue and scanned the medicines with a practised eye. After pulling a few off the shelves, he commanded in a voice that brooked no argument, "You're coming with me. I'll nurse you back to health. You shouldn't be gallivanting around in your condition. You might have third-degree burns."

*Great!* That's all he needed. He couldn't afford to slow down with his doggy parade and show coming up in a month. Already, more than a hundred dogs were entered and new registrations poured in daily.

Devon paid the cashier and waived away his offer of compensation. "I'm driving you home. Look at you, you can't even walk."

"But Spike! He's waiting in the car."

"Oh, yeah, Spike. Do you go anywhere without that mutt?"

Sandy crooked a painful smile, even his face sunburnt. "A superhero needs his side kick."

Devon did a double-take at the bulldog. "Is your dog wearing a Superman costume?"

A belly laugh attacked Sandy, and he opened the door to let out the dog. "Heaven forbid. Don't let him hear you put him down like that. He hates Superman. He's 'Super Spike', far hairier, sloppier, and a better singer than 'Superman' ever could be."

Devon's brow arched. "He sings?"

"When I play my harmonica, he howls up a storm."

Devon helped Spike into the backseat of his car then strapped in Sandy. "Super Spike won't make a mess in my car, will he?"

"Nah. He's car broken except for maybe a little drool." Sandy glanced over his shoulder at his super hero and gave him a stern look. "No drooling, you hear?" He felt like Jorell instructing a defiant Colell, and got about as much cooperation when a long string of doggy drool trickled out the side of Spike's mouth.

"I'll clean it up," Sandy promised on a sigh. He shook his head then winced at the pain. "Children. The joys of parenthood."

Devon sent him an odd look but didn't remark on his comment. Instead he said, "Don't you worry your pretty little head over it. Lucy and Ethel have already christened my car a thousand times over. By the way, I need to stop home and check on them if you don't mind."

Devon turned on the right turn signal then sharply cut the wheel. He let the wheel slide through his hands as they entered a community of ritzy Boca town homes.

"Nice place," Sandy said, appreciating the wealth of pink, purple and white azalea blooms and the sparkling fountain that was lit up by myriad coloured lights. God, but he loved Boca and all its wealthy dog owners for all his private jokes about the evils of the Boca babes. If not for the Boca babes, he might go out of business.

Like a perfect gentleman, Devon escorted him inside, treating him like spun glass. When two dogs, a German shepherd mix and a black lab lumbered up and started to jump, Devon put himself between them and Sandy. "Down girls."

Then Spike barred his fangs and a growl rumbled in his chest. Before Sandy could grab him, he leapt out of Devon's arms and attacked the two bigger dogs. Their teeth ripped off Spike's cape and tore it to shreds, but at least, no flesh or blood splattered the walls.

Devon lassooed his dogs and put them in the back yard. For once, his perfect hair was mussed and his shirttails had come untucked. His glasses sat askew on his nose, and he straightened them as he rejoined him. "If only our team was so aggressive."

Ignoring his screaming flesh, Sandy scooped his troublemaker into his arms and gave the canine an evil glare. "Perhaps we should wait in the car."

He waved his finger in front of Spike's nose. "Bad dog. You're better trained than that. This is their territory not yours." He wondered what had gotten into the canine. He hadn't even marked the place.

"Don't worry about it." Devon brought out his broom and mop and cleaned up, leaving Sandy to wonder if he'd imagined the melee as no trace was left.

The rest of the house sparkled just as brightly and looked more like a mansion than a town home. Gold statues of Greek gods, naked cherubs, and wax roses adorned his living room. He wondered that the dogs didn't break such fragile valuables. He was afraid he'd soil the arctic white furniture and so remained standing, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Devon crooked his finger at Sandy. "Come with me. Let's get you fixed up."

Hypnotised as if a siren had him in his sights, Sandy followed, still clutching a squirming Spike.

Devon backtracked, confiscated the dog, and led Sandy to a stunning blue and green bedroom with muted gold highlights. Soft lighting accentuated the bed piled high with

decorative pillows. Billowed curtains cracked an inch, letting in a stream of moonbeams. Fancifully, he imagined they were really miniature fairies dusting the room with their magic. Fairy enchantment or not, the room was filled with magic, and Sandy trembled as Devon rolled back the covers and pointed at the bed. "Strip down to your skivvies before you get in."

The scrape and scratch of the material against his burns was excruciating, and he bit his lip to keep from moaning in agony. It took him three times longer than normal to accomplish the simple feat and each moment seemed to drag into an eternity of hell. Again he cursed himself for being so stupid. Even in Michigan, his home state, people knew better than to fall asleep in the sun.

Devon folded his clothes with almost military precision and laid them on a nearby chair. Then he squirted a cool blue gel onto his hands and perched on the bed beside him. "This'll take the sting out of the burn."

After the initial slice of pain, the gel combined with Devon's gentle fingers to relax him and draw out the worst of the sting. "Where'd you learn to massage so well? You have bewitching fingers. Are you a therapist?"

"Worse. I'm a full-fledged RN. Or I was..." The mattress depressed deeper as Devon leaned further to smooth the ointment on his far arm, and Sandy rolled into him. When their thighs collided, a new, wonderful burning sensation replaced the old.

Sandy moaned with delight. "This is bliss. You must be the best nurse ever."

Devon made a face and looked heavenward and said a small prayer. "From your lips to the review board's ears."

Sandy lifted his head off the pillow, but the motion hurt so he dropped it back to the bed. He wondered what Devon meant by that but was hesitant to probe. Devon's voice had dropped several degrees below freezing on his last statement, and Sandy didn't know him well enough to ask nosy questions. But he wanted to.

Devon glowered and wished he could go for a whole day without thinking about his professional woes. Ever since that little boy had died on his watch at the hospital, he'd been demoted to admin duties and placed on review. No one seemed to account that they'd been woefully short-staffed or that he'd been attending to another emergency.

When he heard the drone of a voice, he snapped back to the present and refocused on his patient. Not that it was difficult to look at the broad, muscular shoulders, or his washboard stomach with the swirl of dark hair that tapered to a thin line that disappeared beneath his drawers.

His mouth watered as his gaze was drawn lower to the sexy bulge in Sandy's boxers. Knowing Sandy wasn't fit for any physical stress didn't stop his cock from twitching or dampen the fever boiling his blood. It didn't lessen his need to taste his kiss, to be held in his strong arms, and just to be with him.

Checking his urges, he asked, "Feel any better?"

"Much." Sandy purred and regarded him with dream-filled eyes.

Devon got choked up by his needs. Sweeping up his lashes, he let his gaze adore the cutie. "Uh, you could stay here. Let me take care of you." It had been a long time since he'd been so tongue tied, and he kicked himself. He might as well shout to the whole free world that he wanted to take Sandy to his bed and make mad passionate love to him.

Sandy's dark eyes intensified with an inscrutability Devon wasn't sure he liked. He really didn't want to spend another lonely night with just the dogs to keep him warm, but in his present state of flux, his life on the verge of shambles, he didn't think it fair to get Sandy in the middle.

"What about Spike, my anti-social brat?"

\* \* \* \*

Devon lay on his side and let his gaze adore the Adonis by his side. Lazily his gaze roved over the sleeping beauty, appreciating his fine muscle tone, his broad shoulders, and lean hips. When his gaze travelled further south, his mouth watered.

God, but he longed to reach out and caress the beauty. He still couldn't believe such perfection lay in his bed, snoring so softly beside him. It felt so very right, and the ice from his long winter of loneliness began to melt.

But then Sandy groaned, drawing Devon's gaze to his angry red burn. No, it wasn't mere red but a furious, painful-looking scarlet, almost magenta in places. The man had really

done a number on himself. Plus, Devon reminded himself, this wasn't a good time for him, either, even if his libido kept forgetting.

Worried, he pushed himself off the comfy mattress and in bare feet, he padded to the bathroom. He wet a fluffy white wash rag, wrung it out then returned to his patient.

But Spike had stolen his spot on the bed and when he re-entered the room, bared his fangs. A low growl emanated from the animal that made Devon pause.

Sandy's muscles twitched, and his lashes fluttered. Long and dusky, they cast shadows over the crest of his high cheek bones. As they slowly lifted, the shadows rose up to meet his bottom lid and groggy eyes met his. When the dog's growl lowered an octave, Sandy turned a stern gaze on him and frowned. "Off the bed with you. Stop the growling. It's his bed, not yours."

Spike's ears perked, and his head snapped around to look at his master, but his body stayed firmly planted. His nails, in fact, dug deeper into the sheets, making indentations in the mattress.

Sandy gave the dog a gentle shove. "You heard me. Go."

Spike slithered to the floor and stood sentinel at Sandy's end of the bed. His eyes kept a close watch on Devon despite a nervous tick.

Devon held his arms akimbo and let the rag hang down. "I swear I'm not armed."

When Sandy's gaze riveted to the material with askance, Devon waved it like a white flag. "It's purely medicinal. I swear."

Sandy propped up himself on his elbow and bent his knees. His brows tented as he cocked his head. "Oh yeah? Looks kinky."

Devon's knees threatened to give way, and his mouth went dry. He didn't know how long he could constrain his raging libido with Sandy being such a provocative seducer.

He pretended he wasn't affected. "This is to bring down your fever not cause it to climb." Unfortunately, his voice came out gravely and way too husky for comfort.

Sandy batted his killer lashes and tilted his head so adorably Devon felt trapped between desire and concern, but his nursing training and concern won out. "Do you want to wind up in the hospital? Super Spike needs his sidekick to keep him out of trouble." He added for good measure, "And don't look at me. I don't babysit super heroes."

Sandy batted his lashes so coyly. "Pretty please. You wouldn't do that for *moi*?"

It took all Devon's strength and integrity, but he bit down on his tongue and left the room. "Not on your life!"

## Chapter Five

Sandy brimmed over with excitement as he drew his two favourite people together — his sister Ali and Devon. Every muscle contracted. Every hair crackled on his head.

When he spied the beauty, his heart twirled and his toes curled. In the middle of the field with the midday sunshine, he glowed like an angel. The Greek gods on Olympus would be envious of his beauty.

When Devon caught sight of them, a smile split his face, and he waved. In his long, easy stride, he began to lope over.

Sandy clutched Ali's arm. Fierce tingles attacked him, and his lips twitched, eager for Devon's caress. His pulse thrummed, and his fingers bit into Ali's arm.

Ali glared at him and yanked away. Briskly, she rubbed her arm. "Ouch! Bring it down a few rpm's, would ya?"

With each step closer Devon came, Sandy's breath grew shorter. "I'm just so excited that the two of you are finally going to meet. I really think he's the one. He's perfect for me in every —"

Ali gasped, grabbed her throat and shuffled back. Her eyes widened incredulously, and her face drained of all colour. Her lips moved without sound for several moments before she mumbled, "Oh no no no."

Thoughts jumbling in his brain, ice frosting his blood, he tilted his head to see if he could see his sister in the apparition before him. When she jabbed a shaky finger at Devon, and muttered, "You," Sandy followed her gaze.

Devon no longer glowed like an ethereal being. His flesh was a sickly grey, and he stood petrified, his bulging eyes glued to Ali.

Sandy's heart shrivelled, and a big lump clogged his throat. His temples throbbed, and he could no longer stand the merciless sun so he pulled his visor lower. But the shade only brought the others into better focus and made him dizzy.

He pointed from one to the other. "You two know each other? What am I missing?"

Ali backed away until she was fenced in. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her mascara cascaded down the rivulets. "How could you? Traitor." Then she whirled around and darted to the parking lot.

The ground shook beneath Sandy's feet as his jaw dropped, and he watched Ali disappear around the bend. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony blared in his head as he turned back to Devon. "Do you mind telling me what all that was about?"

Devon's throat worked, and he swayed. Then he blinked and dragged his pained gaze to Sandy's. "I didn't know he was your nephew. Not until just now. I swear I didn't."

Sandy's mind raced. What did Devon know about his nephew? How did he know him? Why did Devon look so anguished? So pleading?

Then Sandy's gut lurched and bile bubbled up in his throat. Strength ebbed from his legs and he buried his face in his hands. It couldn't be!

He knew deep down he was right. He'd aced upper math.

Devon was a nurse.

Devon was going to face a review board about some trouble he was in.

His nephew had recently died because of a nurse's neglect—a nurse who was being brought before the review board.

Ali had reacted as if Devon was a murderer...

Tears ran down his face. Without volition, he said, "You were the nurse who let Bryant die. He was my nephew."

Sandy's heart shattered, his hopes cruelly dashed, he swiped at his tear, pivoted on his heel and followed his sister. He cursed the bright summer sun. He damned the heat shimmering up from the sidewalk. Even if it reached broiling point, it wouldn't be hot enough to melt the ice freezing his veins.

\* \* \* \*

"Where are you going?" Clay yelled after Sandy. When Sandy sped into a run and dashed off the field, Clay cursed, threw down his cap and stomped on it. "Where in the hell does he think he's going? Who in the hell will pitch? Damn!" He punched his fist into his other hand and yelled louder, "Damn damn damn it to hell!"

Devon couldn't care less who would pitch. He couldn't care less if the team lost. He couldn't care less if the Earth stopped spinning and he was sucked into a black hole.

He was damned to hell.

It didn't matter if he was innocent, if he shouted it to the world, if he wrote it in blood. Sandy's family blamed him for the child's death. So did the hospital.

Fed up with life, Devon stomped off the field stirring up a dust cloud. He didn't care if it turned into a tornado and swallowed him whole. He rather hoped it would.

"Where do you think you're going now?" Clay planted himself in Devon's path and lowered his head like an angry bull. "The game starts in ten minutes."

Devon seethed at the injustice and so stared down Clay. Then, suddenly, his anger deflated and he slumped. The world lost its colour and everything became monochrome. It went from three dimensional to flat. With a sigh, he voiced his thoughts. "I wouldn't be any good to you or anybody today. Or ever..."

Clay's fury softened into concern, and he looped his arm around Devon's shoulders and gave him a commiserative squeeze. "You're in no shape to drive, and we need body count so take a seat on the bench."

When Devon opened his mouth to protest, the coach put his fingers to his lips. He jabbed his thumb at the dugout. "Sit. Stay. Now."

Feeling like a flea-bitten mutt, Devon scrunched his nose but sauntered to the bench with the other guys. He didn't give a damn about his own safety, but he didn't want to endanger anyone else. Whether or not a soul believed him, he cared a lot about human life.

As he hunkered down on the far end of the bench and leaned his heavy head on the fence, he couldn't help but hear Ryan murmur to Drew a few feet away, "It'll be okay, baby, you'll see."

Devon curled into himself and choked back a sob. God, but he wished Sandy would say that to him, but he never would now. He'd probably testify against him at his inquisition set just a couple days away.

\* \* \* \*

Devon dreaded facing the review board. His every nerve taut, his head aching, his fingers tingling, he felt like pivoting on his heel and running to the other end of the earth. But only for a sec.

Nursing and caring for people was his life. If the ability was stripped from him, he didn't know what else he would do. He supposed there were other ways to help people, but he couldn't think of anywhere he could still earn a living.

His creditors made fire breathing dragons look like pansies. They were ready to garnish his salary. He had trouble paying his bills now due to reduced wages. He didn't know where the extra would come from. A second job didn't seem to be an option. No one was hiring, especially not people with such a dark cloud over them. If he didn't have to stay in touch with the board, his attorneys, and his employers, he'd turn off the phone. He might not have a choice.

Craving pain reliever, chocolate, spirits or anything that would take the edge off he settled for sucking on a breath mint. Again he smoothed the crease in his slacks, stared at his reflection in his shiny loafers and stuck out his tongue at himself. He felt like he was going in front of a firing squad then realised a firing squad would be friendlier. He stared at his spit-shined image, his hair newly cut and plastered to his head, his nails filed and buffed, his shirt stiffly starched.

He gulped and from his peripheral vision watched people meander down the hall. Some bustled, holding their heads high and jutting their chins out. They squared their shoulders, and they swaggered as if no one was badder than them.

Others slinked by as if they were scared of making a noise, as if they felt worse than him, if that was possible. They kept their heads down and their gazes lowered. They watched their feet as if they were fascinated or afraid they'd stumble if they didn't. Their lips twisted in rueful grimaces, and their brows knitted.

Others ambled by as if in a daze, as if they were a million miles away. Some sported dreamy smiles. Some murmured to the air as if they were conversing with an invisible friend. And some munched on gum and whistled their way down the hall with a jaunty step.

Spooked by what could be, he was going stir crazy being made to wait and ponder so long. Was the board intent on torturing him? Were they trying to scare him away so they

wouldn't have to face him? Or were they just that inconsiderate and oblivious they didn't realise every second weighed on him like an anvil?

Footsteps pounded down the hall then there was a loud, ear-splitting shriek. Hard breathing joined in harmony then a long shadow rounded the closest corner, to his right.

He glanced up and frowned. Maybe the latecomer was the hold up, so he glowered. His breath hitched in his throat, and he expected to see Sandy lope around the bend. He checked his watch again and hoped finally to see a friendly face.

When a spiffily dressed woman sashayed towards him and gave him a wink, his heart fell. He longed for Sandy, and he wondered if he even gave a damn.

He punished his hands, pushing back his cuticles and shredding his nails.

A dour-faced clerk stuck her face out the heavy doors, peered first left and then right, and then let her gaze dwell on him. "Devon Barrett?"

When he straightened and nodded, she opened the door wider. "Please join us. We're ready for you."

He swallowed a deep breath and fought to keep his composure. Unfurling his long length, he rubbed the kinks out of his neck, stole a deep breath and faced his destiny.

He snuck in one more prayer hoping he hadn't used up his allotment since he'd been praying so much about this situation, knowing he was being selfish when so many other people went to bed hungry or suffering from painful illness.

If only Sandy were here, Devon would be able to face this inquisition so much better. Pausing, he took the liberty of glancing down both ends of the hallway, fervently hoping he would see Sandy he almost conjured him.

But the hallway was devoid of friendly faces. Only strangers flitted through, some looking more frightened than he felt.

"Mr Barrett? We're ready."

"I'm not," he mumbled under his breath. He'd never be ready to be stripped of his nursing career.

His attorney nudged him gave him a stern glare. "It's time. Hold your head high. You did nothing wrong."

Devon repeated the words like a mantra. He knew he was innocent. He just didn't have faith in the system. He'd seen too many innocent people railroaded, especially gay people.

But he inhaled deeply, rolled his shoulders, and nodded. "Let's do this."

The room looked innocuous enough, just a long board room table with a group of strangers and his bosses in the middle. He was surprised to see Trudy, a co-worker.

"What's Trudy doing here?" he asked in an aside to his attorney, Gene.

Gene shushed him. "Not now," he said, his lips not moving just like a good ventriloquist.

The hospital administrator tilted her head at two vacant chairs on the deserted side of the table. "Please have a seat. We won't bite."

Devon tried to laugh but failed. His wry chuckle came out strangled, almost like a whimper so he bit his tongue. He folded himself into his chair, sat tall and clasped his hands before him on the table. His nerves tingled, even in his toes and the roots of his hair. All blood drained from his face as he imagined life as an ordinary person who didn't have license to provide care for others.

Gene stood and cleared his throat. "You've all had time to read our case. I'm sure you'll see that while sad and unfortunate, Bryant Nelson's death, was not my client's fault nor due to any negligence on his part. The hospital is grossly understaffed and was on the night that young Mr. Nelson passed away. My client, Devon Barrett, was tending to another emergency saving another patient in distress. He couldn't be in two places at once."

Gene paused as if to let that sink in. Everybody else listened respectfully. Some leaned forward and perched on the edge of their seats. Every pair of eyes was riveted on his attorney except for his as he studied each face in turn.

Some looked sympathetic, but some were inscrutable. He struggled to keep his breath even and to stay still and not fidget though his nerves played a riotous match of ping-pong.

He focused on a middle-aged woman across from him and mentally traced her nostrils with his fingertip. He had to stop his fingers from moving in the imaginary motion. When he realised what he was doing, he chastised himself and pinpointed a neutral spot across the room. But it was impossible not to dissect his judges and wonder what they were thinking, feeling.

Next Trudy stood, wringing her hands, her elbows resting on her plump hips. "Two other nurses called in sick that night at last minute. We couldn't find replacements so we were dangerously short-staffed. We're short-staffed as it is, and we've put in numerous

requests to administration to hire more nurses and aids, but so far, our requests seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Maybe now, they'll listen. We're professional caregivers, but we're not miracle workers. We can't be in two places at once."

An older man with wisps of white hair that were combed over his bald pate bent over the table and furiously scribbled notes. A few of the people nodded at intervals. The director of nursing Pamela Miller, narrowed her eyes at Devon. She wore a red power suit with diamond ear studs and a matching diamond watch. She sat so straight and stiff it looked like she had an iron rod shoved up her back. Her hair was almost as stiff as her countenance. She looked no more amenable than when she'd suspended him.

Unable to look at her without retching, he turned his attention to the speaker and gave her a grateful smile.

Trudy winked at him and gave him the thumbs up as she reclaimed her seat. "It'll be okay," she mouthed.

He wished he could believe her, but his future was at stake. From here, it looked like a black hole with no light, no escape in the distance.

Pamela placed her palms flat on the table and pushed herself up. Holding her head high, she jutted her chin and her small breasts forward as she claimed the head of the table. She let her stern gaze settle on each person present in turn. "A young, precious child died on this man's watch. He 'claims' he was too busy with another patient that he couldn't be in two places at once." She paused to let her words sink in.

Devon's heart fell, and he felt wretched all over again as visions of Bryant haunted him. His pulse slowed, and he blanched. His blood pressure plummeted as the old weakness settled in his bones. Worry escalated as Pamela continued. He couldn't deny her eloquence. She should've been the Republican running mate the way she could spin words. If he didn't know the situation first hand, he'd believe her.

"A nurse's job is to care for many patients, to know when to call for assistance. Hot dogging it, trying to be a star, isn't in the best interest of the patients as we've learned all too sadly, here."

He was 'hot-dogging' it? His blood thrummed in his veins, and he catapulted out of his seat and faced off against her. "I did no such thing! I was administering life-saving aid to Gwendolyn Carr. Didn't you hear? Can't you read the reports? We were dangerously short

staffed. There was no one else to call." He pounded his fist on the desk and glared at his nemesis.

Gene tugged at his arm and pulled him down. He glowered at Devon and whispered, "You're not helping your case. Let me handle this."

"Please put your client on a leash, and if needed, a muzzle," Pamela said haughtily with an arched brow and a superior gleam in her eyes.

"That's uncalled for." Gene stood and addressed the assembly. "A simple check of the number of patients versus the number of staff on duty the night of April twenty-third should be sufficient evidence. Add to that Gwendolyn Carr's chart and my client's innocence will be clear. I trust you've all briefed yourself on the details of this matter?"

Several heads nodded in unison. A couple people flipped through their documents, squinting at the small print. Gene remained silent until the papers stopped fluttering.

"Yes, it's always a tragedy when a child dies. It's heartbreaking. But my client is not at fault. The system's at fault. There's a serious shortage of nursing staff, and you think that eliminating a valuable nurse will help that?" He pounded his fist on the table now, shaking it. His voice rose to a fever pitch. "No! My client, this man besides me, Devon Barrett, is a good, dedicated man and an excellent nurse. He was saving another life. He was doing his job. He wasn't scheduled that night, but he was called last minute and dutifully took someone else's shift. Why aren't the people who called in absent on trial? If there'd been a full staff, this tragedy could have been prevented. Or so you say. If someone had been at Bryant's side, he'd be alive now. Devon showed up. He was there, doing his duty while two of his co-workers decided not to do their duty that night."

By the time Gene fell silent, his face was ruddy and his voice was raspy with emotion. His hands shook and his shoulders slumped.

Devon blinked back tears. That someone believed in him so very much, could so passionately defend him, made his heart sing. If only Sandy felt the same...

Devon's attention riveted to the elderly man with his hair combed over his baldness when he whispered to his neighbour. His ears unsuccessfully strained to hear their words so he tried to read their faces. But they were in shadow, and his emotions ran rampant so he didn't trust his perceptions anyway.

After what seemed an interminable time, the same gentleman stood with grace and dignity. Unlike his face, his outfit showed nary a wrinkle. Crisp and white, his starched shirt rivalled Pamela's, but his much kinder expression warred with it. "Would you mind giving us a few minutes to confer?"

Gene touched his elbow and nodded. He tilted his head at the exit. "Let's wait in the hall."

Devon held his breath, feeling like he would faint, but he understood. His nerves did the cha-cha as his thoughts volleyed from one extreme to the other.

When he reached the hall, he wished things were different, that his man could be there for him. With a muttered epithet, he banished Sandy from his mind, and he bent his head in silent prayer and begged for strength to move forward regardless of the outcome. When he lifted his head, the harsh fluorescent lights hurt his eyes so he shielded them. His neck ached, too, so he massaged it then rolled his head to get out the kinks.

He leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands. He felt about as blurry as his fuzzy image on the scuffed floor. He didn't doubt that he looked much better despite how frazzled and frayed as he was. The only things he was thankful for was that Gene was still by his side and that whatever the outcome, the nightmare would be over in a few minutes.

But minutes dragged into a quarter of an hour then an hour. Gene asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

His stomach queasy, Devon was afraid he couldn't hold anything down, even coffee, so he shook his head. "No, thanks."

He was cold yet hot, shivering when a blast of arctic AC whooshed down his hot neck. He'd blame flu symptoms if he wasn't under such stress.

Finally, the door opened and Pamela minced out, her sensible heels banging on the linoleum. She towered over them with a schooled expression. "Would you please rejoin us? We're ready."

Devon's fright and flight reaction screamed at him to run the other way and keep going until he was in international seas and clear of the deadly storm, but his legs stood firm and refused to let him make a fool of himself. On autopilot, he followed Gene, hoping it wouldn't be to his doom. The cheery yellow sunlight streaming in through the far window assured

him the world wasn't ending and the planet wasn't doomed even if he might be. The stuffiness of the room suffocated him, and he struggled to breathe.

*Get a grip. There're a million other things you can do if you get sacked.*

Like what?

Dig ditches.

Pick up trash at the side of the road.

Change bed pans.

File patient charts.

Oh yeah, the future was full of possibilities if he was stripped of his license.

*Stop it!* He tried to look at the glass as half full but it was a struggle.

\* \* \* \*

"You should be grinning ear to ear," Gene murmured on the way out of the hospital. His weathered face reflected pure sunshine rivalling the sunny summer day.

Devon squinted at his attorney through all the blinding light, but even the warm rays bearing down on his head didn't make him feel better. But he faked a smile for Gene's benefit and slapped him on the shoulder. "You did good. Thank you."

"As happy as you sound, you'd think you were going to get incarcerated instead of being exonerated and restored to your full-nursing status. What gives?"

Devon didn't want to spill his guts and wax on about his personal life. Gene had suffered enough of his trials. He frowned and rubbed his temples. "Just a headache. I guess all the stress got to me."

Gene nodded as he pulled out his pocket watch and studied it. Now in the shadows of the tall courthouse buildings, Devon read over his shoulder, 4:10 p.m. Again he wished things were different, that he'd not answered the call to duty the night Sandy's nephew died, that he wasn't involved with Sandy's family this way.

He fingered the validated parking ticket in his pocket and told himself to stop thinking about it, but his heart protested. He told the silly thing to shut up and refused to listen to the troublemaker. Sandy wasn't the first lover he'd lost and he wouldn't be the last. From now on he'd stick to sex and forget love and all that bullshit.

"You'll be okay?" Gene asked as he started to cross the street, his shoes thudding against the hot asphalt.

Devon's feet burned despite his good leather shoes but not as much as his temper. "Yeah. Sure. Thanks again."

When they reached the far sidewalk, Gene stopped and shook his hand. "That boss of yours gives you further gunk, you call me. We won't let her get away with it. You're a damned good nurse, and I'd want you at my bedside if I fell ill."

Broadsided by the unexpected compliment, tears stung Devon's eyes, and he stuck out his hand to pump the other man's. "Will do. I'd be honoured to return the favour. You saved my life."

Herds of people parted around them as they fervently shook hands and a tremulous smile play about Devon's lips. The heat melted the last vestiges of the AC that had lingered in his clothes, and he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top of his shirt. He couldn't wait to shower and change out of this monkey suit. Then he'd have to make sure his uniforms were ready for the following week and get some rest so he'd be ready.

The girls jumped on him when he walked into the house, and he was so in need of the affection, he didn't admonish their bad behaviour but embraced them until they whimpered to be let down. "I'm glad to see you, too. Daddy missed you." Even if he hadn't been gone for even the length of a normal nursing shift, it felt like a year.

Exhausted, he tore off his clothes as he trudged to his shower and left the trail in his wake. It was the dog's turn to clean up after him.

He stayed in the shower extra long, but still couldn't sluice off the day's stress. He knew he should be happy and although relieved, he couldn't work up enthusiasm for anything. "You're an ungrateful bastard," he muttered, getting a mouthful of water as he washed the day's dirt from his hair. Although he scrubbed longer than usual, he could still feel Pamela's stench on him and wondered how he could work with her. It was only a matter of time until she turned on him again. He knew she didn't feel it wise or safe to have an actively gay man on staff.

Personally, he didn't feel that it was safe to have a narrow-minded bigot on staff. Being a gay man and a professional caregiver, he took extra safety precautions, something he'd noticed more than one co-worker woefully lacking in.

"You've got to get yourself another job," he said to himself as he combed his hair. It was a bad sign that he was talking to himself in the mirror again, but he didn't give a rat's ass. Until he got his life in order, he had bigger things to worry about.

Revelation struck, and he stared at himself in the mirror. "This is the perfect time to move." He read his lips and blinked in awe as if his reflection imparted the wisdom of the ages.

He held up a finger. "I have to get out from under Pamela's thumb."

Then he held up a second finger. "South Florida sucks bigger than most others. I'd earn more and live for less elsewhere." Screw sunshine and warm weather year round.

He held up his third finger and put down the other two. "Three. Sandy's a jerk. He's not a reason to stay." He didn't want to stay on the ball team and see Spike's stupid picture or that ridiculous name, *Doggy Style*, on his team's shirts every lousy game.

"Oh yeah. It's past time to move on. The résumé is going out."

The only problem he could see would be dumping this place in the current market. He'd get pennies on the dollar. Or, he could just rent it until the housing market bounced back.

Having a plan buoyed his spirits if it wasn't exactly an all-healing salve.

Seething still, he vowed to put Sandy from his mind for good. How he was going to play with the team until he found another job out of state, he didn't know, but he knew he couldn't let down the other guys even if he dreaded seeing the sponsor.

\* \* \* \*

As the man who was in love with Devon, Sandy was relieved when his lover was judged innocent and reinstated as a nurse, but as Bryant's uncle, he wasn't convinced it was the right verdict. He hadn't been able to sleep in days, and he felt more strung out than the walking dead.

How he made the final preparations for *Doggy Style's* big parade and contest he didn't know. He presumed he was on autopilot going from place to place in a daze.

He'd thought he'd emptied himself of tears over Bryant, but a new well sprang forth, and he'd leaked a lake since the last time he'd seen Devon.

There was no way had he been able to show up at Devon's hearing. One part of him had longed to, but the other part had felt like a traitor to Ali and Bryant. His feet refused to carry him. The trauma burst his heart.

A huge bag of mail awaited him, but he was in no mood to go through it. However, he had to. Registrations and checks were pouring in for the parade. At this rate, he'd have to rent Tradewinds Park to fit a festival this size.

Fortifying himself with a cup of black coffee, he dumped the mail on the desk and sorted bills from other letters and was amazed at how high the 'other' correspondence stacked. His mouth watered at the thought of all those yummy checks. He looked down at Spike and rubbed the dog's head. "Looks like you'll be sitting pretty in doggie biscuits for another year, pal."

He wondered if he really should rent half of Tradewinds Park, if he should turn this event into a semi-annual thing or take it on the road to other states.

Then he saw it. A letter with Devon's name and return address. The lettering blurred. His hands trembled. He bit his lip until he tasted blood.

The blue scroll was beautiful but masculine, powerful but intelligent. It demanded he read it. Then Bryant's face superimposed itself on the envelope, and Sandy dropped it. His head pounded. His neck ached. Even his hair hurt.

Divided in two, he didn't know what to do. Finally, he folded the letter and stuffed it in his wallet.

Later, he'd read it, after he finished his work, when his staff wasn't about to hear him if he broke down—again. Soon, they'd send him to the loony bin. If he didn't get a grip soon, maybe he'd admit himself to the psych ward.

God, but he missed his nephew and Devon so very much.

Spike whimpered and tried to climb on his lap, but he couldn't drag up his portly body. He licked Sandy's hand, and his eyes shifted back and forth.

"Oh, okay, you big baby. Come up here." Sandy scooped up the dog and hugged him to his heart. "Don't you ever leave me. Promise. I'd die if I lost you, too."

Spike yipped and gave him a slobbery kiss on the lips.

Desperately craving affection, Sandy didn't scold. He cradled Spike closer until the animal squirmed and slid out of his arms.

He cupped his chin in his hands and asked, "What now?"

Spike jumped and pranced around looking too prissy in his butch Green Beret outfit. He bit his leash then dragged it over and lay it at Sandy's feet.

Sandy checked his watch then rolled his eyes. "So soon? You just want to chase butterflies, doncha? You can't have to pee again. You just went out twenty minutes ago."

Spike grinned and wagged his butt then he nudged Sandy's hand and clattered to the door.

Sandy looked at all the envelopes and shook his head. He made a compromise and tossed a doggy snack to his pup. "Enjoy that while I take care of all this moola then I'll take you—"

He bit off the "O-U-T" word just in time. Spike was hyper enough.

Under his breath, he muttered, "I'm going to have to hire Brink's to bring the mail if this keeps up." And get a larger safe. Hire a bookkeeper. Hire more staff. Not that he was complaining.

*If only my personal life were going so well...*

*What personal life?*

Other than Spike and Ali, he had none. And since his nephew's death, Ali had been a zombie. Somehow, some way, he had to bring his sister back to the land of the living. But how? He was barely here himself.

Devon's letter burned his thigh, and he delved in his pocket and curled his fingers around the crumpled stationery. Damn the registrations! Damn the money! What good was any of it if the price was his heart?

With a ragged sigh, he tore into the paper and with trembling fingers, held it up to read. At first, he had trouble as his tears blinded him, but he found a tissue and dabbed at his eyes then his nose and finally forced himself to concentrate.

*My dearest Sandy,*

*I would never, could never, hurt or neglect a child. I'd rather die myself. I've devoted my life to caring for others, in particular precious children.*

*Please know that I deeply grieved and still grieve for Bryant and his family – your family. I did so long before I knew he was your kin. I know that mere words, in particular from me, will not soften*

*the pain of your loss. But I offer my condolences, my sympathy, and my prayers anyway. I can only imagine how deep a scar such an inconsolable loss would be if I lost my child.*

*I've searched my heart time and again and know I could have done no different, no better, with my knowledge and circumstances at the time this tragedy happened.*

*I pray you and your family will some day forgive me for what you perceive is my fault.*

*I am deeply pained that you don't have enough trust and faith in me, that you don't know me well enough or love me deeply enough, to know I am not the monster you think I am.*

*I hope and pray that you and your family can get on with your lives, just as I hope and pray I can get on with mine. My wounds also run deep, but not as deep as yours.*

*This is goodbye. I will not inflict more torture on either of us by forcing us to run into each other, thus I am resigning not only from our baseball team but from the league. My heart's no longer in baseball anyway.*

*Have a wonderful life, and if you think of me, I hope it's not harshly or with too much pain. D*

Every word singed Sandy's heart. He reread the letter several times until his tears began to make it soggy and the writing blurry. He smoothed the wrinkled paper and slid it back into its envelope for later consumption, and someday, to share with Ali. The more he searched his heart, the more the painful fog lifted from his brain and he knew Devon wasn't guilty. But convincing his sister would be impossible despite the review board's ruling and Devon's letter. Ali needed someone to blame, and she had her heart set on blaming Devon. If he forgave Devon, which he did, if he got back together with him which was doubtful since Devon looked at him as if he was the murderer, Ali would have nothing to do with him.

Devon couldn't mean the part about resigning from the sport he loved so much. As the newcomer, he should be the one to get out of the way.

His mind set, his heart still a mess, he dialled Clay. When the coach answered, "It's your dime, speak now or forever hold your peace," Sandy sucked in his breath. Raw and reeling, he dropped the phone. He fumbled around and finally got it to his ear. "Falco here. I won't be able to play with the team anymore."

Clay let out a string of curses that blistered Sandy's ears. Finally, he spat out, "You can't quit. We need you to pitch. Who will sponsor us?"

Operating solely on emotions, Sandy hadn't thought out all the ramifications and swore silently. Whichever way he went, he was going to let down someone. But Devon's needs

were more immediate, more crucial. "Blake's an excellent pitcher. And I'll still sponsor the team until you can find someone to replace me."

"Did we do something to offend you? Did one of our jackasses rub you the wrong way? I bet it was that pussy, Devon. Why I'm gonna—"

Mortified that Clay would heap blame on Devon, Sandy wildly waved his hands. "No! It's not his fault." That's the last thing he wanted was for Devon to get the blame. He lied. "This has nothing to do with Devon. Business is just getting too busy."

"You got a job for me, then? Rumour has it we're having layoffs where I work. Only I'm not gonna dress no dog in frou frou duds."

Sandy frowned, caught. "Well, uh, what do you do? We're just a small shop...retail mainly."

"Investment banking. Loans and shit."

"Uh, sorry." Sandy was sure he could handle the bookkeeping position, but beyond it being beneath a banker, he couldn't stand to have the big grouch around so much. He couldn't stand him in doses of two hours.

"Well, if you hear of anything, keep me in mind. And maybe you could still sponsor us, even if you can't play."

Sandy would if he wasn't sure just the mention of anything to do with him would cause Devon excruciating pain.

He wasn't sure he could handle it, either. All this would remind him of his nephew. If he stayed on the team, it wouldn't be the same. The joy was gone. "I don't know..."

"Don't give me an answer yet. Sleep on it. We don't have to know about next season for awhile yet."

Sandy nodded then remembered he wasn't on a web cam. "All right." But it was a hundred to one shot. He snapped shut the phone, wishing he could turn off his thoughts about the team and Devon as easily.

Spike yipped and humped his leg.

Sandy scrunched his nose and pushed down the dog. "Get off me, you horny thing."

Spike's tail kept wagging, and he trotted to the door and nudged the knob with his nose. When Sandy didn't immediately follow, he jiggled it again.

Sandy pulled his tired bones out of his chair and grabbed the leash. He deliberately didn't look at the mountain of mail waiting to be opened, just locked both doors before he left. "Okay, already."

## Chapter Six

Devon packed the last box in his house, sealed it, and deposited it on top of the stack so it was ready for the movers. Twinges of remorse attacked him, but he fought them down. Kansas would be a nice change. He'd get a change of seasons, snow for Christmas, and the cost of living would be a pittance compared to South Florida. His salary, amazingly, would be higher, too. So what if he couldn't play baseball year round? His heart was no longer in the sport. It would only remind him of Sandy and his family.

His heart tossed about in his chest when he thought about the guys on the team, missing them already. But he wouldn't be able to see them without remembering Sandy in vivid detail, or the horror on Sandy's sister's face when she'd realised he was Sandy's lover. Would he ever be able to forget no matter how far he ran?

He hoped so. At least, it wouldn't be rubbed in his face daily. At least, he could start fresh. He'd have a prayer at a new life.

He grimaced. Kansas didn't sound very exciting despite white Christmases and more money. He'd never liked small towns or the country life. Gays weren't as accepted there as they were in the big city. He'd have to hide who he was, at least at first. He might be lonely as hell.

"Stop it!" He screwed up his lips and stared out his back door at the canal. Then he remembered it wasn't his back door anymore. Nor was it his yard or his house. He'd sold it to a sweet young couple with two and a half kids who planned to move in next week if not sooner.

He checked his watch. The movers should be here any moment. Not only that, Sandy's doggy style parade would be in full swing within a matter of minutes, if not already.

Lucy and Ethel chased ducks around the backyard as if they had no clue this would be their last day to enjoy this pleasure. He'd miss it, too. Ducks probably didn't roam around residential neighbourhoods in Kansas like they did here. He didn't know what kinds of animals were native to Kansas.

Did he care?

His heart cried for Sandy. For Sandy's loss. For his nephew. Pure and simple, it cried for his loss. He missed Sandy like hell.

A small part of him had hoped Sandy would contact him after receiving his letter, that Sandy would beg for his forgiveness, that Sandy would forgive him, that they would vanquish this terrible pain that held them both prisoners. But Sandy hadn't said a word. He was letting him leave.

After the movers left, he rounded up the dogs and saluted the house. "This is it, girls. Say your last goodbyes."

The panting dogs smiled up at him then squatted in the backyard one last time.

Tears came to Devon's eyes as he looked around the neighbourhood, the ducks floating on the sun-drenched canal that ribboned behind the houses, the pink and purple azalea bushes that bowed over the fences, the bananas still green hanging in bunches.

"Am I doing the right thing leaving like this? Tucking my tail between my legs and slinking away?"

Lucy loped after a duck. Ethel drooled on his foot.

His heart ached, and he was already homesick. He'd never liked snow and ice and dead trees. Winter sports weren't his thing. Most of all, he feared his heart would dwell in eternal winter without Sandy.

His pulse drummed in his ears. His feet went numb. He got choked up, and his vision blurred. In a garbled voice, his tongue so thick he had trouble talking, he said, "Am I making the biggest mistake of my life?"

Ethel licked his fingers and her tail thumped his legs.

A chill shuddered through him, but he didn't think it had anything to do with the dog's whiskers. Afraid he knew exactly what was wrong, he rubbed his throbbing temples. Teetering on the brink of insanity, he swallowed his pride. "Hey, girls. Wanna crash a party?"

Whether they did or not, he didn't. But he needed to. If he didn't talk to Sandy, he'd never forgive himself.

He ushered the dogs into the car, all the while calling himself all kinds of an idiot, trying to talk himself out of this lunacy.

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled into Tradewinds Park and followed the trail of dogs dressed like clowns, pirates, princesses, and all kinds of idiotic costumes.

When Lucy whined and nudged his neck with her cold nose, he jerked away. "No way. You have too much dignity to dress like those dorks."

But Ethel joined in, and when they strolled up to the merriment, she dragged him to a booth selling doggy creations. She put her nose on a silvery spaceman's outfit then nipped his hand. She rounded him and pushed him at it.

He frowned down at his crazy dog and shovelled his fingers through his hair. "You've got to be joking. You'll look like a stripper."

"If it ain't Florence Nightingale. I wouldn't mind seeing you strip but not here. This is a G-rated family event," Sandy drawled.

Devon's heart catapulted to his throat, and his soul naked, he whirled around to face the man of his dreams, tripped, and fell into his arms. His heart stopping, his blood freezing, Devon gasped. He tried to jump back, but Sandy's strong arms held him tight.

Sandy pulled him closer and stared into his eyes. "Hey, are we playing charades? I get it. You've fallen for me."

Devon blinked. Tens of gazes pricked him like needles. They drilled holes in his skull, but he wasn't afraid his brains would leak out as he'd obviously already lost them. His atmosphere thinned, and he couldn't catch his breath. He knew he should move, but he couldn't. His muscles wouldn't cooperate.

Sandy slid his forefinger under Devon's chin and forced his gaze to meet his. "I'd ask if the cat got your tongue, but I don't think any cats would dare come around here today."

Devon's lips quirked into a grin, and he found his voice. He tried to push away, but his hands got lost on Sandy's broad chest. "You don't sound pissed at me or like you hate me."

The moment the words escaped his lips, he kicked himself. God, but he sounded desperate.

Was he?

*Hell yeah!*

His nerves shaky, his heart trying to jump out of his chest, he screwed up his courage. If not for all the kids, he'd plant a big, wet kiss on Sandy's lips. As it was, his cock swelled against the sexy man, and he was loath to turn around to let other people see.

"I never said I hated you," Sandy said.

Confused, Devon tried to make sense of things. "But you quit the team."

Faint colour tinged Sandy's cheeks but his gaze intensified. "Only so you would feel you didn't have to. I didn't want to quit the team...or you."

"You didn't? But your nephew...your sister."

A young woman with a shaved head and ten earrings in each ear as well as one in her nose, tapped Sandy on the shoulder. "Hey, boss. We're waiting on our master of ceremonies to get started. A lot of the dogs are trying to eat their costumes so we can't wait any longer if you want to judge them."

Sandy scowled and shot him an apologetic look. He linked his hand through Devon's and dragged him along with Spike, Lucy, and Ethel trailing. "We're short a judge so you're drafted."

Unable to stand the suspense, Devon whispered in Sandy's ear, "Does this mean you don't blame me for Bryant's..." He bit off the final word.

Sandy stopped dead so that Devon barrelled into him and together they tumbled to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. Sandy pinned Devon to the ground and gave him a stern gaze then it blazed into passion. "I've read the reports, and I've memorised your letter. Clearly you're not to blame. Your bosses on the other hand..." Sandy's lips trembled and he paused.

"Ex-bosses." Devon emphasised the 'ex'. The image of Sandy's sister flooded his mind and he petrified. "But your sister..."

Sandy pressed two fingers to Devon's lips. "Shush. She's still blaming the whole world. It's going to take time. I've convinced her to join a support group and see a counsellor."

A whoosh of relief escaped Devon's lips. His worry for the child's mother lessened. Maybe now she could start to heal, as much as anyone could in such a situation.

Sandy released him then scrambled to his feet. He offered Devon a hand up and pulled him up.

Electricity shot clear to Devon's heart, reincarnating it. "That'll be good for her. What about you? How are you dealing with everything?"

A faraway look filled Sandy's beautiful eyes then he shoved his hair back from his forehead. He popped a piece of spearmint gum into his mouth and balled up the wrapper and dropped it in his pocket. "Not good."

Devon's heart sank, and he massaged his neck. He'd give anything to ease Sandy's pain, anything but take blame for something for which he wasn't guilty.

Sandy grazed his knuckles down Devon's cheek. His eyes brimmed with adoration. "I mean, I'm not good without you. Don't make me lose two of the most important people in my life. I need you."

Devon's heart stopped, then it rocketed into the stratosphere. He did a double take and hoped he wasn't dreaming, that he hadn't gone deaf from the cacophony of the anxious dogs, that the sweltering summer sun hadn't given him heat stroke. "Do you really mean that? Being with me won't keep bad memories alive?"

Sandy looped his arm around Devon's shoulders and pulled him impossibly, wonderfully close. "Listen up and listen good, you. I appreciate the loving care you gave my nephew and all the other kids. I don't hold you responsible. I don't associate you with what happened. It was a tragedy but don't compound it by making me lose you, too."

Devon digested Sandy's plea and savoured the heartfelt words full of pathos. His heart mended, and he was whole for the first time since the little boy's death. The summer sun warmed far more than his flesh, it illuminated his soul. It thawed the grey wintry weather that had iced over his spirit. "Well, I don't have a place to stay. I quit my job, sold my house, and I lined up a new one in Kansas City."

Sandy toyed with Devon's hair and wound a lock around his finger. "Well, I just happen to have a huge house, and I'd love company – your company – forever, if you'll have me."

Devon froze to the spot. He didn't care about the job. Now that he was cleared, he could get a new one here. "But your sister..."

"Ali can get her own man. You're all mine."

"That's not what I meant..."

Sandy favoured him with a hundred-watt smile. "I know what you meant. Stop it. Ali'll come around. She knows you're not to blame. Give her time."

Devon's heart spasmed. "I'm not sure I've forgiven myself. I mean I didn't do it on purpose, but could I have done more? Could I have worked harder? Faster?"

Sandy grabbed his hand and yanked him into a private tent. "You're not Superman. You did all that was humanly possible. I know that with my entire heart, without a doubt. I want you to know that, too. You were judged innocent because you are. No more doubts."

"But..."

Sandy's gaze became stern, and he put his fingers on Devon's lips. "No buts. No regrets. Bryant would want us to go on, to have a good life. He wouldn't want us to be unhappy because of him."

Sandy opened his arms wide and tilted his head. "Get over here."

As if Devon was magnetised, he floated to his lover and gave him his lips, his heart, and his soul. Their bodies melded and they were one. Against Sandy's lips, his heart overflowing with love, he murmured, "I don't deserve you, but you're all mine."

Sandy's hands roamed Devon's back then snuck below the waistband of his slacks. "We deserve each other, and I'm not letting you get away. You can just call that hospital in Kansas and tell them you aren't coming after all. You're staying right here. South Florida has plenty of hospitals that would kill to get a nurse of your calibre."

Devon winced, but he chuckled. "Bad choice of words."

"You know what I mean. Spike and I need you."

Devon glanced down at Spike but couldn't see any love glowing there. "Spike needs me?"

Sandy gave Spike a soft shove with his foot until the dog rested against Devon's legs. "See? He's cuddling up to you but forget him. *I need you. I love you. I don't want to lose you. I can't lose you.* You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. Got it?"

Finally, Devon got it, the whole love and forgiveness thing. The anger in his heart at himself went up in smoke. His self-doubt was gone. He was free, totally and completely. And he was madly, deeply, and insanely in love. Giddy, love zinging through him, he picked up Sandy and whirled him around until he was so dizzy they fell onto the floor laughing in glee. "Woo hoo! I love you, too! This is the best home run I've ever hit."

Sandy rubbed his swollen cock against him and feathered kisses across Devon's face. "This is better than pitching a no hitter. Way better."

“Boss? Sandy?” A feminine voice called from outside the tent. “Are you in there? The dogs are going nuts.”

“I knew it,” Devon said on a sigh as he wiggled out from beneath his lover and stood.

Sandy scowled and accepted Devon’s extended hand to get up. “What do you know?”

“This world is going to the dogs.” But Devon grinned so that Sandy wouldn’t take offence nor did he really mind any of the craziness. He rather enjoyed it as long as it came with Sandy.

## **About the Author**

Ashley Ladd lives in South Florida with her husband, five children, and beloved pets. She loves the water, animals (especially cats), and playing on the computer.

She's been told she has a wicked sense of humour and often incorporates humour and adventure into her books. She also adores very spicy romance, which she weaves into her stories.

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