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**Tonya  
Ramagos**

**HOLLYWOOD LIGHTS**  
*The Heroes of Silver Springs*

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# **HOLLYWOOD LIGHTS**

## ***The Heroes of Silver Springs 6***

**Tonya Ramagos**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**HOLLYWOOD LIGHTS**

Copyright © 2009 by Tonya Ramagos

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-658-X

First E-book Publication: November 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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**PUBLISHER**

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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# DEDICATION

To Joan, for your comments, attention to series details and editing expertise. Thank you.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Silver Springs, MS is a fictional city existing only in my imagination. Any liberties I have taken or mistakes I have made in regards to fire department, police, FBI, DEA and military procedures are my own for the sake of the story.

# HOLLYWOOD LIGHTS

## *The Heroes of Silver Springs 6*

TONYA RAMAGOS

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### Chapter One

Theresa Keaton heard the whiz of the shot as it sliced through the air a fraction of an inch from her cheek. She ducked behind a supporting wall, her back flush to the plaster, her heart tripping over the adrenaline rush of the fight.

*Too close. Way too close.*

But, as the saying went, close only counted in horseshoes and hand grenades. While a hand grenade might have been nice right about now, a horseshoe wouldn't do her a lick of good. But the standard issue .9mm in her hand with its nifty little attachment would. Yeah, she might be ducking for cover, but she was still in the game.

How many of the bastards were there? She wished she knew. She had taken out three already before the fourth nearly took her out.

*Not going to happen today, Skippy.* She readjusted her grip on the handle of her piece. *You SOBs are going down.*

When she finished, she would pack up and head to the mall for a treat. A new pair of high heeled Crocs sounded divine. Red high heeled Crocs. Yeah, they would look sexy, sleek, and really swank with the black Vera Wang tank dress she picked up last week for a song.

*Get your head back in the game, Theresa.* Yeah, she better, unless she intended to wear the dress and shoes to her funeral. Not a pretty thought.

She pushed all outfitting ensembles aside and took a deep breath, stepped around the wall, and found herself face-to-face with a perp. She fired, hitting him right between the eyes.

*Score!*

Even as he folded, another assailant materialized behind him. Damnit, she walked into an ambush.

Tess didn't hesitate. Her finger squeezed the trigger, firing off another shot that struck the second attacker dead in the chest. Movement to her left caught her attention. A third perp hunkered down behind a stack of crates. She dropped, rolled, and fired, narrowly missing a shot from a fourth goon somewhere behind her. Number three partially hidden by the crate went down, and she got to her feet once more. She spun on her heel, her weapon trained to shoot. Her gaze collided with a pair of yellowish-brown eyes in her kill zone and she faltered, her heart in her throat, her blood chilling in her veins.

That hesitation cost her the game. The blow hit her right between her breasts, and she knew she had bought it.

*Son of a bitch!*

A deafening buzzer sounded, sealing her fate. She yanked off her 3D goggles. A string of expletives escaped her lips as light flooded the simulation room.

"What the fuck!" Red rimmed her vision as she glowered at the image frozen on the screen. Devon Gerard, movie star extraordinaire. Or rather a Photoshop alteration of Devon's face in all its amber-eyed, smooth-skinned, kissable-lipped glory, imposed over the computer target's head.

*Son of a mother fucking bitch!*

Snickers from the observation platform above drew her attention up. It seemed a few of her fellow officers, specifically rookie cop



Taylor Page, Narcotics Detective Ford Harris, and Patrol Officer Colin Baggins got their jollies over her humiliation.

"Uh oh," Taylor said with only a slight inflection of worry in his otherwise amused tone. Long, lean, and young with light brown eyes and short dark hair slightly longer on top, he reminded Tess of Ben Affleck in the 2000 film *Bounce*. And if he kept smiling at her like that she'd give him a bounce right off that damned platform. "I think she's pissed."

*No shit, dip wad. What gave you the first clue?*

Tess removed the laser attachment from the barrel of her .9mm and tossed it on the bench against the far wall. Her movements jerky, she stripped off the laser sensing vest and rounded on the men. The look in her eyes must have been pure evil because Colin, who previously leaned over the rail of the surveillance platform, took a step back. He stood a full inch shorter than Taylor and still managed to redefine the expression that dynamite came in small packages. Built to the max with broad shoulders, a wide neck, and shaved head that revealed a smooth café mocha scalp, the patrol officer could easily go head-to-head with Tyson in a boxing ring and would likely come out the winner.

Not in a ring against Tess, though. She didn't even have to step up to the ropes, or in this case the platform, to have him cowering. He held his hands up, palms out as if fearful she might shoot him. The idea held more than a small amount of appeal right about now.

"Whoa, Tess, it was only a joke." Colin's barely contained laughter only added to her fury. "You did great. Hell, almost as good as Ford. Look at that score."

She shot a glance at the scoreboard in the top corner of the main IMAX style 3D screen. Two bastards shy of the win. She would've beaten Ford if they hadn't pulled that stunt. So much for her new set of high heeled Crocs. Now she deserved a brutal knock upside the head. How dare she let herself be so affected by the mere sight of Devon Gerard!

*Pathetic, Theresa. Absolutely pathetic.*

"Shove it up your ass, Baggins." She yanked her hair from her uniform ponytail, slammed her piece in her shoulder holster, and stormed out of the training room. Her brisk steps echoed off the walls of the deserted hall that took her straight out the door of the training facility without a backward glance.

"Tess, wait up."

She stopped at the sound of Ford Harris's heavy-booted footfalls behind her, but she didn't turn.

"What happened in there?"

"I lost." Tess snarled.

"You don't get pissed like that just because you lose a round in the simulation room against the computerized bad guys."

"Today, I do." Tess shot him a look that she knew would've sent a lesser man to his knees begging for forgiveness, and then started walking again. A half a dozen steps brought her meager feet from the serenity of her squad car.

"Shit, Tess, talk to me, will you?"

He wanted to talk. Fine, she'd talk. She whirled on him and let the fury fly. Temper be damned. He put himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and, guilty or not, he would take the heat for that move now. "Who came up with the bright idea to do that?"

Not that she needed to ask. Of the three present, Taylor possessed the computer knowledge and skill to hack into the training program and impose Devon's image over the target. Though still a rookie cop, Taylor gained a name for himself on the department in short order because of the things he could do with a computer.

"Taylor's," Ford confirmed, "but we all got in on it. We thought it would be funny. What, with your Hollywood background and the movie coming to town and all."

Her Hollywood background, yeah, she experienced that one in spades. The qualifications she racked up spelled want-to-be actress, no, worse, *failed* want-to-be actress. But she left that part of her life

behind her over two years ago just as she left Devon "Control All Mighty" Gerard in the past.

"Well, it wasn't funny. I could have made that shot. I would have had it if...oh, hell." The fight left her at the confusion stirring in Ford's liquid brown eyes. A blondish-brown curl fell charmingly over his left brow. She had the sudden urge to push it out of his face. Instead, she balled her fingers into fists. She would never make such a forward move toward this man. She didn't even want to. Still, when he gazed at her like that, allowing a river of apology and concern to run through his expression, she found it hard not to notice how incredibly handsome he looked.

"You're right." He nodded and then shook his head. "Forget about the bet. Apparently, we made a cheap shot. What's your beef with the guy, anyway?"

"Devon Gerard and I have a history." She inhaled deeply, puffing out her cheeks on the exhale. "And it's not a very pretty one. We were involved. Okay?" More than involved, she silently amended. He had taken her places, made her feel and do things that still made her cringe even as her panties grew wet from the memory.

Ford swore under his breath. "I didn't know."

How long had it been since Tess said those exact three words to Ford? Six months? Less? She closed her eyes, took another deep breath, and let it out on a sigh. "You couldn't have. We kept our relationship out of the public eye."

"That had to be hard, him being a star and all."

"Yeah, it got to be pretty tricky at times. It's so stupid. A flyby celebrity love affair, it shouldn't be news at eleven, especially when one of them isn't even famous. I guess you can't help but love the paparazzi."

"You and Devon Gerard." Ford gave a low whistle. "Man, Tess, I knew you had an interesting past, but wow."

"Really, Ford, it happened a long time ago." *Two years, three months, and six very long days.* "I should be over it by now."

In truth, her affair with Devon lasted longer than any flyby night thing. Tess could credit herself with a string of drool worthy men in her life, but the number of her lasting relationships could be counted on her thumbs with one left over.

"Even so, I'm sorry." Ford sobered and shoved a hand through his tousled curls. "If I'd known, well, I wouldn't have let Taylor hack into the program. Want to talk about it?"

Tess made a raspberry sound at that. "Talking about it is the last thing I want." She would rather forget it, forget him. She inevitably failed at that task as completely and expertly as she had in all the years she struggled to be an actress.

Ford nodded again, understanding and acceptance in the gesture. "Look, as for the bet, how about we just let it ride?"

"No." Tess refused to consider it. "You carried through with your loss the last time."

She had beaten him in a poker game with a sweet—almost unheard of—royal flush against his four ladies. In return, Ford picked up her shift for a day. Little had she known that sticking him on a ten-hour shift of traffic duty proved to be more like a sentence to hell thanks to a history more horrid than she could have dreamed involving an old friend, his sister, and a past lover.

"I'll keep my end," she told him now determinedly.

She lost this time in the first Friday night hand at poker they indulged in since she won six months ago. It led to her busted pockets and a seemingly sure-fire winning hand. She held the four ladies and he beat her, not with a royal flush, but four freakin' aces.

"Why don't we change the wager, then?" Ford suggested.

"It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

"Not if we agree. Who else is going to know or, hell, even care?"

"Ford, we had a few hundred riding on that hand," she reminded him. The pot between them got so large, all the other players bowed out.

"So spend a few hundred. Get me a suite for the night, room service, and a cheap bottle of bubbly at the Rings in Billings. I'll take Rayne and Cory with me, and we'll call it even. We haven't managed to pull off a honeymoon yet."

"Neither one of you have managed to marry her yet." How exactly did they plan to pull that one off, anyway? Mississippi law didn't allow polyamorous marriages. Hell, the law makers would chalk that one up there with all the gay marriage petitions, stamping them with a great big 'Not in our state.'

"Details, details."

"You just want a free night at the Rings."

"Well, duh."

The Rings didn't hold the reputation for being the most posh casino across the bridge on the Billings beachfront, but it ranked at a high third. Few of the casinos lining the beach managed to make a lavish comeback so quickly after the destruction of Hurricane Emilio barely a year before. The Rings, however, boasted a pre-hurricane opulence only two others could top.

"A suite with the works as opposed to me auditioning for a tiny part in a movie I likely won't get anyway?" Tess shook her head. "My pocketbook says no. We'll keep with the original stakes. I'm the botched actress, remember? Besides, it's only fair after what I put you through before."

Ford scratched the side of his nose. "Are you sure about that? I mean, my hell ended after only ten hours, but yours, well, consider if you do get the part. You could be stuck working with the guy for who knows how many weeks."

"The guy? What guy?" Tess took her turn on the wheel of confusion.

"Christ, Tess, where have you been? Devon Gerard. He's playing the lead in this movie, isn't he?"

"He is?" *Oh, holy fuck.* "I thought Samuel Pritchard got the part."

She'd been sure of it. Especially after the pictures she spotted of Devon, despite her best efforts to avoid them. He'd looked terrible, strung-out. She also heard, despite her best efforts to avoid them, conflicting rumors about why he hadn't been seen in many movies since she left California. Some put him turning down every part offered to him, while others claimed he couldn't get a role if he stooped back to his indie days. She figured the truth landed somewhere in-between.

Ford shook his head. "The flier that crossed my desk at the station cited Devon Gerard playing the part of Raymond Mage, which we all know is really Ryan Magee even if they won't own up to that fact."

"Hollywood's muddy, altered take on him, at least," Tess muttered.

Ryan Magee, former Navy SEAL turned firefighter for Silver Springs Fire Department. The man went through the proverbial hell in a hand basket immediately after Hurricane Emilio. The storm brought more than devastation to the Gulf Coast. It served as cover for employees of a notorious Cambodian drug lord out for revenge to get into Silver Springs. Two days of natural destruction, drug runners, kidnapping, and military, FBI, DEA, and local PD involvement had Hollywood written all over it. It came as no surprise that not even a year later producers started setting the stage to turn the event into the next box office draw no matter how diluted the facts in the script proved to be written.

A box office smash directed by Devon's closest friend, Milton Remy, no doubt. Bottom of the barrel or top of the food chain, Devon's name remained golden in Los Angeles. What better way to ensure the movie got the best of the best in financial backers and publicity than to cast Hollywood sex symbol Devon Gerard in the lead. Even if he recently turned down a string of roles, no way would he have passed on this one or been able to say no to Milton Remy.

*Shit, shit, triple shit.*

"Still want to keep the original stakes?"

Tess sighed and experienced a sudden premonition she would be doing a lot more of it in the coming days. A crystal clear vision of those incredible amber eyes, so odd in color they seemed otherworldly, flashed fresh in her mind. "Yeah, how bad can it be? If I get the part, and I remind you again I left Los Angeles because I couldn't cut it as more than a B-list actress, it's only a line or two. From the buzz around the station house, it's little more than an extra's roll. Nothing big. Nothing major. And if he gives me any shit, I'll feed him his dick through a straw."

Ford barked a laugh. "That's the confident Tess I'm used to."

Tess smiled. She only wished she felt as confident as she sounded.

"And failing that, we're inching toward the first days of another hurricane season. Who knows, those Hollywood fucks could get a firsthand experience of a real storm. Then they won't need anyone to act it out for them."

Ford winced. "Oh, please, don't say that. Ever heard that expression, 'Be careful what you wish for'?"

"Yeah, I've heard it and I'm not wishing. The last thing this city needs is a visit from Emilio's next of kin. Don't sweat it, Harris. I've got this thing covered."

She did, she told herself as Ford turned and headed back to the training facility. She could do this. She slid behind the wheel of her squad car, refusing to acknowledge the slight nervous shake of her hand as she put her key in the ignition and started the engine. She could face down Devon Gerard and all his charismatic, orgasm-inducing authority, and this time she would walk away completely unscathed.

Yeah, she would be fine as long as he didn't touch her, or speak to her, or get near her when they weren't in the company of a room full of people, or, oh hell. Who did she think she could kid? If he got within ten feet of her, she would completely lose control.

*Damnit!*

\* \* \* \*

What had he been thinking? Thaddeus Carter wondered as he hopped out of Kyle Shannon's ancient F150 and rounded the hood.

"Are you going to spill the news or am I?"

Thad took one glance at Shannon's beaming grin and wished he could change the outcome of the past three hours. Did he really need to give the guys on Silver Springs Fire Department B shift more of a reason to rag him?

*Should have thought of that first.*

He followed Shannon through the open doors of the station house bay. When he immediately spotted three figures seemingly in deep conversation leaning against the front of Rescue 4, he decided what the hell. "You do it."

Shannon's grin spread, revealing gleaming white teeth with a crooked incisor. "Drum roll, please." He simulated the sound with a roll of his tongue, starting soft and growing louder until EMTs Cory Nox and Terri Vega, and shift lieutenant/HAZMAT engineer Max Jasper, gave him their full attention. "Lady and gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you, the one, the only rising star of stage and screen, Thaddeus Leopold Carter."

Cory winced. "Ouch! Your middle name is Leopold?"

Thad punched Shannon's bicep. "You weren't supposed to share that part, shit weed."

Shannon spun right, laughing and rubbing his upper arm. "Sorry, dude. I guess being stuck with a name like Thaddeus is bad enough, huh? Did you slap your mother for that one? I sure would have."

"I thought about it." Thad shrugged. "But it runs in the family. One of those that goes back to my great three times over grandfather or some crap."

"At least his name has a distinctive ring to it," Terri jumped to his defense, "unlike the ordinary Kyle Shannon."



Thad bit back a smile. She always did that, leapt to defend him against the other guys. Though he might have liked to, he found he couldn't argue with her this time. Kyle Shannon could have been the poster boy for ordinary from his nondescript brown hair down to his commonplace sneakers. Even the truck he drove screamed ordinary—black, F150, stock rims, and factory stereo, mirrors, and motor.

Terri's attention switched to Thad. Her hazel eyes lit with a barely contained happiness. "You got the part?"

Thad nodded. "Believe it or not."

"I can believe it." Max pushed off the front grill of the rescue truck and gestured to Thad with a flourish of his arm. "He's got Hollywood polish written all over him. Good job, Carter." He slapped Thad on the back before stepping around him to head into the station house. He disappeared for less than a minute when Ryan Magee joined them in the bay followed by half the remaining B shift crew.

"I heard you're trying your hat at the box office now." Magee's tone held no variation beyond a serious, almost bored inflection. Thad came to think of that tone as the man's officer voice from his years with the SEAL teams.

"It's a small part." Thad lifted a shoulder and hoped he came off sounding as nonchalant about the whole thing as he wanted. In truth, landing the part in the movie tentatively being titled *Danger Storm* excited him. When Hurricane Emilio danced over the Gulf Coast, he'd been just out of the fire academy with a newly hired position as B shift's engineer for Engine Co. 1. So new, in fact, that he hadn't even been on the job a day. To be a part of the reenactment of that pair of days, even if only in a small two liner with an action scene of battling a fire spawned by the hurricane, gave him a serious case of the thrills.

"Glad you went for it," Magee told him. "It'll be good to have someone on the set who can keep those Hollywood bozos straight on the facts, even if you weren't here."

The facts on the *real* Ryan Magee, no doubt. Thad could certainly do that if it became necessary. Of all the men on the department, Thad admired Magee most. He couldn't imagine being portrayed in a movie with or without his consent, and to the best of his knowledge, this entire production got drafted without Magee's approval. "I'll do my best. You should have come to auditions. That would have been a hell of a sight. The real man showing up to go for an extra's role."

"I'd rather have bamboo sticks shoved under my fingernails," Magee stated blandly.

Did he know that from experience? Thad bit his tongue over the question even as his attention dropped to Ryan's wide hands. "I've read parts of the script," he said instead. "I don't think you should worry much. Their take on you is so off, few will even guess the whole character isn't pure fiction."

"Good. Let's hope they keep it that way." Magee's lips curved in a smirk. "Have fun with it, too. It might be your only chance to see a bit of the action."

"Heck, the simple act of finally seeing action will probably excite him enough to put him up for an Academy Award." Shannon piped up.

"He sees the action all the time," David Karlston chuckled. "It's getting involved, which he never gets to do, being guarded by the safety of Engine 1 and all."

Thad rolled his eyes and groaned. He pretended to check his watch. "You guys are slacking."

"We thought we'd give you an extra minute or two. You know, in honor of your recent dazzling success." Bailey Lamont-Barrett shot him a brilliant smile.

Thad figured out of all of the guys, he tended to let her slide with the ragging most. As one of the only two females on B shift, she'd taken her share of shit from the others through the years. It seemed only fair to let her get in her jabs, even if they came at his expense. The guys meant it all in good fun, after all. He knew that. Besides, he

supposed he earned what they dished out and more by coming out of the fire academy with a specialty in engineering, something few firefighters ever did. He signed on with the Silver Springs Fire Department and found himself assigned to B shift as the Engine Co. 1 engineer straight away. At the time, the position belonged to none other than his idol, Ryan Magee.

Lucky for Thad, Magee itched to move on. As far as department rankings went, engineers topped firefighters in pay and stature. But being stuck with the driving and truck operations on nearly every fire scene made the position less than coveted, especially for an action seeker like Magee.

Several shifts in ranks and positions happened shortly after Thad joined the department. The changes put him in the engineer seat he wanted. Magee got pushed to the more desirable and newly vacated position of lead nozzleman after Tripp Barrett took the move from shift lieutenant to district battalion chief. Max Jasper of the HAZMAT truck then jumped into the rank of lieutenant.

And they all lived happily ever after, Thad thought, as long as they could continue to tease him about being on the sidelines. They could make fun of him all they wanted. He held his reasons for the path he took, reasons he simply didn't want to share, *hadn't* shared with anyone but his captain, Dean Wolcott.

As if on cue, the captain poked his head out the door to the station house. "Break it up, people. Shannon, you're on kitchen duty tonight. I'm starving. Carter, congratulations. I'm glad a few real firefighters will be a part of this thing. Make sure you show them how it's done." He shut the door, vanishing back inside, and the crew scrambled.

Terri remained leaning against the rescue truck, her arms folded, stretching her navy uniform shirt like a band of elastic over her generous chest. She wore black slacks that hugged her long legs, one bent at the knee, her booted foot propped on the bumper. "It really is good, you know, having some real firefighters involved with this movie."

"It's even better knowing I'm not the only one." Thad moved to stand beside her, adjusting his black slacks so he could lift his foot to rest on the top of the front tire beneath the wheel-well. He put his forearm on his thigh and leaned on it. "I heard a couple of guys from A and C shifts got a part and a few more guys from one of the other stations in town."

Terri nodded, her springy blond curls bobbing. "I heard that, too. I think it will add more realism to the story." She waggled her eyebrows, her lips tilting in a mischievous grin. "Besides, it will give me a DVD to drool over when my eyes get tired of checking out my B shift calendar."

Thad bowed his head and chuckled. Her B shift charity project calendar featured the men on shift at various destruction sites and staged rescue backgrounds. In every picture, each of them wore far less than they ever did on a true emergency scene.

"Girl, you're incorrigible. That's why I did it."

"To give me something else to drool over when you're not around? Hmm, how will I ever thank you?"

"You know that's not what I meant." Thad rolled his eyes, making her laugh. She had a great laugh. The sound came from within, pure and sultry, a real sex kitten waiting to dig in her claws. Too bad for her he couldn't be her scratching post. Nor could he accept her thinly veiled offer to thank him. No doubt she'd turn him into Meow Mix at the first opportunity.

Maybe it was too bad for him, he thought as he looked at her. He noted the swirl of hope and promise in the hazel depths of her cat-shaped eyes and decided it could likely be bad for them both. He had no doubt in his mind what she wanted from him since she made it clear in not so many words over the past several months. No matter how he sliced it, what she wanted simply couldn't and wouldn't happen.

"I did it because I like the idea of having some real career firefighters in *Danger Storm*. I can see why the Hollywood big-wigs

want to make this film, and not just because of the whole destruction and violence pull in theaters. It has that in spades, yes, but I get the impression they're looking for this to be a movie to show the world the kind of shit this area of the States can take each hurricane season and how well we can bounce back. How the people of the city and the others around us have banded together to help each other rebuild lives that bastard Emilio took. What?"

Terri stared at him with something suspiciously like tears glistening in her eyes. She shook her head, blinked, and swallowed. "Nothing except," she slowly grinned, "I just wondered if you realize how incredibly sexy you are when you go on a rant like that."

"Oh, please." Thad frowned. A light heat tinged his cheeks. "I'm being serious here, Terri."

"I know you are. I am, too, and I agree with you. Television and newspapers cover hurricanes from Florida to Texas and on up to the Carolinas. Outsiders see the damage a storm like that can do but it doesn't change the facts. People who don't live here don't understand. They think we can just up and move and our problems would be solved. If I had a penny for every time I've heard someone suggest such a thing I'd have more money than your family does in a single bank account."

Given that Thad came from one of the richest families in the South, that would probably be a pretty large sum. The Carters ranked up there with the Keatons and surpassed the Abbots, two other prominent southern families each with daughters married to husbands on B shift.

"I think it's great that the casting crew, or whatever you call them, sent out fliers to all the local departments and agencies trying to get some of us to be a part of this," Thaddeus said. "It will add to the realism, even boost a bit of the morale that's gone up and down since the storm."

"You didn't say how big the part is exactly?"

"A few lines, about a three-minute segment of a house fire, not much really."

Terri leaned closer. She smelled of roses and aloe, and he found himself stupidly wondering what kind of soap she used. "Is it the house fire that took Tripp down?"

Thad's focus snapped back. God, he hadn't thought about that. Former lieutenant Tripp Barrett got injured in a house fire that sparked almost immediately after the hurricane. Would the movie people be recreating that particular fire? Surely they wouldn't if they stuck to their intentions of basing it off the events Ryan witnessed. Reports put Ryan across town during that call, somewhere between the boat docks and a deserted island several miles off shore.

"I don't know," Thad answered honestly. "I didn't get that in the part of the script I read. Gosh, I hope not."

"Even if it is, you'll do great." Terri's enthusiasm rushed back, bubbling with conviction. "And I'm glad it's not a huge part. I'd hate to have to compete with Hollywood to get time with you."

"Are you kidding, give up my best bud for the fame and lights of the big screen, never." Thad watched her smile, but didn't miss the look of disappointment that moved through her hopeful eyes at his 'best bud' reference. Sooner or later, he had to tell her the truth. He didn't have a clue how she would take it when he finally came clean.

\* \* \* \*

Tess pulled into the drive of the two-bedroom house she shared with Detective Samantha Becket. The lines to the script for the part she would be auditioning for ran through her head like a CD track set on repeat. It felt weird doing this again, rehearsing with every breath she took, memorizing and practicing just the right inflection, facial expression, and timing. For more years than she could count, she spent nearly every waking moment and even a few in her sleep going

over lines for some part or another until they became as much a piece of her as her own natural thoughts.

"And here you are doing it again," she muttered. She locked up her squad car and made her way to the front door.

She considered winging it. Going to the audition pitifully unprepared would be a sure fire way to make certain she *didn't* get the part. And once again, she would be a failure in Los Angeles, even if this time it would be on purpose and on her turf.

No, she planned to go in there set to stun, one hundred and ninety-nine volts of pure electric Theresa Keaton. She would give it her best as she always had, but with one insurmountable difference. This time, if she didn't get the roll, she could be the one to snub her nose at Los Angeles rather than the other way around as it happened in the past. She would walk away knowing she found happiness in her life. Best of all, she would know she controlled every single aspect of it and still managed to shine.

Okay, except when she lost to Ford Harris in a stupid simulation room against a cartel of computerized goons all because she got blindsided by the handsome as sin face of Devon Gerard. Yeah, that turned out to be a pretty dim moment.

Speaking of Devon Gerard, she could do it, she decided with a steadfast determination she felt more often than not these days. She slid her key in the lock on the front door and squared her shoulders, letting that determination move through her like a surge of the electricity she started stockpiling. She could work with him, even along side of him if need be, which thankfully she already knew would not be necessary. She would be on the set with him, yes, but not as his co-star or even a crucial character to his part.

But even if that somehow changed, she could be a professional despite the fact that the pricks in Hollywood never saw her as such. She knew all the stage tricks, knew how to slip into the part, how to block her true self from the character she played, how to become that character. And for a few lines and a couple of segments that put her

on the set with Devon for all of five minutes in various intervals, she felt supremely confident that she could pull off an Oscar-winning performance.

The thought made her chuckle as she pushed open the door and stepped inside. Wouldn't that be the shit to top the cake? Her winning an Oscar after being told by so many nasty agents, producers, directors, etcetera for so long that she couldn't make the cut.

"Dream on, Theresa," she muttered and then laughed because she knew she would entertain the fantasy more in a little while. Perhaps in the tub covered in bubbles with a glass of wine and the latest Nickelback CD playing on the stereo.

An antique basin her uncle Edward left her sat on an equally aged table to the left of the door, and she tossed her keys inside. Perhaps it wasn't the intended use of the centuries old possessions, but she always felt objects should be used rather than bought to sit around and collect dust. To Tess, the basin and table represented sparklers, and she loved to sparkle in her surroundings, her clothes, and her life. Uncle Edward had surely known that and left them to her for precisely that reason.

She bent to untie her boots and reconsidered her decision not to go to the mall for the Crocs she wanted. The black dress and red heels would make a killer outfit for one of the many parties certain to spawn from having a movie being filmed in the city. Maybe she *did* lose in the simulation room, but she beat Colin and had only been mere points behind Ford. How many cops with barely a year and a half on the force could say that?

"You can," she said aloud as she straightened and froze. She sensed the presence at her back a fraction of a second before a large hand clamped over her mouth. She registered the faint scent of spearmint and an even more remote smell of hand sanitizer.

Instinctively, her left hand came up to grasp at the long, slender fingers even as she reached with her right hand for her gun in her shoulder holster at her left breast. He caught her. In a brisk move, she



found her right arm wrenched behind her, held in place by her assailant and the hard body pressed against her. The position prevented her from drawing her weapon.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins, speeding her heart and scrambling her brain. She didn't bother to scream. With Samantha scheduled to pull a late shift, her roommate wouldn't be home until early morning at best. Besides, she didn't need someone to come to her rescue. She was a cop. She could take care of herself.

*Think, Theresa. You know what to do. You've trained for this.*

Remembering her self-defense classes, her mind kicked into preservation mode. She retained the mobility of her left hand. Good. She may not be as accurate a shot with it as her right, but she knew how to use it in desperate times. Right now, she couldn't think of a more desperate situation.

She had her feet, too. They often proved to be a woman's best weapon, and hers remained planted in hard-soled boots. She'd loosened the strings, but that wouldn't hamper her from bringing the heel down on her attacker's toes with enough force to cause him some real pain. That would buy her some time.

There, she had a plan. Stomp on his toes while simultaneously going for her piece with her left hand. And when she got her finger on her gun, *Watch out, fucker.*

"Don't go for your gun."

The order came soft, but rang with authority in a voice decidedly male, husky, and warm against the side of her face.

"Do it and I might have to punish you." The tone rather than the words made her turn stiff as a stone in his arms. A part of her—devious, evil, dangerous, a part she never liked—considered reaching for her weapon just to see if he kept his word.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Yes, he would. Oh, God, yes, he would.

"Is anyone else here?" His lips moved like a feather-soft caress to her cheek, and her heart stumbled in her chest. "Shake your head yes or no."

*You should've thought about that before you broke into the place.* The words sprang to the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say them because his hand still covered her mouth. She started to shake her head yes. What would he do if he found out they weren't alone? Would he let her go? Would he leave?

Her belly gave a little jolt in protest. A trickle of fear mixed with the adrenaline, and she shook her head. No, no one else was home. They were alone.

"Good."

No, not good for her.

"I'm going to move my hand from your mouth," he told her in that quietly authoritative voice that left no room for argument as to who controlled the moment. "Promise me you won't scream?"

Tess shook her head again, this time up and down. Yes, she promised. She couldn't have screamed if she wanted to because all ability to make a sound left her the moment she heard his devilishly sexy voice.

"Good." His hand slowly fell away, but not before he brushed his thumb lightly over her mouth. Her lips parted, an involuntary response, and a ragged breath escaped as he trailed his hand down, bringing her left hand with it as he grazed his palm along her throat.

Tess let her head fall back to rest on the firmness of his chest. She felt it rise and fall on a ragged breath that mirrored hers. Heat radiated from his proximity and, for a moment, she let herself feel every place their bodies touched. Her head and shoulders to his broad chest, her back to his front, his groin to her lower spine, his legs pressed to the backs of hers. He felt like an unmovable wall of toned muscle and incredible potency that zapped her resolves and ignited her every wicked desire.

"That's my girl," he whispered.

She gulped and closed her eyes. *Dear God, help me. Please, help me.*

But there would be no help for her. There never had been. Every erogenous zone in her body leapt to full do-me alert at his touch just as it always did. She knew she should fight it, *wanted* to. Her mind screamed at her. She should be stronger than this, strong enough to protect herself against him.

His fingers began to lightly caress her collarbone, sending pulse points of sizzling desire straight to her pussy. She knew with bone melting certainty that she would never be able to shield herself against him. She'd never been able to fight her mind, her body, or her soul in opposition to the control of Devon Gerard.

## Chapter Two

Devon's heart hammered at a tempo faster than any drum cadence he ever heard. Having Tess in his arms again felt fucking amazing. He'd dreamt of this moment. For over two years, she haunted his nights and monopolized his days with the fantasy of holding her this way again. No other woman had sufficed, and he'd tried. Oh, how he tried. Night after night, invitation after invitation, he played the field like he hadn't done since shortly after his first picture saw the big time. He'd discovered rather quickly that no woman would ever replace Tess.

He half expected her to flip him over her head and slam him to the floor like a stunt double in a script. He didn't doubt she possessed the strength. He knew she possessed the temper. He might outweigh her by a good eighty pounds or more, but couple blunt fury with toned muscle and he considered himself lucky not to be on his ass before he could get his hand over her mouth.

As arousing as that might have been, he preferred this outcome—Tess in his embrace, her lithe body pressed to his. Christ, the sensations spiraling through him already threatened to drive him to the point of near madness!

Her trim body fit his larger one with pristine perfection, angle for angle, line for line, and curve for curve. Oh, and the woman had some delectable curves. His cock, already hard from the second she walked through the door, stiffened almost painfully as he let his fingers dance from her collarbone down a line between her breasts. He followed the buttons of her uniform shirt to the waistband of her slacks, meeting

with solid muscle, rigid abs and a quivering but taut stomach. The quiver filled him with hope.

"W-what do you want?" Her soft, breathless tone held just an ounce of fear. *Real? Or make believe?*

The question threw him, his indecision immobilizing his rising hope in a sudden trickle of alarm. Did she truly not recognize him or did she simply mean to play along? Instinctively, he started to turn her around, to stop this game here and now before it really got started. But if he did, she would likely throw him out.

He knew Tess. If he gave her time to think right now, he would be out on his ear so fast he'd be deaf for life. Or maybe she'd throw him in jail. Breaking and entering would be an easy enough charge to make stick considering the circumstances.

He wouldn't do anything to her, at least not without first gaining her consent. If she wanted him to go, he would go. He did it the last time they came face to face. He had yet to heal from the wounds she inflicted on his pride and his heart that long ago evening, but he let her have her way then, and he would do it again if he must.

"Where do you keep your side arm?" He would find out this way instead. If she wanted to play along, she'd tell him.

"In my holster where it happens to be, incidentally, still within reach."

Her haughty response almost made him smile. Yeah, she knew it was him. Still, he didn't miss the thinly veiled warning that came with her words. Would she really pull her gun on him?

*Yes.*

If she wanted him to leave, she wouldn't hesitate to order him out at gunpoint.

"Let me rephrase it. Where do you *store* your side arm?"

"There's a lock box in the top of the closet in my bedroom."

Relief gushed through Devon with such force, his knees went weak. Thank the gods of testosterone she'd decided to play along. "Is the safety on?"

Tess made a raspberry sound. "Of course it is," she said in a gee-do-you-think-I'm-stupid tone.

This time, Devon smiled. Jesus, he'd missed her. Yeah, every smart mouthed, confident, sassy word that came out of her sweetly sensual, wickedly tempting mouth. A mouth he couldn't wait to feel wrapped around his throbbing cock, but not after he put his own mouth to use on her. No, he wanted Theresa writhing and begging before he took his own pleasure. Not that exploring her, driving her mad with desire, didn't give him insuperable pleasure, because it did. Oh, boy, it did.

He licked his lips, his taste buds gearing up for a trip to paradise he hadn't experienced in far too long. He had only to stick out his tongue to sample. His mouth remained that close to her face. Even now, without experimenting, he knew she would be delicious, a decadent mix of tantalizing fervor with a hint of sugariness and pure iniquitous persuasion. For a heartbeat, he imagined licking that soft patch of flesh at her ear where her hairline began, catching her lobe between his teeth for a nibble and a suck, before continuing to feast on the satiny skin of her neck.

He swallowed. "Do you trust me to put it away when we get to your room?"

Her spine stiffened, and her head came up fast enough that he had to angle his own to keep her from clocking him in the chin. "I can put it away myself."

An alarm bell sounded in Devon's head. *Okay, maybe not playing along after all.* Unless she used this as her way of tossing out the disobedience card. She always enjoyed giving up a good struggle and, oh, happy balls, he loved it when she did. Even now, the idea made his sac jerk in excited anticipation. He knew of only one way to end his indecision once and for all.

He nuzzled his lips at her ear and allowed himself a taste, drawing a faint line along her outer earlobe with the barest tip of his tongue.

She shivered in response, and he might have heard her make a soft moan. He couldn't be sure if the sound came from her or his own lips.

"You can't if your hands are bound," he told her, his voice barely a whisper in her ear. "Give me your handcuffs, Theresa."

"D-don't you know that is the worst insult you can give an officer?" Her question came out raspy and ragged, full of desire and a struggle teetering on the line between disobedience and submission. "To be b-bound with her own h-handcuffs."

But even as she said the words, Devon felt her reach on her belt for the pouch that contained her cuffs. Did nervousness cause her hand shake or arousal? He prayed for the latter. He heard the faint clang of metal and then felt the coolness of the object in his hand still splayed on her waist.

Her quick intake of breath as he gently but swiftly grasped her left wrist and twisted it behind her back to join her right sent slivers of arousal ricocheting through the inner walls of his throbbing shaft. He held her, snapping the cuffs around her slender wrists in a practiced move learned in his many roles as a cop and his life of being a dominate lover.

Devon couldn't take it anymore. The urge to taste, to explore, won out over his battle to contain himself. He dipped his head, pushed the satiny strands of her chestnut hair aside with his nose, caught the pulsating muscle at the side of her neck between his teeth, and bit. She moaned. This time, he knew the sound came from her sumptuous lips, her head tilting ever so slightly, granting him a little more access to the malleable skin of her neck. He nibbled, tasted, and barely suppressed a moan of his own. She tasted even better than he remembered, a heady combination of sweat and excitement, of impending satisfaction and heart-wrenching power.

"How about if I promise to turn the insult into undefeatable pleasure?"

He brought his hands to her shoulders and let them fall down her arms, her sides, her hips, framing her alluring body and reveling in the

slithering gyration the movement drew from her. He grazed his teeth along her jaw and licked his way over smooth flesh. The intoxication of feeling her, of having her flavor on his tongue made him feel drunker than a bottle of Jack. A low growl rumbled from his chest when she rocked her body against his cock, and his fingers dug into her hips.

"Christ, I've missed you." The words tumbled from his lips before he could stop them. He hadn't meant to tell her, didn't want to scare her. He felt her hesitation in the way she jerked and startled. His mind struggled to find a way to cloud what he'd said with need. He wanted her to feel only desire, only the intense necessity to have him, to give herself to him. He wanted her back and, damnit, this might very well be his only shot to get her.

"Will that work for you, Officer Theresa Keaton, if I make the offense of taking your cuffs, of binding you this way, so pleasurable that your body trembles with orgasm after orgasm after orgasm?"

He reached around her body, finding the apex between her thighs. He covered her pussy with his hand and closed his eyes.

*Oh, yeah. God, yes!*

Even through the material of her slacks, he felt her heat, her wetness. She'd soaked her panties to the point that her pants grew damp, as well. He squeezed, not hard but enough to have her taking another quickly indrawn breath. "I asked you a question, Theresa." He put just the right amount of mandate in his voice to leave no question in her mind of his intentions.

"Yes," she answered fast, the breath leaving her on an audible *whoosh*.

Devon smiled and, for the first time since she'd left him, felt his world go right once more. "Turn around, baby. I want to look at you."

\* \* \* \*



Devon's hands moved to Tess's hips, and he spun her around in his arms.

It was heart attack time.

Tess's gaze slammed into his amber stare heavy lidded with desire, and she felt her heart convulse in her chest for the second time today. The difference came in the knowledge that this time, the eyes were real. Not some computer altered image, but the real thing on the real man, and the man's arms wound around her, holding her.

*Dear God, help me.*

She looked up at him and didn't miss the flicker of surprise that moved through the yellowish-brown depths of his eyes. She saw more there, too. Everything from apology to, no, she wouldn't think that could be love. No matter what they'd shared, what he'd taken from her, what he'd ordered her to do, there had never been love between them, at least not on his part. He gave only heat, only desire, only sex. He blinked and whatever she thought she saw disappeared as his mouth came down on hers.

He didn't kiss her. He possessed her, *claimed* her. Or *reclaimed* her, she thought as his tongue plundered the recesses of her mouth. She'd been his obsession, always his to control until the day she walked away. Until this moment when he took her back.

He tasted of happiness, of the gum he chewed relentlessly since he quit smoking a few years back, and of an indescribable flavor she'd only ever known in Devon. And it scared her to death that she stood in her entryway kissing him again after two very long, sex deprived years. She couldn't go back to what she'd been, wouldn't give up what she'd made of herself. But even as she fought for the resolve she needed to push him away, she felt herself give, felt herself change. She felt the needy Tess, the one who reveled in the dominance and sheer naughtiness he would show her, return.

"How long do we have?" He whispered the question in tandem with the movement of his hands working the buttons of her uniform shirt one by one. His tongue licked the outline of her lips before

plunging again to steal her breath. He swiped a fiery path down her neck and then nipped at her collarbone. Her head fell back, her upper body arching in search of more attention.

"I-isn't that something you should've, oh, yeah, considered before you, oh, wow, cuffed me and started taking off my c-clothes?" He freed the last button of her blouse not tucked inside the waistband of her pants and delved his hands inside, pushing the material of the shirt out of his way. It fell off her shoulders, stopping at her elbows, unable to go farther with her hands bound behind her back. Now she had even less mobility, a fact she knew would get him off.

Her, too, damnit. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to feel his compact muscles beneath her palms. She wanted to curl her fingers around his impossibly wide, deliciously long shaft. But she could only stand there as he explored her torso with his lightly calloused hands. His fingers skimmed her flesh and then dipped beneath the underwire of her bra while his tongue traced the outer rim of her belly button.

He looked up, his gaze landing first on her breasts and then meeting her eyes. "Hmm, black lace. That's my Theresa."

The use of her name brought tears to her eyes. Thankfully, he looked away before he noticed. He always called her Theresa during sex. No other man ever used her full name. He might call her Tess in conversation, though usually he leaned more toward endearments like 'baby' or 'darling' or 'honey,' but always, *always* when they made l—had sex, he called her Theresa. She never told him how much that meant to her. She never would.

"I'm not worried." His heated breath fanned her navel. He pushed her bra up, freeing her breasts and eased back, his gaze seemingly transfixed on the sight. "I only wondered how long I had to make you beg and scream without disturbing your roommate. Once she gets home, we'll have to turn down the volume."

"She's pulling an all-nighter." The second the words left her lips, Tess wished she could take them back. Devon's eyes gleamed, all the while darkening with desire to the point that the yellow turned to full

intoxicating brown. She felt done for, completely in his control, and the realization of what she'd allowed to happen terrified her as much as it thrilled her.

She'd had an out. All she needed to do would've been to tell him Samantha would be home any minute. Instead, she blurted the truth and found herself in the one place she swore she would never let herself be again.

Devon's tongue skipped from her navel to the valley between her breasts, doing a side-to-side slide as if to keep her guessing which breast he would go for. He chose the left, circling the underside with a fiery lick that left a tingling, icy path as he abandoned the trail to begin another under her right breast. Each lick brought him closer to her beaded nipple, each graze of his teeth caused her breasts to flex and her nipples to throb, and each attentive action kept him an infuriating fraction from where she wanted most.

She jerked her hands. She intended to grab his head and force him to suck her nipple in hopes it would ease some of the intense burn he started with his teasing swipes. When she met with the resistance of the cuffs, she growled, the sound just short of that from a mad woman. It caught his attention, and he looked up, a slow, sinfully sexy smile unfolding on his moist lips.

"No fair." She gasped, hating the underlying plea that already settled in her voice.

The smile faded, leaving behind a slight quirk at one edge that screamed of promise and challenge. "Are you sure? Because I can show you exactly how fair it is. Do you remember the last time you said that to me, Theresa?"

Oh, yeah, she remembered. And, oh, no, she did not want to go there again. He'd left her naked and bound to his bed with a remote control dildo shoved deep inside her channel, securely strapped in place so the vibration didn't cause it to fall out. He used it, too, every half hour or so, to drive her to the brink of orgasm over and over again, but never allowing her total release. She didn't know how long

he kept her that way, though it felt like an eternity at the time. She never complained about the unfairness of anything he did to her again.

Until now.

Tess shook her head, and his smile returned in full, super-charged force. Christ, he was gorgeous! More handsome than she remembered and she hadn't thought that possible. She didn't see any trace of whatever brought him down in the photos she'd seen where he looked rough and haggard. Of course, those photos appeared shortly after her departure from California.

She'd heard the first conflicting stirrings of the gossip, the ones about him turning down parts that clashed with the others that no one in Los Angeles wanted to hire him, and then forced herself to ignore the rest. In time, she reached a point where she simply avoided the entertainment industry as a whole. She read the newspaper, first tossing the entertainment section in the trash. She purposely checked out in the tabloid free lanes at the grocery, changed the TV channel during movie commercials, and boycotted websites like IMDb.com as if they might give her the plague. She went out of her way sometimes to avoid anything with Devon Gerard on it simply out of self-preservation and the need to move on with her life.

Her efforts proved to be a waste because here he stood and damned if he hadn't gone from box office buzz handsome to deliriously drool-worthy gorgeous. Forget *GQ*. Devon Gerard seemed destined to be *People Magazine's* next sexiest man of the year.

"I didn't think you wanted to go there again." He straightened in front of her, and her breasts whimpered in protest. "I'm glad, too, because that's not what I want tonight, either."

He licked his lips rather than the nipples that pulsed for his touch. She bit her tongue knowing if she said anything, he'd make her wait even longer for the attention her body demanded. He might not leave her bound to her bed, but he had other expert ways of torture that kept her teetering on the edge of insanity and pleasure.

Rather than speak, she let herself study him, her fingers itching to bury themselves in the brown strands that brushed the collar of his solid black t-shirt. He'd added blond highlights, she realized, or maybe he'd just been spending more time in the sun. He let his hair grow longer than usual, too, a fact that proved he couldn't be playing Ryan Magee true to life in *Danger Storm*. Two days or more of stubble covered his upper lip and chin giving him the rough, edgy appearance.

"Step back," she dared to tell him and caught the mixture of surprise and intrigue that flashed through his expression.

"Why?" One brow winged up, adding a stunned expression to the sinfully sexy smile.

"I want to look at you."

Without another word, he stepped back as she asked.

Tess let her gaze slide down. She drank in the sight of him like a woman stranded in the desert without so much as a canteen of water for months. She supposed the analogy fit in a sense. Not a desert, but the rapidly growing town of Silver Springs where Devon Gerard existed only on paper, screen, and in her memory, until now.

The broad shoulders and muscular chest she leaned against moments ago stretched the material of his t-shirt until it fit like a second skin. He wore it un-tucked with a pair of jeans so well worn they even sported a hole in the knee and upper thigh. Brown Caterpillar work boots finished the ensemble making him look as far as possible from the Hollywood A-list actor people knew him to be. By the time she pulled her gaze back up to meet his, her body pulsed with a maddening desire to orgasm without so much as a touch.

"Damn, you're gorgeous." Shouldn't it be illegal for a man to look so good? Maybe she should check the law books.

She watched the surprise move through his expression once more, stirring with more emotions she didn't dare attempt to define for fear her heart couldn't take the meaning. She saw things there she never

noticed before, indefinable things that had to be a product of her own imagination. They just had to be.

"I think that's supposed to be my line." He closed the distance between them, slipping his arms around her waist, and drawing her against him.

"Tonight, the line is in my script." As were so many other lines she knew she shouldn't say but felt unable to stop. Things she knew she would hear from her own lips such as 'yes' and 'please' and 'make l—fuck me, Devon.'

He reached up with one hand, fisted his fingers in the hairs at her nape, and yanked her head back. He didn't pull hard but forcefully enough that it drew a shocked moan from her lips. Then he opened his mouth over hers and took her in a drugging kiss that made her forget all about the words she couldn't say, the things she shouldn't do.

"Show me to your bedroom, Theresa." He ran the backs of his fingers down between her breasts and then turned her around, catching the chain of the cuffs, confirming to her who held command. "I want to look at you."

\* \* \* \*

The room Tess led him to left no question in his mind that it belonged to her. A four-poster bed fit for a magazine centerfold and the late Marilyn Monroe beckoned his predatory attention, as did the Regency style armchair positioned in the corner. An armoire, a dressing table, and a chest of drawers sat strategically placed for primping and perusal. He took it all in with a slowly spreading grin and could only think, *That's my Tess*.

He could easily see her moving about the room, going from the armoire or closet to the dressing table and back again, decking herself out in the latest high-end fashion she always wore better than any woman he knew. Theresa Keaton oozed sheer elegance, sophistication, and confidence. He always loved that about her.

Devon spotted the closet she'd spoken of and reached around her, gently pulling her weapon free of her holster by the grip. She went rigid against him for a second before relaxing once more, a reaction that undoubtedly came naturally to the cop inside her at having the security of her firearm taken away.

He brushed his lips to the side of her neck, a small gesture he hoped she would take as the comfort he wished to show her, and then stepped away. "Stay here. Stay just like this." The lock box sat on the shelf in the top of her closet precisely where she said she kept it. He took it down, carefully placing her weapon inside the velvet lined case before replacing the box on the shelf.

Through it all, Tess didn't make a sound. He heard only the faintest whisper of air as she breathed. She followed his command not to move, too, he noted as he turned to face her. For a long moment, the world seemed to stop on its axis. He looked at her as he'd told her he wanted to, as she did to him out in the living room. What had she said? *Damn, you're gorgeous*. Oh, yes, that line definitely belonged in his script.

She shifted her weight, a small movement, but his gaze leapt to hers, and he caught the flash of defiance swirling with excitement in her eyes. Desire darkened them to the color of jade now. Later, when she lay sated and sleepy, they would lighten to the green of fresh grass in the summer sun. He'd often been able to gauge her mood by the color of the green in her eyes. Despite the consensus of Hollywood, the woman could act when she wanted to, sometimes so freaking well that the color of her eyes gave the only hint to her temperament.

"I said not to move." He said it more because he saw she expected it. For quite possibly the first time ever, he found himself willing to let some defiance slide. She, on the other hand, apparently didn't want to get away with anything. It may have been years, but she hadn't forgotten how to play the game. She hadn't lost her thrust for it, either.

He saw that, too, in the spark that all but sizzled through the air at his disapproving words.

She looked, he decided as he returned to his appraisal of her, like she belonged on the cover of a porn DVD. No, he quickly changed his mind. Theresa Keaton would never look that tasteless. The woman was poised for pure erotic elegance. His very own sex personified wet dream that captured his heart and altered his reality. What he wouldn't give for a camera right about now.

He dropped his gaze to her feet, observed the untied laces of her boots, and started to raise his focus. The uniform pants she wore flared at the calf, tightening around the knee and forming to her thighs. The pants fit loose, mores the pity, but managed to mold to her hips in a way that left much to the imagination while offering a view that teased and provoked. Her shirt gaped open straight down the front. His doing, the freeing of the buttons, the pushing aside of the material, to expose smooth, tanned, enticing flesh to make his mouth water and his hands itch to feel. Her bra rode above her breasts where he'd pushed it, drawing a line of sorts between delectable mountainous peaks and the downy expanse of her throat and neck. Chestnut strands brushed her shoulders while an expertly applied thin layer of makeup drew out the best features of her angelic face.

His gaze settled on her mouth. He didn't intentionally transfix his attention there. He didn't even realize he did so until the barest tip of her pink tongue eased out of her mouth to slowly, tauntingly glide between her lips. His own mouth instantly went dry, and his cock danced in his pants. He caught the agonized moan a split second before it rumbled out of his chest. A blink snapped him out of the lust-starved trance the sight of her like this put him in and stepped toward her.

"Yet still you toy with me." He reached behind her head, catching her hair in his fist and yanking her neck back, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Are you looking for punishment, Theresa?"



She visibly gulped, the action momentarily pulling his focus to the rapidly beating pulse just below the flesh in her throat. "No."

"I owe it to you, anyway. You know that, don't you?" He watched understanding race through her expression followed by a flash of thrill and peace. Why did peace come to his mind when she looked at him that way? He actually felt the tranquil vibes pumping from her, stirring the air with the arousal and anticipation.

Her only answer came in a nod, the movement so slight he might not have seen it if he hadn't been looking right at her.

Devon released his hold on her hair and reached for the buckle of her belt. He removed it in quick order, next unfastening and unzipping her pants, and then he shucked them down her legs. Sweet God, the panties he revealed were black, lacy, and barely there.

"I wonder, Theresa, if it gets you hot to walk around wearing something like this beneath your uniform." He didn't need to meet her gaze to know she smiled a little at that. He heard the amusement in her tone when she answered.

"It's my little secret."

"And a naughty one at that. Do you ever wear nothing at all?"

"You mean no underwear? No."

"You will tomorrow."

She stilled her movement, her breath, and he knew he hit on a point that would make her want to disobey in her struggling desire to obey.

He let it go for now. Curving an arm around her waist, he back-stepped and drew her with him until the backs of his legs hit the mattress. He sat, spreading his legs and positioning her between them. His gaze met with her abs, just above her navel, but he'd already tasted her there. Instead, he dipped to slide his tongue along the slinky string of material that held her panties in place.

Her body arched into him, pressing against his mouth, gyrating and trembling as a soft string of amazingly sexy sounds drifted on the air. He heard the clank of the metal of the cuffs, knew she tried to free

herself, to reach for him before remembering the effort would be futile. He smiled and dipped his tongue beneath the string, licking her pelvis as his hands moved around to cup her bare buttocks. His cock screamed, his blood thrummed through his veins, and his mind raced with sensation after elation after wonderment. Because he always longed to be exactly right here with her.

\* \* \* \*

Tess couldn't think. Perhaps that was a good thing.

No, not perhaps. Not thinking would prove to be a very good thing. At least until this ended. Until reality slapped her in the face and her real world returned.

But right about now, with Devon's hands on her ass and his tongue inching toward her aching heat, she couldn't remember precisely what her real world entailed. His tongue skipped lower, stopped a millimeter from hitting home, and she whimpered.

"Please." She hadn't meant to beg, would surely be embarrassed as hell about the fact that she did later, but now it rendered her with the ability to forget her inhibitions. Her body wanted, *needed* things he denied her, and if she had to beg to get them, then Goddamn it, she'd beg.

He laughed, the bastard, a breathy chuckle against her lower belly that brought goose pimples to the surface of her flesh from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes. Then he pulled back, pushing her from between his legs, and she truly considered kicking the shit out of his shin. That would teach him to find amusement in her torment. The idea skittered out of her brain when he started to bend her over his lap.

"W-what are you doing?" Mortification warred with the devious thrill that kicked up in her middle.

"I'm about to give you the punishment I owe you. Lie across my lap, Theresa, and don't fight me or it will be worse."

"I—"

She couldn't do it. With this one act, he would strip away a sizeable chunk of the self-preservation she had built since leaving him.

She wanted to do it. The need to obey him, to submit to his every command, burned her insides from nipples to pussy.

"Theresa, I did not make a request." His tone hardened, the authority settling in the air like a stone.

Tess let him guide her until she lay on her stomach across his thighs, arms bound behind her back, her ass exposed to his sight and his hand. She closed her eyes as he caressed first one cheek and then the other. She sucked in a breath of half fear and half anticipation as he slipped a finger beneath the thong that sliced between her cheeks.

"We're not going to discuss this punishment now," he told her, his voice thick with his own arousal. She could feel his cock, long and hard, inside his jeans, pressing at her side. "You know what it is for."

She did. She left him. A feat she didn't deserve to be punished for and yet couldn't find it in herself to protest the sentence he'd given her. Because as right as she had been to do what she did, the devil inside her wanted this, needed to be disciplined for her actions.

"You will take this punishment without argument and when I'm done, you will thank me. Do you understand?"

Thank him for punishing her? *Not a chance in hell, pal.* She nodded and heard the quiet "Yes" spill from her lips seemingly of its own accord.

The first hard slap to the tender flesh of her ass stung like a bitch. Tess inhaled sharply. The second didn't come immediately. Instead, Devon took a moment to palm the spot, soothing the burn and allowing the anticipation to build.

"Mmm, I've always loved the way your flesh turns such a fantastic shade of red when I spank it. You didn't do as you threatened, the all over tan you talked about getting. I'm glad. I might have been forced to punish you more if you had."

A second slap came on the heels of his last word, and her cheek exploded in a riot of vicious pleasure. The third smack landed on her other cheek quickly followed by a fourth. He'd always been thorough in making sure each side got equal attention. His fifth and six strikes came harder and faster, and her pussy gushed, her juices leaking from between her feminine lips.

She felt dizzy, her head spinning in a tilt-a-whirl of pain and pleasure. The lines between the two blurred beyond vision. That's when she lost count. He spanked her, working her tender flesh until her bottom flamed, her pussy convulsed, and the orgasm knocked on the walls of her sodden channel.

*Almost there.* The thought became a mantra in her mind as her release grew claws, climbing higher and higher. *Almost there, almost there, almost....*

"Theresa, are you about to come?" He stopped, the next blow so close, she could feel the warmth of his hand, but he didn't make the contact.

"Please." She squirmed on his lap, struggling to lift her buttocks to meet his hand, fighting to squeeze her legs together to offer a bit of pressure to her throbbing clit.

He slid his hand beneath her panties instead, pushing her legs apart to swipe a finger between her pussy lips. "Damn, Theresa, you're soaked, baby. I know you didn't come already."

"Not yet," Tess said through gritted teeth. "But if you'll give me another second, I will."

He laughed, and she considered biting his thigh since she dismissed the idea of kicking his shin earlier. He remained fully clothed, but she bet she could get in a good bite through the denim of his pant leg.

"Do you want to come, Theresa?"

"Duh."

He tsked. "Such feistiness should earn you more punishment, not pleasure. Although," he paused to circle his finger along the outer

edge of her opening, "it feels as though punishment gives you pleasure, as well."

Tess said nothing at that. She couldn't. She didn't want to acknowledge the truth of that statement.

"Thank me now, Theresa."

Thank him? *No. No way.* "You aren't finished."

"I can be." Warning rang in the air from those three little words.

"No, please." He couldn't stop, couldn't leave her like this. She'd die from the torment.

"Then thank me for your punishment."

Tess gulped. She couldn't say it, wouldn't. Her lips parted, another argument on the tip of her tongue, but the two humiliatingly truthful words spewed out instead. "Thank you."

"How do you wish to be pleased, my love?"

*My love?* The endearment took her breath and her thought. He never called her that. In all the months they spent together, all the different scenarios and games they played, he never once remotely let that four letter word cross his lips even in an accolade, let alone to convey emotion. And he didn't mean it the way her mind wanted to take it now. She would be stupid to take a little name like 'my love' and turn it into a true declaration of the one thing she always wanted from him but never got.

His finger drove inside her channel in a single plunge that ripped her back to the present, to his question, but before she could answer him, the orgasm stole her words. Her body convulsed, jerking violently on his lap as he pounded his finger inside her in relentlessly stupendous thrusts. Only when the worst of the spasms subsided did she hear his soft chuckle.

"I guess that's my answer."

\* \* \* \*

Devon lifted a lifeless Tess off his lap and stood with her, turning to guide her down onto the bed. He released one of the cuffs on her wrist, using the key he found on the ring he took from the bowl in the entryway before following her in here. He brought her arms in front of her and snapped the cuff in place. She moaned, a quietly contented sound, and stretched her arms over her head. She looked like a sleepy sex goddess with her auburn hair fanned out around her, her tanned skin flush from her orgasm, the slightest hint of a smile on her sensuous lips. Her heavy lidded eyes had gone the color of the grass in a summer meadow. Yep, sated and sleepy, he'd pegged that one right.

An overwhelming sense of protectiveness moved through him. Not that he believed her in need of protection exactly. He knew Theresa Keaton to be perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Even so, that never stopped his need to shelter her, to shield her. Is that why she left him? No way would he ask her now. So far, the evening progressed exactly as he planned. Well, with the minor adaption of the spanking he just gave her. He hadn't intended to discipline her. Not before he pleased her, in any case. Although, she certainly found the apex of pleasure in the punishment and his own release promised not to be far behind.

"Not going to sleep on me, are you?" He leaned over her, brushing his lips first to her abdomen and then her stomach as he freed the remaining buttons of her uniform shirt. His hands on her thighs, he skimmed them down her legs, stopping when he reached her bunched slacks at her ankles.

She sighed, a breathy, thoroughly contented sound that was sexy as hell. It floated through the air, gliding over him like a whip of satin. His balls sizzled and jerked. "Not a chance. I'm just waiting for the second round."

Devon smiled. Sated or not, he'd never known his Tess to refuse sex. She continued to be one of the only women he ever met who

could keep up with him sexually. Hell, several times in the past he worried he might not be able to feed her insatiable appetite.

"Kick off your boots. I want these clothes off of you."

"Mhmm, and are you going to do the same any time soon?"

"I thought I might." He stood and took a step back, paused when her head came up and her gaze landed on his crotch. "Did I say you could watch?"

Her brow winged up, and a defiant little smile curved the corner of her devious lips. "Did I ask permission?"

Devon shook his head. "It looks to me like someone still needs to learn her place." The quick flash of lightning in her eyes told him the idea of more spankings turned her on.

"It looks to me," she countered and licked her lips, "like someone is still fully clothed."

"I should stay this way, leave you that way." He wouldn't, *couldn't*. Not this time. She recognized the threat as a hollow one, too, because she merely smiled and let her gaze roam over his body.

"You could, but you won't."

She had him there and she knew it. Devon reached for the hem of his t-shirt, pulled it over his head, and tossed it to the floor.

"Oh, my, someone's been working out."

He knew he shouldn't blush, yet he actually felt his cheeks grow warm. He spent much of his life being no one, ignored by everyone because he'd been trash, the lowest of the low. Then he'd cleaned up, turned everything around, and suddenly became somebody. Women looked at him, though admittedly none of them in the same cock-stirring way Tess did. Would he ever get used to it?

"I spent a week with the LAFD, hung around their station doing drills and tagging along on calls. During the downtime, they don't do much more beyond eat or work out." Devon shrugged and removed his boots. "I worked out. I noticed you've been doing a bit of that yourself."

"During our downtime at the station, we don't do much more beyond eat doughnuts or workout. Lemon-filled doughnuts are a weakness, so I make sure to do double time in the gym."

"It works." Devon took off his pants and briefs. Then he stood there naked, his cock hard as stone and standing at full atomic attention. "Your turn."

"The boots I can take care of." She demonstrated her words by using the toe of one foot to dig into the heel of the other. In less time than it took her to complete the sentence, both boots hit the floor. "The clothes will create a bit of a challenge with these cuffs on my wrists." She raised her arms off the mattress and waved her hands to indicate her still bound wrists.

"Ah, ah, ah, nice try." He caught one of her slender ankles in his hand and lifted it, bending to brush his lips to the inner side of her shin. He skimmed his tongue up, the lightest of licks, and delighted in the uneven gasp the act drew from her lips. "The handcuffs stay. I'll improvise."

"Suit yourself." Tess let her arms fall back to the mattress. "I'll just lay here and enjoy."

Devon laughed and, for a moment, he simply rested his forehead against her inner thigh. Jesus, he was so freaking crazy about this woman! How had he ever thought he could live without her? He let her walk away, one of a very select few women in his entire thirty-two years of life who did the leaving instead of him. And he hadn't truly *lived* without her, though admittedly he hadn't given it his best shot. He knew he would come after her. Two years and some odd months down and that's exactly what he did.

"No." He returned to his exploration of her inner thigh, each slow glide of his tongue bringing him closer and closer to that tantalizing strip of black lace covering her sodden pussy. "You're going to tell me what you want."

"Since when does it matter what I want?"



Devon stilled. He lifted his head, looking up her body until his gaze landed on her face. She lay staring at the ceiling, her lips folded in as she bit them together. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again when he realized he didn't know how to answer her. Was she serious? Acting? Being defiant? Christ, he didn't have a fucking clue!

*It always mattered*, he wanted to tell her, but surely she couldn't be serious. She was acting, he decided, playing the part of the cocky submissive. She had always been one to mouth off at him until he put her in her place. She did it on purpose just so he would set her straight.

He lowered her leg and reached with both hands to the string of her panties. A quick tug and the thin piece of lace snapped. He tossed it aside, then brought a finger to her pussy lips, tracing the outer rim of her slick, tender flesh with the tip of one finger. "What is it you want, Theresa?"

She didn't answer, but simply lay there. Yeah, he knew this Tess, defiant at her best. In the past, he would've spanked her again for her noncompliance, or made her suck him off and then leave without fucking her, denying her another orgasm. But too much time passed since he'd been right here with Tess, between her legs. This time, and this time only, he vowed, she held the upper hand. Not that he would ever tell her so.

He spread her pussy lips with the thumb and forefinger of one hand, exposed her swollen clit, and gave it a light thump. She jerked, a surprised moan following her quickly indrawn breath. "I asked you a question, Theresa."

Her head lolled from side to side, her lips tightly clamped together. No, she wouldn't answer him. He didn't question her further. Let her push her luck. There would be time for more reprimands later when he wasn't suffering so badly along with her. Right now, he needed to taste, to feel, to lose himself in Tess, her scent, her softness, her heat, her wetness.

He dipped his head between her legs, delved his tongue inside her folds and lapped at the onslaught of juices he found there. "Hmm," he groaned against her smoothness, loving the way she shaved all but a very thin strip of hair above her clit, leaving the rest bare for his feasting. He would, too, later. For now, he treated himself to one last helping of her juices and backed away.

"Please." Her head came up, the look on her face as tormented as the sound of that single word.

He tsked as he did a slow climb up her body, moving over her, and positioning himself between wide spread legs. "Too late now, sweetheart. You had your chance to ask for what you wanted."

Devon held himself above her, resting all his weight on one arm as he dipped his head. He caught first one nipple and then the other between his teeth for a tenderly pressured nip. She cried out, writhing on the bed, her arms rising as if she intended to hook her bound hands around the back of his neck. He trapped her hands with his free hand, pushed them back to the mattress, and held them there. She closed her eyes as if resigning herself to his command.

*Good.*

"Now I'll get what I want." He started at her nose, laying a tender peck on the tip before kissing his way to her mouth, her chin, her jaw. Her lips parted slightly, and he heard her breathing as much as felt it—short, quick inhales, ragged exhales. If she kept breathing that way, she would start to hyperventilate. He continued on to her neck, her collarbone. He stopped there and lifted his head once more, unable to move farther and continue holding her hands to the mattress as he did.

"I'm going to let you go." He slowly eased his hand away. "Don't move, Theresa." He put just the right amount of authority in his tone to have her eyes opening. Her glassy-eyed gaze slammed into his, but she didn't answer, didn't move, either.

He closed his mouth over one breast, sucking the beaded nipple between his teeth as his other hand found her opposite breast. He took

that nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and giving them both equal attention with his mouth and hand, squeezed and nibbled until her body twitched beneath his.

"Oh, God, please, Devon." Her legs clamped on either side of his hips, turning into vises. Jesus, she was strong! She lifted her own hips, using her hold on his body as leverage, and attempted to draw his cock inside her awaiting pussy.

He kept his dick just out of reach, allowing only the tip to graze lightly along her outer folds. The engorged head pulsated in a protesting pain that almost made him drive his rod inside her, but he held off. He wanted her begging. He wanted her screaming.

He alternated his attention of her breasts, shifting to feast, to pinch and pull, to bite and lick. He couldn't keep up this assault to her sensitized nipples long without bringing her to another orgasm. He proved that before, but he wanted to do it differently tonight. When he stopped abruptly, pulling back both hand and mouth, she cried out so loudly, he knew she'd been right on the edge.

"No! Please, oh, blessed orgasms, *please*."

Devon barely bit back his laugh at that. Yeah, she was almost ready. He entered her, pushed only the head of his dick inside her sopping channel, and stopped. This time, he had to bite back his own groan of protest. He never met a woman who could bring him to the brink of losing his own control until he met Tess.

"You have to ask for it." His arm shook with the effort of holding his weight off of her. He put his free hand on the mattress next to her head, redistributing his weight. Then he stared down at her and waited.

"No, I c-can't."

"Yes, you can. You will or you won't get it. How long has it been, Theresa?" He didn't know what made him ask. Did he seek to find a torture of his own? He really didn't want to know how many men she slept with since leaving him, didn't want to imagine her with another

man at all. He did, however, want to know if she'd replaced him. Had she found someone else?

"Too long," she answered in a rush. "Please, Devon, I need, oh, please."

"You need what, Theresa? How long is too long?" He eased his throbbing cock inside her another inch. Christ, she was tight! The walls of her pussy created a suction around his shaft, squeezing, milking. He wouldn't be able to last long once he finally pushed all the way inside her.

"Two years," she whispered, the admission barely audible.

Devon's heart slammed into his breastbone. "Two years?" he repeated, unable to hide his shock.

"Two years, three months, and six days." She opened her eyes, her gaze glistening with—Christ, were those real tears?

"Oh, Tess." Emotions surged through him at warp speed, astonishment, elation, disbelief. It touched him as much as it stunned him. He suddenly couldn't move, but she could. She locked her legs around his waist, dug her heels into his lower back, and pulled, the movement plunging his cock fantastically deep inside her impossibly tight pussy. Impossibly tight because she hadn't been with another man since she left him.

The sound she made, full of erotic bliss, yanked him back and he pulled his cock out, nearly letting it slip free before slamming into her again. He fucked her, hard and fast and vicious. When she screamed his name loud enough for the neighbors to hear as she fell over the edge of Orgasm Mountain, he went right there with her.

## Chapter Three

Tess stood silently at the foot of her bed and stared at the sleeping figure wrapped in her pink sheets. He should've looked out of place among all the pastel and frills. Instead, he looked amazing as always. His chest rose and fell in the even breaths of a deep, soundless sleep. Every now and then, his lids would ripple, his eyes moving in a dream. What sort of images played in the man's mind as he slept? She never thought to ask him before.

His hair fanned the pillow, the strands beckoning her touch. Her fingers itched to obey, to let the silky tresses slide through her hands. She never got around to asking him about his hair last night, about how he managed to get by without cutting it for *Danger Storm*. She knew the former Navy SEAL inspired the adapted part of Raymond Mage. Given Devon's appearance, she figured 'adapted' to be an understatement. Knowing the way the movie business operated, close to three-fourths of the film had probably already been shot in the studio in California. The on-location filming would last little more than a few weeks at best. Exactly how long remained yet one more thing she hadn't gotten around to asking. She really hadn't said much to him at all. Nothing new there. Sex always proved to be the driving force of their relationship. Idle words spoken between them came few and far between.

*Except his orders and your frantic pleas of 'please' and 'fuck me.'*

There had always been plenty of those. She scowled, her body warming with the blush that raced through her from head to toe. Last night proved to be no different. She had no trouble following his orders and even less trouble begging when the time came.

*Damn the man.*

She ran into no problems revealing to him the fact that she hadn't had sex with any man since him, either.

*Double damn the man.*

She could only be grateful to herself for not telling him why. Because no other man could give her what he did. And damn her for being so vulnerable, for so easily forgetting everything about herself and everything she'd strived to become in the last two years at his touch. Double damn her for the way she so quickly took him into her bed again, for wanting him so badly that she would rather be celibate than give herself to another man.

God, she hated what she became in his presence! The weak, submissive Tess, ready to obey at his first command, ready to be spanked like a naughty child, and then made to beg for a release she didn't even want.

Trouble was she *did* want that release and everything that came along with it. She still wanted it. Even now as she berated herself for the things she did last night, for what she allowed him to do, her body hummed for more.

And she absolutely hated herself for it.

*Not again. Never again.*

Hadn't she made herself that very same vow when she left California? She fled nearly two thousand miles to get away from him. Well, okay, if she couldn't be honest with herself, then who could she be honest with? She hadn't left just because of him. Her bombed acting career played a major part in her flight. She finally admitted to herself that she didn't have what it took to make it in Hollywood anymore than she did to be Devon Gerard's woman in the spotlight. So she ran from them both. Yet, after all the progress she made, she found herself here again, standing at the foot of her bed staring at a sleeping Devon Gerard while she dressed to attend a casting call for extras in a fucking movie.

Anger at herself for things she should've been able to fight made her eyes fill with tears. Yeah, she'd made that vow before, but this time she would stick to it. She did well for two years, didn't she? She did exceptionally well until Devon walked back into her life. Or rather, until the bastard broke into her house, she amended. How did he get in, anyway? A house belonging to a detective and a cop shouldn't be so easily infiltrated. She made a mental note to find out before it happened again. For the moment, she had more pressing matters to worry about.

Like how she could get Devon out of the house without Samantha seeing him. Even better, how could she get him out of the house without having to see him herself? He stirred and opened his eyes. No such luck with that one.

"Hey there," he said groggily. His lips eased into a panty-creaming smile.

Tess quickly looked away. He told her last night not to wear panties today. She didn't listen. Would he spank her again if he discovered that fact? God, she hated how her butt cheeks tingled in anticipation at the thought.

"Where are you going?"

"Work." She shot him a curt answer as she snatched up her shoulder holster from where they'd discarded it on the floor the night before and slipped it on over her uniform shirt. It wasn't a lie, exactly. She did have to report to the station after the audition. "Don't you have to be on set soon?"

She pretended to check the time on her wristwatch. Really, she was fishing for information. She felt stupid trying to hide the fact that she planned to audition for a part in a movie in which he held the lead role. Still, she didn't want him to know. What if she didn't get the part? Then he would never have to know she went to the set at all. And she'd have one less person knowing she still couldn't cut it when it came to Hollywood standards.

*Stupid fucking bet.*

"No, I don't have to show until next week."

"Really? That long?" Relief, cool and comforting, swept through Tess like an ocean wave. Now she only needed to do get away from him quick and she could keep her little secret.

"There's not much going on right now beyond extras casting and auditions for some of the smaller roles the directors and casting agents want to fill with locals. Hey, you should go out for one, Tess. I know there are a few cop parts. Then again, no, you shouldn't. If you did, you would end up being busy all week, and I wouldn't get to spend this off time with you."

Tess forced a laugh that sounded remarkably real and threw him a glance over her shoulder. "You're kidding, right? I gave up on all that starry-eyed fame two years ago. And I'm not sure how much time I can spare this week."

"What? Will you be working all the time?"

"Most of it." Tess thought fast. God, she couldn't spend another five minutes with him, let alone an entire week. She didn't want to go back to nights of sneaking around under the paparazzi's noses, and she didn't want the world to know she had it going hot and heavy with Devon Gerard. "I'm really busy. There's a big case I'm helping out with at work. It'll be really good for my career."

It wasn't total bullshit. She *had been* working with Ford, mostly on her own time, trying to pin down the shipment of opium that surfaced after the hurricane when members of Veng Kim Phay's Cambodian cartel escaped capture.

"I understand." He sat up. The sheet fell to drape around his waist. "I can see how much your new job means to you."

He sounded so sincere, so sweet. She had to look away. Her gaze dropped to his chest, hard and muscular and practically flashing a neon sign for a female's hands, her hands. She licked her lips, wanting to taste his flesh as much as feel, and forced her gaze back up.

He shrugged. "Still, I wish you would think about it. It would be pretty cool to have you on the set."



"I'll pass. Thank you."

"Tess, about last night—"

Tess held up a hand and shook her head. "I don't want to talk about last night." She turned, walked to the closet, and retrieved her weapon from the lockbox. "On second thought," she added, turning back to face him. She shoved the sidearm in her shoulder holster. "I do. I'm not sure yet how you got in here, but don't be here when I come home again. What happened last night," she stopped and shook her head, "let's just say it won't happen again. I left, Devon. I left California and I left you. I have a new life here, a different life that doesn't include either of you, and I like it. I'm going to keep it. I'm in control of it, and it's going to stay that way."

"Theresa, wait."

She walked to the door and stopped with her hand on the knob. She didn't turn around but spoke with her back to him instead. "It was good to see you again, Devon. I would appreciate it if you would get out before my roommate finds you here."

And with a shaking hand, a quivering belly, and an aching heart, she walked out into the hall, closing the door soundlessly shut behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Adrien Bingham hit the four-mile mark and picked up his pace. Another mile at a jog rather than the brisk walk of the previous four would get his heart pumping and primed to move on to the next level of his workout.

He glanced at the mirror-lined wall and surveyed the room behind him. Sunny's Gym appeared to be slightly packed for a mid-week morning. The torrential downpour outside, he figured, had much to do with that.

*Welcome to another glorious hurricane season on the Gulf Coast.*

He preferred to get in his five miles a day on the beach, or failing that, the track outside Silver Springs Memorial. Then he would head back to his apartment for an hour of strength training before hitting the showers and getting ready for work. But on days like today when cats and dogs fell from the sky, he ended up here on the treadmill amongst a dozen and a half other sweaty bodies moving from one workout machine to another.

The latest hit from Maroon 5 started up on the loudspeaker, and Adrien lost himself in the song. It wouldn't keep him occupied for the final three quarter mile, but it would hold him for the span of the three minutes and forty-four seconds it played if he let it.

He did, slipping into the zone as the lyrics flittered through his mind. *One heartbeat, one step, breathe in through the nose, breathe out the mouth.* The first verse of the song faded into the chorus, and he lost himself a little bit more in the music. He could listen to Adam Levin's voice for hours, especially when he sang about needing a wake up call. Boy, if only that song had been around when Adrien needed a wakeup call of his own.

Not that he didn't need one now, he thought, his lips moving along to the words. He left Brunson Macy and all his six foot tall infidelity and officially swore off men for all of three or four months. Hey, he needed love as much as the next guy. He was only human.

Human enough to find himself teetering on the edge of Crushville over a man he knew damned well wasn't gay. Human enough to let it happen less than a year after his Macy debacle. Oh, yeah, he definitely needed another wakeup call.

The song ended, and in the brief pause before Disturbed's *Indestructible* took over the radio waves, Adrien heard the sharp ping of the door sensor as someone entered the gym. Thaddeus Carter, SSFD firefighter and engineer. Thaddeus Carter and all his ivy league polish. Damn, the man gave a new definition to handsome! Adrien never cared much for Thanksgiving, but since purchasing the SSFD B

shift calendar, strictly for charity purposes of course, he found himself marking off the days until November first.

*Hello, Mr. November*, Adrien thought as their gazes collided in the mirror.

Thaddeus's thin, pink lips curved in a dazzling smile that affected Adrien from his head to his groin. His cock stiffened, his heart stumbled, and his step faltered. Heat exploded in his cheeks, and he quickly averted his gaze. For heaven's sake, what did he want to do, scare the man into bolting right back out the door?

Adrien didn't know much about Thaddeus Carter beyond his drool-worthy appearance and position on the SSFD B shift crew, but he didn't need any more information to know the man was as straight as the proverbial board. The grape vine put the man hanging with EMT Terri Vega, a fact Adrien admittedly found odd given that the same grape vine reported Terri's escapades to rarely last longer than a few hours, a single night at most.

*And there's another wake up call for you.*

Adrien bowed his head. The digital odometer on the treadmill indicated he'd gone a half mile over his usual five. He slowed his pace, bringing the conveyer belt to a stop, and stepped off. Thaddeus started his workout routine with a series of stretches and curls in the warm-up area. Adrien found it hard not to notice Thaddeus as Adrien walked past on his way to the punching bag. *Damn it all to hell*. Did the firefighter really have to possess a body to make a man's IQ drop into the single digits?

Yes. Yes, he did. Of course he did. And of course, Adrien had to crush on him. Lately, it seemed his destiny to swoon over men he couldn't have, and not just any men, *straight* men.

*Fuck!*

Adrien's first punch sent the bag swinging. It sent a lightning bolt of relief surging through him, too. God, it felt good. He let it flow, all the disappointment, the anger, the lonesomeness and confusion he harbored

for so very long. He put it all into each strike to the punching bag until his arms screamed and his pain lightened.

"If you aren't too worn out when you get through beating that bag to deflation, I could use a spotter on the free weights."

Adrien froze and then darted his head left just in time to prevent the punching bag from delivering a return blow to his face as it recoiled. His gaze landed on Thaddeus's back, on the purple muscle shirt stretching over the wide expanse of his shoulders. His attention slid down to Thaddeus's trim waist, narrow hips, and firm behind clad in yellow running shorts with a purple stripe up the side. Odd that a straight man would openly wear such flashy colors. Then again, maybe Thaddeus simply liked LSU.

Thaddeus turned, the expression on his handsome face part question and part challenge, and Adrien snapped out of the space zone he'd fallen into. Or maybe he simply figured out how to operate in the zone because his legs started to move, taking him closer even if his mind remained stuck in Holy Shit Land.

"You're Adrien Bingham, right? With the DEA." Thaddeus threw a strong looking leg over the weight bench and settled down. "We've never been formally introduced. I'm Thaddeus Carter, SSFD."

"Mr. November." Adrien took the other man's hand, registering the warmth of his palm, the firm grip of the handshake, before he realized what he'd said. He covered the intense heating of his cheeks with a wide-mouth grin. He came gloriously out of the closet at age sixteen. He didn't hide his sexual orientation from anyone. Why hide the fact that he owned a calendar with this man featured in a pair of bunker pants and a turnout coat left open to expose a bare chest gleaming with sweat? Okay, so they more likely applied baby oil to make it look like sweat. Still, the effect remained the same—drop dead, heart defibrillating, hormone racing, fantasy spawn to the max. "How's that Thanksgiving line up looking?"

Thaddeus laughed, a rich, deep baritone that only managed to intensify the heat coursing through Adrien. "The family has that

booked all the way, dinner at the big house with every Carter alive, present generation and at least eight decades past."

"Wow, it must take a lot of turkeys to feed that bunch." Adrien wanted to hold onto the man's hand inappropriately long and, because he did, he eased his hand out of Thaddeus's grip. He immediately felt the loss of the contact.

"And, thankfully, the holiday only comes around once a year," Thaddeus said. "Trust me, after a Thanksgiving Day with my family, you wouldn't want to see turkey again for a year."

"I bet." Adrien moved to stand at the head of the bench as Thaddeus lay down. "Are you ready to do this thing?"

Thaddeus curled his hands around the bar, took a deep breath in, and exhaled as he lifted. Adrien counted the two hundred and twenty pounds of weight on both ends. *Impressive*. Adrien usually topped at two ten.

"How many of these do you usually do?" He held his hands palms up, inches from the bar as Thaddeus brought the weights down, lifted them again.

Thaddeus paused to answer. "Two reps of fifty."

Adrien mentally started the count. *One, two, three...* "Do you come here often?" He winced when Thaddeus's rhythm faltered and let out a ragged laugh. "Wow, dude, I didn't mean for that to sound like some kind of cheesy pick up line."

Thaddeus's grin came quick and full of amusement. His eyes, the color of milk chocolate, glinted. "Don't sweat it. No, not often. Usually, I use the equipment in the weight room at the station. Failing that, I have a bench at home for when I'm off shift."

"But today you felt the need for a little escapade," Adrien supplied. "A little wind, buckets of rain, and a battle for machines at the public gym with other adventure seeking hard bodies."

Thaddeus gave a light chuckle. "Something like that."

A bead of sweat popped out on his forehead and trickled down his temple. Adrien felt the sudden crazy urge to lick it away. The man's head was all but eye level with Adrien's cock.

*Go ahead, Bingham. That's all you need, get a hard-on right in the man's face.*

"Did you guys ever catch those bastards that roughed up the lieutenant's sister a few months back?"

Adrien lost count of Thaddeus's reps and hoped the other man kept track. "No, but we will. Michael Cosmos and I are working closely with the FBI and local PD. We'll bring those fuckers down, and we won't stop until we do."

"Spoken like a dedicated agent." Thaddeus smiled but quickly became serious again. "That was a seriously messed up situation, what happened to Rayne Jasper."

Messed up put it mildly. Adrien hadn't been the agent to go in and find Rayne Jasper beaten and bloody on the floor of her brother's apartment. That job fell to his close friend, some-time boss and often partner, Michael Cosmos, along with one of Rayne's boyfriends, Ford Harris of the SSPD homicide division. Adrien didn't even manage a glance at Rayne until much later that evening. He didn't need to see her to know the members of the Cambodian drug cartel ran by Veng Kim Phay roughed her up pretty good. The goons followed her, nearly killed her, and left a message for Michael Cosmos that chilled Adrien to the bone.

"Cory still goes ape shit when anything about that day is brought up at the station," Thaddeus went on. "I can just imagine how much fun working with Ford Harris can be."

Adrien nodded. "He's relentless in his devotion to finding those guys and the drugs they set loose on our streets. We all are." And he remained especially hell bent on bringing the fuckers down before they made good on their threat to come after Michael.

Thaddeus lowered the weights, guiding them with a surprisingly steady strength to rest on the V brackets. He reached for the terrycloth

towel hooked in the waistband of his shorts and wiped at his face as he sat up. He turned, tipped his head back and looked at Adrien. "And you will. Something tells me there isn't much in life you want that you don't get."

Adrien blinked. Was this man flirting with him? As he stood here, staring into Thaddeus's Hershey chocolate eyes, he actually found himself believing it might be possible. Then Thaddeus stood, hooked the towel back in the waist of his shorts, and angled his head at the bench.

"Want to switch places? I'll spot for you if you like."

"I, uh, yeah, sure." Christ, he'd gone delusional. Adrien moved to stretch out on the bench. He reached up to grab the bar and his gaze collided once more with Thaddeus's. But what if he wasn't hallucinating? What if Thaddeus Carter was secretly gay?

And what if the Easter Bunny truly existed?

Then Adrien could only hope the furry cotton-tailed creature brought him lots of Hersey's milk chocolate next Easter.

*And now you are being delusional, Bingham.*

Adrien sighed and hefted the weights, forgetting to remove the extra pounds from Thaddeus's workout. He felt the burn in an instant and let it come. Maybe a little pain would keep his mind grounded in reality, because without it he felt himself falling faster and faster into a totally awesome but warped fantasy realm.

\* \* \* \*

The bottom fell out of the sky. At least that's how it looked from inside the lobby of the private airport known as Keaton Aire. Devon rested his elbows on the metal railing at the window, squinting as he attempted to peer through the sheets of rain. The wind out there seemed ferocious, hurling the rain drops into the window like rounds from an M60.

"It looks like you got inside just in time."

Devon shot a glance over his shoulder at the sound of the voice and caught sight of a casually dressed female walking his way. He recognized her in an instant, the resemblance unmistakable. Her chestnut hair hung straight and natural around an exotically beautiful face. The simple clothes she wore—lime green button-down shirt, khaki slacks, and lime green pumps—flattered her shapely figure. Yeah, the resemblance stood out, but nothing about the woman screamed for attention the way everything about her sister did.

"Looks like," Devon agreed. He arrived mere minutes before the clouds opened and the winds kicked in to simulate nature's own version of World War III. He tipped his chin at the window. "Can the plane land in this?"

"They land in worse, I assure you. Have you ever seen a hurricane?"

Devon shook his head. "Not first hand. Is it anything like this?"

She gave a light chuckle. "Multiply what you see out there by about ten or fifteen and you might come close."

"No thanks. I'll stick with the earthquakes."

"Hurricanes give more warning."

"Maybe, but earthquakes are gone faster."

"Not if you count aftershocks."

Devon laughed. "Touché."

She stopped beside him, one forearm resting on the railing. She reached across her body with her other arm and extended her hand. "I'm Angelina Keaton-Graham."

"Yeah, I figured as much." He took her hand. She had a firm, no-nonsense handshake. "You're Tess's sister." Her eyes weren't green like Tess's, but browner with flecks of green, flecks that seemed to swirl in surprise at his comment.

"You know Tess, then?"

"I'm Devon Gerard."

"Yes, I know who you are." She let out another quick laugh. "Your face is currently gracing the bedroom walls of teenage girls



everywhere. Hmm, probably a lot of grown women's cubicles, too. Then there's *Danger Storm*. That's the title, isn't it?"

"That's the current working title." He hoped they came up with something better before the film hit final production.

"I don't think you will find a soul in this town that doesn't know your name thanks to the movie and the fact that you're playing the lead role."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"I didn't know you and my sister were acquaintances."

*Acquaintances?* Talk about the understatement of the week, the century, the freaking *millennium*. "Tess never mentioned me to you?"

Angelina shook her head. "No." She frowned. "Honestly, she doesn't talk much about her time in California. I think it was a pretty difficult segment of her life, more painful than she's willing to admit. She's always been so headstrong and stubborn."

Devon forced a smile. "Headstrong and stubborn, yeah, that's Tess."

"You must know her pretty well, then."

"You could say that." And yet she hadn't told her sister about him. Tess made the choice not to reveal their relationship to the world. She hadn't wanted to be known as his woman in the eyes of the entertainment world. She wanted to make her own way, build her own fame. So they kept it discreet. Only a handful of people knew of their past involvement. Still, he expected she would have told her family about him. All the months they spent together, the times they shared, so much more, and she hadn't mentioned any of it to her sister. Why? Had he meant so little to her?

*She left you, man.*

Yeah, she left him and stayed away for over two years. She went on with her life and didn't take a single glance back at the world she left behind. Christ, no wonder she had no problems avoiding him for the last week.

She'd gone those two years without sex. He felt as shocked by that knowledge as he had the night she admitted it to him. That had to count for something, didn't it? That she would go for over two years without sex after leaving him. Why? Because no other man had measured up?

*Getting conceited now, Gerard?*

As much as he wanted to believe it to be the answer, he figured there must be some other explanation.

"Thanks for letting us use this place." He changed the subject because, damn, his heart felt like it wanted to break in two. He thought they made progress the other night, thought that despite the two years and plus months they spent apart, Tess was ready to be his again, maybe even this time for everyone to see. Apparently, he thought wrong.

"It's an even give and take. *Danger Storm* will be good for the people of this city, for the economy. It's bringing jobs into the area, even if only temporary ones. The contract agreements the movie producers made with the city council will give to the people of our city as well as your people in Hollywood. It's a great idea to use local businesses for dining and supplies. They hired local contractors to work on building the sets and cast local people in the roles for extras and even some smaller parts. Plus, they rented out the fairgrounds and buildings for a makeshift studio. Everyone is winning here."

"And a small airport like this makes it easier to keep the paparazzi at bay," Devon added.

Angelina smiled. "And then there's that."

"This place reminds me of the set on *Wings*. You know the 1990s sit com with Steven Weber and Crystal Bernard?"

"Hmm." She glanced over her shoulder at the lobby behind them. "I suppose it does." Silence fell between them for a few heartbeats, the only sound that of the rain pounding against the window. Then she spoke again. "It stunned me when Tess decided to audition for a role in *Danger Storm*. Now that I know she knows you, maybe I shouldn't

be at all surprised. Who wouldn't want a chance to be on the set with heartthrob Devon Gerard?"

Tess wouldn't. Or that's the answer he would've given Angelina if she asked that question a half a second ago. Devon stared at her. Surely, he heard her wrong. "Tess went out for a part?"

"You didn't know?" Angelina asked slowly.

Devon shook his head. "Did she get it?"

Angelina nodded, but a swirl of suspicion shifted in her eyes. "That much didn't surprise me. My sister can act. She can be melodramatic at times, I'll give you that. But when it comes down to it, she's got the right stuff. I've never been quite sure why she failed, so to speak, at the big-time in California. If those Hollywood suits had grown up watching her the way I did, she would've been offered the lead in every blockbuster smash made."

"She's always had what it takes," Devon murmured. He never thought for a minute that she didn't. If she allowed him to give her just an ounce of help, he might have been able to convince someone in the right place of the fact, too. Instead, she insisted on doing it all on her own, refusing to allow his fame and connections to influence her career in any way, and she failed.

He finally concluded her heart simply wasn't in it. When she left, he forced himself to accept that she didn't care about anything in Los Angeles enough to fight for it. And when he saw how well her police uniform fit her, not only her tantalizing body but her mind and heart as well, he knew he'd been right, at least in part.

"I thought so too, but she seems much happier these days. You know, with her job on the force." Angelina's laugh held an edge of amused disbelief this time. "Who would have ever thought, my sister, a cop? It still blows my mind."

"Yeah, mine, too."

"You're in love with her, aren't you?"

The blunt question so seemingly out of the blue made Devon gape at Angelina.

She lifted a shoulder, her lips unfolding in a sweet smile. "I lived with Tess most of my life, remember. I can see through pretty much any type of act, no matter how good you are."

"You must get really bored at the movies," he muttered and diverted his gaze back out the window. The rain had let up some. He could actually see the runway now, bathed in a narrow glow of sunlight that started to poke through the stormy gray clouds.

"Do you have plans for this evening?"

Her brisk change in subject drew his attention back. He stared at her. What? Was Tess's sister hitting on him now?

Angelina's smile bloomed to a full grin that reached her glinting eyes. "You're hot, sweetie, but I'm a happily married woman to one of the hottest men on the SSFD B shift, to be exact. And if he isn't enough, he has an identical twin with the FBI." The glint in her eyes danced, and Devon got the sudden suspicion the story didn't end there. Hot twins plus an amazingly sexy woman, Hollywood had gone so many places with that one already. He couldn't help but wonder if any of those scenarios fit.

Devon put on his best blank expression. "I honestly didn't think—"

"That I would come on to you after I just accused you of being in love with my sister?" she finished for him. "Yes, you did, but that's okay. If it weren't for my husband, well..." she let the implication hang.

Devon shook his head and couldn't hide his grin. "I think I would like to meet your husband."

"Great because that's exactly what I have in mind. He would love to meet you. How about dinner tonight at our place? If you aren't otherwise engaged, of course."

"I'd like that."

"Fantastic! I'll write down the directions before you leave. How's seven o'clock? I can make sure Tess is there."

"Seven is fine." Devon stopped, only then catching the enticing tone in her voice. "You'd do that?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"The better question is why?"

"It's been a few weeks since she's been out to the house for dinner."

Devon narrowed his eyes. "Are you matchmaking, Mrs. Graham?"

"Me?" Now her tone rang of pure innocence.

Devon laughed. "Leave the acting to Tess."

Angelina wrinkled her nose. "I'm that bad at it, huh? Okay, maybe I am a little. It's just so obvious how much you care for her. She needs that." A world of emotion rotated in her tone and her eyes. "We haven't always been the closest of sisters. She can be pretty hard to deal with sometimes."

"Tell me about it," Devon muttered.

Angelina smiled. "I guess I can be, too. She's grown up a lot in the last couple of years, though, really matured and become her own woman. I know she would argue that's not a new development, but she'd be wrong. Still, she's missing something, and I'm starting to think that something might be you. I don't know what the deal is between you, and frankly, it's not my place to ask. At least not to ask you," she added and winked. "Thank goodness we've grown closer these last years, because I can't wait to pick her brain on this one."

"The whole sisters-are-supposed-to-share-everything bit, right?"

"You bet. Thing is, when someone cares about a person so much that even an A-list actor like you can't hide it, there must be something there. I figure a little nudge in the right direction can't hurt."

Devon sighed and wondered if she was right. "Tess might get pretty pissed if she thinks you're trying to set us up. She's been, um, pretty much avoiding me this week." Damn, that was a hard thing to admit.

"Listen up, sweetie." Angelina stepped back and planted a fisted hand on her hip. "I may not be able to act worth spit, but I can certainly handle my sister. Now, do you want my help or not?"

"I want." Devon didn't hesitate.

"Good, then seven o'clock it is." She tipped her chin at the window. "It looks like the plane is here."

Devon followed her gaze, and sure enough, a personal jet just made a smooth landing out on the runway. The rain had nearly stopped, leaving a light drizzle and a gentle breeze as the only reminders of the hell-breaking storm.

"Looks like."

"Come on, I'll show you out." She led him out the door and onto the open cement area between the terminal and runway. "That's one of the many pleasures of a small, private airport. You can't do things like this at the big municipal landing pads."

Devon didn't bother to tell her that he'd actually been on the tar mat at several municipal airports. Connections and a few Oscar nominations got him damned near anything in life he wanted.

The plane came to a full stop and the narrow door on the side opened. Milton Remy, acclaimed director and one of Devon's closest friends, exited the plane moments later. The man stopped at the foot of the steps, cast a look to the sky, then met Devon's gaze and grinned.

"I started to think we might get to film in the midst of the real thing." He raised his voice to be heard from his distance still several feet away.

Devon glanced at Angelina, caught her nod of approval, and met his friend halfway. "I've been told that paled in comparison. Good to see you, Milt." He hooked an arm around the man's shoulders as they walked. Friends for more years than Devon could count, he reckoned he owed the older man a good forty percent of the credit for his acting career. Forty percent because Milton's influence only partly contributed to Devon's success, and Devon figured he had to possess

at least ten percent of acting talent, or no amount of weight from anyone would've done any good. Milton Remy served as one of Devon's two greatest mentors, his connection, his confidant, his friend, and damn, it felt good to be working on a movie directed by him again.

"Devon, my man. You're in town early."

"Had to be here to roll out the red carpet for your arrival," Devon kidded.

"And yet I see no carpet," Milton pointed out with an ear-to-ear grin that put Devon in mind of a grown up Louis from *Revenge of the Nerds*.

Yeah, Milton Remy could've led the nerd division of the Lamda Lamda Lamda sorority. Hell, maybe he had at one time. Ebony hair combed to one side and no strand out of place, nondescript brown eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses, and a crooked grin that exposed a perfect set of brace-straightened teeth set up his character profile. His clothes, however, told a different story. The man exuded Armani all the way.

Nerds meet *GQ* magazine, Devon often thought and stopped being surprised at how well it worked for his friend a long time ago. Women went for Milton Remy in a major way. Too bad for them, he'd been happily married for over a decade. At least, he seemed happy for most of that decade.

Devon shrugged. "The rain screwed up my plans."

"Are you sure the rain is to blame and not a late night spent with Theresa Keaton?" Milton fell into the select handful of people who knew about Devon's relationship with Tess. "That is why you're in town so early, isn't it? I got word from the casting agent last night that she's been slated for a part in *Danger Storm*."

Jesus, did everyone know about Tess's part in the movie but him? Apparently. "I never could slide one by you."

"It hurt to find out that my best bud only took the lead role in my movie because he wanted an excuse to be closer to a woman."

"It hurt, huh?" Tess wasn't the only reason he'd accepted the offer to play the lead. Accepted the offer? Hell, he started out persuading Milton to give it to him. The role held the potential of putting him up for a nomination at next year's Oscars. The time came for him to get back in the game. He turned down numerous offers since Tess left him, reached a point where the offers stopped coming, and locked himself away for weeks on end unable to face the bullshit that had become his life. When he came out of seclusion, he drank, he partied, and he fucked. None of it erased his need for Tess. He heard about *Danger Storm* and approached Milton, all but begging his friend for the role of Raymond Mage. Devon saw the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. He saw a kick ass part in a blockbuster movie set in his woman's home town.

"For about a half a second." Milton winked.

"I didn't spend the night with Tess."

"I take it things aren't going as well as you hoped."

Devon shook his head. He told Milt a lot of personal shit, but his relationship with Tess remained something he never went into great detail about. "How's Sabrina?" He turned the tables on Milton by asking about the man's wife.

Milton sighed and the goofy grin faded from his lips. "Rocky but hanging in, man."

"Well, there you go." Could he describe his relationship with Tess the same way? Rocky certainly fit, but were they hanging in? He guessed he would see at seven o'clock tonight.



## Chapter Four

Devon pulled his rented Jaguar into the drive of the Keaton Estate, parking behind a midnight blue pickup truck with a bumper sticker that read: Want to steam up your kitchen the right way? Invite a fireman for dinner.

He cut the engine, chuckling to himself as he got out.

The place looked like a set straight out of a southern bell movie. Lush green grass blanketed a lawn decorated with exquisite fountains, marble statues, and lavish gardens spread around a house of three-story opulence. Painted an ivory white with hunter green shutters, giant pillars lining the front porch and a scatter of balconies off several of the upper rooms, the place screamed antebellum mansion.

"There's nothing I like to see more than a handsome man with a smile on his face." Angelina stepped onto the front porch, a beaming smile lighting her lips. "Welcome to the Keaton Estate. Care to share the joke?"

"Who's cooking dinner tonight, you or your husband?"

Angelina looked perplexed for all of a half a second, and then the smile returned larger than before. "Oh, the bumper sticker. Jason's actually a *really* good cook. All the men in his family are culinary geniuses. I've never known him to burn anything, though the guys at the department still rag him about a pot of charred spaghetti."

"What they don't know is I started fantasizing about her when I should have been cooking." A man walked out behind Angelina, tall, muscle-bound with light gray eyes and buzz-cut dark hair. He slipped an arm around Angelina, extending his other hand to Devon as he

walked up the steps to the porch. "I'm Jason. Forgive me in advance if I act a bit star struck. Glad you could come tonight."

Devon shook the man's hand. "You're forgiven. I appreciate the invite."

"Oh, and dinner tonight was a joint affair, though Silvia prepared most of it."

"Silvia?" Devon asked.

"My mother," Angelina answered.

"Ah, the queen of the estate."

Angelina directed him inside through the open door with a flourish of her arm. "She would love to hear you say that."

Devon stopped in the foyer, taking in the Italian fringe rug covering the diamond patterned marble floor, the crystal vases, the Van Gogh painting. *Real or a replica?* "Will your mother be joining us for dinner, too? I would love to meet her."

He hadn't heard a thing about Silvia Keaton from Tess, but he read about the woman. That's how he stayed in touch with Tess's life the last two years. She fought tooth and nail to remain out of the newspapers and tabloids when in Los Angeles only to land on the front page of every media reporting publication shortly after her return to Silver Springs. She got fame, all right, but not the limelight she sought to achieve in California. Instead, she landed in the middle of a family debacle, nearly lost both her mother and her sister, and killed her own cousin.

"I issued the invite, but she already made plans." Angelina stopped at his side and waggled her brows. "Hot date. She's been spending an awful lot of time recently with an appellate attorney out of Billings." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I think they're getting pretty hot and heavy. She did most of the cooking, but left Carmella to do the serving."

"Carmella would be the housekeeper," Jason supplied. "Keeping up with Angelina can be a challenge sometimes."

"No worse than Theresa, I assure you."

"I believe you're about the only person I know who calls her that. Aside from Mom, of course, and that's usually only when she's angry with her."

"Honestly, I tend to call her Tess most of the time, too, except when we're, um, well..." Devon stopped at the knowing glint in Angelina's eyes. "Sorry. TMI."

She giggled. "Not at all. You simply confirmed my suspicions. She'll be here within the hour by the way. If you know Tess, then you know she always has to make an entrance."

"It's the Hollywood in her blood," Jason commented. "We'll have drinks in the parlor until she gets here."

Devon followed the couple into a room furnished with a grand piano, a wet bar, and a turn-of-the-century sofa with two armchairs. "This is a great house. You should probably be thankful the set designers haven't gotten a glimpse of it."

"It does have that picturesque look, doesn't it?" Angelina asked with no loss of pride in her tone. "The property, the house, have been in the Keaton family for more decades than I can count." She made her way to the wet bar and lifted a bottle of brandy. "It's been through some renovations, of course, some modern amenities added, even the balconies off the upper rooms are new within my mother's lifetime."

"I noticed those." Devon nodded when she held up the bottle of brandy. She poured three fingers into a glass and brought it to him. "They have a real Romeo and Juliet feel."

Angelina and Jason exchanged a look loaded with secret passion.

"They do, don't they." Angelina returned to the bar. She poured two more glasses of brandy, one for herself and the other for her husband. "More like Rapunzel, actually. We had a little moment like that shortly after we met. And, of course, hopeless romantic that Tess has always been, she used to pretend to be Rapunzel as a little girl." She passed a glass to Jason and then took a slow sip from hers. "Perhaps after dinner tonight, the two of you can play out the scene for us."

Devon gave a dry chuckle. "If I know Tess, she'd let me get all the way up the trestle before knocking me back down on my ass. Does she know there will be four at dinner tonight?"

"I'm sure she assumed there would be, though I'd bet she expects the fourth to be our mother." Mischief sparkled in her grin.

Devon savored the burn of the first sip before he spoke. "You didn't tell her you invited me, then."

"I thought we would surprise her. I'm sure you know how Tess likes surprises."

Devon thought about the way he surprised Tess at her house his first night in town. He'd thought she liked that surprise, until the sun came up and she once again walked out of his life. "Surprises involving diamonds and pearls, yeah, but finding me in her childhood home..." He shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doing, Angelina."

\* \* \* \*

*What the hell are you doing here?*

The demand stuck on the tip of Tess's tongue as she froze in the doorway of the front parlor. Shock sent icy shards pricking beneath the surface of her skin. Damn it all to hell, she spent the last week avoiding Devon Gerard. She never expected to run into him here. But why not? She collided with him that first night in her own home. Why shouldn't she find him again sharing a drink with her sister and brother-in-law in the home she'd grown up in?

"We work shifts of twenty-four on, forty-eight off," Jason said from his spot on the love seat next to Angelina.

"And B shift, your shift, takes over again tomorrow morning at nine." Devon relaxed in one of the high-back armchairs, his ankle resting on the opposite knee, a sifter of brandy perched on his thigh. The man painted the picture of laid back cool and, *damn skippy*, he was truly gorgeous.

He'd gone with dress slacks and a button-down shirt tonight, both in a deep brown, accented with a tie of blues, reds, and gold. He left the tie charmingly loosened and his hair down, mussed, and ruggedly sexy. Tess wanted to run her fingers through the silky smooth strands as much as she wanted to ball them in her fist and yank them out for him being here.

She closed her eyes, tamping down the anger and finding a slot in her mind to save it for future use. Right now, she needed calm, cool. She could play tranquil. She could be composed. She hadn't spent years learning to act for nothing.

"Well, well, well, what a pleasant surprise." She all but sang the words as she sashayed into the room, her back straight, and her head high. She even put an extra swing in her hips as she moved toward Devon. "I didn't realize the three of you knew each other."

Devon stood, his gaze on her full of apprehension until she gave him her best 'hey, babe, it's nice to see you' smile. He took both her hands in his and drew her close, hooking her arms behind her back as he leaned in to brush his lips to her cheek. The position was both casual and possessive, the kiss equally soft and territorial. In that split second, that single move, he managed to bind her, if only for an instant. Fuck if her body didn't respond to the show of control in a way that made her nipples bead and her pussy spasm in a blissful cacophony of sensations.

"Milton Remy flew into Keaton Aire today. I showed up to meet his plane."

"And met my sister at the same time," Tess filled in the blank. She reached for Devon's brandy and took a long swallow. It burned all the way down, a delicious fire that mixed with the desire churning inside her.

"I came up with the bright idea of dinner," Angelina volunteered.

"Oh, really." Tess turned to watch her sister move to the wet bar. Their gazes met, and a wealth of knowledge passed between them. She'd been framed, set up by her own sister. *The bitch.*

"For me, of course." Jason grinned like a kid meeting his favorite superhero. He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs. "Dude, I have all of your movies on Blu-ray."

"Dinner is served, Mrs. Angelina."

All attention shifted to the doorway where the housekeeper stood in her apron and a dress that might have been new in 1946. Tess cringed inside. All her life, she'd attempted to make-over Carmella only to find the woman in the same out-of-date clothing and stained aprons day after day.

"Thank you, Carmella," Angelina said. "Will you be joining us this evening?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Angelina." Carmella shot a bashful glance at Devon, no doubt recognizing him for the movie star he was. "I'm headed to my room for a night of cuddling with Nora's latest beau."

Nora Roberts, ah, yes. Maybe Carmella didn't recognize Devon after all, Tess considered, remembering only then that the housekeeper preferred books to television any day of the week.

Angelina laughed. "Enjoy, Carmella."

"I sure will, ma'am."

"You have some catching up to do." Angelina handed Tess a glass of brandy. "Bring it with you. And don't blame him for this." She leaned in to whisper in Tess's ear as the four of them moved across the hall to the dining room. "I really did come up with this idea."

"Why?" Tess couldn't stop herself from asking.

Angelina's gaze softened, and she placed a gentle hand on Tess's shoulder. "I just want to see you happy, sis."

Tess bit her tongue over the great big 'fuck you' that sprang to the tip even as her throat constricted. She quickly looked away. Damn it, she nearly declined the invitation to dinner. She and Angelina had never been close. Sibling rivalry put their childhood into a mild focus. They managed to build a bit of a relationship in the last few years, no matter how fragile. Still, Tess always felt like the proverbial third wheel around her sister and brother-in-law.

*Because you're jealous.*

She would've cursed the voice in her head if the words hadn't been so true. What her sister found with Jason made her jealous. She envied Angelina's confidence, too, the way her sister turned her life around so completely. She got the airport, the man, the home, and soon she would likely have the family.

Not that Tess wanted the airport or the house, she reminded herself as she took a seat at the table next to Devon. She certainly didn't want the family. And what the hell was her problem, anyway? She turned her life around, too. She had her job and loved the little house she shared with Samantha.

*But you still lack that total confidence, that blinding light of happiness.*

"We have to talk later." Angelina's conspiratorial whisper drew Tess's attention back. "You must tell me everything. Talk about Mr. Hunky."

Tess felt the smile bloom. Mr. Hunky. The memory rushed to the forefront of her mind. She'd called Jason that standing in Angelina's office at Keaton Aire shortly before her sister and the firefighter hooked up the first time.

"You have no idea." Tess slipped easily into girly mode, though it lasted only for an instant.

"Oh, but I will, as soon as you tell me."

Tess walked to the table and sat. Memories twisted with reality in her head, pulling her into the zone.

"I don't think your sister meant what she said about you having some catching up to do," Devon leaned close to say. "But if you want some more, I would be happy to go back to the parlor and get it for you."

Puzzled, Tess looked at him. Catching up? Want more what? Her gaze dropped to her brandy glass, her now *empty* brandy glass and the answers clicked into place. Great, she let herself become so lost in thought that she downed the drink without realizing. "No, thanks.

Wine will do." She tipped her chin toward the bottle of red already open and breathing in the center of the mahogany table.

"Long day?" He reached for the bottle and poured her a half a glass.

She sipped before answering him, letting the flavor linger on her pallet before she swallowed. The combination of the brandy and the sweet grape flavor mixed in an offering that settled her nerves and took the edge off her anger.

"Not at all." She graced him with her best Oscar-winning smile. She practiced that smile in the mirror since the age of six. Back then, felt so certain she would use it to dazzle the crowd when she someday took the stage to accept the most coveted award in acting. Now she used it to melt him to his knees. "Just good brandy."

He laughed and grazed the backs of his fingers along her arm. "That's my Theresa."

Tess suppressed a shudder even as the flames in her belly spread to ignite a fire between her legs only he could put out. The fire continued to swell, consuming her insides and monopolizing her thoughts as they ate dinner. God, she wanted him, *needed* him, and damn if it didn't piss her off to no end. She should've turned around. The instant she spotted the flashy Jag in the driveway, she should've realized it belonged to him and driven away as fast as she could.

Instead, she sat beside him for the better part of two hours listening with half an ear to the conversation ball ping-ponging around the table between Devon, Jason, and Angelina.

"Raymond Mage's character is loosely based on Ryan Magee, yes," Devon told Jason, "but the role has been adapted. Mage isn't ex-military like Magee. He's a firefighter. That much stuck. Raymond finds himself mixed up with a cartel trafficking drugs into the city in the middle of the hurricane. From my understanding, that holds some truth, as well. But all the military details, the kidnapping of Magee's stepson, the stuff with his wife, none of that is in the script. Mage has a love interest, but she's nothing like Tina Magee."



"Which is why you are able to get away with this?" Tess twisted a finger in his hair. She quickly suppressed a low sigh as more memories sent her mind into sensory overload. Crystal clear images of his smooth strands gliding over her naked flesh swamped her. Her nipples beaded from the remembered feeling.

"You don't like it long?" Devon answered her question with one of his own.

"Actually, I do." Tess picked up her wine glass and sipped as she studied him over the rim. "I didn't think I would. Not that long, but it looks good on you."

"Thanks." He scrutinized her for a long moment, obviously weighing his time with whatever he wanted to say. "You could've told me you planned to audition for the part."

She knew it would eventually come up in the conversation. She'd had no doubt he would know about her role in *Danger Storm* by now. Though his words might have been construed as accusatory, his tone held more hurt than anger. The same emotions created a whirlpool in his eyes.

Tess sighed, averted her gaze, and set down her glass. "It was a bet. Nothing more. I lost a game of poker to one of the guys I work with. I'd already busted my pocketbook, all that I wanted to at least, so we put the part up as an ante. Whoever lost had to audition."

"And it ended up being you." Devon nodded slowly. "You could've blown it. The bet didn't mean you had to actually get the part, did it?"

"I wasn't about to blow an audition on purpose."

"Did this happen before or after the other night?"

She wanted to lie to him, started to, but the imploring look in his eyes made the truth spill from her lips. "Before. It's a onetime deal," she said quickly, attempting to cover the fact that she lied to him before leaving her bedroom the morning after. She put all the conviction and determination she could possibly muster into the statement.

Devon nodded. "Like I said that morning, it'll still be nice to have you on the set." He turned to Jason. "You should come by sometime next week, maybe between rotations at the department. I can show you around the make-shift set."

"Dude, that would be so cool." Jason beamed as if Devon had given him the golden key to Hollywood. It made Tess smile. She couldn't remember ever seeing her brother-in-law act so positively immature about anything.

"Does anyone want dessert or shall we move back to the parlor for more brandy?" Angelina asked, pushing away from the table.

"Actually, I'm going to head out, Angel," Tess said before anyone else could answer. She purposely shortened her sister's name the way she only did when she wanted something. Tonight, she wanted her sister's understanding. This wasn't easy for her. Being here like this with Devon wasn't easy, and she wanted her sister to realize that. "I've got an early day tomorrow."

"I'm glad you came tonight." Angelina obviously wanted to say more, but to Tess's relief, she gave Tess the understanding she sought instead.

"I'll follow you out." Devon stood with her, helping her with her chair like a true gentleman.

Tess didn't bother to argue. She knew it would do her no good. Instead, she said goodbye to Angelina and Jason and led the way out the front door.

"Are you okay to drive?"

She shot Devon an exasperated look over her shoulder as she walked to her car. "I didn't have that much to drink." She reached for the door handle of her car, but his hand closed over hers before she could pull it. He stopped right behind her, his front pressed to her back, the heat of his body an electric assault to her senses. She closed her eyes, attempting to retain her bearings, but already feeling them starting to slip.

"You really meant what you said the other morning." His lips rested against her neck, the faint graze of them as he spoke sending slivers of excitement coursing through her. "About not wanting to act anymore, you really meant it, didn't you?"

"Every single word." She turned between him and the car until she faced him. Maybe it wasn't the smartest move she could've made because now her breasts pressed against his chest, her nipples rubbing the hard muscles, her belly flirting with his groin. She only did it because she wanted to look him in the eyes when she told him without any ounce of doubt that she had no intentions of ever following an acting career again. "I'm happy with my life, with my job, Devon. I'm not the same person I was when I left California."

His gaze skipped over her face, his expression somber and at the same time understanding and kind. There was softness there, too, mixing with something else she couldn't quite define, didn't know for sure she wanted to.

"I see that." He turned her hand over in his, lacing their fingers together. "I felt it in you the other night." He cupped her cheek in his other hand and lightly grazed his thumb over her lips. "But there's still a part of the Tess I know in there, too. Why do I get the feeling you don't want me to know that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her brain scrambled, the circuits misfiring at his touch, the gruffness of his voice, the intense tenderness in his gaze. Her tongue slid between her slightly parted lips of its own volition, licking the pad of his thumb as it glided once more over her lips.

Desire flared in his amber eyes. "I think you do. Touch my cock, Theresa. Reach down and cover my dick with your hand."

It was a test to see if she would do it. Damn it, he did know, and fuck, she wanted it. She stared at him, her free hand itching to do exactly as he said. She could feel his cock between them, not fully erect but well on its way. She needed only to touch him, cup him

through his slacks as he told her to do, and he would be harder than a rock. She knew it, wanted it, fought not to do it.

She averted her gaze when she felt the tears burn the back of her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Devon watched the struggle shift through Tess's expression and caught the glimmer of moisture in her eyes. Jesus, was she crying? Steel bands squeezed at his heart. He wanted to talk to her tonight, to find out why she kept avoiding him, why she really left him, because in the last week, he realized that he didn't have a fucking clue. Not like he thought he did.

But just like any other time he got within ten feet of Theresa Keaton, all plans of talking sizzled to nothingness beyond the order for her to touch him or to let him touch her. The magnetic force between them always proved too great. Neither of them could ignore it. They couldn't resist it. They never could.

"Theresa?"

She shook her head sharply.

For quite possibly the first time since he met her, he didn't know what to do. Should he push her to talk? Let her leave? Order her to get naked and fuck him in the middle of her sister's driveway?

Of all the options that sprang to mind, he had a feeling the first would only drive her to the second, and he'd be no closer to figuring out what was going on than he felt right now. No way would he go for the second option. He already let her walk away from him twice. In a case like this, the third time would definitely not be the charm.

That left the third option, or some variation thereof, he decided. It didn't seem right, taking the sex route when his woman stood before him on the verge of tears. Something about her stance, about the torment moving through her expression made him think it was exactly the right approach.

"Touch me, Theresa," he said again, adding a little more authority to his tone. He wanted her hand on him. He wanted more. He wanted to be skin-to-skin, to feel her lips wrapped around his aching cock, to slam inside her slick heat. But for now, he simply needed her touch.

He gave her the order first to keep her from hopping in her car and driving away. He repeated it for the same reason and to watch her reaction as he said the words. She wanted to do it. He saw that much in the depths of her glistening gaze. It turned her on, being told what to do, forced to submit to his demands. Still, he sensed a new fight in her that hadn't been there before, something almost akin to self-loathing. That part, he didn't understand.

He almost took the first option after all. Christ, they really needed to talk. But then she slipped her free hand between their bodies, turning it to cup his semi-erect cock through his slacks, and the mere contact made his thoughts scatter as his heart in his throat.

"Oh, yeah." He sucked air through his clenched teeth as she started to stroke him through his pants. He shouldn't let her. He hadn't told her to do it. He'd told her only to touch. But the way her palm covered him, the way her fingers closed around his shaft even though the crotch of his pants felt so freaking good, he couldn't find the strength to stop her. "That's it, baby. Unzip my pants and stick your hand inside. I don't want anything between your palm and my shaft."

Her hand shook slightly as she fumbled with his zipper, lowered it, and then, oh yeah, her delicate fingers closed around his shaft without the barrier of his pants, and his world exploded in a riot of rapturous desires. She stroked him, her fingers offering a pressured squeeze to his shaft as she glided her palm down to his full length and up again.

"Get on your knees, Theresa. Take it in your mouth."

She looked at him then, excitement and arousal battling with defiance in her gaze. He hit on the thing she enjoyed most. She once told him she got nearly as much out of sucking a man's cock as she

did being fucked by one. And damn, the woman was a pro at the act. She shot a furtive glance at the house and then met his gaze again.

"No one can see us." He dipped his hand beneath her hair to caress her nape. Her skin felt soft and warm beneath the curtain of silk made by her chestnut tresses.

She scanned the yard around where they stood. She'd parked on the far left of the drive, their position shielded by both her car and a row of tall shrubs along the side of the porch. They weren't in total seclusion, but one would have to pointedly look for them to even spot their shadows.

Despite the fact that their cars hadn't moved, signaling their continued presence at the Keaton Estate, Devon didn't believe Angelina or Jason, or even the housekeeper would make that extra effort to spot them. To heighten the arousal, he used the hint of the threat to his advantage.

"Not that it matters. Does it?" Her gaze snapped to his once more, a keen stimulation aglow in her breathtaking eyes. Oh, baby, he knew that would do the trick.

Devon tightened his hand on her nape and guided her to her knees in front of him. "Now suck me, Theresa. I want to feel those wicked lips on my cock."

Her tongue touched him first, a light graze of the tip that traveled over the head to dip inside the weeping slit. His balls tightened, stinging as if smacked by a whip. All the blood in his body seemed to rush to that one spot. His cock hardened to the point of pulsing pain, and he tried to concentrate on breathing through the mounting pleasure.

Her lips closed around the engorged head, her tongue circling the tip, finding the ultrasensitive skin at the fold and turning that single lick into a torment that made his body jerk in response. The madness continued as she curled her slender fingers around the base of his shaft and angled her head. She trailed her tongue along the length of his erection, that little strip of moist silk following the pulsing vein

that ran along the underside until her tongue collided with her hand. Then she eased back, repeating a snail's paced progression as she found the head once more.

Devon bared his teeth at the wash of insurmountable pleasure. It tore at his nerve endings, contracted his muscles, and controlled his very breath. He tightened his grip on her neck, stopping her from making another of those dick-suffering passes with her tongue.

"I said suck it, Theresa, not tease." A part of him hated to take away even an ounce of her enjoyment, but Christ, at this rate, he would blow his wad down her throat before either of them had the chance to really find fulfillment. She closed her mouth, and he brushed the head of his cock over her lips, tracing the outline with the gooey thickness of his pre-cum. "Open your mouth."

She did, taking in first the head, her tongue flaying over the too sensitive skin once more in what he knew to be her last act of defiance. Then her lips tightened, and she swallowed down his length until her lips met her fingers. She sucked his thick cock head to the roof of her mouth, working his shaft with her lips and drawing a low, guttural sound from deep in his throat that he never quite heard himself make before.

Jesus, could it be possible to die from a freaking blowjob? He hadn't thought so before, but damn, there might be a first time for everything. Maybe the time they spent apart did it, maybe the simple thrill of having her mouth on his cock again drove him closer to this madness, or maybe it was practice. Fuck, he didn't want it to be the latter. Just because she hadn't had sex with another man since him didn't mean she hadn't done other things, oral things. Whichever of the three, she never gave him a blowjob like the one she gave him now.

Her tongue moved over his throbbing head, her fingers stroking his aching shaft. Her lips continued to work his length, rolling and clamping down on him like an erotic vise. She took his erection deep.

He felt the head hit the back of her throat. He swore she would steal his soul when she grazed her teeth up his length as she eased back.

Devon went mindless, a string of psychobabble spilling from his lips as she sucked his cock down again, this time releasing her hold on his shaft to take in more of him. "Ah, yeah, baby, that's it. Suck it deep, Theresa."

She did, flexing her throat and tilting her head until she got the right angle to swallow him all the way. Only when her lips met with the flesh at the base of his cock did she stop. She held him there, her throat working, her mouth sucking, and his legs trembled. It made his knees weak the way she hummed around his length until the vibration shook him to his toes, and then she eased back once again. The sharp threat of teeth grazing along the sides of his shaft until they met with the tender fold of skin at the head of his cock brought goose pimples to every fleshy surface of his body. The way she paused when she reached the engorged head this time blew the last ounce of his control.

His hand fisted in her hair, but before he could force her to move the way he wanted, she did it on her own. She sucked his entire length fast and deep. Her tongue circled and tasted. Her lips clamped and rolled the flesh. The muscles in her throat tightened, stroking his shaft. She started a vicious and soul-wrenching rhythm.

"Christ, baby." Devon's hips rocked against her face, settling into the tempo she set. "So greedy."

Her hands moved around his legs to grip the backs of his thighs as she devoured his cock as if she starved for it. The soft sucking sounds she made drifted to him on air that sizzled with eroticism. He wanted to stop her, needed to stop her before he lost the final, tenuous hold on his control.

He couldn't stop her.

"So perfect. So sweet. So hot. Theresa, you're killing me." He didn't often allow such an admission to slip from his mind and out his mouth, and she knew it. She giggled, the devious little vixen, and the



delighted sound beat along his shaft and traveled through his balls until he knew he couldn't take anymore.

"Enough, baby." His fingers still fisted in her hair pulled. His cock slipped from between her wicked lips with an audible pop.

"I'm not done." She sat back on her heels and looked up at him.

Later, Devon knew he would laugh about the gorgeous pout that curved her glistening lips, but right now he could only think of being inside her again.

"Yes, you are." He made his voice firm, leaving her no room to argue. "Stand up, turn around, and put your hands on the car."

She lifted a brow as she stood in front of him. "Are you finding a certain thrill in putting me into positions we use on the department?"

He hadn't thought of it that way. He really only wanted her in a perfect position to fuck her from behind. But now that she mentioned it... "Are you finding a certain thrill in commenting on every order I give you, Theresa?" He turned her question around even as she followed his bidding.

The conniving grin she shot him over her shoulder as she placed her hands on the roof of her car and spread her legs shoulder width apart should have earned her another spanking. Instead, it sliced through his shaft like a double edged dagger made of pure tempestuous desire.

"Maybe." She gave her hips a wiggle of both invitation and torment.

Any semblance of the tears he thought he saw in her eyes when he first caught her here after leaving the house vanished. He saw only the Tess he knew, his semi-defiant submissive who found intense pleasure in pushing the envelope of her dom's authority. She would find a button and make it work for her, bringing him to the very verge of punishment, sometimes even a little over that thin line, before she submitted as she ultimately wanted to do.

If they'd been in his trailer on the set or back in her bedroom in her little house, he might have slowed the pace, given her a taste of

the punishment she obviously craved. He couldn't out here in the open where, despite his firm belief they wouldn't get caught in the act, the possibility remained all too real.

He closed the distance between their bodies and yanked up her skirt. A growl escaped him, sounding of more animal than man as he met with the barrier of her panties. She wore a pastel color tonight. In the dim light cast only by the outside lamp on the house, he couldn't tell exactly their color, but gauging the lavender blouse she wore with a charcoal gray skirt, he guessed purple. Theresa Keaton always matched from her designer shoes to her silky, lacy, thankfully barely there underwear.

Devon didn't take the time to remove the panties. His aching cock wouldn't allow it. The need to be inside her, to find release for them both sliced through his balls leaving him no room for play or hesitation. He reached around her, delving a hand between her legs. He pushed aside the thin strip of satin and found her folds with a finger. Her juices oozed into his hand.

"Jesus, Theresa, you're dripping wet." He rested his forehead on the back of her shoulder and took a moment anyway simply to feel that sticky sweet nectar. "I wish I could taste it, sip it until I drank you dry."

He found her clit with the tip of his fingernail and heard a little whimper leave her as he flicked the nail over the sensitized nub. "You were itching for punishment tonight." He gave the swollen slit another flick, and she shivered against him. "I have just the thing in mind. It won't be tonight, though. I'll let you think on it, let it simmer in your mind until next time." He purposely hardened his tone, lifting his head to speak directly into her ear. "There will be a next time, Theresa." She shook her head, a small movement he might have imagined. He couldn't be sure, but real or not, he wouldn't allow her to deny this thing between them any longer. "Avoiding me as you have done this week will not happen again."

Devon used his hold on her hip to angle her lower body out. His cock needed no guidance to find her slick opening. He thrust inside her in a single move of ferocious velocity that made them both cry out with the sudden explosion of pleasure and the hint of pain. He rocked her, pounding his cock inside her sopping channel until sounds of bodies slapping and ragged breaths filled the night air. He fucked her. No other word described the primal mating that consumed them. When his control snapped, his come spewing from his body with an intensity that left him barely able to stand, he knew Tess was right there with him.

Melded, sweaty, breathless, and sated, they quivered together against the car for several moments before she turned her head. She brushed her lips to his nose. "I have to go," she told him softly. "Please let me leave without anything more tonight."

The 'please' did it. That and the shimmer he noticed in her eyes as he stepped back and righted his pants. She pulled down her skirt, opened the car door and slid behind the wheel, starting the engine and backing out of the drive before he could fathom anything at all to say.

## Chapter Five

Thaddeus shifted Engine 1 into high gear and punched the gas as he pulled out of the station house. He didn't get a zero to sixty response like he did in his Ferrari, but the American LaFrance F-Class Mid-Engine with its Detroit Diesel Series-60 beneath the hood had some get up and go. SSFD's Engine 1 could kick some major ass, especially when taken into account the five-hundred pounds of water filling the UPF tank and the seventeen-hundred and fifty feet of fire hose folded in the hose bed. He grinned to himself as the truck hugged the road around a curve. God, he loved being behind the wheel of this beautiful monster.

"Engine 1, Rescue 4 and HAZMAT responding," Lieutenant Max Jasper's voice came over the truck radio in response to the dispatcher's call from her place housed in the sheriff's office downtown.

"Roger that, 902," the dispatcher's no-frills, deadpanned voice came back. "Police are already at the scene."

"That was fast," Bailey Lamont remarked from her spot in the jump seat behind Ryan Magee.

"They were probably in the neighborhood." Magee grabbed for the receiver, then obviously decided better of it and put it back, going instead for his hand-held.

"I didn't know someone opened a doughnut shop on Washington Avenue," Graham piped up from the backseat and everyone chuckled.

"There isn't, but the new Starbucks next to the interstate opened last week," Lamont supplied. "I hear it's the new Krispy Kreme for the men in blue."

"You two are bad." Magee grinned and keyed up his hand-held. The truck radio would stay on the SO frequency. The hand-helds every member of B shift wore on their belt would be changed from the SO band to one specifically assigned to the crew. "906 to 902, are you taking point on this one, Lieutenant?" Unless Captain Dean Wolcott decided to roll or the District Battalion Chief Tripp Barrett showed, the lieutenant would assume incident in command of the scene.

"Affirmative, I want you and 921 on the hoses. 933 can aid with any evacuations. 950, leave plenty of space for Rescue 4 to get in there. If this is as bad as the report, they're going to need in fast."

Thaddeus slowed as he approached the intersection at Washington Avenue and Highway 90. He scanned the four lanes of traffic even as he steered into the empty turning lane to get around it.

Lamont let out a low whistle as the flashing blues of the SSPD patrol car on scene came into view first, followed immediately by the early 90s model Dodge Ram. The van with its smashed front end sat catty-corner in the median. A propane tanker lay on its side at the corner of Washington Avenue and Calhoun Street. "Guess I might need to do some evacuating after all."

Thaddeus eased the fire engine to a stop several feet from the accident, letting the Rescue and HAZMAT trucks take the lead. He'd thought the lieutenant might be overly cautious assigning Lamont to order people out of nearby homes. Given the way this scene looked, he'd been wrong. The propane tanker had overturned in the yard of a single floor home on the corner of the block. If the truck leaked, the danger could be insurmountable. A couple of people, presumably the occupants of the home, stood on the front porch while a scatter of other on-lookers kept a safe distance in neighboring yards.

"Anyone want to bet on which vehicle ran the red light?" Jason Graham pushed open the back door of the cab and hopped out.

"My money's on the van." Magee followed Graham out of the truck and around to the pump side.

*Yours and mine both.* The setup of the scene appeared too perfect for there to be any other cause. The tanker looked to have been headed north, the van turning south off Calhoun Street. He could all but see the whole thing play out in his mind. *The van speeds up to the intersection, fails to stop despite the red light, the tanker swerves to miss the van and—timber—over goes the tanker.*

Thaddeus put Engine 1 in neutral and pulled the emergency brake. He left the motor running, his foot still on the parking brake for safety purposes as he reached for the pump-engage knob to the right of the steering wheel. With the pump now operational, he put the gearshift back in drive and climbed out of the cab.

Graham and Magee started pulling the pre-connect hoses from the upper hose bed. Thaddeus double-timed it to the control panel, pulled the reach-rods to charge the lines, and watched the hoses expand as the water filled them. Graham and Lamont cracked the nozzles, letting the water drip as they moved in behind the lieutenant.

Thaddeus watched Max Jasper decked in full HAZMAT turnout gear approach the propane truck. The sight put him in mind of Michael J. Fox in the first *Back to the Future* wearing his yellow encapsulation suit. The lieutenant's personality when it came to playing with chemicals and the glories of science, as he often called them, resembled the Doc more. Thaddeus couldn't help but wonder if Max would have the frizzy gray locks and far off look of the mad scientist in a few more years. He already sported the spiked blond hair and eyes filled with the crazy gleam.

Thaddeus turned to check the gauges and monitor the pump settings while his focus centered on the conversations bouncing through the radio on his belt. He listened for any cue to what his crew might need from him.

Bailey Lamont led the residents of the three nearest houses to vacate despite growing belief that the propane tanker survived with nary a leak. Graham and Magee kept the pre-connect hoses trained on the overturned truck while the lieutenant did his inspection of the

tanker. Cory Nox and Terri Vega readied Rescue 4. An ambulance arrived, the two-man crew splitting up to help Cory and Terri with the injured occupants of the vehicles.

Terri had some muscle. Thaddeus gave her that as he watched her heft the driver of the tanker out of the truck cab with little help from the ambulance technician on the ground. From Thaddeus's vantage point, the driver appeared to be about a hundred and eighty pounds of flab, coherent, and unharmed save for the gash on his forehead and scrape on his cheek.

The driver of the van hadn't fared so well. Nox's tone sounded clipped and authoritative even from Thaddeus's distance as he ordered the ambulance technician at his side to go for the stretcher. "He's out cold. Pressure is erratic."

The technician returned in a flash with the stretcher and, together, he and Nox removed the unconscious driver from the front of the van. Thaddeus saw Nox duck back inside the van, for what Thaddeus didn't know, but when the EMT straightened again, he got his first clue.

Nox rounded on the technician, signaling for the officer on scene taking witness statements across the four-lane road even as he reached for the radio on his belt. "914 to 902."

At the overturned tanker, the lieutenant pulled off his helmet, obviously secure in his findings that the tanker hadn't sustained any damage that would cause the propane to start leaking. "What is it, Nox?"

"You're going to want to get more officers out here, sir. We've got what looks to be some pretty interesting candy in the passenger's floorboard of this wreck."

Jasper turned, one brow lifting. The true definition of Nox's 'candy' obviously not lost on him. He twisted the knob on his hand-held, switching frequencies and keyed up the mic. "902 to SO, we need narcotics officers dispatched to the accident on the corner of Washington and Calhoun."

Even as Thaddeus heard the lieutenant's transmission flow from the radio inside the cab of Engine 1, he saw Nox exchanging his hand-held for his cell phone. He guessed the EMT was dialing his roommate, narcotics detective Ford Harris.

Thaddeus's fingers itched to reach for his own cell phone. Too bad for him he didn't know Adrien Bingham's number.

\* \* \* \*

The part turned out to be larger than Tess auditioned for. A few rewrite requests by director Milton Remy, a shift in lines, and the elimination of an extra's role, and Tess's part grew. It went from three segments and as many lines totaling five minutes of screen time to five segments and a handful of lines equaling nearly fifteen full minutes on the screen.

She adjusted her grip on the handle of the .9mm in her hand, much like her department issued weapon, but loaded with blanks, and waited for the command to settle on the set. She felt surreal as she watched the commotion on the sideline.

The scene took place in the storage room of the severely damaged Best Buy. The electronics store had been reconstructed since the storm, but insurance claim photos coupled with computer generation and enhancements would bring back the destruction when the movie crew edited the segments together for final production.

She'd always found it strange as well as interesting how a movie got made. They shot each scene in individual segments that were later edited and merged together to create the whole. A segment shot on the first day on set might not necessarily be the first scene of the movie, as was the case today.

The electronics store proved easy prey for looters immediately after the hurricane, a dereliction of the law that occurred frequently when such catastrophic storms hit cities. An officer with the SSPD



had even been shot attempting to apprehend a perpetrator in this very storeroom. They planned to recreate that event today.

She dreamed of a part like this for so very long. She worked her ass off in Hollywood to achieve exactly this, but she always managed to miss it by the tip of a fingernail. Now, she held it in her grasp, a sizeable role in what would surely be a major box office smash next year, and it seemed to fall sweetly in her lap. All thanks to a hand of four ladies.

*Go figure.* She chuckled to herself as the order bellowed over the low cacophony of voices and sounds.

"Settle, people. I want quiet on set." A perky redhead with a pit bull face dressed in nondescript clothing clapped her hands once. All hint of noise disappeared in the storage room.

Tess closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and felt herself sink into the role.

"And...we're...rolling." The director drew out the words.

Tess opened her eyes, everything inside her focused, her lines already on the tip of her tongue. The perpetrator stepped into view, his arms laden with a box of brand spanking new iPods. Tess leveled her weapon using the two handed stance so popular in films to line up the shot.

"Freeze!" The moment the word left her mouth she shook her head and lowered her prop gun.

"Cut!" Pit bull yelled, though she could've whispered and been heard just as clearly with the silence in the room.

"What happened, Keaton?" Milton Remy didn't move from his seat in the director's chair on the far side of the room. "The scene was going perfect. Why did you stop?"

"You want this realistic, don't you, Milt? Isn't that why you cast career cops in the law enforcement roles? Well, I'm one of those real cops." Tess didn't give him a chance to answer. She turned toward him, angling her head and trying her best to keep the 'gee, you're such a dumb ball' out of the expression she felt twisting her face. "And real

cops don't say freeze. That's so Hollywood. Can we please get past the days of *Charlie's Angels* and *Chips* and get with the new millennium?"

Someone quickly stifled a snicker from somewhere behind the stage lights. She thought she saw the corners of Milton's lips twitch, but couldn't be sure from the distance of the few feet between them.

"O-kay," he said slowly, his head nodding and lips working. Oh, yeah, he wanted to smile. "What would you suggest, Officer Keaton?"

Hmm. Well, now, that sounded better. Tess squared her shoulders and gave him a straight look. "Hold it, or even stop, is more commonly said than freeze. I say freeze and I feel like the short officer with the squeaky voice in *Police Academy*. All that's missing from the line is dirt bag."

Milton did smile then, a quick quirk of his lips that disappeared nearly as fast as it came. "That's a part you could've never played. Okay, we'll do it your way. Say whatever comes natural. If it works, we'll use it."

Tess got back in place, her teeth grinding from the little dig. She could've played the part of the squeaky voice female cop as good as Marion Ramsey. Well, maybe not as good because Ramsey was a hell of an actress, but Tess could've done the part justice.

The command to settle came once more, and Tess let the insult roll off her. She knew of only one way to set Milton straight, and she currently stood in the perfect position to do it. A half a second passed before the director's voice filled the air.

"And action!"

The guy playing the looter, Tess blanked on his name, stepped into view, and she raised her weapon, leveling for the shot. "Hold it," she said in her best don't-fuck-with-me-because-I'm-a-cop voice.

The guy stopped, shifted the box in his arms, and leered at her. "I am holding it."

That wasn't the line. He didn't even have a line in this part. He was supposed to drop the box, pull out his own gun, and take the shot. The

entire sequence screamed Hollywood so loud it made Tess's skin crawl, but according to official reports, the whole incident went down remarkably close to the way writers scripted it.

Tess didn't even blink. Like the camera she knew to still be in motion, she rolled with it. "Put it back on the shelf, and no one has to get hurt."

"Yeah, right." The box hit the floor with an audible thud as he pulled a prop .22 from his waistband. There was a click that would later sound like a real gunshot when the sound effects were added. Tess spun, pretending to feel the impact of the bullet to her thigh even as she got off a shot of her own.

"Cut!" Milton snapped out the command this time. He walked to the center of the room. "Not bad. A bit more adlibbing than I expected, but we'll take a look at it when we watch the dailies this afternoon. Take ten and we'll run it again the same way." He turned to speak directly to Tess. "My first instinct is to ask where you learned to act like that, but I have a feeling it would only piss you off."

Tess lifted a brow. She had worked on movie sets with Milton Remy, auditioned for more parts in movies directed by him than she could sneeze at. She even had dinner with him on several occasions, always with Devon as the two men were close friends. He remained one of the very select few that knew of her and Devon's involvement. Never once did the man give her any indication he thought she would ever cut it as an actress.

"Follow your instincts, Milt. They seem to be giving you pretty sound advice right now."

He laughed. "You always tried too hard, Tess. I never quite figured out if you wanted it too bad or didn't want it enough."

Tess stared at him for a long time, shock washing through her in a combination of hot and cold waves. She looked away, her gaze colliding with Devon's. He stood with December Johansen, his co-star and love interest in the movie. His lips moved in obvious

conversation, but his attention transfixed over the actress's shoulder, seemingly glued to Tess.

Was it too girly of her, too petty to find the moment so refreshing? Hollywood's latest beauty queen stood between her and Devon, yet Tess held every ounce of his undivided awareness. December Johansen made all the men swoon with her tumble of blond ringlets, icy blue eyes, all over tanned skin, and a body to make women snub their noses and envy her to her grave. She looked absolutely nothing like Tina Walker, the woman her character supposedly stemmed from. No more, Tess admitted, than Devon favored Magee with his long hair and continuous five o'clock shadow.

*That's Hollywood for you.* Tess felt an odd ball of admiration for the business pricked by a pin of disgust. They took what they wanted of a true story, shaped and molded the events into the way they wished it happened, and made a movie out of it that sold billions. They did exactly that with *Danger Storm*.

December apparently realized she held less than half of Devon's focus because she shot a glance over her shoulder. She looked at Tess talking with Milton. A frown etched itself between her perfectly plucked brows.

"I don't know," Milton went on when she didn't respond. "Maybe you just went out for the wrong parts. This one works for you." He patted her on the shoulder before stepping back. "Good job. I expect you to do it just like that for the next take."

Tess watched him walk away. She couldn't move. Her brain scrambled over that short exchange of words. Had she merely been going for the wrong parts, attending the wrong casting calls? She had wanted the starring roles. What actress didn't? She went for the dramas, the chick flicks, even the horrors and thrillers figuring they would give her exactly that. The agent she worked with set her up for lead auditions and secondary roles out the wazoo. Few of them turned out to be right for her. None of them made her a star.

*You always tried too hard, Tess.*

Yes, she had. She fought for what she thought she wanted until she felt she might die from the struggle. The heartbreak she suffered when she finally gave up, when she allowed herself to admit at last that she didn't have what it took...

Hadn't been anywhere near as wrenching as it should have been, she suddenly realized. She grieved more over her choice to leave Devon than she did over walking away from her ruse of an acting career. Because she hadn't wanted it bad enough?

Maybe.

Possibly.

She had wanted it. She loved acting. She still did. The takes and retakes they did today, the concentration it took to get into the part, sinking herself into the role of a fictional cop, all felt exhilarating.

She had missed it, but she hadn't missed it enough. All the years, all the struggles, all the upset and disappointment proved to be for a childhood dream. She went through it all as part of the rebellious Theresa Keaton who walked away from a family that insisted they knew what she wanted just so she could prove them wrong.

Instead, she licked her wounds and came back with her tail between her legs only to discover her true self in the one place neither she nor her family ever dreamed. She could play this part so well because she wasn't truly playing a part. She *was* the part. She had done exactly what Milton instructed today. She said what came natural and it turned out right. It felt right because right for her was not the acting like a cop or any other role, but actually *being* a cop.

*Well, hell.*

\* \* \* \*

Devon kept his distance. He ordered a single malt scotch from the bar and perched on a stool to sip it while he watched her. Tess sat in a booth with a few other extras from the movie set, her hands gesturing in a wild conversation about what, he hadn't a clue. Whatever the

topic, it excited her. Her expression became as animated as her hands, her eyes dancing and lips smiling even as they moved.

He knew so little about her. The realization struck him like a physical blow after leaving the Keaton Estate two nights before, and it rankled to no end since. He thought he knew her like the back of his hand, believed he knew exactly what made her tick. How could he have spent two years with the woman, shared so much with her, fallen in love with her, and not know the most elemental things about what made her tick?

*You never truly talked.*

He wished he could ignore the voice in his head. Better, he wanted to scream at it, to insist it was wrong. They had talked. Of course, they had talked. How could they not? But really, the voice was right. They never lay in bed in the wee hours of the morning and discussed things that mattered. She hadn't told him of her family, of the life she left behind in Silver Springs. He hadn't told her of his childhood, of his parents, or the events that brought him to Los Angeles. They talked the business, acting, movies, and projects. They hadn't talked about future plans, about feelings, about marriage or starting a family.

The last thought made him take a larger sip than he intended, and he ended up gulping down a mouthful. Marriage, a freaking family, what the hell did they put in this scotch to have him thinking such things?

"You okay?" Milton slapped Devon on the back as he took the stool next to him.

Devon spun to face his friend, deciding it best to give himself a break from watching Tess, at least until his thoughts returned from Weirdville. He had plans for Tess tonight, a strategy that definitely involved talking, but asking her to marry him certainly wasn't in the script.

"Yeah, just, well, fuck, Milt." He stopped while he seemed to be ahead. He didn't want to keep any secrets from his friend. Nor did he

want to discuss the turmoil of emotions going through him about Tess right now.

Milton nodded as if he understood and turned to order a bourbon on the rocks from the bartender.

*He looks rough.* Devon studied his friend. Milton's face seemed paler than usual. It shouldn't have been so noticeable in the dim light of the barroom. That fact that Devon saw it so clearly made it all the more worrisome. Puffy bags and dark circles rimmed his eyes, adding to a strung-out appearance.

*Not strung-out.* The phrase made Devon cringe. Weary. Hadn't Devon seen the same expression on his own face when he looked in the mirror for weeks, hell, *months* after Tess left him? He looked so bad the media began to speculate a drug habit. Then, when he volunteered to take a drug test and make it public to keep from ruining his reputation, they moved on to money troubles and then family issues. They never figured out how close they came to the truth with the last.

Devon knew the same held true for Milton. The man hadn't developed a drug habit. He lost his son to a cocaine overdose barely five years ago. No way would he fall victim to substance abuse. Things with his wife, however, had obviously gotten worse than he let on.

"She did good today." Milton turned back to Devon, his glass of bourbon in his hand. "Fucking phenomenal to tell you the truth. Hell, you saw her, Devon."

Yeah, Devon saw her and he hadn't been the least surprised. Milton gave Tess an inch on the set today, and she took the mile. She ran with the scene and turned it into a portrayal much more realistic than anything the writers put to paper. "You sound surprised, Milt."

Milton chuckled, albeit dryly. "That would be because I am."

"You worked with Tess before. Not on a part this size, but you even cast her in a couple of extra roles yourself."

"For you." Milton tipped his glass back and took a long pull of the bourbon. "And if you ever tell her I said that, I will deny it to my grave."

"She would kill you if she ever found that out." *Kill me, too.* It was exactly the kind of thing she hadn't wanted to happen, the precise reason she insisted their relationship remain on the down low. It turned out beyond difficult to keep their association from the public eye. Sometimes, he didn't know how they pulled it off. But they had done it. Not one whiff of their involvement ever reached the nose of a single reporter.

"No shit. She could've had it made. How many women would've passed up a chance for the easy road the way she did? There aren't enough fingers on both my hands to count the number of directors I know who would cast her in a co-starring role if it meant they could get you in the lead part."

"Tess is one of a kind." And he loved her so much more for it. "She isn't one to take the easy road, despite what most believe. She never wanted to build her career off my popularity. She wanted to get it all on her own or she wouldn't take it."

"She didn't take it. She gave up and left Los Angeles before she got what she wanted. I'll tell you like I told her today on set, she either wanted it too badly or not badly enough. I never quite figured out which. Question is, will she come back now? This part, with the rewrites I requested, could put her on the map."

"It could." Devon already thought of that. He saw the way she took to the role today, the sheer brilliance with which she played the part. "If that's what she's looking for."

"You don't think it is?"

"She auditioned for the part on a bet, Milt. In Tess's words, she left all the starry-eyed fame behind. I think she has all she wants already." Damn, it pained him to say that.

"And that doesn't include you."



It pained him more to hear that. "I wish it did." Devon frowned. "Somehow, I don't think it does."

"Figures," Milton muttered in disgust. "What is it about women? We give them what they want, and it's still never enough."

"I don't know, my friend, but something tells me that women likely ask the same questions about us."

"You want to know the bitch of it? No matter what they ask of us, we'll keep on giving. They know it, too. They wrap us around their little finger and string us along until we're nothing more than dogs begging at their feet."

Such bitterness, Devon thought, angling a look at his friend. Despite his marital troubles, Milton rarely resorted to this level of animosity. It made little sense considering the last Devon heard, Milton's problems with his wife stemmed from things Milton wanted that Sabrina wouldn't give rather than the other way around.

"I've never seen you beg for anything." It made quite a mental picture, though, Milton on his knees before his incredibly sexy, shapely, red-headed wife. Devon smiled.

"Stick around." Milton clanked his glass to Devon's in a toast and then tipped it back, drinking down the remains like a shot rather than a half a glass. "I'm on the edge." He tipped his chin in Tess's direction, his lips curving in a grin of doomed amusement. "As are you. I predict before the end of production that woman is going to have you begging on your knees."

Devon wanted to argue. He started to, but closed his mouth on the words. If any woman could make him beg for anything, Theresa Keaton could. Tonight, however, he planned to make sure she did the begging, and the talking, a full submission to the last.

*I think she has all she wants already.*

His own words reverberated in his head. He followed Milton's lead, gulping down the last of his scotch and ordering another. In that moment, he vowed a prediction of his own, one that would insure by the end of production he would be included in Tess's wants for good.

\* \* \* \*

Thaddeus leaned back, hiding a smile around the rim of the chocolate martini glass he brought to his lips. Two tables over, Tess Keaton struggled not to spew a mouthful of her beer on the extra sitting next to her. Her cheeks puffed out with the effort. Thaddeus didn't catch the full text of the comment, but heard enough to know it involved the extra's desire to be holding something other than the box he held in the scene they shot that morning at the Best Buy. The extra turned two shades of red. Whatever Tess said must have been a classic retort.

"Do you always do that?" Across from him, Terri Vega followed his attention to the other table and then leveled a look at him.

"Do what?"

"Just," she waved a hand between them, "watch people."

"It's part of my training, remember. I watch the action unfold. I like to watch people."

"Mhmm, I can relate. I don't like to watch just anyone, but there are some in particular...."

Thaddeus heard her sentence pointedly trail off. He knew exactly what she meant, who she liked to watch, and he so didn't want to go there tonight. He flicked a glance her way and took another sip from his glass.

Terri reached for the basket of trail mix. Rather than popping a small handful in her mouth, she ate the nuts and dried berries one at a time. Her lips curved around each bite, her tongue snaking out to draw the trail mix into her mouth. She did it with such skill that it came off as nonchalant rather than blatantly sexy.

Thaddeus tucked his tongue in his cheek and continued to look the other way.

"It looks like they're having a good time," Terri commented with only a slightly disappointed inflection in her tone.

"I think that guy is trying to give Tess some shit, but she's dishing it back to him in a spoon." He admired that about Tess. The woman possessed a hell of a take-no-shit-off-of-anyone attitude. He didn't know her well, but their paths crossed often enough on the job. The police responded to most of the calls the fire department ran. He saw a lot of her around the station house, too, with Jason being married to Tess's sister. Word put her as the black sheep of the Keaton family. Thaddeus could definitely relate and figured he and Tess would likely hit it off if ever given the chance.

"From what I've heard about her, she could do it, too. You've got to admire that in a woman." Terri picked up her beer, her words unknowingly echoing Thaddeus's thoughts. "She's got spunk and the class to make it work for her."

"That she does."

"You ever thought about asking her out?"

Thaddeus studied Terri. Sometimes, he just didn't get her. He knew—okay, maybe 'knew' wasn't quite the right word. He strongly suspected she wanted more from him than the friendship they managed to develop since he signed on with B shift. Yet, every so often, she tossed out questions like that. She would point his attention toward another woman and make the suggestion he should go for her. It didn't make sense.

"No." He left it at that, simple and honest. Then, because he really didn't want to get into the reasons why, he steered the conversational train onto a different track. "I never thought about this place becoming the hang out for the cast and crew of this movie while in production."

Terri shrugged and glanced around. He knew she saw what he did, a lounge packed to capacity with everyone from the shabby dressed extra playing the bag lady under the pier to the starkly handsome Devon Gerard sitting at the bar.

"It's the best bar in town. Just think, you're really a part of all this." She feigned a visible shiver. "Isn't it exciting?"

"All what?"

"The movie, this crowd. Come on, Thad, you could be a star!"

Thaddeus cracked up. "I seriously doubt that, Terri. Hell, I don't think I want to be a part of all of this on a regular basis. I mean, look at these fools. No wonder the tabloids have such a field day with stories."

"I bet Kevin and Delilah wouldn't mind one of those stories spawning from tonight," Terri speculated of the Paradise Lounge owners. "Think of the publicity they would get just having the bar's name mentioned. I'm sure they never expected to be this busy in the middle of the week."

More often than not, the clientele of the Paradise Lounge ran to the public service departments. Firefighters, police officers, doctors, and the likes stopped by for a quick brew after shift's end or packed out the tables with the occasional co-worker's birthday party. Seldom did the lounge see every table full, every barstool occupied.

Even as he surveyed the crowd, Thaddeus's gaze landed on one of those occupied barstools, and his gut did a delicious flutter. Adrien Bingham pulled a bill from his wallet and placed it on the bar, giving the bartender a dazzling smile as he exchanged the money for a drink.

"I sure didn't," Terri went on. "I'd hoped for a quiet drink, some easy conversation, and..." She shrugged and ended the sentence with a "Who knows."

Thaddeus knew. Or at least he figured he did. Despite her boggling question about Tess Keaton moments before, Terri's attempts to take their relationship somewhere he so didn't want to go were becoming more and more obvious lately. Terri didn't generally beat around the bush. He wondered why she did so with him. Then he realized two very distinct points. One, she wanted him to make the move. Two, he didn't want her to stop beating around the bush because if and when she did, he'd have to come clean. All the way clean.

"I think I'm going to scoot." She set her beer on the table and pushed her chair back, preparing to stand. "You want to go to my place, watch a movie, grab some popcorn? I've got a six pack in the fridge. I've even got a bottle of Kahlua, Baileys, and some vodka for those girly drinks you like so much."

Thaddeus stood with her, his mind scrambling over the possibilities. Did he go for popcorn, a movie, and a drink at Terri's place or shoot for another drink and conversation with Adrien Bingham here? The answer seemed a no brainer.

"I think I'm going to stick around. I see someone I wanted to talk to about the movie. One of the scenes I'm in starts filming tomorrow." He couldn't lie for shit. He knew it and, damn, he hated doing it. He supposed he could've told her the truth, but then how would he explain his wanting to talk to Adrien Bingham?

*How about with more of the truth?* He watched obvious disappointment flicker through Terri's eyes and then she smiled and shrugged.

"Sure, okay. Well, I guess I'll see you later, then."

Thaddeus watched Terri leave the bar. Damn, he needed to stop this pretending bullshit with her before he ended up really hurting her. He sighed, turned, and said a great big silent thank you to fate when the barstool next to Adrien emptied.

\* \* \* \*

Adrien smelled him before he saw him, a heady mix of musk and pheromones that drifted over him, through him, and settled in his groin. Glory be to God, when had he become such an animal? He'd seen Thaddeus sitting with Terri Vega across the bar, and a green and all consuming jealousy seared through him. It seemed ridiculous how badly he wanted the man, how he'd been completely unable to get Thaddeus out of his thoughts since running into him at the gym.

"Mind if I join you?" Thaddeus asked as he sat down on the barstool next to Adrien.

Adrien took a deep breath to steady himself before he looked at the other man. It didn't help. Instead, he managed to draw in more of Thaddeus's tormenting scent.

*God, he smells so good.*

"Hey." Adrien turned his head, smiling into Thaddeus's eyes and feeling himself start to melt. "Of course I don't mind. Didn't I see you over there with Terri Vega?"

"She went home."

"In that case, can I buy you a drink?" Adrien averted his gaze, shaking his head. He started to apologize when Thaddeus stopped him with his response.

"I'd like that. Thanks."

Adrien signaled the bartender. His heart thudded so hard against his ribcage that he wondered how Thaddeus couldn't hear it. "I'll have another drink and a, what is that?" He shot a questioning look at Thaddeus.

Thaddeus hadn't looked away. His gaze remained transfixed on Adrien's, and holy heaven, Adrien imagined seeing all sorts of lovely things in the depths of Thaddeus's eyes. "Chocolate martini, please."

"Be right back," the bartender told them, but Adrien only half heard her. He lifted a brow.

"A chocolate martini?"

Thaddeus shrugged. "I'm a chocoholic."

Adrien let his gaze slide down Thaddeus's front. He knew he shouldn't, knew the move fell into the category of way too forward, but he couldn't help himself. Maybe he shouldn't have finished that first drink so quickly. "You could've fooled me with that body."

Thaddeus's cheeks turned a truly charming shade of red. "Hence the reason I spend so much time at the gym." He tipped his chin at Adrien's glass when the bartender returned with their drinks. "What's your weakness?"

"Sex on the beach."

Thaddeus grinned, and Adrien felt his whole world tilt. "I could comment on that, but I think I'll leave it alone. I heard that drug bust landed on your desk."

It took Adrien's brain a moment to switch gears. It got stuck somewhere between the first gear of wanting desperately to hear Thaddeus's comment and the second gear of talking about work. "It did." He finally nodded. "I just came from the hospital. The guy is still in a coma."

"So there's no news on where the drugs came from?"

"We believe they're connected to the shipment we've been trying to track down from the Phey cartel."

"No shit! I thought they found cocaine in that car?"

"They did. Three kilos of coke, but they got two vials of pure, liquid opium, too." And pills. Adrien didn't know exactly what stopped him from mentioning the pills.

"Son of a bitch." Thaddeus gasped so quietly, Adrien almost didn't hear him over the chatter in the bar. "So what happens next? Do you think the guy in the car will give up his supplier?"

"We're hoping so."

"What happens to him if he does?"

"If the information he gives us proves to be legit, he'll be ticketed for running the red light and get off on the drug charges."

"And you'll go after the other guy," Thaddeus concluded.

Adrien nodded. The DEA worked that way. They would bring in the little guy, get him to talk in exchange for a drop of charges in a technique known in the agency as a flip, and then go after the next higher up. Then they would repeat the process. It let the little guy, the small drug pusher back onto the street, yes, but agents got the bigger guy, the one with the larger drug supply, behind bars. And if they got lucky and managed to flip each one until they made it up the ladder to the king pin, then they could recognize a true victory.

The agents of the Silver Springs division of the DEA started looking to celebrate that true victory just after Hurricane Emilio. All the world put their focus on the war against the drug lords in Afghanistan and their four-billion-dollar-a-year heroin trafficking enterprise. Meanwhile, the narcotic most frequently processed to chemically create heroin had hit the streets of Silver Springs in pure form, and its roots reached back to an entirely different country.

The first signs of the cleanest opium to ever hit the Coast had appeared some six months ago when a traffic cop with the SSPD brought in two guys on separate occasions in possession of several vials of the liquidized drug. The first proved impossible to flip, but a whole lot of leaning and fancy skill by Adrien and Michael Cosmos had the second guy doing acrobatics. Still, a luck shot more than revealed information led them to the main supplier: Boran Roumduol, employee of the notorious Cambodian drug lord, Ving Kim Phay.

And the fucker got away, but not before he delivered a threat that chilled Adrien to his bones. The Phay cartel meant to come after Michael.

They would get to him over Adrien's dead body.

Thaddeus shook his head. "I'm not sure I could do what you do. Taking down the bad guys, hoping they lead you to even worse ones. Talk about putting yourself in a world of danger."

Adrien slanted Thaddeus a look. "Like fighting fires isn't dangerous."

"I guess we both like to live life on the edge."

*Oh, honey, more than you know.* Adrien glanced around, half expecting to see the bar starting to empty, but only marginally surprised to find the party seemed to be getting into full swing. He turned back to Thaddeus. "I heard you got a part in this movie."

Thaddeus shrugged. "It's a small part. Nothing major. I thought it would be fun."

"As if you don't get enough adventure on the fire department."



"I'm an engineer, remember? I get to hang with the truck and watch all the adventure unfold."

Adrien leaned on the bar, angling his body more to face Thaddeus. "I've wondered about that. I heard you majored in engineering at the academy."

Thaddeus nodded.

"Why do that if you would rather be in the middle of the action?"

"It's a long story."

"I would love to hear it sometime."

Thaddeus froze with his glass halfway to his lips. Oh, man, Adrien said too much. He started to tell the man he wasn't flirting because, okay, he could see how what he said could've sounded like he meant it as some sort of an action junky come-on. In truth, he really just wanted to hear the story. Something about the look in Thaddeus's gaze stopped him.

"The other day, at the gym..." Thaddeus began, but stopped.

Adrien closed his eyes. Fuck, he screwed up then, too. He knew it. He tried to be as nonchalant with Thaddeus as he treated any of the other men he talked to on a daily basis. He had straight male friends. Christ, he hung out with Michael Cosmos as much away from the agency as he did at work, and Adrien never came onto the man. Not that Michael wasn't sexy as hell, because he was with a capital S, E and X. So why couldn't Adrien manage to be around Thaddeus for more than five minutes without sounding as if he wanted to jump the man's bones?

"I knew you would be there," Thaddeus said quickly.

Adrien slowly opened his eyes. His pulse pounded so loudly in his ears that all sound in the bar got drowned out by the vicious *thump, thump, thump*. All sound except for Thaddeus's next words.

"I, uh, staged the whole thing, so I could talk to you."

\* \* \* \*

Tess breathed deep, licked the salt off her hand, pounded down the shot of tequila and closed her lips around the lime wedge to squeeze out the juice. She closed her eyes, feeling them start to well as fire erupted from the liquor burning down her throat. She shivered from head to toe, opening her eyes and her mouth on a gasp.

"God, I hate the taste of that stuff."

"And yet you still do the shots." Donald, the extra from the day's shoot who insisted on giving her hell most of the evening, picked up the bottle of tequila that sat on the table between them and poured another shot.

The surreal feeling that began back at the Best Buy followed her to the Paradise Lounge. So this was what it felt like to hang with a movie crew after a day on the set. She'd gotten a taste of the experience once or twice before in teensy parts in other productions. She even went out for drinks after the day's shoot, but those times paled in comparison to tonight. She couldn't say exactly why. Maybe the knowledge that her name would actually show up when the credits rolled for this film made the difference. It would be next to the title of first officer rather than an actual character name, but hey, it topped the indistinct credit she received in the past.

"No." Tess held out a hand, palm out. "If I do another one I'm likely to puke." She did four already. Combined with the beers—she lost count of how many of those she'd had—she would be lucky if she didn't fall on her nose when she got ready to stand.

She wanted to get drunk, not plastered, wanted to have an excuse come morning for the things she planned to do tonight, not hug the toilet until noon nursing the mother of all hangovers.

"Aww, come on. Just one more, Tess," Donald urged.

Tess held her ground, shaking her head and pushing away the shot. "No, no, no." She picked up her beer instead and took a long pull, throwing her head back to drain the bottle of the last sip. When she brought her head up again, her gaze collided with Devon's.

He remained in the same place he sat since he walked into the lounge—on a barstool at the bar with Milton Remy. Neither man looked to be having much fun, though the expression on Devon's face had remained more calculating than bored most of the evening.

He had watched her all night. Waited? Yeah, he waited all right. He waited for the moment that she got drunk enough to forget her inhibitions and go to him.

She left all her inhibitions at the door tonight, but he couldn't know that. She came here with full intentions of getting a good buzz. She wanted something to give her the courage to take what she wanted from Devon while dulling her emotions to the truth when she became the woman she didn't want to be with a man who didn't love her.

Not that she loved him. She wouldn't allow herself to love him. All the time they spent together, she guarded her heart against that one particular emotion. She couldn't love a man who dominated her so completely, who made her do the things he made her do.

He lifted a brow as she set down the now empty beer bottle. Tess knew that look. He dared her to drink more. She wanted to reach for the shot she had pushed away simply out of an act of defiance, but she knew she would make herself sick if she did. It should've made her angry the way he kept watch over her all night as if she were a child under his parental care. Instead, his unswerving attention turned her on.

*Damn him.*

Her panties were wet. Not that they ever remained dry for long in his presence. Her nipples throbbed. They had grown tight and hard inside the practical bra she put on this morning beneath her uniform shirt. She changed her outer clothes since the segment shoot at the Best Buy, exchanging her uniform for a skimpy skirt, blouse, and heels. An outfit designed to make Devon's head spin. Only fair, she decided, since her head currently felt like a carnival Tilt-a-Whirl. The room spun in a delicious mix of desire and alcohol. She saw Devon

stand and start making his way toward her table. Every erogenous zone in her body leapt to full 'do me fast and do me rough' alert.

He walked like a man on a mission. She supposed he was exactly that. A man on a mission to take her places she dared to want to go, to do things to her she dared to enjoy. The promise of all of it gleamed in his amber eyes with each step he took. Everything around her, everyone in the bar seemed to disappear. She saw only Devon and his predatory, king-of-the-alpha-males walk as he closed the distance between him and her table.

"Let's go."

He didn't ask. He told. His tone left no room for argument or hesitation. Damn, she hated the way that tone made her feel, all ready and willing and desperate to obey.

Tess wanted to argue, to say no. She tore her gaze from his penetrating stare and realized everyone at the table focused on her as they listened to him and waited for her response. Could they feel the sexually charged tension between her and Devon? How could they not when she felt nearly suffocated by it.

"Hey, Devon, do you want a shot of tequila?" Donald pushed the still full shot glass to the edge of the table in front of Devon.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm driving Theresa home."

Donald's eyes widened to the size of saucers, his astonished gaze dancing from Devon to Tess and back again. "Oh, shit, man, I didn't realize."

"Don't sweat it," Devon told the extra in an easy, friendly voice. "I promised her sister and brother-in-law, he's a firefighter on the same shift as Ryan Magee. I promised them I would see Theresa home safely tonight."

Smooth as silk, Tess thought as she slid from the booth. And Devon being Devon, the actors at the table would likely believe him. They would be seen leaving the bar together, but the minute the rumors started flying someone from the table would make mention of

Devon's explanation. It would be accepted as true with the same ease as a child's belief in Santa Claus.

## Chapter Six

Thaddeus's heart lodged in his throat, pounding so ferociously, he couldn't swallow. Adrien stared at him, his gaze dancing in a mix of confusion and, *Jesus God*, hope over Thaddeus's face. He hadn't meant to say it, to reveal that he purposely went to the gym that rainy morning knowing full well Adrien would be there. But he hated the way Adrien kept backpedaling every time he said something a straight man might misconstrue as a come-on. It was time to let the man know that Thaddeus wasn't straight, and he wished for nothing more than for Adrien to come on to him.

Seconds that felt like torturous hours passed as Adrien simply continued to stare at him. Finally, Adrien broke the eye contact only to look down into his drink. Only then did Thaddeus see a hint of a smile forming on his alluring lips. He barely heard the sound Adrien made. It might have been a quick burst of breathy laughter, and then Adrien shook his head and met Thaddeus's gaze once more.

"You set that whole thing up just to talk to me? How did you know I would be there?"

"You always go there when it's raining outside."

Adrien lifted a brow. "And you know that, how?"

"Oh, God, I haven't been stalking you or anything." Mortification heated Thaddeus's cheeks. "I've seen you there before. I go there a lot." He went there a lot more than he led Adrien to believe the other day. "You know, when I'm off shift and don't feel like dealing with the guys on A or C shift in the department workout room. I guess you never noticed me there." He let his gaze fall to his glass. His now empty glass, he realized with a start. When had he drunk the martini?

He didn't know, but he desperately needed another one. He signaled for the bartender. "You want another one?" he asked Adrien even though the other man's glass remained half full.

"No, thanks, I'll pass."

Thaddeus nodded, ordered a drink for himself, and pulled out his wallet. Adrien waited for the bartender to serve Thaddeus's drink and move down the bar before he spoke.

"I'm sorry. I don't usually pay much attention to my surroundings when I work out. I tend to get lost in thought." Adrien shifted slightly, and the movement turned him on until his knee brushed Thaddeus's thigh.

The contact zinged through Thaddeus's bloodstream, leaving him feeling an intoxication that had nothing to do with the martinis.

"I've noticed you other places, though. Like the day at Max Jasper's place when his sister got assaulted by Phay's men." Adrien chuckled again, a lightly amused sound with a touch of nerves in the mix. "I guess that isn't the best time to take note of how attractive someone is, but there you go."

Thaddeus snapped his head up at that. Adrien had noticed him. He found him attractive. Woo hoo, that news made him want to start a freaking happy dance right there at the bar.

"I, wow," Adrien shook his head. "I would've said something, done something if I'd realized...."

He let the sentence trail off, but Thaddeus knew what he meant to say. If he'd realized Thaddeus was gay. "I knew you never would, well, not unless I told you or gave you some sign. I tried at the gym the other day, but well, I chickened out."

"You, a chicken? The description doesn't seem to fit."

"It does when it comes to you." The words, no matter how true, flew out of Thaddeus's mouth before he could stop them. Christ, first he could barely get up the balls to talk to the man and now he came on too strong.

"Are you going to finish that drink?" Adrien shot a pointed glance at Thaddeus's fresh martini.

Thaddeus lifted the glass, sipped, and shrugged. "Liquid courage."

"You don't need any more courage, baby. Why don't we go some place quieter, so we can talk?"

Thaddeus sat down the glass with a hand that trembled. His heart, now safely in place in his chest, tripped and stumbled over Adrien's suggestion. A new fear wound its way through Thaddeus's core. His entire body quivered with nerves, excitement, and desire as he met Adrien's gaze. He lost himself in the man's eyes and nodded. "I'd like that."

\* \* \* \*

A row of trailers set up for the actors and movie crew while on location for the production lined the outer edges of the fairgrounds. The trailers looked much like the ones supplied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA for short, to the residents of the city whose homes had fallen victim to the destruction of Hurricane Emilio. White, single-wide mobile homes with a kitchen, living room, bath, and one or two bedrooms of no frills living space stood in a tidy straight line. Devon's private trailer sat at the far end of that line and boasted one thing the others didn't: a wet bar.

"So this is what an actor's trailer looks like." Tess stepped inside, stopped so that she blocked the narrow doorway, and looked around.

Devon gave her a gentle whack on the ass to get her moving again and walked in behind her, closing and locking the door to ensure their privacy. Not that he really need worry about anyone barging in on them. No one would enter his trailer without knocking first and waiting for permission.

"You've been on location before." He tossed his key on the countertop separating living room from kitchen and kicked off his shoes. "I know you've been inside the trailers a time or twenty."



"I have." She nodded as she turned to face him. Her green eyes glittered with both desire and inebriation. "But I never went inside yours."

"And whose fault is that?" Devon closed the distance between them, enveloping her in his arms, and pulling her body to his. Warm and soft, her curves yielded to his hard angles and lines as they so easily did any time they touched.

"Mine." She pushed away before he could claim her mouth. He could've held her there, could've forced her into the kiss. He let her go in favor of watching her sashay around the front room of the trailer. "All my fault."

She didn't slur her words. Surprising given how many shots of tequila he watched her ingest. She took astonishingly stable and even steps, too. If he hadn't seen her pounding down drink after drink, he might not have known her to be drunk. Except for the glassiness in her eyes and the looseness with which she moved.

Tension often caused her body to look stiff, almost soldierly. He hadn't truly realized that until now. Christ, how could it be possible that he loved this woman to the depths of his very soul and yet he never paid enough attention to the way she held herself or the myriad of things that made her into the woman she'd become? He didn't know, but he was bound and determined to remedy that tonight.

Okay, maybe not bound, he thought as his attention dropped to her wrists. Damn, but the woman had a sexy set of wrists. They were slight and sleek, the bone raised in a perfect spherical shape for biting. His cock hardened, and he nearly laughed aloud. It must be love if he could stand here getting turned on to the point of erection looking at her freaking wrists.

"I don't think I missed much. Do you?" She spun around on her heel, a runway-model-worthy move that put her facing him once more. She hadn't taken her hair down from the intricate braid she wore on the set. The tied tresses moved like a ribbon of enticing silk behind her neck. He wanted to grab the braid, to fist it in his hand,

and yank her head back as he feasted on the exposed flesh of her neck. He wanted to take it down, to see those satiny strands falling around her shoulders and face, to feel them brush his body as he ordered her to go down on him.

"By choosing to stay out of my set trailers, so you didn't land in the public eye, or by not spending that private time with me?"

She opened her mouth to speak but closed it again without so much as a sound. "You have your own wet bar. I didn't know they put those in the actor's trailers."

"They will at the actor's request." Devon shoved his hands in the pockets of his slacks and leaned his back to the doorframe. He hadn't moved any further into the trailer than when he first entered, enjoying watching her instead. From this vantage point, as long as she didn't walk down the hall, he could see her every delicious, dick-teasing move.

And the woman could move. A simple step in the glossy black Prada heels she changed into between her time on the set and showing up at the Paradise Lounge could make a man whimper from the sheer sensual beauty of her movement. She'd put on a paisley blouse cut low enough to send a man into cardiac arrest with a matching skirt that barely covered her delectable rear. The outfit coupled with the neck-breaking heels screamed class with a sex personified maximum. Devon couldn't wait to get her out of those clothes.

"Are you going to offer me a drink?" She stood at the bar, a manicured nail painted do-me red trailing along the glossy painted particle board.

"No. I'm going to tell you to get undressed." Her head turned slowly at his words, her expression one of narrow-eyed disbelief and a flash of rising arousal. "Strip for me, Theresa. Slowly. I want a full show, starting with your hair. Take it down."

She didn't move, but stood there as if contemplating what to do. The heat that sprang to her eyes, changing their usual green to a flaming brownish-orange, gave away her desires. She wanted this,

had likely planned to land right here with him tonight. He suspected it was her reason for all the shots back at the bar. He hadn't failed to notice how she glanced his way each time she pounded one down. For a reason he couldn't name but fully intended to find out before the night ended, she felt compelled to be drunk before giving herself to him.

"I'm not going to tell you twice." He put just enough hard inflection in his voice to have her gulping as she slowly turned all the way to face him.

Her hands had fallen to her sides, and she skimmed her palms up now, framing her curves with her touch as she brought her arms up and found the braid. It took her a moment of concentration to free the strands from their binding. That moment served as an infinitesimal proof of the effect from the alcohol flowing through her bloodstream. Even as she worked, her body moved in a leisurely grind to start the show. The woman was a piece of work, perfect in repose and chic to the *oomph* power even when distracted by such a seemingly simple task.

When she freed her hands, she gave her hair a little shake and the chestnut strands tumbled around her face and shoulders just the way he liked them. Her fingers found the neckline of her blouse next, tracing the v-shape with the tip of one nail until it met with the first button fastened securely between her scrumptious mounds. She freed the button with an easy twist of her fingers and immediately headed down for the next.

Devon watched in concrete fascination as each button released in her fingers, as more and more of her creamy, tanned flesh came onto the scene. His breathing accelerated, his cock stiffening to the point of complete agony behind the zipper of his slacks, and yet, when her hands reached quickly to push the blouse off her shoulders, he stopped her.

"Slowly, Theresa."

She heaved a ragged breath and slowed her hands. She eased the blouse off her shoulders and guided it down her arms with a sway of her upper body that reminded him of a cobra's dance. The comparison seemed apt knowing that Tess could, in fact, become a kind of cobra who would strike given the first opportunity. He didn't intend to let her get that chance tonight.

He followed the path of the blouse to the floor, where it fell in a whisper of material behind her feet, and then let his gaze climb back up to follow the next progression of her hands. She splayed them flat on her belly and grazed them up to her breasts.

Devon shook his head and tsked. "White, no lace. What is that, cotton, Theresa?"

"It's a work bra." Her tone hinted with apology.

"I thought you preferred your little secret beneath your uniform."

"Not all the time. Only when I'm feeling...."

Devon waited for her to finish her sentence, and when she didn't go on, he prodded. "When you're feeling what?"

"Naughty." It truly amazed him how certain moments or tiny things could make this woman blush. She came off as so head-strong, often sassy, and even more often defiant. Yet he'd seen the color creep into her cheeks on such admissions many times in the past. He never quite figured out what made it happen or how to guess when it would occur again.

"You weren't feeling naughty when you got dressed this morning? Even though you knew you would see me today?"

She shook her head in answer.

"You knew you would be with me tonight." Maybe 'knew' wasn't quite the truth, but he figured she should've guessed she would end up in his bed again. Hell, he promised her the other night outside her family home that it would happen. "Did you wear that in hopes I would punish you?"

"No." She shook her head vehemently this time.

"Are you feeling naughty now?"

A nod.

"Then show me."

Jesus, this show he ordered just might be the death of him. She took so long removing the blasted granny bra that his mouth watered buckets, and his balls hammered in anticipated distress. Her body slithered to an exotic rhythm only she could hear. By the time she pushed her skirt down her thighs to pool around her ankles, revealing matching white cotton panties, he didn't have the breath or control to reprimand her. She knew it, too, the vixen.

"Is something wrong, Devon?" She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and let her fingers dance along the waistband of the panties. Her breasts hung heavy, her nipples beaded and dark with arousal. Her stomach rose and fell in a collection of ragged breaths. Her fingers moved slow and sensuously over her flesh to tease and drive him mad with hunger.

"Take them off, Theresa." His voice sounded of more animal than man, a low growl of the hunter feasting his eyes on his prey.

"Why don't you take them off for me?"

Oh, no. No way would he move from this spot. He wanted her naked, he wanted her hot, he wanted her begging, all without his touch. If he touched her, his plan would turn to dust as quickly as a vampire walking into sunlight. Tonight, he played the vampire role and before the sun rose, he would drink his victim dry in the form of information rather than blood.

"I told you to take them off. Now."

Her fingers hesitated for another moment before she hooked them in the elastic waist and pushed them to her ankles. When she straightened once more, she stood in front of him starkly and deliciously naked but for her heels. She started to kick those off, but the quick shake of his head stopped her.

"Leave them on and walk to the back."

Watching her make her way down the short hall to the bedroom tested his willpower as much as her strip show did. Christ, he never

saw such a perfectly shaped ass. His cock sizzled with a rush of pain as if a whip smacked across his shaft. He felt a drop of semen leak from the tip to wet his briefs. He wanted to take her there, to feel that tight ass close around his shaft and milk him dry. He never got to do that with her. He played with that nether hole, fingered it, but never fucked it. Later, he promised himself, but not tonight.

"Lie on your back and spread your legs."

She climbed onto the bed like a sensual tiger on her hands and knees, her back arched and ass out. The sight drove him closer and closer to saying the hell with his plan. He could all but feel the muscles of her anus squeezing around his cock. Jesus, it would be so amazing!

"Touch me." The words held the timbre of equal request and command.

Devon lifted a brow. He stopped at the bedside but didn't lay a finger on her smooth, warm flesh. He wanted to. Christ, every inch of his body burned to feel her, to taste her, to take her. He resisted, keeping his purpose in the forefront of his mind. Otherwise he might not survive this night.

"No. Put your hands above your head."

"Then I'll touch myself." Defying his order, she reached between her legs, going for the moist heat of her sex.

He caught her hand just before she reached her goal, the temptation to help her, to replace her hand with his own so great that he jerked both their hands away as if they met with a scalding flame. He snagged her other hand for good measure and pushed both of them to the mattress above her head. He had installed a set of rings there with leather straps for binding already in place. He used them now to hold her captive.

Rather than cover her and slide down her body as he usually would've done, he moved off the bed and walked to her feet. He grabbed first one ankle and then the other and bound them with the

leather straps he had installed to the foot of the bed for exactly this purpose.

"Devon?" The first trickle of alarm sounded in her voice. He only bound her fully this way when he intended to punish her for her defiance. She obviously remembered that and seemed to fear it as much as she hungered for it.

"I'm not going to punish you, Theresa," he told her gently. He moved back to her side and sat down on the bed. "I just want to talk."

"Talk? You had me strip, ordered me to this bed, and tied me down so you can *talk* to me?"

"No, so we can talk to each other. My favorite color is purple. Did you know that? Yeah, I know, it's a gay man's color, but it's really very sexy, especially on you. So what's your favorite color?"

"You bastard!" Tess's body jerked as she pulled at the straps binding her wrists and feet. "Untie me."

"Not until we talk, Theresa." Devon kept his tone reasonable, his voice soft and low. "See, I realized something since I came to Silver Springs. You and I hardly know each other. Tonight, that's going to change."

"You can't be serious." She stared at him as if he had spawned a second head.

"I'm more serious than I've ever been about anything in my life," he assured her with a smile. "Now, answer my question. What's your favorite color?"

\* \* \* \*

Tess stared at Devon as a river of fear washed through her. She never felt anything like it before. No situation she encountered on the police force, nothing she faced prior to becoming a cop, ever instilled this level of icy terror in her blood. She shook her head fervently, unable to give into the doom that stretched in front of her.

"No?" Confusion and question mingled with Devon's authoritative tone. "You don't have a favorite color? Come on, Theresa, everyone has a favorite color. I bet it's blue. You wear a lot of blue or red. Yeah, siren red. You know you look positively sinful in red."

"Why are you doing this?" Her own voice sounded small, pained. She looked at him and saw an echoing pain manifest in his expression. God, his eyes even glistened with moisture. That had to be her imagination, or an acting trick.

Yeah, it was a trick. A good actor could summon tears on a whim, and Devon Gerard wasn't just a good actor, he was freaking amazing.

"Because I want to know you, Theresa." A lump formed in her throat at the sincerity in his voice. "I want you to know me. We've never talked. Not really. Do you know I can count the number of deep conversations we've had in the entire span of our relationship on the fingers of one hand? I know so little about you."

"You know a lot about me," Tess argued even though the largest part of her knew he was right. Dear Heavenly Father, he was right. Their relationship started from a spark of attraction and escalated to one of hot, sweaty, BDSM sex not long after. It stayed that way, not strengthening to anything more than an explosion of climaxes night after night after endlessly pleasure-filled night. At least, not that she voiced aloud. But inside Tess, their relationship became both the solace for the devil she kept captive and the outlet for the love that swelled in her heart.

"Do I?" Devon angled his head. He sat on the bed beside her, one leg bent and the other planted on the floor. He still wore every stitch of clothing he had on when they walked into the trailer with the exception of his shoes. His button-down black shirt parted at the collar where three unfastened buttons revealed a vee of smooth, tanned flesh and light brown curls.

Tess wanted to bury her face in that vee, to graze her lips over that flesh, to twist her tongue in those curls. She swallowed and tore her gaze away. "Of course you do. There isn't that much to know. I'm the



black sheep of a well-to-do southern family. I aspired to be an actress, but didn't have what it took, so I rushed back home and went to the police academy. The end." She whipped her head back around and pinned him with a steady glare. "There. You know all there is to know. Now *touch me*."

"Red, right?" Devon continued, relentless in his idiotic pursuit for information. "We'll go with red unless you would like to correct me."

"Devon, this is stupid. It's a waste of time." *It hurts too much*. She couldn't do this. She didn't want to know more about him, didn't want him to know her. She needed to hold on to that last little defense she had for her already shattered heart.

"We have all night long. You know why I brought you here? This is my personal trailer. No roommate to be concerned with walking in on us or seeing me leave."

"No, just a shitload of reporters to see me leave your fucking trailer on set come morning."

"That still bothers you? To have people know we're together even though you say you're no longer looking for an acting career?"

"We're not together. We fuck, Devon." He winced at her harshly spoken words as if she slapped him across the face.

"That's all I am to you?" She asked the question in a barely audible whisper.

Their gazes locked, and Tess saw a world of emotions in his amber depths that she never thought to see. God, was he acting? Surely, this was all another one of his games to control and conquer.

She made a raspberry sound and looked away. "Please, that's all I am to you, all we are to each other. Why are you trying to pretend otherwise?"

"You truly believe that, don't you?"

No, she didn't. He meant a hell of a lot more to her than a fuck buddy. A part of her hated him for that. "Well, duh, it's how it's always been, how it should be, how I want it to be."

He swallowed hard enough to have his Adam's apple bobbing. "Why? At least tell me that much. Why don't you want more between us?"

"Because I don't like who I am when I'm with you," she spat. Tears welled in her eyes. Damn it, she hadn't meant to say that, hadn't meant to say anything. But once she started, she couldn't seem to stop. "I can't believe the person I become for a man who doesn't even love me, who only wants to control me."

\* \* \* \*

Control.

This was all about control.

Christ, how could he not have realized?

Love.

Devon gazed down at the woman who owned his heart for two years and had no idea what to say to her. How could she not know how much he loved her, how badly he burned just to be near her?

"Let me go." Her voice cracked with the words. "Untie me and let me go."

"No." He wouldn't. He couldn't. Not yet. Not until he figured out a way to get through to her.

She laid spread eagle on his bed, bound by wrists and ankles like a stunningly sexual sacrifice. Her chest rose and fell on tattered breaths. She took to staring at the ceiling rather than looking at him. His gut tightened, the pain slicing through it like a double-edged sword at the sight of the glimmer of tears in her eyes. Jesus, he never meant to make her cry.

"Then fuck me," she spat. When she finally looked at him, a hard edge of fury replaced the glimmer.

The demand surprised him. Despite all she said, all she revealed, she would still give herself to him tonight. No, he realized in a blink, she would let him *fuck* her tonight.

He started to tell her no, he didn't want to fuck her. His cock had shriveled like a rotting cucumber, his balls shrinking to peas when she hit him with her harsh words. He wanted to scream at her, to fire back that she was so wrong, so mother fucking wrong about his feelings. But he couldn't tell her how much he loved her now. She would see the words only as a ploy to keep her, a lie to smooth over the waters between them once more.

And, Christ, what did he do to combat the control issue? It never occurred to him, never flittered through his mind that she could hide such an internal war against her own desires to be dominated by him.

It should have, he thought in disgust. Tess was as controlled as they came. He had never met a more head-strong woman, so confident and driven to prove everything in life and do it on her own, until she stepped behind the closed door of a bedroom. Then she wanted it rough and kinky. She wanted to be dominated.

Devon walked to the foot of the bed. His hands actually shook as he reached for the leather strap binding her right ankle. She made a noise torturously close to a sob. He squeezed his eyes closed to prevent his own tears from flowing. He took a deep breath, unfastened the strap, and moved to her left ankle, freeing it, too.

She immediately closed her legs, hiding the treasure between them, but not before he saw the lips glinting with moisture. Even after everything, she remained wet, ready, primed for the down and dirty control of a man whom she believed didn't give a rat's ass about her beyond a good lay.

He returned to the side of the bed, easing to sit on the mattress at her side, and leaned over her. He closed his hands on her upper arms first, glided his palms over her elbows and forearms in a slow progression to the leather binding her wrists. His hands were far from steady and still he felt her quivering beneath his touch. She wouldn't look at him. She had closed her eyes and seemed to be fighting an endless battle to breathe calmly, evenly. With each ragged rise and fall of her chest he could tell she was desperately losing the battle.

The moment he released her wrists, she tried to pull away, but he caught and held her. "No." He kept his hold on her wrists as gentle as possible without letting her go. He slid one arm beneath her, lifting her off the mattress so he could hold her close. Her body trembled on what might have been a sob. He couldn't tell with her face buried against his chest. Right now, he didn't want to know. The sight of more of her tears would surely tear him apart.

Devon held her for what seemed like hours. He kept one hand on her wrists out of fear she would either use her free hands to push him away or pummel him to a bloody pulp. He lightly caressed her naked back with his other hand. He held her until her breathing steadied, until he felt her body relax in his embrace, and then brushed a kiss to the top of her head and slowly released her wrists. Still, he kept her in his arms.

He dipped his fingers beneath her hair, pushing back strands at the side of her face to expose her ear. She didn't move her head, didn't raise it to look at him. He leaned in, closing his eyes as he breathed her sweet scent.

"I'm sorry," he said softly against her ear. Then he lightly, lovingly traced her lobe with his tongue. He didn't know what else to do. He had never been so lost in his life. He only knew if he let her go right now, he would likely never hold her this way again.

He nipped her lobe and then went with her as he pushed her back on the bed, covering her with his body. She didn't fight him, but fell back willingly. Her eyes remained closed, her lips slightly parted.

Slowly, tenderly, he licked his way across her cheek, planted a soft kiss on her nose, brushed another to her satiny lips, and moved on to her chin. Resting his weight on one arm, he reached with the other and began unbuttoning his shirt. He managed to remove it with only a little bottled frustration, all the while continuing to kiss and lick his way affectionately over Tess's body. His slacks and boxers followed as he painted a trail of fiery kisses over her breasts, down her abdomen, her stomach, and settled at the apex of her thighs.

She attempted to rise once, but a soft press of his hands to her sides soothed her and seemed to convince her to stay. He didn't speak, didn't order. He wouldn't. Not now. Not with the fear and tension lingering between them. He would tell her this way just how wrong she was. He would show her. She wouldn't believe any words if he said them to her now, but maybe, just maybe, she would believe his touch.

He urged her legs to spread with a gentle push of his hands. They eased open. Her center shimmered with her desire. He lowered his face there to smell and taste. He always found a slice of heaven right here with Tess. He thought of her wetness as sweet nectar that he believed exhibited her feelings for him, her acceptance of him for her. Now, he knew differently. His heaven merely served as a conduit to what she obviously perceived as her personal hell.

\* \* \* \*

Tess felt herself dying. As Devon closed his mouth over her pussy, as his tongue delivered tender stroke after compassionate caress, her soul left her bit by bit. Her mind rebelled against the affection, blocking out the raw emotions, refusing to believe them to be real and not imagined.

They were real. Each caring touch, each generous kiss bruised her heart even as it healed her essence.

And she died a little more.

No words passed between them. No sounds beyond the softness of ragged breaths and the faint moans that escaped before capture. He stroked her with his tongue, fondled with his fingers until her channel became inflamed with the need to close around his erection. It proved a brutal punishment, more intense and cruel than any he ever dealt her, and it didn't stop. Not even when the release built to bursting inside her. Not even when her body quaked and thrashed uncontrollably from the force of her orgasm. Not even when he left

the saturated wetness of her pussy to move his body over hers, positioning his thick, long cock at the still convulsing entrance to her channel.

"Open your eyes, Theresa."

The sound of his voice stabbed through the silence of the room. His whispered words fell like a heat-seeking missile. She knew it sought the heat inside her.

She opened her eyes to find him hovering over her, gazing down at her with such raw passion in his eyes that it brought the tears back before she could stop them.

He didn't say anything, though she saw his eyes grow moist, too. Instead, he kept his gaze locked with hers as he entered her, a gradual claiming that tore her in two. He stopped, buried balls deep inside her weeping channel, and only then did he kiss her. He never put a kiss to her lips as soft and sweet, and the last piece of her heart and soul crumbled.

He started to move, achingly slow, pulling back until she feared he might leave her only to ease in again. His cock tormented the sensitive walls of her channel. His tongue echoed that affliction on her mouth. He took her gently. The possessiveness to which she had grown accustomed remained, but in a way that spoke of kindness, of peace, of love.

Of love.

*God, help me.*

Tess couldn't take it. She needed this to end. What was he trying to do to her? This wasn't Devon. He didn't do slow, didn't like tender. Missionary sex didn't get him off. He dominated, he owned, and he took.

She lifted her hips, trying to find that Devon in the man over her now. She tried to speed the pace, squeezing her inner muscles around his shaft in an attempt to bring him to release. He wouldn't have it. He thwarted her every effort with his smooth gyrations and dawdling thrusts. He never took her gradually, never with such affection, and

when the second orgasm gushed from her, she wondered at the sheer magnitude of it.

Devon's eyes closed on his own release, a quiet growl rumbling from his throat. He lifted his head to look down at her, hesitating for a long moment before he leaned down again to brush his lips to her forehead. Then he rolled off her, stretched out beside her, and pulled her into his arms, tucking her head beneath his chin.

"I'll understand if you want to leave so no one sees you here in the morning," he whispered against the top of head. "But stay for awhile, please. I need to hold you just for awhile."

Tess closed her eyes as the tears spilled over. She didn't realize it when she drifted off to sleep in his arms.

## Chapter Seven

Thaddeus couldn't believe his luck. He tipped his head back, enjoying the cool breeze that blew off the Gulf of Mexico. It turned an otherwise late summer night into a pleasant time for a walk on the beach. Having his dream man walking at his side only made the clear night with dazzling stars in the sky even more glorious.

"So tell me this really long story." Adrien shoved his hand in the pocket of his black dress pants. He twisted slightly, bumping Thaddeus with his elbow.

That gentle bump sent slivers of electric awareness shooting through Thaddeus. He stole a glance at the other man and felt his insides rock at the way the moonlight played on Adrien's blond hair. He always looked so impossibly gorgeous, often dressed to the nines in designer suits or flirting with the Rambo meets gay GQ look in a pair of black BDUs, black shirt, and black boots. Tonight, he'd gone with the suit. The shirt stretched over his broad shoulders, tailored to fit beyond perfection to his lean muscular body. The pants hugged a trim waist and mouthwatering ass. He had removed his suit jacket, tossed it over his shoulder and now held it hooked on one finger.

Thaddeus tore his attention from Adrien's delectable body and dropped his gaze to the sand. They had kicked off their shoes back at the car, both men favoring to go barefoot rather than deal with sand in their loafers. Christ, even Adrien's feet sent Thaddeus's hormones on a brisk ride to Happy Land.

"You really want to hear this? It's not all that exciting."

"Yes, I really want to hear it."



Thaddeus took a deep breath and let the story spill. "My great grandfather was a firefighter. I don't remember him well. He died when I was five. But I listened to stories about him my whole life. I saw the awards that seemed to wallpaper my great grandparent's house. I read the newspaper articles my grandmother scrapbooked through his career."

He remembered discovering those scrapbooks in the family attic when he turned ten. He could see himself in his mind's eye begging his mother to let him bring them down, to keep them in his room.

"See, my great grandfather was an engineer with a fire department out of Waterston, but not just any engineer. He made a difference. He knew a fire truck better than the back of his hand. There is more to being an engineer than just driving the truck. A lot of people don't realize that. They see a guy who wears a firefighter uniform who drives the truck and then sits with it on the sidelines while the rest of his crew goes in to risk their lives fighting the flames. What people don't realize is without that engineer and his knowledge of the truck, the crew that depends on him would be in even graver danger."

"Wow, you're right," Adrien said quietly. "I'm one of those people, you know, one of the ones who didn't realize. It makes sense, though, now that I think about it. It's really important, what you do."

Thaddeus shrugged, embarrassment tingeing his cheeks. "Yeah, well, it's not like the other guys aren't trained to do the same thing. We're all taught in the academy how to drive the trucks, how to operate the pumps."

"Maybe, but the other firefighters don't make it their prime focus to know all the mechanics behind every detail. I mean, that's what you've done, right, by majoring in being an engineer?"

Adrien got it. Thaddeus looked at the other man. He saw not just the way the moonlight accented Adrien's already handsome features, or the way his trim hips swayed so deliciously with each step, but a man who listened when Thaddeus talked. He understood the depth of what Thaddeus tried to say.

Thaddeus had to swallow a lump that formed in his throat before he could answer. "Yeah, that's what I've done."

"So you followed in great granddad's footsteps," Adrien concluded.

"There's a little more to it than that. My great grandfather was gay, too."

Adrien let out a bark of disbelieving laughter and stopped walking to stare at Thaddeus. "No shit?"

Thaddeus stopped, too. He laughed, not out of disbelief, but at the dubious expression on Adrien's face. "No shit. Thaddeus Leopold Carter II was a flaming, out of the closet gay man."

"The second? So you're, what, the fourth?"

"Yeah, and don't expect there to be a fifth, either. The Thaddeus Leopold curse will end with me. I mean, come on, it's horrible!"

God, he loved making Adrien laugh. The musical sound drifted over him on the mild breeze of the night, seeping into his skin and flirting with his very soul. And Adrien's smile, ah, man, Thaddeus saw that smile every time he closed his eyes lately. After tonight, he knew he would be seeing it more and more in his dreams.

Adrien's laughter slowly faded and they started walking again in a companionable silence for several strides. "You know, the question is begging to be asked?"

Thaddeus held his breath, unknowing what question Adrien meant. It could be anything. Jesus, so much still remained to be said between them. They had barely gotten started. When he said nothing, Adrien went on.

"Why didn't the curse, as you put it, die with your great grandfather? If he was gay, well, I've been gay all my life, and I have yet to figure out how to procreate like a heterosexual. Unless being flaming has something to do with it, though I've known flamers, too, and well, I still don't get it."

"He had a straight moment." At Adrien's lifted brow and intrigued look, Thaddeus added with a wide grin, "That's what the family likes

to call it. He didn't want the curse to end. Or rather, he didn't want the bloodline to end. He ended up being the only male born to the Carter name in his generation. He had to procreate to keep the family tree alive."

Adrien nodded. "So he found a woman who understood the situation. She knew of his sexual preference, but didn't mind bearing a child to be part of the Carter legacy. They produced your grandfather and the family lives on."

Thaddeus stared at Adrien, speechless. In that moment, with those three sentences, he fell just a little bit in love with Adrien Bingham. Adrien didn't say Thaddeus's great grandfather deceived a woman, bore a child out of wedlock with the first woman he met, or anything of the sort. Adrien simply assumed the man would look for the right woman with whom he could be honest and who would agree to the terms of the life he could offer her.

"That's it in a nutshell," Thaddeus finally said.

"You're wrong, you know. That *is* an exciting story, and I'm really glad you told me. I'm also glad you decided to follow his lead. That's what brought you here, right, to Silver Springs?"

"The job, the beach," Thaddeus lifted a shoulder. "The space from the family. I love them all, don't get me wrong, but the pressure of being a Carter, especially a fourth can be pretty daunting."

"Do they expect you to follow everything he did?"

"You mean with the whole marriage and have a child thing to carry on the family name? I don't know. I'm not the only Carter male this time."

"You're just the one with the awful name," Adrien joked, his lips curving into a full-blown, wish-kiss-inspiring grin.

Thaddeus chuckled even as his gut did a slow somersault of acute arousal. "You got it. My brother got to be the normal one, Charles Emerson Carter."

"And did your mother watch *M\*A\*S\*H* while in labor with him?"

Thaddeus blinked twice before he made the connection. "Charles Emerson Winchester, can you believe no one has ever put that together? Wait until I see little brother Charles again. I finally have someone to give hell about something."

"Do you take it a lot?" Adrien's smile disappeared. He went completely serious, his lips thin, his gaze penetrating. "From your family, either one of them?"

"My family isn't happy about my sexual orientation, but it's not like it's something they never encountered before. The guys on B shift give me all kinds of hell for the whole engineering thing." Thaddeus knew Adrien referred to the crew as his other family. And he was right about that, too. Thaddeus saw the guys on B shift as family the same as he did the Carters. "But they don't know the whole story, and they don't know I'm, um, they don't know I'm gay."

Adrien's step faltered on the word, and his head slowly turned, his gaze meeting Thaddeus's. Thaddeus's heart pounded so hard he wondered why it didn't leap right out of his chest and bounce into the surf. He knew that secret had come out between them back at the bar. Hell, he all but waved a gay pride flag in Adrien's face with his words and admission to the gym setup. Still, he hadn't come right out and said, "Hey, baby, I'm gay," until that moment.

Adrien's gaze danced over Thaddeus face, the expression in his eyes one Thaddeus couldn't quite put definition to. "Have you considered telling them either story?"

"Nah, at least not about my reasons for being an engineer. The captain knows and Terri Vega, but the rest of the guys don't need to know. It doesn't matter, anyway. They tease and give me a hard time, but it's all in good fun. I'm still the rookie on shift, too. If they didn't have that to rag me about, they would just find something else."

"And the other? I don't know how many people saw us leave together tonight, but my being gay isn't exactly a secret around town. Not every guy I'm seen with is gay, but people do make assumptions."

"I'm not worried." Thaddeus assured him. He wasn't. He grew tired of living in the closet. It hadn't been an intentional choice. He simply hadn't come out to someone before tonight since moving to Silver Springs. He hadn't told anyone of his sexual orientation. "Are you?" Jesus, he hadn't thought about that. What if Adrien didn't want people to know he went for a walk on the beach with a might-be-gay-but-believed-to-be-straight firefighter? Hell, worse, what if Adrien had a lover?

"No." Adrien barked a laugh. "I just didn't want to be the one to out you if you weren't ready."

"If I wasn't ready, I would've left the bar with Terri instead of coming over to you."

They walked along in an easy silence again for several steps, and again, Adrien broke it.

"You know the buzz around town is that you and Terri are an item."

"Terri doesn't have *items*, she has flings."

Adrien winced. "I didn't want to sound rude or judgmental."

"That's okay, I will." Thaddeus shot the other man a grin. "Truth is I love the woman to pieces. She's great, really fantastic. And, yes, she has her flings, a lot. She's easygoing about sex, likes to have it without all the strings and awkward morning afters. I know most men can easily relate to those, if not even a few women. I think there's more to it than that," he admitted, "though I haven't said as much to her. And, yes, she has her sights set on making me one of those flings. That's pretty awkward considering the circumstances."

Thaddeus paused and hesitated. "I need to tell her. I plan to tell her. We're friends. I don't want to lose that." He sighed. "Which is why I've been sidestepping her for months."

"The way you sidestepped into the gym the other day?" Adrien's grin came back, and Thaddeus felt his insides melt.

He chuckled, albeit breathlessly because, oh, holy Christ, that spark in Adrien's eyes hadn't been there a moment ago. "That was a

bit different." Adrien reached out, lacing his fingers with Thaddeus's and Thaddeus stopped laughing.

"I know that now," Adrien said softly. "And I'm glad for it."

They stopped walking again, this time beneath the pier. Thaddeus turned to face Adrien. His hand sang at the sensation of having Adrien's hand in his, at the heat of the contact, the smoothness of Adrien's palm. He had soft hands, not calloused like Thaddeus's, but baby fine like a strip of satin. Thaddeus knew those hands could be as dangerous as he guessed they could be tender. He had seen Adrien holding a gun, his grip sure and unswerving. He wouldn't hesitate to fire that gun if he had to. No more than Thaddeus would hesitate to run into a burning building if the opportunity presented itself.

"Are you?" Thaddeus managed to ask. His throat felt tight, the muscles constricting on the words. It had been far too long since he got this close to someone he liked, even longer since he wanted a man as badly as he burned for Adrien.

Adrien's gaze dropped to Thaddeus's mouth. Thaddeus licked his lips out of reflex. He watched Adrien's eyes ignite, saw the intent even before he believe Adrien realized it.

"Definitely." Adrien kissed him.

His lips were soft, the kiss a gentle brush of moist flesh to moist flesh. Thaddeus wanted more. He parted his lips half in invitation, the other half a sigh, and lost all sanity as Adrien's tongue slipped between them.

\* \* \* \*

Adrien pushed his tongue into Thaddeus's mouth and experienced a world of sensations exploding through his mind and body like fireworks on Independence Day. *Taste*, Thaddeus tasted of the lingering chocolate and cream from the martinis he drank back at the lounge coupled with an innate flavor all his own that gave Adrien a sugar rush out of the universe. *Feel*, Thaddeus's mouth felt warm,

moist, silky, his five o'clock stubble a delicious abrasion to Adrien's chin and upper lip.

Thaddeus tasted of surprise, too, for all of a half a second. Then, Jesus God, he kissed Adrien back. He put his hand on Adrien's hip and closed the minute distance between them until their bodies touched, hard plane to hard plane. He angled his head, taking the kiss deeper and blowing Adrien's mind with superb skill. Sweet Virgin Mary, the man could kiss. His tongue danced over Adrien's, sweeping into his mouth, licking over his teeth, exploring his palate and raining fiery embers of arousal through Adrien's soul. It was desire, lust, a detonation of attraction both men feared to let show, and it was dangerous, stupid, and wrong.

Adrien jerked away so fast, he took a full step back out of Thaddeus's reach. "Ah, God, I'm sorry." He raked a hand down his face, trying to wipe away the last few seconds, though he knew deep down he didn't really want to even if he could. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Adrien, wait." Thaddeus reached for him, catching his wrist. He didn't attempt to pull Adrien to him again, didn't try to close the distance Adrien had put between them. "Don't apologize. That was, wow."

"Amazing, yeah, I know." Adrien couldn't look at him. He dropped his gaze between them instead, focusing on Thaddeus's hand curled around his wrist. The man had long, slender fingers and a sure grip that comforted rather than threatened. Adrien wanted to feel that hand on other parts of his body. He wanted to close his eyes and revel in the feel of Thaddeus running those fingers through his hair as he trailed his lips over his temples and cheeks. "I—"

"If you say you're sorry again, I'm going to get pretty angry," Thaddeus cut him off. "I'm not sure what just happened there beyond one of the best, and yes, amazing kisses I've ever shared with a man, but I do know that I'm certainly not going to regret it." He hooked a finger under Adrien's chin, tugging Adrien's face up to look at him. "I

would rather you talk to me instead of acting so contrite. Something changed. Do you want to clue me in?"

"I shouldn't have kissed you." Adrien met Thaddeus's gaze, barely able to keep himself from saying the hell with the world and kissing the man again. Thaddeus Carter screamed gorgeous incarnate, but the pull Adrien felt to the man went way outside of physical attraction. It began that way, yes, but in the few short hours he spent with the man tonight, walking, talking, listening, and simply *being* with him, Adrien knew it wouldn't take much for it to blossom into so much more.

"I guess that point is up for debate because I wholeheartedly disagree." Thaddeus grazed the backs of his knuckles down Adrien's cheek. Adrien couldn't help but close his eyes and sigh at the contact. So tender, so compassionate, so right!

But it wasn't right. It was wrong. "I'm not ready for this," Adrien heard himself whisper the lie as if he stepped out of his body and stood off to the side watching the exchange. The out of body he shook his head because Adrien was so ready for this. He wanted a relationship, a partner, someone to come home to, someone to wake with in the morning. He didn't want to be alone anymore.

"You're not ready for what? You're not ready for a kiss, a walk on the beach, friendly conversation?"

A kiss, walk on the beach, friendly conversation, yes, that's all he shared with Thaddeus tonight. Thaddeus likely looked to share nothing more with Adrien. The man didn't necessarily want a relationship, he didn't necessarily want forever with someone, but simply a communal trade of passion. Except, as Adrien stared into Thaddeus's gentle stare, he knew he could have more with this man if he gave it a chance.

"I'm not ready for where all of that might lead," Adrien admitted, again listening to himself as he spoke the words of yet another lie. "I don't know what I'm ready for." Lie number three, because he knew exactly. He simply didn't know with whom.



The he watching on shook his head again and rolled his eyes. Would he really give up a chance for something with Thaddeus because of the feelings that kept him up nights, feelings he had yet to define over a straight guy?

Thaddeus is straight? A part of his mind argued. At least, he believed Thaddeus to be straight until just a few hours ago. What if the only other man who caught his attention since he broke it off with Brunson turned out to be gay, too?

"Okay." Thaddeus nodded and dropped his hand, but he retained hold of Adrien's wrist with the other. "I'll admit tonight has already been more than I expected. It's been fantastic," he added quickly, "but more than I dared to hope for."

*More than he dared to hope for.* The words reverberated through Adrien's head. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The air between them smelled of arousal and hunger. No way could Thaddeus ever think Adrien didn't want what had already transpired between them. "It's just that..." Adrien began, but broke off when his jacket started to ring. He squeezed his eyes tighter even as Thaddeus released his wrist so he could go for his Blackberry in the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket.

Adrien swore under his breath, pulled out the phone, and punched talk. "Bingham," he snapped, opening his eyes to find Thaddeus watching him with a keen understanding and unswerving patience on his face. Adrien listened as Michael Cosmos gave him the news he waited to hear for days and now wished with all his might would've waited a few more hours. He punched off the phone with a sigh and shoved it back in his jacket.

"You have to go," Thaddeus guessed correctly, his tone soft but not angry.

Adrien nodded. "The guy from the accident came out of the coma about fifteen minutes ago. I, um, I have to get to the hospital."

"I understand."

"I'll give you a ride back to the lounge." Thaddeus had wanted to ride on the back of Adrien's Harley, so Adrien had driven them to the beach.

"It's not that far. I'll walk."

"Are you sure? I can take you back."

"It's in the opposite direction of where you need to be. Go, I'll be fine."

"Thaddeus." Adrien chuckled at the slanted look and raised eyebrow Thaddeus gave him. "I'm not going to apologize again. I just wanted to say thanks for a great evening. Even with, well, the way it ended, it still ranks as one of the best nights I've had in a long time."

"Me, too."

Adrien turned to go. He had taken only a half a step when Thaddeus's hand closed around his arm. He twisted his upper body, and Thaddeus moved in. His mouth covered Adrien's without hesitation or invitation, coaxing Adrien's lips to part. Thaddeus's tongue swept inside for another quick, but no less mind-blowing kiss.

"Yeah," he whispered against Adrien's mouth as he slowly pulled away. "You definitely should have done that."

Thaddeus let him go, and Adrien walked away. A rapture of confusion and desire boggled his brain, threaded through his system, and awakened places better left to rest. Thaddeus Leopold Carter IV was more than gorgeous incarnate, the man spelled danger with a capital D, and Adrien was in trouble.

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Tess tightened her grip on the steering wheel as she made the turn onto the residential street. Well-kept middle class homes lined both sides of the road, all with manicured lawns and flowers beds, some with small vegetable gardens and children's play sets. The neighborhood put her in mind of a scene from *Seventh Heaven* screaming of pride, hard work, and family. She came through this

community before, but it never felt like this, never made her want to cry. Today, she fought a losing battle to keep the tears at bay.

"She handles like a dream, doesn't she?" Devon sat in the passenger's seat, his long legs extended as far as they could go in the short expanse of the Jag's floorboard. His hands rested lightly on his thighs. His right thumb tapped out the tempo of the drum beat to the Apocalyptica single playing low on the radio.

It took Tess a moment to realize he referred to the car. "Yeah, it's great. Too bad you don't get to keep it."

"Hell, for the money I've paid to rent it while I'm in town, I probably could've bought one," he said dryly.

"You're the one who insists on living like a movie star." He shot her a withering look, and she couldn't stop the quick grin. "The hurricane nearly demolished this entire street," she told him as she returned her attention to the road. "Look at the houses. Most of them don't even look as though they sustained any damage."

"The people around here bounced back pretty quickly, didn't they?"

Tess nodded. "And did most of it on their own. Don't get me wrong. The government helped. At least they did what they could."

"I doubt that," Devon muttered. "The government never does all they can to help families in need. They claim to, but most of it is just a copout."

"That's not true," Tess started to argue but stopped when he turned to her again, the expression on his face sad, as if remembering.

"Did you ever have to live off the government, Tess? I don't mean off a government pay check like you do now. I'm talking welfare, food stamps, the whole nine yards."

"No." Tess slowed for another turn and then pulled to the side of the road. She'd stopped two houses from their destination. She put the car in park and turned slightly in her seat. Disbelief warred with astonishment in her voice when she asked, "You have?"

"Yeah, I have." He didn't look at her, but continued to face forward in his seat. His attention seemed focused on a point in the far distance. "I didn't come from a family of actors, Tess. Hell, we barely had a TV that worked most of the time. We were poor, *dirt* poor. My mother worked as a waitress and my father," he stopped and shook his head, "the bastard didn't know the meaning of the word. He put in a day here and another there to shut my mother up when her bitching got too bad. Then he would quit and go back to spending his days on the sofa bossing my sister and I around and giving us hell."

"You have a sister?" How had she not known that, not known any of this? She'd never believed his roots stemmed from a family in the spotlight. The lack of publicity about his past made that obvious. Still, she realized only now she never asked exactly where he came from, and he never volunteered the information. Until now.

He looked at her, and she didn't miss the 'I told you so' spark in his amber eyes, the one that reiterated what he said last night about them never really talking, never getting to know each other.

"Had," he corrected her, turning away again. "I had a sister."

Tess closed her eyes. She didn't want to do this, to talk this way, to put all this personal shit between them. Nothing about last night had changed her mind about that. If anything, she felt more determined than ever to keep things completely on the level of sex between them. God, she didn't even want that. She wanted to get away from him, needed that distance back that she put between them by leaving California in the first place.

He hadn't mentioned last night. She had fallen asleep in his arms—cried herself to sleep, though she would never admit that even to herself—and hadn't awoken until well past dawn. She had gotten up and dressed with full intentions of getting out quick. He stopped her, talked her into driving him around the city, and not once did he bring up anything that transpired last night.

"What happened to her?" She heard herself ask the question, despite the feeling and knowledge that she didn't want to hear the answer.

Devon sighed. "Overdose. PCP. She got tired of life, fed up with my father, sick of the abuse."

"And she turned to drugs," Tess concluded.

Devon shook his head. "One time, Tess. Sally wasn't a druggie. She went out one night with the wrong crowd, got high one time, and it killed her."

Tess felt stunned. She heard of it happening, of course, knew of many cases that passed through the narcotics division at the station that began and ended in much the same way. She never would've dreamed in a million years Devon's life could've fallen into one of those case files.

"I left that night, the night she died," he confirmed. "I left and I never looked back. Went to Los Angeles, lived off the streets for months until this guy spotted me. Caught me, is what he did, attempting to steal his car. I sucked at being a thief." He laughed softly. "He turned out to be a talent agent. He saw something in me beneath the funk and the grime, got me cleaned up and told me if I wanted a chance at the lights, he could give it to me. He set me up with a job so that I could earn my way, pay for my acting classes, and then later got me an audition with Milt." He shot her a crooked grin that held only a marginal wattage of his usual drop-dead smile. "You know what they say about the rest."

Tess nodded and swallowed. "It's history."

"Ancient history, thank the powers that be." He slapped his thighs with the palms of his hands. She jumped at the sharp sound in the sudden silence of the car. "That's the house, huh?" He tipped his chin at the house two lots down. "What were you doing the day the hurricane hit, Tess?"

\* \* \* \*

Tess blinked at his swift change of subject. For a long moment, he thought she wouldn't answer. *Come on, baby, talk to me.* He wanted to scream it, to grab her by the shoulders and shake an answer from her frowning lips. Instead, he waited patiently as she put the Jaguar back in drive and crept the remaining feet to the driveway of the partially burnt structure they came to see.

"Working," she finally said.

A river of relief washed through him. *Thank you. Thank you!* Four little words, but a start nevertheless. He waited for her to elaborate.

"I'd barely been on the department six months." She gave a quietly amused laugh. "I was so freaking green behind the gills. The order came down to patrol the streets, help out where we could, make sure people got to safety, take shelter at the last minute. Then, when the storm had passed, our superiors told us to get back out here and keep an eye out for looters. I was three streets over when the call came through about this." She nodded out the car window at the burnt remains of the house.

"But you never made it here, did you?" According to the police reports, she went to the docks.

She shook her head. "Did you read the papers, get the full scoop on what happened here?"

"I know the reining lieutenant of the SSFD B shift nearly got killed here."

"Tripp Barrett." Tess nodded. "A metal shelving fell on him while he attempted to put out the fire. It started in the back somewhere, in some kind of art supply store room or something. Are they really recreating that scene in the movie?"

"A variation thereof." Devon read the newspaper articles about the event. He read the scene in the script. There were similarities, but like everything else they did with *Danger Storm*, the writers put their own spin on the incident.

"Did you want to get out, look around?"

"No, it doesn't look like there's really much to see."

"Debris and burnt rubble." Tess backed the car out of the drive. "My superiors redirected me before I could get here. That's when everyone available got dispatched to the docks."

"Can we go there now? I mean, if you have time." He knew she did. She didn't have to be on shift until this afternoon. And if he played his cards right, he could keep her with him and talking until then.

He had yet to actually sort through everything that happened between them last night, all he learned about their relationship, or at least what he always thought of as a relationship. It would take time to think it over, to work through it, to ease her out of the way she saw what lay between them as well as how she felt about her own desires.

She said she hated who she became in his presence. He could only take that to mean she despised the submissive side of herself. For a woman like Tess, he could see how that could be true. He needed to show her that her thinking couldn't be more wrong, that she shouldn't be ashamed of what she enjoyed, that it was okay to want it, to love it, and damnit, to love him.

"I have time." She picked up speed as they hit the main strip through town. A companionable silence fell between them for several minutes. She finally broke it when she pulled into the gravel parking lot of the boat docks. "Ryan Magee had gone missing. I should say everyone knew he had gone after the boy, his step-son, Timmy. Well, he wasn't his step-son at the time, but anyway, the goons with the Phay cartel kidnapped Timmy and had him on a boat out there." She pointed into the distance at the crashing waves off the coast.

Devon didn't wait for her to turn off the engine, but got out of the car and walked around to the front. He leaned against the hood, crossing his arms and his ankles as he stared out at the open water. After a moment, Tess joined him.

"Magee swam from shore to the boat where they held the boy hostage," he said. He knew he didn't need to tell her. She likely read

the reports more than he. Hell, she had been there. Still, he put voice to what he had read as it flittered through his memory. "They caught him, though, before he got to the boat, took him off in some kind of raft or something."

"They left Timmy on the boat for the SEAL team, FBI and DEA to find and took Magee to one of those islands out there."

Devon could see them, three specks of uninhabited islands far in the distance. "I can't imagine what it must have been like for him. Trading himself for the boy, not knowing if the boy would be safe, not knowing if the woman he loved would be safe."

"He's a trained warrior—a SEAL—even if he's no longer with the teams," Tess reminded him. "That's what they do."

"And he left that career to be a firefighter. He's a real hero. I'm glad, you know, that the script writers did their little switch-a-roo with the facts in this case, that they changed up the character of Raymond Magee the way they did. I couldn't have played the real Ryan Magee." He felt Tess's hand on his shoulder, and he turned his head to look at her. He didn't miss the surprise and glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"You're an amazing actor, Devon. You can play any part you set your mind to."

It meant more to him than he could possibly say to hear those words come from her. Stupid, he knew, for such a compliment to hit him where it hurt. Yet her opinion of him, of his career always mattered to him so much. It was why her not wanting to be seen with him during her time in Los Angeles always pained him even as he understood her need to keep herself out of his limelight for the sake of her own career.

"Maybe." He shrugged it off, because despite that sheen of tears and the shock, he knew he didn't need to push too hard too fast. "But I'm still glad I don't have to live up to that image."

"Have you met Magee?" She dropped her hand from his shoulder. He felt the absence of that touch, of the first contact that passed



between them since they crawled out of his bed that morning. Being so close to her without touching her threatened to drive him insane.

"No, not yet."

"Maybe you should."

Devon looked out over the water again, his mind replaying how it must have looked that day, how he knew it looked through the news cameras that filmed the aftermath. "Yeah," he softly agreed. "Maybe I should."

## Chapter Eight

"You ready for this?" Michael Cosmos stopped in the doorway to Adrien's office. The man who usually passed as an advertisement for Armani had ditched the suit for a pair of black BDUs, black t-shirt, and black DEA windbreaker like the one Adrien wore. The whole outfit resembled Adrien's down to the black combat boots. It was their street clothing, the ones they wore when they went on scheduled busts like the one they staged to happen within the hour. Still, Michael tended to go for the suit and tie over the casual look no matter the mission.

Adrien lifted a brow as he took in his partner's appearance. "Wow, it looks like you are. Damn, sweetie, you look spiffy." He slipped his arms into his shoulder holster and checked the clip on his Glock before sliding it into the holder. He fastened an extra clip to his belt along with an encased sling blade and covered both with his DEA windbreaker.

Michael spun in a circle in the doorway. "Don't I look hot? Check out my ass in these pants."

Adrien cracked up. "Oh, man, you slay me." Of all the men he worked with, Michael had quickly become his friend and confidant as well as his working partner. Michael outranked him in stature, but rarely did he pull the boss strings, and he never looked down on Adrien for his sexual preference. For that in itself, he would forever love the man.

Michael shrugged and went back to leaning against the doorframe, his expression never changing from the hard-edged, haunted look Adrien had come to think of as the man's default face. "I tried to talk

to Sanchez again, tried to make him see the benefits of turning CI." He shook his head. "It's no use."

Sanchez, the guy in the hospital, came out of the coma only to give them squat in terms of the information they needed.

"The guy refuses to flip. No flip. No deal. He'll go to jail." Adrien didn't need to tell Michael that. The man knew the way it worked better than Adrien. Still, it didn't surprise Adrien that Michael tried again to turn Sanchez into a confidential informant for the agency.

"It's too late now, anyway. The setup would've only worked if Sanchez gave up his supplier as soon as he came out of the coma. The word is on the streets now. Whoever the bastard is has gotten word and won't come anywhere near Sanchez now."

"Does Harris have the search warrant ready?" Adrien walked around his desk, patting his pockets and checking to be sure he had all he needed before he left his office.

"Ready and waiting for us." They had to bring in Ford Harris from the SSPD's narcotics division on the bust to get the warrant they needed for this afternoon. Not that either of them minded. Harris was a solid cop, hell bent on catching the bastards as badly as Michael and Adrien. "Tess Keaton and Samantha Becket are assisting, too, along with Dregs, Sprik, and Goshier from our side."

"Isn't Keaton in on this movie in town?" Adrien liked Tess Keaton. He thought her as solid a cop as Harris despite her limited time on the police force. He saw her in action when they attempted the takedown of the members of the Cambodian drug cartel that attacked Rayne Jasper. "The last thing we need is for the Hollywood fucks to get wind of this."

"I'm a step ahead of you, my man. Harris and I had a long talk about her, and I can assure you he had a longer talk with her when he called her in on this bust. Her lips are sealed."

"That's good enough for me." Adrien gestured through the office door to the hallway. "Let's get this show on the road. After you, boss."

"Boss." Michael made a *pft* sound at that. "Please."

They found the other guys on the raid team waiting for them when they exited the building. Despite the varying heights and hair colors, the five men of the raid team could've blended into one dressed alike as they were in DEA jackets, BDUs, t-shirts, and boots.

"Are we ready for this?" Simon Dregs, the raid team senior agent and often point man, the first to enter the spotlighted location, asked from his perch on the back bumper of the SUV they would take for the bust. He held the keys and tossed them in the air, caught them, tossed them again.

"You bet." Dregs tossed the keys a third time, and Michael snagged them from midair as he passed on his way to the driver's seat. "Does everyone know the score?" he asked after the five men belted themselves into the SUV.

Adrien took the passenger's seat. He snapped his belt and turned in the seat so he could see the three men in the back. "We're looking for anything and everything to nail this guy. Local police will be on the scene to assist. Sanchez has already been caught with four vials of pure grain opium and a Ziploc baggy of what we now know to be pure opium tablets. We're looking for more. He won't flip, so we're also looking for anything to lead us to his supplier."

"This is the shit you've been so hot for these past few months, isn't it, Cosmos?" Martin Sprik leaned forward in his seat to ask.

"Try the last year, but yeah, this is the shit." Michael kept his attention on the road, but took the conversational ball. "I want everything you can find, anything that will help us track and take down these bastards. They've taken it a step farther now, manufacturing the opium into pill form. It'll be easier to push this way, easier to sell."

"'They' meaning that cartel out of Cambodia?" This from Harry Goshier who leaned on the back passenger's door as Michael took a curve a little too sharply.

"With any luck, what we find will eventually lead to them. This Sanchez guy is small potatoes to the fuckers we really want. We're

starting at the bottom of the ladder again with this one, boys. By the time we leave this fucker's house, I want to be one step closer to the top."

"I don't suppose I can talk you into staying in the truck for this one," Adrien muttered softly as not to be heard by anyone but Michael. For a moment, he didn't think Michael heard him until the other man shot him a look filled with incredulity.

"I don't suppose you can." Michael refocused his attention on the road.

They were nearly there, a few more blocks through the worst subdivisions in town and they would reach their destination. The glossy SUV with its five men dressed in black stood out like a sore thumb in this neighborhood. But they weren't here on a stake out or an undercover operation. They decided to take this place down in the late afternoon sunlight for Mr. Big Bad Drug Dealer and all his merry cohorts to see.

"I want these guys, Bingham."

And Adrien knew he would go after them no matter the cost.

"I'm not staying away from this, too." The way he stayed away from the recently separated Rhonda Ramsey for several months now.

He didn't have to say it. Adrien knew the man was chipping at the bits to keep himself from the fledgling friendship he started with the woman he wanted to have so much more than a friendship with. Because Michael realized not so long ago that his relentless pursuit of the notorious Phay cartel could very well put Rhonda and her son Lucas in danger. It nearly happened once already when freelance photographer Rayne Jasper snapped a photo in the park of Boran Roudnuol that incidentally captured Rhonda in the background.

Michael stuck to Rhonda like glue after that, accepting her insistence that they could be nothing more than friends despite how obviously hot they burned for each other. Right up until the moment he stepped away to protect her and her son from what he believed to be certain danger.

"She's doing good, you know," Adrien volunteered, still speaking softly. The ticking muscle in Michael's jaw gave Adrien the indication he needed that Michael heard him. "She asks about you all the time, wonders why you won't return her calls, why you stopped coming around. She, um, really thought you had become friends."

"Let it go, Bingham." Michael pulled the SUV to a stop outside a rundown single story house.

Not surprisingly, the place looked to be little more than a shack, Adrien observed. A police cruiser with Ford Harris behind the wheel, Detective Samantha Becket in the passenger's seat, and Tess Keaton in the back pulled up in front of the SUV. Adrien listened to Michael. He let it go, for now.

The five men in the SUV jumped out, rounding the back of the vehicle. Sprik opened the back, and they reached inside for the tools they would need.

Adrien noted the gated door, not uncommon in a neighborhood such as this, on the front of the house at the same time Dregs went for the Blackhawk Halligan tool. At thirty inches in length and made of unbendable steel, the tool would pry through the door with little muscle behind the intrusion. Sprik pulled out the Mono Shock Ram, disabling any need for a key.

"The house is supposed to be empty," Michael informed them as he reached inside to claim both the 12 gauge and the M16. Adrien caught the 870 Express Combo with the solid steel receiver and modified Rem Choke that Michael tossed him and watched as the other man readied the M16. "Bingham and I will go in first. Harris, Becket, and Keaton will secure the area out here and then assist with the search when we get inside."

The operation went like clockwork, each agent moving into position and carrying out his duty flawlessly. The house was indeed vacant, but not short on fantabulous findings. Between the five agents and three officers, they uncovered more than a dozen cell phones and enough guns for a good start to the next revolutionary war. They also

unearthed bags of marijuana, and, *score*, another six vials of the devilishly pure opium and six more Ziploc baggies of the pills they came after.

Adrien pulled one of the vials from the holding box he discovered hidden on the rafter above the ceiling in the back bedroom and beamed a smile at Michael. "Looks like you and the Jeffersons get to fight over their theme song." At Michael's perplexed look, Adrien started to sing, "We're moving on up."

For quite possibly the first time in weeks, maybe even months, Michael Cosmos smiled.

\* \* \* \*

Devon grazed a fingertip over December's slightly parted lips. "You can stay with me, here," he told her softly, his voice husky with desire and sexual promise. "There's no sense going back out there. It's too dangerous."

December looked up at him, her gaze moving over his face. She licked her lips, drawing his attention to the fullness of her mouth, the glistening moisture her tongue left behind. "And staying here with you isn't any more dangerous than fighting that storm outside?"

Devon leaned in, brushing his mouth to hers. She made an audible quick intake of air, a sound of surprise that ended in a quiet moan. "You'll be safe here with me, I promise." He kissed her, or rather staged kissed her. He slanted his head away from the camera, keeping their mouths blocked from the shot while still exposing enough for the audience to believe they really kissed.

Her arms folded around his neck, her curvy body pressing against him, her voluptuous breasts molding to his chest. He felt it all and felt absolutely nothing. Not a single zing, not a spark of arousal, not a flicker of hope. He didn't let the camera see that either, of course. No, he played the part like a pro for the film. He knew when the scene made the screen the audience would see a man and a woman torn

between their desires for one another and their need for safety from the raging storm.

"Cut!" Milton's director voice boomed through the building. "That's a wrap."

Devon eased away from December, slowly letting his co-star go. She stared at him, seemingly dazed for a moment. Then she composed herself in a flash and spun on her heel. What the hell? He shook his head, not all that concerned with whatever stuck into the actress's craw. Movement at the edge of the set caught his eye. He narrowed his gaze, forcing his eyes to focus through the blinding stage lights to the darkness off the set. The lights dimmed as if on cue, and his focus cleared on Ryan Magee.

Devon immediately recognized the firefighter. Magee's hard edged expression, his wide shoulders and military stance screamed former SEAL even before Devon noted the sand colored t-shirt and desert print camouflage BDUs. Devon snagged a bottle of water from a bin of ice as he made his way over to the man. With the storm machines and sounds turned off, only the scatter of conversation among stage hands prevented any silence.

"That's some storm," Magee commented when Devon stopped at his side.

Devon couldn't stop the grin. "It will sound more realistic when the sound and effects guys make their final tweaks before the end of production."

"Final tweaks," Magee repeated and shook his head. He laughed. "If only it could be that simple." He turned to Devon and extended a hand. "Ryan Magee."

"Yeah, I recognized you." He took the man's hand. "Devon Gerard."

"Yeah, I recognized you." Ryan didn't exactly smile. It was more a slight upturn to the corner of his mouth, but the easy glint in his eyes seemed friendly enough.



Devon felt his shoulders relax and only then did he realize how tense he felt. "You're the last person I expected to see on set." He twisted the cap on the water bottle and tipped it back for a long swallow.

"Why? This whole thing is about me, isn't it?"

Devon eyed the man as he lowered the water bottle. "It started out that way. I'm not sure it still applies, though. Even so, I would think that would be all the more reason you would want to stay away."

Magee lifted a shoulder. "I also heard they got way off base, at least with the biography part of the script."

"Autobiography," Devon corrected. "That part took on a direction all its own."

"Yeah, I noticed. That whole scene you just did," he waved a hand at the now empty stage set, "I don't remember anything like that."

"Want to share what you do remember?"

"About that particular moment?" Magee shot him a look and this time he did smile, a full-blown, ear-to-ear grin. "I'll pass, thank you."

Devon laughed. "I didn't mean that exactly, not the personal stuff between you and Tina. That's her name, right?"

Magee nodded.

"I meant more how you remember the storm. What was it like? Were you...." Devon cut himself off and changed directions. "No, of course you weren't. You're a firefighter, a freaking former Navy SEAL. But you had a job to do and you got stranded in your house to ride out the storm while your crew held down the fort, so to speak, at the station house, right?"

"Everyone on the department who could make it in before the worst of the storm hit rode it out at the station, yes. Not just B shift, but everyone and their families. I couldn't make it back in time, so the captain ordered me to stay put." He shifted, shot a glance over his shoulder as if making sure no one stood behind him, then leaned in and lowered his voice. "What was it like? Fantastic, the very best night of my mother fucking life."

"Because you spent it with Tina." Devon nodded. "Okay, I get it."

"I bet you do, but don't go spreading that around. I'm supposed to be the hero here, right? The big bad tough guy who spent the evening bouncing off the walls, barely able to contain myself from going out into a category-three hurricane to find the bad guys."

"You watch a lot of TV, don't you?"

"Seen one, you've seen them all."

"Actually, the bad guys didn't come around until the next day," Devon prompted, steering Magee to the part of the experience he really wanted to know about.

Magee's smiling face sobered. "Immediately after the storm, when Tina awoke to find Timmy gone. I wasn't scared through the storm." He shot Devon a sideways glance that told Devon he knew exactly what he started to ask before. "Terror hit me the next morning. I've never felt fear like that before, and I pray to whatever power watches over us that I never feel it again."

The admission surprised Devon to silence. How many times, he wondered, had this man, this tough, trained warrior been afraid? More, how many times had he admitted it to anyone? Devon guessed he could probably count the times on one hand.

"Do you ever think about going after them?" Devon asked softly. "They got away, didn't they? Ever think about getting back into the Navy, going back to your old team and declaring war on the bastards?"

Magee nodded slowly. "It crossed my mind a time or ten hundred." He shook his head. "It's not my job now. That's for the DEA, FBI, and the guys left on Team Six to do."

*And the local PD*, Devon thought but didn't say it. He had still been with Tess when she got the call from Ford Harris shortly before noon. She hadn't told him the precise reason for the call, but he deduced it had something to do with a drug bust. He managed to get her to talk a little about her career and her recent cases today. He got enough out of her to come to that conclusion.

"Uh oh, problem in Hollywood?" Magee's softly spoken question and inquisitive gaze drew Devon's attention to the far side of the set where Milton paced, one hand flying rapidly as he argued with someone on his cell phone.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Devon muttered. But it wasn't Hollywood he suspected giving Milton trouble. Milton's wife, Sabrina, would be his better guess.

But as he watched, Milton completed the call and shoved the phone back in his pocket. His lips moved in such a keenly pronounced, "Fucking son of a bitch," that Devon read the words from across the room. Not Sabrina, then, he decided. Who else could ruffle the usually taciturn director's feathers that completely?

"I better go." Devon turned to Magee. "Good to meet you. In case no one has told you, you're welcome to hang out on the set any time you like. Maybe bring Tina and her son next time."

"I might do that. Thanks."

Devon turned again just in time to see Milton stomping out of the building as if the hounds of hell barked at his heels.

\* \* \* \*

Tess slid one of the confiscated phones across the table in the evidence room of the station and leaned back in her chair. "How can anyone keep up with more than a dozen cell phones?" She rubbed her temples as she stared at the scatter of cells, papers, and other paraphernalia they had taken from the Sanchez house. "I can barely keep up with one! And they're all connected, each having different numbers, probably even different access codes to the voice mail."

"It's the business, Tess." Ford reached for a file, flipped it open, and studied the top report. "One of those boogers has the information in it that we need, too. One of them is either programmed with the number to Sanchez's supplier or is the phone the supplier calls to

reach Sanchez. The others are likely Sanchez's contacts to buyers, other pushers, and supposed friends."

Tess made a raspberry sound at that. "Friends. When will drug dealers realize they don't have friends? They have people who use them to supply their next fix or to set them up with a wad of dough. They have people who will turn them in on a dime, or hell, even *for* a dime if the opportunity comes knocking."

"And so they will," Adrien Bingham sang as he sailed into the room, followed closely by Michael Cosmos.

"You guys get anything?" Ford sat up straighter and closed the file in favor of hearing what the DEA agents had managed to pull from Sanchez.

"Oh, yeah, now that we've turned his home upside down and hung him on enough charges for possession of both drugs and guns, intent to distribute, and a slew of others we threw in for show, he's flipping like a fish out of water." Adrien smiled as he settled in the seat across from Tess. "He's handing over some pretty impressive information, too."

"Like what?" Tess's gaze moved from Adrien to Michael, who had yet to take a seat.

"I'm glad you're still here, Tess." Michael spoke for the first time since entering the room. The deadpanned tone of his voice sent a sliver of trepidation traveling up Tess's spine. "We need to talk."

Tess angled a look at him, lifting a brow in an expression she knew would appear more of intrigue than concern. She could put on a poker face with the best of him. *Okay, Special Agent Cosmos, you show me your best blank stare, and I'll raise you a thin lipped, innocent glare.* "About?"

"Do you recognize this number?" The agent took a small notebook from the pocket of his windbreaker and slid it across the table.

Tess looked down at the scrawled numbers, the area code registering even if the rest of the numbers meant diddly to her. She knew the handwriting, though. Michael had written it. She had seen

his chicken scratch enough in reports since Ford started to pull her in to work with him in the narcotics division. "It's a southern California area code." She looked back into Cosmos's penetrating gaze. "I don't know the number."

"Who in Silver Springs would have a cell phone with a southern California area code?"

Tess started to squirm, but caught herself. Every officer knew to refrain from that basic interrogation blunder. Not that Cosmos actually had her in an interrogation. No, his tone didn't accuse, but instead urged her to figure it out on her own. And it clicked even as a wave of fear moved through her.

"The movie," she whispered, her eyes growing wide.

"The movie," Cosmos nodded his confirmation.

"Sanchez wouldn't give us a name," Adrien put in, "said he didn't have one. He has been told to call the guy Chum."

"I assume you've already ran a trace on the number," Ford said.

Cosmos nodded. "It came back to a Jerry Norman, nice nondescript name belonging to a talent agent in the Los Angeles area. He lost the phone about three weeks back. Seeing as it's not his primary phone for contacts and he's been busy, he hasn't taken the time to have it disconnected or report it lost."

Something stirred in Tess's mind, something of possible importance, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Before she could try further, Cosmos continued, "Sanchez knows it's someone in town with the movie, but couldn't tell us much more."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?" Tess heard herself ask.

"Touché," Cosmos gave her an almost-but-not-quite smile, just the smallest quirk of his lips. "We need to find out who has this phone without tipping him off that we know. We need to find out how deep in the drug organization he is."

"We've got a list of people associated with the movie that have had contact with the talent agent in the week the phone went missing." Adrien slid another notebook across the table.

Ford stood, walked around the table, and read over Tess's shoulder. "Hell, what did this Jerry Norman do, cast the whole fucking movie himself?"

Tess's thoughts echoed that very question. There must have been ten names on the list. Everyone from one of the women she knew in make-up, all the way to...Her mind seemed to short circuit on the last name on the list.

*He turned out to be a talent agent. He saw something in me beneath the funk and the grime, got me cleaned up and told me if I wanted a chance at the lights, he could give it to me. He set me up with a job, so that I could earn my way, pay for my acting classes, and then later got me an audition with Milt.*

Devon's words replayed in her memory, 'A talent agent.'

*Oh, dear God.*

"It almost seems that way, doesn't it?" Cosmos said. "Apparently, this Norman fellow is friends with the director, what's his name?"

"Milton Remy," Tess supplied softly, only half realizing she answered the agent's question.

"That's him. And that's exactly why I wanted to talk to you." Michael placed his palms on the tabletop and leaned in. "You're part of this movie, you know this crowd, you can get the information we need. I need you to work it, Keaton."

"Hey, your first undercover assignment." Ford slapped her on the back as he returned to his seat.

*Undercover.* The word seemed to echo in the room.

"I can help," Adrien interjected. Tess felt a moment of gratitude for the man snagging the other's attention. "I've got an in with the movie, too. It's not as good as Tess's, but I might learn something from it."

Tess saw the look exchanged between the two agents but didn't really think much of it. She couldn't get past the word still pounding a mantra in her brain. *Undercover.* She wanted to go undercover since

joining the force, but not like this. Had she already been undercover in more ways than one with the man they were after?

*Please, no.*

\* \* \* \*

Adrien walked out of the evidence room with Michael knowing with each step he would soon have questions to answer. He didn't have to wait long.

"I didn't know you knew someone involved with this movie." Michael pushed open the door at the end of the hall leading out into the night and waited for Adrien to go through first.

"Actually, we both know several people in the movie," Adrien countered. "Tess isn't the only one who got an extra's part, though hers is the biggest."

"Okay, you got me there. So who else do *we* know on this movie set we can trust?"

"Thaddeus Carter." Adrien took the lead, walking briskly across the parking lot to the passenger's door of the SUV. Only when he slid into the passenger's seat and buckled himself in did he realize what a stupid move he made. They had parted with Dregs, Sprik, and Gosher hours ago. The other agents returned to HQ to see what they could dig up from the other information they uncovered in the latest round of Sanchez's questioning. Now Adrien sat in an enclosed vehicle with Michael and no way to avoid the onslaught of questions the agent would fire next.

"The firefighter?" Michael shot Adrien a glance as he put the key in the ignition. "I wasn't aware you knew him that well."

"I didn't until, well, last night. I was, um, walking with him on the beach when you called about Sanchez." Adrien saw Michael's hand freeze in his reach for the gear shift, but he didn't look at his friend.

"Are you saying I owe you an apology?"

"Not as big of one as you're thinking, but maybe a small one." Adrien sighed. "Or maybe I owe you a thank you instead." He finally glanced at Michael. "I'm not real sure on that yet."

"Is he...?" Michael let the question trail off, but even in the dim lights flickering over his face from the dashboard, Adrien could read the rest of the question in the man's eyes.

Adrien nodded. "Yeah, shocked me silly, too. That's, um, not public knowledge, by the way."

Michael put the SUV in reverse and backed out of the parking spot. "I can keep a secret. I'm pretty good at keeping them, actually."

Yeah, Adrien knew that to be fact. Like the secret Michael kept for who knew how long now that he'd fallen head over his expensive loafers in love with Rhonda Ramsey. Like the secret that before Michael got scared he would put Rhonda in danger, the entire friend thing with her had been one great big yellow brick road to the land of love he hoped to reach with her at the end.

"I know I said Keaton's lips were sealed on this," Michael changed the subject. Adrien could've kissed the man for his diplomacy. "But I didn't realize at the time that she has a thing going with Devon Gerard."

"Oh, crap," Adrien slapped his forehead. "I did see her with him last night at the Paradise Lounge. I didn't even think about that."

"Don't sweat it. From the sounds of it, you were otherwise preoccupied last night." Michael shot him a grin that held a world of knowledge and even more teasing.

"You know, I've seen you smile more today than I have in weeks. I think I liked it better when you had your whole mad-at-the-world face going on."

"I'll get back to that, I promise." Michael stopped at the edge of the parking lot, waited for a line of cars to pass, and then pulled out onto the main strip toward the DEA HQ. "Becket mentioned Gerard being at her house the other morning when she came home from a



night shift. Harris relayed that little piece of info because I questioned him about Keaton."

"I know I'm the one who questioned you about Tess before the bust, but well, I don't know her all that well. Even so, I can't see her putting her career on the line for a man, even if he is a heartthrob like Devon Gerard. I've gotten the impression the few times we've worked with her that her career is more important to her than that."

"Do you get the impression that it's important enough to her to tell us if Gerard turns out to be the connection in this drug ring?"

Adrien thought about it for a long moment and then nodded. "Yeah, I do." He kept his expression carefully blank even though Michael focused his attention on the road. "But if you have any doubts, you could always stake out Keaton's house. You could do it without being noticed, too. What with Rhonda living right next door and all."

The muscles in Michael's jaw started to tick again and, yeah, he had his mad-at-the-world face back on. "No matter what I do, she still somehow ends up in the middle of this Phay mess without knowing or trying."

Because no matter what Michael tried to do, he continued to go against fate. Adrien didn't say as much, but he firmly believed it to be true. Until Michael and Rhonda finally let themselves acknowledge what really lay between them, fate would continue to toy with them.

"When we get back to HQ, I need you to contact Stone with what we've learned tonight. We promised to keep him in the loop."

Adrien's heart skipped a beat, but he nodded. Was this fate's way of toying with him, too? Forcing him at every turn to talk with FBI agent Cameron Stone?

Thaddeus's face flashed through his mind as he got out of the SUV at the DEA HQ. What kind of game was fate truly playing? Adrien wished he knew.

## Chapter Nine

Thaddeus stopped, rolled his eyes to the clear blue sky, and reached without looking back to snag Terri's arm. "Let's go," he sing-songed as he practically dragged her down the sidewalk.

"Wait!" Terri's protest fell on deaf ears. She tugged at her arm, even attempted to dig in her heels, which had no effect on cement and even less against Thaddeus's strong grip. She had muscle. Thaddeus would give her that. But it didn't compare to his. "Did you see that dress?"

"Nope, sure didn't. Oh, look, didn't you say you wanted to stop by the fresh market, something about needing some zucchini and squash for a casserole for dinner?"

"Yeah, about as badly as I want a cavity," Terri retorted dryly and gave in to walking alongside him.

Thaddeus bit back a grin. "Keep eating the way you do most of the time and you just might get that cavity."

"I'd rather have that dress back there. You should've seen it!" Her voice turned animated once more, and he fell a half-step behind her, the better to catch her again if she tried to bolt. "Sleek black silk and velvet cut low on the chest and high on the thigh. Really, Thaddeus, I need to go back and see how much it is."

"There's no need for that. I can already tell you it's more than you're allowed to spend today." If he hadn't been watching her, he would've plowed into her when she abruptly stopped walking. She tossed him a look, opening her mouth to make another argument, but he held up a hand. "You did that yourself." He put a girlish lilt to his voice and a hand on her shoulder the way she often did him when she

had something to say. "Do not, under any circumstances, let me buy anything I don't absolutely need today. Every spare dime I have has to go to my new car fund."

Terri huffed. "Do you really have to take everything I say so seriously?" she muttered as she stomped away.

"I do, and you know I do. That's why you tell me. That's why you bring me shopping with you, to prevent you from buying unnecessary things."

"How do you know that dress isn't necessary? You know, most men would jump at the chance of seeing a woman in a dress like that."

Oh, no, Thaddeus would not comment on that one. "Fresh market. Zucchini. Squash. Now." He made each word its own sentence as he steered her into the store. "You're really making a casserole?" He snagged a hand basket, passed it to her, and grabbed one for himself.

"You said I should learn how to cook more." She shrugged. Only a hint of her pout over the dress remained in her expression.

"I said you should learn how to cook healthier. It amazes me how you manage to keep that figure the way you pig out on high carbohydrates and sweets all the time."

"You noticed?" She lifted a brow, and her gaze dropped straight to his mouth.

*Shit.*

"Imagine how great my figure would look in that black dress, especially if I eat vegetables for dinner instead of a fat, juicy cheeseburger. I could even make the casserole, wear the dress, and invite you for dinner."

*Double shit.*

"But, wait, you can't imagine it because you didn't stop to look at the dress."

"Nope, and I'm not going to. We're getting veggies and then ducking next door for my bottle of Merlot and then we're calling it a day." Thaddeus wove through the displays of melons, breads, and

greens until he found the zucchini. He picked up one, examined it, discarded it for another and handed it over his shoulder to her.

"Will Merlot taste right with zucchini and squash casserole?" Though her tone sounded innocent enough, her question rang of a set up.

*Triple shit.*

"Because I thought I might pick up a bottle, too, though I figured on white."

Thaddeus shrugged and placed a zucchini for himself in his own basket. He moved to the squash, found a good one and turned slightly to put it in her basket. "Despite the general belief that all rich people are wine connoisseurs, this rich boy is not. I drink what I like with whatever I decide to eat, and I prefer Merlot."

"Merlot it is. You will be joining me for dinner, right?" She said it as more a statement than a question, even though she added that all too innocent 'right' at the end.

Thaddeus slid down the line of produce, selecting a cucumber, a batch of Romaine lettuce, cherry tomatoes, and carrots for a salad later in the afternoon. "I can't. I've got to be on the movie set at four."

"You think you'll be there that long?" She hid the disappointment in her tone well, but Thaddeus saw it move through her expression when he glanced at her.

He shrugged again and led her to the checkout lanes. "Who knows? Sometimes, a shoot will be perfect on the first take. Other times, it still isn't right after twenty takes."

"A few days in a movie and he's already talking like a star," Terri muttered, but she grinned as she moved through the checkout line to pay for her veggies.

They talked little as they left the fresh market and entered the liquor store next door. Minutes later, they stepped back onto the sidewalk, Terri with her bottle of white wine for her casserole and Thaddeus holding onto his bottle of Merlot.

"Do you think we should zip in there for a second, say hello to Veronica since we're in the neighborhood?" Terri nodded toward Romantic Illusions across the street and diagonal from where they stood.

Dean Wolcott's wife, Veronica, owned the shop. Thaddeus had met her only a handful of times, but saw quickly why the B shift captain fell helmet over boots in love. The woman had spunk, tenacity. Thaddeus supposed she needed it to run a store like Romantic Illusions in a town like Silver Springs with its catering stock leaning more to sexual adventures than simple hearts and flowers.

"And see what other things you can find to spend your car fund on?" Thaddeus countered quickly, once again sidestepping her attempts to put him in a sexual situation.

Because that's exactly what she tried to do. He had grown accustomed to her advances, even expected them as of late. She managed to throw them into the conversation more when they kept one another company while running errands on their time off shift. He enjoyed spending time with her and even looked forward to days like this. He valued their friendship. He only wished he could talk to her as a friend right about now.

"We better not." Thaddeus started walking in the opposite direction of Veronica's store. Terri followed, but he sensed a tension between them that hadn't been there moments ago. He felt her hand on his shoulder, expected another ploy to get him to tag along into some other sex store or lingerie shop, but instead she spoke softly.

"Is something bothering you?"

Thaddeus looked at her. All the playfulness and flirtation left her expression. He saw only concern and kindness. Maybe that's what compelled him to answer. "Yes, well, a little."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Did he? Could he?

Yes, he absolutely wanted to talk about it. And yes, he definitely could, should, as soon as he found the right words.

"How about I buy you an ice cream and we go for a walk in the park," he suggested. "It's only a couple of blocks. Our vegetables should be okay for a while longer."

"Sounds good." She didn't say anything more until they got their ice cream cones and started following the path that curved around the edge of the city park. "I get the impression you need a little nudge for whatever this is that's bothering you, so how about we work up to it. You stop me whenever you're ready to talk. Okay?"

"You're great, you know that, Terri?" He would've taken her hand if his own hadn't been full of ice cream, veggies, and wine. It would've been a bad move, too, because already he saw the glint of accomplishment and victory in her eyes.

"Hmm, you noticed that, too, did you? Good. We're finally making progress. So, what did you do after I left the bar the other night?" she rushed on before he could comment.

Thaddeus licked his ice cream cone. *So much for working up to it.* She unknowingly asked the one question that set him up to reveal the truth. He took the plunge. This was it, now or never. He needed to tell her. "I went for a walk on the beach."

Terri nodded slowly, took a bite of her ice cream, looked away, and then looked back. "Who is she?"

Thaddeus's heart tripped. "*His* name is Adrien. He's with the DEA." He watched her for any reaction, saw when the relief moved over her face first at his correction that he spent the evening with a man rather than another woman. But then she blinked and something indescribable replaced the relief.

"Isn't he...?" She stopped walking and stared at him.

"Gay," Thaddeus finished for her, nodding as understanding dawned next in her eyes.

She blinked again, pursed her lips, and started walking again. "He's cute."

Thaddeus barked a laugh that sounded part relief and part amusement. The woman never ceased to amaze him.

"Hell, who am I kidding? The man is gorgeous!" She bumped her elbow playfully into Thaddeus's arm. "You dog. No wonder you weren't ready to leave the lounge. I wouldn't have been, either. So, are you seeing him?"

Thaddeus stared at her, knowing the admiration he felt for her at that moment must be written all over his face. No ridicule, no scorn, no anger or even disgust. She took in the news that he was gay, rolled with it, and slipped right back to the Terri Vega he had befriended.

"We've never spent any real time together before last night," he told her. "I ran into him a few days ago at the gym. Okay, I purposely ran into him."

She laughed. "You staged a meeting? You are a dog."

"Woof, woof." He pretended to bark. "I wanted to talk to him, and I couldn't think of any other way to do it."

"Are you in love with him?"

Her blunt question shouldn't have thrown him, but it did. "I, well, no, I'm not in love with him. Lust maybe." She shot him a sideways glance, and he chuckled. "Okay, lust definitely, but not love. I could be but, oh, I don't know." He stopped when she walked in front of him to get to the trashcan just off the path and waited for her to return. "You aren't angry, are you?" He couldn't help but ask.

"About you being gay?" she said point blank. "Not at all. I mean, it's a shame for women everywhere. I've always thought the same about Adrien being gay. The man is just too hot."

"Tell me about it." Thaddeus sighed.

Terri giggled. "But if you want the truth, I'm actually relieved. I was starting to think I must be losing my touch."

"You? Never! If I was straight, I would've been in your bed the first night we met."

"Thanks, sweetie." Her hand now free of her ice cream cone, she grazed it down his arm. "Now I feel much better. Before I screw up or anything, is this news shared in confidence?"

"You mean do I expect you to keep my being gay a secret?"

She looked around. Only a scatter of people occupied the park at this time of day, but a few of them stood close enough to hear him, not that they seemed to pay his words much mind. "I guess not," she said. "But what about the guys on shift? I'm not going to walk into the station next shift and yell, 'Hey, everybody, old Thad baby is gay,' but do you want them to know or not?"

"I'm not all that concerned," Thaddeus answered honestly. "I don't figure they will be, either. I don't intend to hide it."

Terri nodded. "I figure you're right. And you shouldn't hide it. Hell, you haven't been, have you?"

"Not really. No one asked, I haven't volunteered, and I haven't been put in a position where it showed."

"Speaking of positions, which one do you plan to take next with Adrien?" Her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth to stifle her laughter. "I didn't mean that to come out as perverted as it sounded."

Thaddeus laughed, too. They would be okay, their friendship would be okay. Better than okay, he realized and felt a happiness beyond imagination at that. "Thank you." He polished off the last bite of his ice cream cone, shoved the napkin into his pocket, and hooked his arm around her waist, pulling her close. "I really love you, you know that?"

She beamed a smile up at him that would make any straight man melt in his shoes. "I do now, and I love you, too." She kissed his cheek.

Thaddeus sighed. "As for what *position* I intend to take with Adrien, I'm not sure. He kissed me, but..."

"Hold up, Road Runner," Terri cut him off. "He *kissed* you? On a scale of one to ten?"



"A definite twenty-five." Thaddeus grinned, the memory of Adrien's lips on his, of Adrien's tongue in his mouth made his dick hard all over again. God, the man could kiss!

"Figures. I've never kissed a twenty-five. I'll get all the details later but finish the but."

"But he said he shouldn't have."

"Shouldn't have kissed you?"

Thaddeus nodded. "I think he might be seeing someone else."

"You didn't ask him?"

"Well, no."

"You should. The next time you see him. Hell, stage another meet at the gym or something, but you should definitely ask him. You need to know."

"Mmm hmm, like you asked me if I was seeing anyone else?"

"Hey, I finally did today, in a manner of speaking. That counts. Besides, I figured I would work up to it."

"So am I." Or he would be, as soon as he managed to be in the same place at the same time with Adrien again.

\* \* \* \*

Tess never knew Devon to be late for a call on the set, until now. She glanced at her wristwatch as she stepped out the back door of the make-shift studio at the fair grounds and into the rapidly darkening afternoon. The sun would set in a little less than an hour, but enough daylight remained for her to quickly scan her surroundings, to note the faint light spilling from the side window of Devon's personal trailer.

She made her way toward it, her mind reeling with too many questions to name, too many points that needed addressing. The list she read back in the evidence room of the station, the one scrawled in Michael Cosmos's hand, had etched itself in stone in her memory, Devon's name seemingly highlighted in canary yellow. It hadn't been,

of course, nor had any of the others. And because his name landed on that list because he knew the talent agent in question, even likely saw that talent agent as the one he owed his life and career to, didn't make him involved in the drug ring.

But what if it did? She tried to push all her personal involvement with Devon aside, attempted to focus solely on the job. She needed to see this objectively, to see him as any other possible suspect. Instead, she saw the tenderness in his expression as he took her the other night. She wouldn't think of it as making love even though they never had sex quite like that before. But he had broken her, reached inside her and pulled things from her very soul that she hadn't wanted him to know.

Now she should look at him and see a drug dealer. She didn't know if she could. The fact that she hadn't seen him since she left him to report to work yesterday had little to do with it. She found it odd after the tenderness he showed her and the easy conversation they'd shared that he hadn't made a move to see her since.

"Maybe he's just been busy," she whispered aloud as she climbed the three steps to the front door of his trailer. She tried the knob, found it locked, and started to knock when she heard the voice. Voices, she corrected, as she trained her ears to listen. Faint voices, not quite whispers but a conversation kept low. A male and a female, that much she could make out, though the female's voice sounded decidedly weepy. She walked back down the steps and tiptoed toward the sound, stopping at the edge of the trailer where she still had cover.

"I won't tell anyone."

*Devon.* Tess would know his voice anywhere, would recognize that tone of complete conviction and assurance any time. *Or maybe he's been with someone else.* Tess felt the jealousy merge with anger in her blood. *Of all the fucking nerve.*

"You can trust me. You know that."

*Not if your life depends on it.*

"I know, but what if someone finds out?" The female's voice sounded teary and faint. Tess couldn't make it out. She could tell only that it belonged to someone terribly upset.

"Only you and I will know, I promise," Devon soothed. "I'll get you what you need, but this has to be the last time, all right? I can't do this again. I'll get in a world of shit if I'm caught."

Tess stiffened. *Oh, God, no.*

"Like I wouldn't?" The female gasped and it clicked. *December Johansen*. That's who was with Devon. Could they be having an affair? It wasn't unheard of for leads in a movie to go at it behind the scenes. Hell, Hollywood practically required it! Yet, the context of the conversation didn't spell out hot sex between the trailers so no one will know. It spelled out...*No, please, no.*

Tess felt her blood ice in her veins. She hadn't wanted to believe it, hadn't wanted to think it, even though she could think of little else since seeing that list. She shot a look around. She didn't see anyone else except for a few figures near the front of the building several yards away. She disregarded them. Unless they truly looked, she wouldn't be spotted. She leaned closer to hear better.

"How soon can you have it?"

"I can probably get it by tomorrow. I'll make a call, see what I can do. Look, I have to get going. I'm already late on set."

*Shit.*

Tess straightened and spun, her heart racing from pain, shock, and the adrenaline that accompanied a quick flash of fear. She dimly heard Devon tell December goodbye, that he would catch up with her as soon as he had *it* tomorrow. *It* could only be the drug.

She couldn't get away. Not fast enough to prevent being spotted. Instead, she double-timed it back to the steps of his trailer and pretended she just arrived. She stepped down the last step as he rounded the corner.

"Hey, where have you been?" Her voice sounded smooth and calm, revealing nothing of what she had overheard or what she

suspected. It was probably the best acting performance of her life. And who said she didn't have what it took to be a Hollywood star? "Milton is looking for you on the set."

"I know." He hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. He kissed her, a cross between a hey-babe-I'm-glad-to-see-you kiss and a hey-it's-good-to-see-you-but-I've-got-to-run kiss.

Tess should've been chilled to the bone after what she now believed. Instead, she felt those bones melt in his arms.

"Mmm, damn, maybe I should make him wait longer." He eased back, his gaze locking on hers, and a swirl of arousal mixed with a new tenderness in his eyes. "I didn't expect to see you this afternoon."

Tess swallowed, wanting to slap him for being the drug pushing son of a bitch he had become even as she wanted to lose herself in his arms. She wanted to cry because she felt so damned confused about everything now. Her job managed to push through the fog in crystal clarity when nothing else could. She had a job to do and, no matter how it ripped her apart, she would do it. "I thought we could get together tonight after you finish on the set."

Surprise flickered in his expression. "Really? I didn't expect you to, I mean, okay. I have some things to do first. Can I meet you at your house when I'm done, or do you want some place more secluded?"

"I think the cat is already out of the bag about us. Enough people saw us leave the lounge together the other night and saw us around town together yesterday."

"I'm sorry." He rested his forehead to hers, the weight of his apology heavy in his gaze. "All the time we spent together beneath the public eye in a city like Los Angeles and no one ever found out. We're seen once together in Silver Springs and, *fuck*, I know you never wanted anyone to know. I screwed that up."

"Hey, at least the media hasn't gotten hold of it yet. They'll be keener to report you getting it on with December than an officer extra."

"Yeah." He laughed cynically. "December. Like I would ever go there."

*Wouldn't you?* The question stuck in Tess's throat. Maybe he wouldn't go to the woman's bed, but he would go somewhere for her, somewhere to get her a supply of truly terrible drugs. Who knew December Johansen used drugs? Tess thought about all the times she had seen the actress and couldn't think of one when December looked strung out. *But that's what the makeup department is for now, isn't it?*

"And here I am holding you like this right outside my trailer." He released her and slowly stepped back. "I guess it won't hurt after all of that to ask you to walk with me to the set."

Tess forced a smile. "No, I guess it won't. How long do you think you'll be tonight?" *And what exactly will you be doing?* she wanted to ask but didn't want to raise any suspicions. If he was indeed involved in the drug ring, he already knew she had been on the team to bust Sanchez. Too many questions too quickly would put him on guard.

Another realization struck her that nearly made her stumble before she steadied herself. He said he didn't know her, but he did. He knew everything about her he needed to know to keep her out of the loop while he set the stage for some pretty nasty drug deals. And she fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

"Not long. An hour or so. I'll be there as soon as I can." He did a quick scan of their surroundings outside the make-shift studio and then brushed a soft kiss to her lips. "Put on something sexy for when I get there." He winked and walked into the building, leaving her standing outside watching him.

That hadn't been a request. He issued a command and damned if her woman mind didn't start going through her lingerie drawer even as her cop brain began deriving a plan to make him confess his transgressions.

\* \* \* \*

Devon got held up. By the time he found a liquor store that stocked the specific brand of wine he wanted, grabbed take-out, dessert and a couple of items to throw some fun into the evening, he ended up being more than an hour and a half late to Tess's. He pulled the Jag into the drive, cut the engine, and managed to juggle the bags he brought up the sidewalk. Tess stood in the open doorway of the house. A shirt that he instantly recognized as once belonging to him hung to her knees, a pair of stilettos dressed her feet, and a slight smile tilted her lips. That smile nearly gave him heart failure.

"I take it the roommate isn't home tonight?"

"She left over an hour ago." Tess stepped aside to make room for him to enter.

Devon set the bags in the foyer and waited for her to close the door before he advanced on her. He didn't touch her, but stepped close enough to have her backing away until she retreated to the wall. "I'm sorry I'm so late." He leaned down, still not touching her except with his lips as he covered her mouth with his. She tasted sweet and a bit tangy, warm, and aroused.

Her arms folded around his neck. She changed the angle of the kiss, taking it deeper and assuming control. His mind questioned the move even as his body went with it. Pulse points of desire exploded from his lips in a fiery trail straight to his groin. His dick leapt to attention, his balls stinging as if suddenly assaulted by a swarm of angry bees.

She eased away slowly, just a bit breathless, her face lightly flushed, her lips swollen. "What kept you?" She sniffed and grinned. "Besides the fresh seafood I smell in my foyer."

One of her guilty pleasures, as she often called it. And one of the few things he could pinpoint with a certainty that he knew about her. She loved seafood. Not baked, not broiled, not blackened. She wanted it blood pressure rising, artery clogging, cholesterol soaring deep fried.

"Fish, shrimp, and crawdads," he confirmed. "All the southern delicacies in one, right?"

She slanted him a look. "Got hush puppies?"

"I got a dozen of them." And knew he would love feeding her every fried, seasoned cornbread bite.

"You're forgiven for being late." She stepped around him and snagged the bag on her way to what he presumed to be the kitchen. "And for that."

Devon hadn't taken the tour of the house beyond the foyer and bedroom the last time he came here. He let himself in the front door, surprisingly enough without being spotted, a little trick he learned when researching for a part in one of his last flicks, right along with how to disable her alarm system. Then he hid in the shadows until she came home.

"For what?" His attention landed on the table in the center of the kitchen floor, his focus zoning in on the headlines of the front page. "*Fuck.*" His whispered expletive drew her gaze. The headline of the newspaper read *Hollywood sex symbol making it hot with local cop.*

"I gather you haven't seen that."

"No." Devon pushed a hand through his hair. "Damn, Tess, that's all my fault."

"If you read the article, you'll find the sentence that poses the question if said local cop, me," she pointed a finger to her chest, "got the extra roll because of her apparent fling with said sex symbol, you," she turned the finger to point at him.

Devon winced. "Point taken." She had been right all along. Not that he ever really doubted what would happen, how the media would see their involvement if the press ever got wind of them.

Tess pursed her lips and then those lips twisted in a wickedly arousing smile. "You know the best part about it? I don't give a shit what kind of questions those bastards raise. I don't care what they speculate about me as long as it doesn't interfere with my job. Which it won't because acting isn't my job. Being a cop is."

"You aren't angry, then?"

"Nope. Not even a little bit. Did you catch this yourself?"

Devon blinked. "Catch what?"

Tess stuck her head in the refrigerator and came out holding a bottle of ketchup, a jar of tartar sauce, and another of horseradish. She shot a pointed glance at the table, more specifically the bag she had placed by the newspaper. "Duh."

Devon stuck his tongue in his cheek. Christ, he loved her sassiness. "Yeah, right, me fish? I got it at the Golden Coral on the highway." When she pointed to the restaurant's logo on the outside of the bag and shot him another look, he caught on. "Ah, you mean is that why I'm so late. I got held up at the set. Truthfully, I had it out with Milton at the set." And he really didn't want to talk about that right now.

"Wow, really. You and Milt never fight." She seemed genially surprised and absolutely correct.

In all their years of friendship, he and Milton had less than a half dozen fights. "Yeah, well, we had a real doozie tonight."

"About the movie?" Tess got down plates, pulled out silverware, and two glasses for the wine.

Devon shook his head. "Personal. It's a real mess. Look, I really don't want to talk about it tonight." Something flickered in her eyes, but left before he could define it. Still, he thought he knew. He reached out, snagged her by the waist, and pulled her to him. "I'm sorry, baby. I know I'm the one who said we need to talk, but I can't about this. Not yet, anyway."

Tess pretended to shrug it off, but he could tell his refusal to talk about his argument with Milt hurt her more than she wanted him to know. She tried to move back, and he let her go, deciding the best way to handle it would be to change the subject. They still needed to talk about so many other things. His problems with Milton, *Christ*, his suspicions about his friend could wait.



## Chapter Ten

"Tell me about Samantha," Devon said around a mouthful of fried catfish. "Are the two of you partners?"

The question threw Tess for a half a second. A lot of people on the department, hell, a lot of people in the town, thought Samantha was a lesbian. Devon didn't mean partners as in lovers. He meant on the job. She shook her head. "Just friends. It's kind of hard to believe since she tried to slam the book on me for arson and murder once."

Devon choked a laugh. "No shit?"

Tess smiled. It hadn't been funny at the time, but she and her roommate tended to find a great deal of laughs out of the moment now. "She became convinced I was the one behind the arson at Keaton Aire."

"I read about that. Sabotage to expensive equipment, the planes, a fire, threatening letters, and all of it meant for Angelina, wasn't it?"

"Uncle Edward left her the airport in his will." Tess propped her elbow on the table, letting her fork dangle above her plate as she rested her chin on the top of her hand and stared at him. "You read about it?"

"I had to have some way of keeping up with you after you left me." He shrugged. "Your family is pretty high profile in this town. I figured local news, if nothing else, would cover anything substantial that happened with the Keaton's. I was right."

"So you were. Then you know my cousin did all that stuff and not me."

"Yeah." Devon set down his fork and met her gaze. "I also know you killed him."

"I had a choice between him and my mother. He went loco, really lost it. He kidnapped my mother and planned to kill Angelina. I figured out where he took my mother before the cops did. Samantha stayed so hell bent on building a case against me that I didn't think she would believe me. Time started running out in any case." Tess speared a popcorn shrimp with her fork. "I went after him myself. By the time the Feds and local blues caught up, I was already in position. The only one, in fact, ready to take the shot when it became necessary to do so."

"I bet that rankled the detective's feathers."

Tess grinned. "More than you know. She still tried to throw the book at me, just switched tactics and charges."

"But she didn't succeed and now you're friends. What changed?"

Tess angled her head thoughtfully. "I don't really know. One minute Samantha did all she could to have me locked up for manslaughter and the next she started pulling strings to get me into the police academy."

"It's funny how things work out, isn't it?" Devon pushed his plate away and leaned back in his seat. "Do you ever work together? Handle the same cases and what not?"

"We do." Tess nodded. "More often than not lately, I work more with Ford Harris in narcotics." She watched Devon's expression for any sign of a reaction to the name, but saw only a hint of intrigue.

Devon picked up his wine glass, sipped. "Are you intending to focus your career on narcotics?"

"I might. I've been on some pretty exciting calls since Ford pulled me in to assist him. I probably wouldn't have gotten to tag along otherwise."

"Like the bust yesterday?"

Tess's pulse kicked. "Among others."

"Can you talk about it, or is it classified?"

"Classified," Tess answered slowly. God, had they gone from a companionable dinner to a fishing expedition? She stared at him,

trying not to let show how much his questions raised her suspicions.

"Why do you ask?"

"You told me a little about your work yesterday, gave me another morsel to chew on tonight. I'm doing what I said I wanted, Theresa. I'm talking with you, finding out things that matter. Your career, what's important to you, they matter to me."

Oh, God, why did he have to say things like that? Especially now when she was becoming convinced that he knew more about yesterday's bust than he let on. Unless he said it in an attempt to derail her, to placate her, and pry for more information.

"I heard Senator Hampton's daughter is starting a new center in Billings. It's reported to be something along the lines of the Betty Ford Clinic, but not all for the wealthy. Word has it she's been hitting hard and heavy at combating drug trafficking and abuse the last few years."

"Since the Phay cartel took her hostage while on an excursion in Cambodia." Tess nodded. "You know Magee was on the SEAL team that pulled her out."

"Was that the same op?"

"Yeah, from all accounts, that's the op that started all the revenge shit between Phay and the government. It's why they came after Magee."

Devon shook his head. "That's some bad shit, Theresa. I never thought you would be mixed up in such dangerous stuff. It's scary, you know."

"I can handle myself, Devon."

"I have no doubt you can."

"Focusing my career on narcotics isn't a bad idea. Drugs ruin lives. You hit the nail on the head by saying it's some bad shit. It truly is, and yet bastards like Phay and that son of a bitch we busted yesterday don't give a rat's ass about the people they harm. They're only out for the money they can make."

Devon got a strange look in his eyes, one she couldn't define, but if she took a guess, she would have pegged it for remorse. Did he get that look because of what he did to people in his own thirst for greed, power, or whatever reason he started pushing drugs?

"I would love to take them all down. Why would someone do that to themselves? More, why would they do it to other people?" The anger started to rise, heating her cheeks and hardening her voice, but she couldn't stop it. "Marshall shot my mother up with morphine when he kidnapped her. She went into serious withdrawals for a while from just a single dose. That son of a bitch deserved the bullet I put in his fucking head."

She stopped, took a deep breath to send away the gray edges of fury that started to haze her vision, and saw Devon watching her, a small smile curving the corners of his lips. "Why are you smiling at me?"

"Do you have any idea how sexy you are when you get angry like that? How would you do it?"

Tess narrowed her eyes. "How would I do what?"

"You said you would love to take them all down. How would you do it? Call me demonic, but I'm getting really hard listening to you go off like that. I don't know. I never considered having the tables turned on me, but when you get so serious the way you did just now, so heated and vicious, damn, baby, it's so freaking sexy."

Now Tess rolled her eyes, but felt her lips twitch despite herself. "Are you looking to play good cop and naughty drug dealer?" Call him demonic? The name fit her more than him, because fuck if she didn't feel drawn to the idea. She studied him. He had shaved. His now smooth face begged for her touch. His hair fell down around his shoulders, a single lock flirting with the corner of his left eye. Her finger burned to twirl that strand of hair around it, to give it a good yank until his head fell back on a surprised gasp.

She wasn't dominant, at least she never had been with Devon. Yet at that moment, she felt empowered, ready, in control. Stupid to feel

that way, she knew, when everything in her mind screamed he could be the man they were after. She might be forced to throw him behind bars as soon as an hour from now if all the information they sought fell into place.

She should loath him, want to kick his ass. She shouldn't want to fuck him to oblivion. She shouldn't be longing to lie in his arms afterward until dawn the way she had in his trailer only two nights before.

But maybe she should play. Maybe she should give into that longing for the sake of her body and the case. She could get him vulnerable, make him do the begging for a change, and maybe, just maybe, she would succeed in pulling out some needed information that would bring him down.

"The idea holds a certain strange appeal," Devon admitted.

"Stand up." Tess put her best cop voice into the order. A flutter of excitement moved through her belly in direct agreement with the one flashing through his gaze.

"All right, we'll give it a shot."

"Did I say you could talk?" Tess lifted a brow.

The corner of his lips twitched, but he didn't say anything more. The chair scraped the tiled floor as he pushed it back and stood. The sound cut through the fresh, sexually charged atmosphere that settled in the room.

"Strip." Tess picked up her wine glass and leaned back in her chair to watch. "And don't take too long. I don't have all night." She sipped her wine to hide the grin that wanted to come at the mix of amusement and heat drowning his expression.

He bent to untie his boots, kicked them off his feet even as he straightened and pulled his shirt over his head. Tess's gaze followed the shirt to the floor but didn't linger. The privilege of watching him strip proved too great a treat to be distracted. She focused on the broad expanse of his chest, the rippling muscles of his abdomen, and the tantalizing patch of blondish-brown curls that created a path down

the center of his stomach before disappearing beneath the low riding waistband of his jeans.

The man had a hell of a happy trail. She licked her lips, her mouth watering in its want to taste. Her tongue pulsed in its need to follow the path. She could, she thought fleetingly. For the first time without asking permission, she could lick him anywhere she chose. She was in control this time. Yet, she didn't move from her seat.

His hand slid down his stomach as if he knew exactly the turmoil going through her mind and settled on the waistband of his jeans. He didn't move to unfasten them, didn't remove them as she told him to do. He simply stood there watching her.

When she realized this, she snapped from the trance in which she had fallen and her gaze locked with his. She forced herself back on track. "What are you waiting for?"

"I wondered if my lady might have decided she wished something more of me first." His tone grew soft, heady, and held the slightest twinge of mockery.

Yeah, he knew exactly what went through her thoughts and decided to tease her about it. *The bastard*. "If I want something more, I will tell you. Take them off."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned, a slow unfolding of his lips into one of the most mischievous, sexiest smiles she thought she had ever seen on his handsome face. He unfastened the button of his jeans and pushed them and his boxers down around his ankles. He kicked them off, taking a half a step forward and leaving them laying in a heap with his discarded shirt and shoes. "What would you have of me now, my lady?"

What was with the medieval speech? The question skated through Tess's thoughts only to collide with a solid wall of pure carnal lust as her gaze dropped to the evidence of his arousal between his legs. His cock stood at full attention, impossibly long and deliciously wide. She licked her lips before she could stop herself.

"Do you want to taste, Theresa?" He whispered the question, a touch of his own commanding nature underlying the tone.

*Yes, oh, please, yes.*

Her mouth watered for it, burned for it so hotly, she wondered if steam didn't come out of her ears. She ignored it, ignored him. This was her moment, her time to rule. She wanted this, needed this. She could play this role, she could be the one in control, not the one cowering and begging and writhing to be touched.

"Stroke it." Her voice sounded tight, rough even to her own ears. That was good, wasn't it? It would make her sound cool, detached, and in command.

Devon took his cock in his palm, curling his long fingers around the base of his shaft and started to stroke in slow, measured slides. He groaned, a low sound that rumbled from his throat and drew her gaze to his. "That feels so good, my lady, but it's a lot better when you do it."

She wanted to do it. Damnit, her hands clinched and unclenched with the need to do it. She watched, mesmerized as his hand caught the head of his cock, his thumb grazing over the weeping slit.

"The thought of having your hand where mine is makes me so horny, Theresa. Look, my thumb is covered in pre-cum. Do you want to taste it?"

This time when he asked, she nearly leapt from her seat. She had to tense every muscle in her body to keep from nodding. Yes, oh, yes, she wanted to taste it.

"No," she lied. "You do it."

He didn't argue, didn't hesitate. He brought his thumb to his lips, licked it, and sucked it clean.

Tess moaned, the sound low and hungry, and a definite sign of weakness.

"It's not so bad, but you taste better. If I may say so, my lady, I would really love to bury my face between your legs and feast on your pussy as you writhe and beg for release." He moved closer.

One step.

Two.

"Did I tell you to move?" Her mouth had gone dry now. The need to experience all he spoke of felt like a loaded gun inside her cocked and ready to shoot down her resistance. She felt herself caving, felt herself becoming that part of her she hated, and saw her chance slip away. *Damnit*. This time it should've been right because she held the control.

"Are you afraid if I get too close to you, you'll lose it, Theresa?"

He took a third step toward her. Two more and he would be in front of her, close enough to touch, close enough to take over.

"It's okay to lose it, baby. It's okay to want what I can give you, what I do to you."

Tess shook her head. "No, it isn't." She sounded so small, so weak. God, she hated herself in that moment.

"Yes, it is," Devon argued. "There's no reason to be scared of what you want."

Tess made herself laugh. "I'm not scared. Not of you, not of anything."

"Okay, I'm sorry. You're right," he said quickly. "You're not scared. And since you aren't, since you're in control, you can tell me exactly what it is you want right now. Tell me, Theresa, the one thing that is so strong in your mind right now that you're fighting yourself to keep from doing it."

"I want to suck your cock." The admission flew out of her mouth before she could stop it, and she knew she had lost. She closed her eyes, her breath hitching. When she opened her eyes again, he had taken those last two steps that brought him directly in front of her. He reached out, the backs of his fingers grazing the side of her neck as he found the hairs at her nape and pulled her head back.

"Nothing is stopping you from taking what you want, from enjoying what you want, except you."

Tess shook her head. He tightened his grip on her hair.



"Do I have to tell you to do it, Theresa? Do I have to make you? That's it, isn't it? That's what you truly want."

"No," she whispered even as she felt her face form into an expression of excitement that betrayed her. Yes, she wanted it. Damn her and her fucking hormones, her devious needs and disgusting desires. Her pussy flamed, her nipples throbbed, and she had to bite the insides of her lips to keep her mouth from opening to accept his cock.

"Suck my cock, Theresa." His voice turned as harsh as the tight grip he had on her hair. He guided her head to his cock and brushed the glistening head over her still tightly closed lips. "Open your mouth and suck me. Stop fighting me unless you wish me to punish you. Is that what you want tonight, my love? Do you need me to punish you to remind you of your place with me?"

*No.*

*Yes.*

*Fuck!*

Her mind rebelled even as her body screamed. She fought the desire to be treated with such rough and reckless abandon. She tried to hang onto her sanity and need to be strong. Her lips parted, possibly to argue, though she couldn't be sure, and he shoved his cock inside her mouth.

"Oh, fuck, yeah!" He growled, loud and animalistic, as her lips met the base of his body. His cock lodged completely inside her mouth and down her throat. "That's it, Theresa, take it deep, baby. Show me how badly you want it."

She did want it. God, she hated herself for wanting it so. She hated herself for finding such a nasty thrill in it. Still, she couldn't fight it any longer. Not now, at least, with his cock wedged down her throat, the salty-sweet taste of his pre-cum teasing her taste buds urging her to suck harder, to gain more of his delicious essence.

She tried to pull back. She tried to let his cock slide from her lips so she could lick his balls and roll them in her mouth. His grip on her

hair remained firm. He held her there, allowing only the smallest retreat of her head as he fucked her mouth the way he wanted. It was harsh and fast, and she found such pleasure in being restrained that she climbed to a release without touch or penetration to her sopping core. She had never come without at least a pressured massage to her clit, but as the arousal tore through her, the spectacular taste and feel of having her lips around his cock proved to be all she needed.

*Almost there.* The hard edges of the orgasm clawed through her.

He suddenly pulled back, taking a full step in retreat. His cock made an audible pop as it withdrew from her lips.

"No!" The word wrenched from Tess's throat on a hoarse whispered gasp.

Devon stood before her, his body heaving with each ragged breath. "Stand up and turn around."

She got to her feet on legs that quivered and turned. "Please."

He moved in at her back. His naked body pressed against her. His arms enveloped her, his hands immediately bunching the shirt into fists as he tugged it up. She wore nothing beneath the shirt. A fact he discovered instantly, and the approval in the sound he made only heightened her body's desperation to be filled by the hard, thick length now resting at her backside.

"You knew it would come to this." He brushed his lips to the side of her neck, her shoulder. "You wanted it, prepared for it. Didn't you, Theresa?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes, knowing he was right, knowing that's exactly why she dressed this way.

"You did exactly what I told you to do because you like it when I take control. That's okay, baby. You have to learn it's okay to allow it and feel right when it's over." He nipped her shoulder, his hands gripping her hips. The shirt now lay bunched around her waist. "I would've taught you that long ago. I would've convinced you of it from the start if I realized how much it tore you apart."

Oh, God, not now. Did they really have to discuss this now?  
"Please, Devon."

"Is that why you really left me, Theresa?"

Tess shook her head. "Please."

"Answer me or the punishment I give you this time will be one you won't enjoy."

"It's part of it," she admitted quietly.

His forehead came to rest on her shoulder. "Oh, baby, I wish you would've told me. But it's okay. I know now and it's not too late."

*But it is.*

She didn't argue with him. She couldn't find the voice, but she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt everything in her being screamed it was too late because he turned into something she couldn't abide. Not only could she not handle what he had become, but she swore an oath of duty as an officer to take him down, to see him brought to justice.

Tess thought leaving him had torn her heart out before. Tossing him behind bars would surely be her death.

"I'll show you, Theresa. I'll teach you." One of his hands skimmed up her back, pushing her gently forward until she bent over the kitchen table. "Just like that. I want you just like that." His hand moved down her back again and over her ass. One finger slipped between her ass cheeks. When the finger grazed over her anus, her muscles flexed and her breath caught in her throat. "I never took you here." His finger circled the forbidden opening in slow but pressured turns that made her close her eyes and struggle to keep breathing. "I fingered it, yes, but never fucked it. I told you I would one day."

"Devon." His name left her lips on a plea or question. She couldn't be sure.

"I won't tonight."

She relaxed, but only marginally.

"I did bring something to prepare you for when I do, though. Stay here. Don't move. I'll be right back."

She felt him leave her but couldn't find the strength to defy his order even if she wanted to. How had this night gotten so out of hand? She allowed herself to cave, to bend to his command. Now her body trembled with embarrassment, but more than that, with a reckless desire only his cock inside her could satisfy.

"This might be a little cold at first." He came back, his hands skimming first down her sides and then over her butt cheeks. The fingers of one hand spread her cheeks wide, and she gulped.

"What are you doing?" She sounded terrified. She hated knowing that, but couldn't find the sanity to care.

"I'm going to lube your tight ass." His actions mirrored his words as he squeezed the cold gel onto her heated flesh and began to slowly massage it in. His finger eased in her anus, and she writhed on the table, the movement drawing his finger deeper inside her. "Does that feel good, Theresa?"

"Yes!" It did. The insurmountable pleasure dulled the sharp pain in a mix of mind-numbing bliss. She started to relax even as he fingered her deep, withdrew and added a second finger to the party. Her muscles gave only a little, leaving a trace of stinging discomfort as he worked his fingers inside as deep as he could reach.

"Ah, Christ, that's amazing. If you think this feels good, sweetheart, wait until I take you here." He spread more lube on her rear, worked it into her anus and then backed both fingers out again.

"Please, no." Her pussy flamed, the orgasm holding steady and firm just beyond release to keep her mindless and wanting. "Don't stop."

Devon chuckled softly, and she felt him bend behind her to brush a kiss to the small of her back. "Believe me, Theresa, I don't want to, but you aren't ready for me to fuck that tight ass just yet. Now, take a deep breath. This might sting just a little."

She took a deep breath, not bothering to question his intentions above the fight of her body to hold onto the orgasm, above the desperate desire to beg him to fuck her anyway. The stinging pain of

which he spoke had the breath pushing out of her lungs on a loud groan. It hurt, but the pain quickly dissolved into unspeakable pleasure.

"What is that?" Despite the rapturous feeling, a trickle of fear slipped through. "What did you do?"

"Damn, that's beautiful, almost as pretty as it will be to see my cock there instead of the plug. That's what it is, a butt plug. It will help to stretch your muscles and prepare you to take my cock inside you when it's time. I'll remove it in a few hours, but right now it will serve to give you a taste of double penetration."

*A few hours? Double penetration?* The questions stopped circling in her mind when she felt Devon position himself behind her, felt the head of his cock ease between her sopping folds. He thrust inside her, hard and deep, and both questions vanished as the answer to the second became exotically clear.

Pleasure, unlike any she ever felt before, ripped through her, destroying her common sense. No amount of rational thought could survive a monumental rise to the peak of Orgasmic Mountain like this. Devon barely thrust in her more than a half dozen times before she came undone around him. The feel of his cock ramming impossibly deep inside her couldn't be described or understood. She didn't try, but simply rode with it, allowing it to control her as he controlled her until the quivers and convulsions of her body subsided and she became little more than a lump of sated flesh.

Somewhere in the near comatose state of her mind, she noted his warmth as he folded himself over her back. She felt the gentle brush of his lips to her shoulder and heard his tender whisper in her ear.

"Everything you're feeling, everything we've done and will do, it's all okay, Theresa. Everything's okay because we like it, we want it, we *need* it, and most of all because I love you."

Tess felt certain she imagined the last three words as sleep took her into dreams right there on the kitchen table.

## Chapter Eleven

Adrien leaned against the back bumper of Thaddeus's car in the parking lot of the SSFD and pretended to be absorbed in the calendar program on his PDA. He considered going inside, but caught a glimpse of the firefighters already preparing for shift change. He didn't want to be in the way. Instead, he decided to hang here and wait for Thaddeus to walk out.

He was nervous, he realized, and laughed at himself, shaking his head at his stupidity. He shouldn't be. He came here on business, after all, not looking to pick up Thaddeus for some clandestine affair. Not that the idea didn't hold a whole lot of appeal, and okay, he didn't need to think about that now.

His gut gave a little roll, and he wondered if it was truly from nerves or a bad piece of bacon at breakfast. Nice try, he thought and closed his PDA case. He shoved it back inside his inner jacket pocket. Who the hell did he think he could kid? He felt more nervous at that moment than he did on his first take down assignment with the DEA. All because he hadn't seen Thaddeus, hadn't spoken to the man since leaving him on the beach.

Adrien thought of him, though. Heck, he thought of little else. It made concentrating on tracking down a major drug ring pretty damned difficult, especially when memories like walking on the beach with Thaddeus and holding the man's hand pushed aside all other thoughts. And the kiss, Jesus save him, that kiss proved out of this freaking world.

Voices flowed from the open station house bays followed shortly by the bodies from which they came. Terri Vega and Ryan Magee

stepped into the midmorning daylight flanking Thaddeus, with Bailey Lamont and Captain Dean Wolcott close behind. Terri said something that made the whole group laugh. Adrien's gut did another flip, this one in excited arousal at the grin that spread on Thaddeus's lips. Lips Adrien could still taste, still feel pressed to his own.

*Ah, God.*

Thaddeus turned his head, looking as though he might say something back to Terri, when his gaze landed on Adrien. His step faltered and the smile slowly faded. Beside him, Terri seemed to notice Thaddeus's hesitation because she followed his gaze, lifting a brow when she, too, spotted Adrien.

*Bad idea.* Damn, this had been a very bad idea.

Terri gave a little wave and a smile that appeared a bit too knowing. She slapped Thaddeus on the upper arm before ducking around him and heading for her car. Magee, Barrett, and Wolcott noticed Adrien, too, each giving him a nod and a wave. Adrien saw that the captain started to walk toward him, but Thaddeus intercepted the man.

"I think he's here to talk to me, sir," Adrien heard Thaddeus tell Wolcott.

Wolcott glanced at Adrien again, this time with a little more understanding in his gaze than Adrien felt comfortable seeing under the circumstances. Then he looked back at Thaddeus. The captain slowly nodded. "Then I'll see you on the next shift, Carter." He walked away without another glance.

Adrien saw Thaddeus's shoulders rise and fall in what appeared to be a serious sigh of relief. Or maybe he braced himself for a confrontation with Adrien. Adrien didn't know exactly which to hope for.

Thaddeus made his way across the parking lot, and Adrien couldn't stop himself. Thaddeus's gaze locked with his, a world of questions and hope and more in his eyes. Adrien started to apologize.

"I'm sorry." Adrien closed his eyes and ran a hand down his face. "God, Thaddeus, I didn't think. I needed to talk to you away from the movie set, but I didn't think how it would look if someone saw me out here waiting for you."

"Sadly, it probably looks like a whole lot more than what it is," Thaddeus said on a slight chuckle. He touched Adrien's arm, and Adrien opened his eyes to find Thaddeus had stopped so close to him, their fronts nearly touched. "I thought I told you to stop apologizing to me."

"You did." Adrien found it hard to speak with his heart now in his throat. Damn, he looked good. He wore his prerequisite SSFD t-shirt with a pair of black slacks and combat boots. His hair was charmingly tousled and a smudge of something black that looked like soot streaked his left cheek. "Did you have a fire this morning?"

Thaddeus angled his head, perplexed. "No, why?"

"You've got, um..." Adrien touched his own cheek where Thaddeus's had the mirroring mark. When Thaddeus merely lifted a brow, Adrien dared to wipe the smear from Thaddeus's cheek himself. "Soot?" he finished, though the word came out as little more than a breathless whisper. Yes, touching the man proved just as electrifying today as it did the other night. Jesus, save him.

"We had a call last night, a brush fire at the edge of town," Thaddeus told him, his words as husky as Adrien's. "I didn't get around to tidying my gear until this morning. I must have gotten some on my face. Thanks."

He licked his lips, and Adrien's gaze instantly locked there. "You're welcome, but I shouldn't have done that."

"You seem to do a lot with me that you shouldn't." Amusement danced in Thaddeus's expression. "But I enjoy every bit of it, so I'm not complaining."

"We're outside your station house," Adrien reminded the man, though, okay, a quick glance proved they now stood alone in the parking lot. But their position in broad daylight in front of a city fire



department put them where anyone and their neighbor passing by could see. And to make matters worse, Thaddeus wore his full shift uniform.

"Yes, we are, and your point would be?" Thaddeus moved his hand to Adrien's waist.

Adrien stilled and might have backed up if he hadn't been pinned between Thaddeus and his car. "Suddenly, I have no idea," he admitted on a sigh, and Thaddeus laughed.

Thaddeus's gaze lingered for several long moments on Adrien's eyes and mouth, the man's hand a firm presence just above Adrien's hip. By the time he stepped to Adrien's side, Adrien felt on fire. His body hummed with the desire for more of that tender contact, for more of those promisingly loaded stares.

"Just so you know," Thaddeus leaned against the car next to Adrien, his legs extended, his ankles crossed. The man didn't have to try to be sexy. It came naturally, and everything he did exuded appeal that jumped him right off the top of the screaming stud-o-meter. "I came out to Terri."

Adrien's heart skipped. He came out as teenager, but even back then, he remembered the difficult time he had telling people. He remembered how some people he thought to be his friends turned their backs, never to speak to him again. He didn't want that for Thaddeus. Heck, he didn't wish that treatment for any gay man. "How did she take it?"

Thaddeus barked a laugh that sounded part disbelief. "Like a freaking pro." He shook his head. "I don't know why that surprises me. She's really great. I knew that before I told her how freaking hot for you I am."

Adrien gaped at him, momentarily speechless. "You, uh, wow, that's how you told her?"

"Not exactly," Thaddeus shot him a sideways grin. "She asked what I did after she left the bar the other night. I told her I went to the

beach with you." He shrugged. "She pretty much put two and two together after that."

"The same way you're figuring Dean Wolcott, Ryan Magee, and Bailey Lamont are going to put it together after finding me out here waiting for you this morning."

Thaddeus nodded. "I figure they can add well enough. And if you apologize to me for that one more time, I'm going to deck you."

"Then I'll tell you instead why I'm here."

"Good idea since I'm guessing you aren't, you know, waiting to take me out for a romantic lunch followed by an afternoon of necking in the park."

Adrien chuckled and dropped his gaze, shaking his head. When he looked up again, he found Thaddeus watching him, amusement and, oh, man, hope so potent in his gaze. Adrien started to go with his first impulse and say, 'Yes, that's exactly why I came here this morning.'

"Why do I get the feeling I've unleashed a monster?" he asked instead.

"Rub a magic bottle and a genie pops out, kiss me and you get the rainbow colored flirty monster."

"Do you still grant three wishes?" Adrien asked before he thought the question completely through.

The hope in Thaddeus's eyes grew to a wall of flaming insinuation. "I'm happy to try. I'll do my best to give you anything you want."

Adrien's heart stilled in his chest. Dear sweet baby Jesus. "I don't know exactly how to respond to that," he admitted when his heart finally started to beat again.

Thaddeus just smiled. "That's okay. There's no need to say anything at all. No lunch and park necking today. Not a problem. We'll put that aside for another time. So, exactly what did you have in mind for today?"

"I hoped you would have some time to talk. Business," Adrien clarified. "There's something I hoped you could help me with."

Thaddeus glanced at his watch. "It's working on eleven o'clock. Why don't we put lunch back in the plans and we'll talk? One of the guys on C shift just opened a new place down the road with his father. I told them I would stop in when I got the chance."

Adrien slanted a look at him. "You want to take me to a firefighter joint?"

"Why not? I am a firefighter."

Adrien gave up. He laughed and shook his head. "So you are."

"Hop in." Thaddeus dug his keys out of his front pocket. "I'll drive. You can leave your bike here, and I'll bring you back to get it when we're done."

Adrien walked around the front of the car and slid into the passenger's seat. "How is it that lately every time I'm around you, we end up on some semblance of a date?" he wondered as Thaddeus slid in behind the wheel.

Thaddeus shot him a loaded smile. "I don't know, but I'm not complaining."

Adrien stared at him, momentarily lost in the swirl of unmistakable desire in his eyes. "Neither am I." He settled back in the seat, pushing all his inhibitions aside, at least for the moment, bound and determined to enjoy the ride.

\* \* \* \*

Tess refused to consider the implications of what she intended to do. The repercussions of what she had already done hit bad enough. Devon said he loved her. She might have dreamt the first time, but he said it again and again throughout the night. A night filled with dominate sex and explorations that ripped at her inner loathing and pleased her every demon. She even began to understand how her desires, her fetishes might be okay after all.

*You're a strong woman, Theresa, always in control of every aspect of your life. This one place, this one event is where you can let*

*yourself relax. You can let someone else take the lead for a while and when it's over, you're still the same person. It's a time when you can relax and let someone else carry the burden of making sure everything is done right, that it's pleasurable and exactly what you want.*

Devon's softly spoken words reverberated in her head as she glanced over her shoulder to be sure no one saw her exit the make-shift studio. They had lain in her bed, the darkness of the night broken only by a sliver of moonlight filtering through the tiny part in the curtains over the window, and he talked to her. He held her close and simply talked.

He told her of spending a few moments after filming the day's scene talking with Ryan Magee. That short conversation put his mind at ease to many of the things he had confessed bothered him about playing a character based no matter how loosely on Magee. In turn, she told him of the dinner she shared with Samantha Becket just after rescuing her mother and putting a bullet through her cousin's head. During that dinner she knew without a doubt she wanted to be a police officer.

He told her his need to dominate a woman in bed didn't stem from fetish to discipline or play caveman to the helpless female. It came from an intense need to give pleasure, to show a woman all the beauty of the many erogenous zones the body possessed. In turn, she found she agreed with him in his assessment of her inner demons. She enjoyed submitting. Not because she felt wrong or in need of being treated less than human, but because she found that one event to be a place where she could relinquish control over her actions. She could find enjoyment in handing command to another.

He told her he loved her. Three words she longed to hear, words that might have made her stay in Los Angeles had she known his true feelings. She returned those words and meant them with all her heart. Those words echoed in her head like a mantra now as she walked briskly across the grounds to his trailer.

She left him on the set in the middle of shooting a segment that would take the majority of the afternoon to complete. She waited to sneak out until the part distracted him, until he pretended to be busy holding a conversation on a cell with the captain of the fire department over his orders for what to do while the hurricane passed over the city. Watching him, she nearly stayed, enveloped in the moment, caught up in the make believe that he made appear so very real.

Tess would've rather stayed watching the day's shoot over what she had to do. But now might be her only chance. She needed to be alone in Devon's trailer. She needed to search for evidence. She had lain in his arms last night, listening to all she always wanted to hear from him and knew even as she returned his love that she would have to betray him at the first opportunity.

She wanted her suspicions to be wrong about him and prayed for it now in the light of a new day. She needed to know. One way or another, she *had* to know. And she had to find out before she went to Ford and the DEA. That part curled inside her gut like a sour cheese burger as much as knowing that she had likely given her heart to a drug dealer.

She should've gone straight to Ford with her suspicions the minute she overheard the conversation between Devon and December. She should've brought Devon and December in for questioning, maybe even detained them until she found out more. She shouldn't have ducked back, pretending to be just arriving, and then invited Devon to her house and, for crying out loud, do the things she did with him.

*But you did it and now you have to live with it. Control the situation, Tess.* After all, everything in her life centered around control. Didn't it?

She reached the door of Devon's trailer and checked the knob. It was locked, of course. She made a quick scan of her surroundings, noted all seemed deserted, and dug in her pocket for the lock pick she brought.

"Do cops always carry lock picks around in their pockets?"

Tess jumped and very nearly stepped back off the step before an unmovable wall of hard male muscle caught her. Heart pounding, she tipped her head back and up. "Aren't you supposed to be on the set?" She recovered quickly thanks to her training as a police officer and an actress. Who said the two careers couldn't work hand in hand? She put just enough surprise in her tone to cover her stumble, but enough snippiness to be all Tess Keaton.

Devon rolled his eyes. "December stubbed her toe walking into the stage room. She's being a real baby about it. Milton called twenty. You weren't on the set, so I came looking for you." He took the lock pick from her. Her fingers held steady even though her heart still trembled. He looked at the tool and clucked his tongue. "It's attached to your key ring."

"A handy little gadget when you need one." She took it back and shoved the keys back in her pocket. "Which I don't need now that you're here with the key. Do you want to open up? I really needed to get to the bathroom." She bounced up and down like a child doing a peepee dance. It made him chuckle. He pulled the trailer key from his own pocket and unlocked the door.

"Still refuse to use public restrooms, huh?" He shook his head as he backed them down a step to allow the door room to swing open on its outside hinges.

Tess quickly strode inside. "You know I don't do public restrooms and I so won't do a port-a-potty, either," she shot back over her shoulder as she headed straight for the bathroom. Thank God she had never been a fan of public facilities. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, her hand coming up to cover her heart.

*Close one, Theresa.* But she covered quickly and flawlessly if she might say so herself. Now what did she do? She didn't really need to use the bathroom. She needed to search this trailer, something she couldn't do as long as he remained inside it.

*Damnit.*

She covered her forehead with her hand, massaging her temples to ward off the rapidly growing headache. Okay, so she would just have to move on to Plan B. Whatever the hell that was.

She dropped her hand and opened her eyes. How long did it take for a woman to pee? She never paid much attention. Long enough, she supposed, to make a quick search of the bathroom and maybe even get her hands on a bottle of aspirin.

A medicine cabinet hung over the sink. She pushed herself quietly off the door and stepped to it. She didn't expect to find anything inside because this was Devon's temporary home. What man actually utilized a medicine cabin in what amounted to little more than a hotel room? Her jaw nearly hit the sink when she opened it to find four bottles of pills on the center shelf.

Tess reached for them with a hand no longer steady, her mind reeling. She quietly popped the top of the first unlabeled bottle and recognized the tiny blue pill on sight. Codeine. The second and third bottles contained pills she couldn't name but guessed them to be high end painkillers and terribly addictive. Her blood pumped so fast through her veins, she heard it in her ears. She curled her fingers around the fourth bottle, turning it in her palm before she opened it and took out one of the pills. Suboxone, a medication used to treat opiate addiction.

*Dear God.*

Her blood stilled in her veins, turning to ice as she stared at the now open bottles on the edge of the sink. Opiate drugs either derived from or contained opium. Could this be the proof she needed or different evidence that the man she loved suffered from an addiction she hadn't known about? Or, Christ, what if it meant both?

She looked at the second and third bottles of pills again and studied them more closely. She didn't think either appeared to be the pure formulated tablets of opium they found in the Sanchez bust, but with her mind spinning ninety to nothing, she couldn't be sure.

"Tess, baby, are you all right?"

Devon's voice startled her. She nearly dropped the bottles.

"Nope, just fell into the toilet." The snippy comeback rolled from her lips with so little effort or thought, she might have given herself a pat on the back if she hadn't been frozen from shock.

"Need help climbing back out?" Laughter rang in his voice. She closed her eyes, feeling them burn with rising tears.

God, she hadn't wanted to find anything. She hoped, she had *prayed* her suspicions turned out wrong, that what she overheard between Devon and December could be easily explained away. Maybe December had needed a bottle of her favorite discontinued skin lotion and Devon had merely been promising to get it for her or something equally stupid, and golly gee wilikers. Instead, she found not only evidence of her suspicions, but more questions to add to them.

"I don't think so." She raised her voice to answer. "I'm just about free." She slipped a pill from each bottle, carefully wrapped them in a piece of toilet tissue, and shoved them deep in her pocket. Then she replaced the caps on the bottles and put them back on the shelf exactly the way she found them, certain he wouldn't miss the ones she'd taken as long as she left the others behind.

Quietly, she closed the door of the medicine cabinet and turned to the toilet to give it a flush. Then she took a deep breath to thaw a bit of the icy fear and disbelief in her veins before she opened the bathroom door. She found him in the living room, leaning against the wet bar, a glass of something clear in his hand.

Tess lifted a brow. "Isn't it a bit early for a drink?" Alcohol tended to be another substance that went hand in hand with painkiller addiction. Was he an alcoholic, too, and she simply hadn't seen it before now?

He slanted her a look and shrugged. "It's after noon. Most people think as long as it's past twelve o'clock, it's time for a drink. I, on the other hand, rarely hit the bottle before early evening and never in the



middle of a shoot. I figured you would know that by now. It's hot out there. I wanted a glass of water. Would you like some?"

She didn't, but she took the glass from him, anyway. "I would, thanks." She drank deep, feeling the cool liquid melt the remaining ice in her veins.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I be?" The response flew out of her mouth before she stopped to think. Stupid. Stupid. *Stupid*. She could've played it off, pretended to have an upset stomach and asked to lie down while he finished out the day's shoot. He would've left her alone, and she could've completed her search of the trailer. Instead, she went for honesty and screwed up her chance at returning to Plan A.

He pushed away from the bar, advancing on her before her mind could catch up. He enveloped her in the strong embrace of his arms, pulling her to him, and melting every amount of chill inside her with the warmth of his hard body. "Good, because I still have ten minutes before I have to be back on set."

"Hmm, do you, now?" She purred as his lips brushed hers. That single contact fizzled through her. It calmed her confusion, pushed aside her suspicions and doubts until she thought only of him and her body's growing need to be with him. Ten minutes, she thought as she boldly licked the outside of his lips. She would give herself these ten minutes to forget and simply enjoy. It may very well be the last ten minutes she got with the man she loved.

He worked fast, unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them down around her ankles even as she did the same to his. She kicked off her shoes, hating the way the denim bound her legs together. She wanted to be free to spread her legs around his waist to draw him as deeply as possible into the wet achiness of her body. She struggled to kick the pants off her foot. They both laughing breathlessly by the time she succeeded. She silenced his laughter a second later when she vaulted

herself into his arms, locking her ankles around his waist, and skillfully impaling herself with his cock.

"Christ, Theresa," Devon growled as he stumbled back a step, his back hitting the wet bar. "That's not exactly what I had in mind."

Tess dug her fingers into the muscles of his shoulders and used the hold for leverage as she rode him. The position offered little ability for the vicious thrusting she preferred. Still, the deliciously long length of his cock coupled with the magnificent girth of his shaft delivered spasmodic pleasure after electrifying jolt with each stroke.

"My turn to pick the position this time," she told him through gritted teeth as her body started the almost instant climb to Orgasm Heaven. "You can punish me for it later."

His hands gripped her ass, supporting her weight even as he started to gain control of their movements. He turned with her, walking them both to the wall by the wet bar where he braced her against it. He pinned her body with his cock and nailed her with a succession of frantic, ramming thrusts that made her cry out and see stars of exotic bliss.

"Can I?" His hands moved on her ass, one spreading her cheeks as the other worked a finger between them to find her anus.

Tess's breath caught. The forbidden hole felt tender, the sensation of heightened sensitivity remaining after the attentions he showed her there last night. He hadn't taken her there, but he had played, fingered, kept the butt plug inside her until she felt mindless from the pain laced pleasure. That pleasure returned in a mind-blowing rush as he slipped a wide finger past the ring of tender muscles and started to explore even as he continued his vicious pounding of his cock into her sopping channel.

"Too much." She gasped as twin sensations of pain and pleasure rocked her body from her anus to her pussy and back again. "I can't stand it, Devon."

"Go ahead, Theresa. Come for me, baby. I'm right with you."

Tess let herself go. Her thighs squeezed around his waist as her muscles stiffened, and her core convulsed from the explosion. Somewhere along the line, her ankles lost their grip and her legs fell to the floor. If not for Devon's continued hold of her, she would've melted right there on the spot, a puddle of goo after such an amazing body-shattering release.

He chuckled softly, his face buried in her hair. "Are you all right?"

Tess closed her eyes as reality slammed back in full heart wrenching force. No, she wasn't all right. After what she planned to do, she might never be all right again.

\* \* \* \*

Thaddeus paid the man behind the counter, an off duty C shift firefighter by the name of Korbin Brooks, and watched the flash of knowing amusement walk through his eyes. It appeared to be a day for clearing up questions and coming out to the city, Thaddeus thought and felt such a ferocious sense of relief move through him that it made his toes tingle. He hadn't realized it bothered him. He signed on with B shift well over a year ago, and enjoyed a happy year. Sure, he went without a man for that year, but it hadn't bothered him. Much. He focused on his career, contented himself with sitting back and letting nature take its course in all the other aspects of his life.

Then he spotted Adrien Bingham.

"Thanks for coming in today." Korbin handed Thaddeus his change, closing the old fashioned cash register with an audible ping. "I heard you guys got some action last night." He glanced at Adrien standing beside Thaddeus, and his lips twitched, the amusement in his eyes twinkling like the North Star. "B shift," he clarified.

Thaddeus bit back a grin. "Nothing spectacular. Just a little brush fire down Goose Mill Road. Thanks for the subs. They look great." He picked up the tray laden with the food and drinks and turned from

the counter, motioning with his head to a small round table in the far corner. "Let's go over there. There's less chance of being overheard."

"Are you trying to give them something to talk about back in the kitchen?" Adrien settled in the seat across from Thaddeus and reached for his diet soda.

"Bonny Raitt isn't the only one who can sing that tune." Thaddeus winked and unwrapped his sub piled high with pork, lettuce, and jalapeño peppers. "Terri would skin me alive if she saw me eating this. I'm always on her case to eat better. The woman is a walking billboard for cholesterol. The mayo on this thing alone will probably put me on the backside of that billboard with her." He took a bite and moaned.

"Good?" Adrien slanted him a look as he picked up half of the grilled chicken on wheat he ordered.

Thaddeus swallowed. "Worth every heart stopping, artery clogging bite. I'm not really looking to start the rumors flying about us, though I can't tell you how good it feels to be out with you. I don't mean *you*, except I do." He paused, frowned. Damn, when did he last get tongue tied talking to a man?

The thought of being tongue tied with Adrien brought crystal clear images of the kiss they shared rushing back again. His gaze dropped to Adrien's mouth, and Adrien froze in the act of taking a bite from his sub. Adrien obviously knew exactly where Thaddeus's mind had wandered. The heat that sparked between them became an almost tangible thing.

"I meant you can't know how fabulous it feels to be myself," Thaddeus corrected himself after a few heart-thumping breaths.

"I can imagine." Adrien set down his sandwich, dabbing at the corner of his lips with a napkin.

Thaddeus's mind stumbled over the instantaneous desire to lick the mustard from Adrien's mouth.

Adrien kicked him, a sharp rap to his shin under the table that made Thaddeus jump. "Ouch! What did you do that for?"

Adrien leaned over the table and lowered his voice. "Stop looking at me like that." Though his tone sounded chastising, the laughter in his eyes ruined the effect.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You aren't. You're making me, well, horny."

Thaddeus choked a laugh. "Well, there's another good reason for taking a table in the back."

Adrien's cheeks turned a telltale shade of pink, and he averted his gaze. "I shouldn't—"

"If you're about to tell me you should've have said that, I'm going to get up and walk out." Thaddeus cut him off. "Apparently, you and I need to have a lesson in your interpretation of should and shouldn't. For now, I'll say thanks. I didn't intend to make you horny right now, but, damn, it's nice to know I am."

Adrien shook his head. His shoulders rose and fell in a deep breath. "It's not easy hiding who you are, what you think, how you feel," he finally said. "I can imagine how refreshing it is now that people are starting to find out about you being gay, especially since being with me keeps you from coming right out and yelling to the clouds, 'Hey, everyone, I'm gay.'"

"Oh, God, tell me you don't think that's why I'm with you?" Thaddeus felt horrified. The thought hadn't occurred to him. Sure, everyone in town knew Adrien Bingham's sexual preference. Sure, he knew being seen with the man so much would raise suspicions about himself, even wave a gigantic rainbow flag that yes, Thaddeus was indeed gay, too. Still, none of that had anything to do with his wanting to be with Adrien. The man was fucking hot! And more, he was funny, tender, intelligent, and a fantabulous listener. And every moment they spent together seemed to add one more adjective to the list.

"No," Adrien said quickly. "Of course not."

"I didn't intentionally hide who I am. It simply isn't a big deal. Other than my friendship with Terri, I haven't felt the need to

broadcast it to the city. I am who I am, and you either like me or you don't."

"Hear, hear." Adrien smiled, picking up his soda cup and bumping it against Thaddeus's in a toast.

"I just," Thaddeus shrugged, "hadn't met anyone who made me want to shout it to the clouds until I saw you."

Adrien set his cup down. His smile slowly faded. "Yeah, I kind of had the same reaction every time I saw you, except, well, I didn't know you were gay."

Thaddeus's heart tripped. "If I had known that, I would've cornered you at the gym sooner."

"What made you pick that day?" Adrien took a bite of his sub.

Thaddeus shrugged and bit into his own sandwich. "I got tired of guessing, waiting, wanting. I didn't know if you might be with someone, but I also didn't know who to ask. Finally, I decided the only way I to find out would be to ask you. So I staged that little meeting at the gym."

*You didn't ask him?*

*Well, no.*

*You should. The next time you see him. Hell, stage another meet at the gym or something, but you should definitely ask him. You need to know.*

His conversation with Terri echoed in Thaddeus's mind and he took a deep breath. She was right. He needed to know, and now seemed as good a time as any to find out.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

Thaddeus saw Adrien's hesitation, and his heart splashed into his gut. He had suspected it after the way the kiss they shared ended the other night, but he hadn't truly wanted to believe it. The indecision in Adrien's expression, however, gave a pretty good confirmation to his suspicions.

"Is that why you have all these shouldn'ts when you're with me?" Thaddeus asked when Adrien didn't respond. "Is it because you shouldn't even *be* with me in the first place?"

"No, I'm not with anyone. There is someone, but we aren't, well, he doesn't even know...."

Adrien stopped and shook his head.

"He doesn't know how you feel?" Hope tied a string around Thaddeus's heart and pulled it back securely in place in his chest.

Adrien gave a soft laugh that held little humor. "I don't even know how I feel."

Thaddeus nodded. It wasn't exactly what he wanted to hear, but he was still in the game. "I didn't expect you to be single. I mean, God, you know that saying, 'All the good ones are always taken'? I had trouble convincing myself it might be possible that you weren't taken."

"Wow, you really know how to make a man feel good." Adrien smiled and then quickly added, "Please, don't say anything. I'm well aware of how that sounded."

Thaddeus cracked up. "But there are so many creative things I could say to that."

"I bet there are. I devoted myself to a relationship with someone who ripped my heart out not long before you came into town, as a matter of fact. It took a while to get over him, as I suppose it should. Anyway, then I met, well, this other guy." He stopped and closed his eyes. "He's the one I just told you about. I've been on a date here or there since Brunson and I broke up. Very clandestine dates with guys I met in Billings. I thought they wanted surreptitious locations to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, but they really wanted to make sure they weren't seen."

"In the closet?" Thaddeus guessed.

Adrien nodded. "I don't want that. I want a relationship with a man I can parade around town, go for walks on the beach. Okay." He

stopped, nodding slowly. Thaddeus lifted a brow and let a small smile twist his lips. "Yeah, I see where I just went with that."

"Good. I didn't mean to put myself in a closet, but the door is standing wide open now. You're welcome to walk in at your leisure. That being said," his sub nearly gone, he leaned back in his chair, "I suggested this sandwich shop and this table inside it trying to give you a more confidential spot to talk. You said you wanted to talk business. I took that to mean DEA, classified, or pretty close."

Adrien rolled with the change of subject, seemingly both relieved and thankful. "You are correct. I don't want to put you on the spot. If you don't want to help, all you have to do is say so. Please."

Thaddeus sat up again. "Mmm, you're making this sound dangerous and exciting, right up my alley, Bingham."

Adrien closed his eyes, chuckled, and shook his head. "You know I'm working on a case to track down the opium the Phay cartel brought into Silver Springs." Thaddeus nodded and Adrien continued. "And you know we believed the guy in the car from the wreck scene is involved."

"Yeah, the bastard picked a hell of a time to come out of the coma," Thaddeus muttered and saw when his meaning clicked in Adrien's mind.

"Drug dealers do seem to have lousy timing," Adrien agreed.

"Were you right? Is he involved?"

"Yes and yes. Thing is, he flipped on someone who's not only supplying his stash but could have a close connection with the Phay cartel."

"Wait, this guy is playing both sides, buying and selling?"

"He's not the kingpin. Ving Kim Phay holds that title. This guy is just another step up the ladder. It's his methods we're questioning. The setups he's made lead us to believe he is either using it himself or has someone who is. He doesn't handle the drug himself, but sets up the drops, uses a middle man to get it done."



"To protect himself in case the heat comes down," Thaddeus concluded. "And if he does have an in with the Phay cartel like you think, he's probably trying to keep the cartel from knowing he's using, too."

"Maybe." Adrien nodded. "Or maybe there's more than one middle man. One could be merely setting up the drops while the other is the one who actually puts his hands on the product. The one making the calls could be the one using, but since he doesn't do the handling, he has to go through Middle Man number two. It's just speculation right now."

"Confusing speculation, but I think I'm following you."

"Good, because here's what's not confusing. Sanchez flipped on a guy involved with this movie. We didn't get a name, and the number traced back to a stolen cell."

"And you want me to find out who that someone is on the movie set?" Thaddeus blinked. "Whoa, Adrien, I'm a firefighter, remember, not a cop."

"I'm not asking you to do any investigating. Really, I wondered if you would agree to keep an eye out, let me know if you spot or hear anything that seems, I don't know, suspicious."

Thaddeus thought back to his last time on the movie set. He had taken a couple of hours away from the station yesterday to do a few quick takes at the production studio that would amount to about a minute and a half of his screen time. "I feel pretty rotten for speculating, but I noticed December Johansen looked a bit under the weather yesterday. Naturally, the makeup department did their magic on her, but the bags under her eyes, the haunted, needy look can't be covered so easily."

"Needy look as in needing a fix and not getting it?" Adrien asked.

"Exactly like that. My brother had a girlfriend once that got into this really bad accident, put her in the hospital for months. She came out hooked on morphine. She often looked like that when she tried to

detox. Then again, isn't it the norm for actors and actresses to dabble in drugs and stuff?"

"Sadly, it is," Adrien said softly, and Thaddeus could almost see the wheels turning in the other man's head.

"I saw Devon Gerard pass her something just before we left the studio, too," Thaddeus added. "Hell, it could've been anything, maybe a love note asking her to meet him behind the maple tree at sunset for all I know. I'm just relaying what I noticed. I didn't really take much note of it, except I remember thinking he might want to be careful given the look of murder in director Milton Remy's eyes, and the fact that Gerard has been spending an awful lot of time off set with Tess Keaton. Are they hot and heavy, or am I imagining things there?"

"They're together. I know that much. I guess you haven't caught the latest headlines in the Silver Springs Press. Did you see her there, too? Tess, I mean. Did you see her around?"

"I don't remember seeing her. You don't think she might be covering for Gerard, do you?"

"I don't want to think so. Michael thinks we can trust her. *I* think we can trust her, but love can make a person do some really out of character things."

Thaddeus absently began stacking their garbage on the tray. "I'll keep an eye out, maybe even do a little amateur sleuthing and see what I can find out."

"Be careful, okay. These aren't amateurs we're playing with here. No matter who it is."

They stood, and Thaddeus dumped the tray in the trashcan, putting the tray on the shelf above it. "I guess you have to get to work now."

Adrien shrugged. "I should," he said slowly as they stepped into the early afternoon heat. "Unless you have a better idea."

Thaddeus shot him a glance. *Hel-lo*. "You could always take the afternoon off and spend it with me. We could catch a movie."

"I'm not really in the mood for a theater." Adrien chuckled, walking around Thaddeus's car to the passenger's side. "Actually, I can't believe you are, either, considering the time you've been spending on the *Danger Storm* set."

Thaddeus stopped. He braced his forearms on the top of the driver's door and gazed over the roof of the car at Adrien. "I thought more along the lines of something on pay-per-view at my place. Or, if you prefer public, we could always go for another walk on the beach. Whatever you want. Truth is, I just want to spend more time with you."

"I saw an advertisement for the new Hugh Jackman movie last week." Adrien's gaze danced across Thaddeus's face, surrender warring with desire in his eyes. "I think it's supposed to be on pay-per-view by now."

"Hugh Jackman it is. Get in. I'll drop you by the station so you can pick up your bike and then you can follow me to my place."

*His place. Glory be to God.* Adrien Bingham was coming back with him to his place. Thaddeus refused to acknowledge how his fingers shook with a combination of nerves and excitement as he turned the key in the ignition.

## Chapter Twelve

Adrien thought about bolting. He passed a number of connecting streets as he followed Thaddeus to his house, all of which would lead Adrien back to his own apartment with little effort. Which was exactly where he should be going, he told himself even as Thaddeus's words rang in his mind.

*Is that why you have all these shouldn'ts when you're with me? Is it because you shouldn't even be with me in the first place?*

The answer spelled a great big giant *yes*, though admittedly not for the reasons Thaddeus thought. Adrien had no right being with the man when he couldn't iron out all these wrinkled feelings inside. And yet, he wanted more than anything today to spend more time with Thaddeus, too.

Thaddeus pulled into the drive of a split-level house in an upscale neighborhood off Cumberland Road. Adrien stopped behind him and cut the engine of his bike. Thaddeus got out of his car, greeting Adrien with a smile that damned near knocked him off his bike and then cocked a brow.

"Coming? Or did you decide you want to watch the movie from the driveway?"

"This is some place," Adrien commented. He removed his helmet, hooked it on the rack on the back of the bike, and walked up the drive.

The house screamed single guy with money. Manicured lawn, potted plants rather than grounded, and a garage, Adrien noted as the electric door went up, packed to bursting with boy toys.

Adrien barked a laugh. "Do you own stock in Toys R Us or what?"

Thaddeus tapped a finger on his chin. "Come to think of it, I believe there are several shares in the Carter stock portfolio. Do you see something you would like to play with?"

Adrien's mouth went dry as he gave Thaddeus a sidelong look.

Thaddeus's brows winged up. He bit the inside of his cheek in an obvious attempt not to laugh. "You dirty dog. Those looks I inadvertently gave you at the sandwich shop really did get you horny, didn't they? I mean the toys in the garage."

He walked inside, and Adrien followed close at the man's heels. Thaddeus's heels weren't what drew his attention, though. Nor did the toys in Thaddeus's garage. Unless he wanted to think of that metaphorically, which he knew he shouldn't do, but, damn, the man had an awesome ass.

"What's your pleasure?" Thaddeus turned back to Adrien, his eyes twinkling with another innuendo. "Remote control, things that go bang, things that go boom, I've got a really great fire engine that does all three."

Adrien shook his head, unable to hide a smile. "You are full of surprises, aren't you?"

"That depends. Do you like surprises?"

"I do, especially these days."

"Then I'll be sure to keep them coming." Thaddeus glanced at his watch. "Wow, it's after three. Did we really stay at the sandwich shop that long?"

"Time flies." Adrien didn't finish the cliché. He didn't have to because he saw understanding and agreement in Thaddeus's expression.

"That it does. Do you want a beer, glass of wine, water, soda? Hell, I don't know what else I have in the house." Thaddeus turned around again and walked to a door deep in the garage. "Come on, we'll raid the refrigerator for movie accessories."

"Movie accessories?" Adrien followed him inside. A cool burst of conditioned air with an aroma completely Thaddeus and equally

intoxicating hit him first. He stopped, noting with only a part of his conscious mind that he had stepped into the man's kitchen even as the rest of him struggled to get a grip on his raging hormones.

"Yeah, popcorn, soda, chocolate, gummy bears." Thaddeus started opening cabinets. "I'm not hungry yet, but I really hate getting up in the middle of a flick or even putting it on pause to grab something out of the kitchen. And speaking of kitchen, don't tell Terri I have all these high cal goodies. You think she would have my ass for what we ate at lunch, let her get a load of this." He shot a grin over his shoulder. The grin slowly faded as his gaze collided with Adrien's.

Thaddeus closed the cabinet and walked back to Adrien where he still stood just inside the kitchen doorway. "Are you okay? You look scared to death, babe. I thought I was the one who got all nervous around you. If it's being here with me like this, just say so. We can go somewhere."

"No," Adrien said quickly. "It's not. Well, it is, but, oh, hell."

"Would it help to ease your mind if I promise not to jump you?"

Adrien expelled a shaky breath. "Actually, I think I hoped you would." God, he had said it. Jesus, what had he said? Thaddeus blinked. Shock crashed with an inferno of arousal in his eyes, and Adrien swallowed. "You know, jump me."

Thaddeus touched him, the lightest graze of his finger down Adrien's chest. "Are you sure about that?" His voice grew thick and burned with hope.

Adrien couldn't speak. He nodded instead and took one step closer to Thaddeus. That small step closed the distance between their bodies.

"Because I'd really be okay with watching a movie." Thaddeus's hands dropped to Adrien's waist. His groin pressed to Adrien's, turning his statement into one huge, hard lie.

"I don't think I would be," Adrien admitted and kissed him. It was wrong. Worse than when he kissed Thaddeus on the beach, because this time, he knew it wouldn't stop. He didn't know what in the hell he was doing or thinking. He knew only that he wanted this man right

here, right now, and he meant to have him. Damn the consequences and confusion he knew he would face later.

Thaddeus sighed into Adrien's mouth, and Adrien could've sworn he heard the other man say, 'Thank God,' but the words got lost in the kiss. Adrien's hands found their way to Thaddeus's hair. He fisted it gently, loving the feel of the silky soft strands. He angled his head, taking the kiss deeper. His tongue licked Thaddeus's teeth, the roof of his mouth, over Thaddeus's tongue.

Adrien's senses exploded. His body tingled from the force even as hunger grew and sparks prepared different fuses for a long, slow burn. Thaddeus's hands pulled at Adrien's hips, drawing him closer still. Thaddeus's own hips moved in a sensual grind that drove Adrien out of his mind. He actually felt himself leaving his body, saw that ghost of himself step aside, and realized he didn't see any derision or condemnation on the ghost's face. He saw only approval and felt, *God*, he couldn't comprehend the things he felt.

Thaddeus's hands moved up Adrien's sides, tugging Adrien's shirt from his pants and slipping beneath the material to run up Adrien's bare back. The mere contact of Thaddeus's slightly calloused hands to the smooth flesh of his back felt nothing short of testosterone pleasuring bliss. Thaddeus broke the kiss, taking the role of aggressor as he licked his way over Adrien's chin, dragging his tongue over Adrien's jaw, and trailing down his neck. His hands left the cover of Adrien's shirt in favor of having it gone. His fingers worked fiercely at the buttons until he unfastened the last. Then his hands splayed on Adrien's front, his palms grazing flesh as he pushed the shirt off Adrien's shoulders.

Adrien let his hands drop from Thaddeus's hair to his sides as Thaddeus guided the sleeves down Adrien's arms only to stop when the cuffs met his wrists. Thaddeus lifted his head, met Adrien's gaze, and the playful mischief in the man's eyes sent a trickle of delicious trepidation fluttering through Adrien.

"Maybe some other time," Thaddeus whispered against Adrien's lips as he leaned in again. He singlehandedly freed the cuff buttons on both Adrien's sleeves and let the shirt fall to the floor at Adrien's feet. "Right now, I'm dying for you to touch me."

Adrien touched him, first catching Thaddeus's t-shirt and yanking it over Thaddeus's head with no hesitation or design. Then, God, yes, they were skin to skin. Thaddeus made a sound that so perfectly echoed exactly the sensations Adrien felt as their chests pressed against one another, the heat between them so suffocating, it might have drained all the oxygen. Every breath seemed to ignite the flames higher, make it burn hotter until a backdraft seemed inevitable.

Thaddeus nipped Adrien's ear. Adrien shivered, eliciting a quiet chuckle from Thaddeus. "I started to tell you we could stop this if you're at all uncomfortable, but after that little move, I'm not sure I could stop if you told me to."

"I have no intentions of telling you to."

"You feel so good, babe. God, it's too incredible being in your arms like this, holding you like this. If you only knew how long I wanted this, how many nights I lay awake thinking about you."

Adrien pulled back to look at Thaddeus. "Really? Wow, I'm not sure I want to know. That's quite a lot for a guy to live up to, you know?"

Thaddeus rocked his hips, grinding his groin against Adrien's, and Adrien sucked in a breath. "Trust me. You're living up to it just fine."

Adrien laughed. "Now who's the dirty dog?"

"We should probably take this to the bedroom." Thaddeus put his hands between their bodies, his palms smoothing over Adrien's flesh.

"Mmm, that feels so good." Adrien let his head fall back, his hands finding purchase on Thaddeus's shoulders as Thaddeus's hands explored Adrien's front.

Thaddeus started at Adrien's shoulders and glided over his pecs. Thaddeus's palms felt rough, the calluses like tiny bits of sandpaper to Adrien's sensitized nipples. Adrien shivered again, this time from the



pleasurable discomfort. Thaddeus paused there, the pads of his thumbs drawing lazy circles around and over Adrien's nipples until Adrien's body jerked from the maddening sensations. Electrified drops of ecstasy rained through him.

"I don't think we're going to make it to your bedroom," Adrien said at last. He lifted his head to find Thaddeus watching him.

"No?" Thaddeus angled his head and his hands continued down to the waistband of Adrien's slacks. He dropped his gaze, following his fingers' progress and licked his lips. "Damn, baby, you've got a hell of a body for a guy who spends most of his time behind a desk." He looked up, a grin dancing in his eyes as he pushed his fingers beneath the material of Adrien's pants. He worked the button free and then pulled at both sides of the fly until the zipper slid down.

Adrien closed his eyes at the onslaught of mind-numbing anticipation sizzling through him. His cock ached, so hard and ready for Thaddeus's touch. "I'll let that slide, smart ass." Adrien caught Thaddeus's hand just before it slipped inside Adrien's boxers. "I'm a little behind here." Thaddeus blinked his confusion. Adrien moved his hands to the man's shoulders, using them for a resting spot as he dipped his head and closed his lips around one of Thaddeus's taut nipples.

"Now whose turn is it to shiver?" he said against Thaddeus's flesh when he felt the quiver move through the man's body. He traced the pebbled surface with his tongue, lapping at the tiny bead as he rolled it between his lips.

Adrien looked up beneath his lashes to see Thaddeus had closed his eyes, his lips pursed on an O of pleasure. Adrien watched that O disappear until Thaddeus seemed to be biting his lips together as Adrien trailed kisses over Thaddeus's pecs and down his abs to his washboard stomach.

"You want to talk about having a fine body." Adrien traced the outline of the man's belly button with his tongue. "Have you looked in the mirror lately, sweetie?"

Adrien felt Thaddeus chuckle in the quiver of his belly more than he heard the breathless sound. And then he felt the man's firm grip as his hands closed on Adrien's upper arms and he pulled Adrien to stand straight.

"Going somewhere?" Thaddeus lifted a brow, his lips twitching.

"I work better when I'm facing the job at hand." Adrien shot a glance down between their bodies to where his hands now rested on the waistband of Thaddeus's pants.

Thaddeus laughed, but it turned into a low throated moan as Adrien unfastened the man's pants and reached in without preamble to curl his fingers around Thaddeus's shaft. He made a groaning sound of his own as the flesh in his hand flexed, the pulse running along the underside racing.

"Don't you mean in hand? Christ, Adrien, you aren't going to let us make it to the bedroom."

"Is that a problem for you?" He didn't let himself do anything but bask in the moment, enjoy and feel.

"Hell no. I'm suddenly having trouble standing, much less walking."

Thaddeus had no trouble moving other parts of his body, though. Adrien noted this as Thaddeus's hands gripped the sides of Adrien's pants and shucked pants and boxers down Adrien's legs. Thaddeus took Adrien's cock in his hand and, *ah, yes*, Adrien felt he might die from the sheer euphoria. Thaddeus stroked him, extracting animalistic sounds from Adrien's throat he never heard himself make. The moves, slow and methodical, brought Adrien to the pinnacle of climax before Thaddeus suddenly released his hold.

"Let go." Thaddeus caught Adrien's wrist and gently pulled Adrien's hand off Thaddeus's cock. Thaddeus had shed his own clothing at some point in the last few seconds, Adrien realized in surprise. Thaddeus stood there gloriously naked, his cock hard and magnificently long against his stomach.

Thaddeus reached for Adrien again, this time spinning Adrien around. He drew Adrien back against his front, Thaddeus's cock an impressive rod pressed to Adrien's back. "I want to feel you, Adrien." Even as he spoke, he reached around Adrien's body to fist Adrien's cock in his hand once more. "I can't wait any longer to be inside you."

Adrien tipped his head back, brushing his lips to Thaddeus's as he nodded. Thaddeus took the kiss deeper, delving his tongue into Adrien's mouth, licking his way to a rapturous release that seemed just out of his grasp. But not out of Thaddeus's.

Adrien rocked his hips, thrusting his cock in Thaddeus's hand, rubbing his ass against Thaddeus's body. Then he slithered to the floor as Thaddeus tugged him down. He felt Thaddeus ease away. He covered his cock with a condom he must have removed from his pocket at some point when he shed his clothes. Then he came back, the warmth of his body a fantastic presence at Adrien's backside. Thaddeus folded his body over Adrien's, one arm around Adrien's waist still holding onto his cock as Thaddeus positioned his own cock at the opening of Adrien's anus and pushed inside.

Ecstasy, sweet and intense, raced through Adrien. Thaddeus entered him slowly, his dick inching past the tight ring of muscles just inside Adrien's anus. Adrien sucked a breath through clinched teeth at the sharp pain, the pure erotic pleasure. Adrien closed his eyes, allowing his sense of touch to become paramount as pinpricks of sensations he couldn't define shot through him to fall back like a rain of sharp arrows. Thaddeus's cock rubbed at the sensitive walls of Adrien's anus, his hands moving to Adrien's hips, fingers digging into flesh and bone as Thaddeus took his ass inch by glorious inch.

"Thad, Jesus, sweetie." Adrien breathed, sighing as the passion mounted, as the release built to an explosive strength in his balls.

Behind him, he heard Thaddeus's echoing sigh, felt the man's rigid control as he battled to keep the pace stable, tender, equal. Thaddeus continued to fill him deeper and deeper until Adrien felt almost certain he couldn't take anymore. He started to say so, started to tell

Thaddeus to stop, the pleasure was simply too much to form words, when Adrien realized he didn't have to. Thaddeus's lips cruised over the back of his shoulder, Thaddeus's cock impossibly deep inside his ass.

"God, Adrien, you feel..." Thaddeus began but trailed off. He pulled his hips back and eased several rock hard inches out before gradually pushing in again. "So amazing. Your ass, the muscles as they close and clamp around my cock, Jesus, baby!"

The urge to let go came over Adrien so fast and furious, he had to fight to hold on. In that moment, with Thaddeus's erotic words, his lips against his flesh, his body inside his, Adrien nearly lost himself to the ejaculation that tightened his balls and thudded in his dick. "Please, Thaddeus. I can't stop it. I'm going to...."

Thaddeus reached around him again, catching Adrien's cock in his hand and stroking in a lightly pressured squeeze that drove Adrien to absolute madness. He groaned.

"Let go, babe. I'm right there with you."

Adrien thrust his hips back, drawing Thaddeus's dick impossibly deep inside him. He came in a blinding rush of light and passion that nearly tore his world apart. Thaddeus came right there with him as he promised, grunting loudly in Adrien's ear as he erupted.

Panting and spent, they collapsed, Thaddeus on top of Adrien, both men sprawled on the kitchen floor. Adrien felt Thaddeus's heart pounding furiously against his back, the rapid beat in time with his own. Then Thaddeus lifted his head. His lips brushed Adrien's shoulder blade before he rolled off to spread out on his back at Adrien's side.

The absence of his weight, of his warmth hit Adrien in an instant. He lifted his head and turned to look at Thaddeus. Thaddeus reached for him, his fingers idly caressing Adrien's arm.

"Wow! I can't get my breath." Thaddeus chuckled. "That felt amazing."

"I think I might be ready for that glass of wine now," Adrien said after a moment.

Thaddeus lifted his head to look at Adrien. "And the movie?"

"Do you have a TV in the bedroom?"

A slow smile unfolded on Thaddeus's gorgeous lips. "As a matter of fact, I do. Planning to do that again, I hope."

"After a fashion. You grab the wine, and I'll make the popcorn."

Thaddeus nodded. "Okay." Neither man moved. "As soon as I'm able to get up."

They exchanged exhausted looks and laughed.

\* \* \* \*

Devon stepped under the breakfast tent and stopped, letting his eyes adjust to the transition from the blinding sunlight of the early morning to the dimness of the shade. They were shooting on location at the docks today. Rather than having everyone jumping from one place to another for food, the set crew erected a tent for breakfast, lunch and even dinner if the actors ended up being out here that long. He prayed they would be done long before then.

A table sat to his immediate right laden with pastries, individual boxes of cereal, bowls of fresh fruits, and two vats, one sporting a sign for coffee and the other tea.

"Continental breakfast at its best," he murmured, but moved to the table anyway when his stomach gave a decided growl. He chose a croissant and a cup of black coffee, drinking a considerable amount of the java despite the scalding temperature without moving from his spot in front of the coffee vat.

"Looking for a kick start to the morning?"

Devon refilled his coffee and shot a look at the owner of the voice beside him. *Becky Valor, makeup*, his mind immediately computed. From the look of Becky this morning with her wild dirty blond hair, etched face, and baggy clothes, she could use a bit of her own magic

in that department. "I tend to dislike mornings. They insist on coming so early."

"A word of advice from someone who has already had her morning revved and her engine flat lined, get your bearings oiled good before you approach Milt. He's in a hell of a mood today."

Devon followed her gaze across the tent. Milton stood with his back to everyone, his shoulders slumped. Gauging the position of his arms, his hands were in his pockets. He looked to be staring out over the Gulf lost in a world all his own.

"Any idea why?"

"Nada, but Lisa in costume tried to talk to him about the clothing for today's shoots and he blew a gasket." Becky's eyes widened in horror. "Poor Lisa, she sprung a leak, ran out of here and hasn't been back."

"Something's eating at him," Devon said more to himself than Becky. Milton didn't yell. He bellowed in the middle of directing, sure, but he didn't tear into a person the way Becky described he'd done to Lisa. The way he lost his cool with Devon just the other night. "I'll go talk to him, see what I can find out."

"Better gas up first, you might need the ammunition."

Devon grinned. "What's with all the car metaphors? I thought you worked in makeup, not stunts and mechanics."

Becky shrugged and the tips of her ears turned pink. "I come from a family of mechanics. As a little girl, I had to hang with them in the garage so someone could keep an eye on me. I set up my dolls and makeup table in the corner out of the way and did my own fixing while dad and my brothers did cars. The information flooded my brain even though I didn't give a socket from a wrench's ass about cars."

"I didn't know wrenches had asses." Devon laughed.

"Hang out in my dad's garage for a while. You'll quickly discover all tools have asses." She didn't walk away. She bounced, her dirty blond bob flying.

Devon shook his head, still chuckling. When he returned his attention to Milt, he saw the man hadn't moved a muscle. Devon topped off his coffee again and walked over to his friend. He stopped beside Milt, sipped his coffee, and stared out over the docks, the Gulf.

"I've read all the reports, all the articles, seen the video footage of what went down here that day," he said conversationally. "It makes it pretty easy to picture it all even though the events are a distant memory to this place."

Milton didn't look at him. For a moment, Devon thought the man might simply ignore him, but then he spoke. "We can't recreate exactly as it happened, but we're going to get close."

"Great day for it, too. From what I hear, the day after the storm turned out surprisingly blindingly bright and beautiful, though weather recaps show a sudden drizzle now and then even with the sunlight."

Milton heaved a sigh. "That won't be hard to add in with effects."

"Nope, easy as pie." Devon rocked back on his heels and took a bite of his croissant. It tasted like plastic, so he tossed it in the nearby trashcan and sipped his coffee. "You look like shit this morning."

Milton still hadn't looked at him, but Devon could see in a sidelong study the man's bloodshot eyes, his mouth set in a grim line, his hair disheveled from too many passes with his fingers. *Fingers*, Devon noted with a cursory glance down, which looked to be curled in tight fists inside Milton's pockets.

"Are you going to start on me again?"

"I didn't plan on it. I intended to apologize for the other night. I guess I overstepped my bounds. Today, I'm just observing the obvious. You look like shit."

"Thanks. At least I'm consistent because I feel like shit."

"Coming down with something? The change in climate from California to here can play a toll on the immune system."

Milton finally looked at him. His expression revealed nothing beyond a terribly haggard man. "When did you become a doctor?"

Devon gave him a quick grin. "I played one a few years ago, remember?"

"I'm not sick." Milton went back to staring at the water. "I'm in a world of shit, and I'm not sure how to get out of it."

An alarm sounded in Devon's head. He gaped at his friend. That wasn't like the Milton he had known for years. This defeatist appearance, hollow attitude, and confusion came out of left field. "And you're sure it isn't Sabrina?"

"It has nothing do to with Sabrina. It's," he stopped and shook his head, "nothing"

"It's something to have you going off on people, first me and now the set crew. I heard how you blew up at Lisa from costume this morning. The poor thing ran off in tears."

Milton closed his eyes and heaved a sigh. "I overacted. I've got a lot on my mind right now and it has nothing to do with fucking costumes."

"Nor does it have anything to do with Sabrina," Devon reiterated. "So what does it have to do with? Maybe I can help."

Milton shook his head. "I'm the only one who can fix it, but if I don't do it soon, the entire production could be in jeopardy." He walked away, leaving Devon to stare baffled after him, a growing sense of unease flowing through his veins.

\* \* \* \*

Tess reached the top step of the department building, only to take three steps back when the glass door swung open and Ford hustled outside.

"Let's go." He snagged Tess's arm, all but dragging her down the steps to his unmarked car in the parking lot.

"What the...? Hey!" She stumbled at the car, yanked open the passenger door and jumped inside just as he started the engine. "You



want to tell me what's going on?" She strapped herself in and glared at him.

"We got another lead," Ford told her and punched the gas, first backing out of the slot and then switching to drive as he barreled out onto the street.

Tess's heart slammed against her breastbone. "On the movie connection?"

*Oh, dear God.*

Terror turned her blood to ice. She had to tell Ford what she had found. She felt the heaviness of the tiny pills she'd placed in a Ziploc bag as if they weighed a zillion pounds rather than mere partials of an ounce.

"They may be connected." Ford took a turn a bit too fast. Tess had to grab the O-shit bar to keep from falling into the console between them. "Lorenzo, the CI from the bust stop just before Rayne's attack, called Cosmos this morning. He got a call from someone looking to score, someone who formerly dealt with Sanchez."

"Is it our guy?" *Is it Devon?* Damn it, she hated the question that immediately flittered through her thoughts.

Ford shrugged. "We're hoping. Lorenzo didn't get a name. The guy called himself Snoopy."

"How original," Tess huffed.

"Apparently, old Snoopy heard on the street that Lorenzo was the man who could get him what he needs now that Sanchez has been outted."

Tess sat up straighter. "The street gangs know he turned CI?"

"Not exactly, but they know he got busted, that his house got raided. It's a good bet anyone looking to purchase is going to steer clear of him for a while. It's our luck they've turned to Lorenzo."

*Lorenzo.* Tess's mind fought to keep up. The druggie the DEA had flipped after they brought him in on possession charges after a routine traffic stop mere days before the shit hit the fan with the Phay cartel and Ford's girlfriend. The SSPD and DEA dropped all charges against

Lorenzo after that bust in exchange for his turning confidential informant, a tactic often used in the agency to get more useful information on high up criminals.

"He got busted, but the heat has obviously died down around him now," Tess concluded.

"Yep, and he's managed to work himself up to a nice little spot in the neighborhood. He's running the show today. He'll be wearing a blue baseball cap."

"Instructions from Snoopy, I assume. It sounds to me like the dog is running the show."

"A little give and take, I guess. Lorenzo set the deal and then called Cosmos with the specifics. It's going down in the parking lot of the Jerry Lee's Supermarket. Cosmos wants us there for the surveillance. If it goes as planned, we're to take Lorenzo into custody to protect the fact that he's our informant. Cosmos and his team will get Snoopy."

*Snoopy? God, could Snoopy be Devon?* Tess stared out the windshield, her mind going ninety to nothing. She'd left Devon in his trailer that morning. He had an early set call at the docks, and she needed to report to the station. She needed to talk to Ford, to show him what she had discovered, to find out for certain if the pills from the second and third bottles were something different or indeed the opium pills beginning to surface.

Devon hadn't left her alone for a second after her hasty search of his bathroom. They had sex and then she followed him back to the set, unable to think of a believable excuse for sneaking away from him again.

She hadn't found a chance to search the rest of his trailer, hadn't wanted to chance waking him in the middle of the night and having to explain her actions. She needed him to remain oblivious to her findings, at least for now. Despite how desperately she didn't want to believe he could have anything to do with the case, she knew her findings practically sealed the information in glue. Why else would

Devon have Suboxone, pills specifically formulated from the very drug they were attempting to track? Why else would he have bottles of other pills that could turn out to be the exact drug they sought? And the conversation she overheard between him and December, *dear God*, the actress was likely strung out and looked to Devon as her supplier.

Ford slowed the car blocks from the Jerry Lee's Supermarket, keeping even with the posted speed limit as not to draw attention. Tess sat up straighter in her seat, praying with all her might Snoopy would turn out to be anyone other than Devon.

\* \* \* \*

Thaddeus's final segment in the movie took a grand total of an hour to shoot. An hour, he later discovered, that would likely net about three and a half minutes of screen time when combined with the segment they previously filmed. It didn't matter. Three and a half minutes or three and a half hours, it still felt cool as shit to see his face up there on the screen.

He settled back in his seat near the back of the room set aside in the make-shift production studio used to view the dailies after each day's takes. It surprised him to find the room so empty. Then again, most of the actors and crew had gone for their usual after work drinks at the Paradise Lounge. Thaddeus had considered going, but decided his luck of running into Adrien at the bar again wouldn't stretch to a second night.

Only three others occupied the room, one of which sat nestled even farther back at her post to control the footage being played on the digital screen. The other two, Milton Remy and December Johansen, sat all the way in the front. Given the small area of the room, that put them only two rows ahead of Thaddeus. Yet he got the impression they didn't sense his presence.

Maybe he wasn't supposed to be, he reflected, as the scene on screen changed to one of Devon's and December's takes. It only half surprised him not to see Devon here. He figured the man likely chose to hang with Tess Keaton rather than watch himself playing his part of Raymond Mage. Thaddeus read about a lot of actors like that. Many refused to watch their own movies before or after the cinema debut.

And who wouldn't rather be with a lover than sitting in a nearly deserted make-shift theater watching clip after clip of unedited film?

Thaddeus would've gone that route, too, if he had a lover to spend the time with. Instead, he woke that morning in a body that felt fantastically sore with more energy than he experienced in months. He also woke alone.

*At least he left a note.* He tried to console himself with the fact that, yes, Adrien had indeed thought enough of their night to leave Thaddeus a note on the nightstand. But the five simple words, *Thanks for a fabulous evening*, hadn't given Thaddeus the hope he needed at that moment. Instead, those words had made him feel cheap, used. Oh, he felt absolutely certain Adrien hadn't meant them that way. Well, okay, he felt relatively certain. How could Adrien not consider the evening they shared anything less than a total monumental volcanic explosion of Testosterone Happy Land?

*He was in a hurry. He needs time to let last night absorb.* After all, it had all been so fast, so unexpected, so freaking magnificent. They had gone from a flirty yet serious conversation in a sandwich shop to a circus ride of amazing sex on Thaddeus's kitchen floor. Talk about falling off the tightrope.

Thaddeus smiled at his own joke as the scene on screen changed again, this time to one of Devon alone as he fought the surf to get to the boat idling offshore. Thaddeus stayed after the day's shoot, deciding to sit in on the viewing of the dailies both out of a desire for survival and to keep his word to Adrien.

Adrien's note hadn't said 'call me,' or even 'I'll call you later'. It simply said thanks. Thaddeus didn't have a clue when he would see the man again and no way did he intend to pull a basic beginning relationship blunder like calling Adrien too soon. He sought survival instead by not going back home where he would be tempted by the phone or lured into his car to drive around town guessing where Adrien might be spending his afternoon. He also sought to keep his word by sticking around the movie set, an act that led him here, two rows behind Milton and December who dropped into a whispered conversation that had nothing to do with the dailies.

"You went to Devon! Are you fucking insane?" Milton Remy sounded livid.

Anger seeped into the air of the room with an underlying fear so strong, Thaddeus felt it. He sank lower in his seat, his ears straining to hear all he could over the sound on the screen. Obviously, neither Milton nor December knew he sat back here.

"You wouldn't give me what I needed," December said haughtily. "I had to get it from someone."

"You're supposed to be off that shit," Milton retorted through gritted teeth. "That's why you can't get it from anyone else. Everyone has cut you off for a reason, December. You go from one to the other. You can't get the pills, so you go for the medicine that's supposed to help you break the addiction."

"They don't work."

"They do work, except that you're addicted to them, too. You're going back and forth, whichever one you can get your hands on. And, Christ, now you've involved Devon in this, too. You never should've done that."

"For crying out loud, Mil-Mil, it's not like he didn't already know."

*Mil-Mil?* As bad as Thaddeus wanted to snicker at that, he controlled himself. These two apparently had a lot more going on behind the scenes than anyone realized. Not that it should've been

surprising, certainly not as surprising as the implications behind the conversation.

"He's gotten them for me before, remember? That's why he didn't need to do anything more than make a phone call."

"I'm well aware of that. But what if he finds out about the other? Damnit, December, you're going to get this whole production shut down. How deep are you in this shit?"

"Deep enough to know we can make an ass load of dough if you'll calm down and think this through."

"This is why you talked me into doing this movie, isn't it? You wanted me here in Silver Springs because you knew. Christ!"

"For a genius, you sure are slow, Mil Mil. Of course that's why I talked you into this. The stuff I got in Los Angeles pales in comparison to what you can get me here. Think of the money we'll make," she said again, speaking to Milton like she would a cartoon character with dollar signs spinning in his eyes.

"When did this turn into money?"

"We'll take it back to L.A. We'll make a fucking killing!"

"We won't make squat as long as you're using the shit," Milton said in disgust. "And I'm not doing it, anyway. Jesus, December, I lost a son to drugs. Why would I want to ruin someone's life with the shit? I'm not a fucking drug dealer."

December leaned over and brushed her lips to the director's cheek. "You are now, my love, and you will do whatever I want you to do or your whole little world will blow up right before your very eyes."

Thaddeus sank so low, he nearly slithered to the floor as December walked out. Milton followed a few minutes later. Blessedly, neither of them glanced toward the back of the room.

## Chapter Thirteen

"What's his name?" Adrien Bingham leaned on the table at Snoopy's elbow, the picture of perfect calm.

Snoopy turned out to be Reginald Deluder, a twenty-two year old local with a squeaky clean record. His association with *Danger Storm* pegged him as little more than a glorified gopher. Tess had actually seen him on the set a time or ten running errands for the actors, the crew, Milton Remy, and damned near anyone else who needed a hand. His mistake apparently stemmed from utter stupidity and the willingness to do anything, no questions asked, for anyone who might land him an all expenses paid trip to Hollywood. Instead, he would likely get an all expenses paid trip to a jail cell if he didn't spill all he knew and fast.

"I don't know his name, man," Reginald insisted, keeping to the story he had given them for the past fifteen minutes. The guy wasn't going to crack, likely because he didn't know anything else.

"How can you run errands for someone and not know who he is?" Michael Cosmos's tone held a carefully staged disbelief. If Adrien sported the picture of perfect calm, Cosmos screamed perfect cool.

The man could act, too. Tess had seen him do it before when interrogating a suspect, watched as he made just the right expression, put just the right inflection in his voice when the time called for it, and went as blank as a sheet of paper after he got what he wanted.

"I told you sometimes the movie people leave a note in my box asking me to do things for them. You know, like take something to the post office or pick up something from the store."

"Or buy opium from a local supplier?" Ford cocked a brow. He sat in a chair at the opposite end of the table. His forearms rested on the tabletop. The chair held steady on two legs as he leaned back in it.

"I didn't know I'd be getting drugs. I only knew I would meet a guy wearing a blue baseball cap in the parking lot of some supermarket or department store, hand over an envelope, and collect a paper bag. I never looked inside the bag, man."

"And it never occurred to you that you had just taken part in a drug deal?" Adrien frowned, incredulous.

Reginald bowed his head. "I guess I'm pretty stupid, huh?"

"That's putting it mildly, son." Michael moved from his spot leaning against the wall to Reginald's other side. "But you know what would be a really smart move on your part right about now? Tell us how you're supposed to finish this little errand of yours. Who do you deliver to? How do they know when you've got the stuff?"

Reginald lifted his head. "I'm to take it to one of the trailers."

"Which trailer?" Tess asked, speaking for the first time. All heads turned in her direction, but her focus stayed glued to Reginald. "There are more than a dozen trailers on the fairgrounds right now." And they sat all lined up in a tidy little row.

"The third one from the end. It's the same every time."

"Which end? Front or back?" Tess demanded before either of the others could ask. *Please, say front. Please, say front.*

"Back."

The room spun. Tess barely held herself in check. It took everything she possessed and even some control she hadn't known she had to call on her acting skills at that moment. She wouldn't get through this any other way without giving herself away. She had to act totally unfazed.

"Devon Gerard's trailer," she said more as a statement than a question. She didn't need to ask. She already knew.



"I think so." Reginald nodded and then lifted a shoulder. "I've never been inside it. I make the drop behind it. There's always someone waiting for me there."

"And you've never seen who it is?" Ford leaned forward, his chair hitting all four legs with an audible thump.

Reginald shook his head fast, his expression wide eyed and serious. "No, never. It's always too dark and he..." the young man trialed off and closed his eyes.

"He's what?" Adrien prodded.

"He's always careful to stand in the shadows," Reginald finished.

"What about his voice?" Adrien asked. "You haven't recognized his voice?"

"He's never said anything. He just takes the bag and goes. Look, I know it was stupid. I even thought at first that I might be doing something wrong."

"But then you decided it was okay?" Michael shook his head. "Why? Has he promised you something? Has he offered you a job in L.A., maybe a chance to run his errands there?"

Reginald nodded. "In one of the first notes he left for me. It said if I followed the instructions to the letter, he would make sure I got a job as a stage assistant until something opened in lighting. That's what I want to do, set lighting and equipment."

Tess didn't bother telling the guy things didn't work so easily in Hollywood.

"I'm going to jail, huh?" Reginald looked from Michael to Adrien to Ford and finally to Tess, his brown eyes pleading with them to say no.

"Afraid so, Reggie." Adrien nodded and all the color from Reginald's deeply tanned face drained away.

"Unless you agree to help us," Michael added and the young man's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Yes, sir," he said quickly. "I'll do anything. Whatever you want, sir. I'll make the drop tonight like I'm supposed to. I'll wear a wire. I'll get the guy to talk. You'll hear it all. I'll—"

"Make the drop tonight like you're supposed to," Michael agreed. "But you won't need to wear a wire. My team and I will be there. All I need you to do is the same thing you've done every other time in the past. I need you to focus on acting natural, on seeming as if none of this has gone down today. My team and I will do the rest. Can you do that, Reginald? Can you be yourself for me tonight?"

"Yes, sir." Reginald nodded furiously. "I won't let you down, sir."

"We get this guy and you'll be free to walk," Michael assured the young man.

Tess watched the relief move over Reginald's face even as a heavy dread settled in her gut. He would walk away from this tonight because it would be Devon who ended up behind bars. "Ford, I need to talk to you and agents Cosmos and Bingham in the next room, please." She didn't look at either of the men as she walked out of the room.

She was standing at the window in the room next door when she heard them enter moments later.

"What's going on, Tess?" Ford asked.

Tess fought not to shake, though her insides quivered from roots to toenails. She couldn't do this. She didn't have a choice. She slowly turned from the window, meeting first Ford's questioning gaze and then Michael's and Adrien's. She locked glares with Michael the longest and could see, despite his carefully blank expression, he already knew what she had to tell them. She took a deep breath and let the words fly.

"I think Devon Gerard is the man we want. If I'm right, he'll be the one to meet with Reginald tonight. That's his trailer, the third one from the back."

"If Reginald has been meeting this guy outside that trailer, it could be set up to look that way, Tess," Ford said, but Tess shook her head before he could even finish.

"It's not staged to look that way, Harris." She stuck her hand in her pocket and pulled out the Ziploc bag. It hit the table between them with a quiet plop and slid toward the center. "I found that last night in Devon's medicine cabinet inside his trailer. I also overheard a conversation between him and co-star December Johansen a couple of nights ago outside the trailer. It's him. That's the only explanation. Devon Gerard is the drug dealer we've been looking for."

\* \* \* \*

Devon had a bad feeling about this. He had never been one to listen to instincts. Playing it safe always proved to be such a drag. He preferred to live for the moment and see where it took him. Right now, that moment took him across the fairgrounds and down the line of trailers. The bad feeling grew with each determined step.

Laughter spilled out of one of the trailers he knew to belong to the girls in costume. The sound made him smile as he passed. *Guess Lisa got over the drama of the morning.* A few glasses of something chilled and potent could help almost anyone with that.

Movement in the distance to his left caught his eye. He slowed, recognizing one of the guys from lighting and sound walking hand in hand with what appeared to be one of the female extras. And here he thought everyone had zipped out to the Paradise Lounge again.

He probably should've gone there himself, he thought as he left guy and girl to do as they pleased. He still could. Maybe he would even find Tess there. He hadn't been able to reach her on her cell all day, and no matter how many times he checked his voicemail, the desperation of the act never telepathically prompted her to call.

Or maybe he should go to his trailer, spend a quiet evening with the boob tube and the bottle of Jack waiting for him behind the wet

bar. But could he sit there hanging with his favorite uncle knowing his best friend faced some kind of trouble right outside Devon's trailer?

"No," he mouthed the words, letting them escape on a barely audible breath of air.

He had gone by Milton's office immediately after the last take only to find the matchbox room empty, the desk in shambles. Something about the messiness of the workspace drew him inside. Perhaps the knowledge that Milton Remy rarely kept a thing out of place in his home, on his person, or in his office set off his internal alarm. Devon couldn't say for certain, but when he saw the note on the top of a stack of papers by the phone, something about it had made the bad feeling start. The message simply read: *Outside third trailer, back, seven o'clock, Snoopy waiting.* Devon didn't have a fucking clue who Snoopy could be, but doubted he intended to wait on Charlie Brown.

No, whoever this Snoopy turned out to be expected to meet with Milton. The 'what for' and 'why so cryptic' turned out to be the questions of the hour. Questions Devon felt determined to get answered. It had to have something to do with Milton's confession that production of *Danger Storm* could be in jeopardy. Milton had said he was the only one who could fix it. Had he found his fix in Snoopy?

Something about that last question made Devon's skin crawl. He touched the button on the side of his wristwatch, activating the light so he could see. Six-fifty-eight. Two minutes. He slowed his step again as he reached the edge of his trailer, the third trailer from the back of the row. It seemed the meeting spot for clandestine get-togethers, first his encounter with December and now this. Unlike the afternoon he followed December back here, darkness bathed the narrow space between his trailer and the next, only the faintest sliver of moonlight and a dim glow from a nearby streetlamp prevented total blackness.

"Snoopy?" Devon whispered, squinting in his attempt to see. Then he didn't have to squint, because a figure stepped into that sliver of light. "Reginald?"

"Mr. Gerard?" Reginald sounded as surprised to see him as Devon did to see the errand boy. "I did as you said, as your note said. Here it is." Reginald practically pushed what felt to be a small brown paper sack into Devon's hand.

"What the...?" Devon started to ask, but the boy stepped back, his eyes going wide.

"I never would've guessed it was you," he whispered, shaking his head.

"What was me? What's in this?" The questions barely left Devon's mouth before he heard a snap of a twig on the ground behind him and felt the presence of another body.

"Hands in the air, Gerard." The voice sounded calm, authoritative, and male.

"Give me the bag." Another male advanced on Devon's side, reaching up to take the bag from Devon's hand now held in the air as instructed.

Devon's heart pounded. His mind reeled. "What the hell is going on?"

"We're asking the questions here," the man at his side said. "Do you have any weapons on you?"

Weapons? "No, of course not. What the hell is in that bag?" His gaze collided with Reginald's. The boy still stood rooted to his spot in that sliver of moonlight mere feet away, disbelief awash in his face. "Did you set me up or something?"

*Milton.* The boy came here to meet Milton, not Devon. Where in the hell was Milton? And what in the hell was in that freaking bag? Devon could think of only one thing, and the implication made his blood turn to ice.

"That's pretty rich, isn't it, Devon?" Tess's voice cut through the night like a double-edged sword slicing through his soul. "I wondered

what kind of tricks you would try to pull, what kind of games you would attempt to play when we busted you."

"Theresa, what are you talking about?" Devon's head spun. He couldn't grasp a single thought beyond utter disorientation. His confusion only worsened when Tess stepped into his line of sight. Someone flicked on a flashlight behind him, illuminating the area in a bath of white, and he saw clearly enough to note the tears brimming in her amazing eyes. "What do you mean busted me?"

"I didn't want to believe it." She shook her head, her hand reaching for the handcuffs she kept in a pouch on her belt. "You didn't leave me any choice." She stepped to him and reached for his hands one at a time. She yanked them down and behind his back, cuffing them securely with her handcuffs. Each move dominated to the extreme, but nothing about them offered the minutest bit of pleasure. And when she slowly began to read him his Miranda Rights in a voice colder than any he heard from her before, he knew he would never feel an ounce of pleasure from this woman again.

\* \* \* \*

Tess no longer recognized herself. In the short walk that took her inside Devon's trailer, she became someone else. She couldn't say who. It wasn't an act this time, but more a possession of mind, body, and soul. She had her suspicions, knew deep down with every trickle of information they gathered that her misgivings ticked closer and closer to truths. But when she stepped into that darkness between the trailers, realized those fears had finally been confirmed, she lost herself.

She figured it to be self-preservation. Another part of her, the strongest part, kicked in to take control, protecting the vulnerable Tess from the betrayal and the pain. The resilient part of her moved her limbs on autopilot, guiding her into the trailer behind the DEA agents now flanking Devon with Ford Harris at their heels. Ford

stopped just inside the door and turned to her, a world of compassion and concern in his face.

"You can stay out here with Becket and Williams." His gaze flicked to the detective and rookie officer who stood in on the bust. "Becket could probably use your help searching the premises."

"Samantha has three other officers and a team of DEA agents out here at her disposal," Tess argued.

"You're too close to this, Theresa."

Tess blinked. Not once in all their time on cases together had he ever called her Theresa. "Do you want to add Marie Keaton to that, Harris? Isn't that what fathers do when they reprimand their daughter for arguing, the dreaded calling of the full name along with the look." She faked a shutter and shook her head. "You don't have the look quite right, and the whole triple name thing never worked on me, even for my real father."

"Let me put that another way, you don't need to be in there."

"Yes, I do. I want to be in there, Harris. I *need* to be in there. You went in to find Rayne." The blow hit low to the belt, bringing up the brutal beating of his girlfriend. Tess knew it and yet she also knew by the expression on his face that it worked. It wasn't quite the same situation, but that was her man in there, her man involved in another case tied to Ving Kim Phay's cartel.

"Damnit, Tess."

"Devon gave us permission to search, right? I want to do it."

Ford's shoulders rose and fell in a deep breath, probably for patience. "Fine." He stepped back and moved aside so she could enter.

The inside of the trailer looked the same as it had yesterday. Why had she expected it to look different? Because the man who stayed here wasn't the same man from yesterday? Except he was, wasn't he? Devon hadn't changed in that twenty-four hour time span. She changed, but he hadn't.

Michael had led Devon to the tiny kitchen table. Tess looked at him expecting to see him sitting with his head bowed, a man defeated.

Instead, his gaze locked on her, his amber eyes portraying confusion, shock, and hurt. Damn, the man was a hell of an actor.

Tess turned away and addressed Adrien. "Do you want me to begin the search?"

Adrien studied her for a long moment and then opened his mouth.

Tess anticipated what he intended to say. The expression on his face might as well have been a neon sign. Rather than argue or start a pissing match, she simply repeated her question. "Do you want me to begin the search, Agent Bingham?"

Understanding moved through his expression. He closed his mouth and nodded. "Yes, Officer Keaton, you can begin whenever you're ready. We have the suspect's permission to search without a warrant. Thank you."

"You won't find anything." Devon's voice sounded of pure anger, but even that cracked when he added, "Christ, Theresa, I don't know what you expect to find. I don't know what you think I've done."

Tess didn't answer. She didn't look at him. She couldn't. The grief in his tone, the disbelief in his statements cut through her deeply enough. So much for her auto-piloting protective self. Apparently, it only worked to make her move, not to ignore her shattering heart.

She managed to kick it into gear again, propelling her steps down the hall and straight to the bathroom. Fury blended with the pain, making her blood boil with anger. She found the protection she needed in that, at least for now. She embraced it, closing an invisible fist around the rage and holding on tight. With her tangible hand, she yanked open the medicine cabinet.

The bottles still sat on the shelf, arranged exactly as she had left them. The bastard hadn't even had the smarts to stash them somewhere. She gathered them and stomped back to the front of the trailer.

"I expected to find these," she told him hotly, holding out the bottles rather dramatically. "You arrogant, criminal son of a bitch, you didn't even attempt to hide the evidence."



"Evidence?" Devon's voice rose, his eyes growing wide. "For fuck's sake, Tess, those are freaking bottles of pain medication."

"Highly addictive pain meds," Tess corrected him. "At least these two are. The third is Suboxone, and this one," she shook her head. "You really think we're that dense? This bottle is full of pure solidified opium tablets. What did you intend to do, Devon, get people hooked on the stuff and then feed them the counter acting pill to get them off it again?"

"Of course not. Christ, Tess, that stuff." He shook head, his face contorting into an expression of utter defeat. "That stuff isn't mine," he finished in a voice far softer than before. "But you'll never believe that."

Tess barked a laugh. "Well, duh. Ask me how many times I've heard that line. You're some actor, Devon, but I expected you to be better at adlibbing a script than that."

"Okay, that's enough." Michael stepped in the path between them, cutting off Tess's view of Devon. The look he shot Tess left no room for more arguments. With that single step, he took back control of the game. He turned to Devon. "If it's not yours, then maybe you wouldn't mind telling us who it belongs to and how it got inside your trailer. And let me remind you that you do have a right to have an attorney present. All questioning stops here if you want to make that call."

"The stuff belongs to a friend." He leaned to the side, peering around Michael at Tess. "And, yes, I know how cliché that sounds, but it's the truth. I got the Suboxone. I know a doctor back in California who can get the stuff. He's a celebrity doctor with a closed mouth. He agreed to overnight the Suboxone to me one time and one time only."

"For your friend?" Michael's voice held no inflection whatsoever. He sounded completely deadpanned.

"Yes. For my friend. She came to me for help because her own doctor has cut her off the Suboxone. An addict is only meant to take it for so long, and they're supposed to wean off the pills first and then

the Suboxone. It's not supposed to be a permanent substitute. She's been having trouble getting off the Suboxone and turned to the pills again. I didn't know, Jesus, I had no clue that bottle was pure opium tablets. I thought it was all OxyContin and codeine and shit."

"Agent Cosmos," Tess said softly. "Please."

Michael moved aside, but not before he shot her a warning look. "Watch yourself, Officer Keaton."

"Yes, sir." Tess swallowed and focused on Devon. "You said this friend is female. Are you talking about December Johansen?"

"I..." Devon hesitated and then slowly nodded. "Yes, it's December."

"Is that who you went to get the stuff for tonight?" Adrien asked from his spot near the kitchen table.

"No. I didn't go out there to get the stuff for anyone. I still don't even know what the hell is in that bag. None of you have told me."

"More of the same," Michael stated. "Several bottles of opium tablets. We figure at the current street value, if you found the right buyer you would've likely netted several grand off that supply alone."

"I'm not a drug dealer," Devon said through gritted teeth. "I just told you I didn't even know what was in that bag."

"Then why go back there? Before you even attempt to lie and claim December wanted to meet with you again, know that we've already checked and she's at the Paradise Lounge tonight."

"Well, goodie for her," Devon scoffed. "And what do you mean again?"

"I overheard you with her a few days ago. The same day you showed up late on the set. I heard you promise her you would make a call and get her the stuff."

"The Suboxone, Tess. Christ, why didn't you ask me about it then?"

Tess didn't answer but merely repeated her question. "Why did you go back there tonight?"

"I went looking for someone."

"Who?" Michael prodded.

"Look, I stumbled across a message, something about the trailer, seven o'clock, and Snoopy. This is my trailer and the message clearly stated to meet behind it. It seemed suspicious, so I went to check it out."

"Bullshit," Tess blurted before she could stop herself.

"Officer Keaton." Michael didn't have to look at her. The tone of his voice served as warning enough. "Where did you find this message?" the agent asked Devon.

"I...*fuck*." Devon swore quietly, but the vehemence behind it carried through the trailer.

"He found it on my desk." The new voice in the room drew everyone's attention toward the door. Milton Remy stepped inside.

"Jesus, Milt," Devon whispered.

"Stop trying to cover for me, old friend. I told you I had made a mess and only I could fix it. I just didn't figure out how to fix it fast enough." Milton turned to Michael. "He has nothing to do with this. You can let him go. I'm the one you want."

"You're admitting the drugs we've confiscated belong to you?" Michael asked point blank.

Milton nodded. "I should've been the one to meet Snoopy, Reginald Deluder, tonight." He sighed heavily and turned his focus on Devon. "I should've told you yesterday. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know how. December is the one who set up the meet. I set up the others, but when I refused to be here tonight, she did it herself and left the note on my desk for me to follow through. She's been blackmailing me to get the drugs. It started off small, a few pills here, a bottle there. She said she got off them. Instead, she became more and more addicted. Then she got hooked on the opium and, hell, I don't know what she thought. She came up with the idea to use Reginald to make the exchanges of money for the drugs. I didn't realize until this afternoon she intended to go into business selling them, too."

"What's she got on you, Milt?" Devon's obvious concern for his friend etched itself in his expression.

"Pictures, video, notes, the whole works. We've been having an affair. She threatened to take everything to Sabrina." Milton shrugged. "You know the state my marriage is in. I couldn't let her do that, at least, not until I figured out what to do about Sabrina."

Tess listened to the whole exchange without asking a question or making a move. She doubted she even breathed. She had been wrong. If everything Milton confessed rang true and all Devon said did, too, then Devon was completely innocent. The clichéd wrong place at the wrong time victim.

"You should've talked to me, Milt," Devon whispered, and even though he called his friend by name, his gaze flicked to Tess, too, letting her know he included her in that statement. She should've talked to him. His gaze hardened, the amber in his eyes disappearing almost completely behind a veil of pain. Tess knew it was too late to talk to him now. He would never forgive her for what she had done.

\* \* \* \*

"So this is what a wrap-up party is like." Terri turned full circle. Her lips dipped into a frown. "I have to say I'm not all that impressed."

Thaddeus grinned. "I don't think this can be deemed anything close to a real Hollywood wrap-up party. Consider this as more of a saying goodbye to on-location shooting and hello to the real production studio."

"Do you think *Danger Storm* will ever make it to the big screen?"

"Eventually." Thaddeus nodded. "The buzz is the financial backers found another director to replace Milton Remy. They also plan to bring in another actress to take over December Johansen's role."

"What about the scenes they shot here with her in them?"

"They'll have to reshoot them or, hell, this is Hollywood we're talking about. They'll likely take the new actress, impose her over December's image and continue the shoot from where they left off."

"It wouldn't surprise me." Terri giggled. "I hope they don't simply shit can the whole project. I'd hate knowing you went through all this for nothing."

"What do you mean for nothing? It was fun! I got to act, be involved in the fire action, albeit make believe, and I even got to be a spy for all of five and a half minutes. All in all, I'd say it's been a busy few weeks packed with adventure for me."

"Mhmm, and the grandest adventure of them all is walking this way, my dear buddy."

Thaddeus turned. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of Adrien slowly making his way through the crowd toward them. Jesus, he looked too good for words. Hair charmingly tousled, delectable body Thaddeus already knew felt and tasted as good as it looked clad in a dark suit and rainbow tie. An intent expression set his handsome face, bringing back crystal clear memories of a very exciting moment of Thaddeus's life. His mouth went dry even as every pulse point of desire in his body screamed to high alert.

"I hoped you would be here tonight." Adrien smiled and Thaddeus's entire world tilted off its axis.

"It's my last chance to hang with the stars." Thaddeus shrugged and then frowned. "Although, there isn't much hanging going on. What, with December Johansen in rehab and Devon Gerard so freaking depressed, he's likely to follow her."

"I don't think he'll go that far."

"It's amazing how many lives drugs can damage so easily, whether directly or indirectly."

"More than you know," Adrien agreed. "Gerard is pretty torn up about Tess. I hope he'll eventually come around and realize she did what she had to, what her job demanded she do."

"She hurt him," Terri commented. "That's a hard thing for a man to get over." She stepped closer to Adrien, putting a hand on his shoulder as she leaned in. Though she dropped her voice to a barely audible whisper, Thaddeus stood close enough to hear. "Make sure you don't hurt my man." She pulled back and grinned. "Now, if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I'm going to enjoy my first, and likely only, want-to-be Hollywood movie party."

Adrien gave a low whistle as she walked away. "Man, she's a handful."

"Don't I know it." Thaddeus sighed.

"I didn't, did I?" Adrien suddenly looked so serious Thaddeus felt alarm rise in his blood. "Hurt you," he clarified when Thaddeus didn't answer.

"No. Left me satisfied, confused, and wanting more, perhaps, but you didn't hurt me."

Adrien laughed, a breathless sound full of unspoken desire. "Join the club. That night was, well, fucking incredible."

"Are you looking to repeat it anytime soon?" Thaddeus felt lightheaded with hope.

"Honestly, I don't know. I'm just not sure what I want right now, and I'm afraid if I don't stop to figure it out, I will end up hurting someone, whether it be you or myself or..."

"This other guy," Thaddeus supplied when Adrien trailed off.

"Yeah, well, see, I don't really believe he's an issue, but I need to know for sure before I go any further."

"Thank you for being honest. It's not what I wanted to hear," Thaddeus added quickly. His toes started to tingle at the small smile that unfolded on Adrien's lips. "But I can handle waiting a while for you to get things straightened out. I would appreciate it if you would tell me. You know, when you get it all figured out. I'd like to know whichever way you decide to go."

Adrien nodded and when he spoke again, his voice cracked with emotion. "I will and thank you for one of the best nights of my life." He took a step closer and then shot a glance around the room.

Thaddeus knew what he saw, a room full of actors, extras, townspeople, firefighters, and other men in uniform, all the root of the gossip grapevine.

"I want to kiss you, but I'm not sure you want me to do it here."

"As long as you don't end it with your famous, 'I shouldn't have done that,' I would love it if you laid one on me, right here and right now."

Adrien's brow winged up. "Laid one on you, huh? Okay."

In a fraction of a step, Adrien's body pressed against Thaddeus's. Thaddeus's breath lodged somewhere in his chest. Adrien leaned in, his lips lightly touching Thaddeus's. But when Thaddeus expected the other man to step back, Adrien surprised him by pushing his tongue between Thaddeus's lips. Adrien laid one on him that he would never forget, right there in the middle of the party for half of Silver Springs to see.

Adrien didn't just kiss Thaddeus. He made love to Thaddeus's mouth. His hand cupped Thaddeus's nape. His head angled to take the kiss as deeply as possible, and Thaddeus felt himself going under. The sensations, the emotions, desire, lust, need, *God*, he simply felt too much to define. He would drown in it all, but what a way to go.

Slowly, Adrien pulled back, his lips swollen and glistening with moisture. "The only reason I shouldn't have done that is because I'm supposed to be here in an official capacity," he said softly, breathlessly. "It's all an attempt by the DEA, local PD and the movie people to outwit the media and everyone else after this drug bust. Not to mention my boss-partner, of the strictly working variety, is standing right over there. Otherwise, I definitely should have done that."

Thaddeus smiled. "Yeah, you should have. Don't wait too long, okay, to let me know. I can only promise to stay on the sidelines quietly going crazy without you for so long."

Adrien swallowed. His eyes brimmed with emotion. "I'll try. I should probably, uh..." He tipped his head toward his boss.

"Then I'll see you soon." Thaddeus watched Adrien walk away praying with each step the man took that time would bring those steps back to Thaddeus real soon.

\* \* \* \*

"Wowza." Ryan Magee waved a hand in the air in front of his face. "Damn, I felt the heat of that kiss way over here."

"Jesus, no kidding." Devon followed Adrien Bingham's progress toward Michael Cosmos, admiration and surprise warring for top emotion after what he just witnessed. "He said he would be here to handle the press if it became necessary. I would've never guessed that's how he intended to do it."

"He definitely gave the paparazzi another angle to report." Magee shoved his fingertips in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I guess every story deserves a happy ending."

"Anyone in entertainment seems to think so," Devon said dryly. He drained his Jack Daniel's on the rocks and tipped his glass at the DEA agent, then swung the glass in a gesture to include the firefighter who stood staring after Adrien. The longing and hope apparent in the firefighter's eyes was damned near tangible. "Think they will find theirs?"

"From what I've seen of them lately, they're working their way to it. Hell, the fact that Thaddeus is letting himself openly swoon over another man is happy ending enough for now. I can't say it didn't surprise me to find out he's gay, but I'm damned glad he isn't hiding it anymore. What about you?" Magee turned the conversation around. "Think you'll find your happy ending?"



*Tess.* Devon felt a knife stab in his gut at the thought of her. Then he spotted her on her way to the door and the knife twisted, the blade doing serious damage to his internal organs. "I had mine. Too bad for me, I didn't realize it until it was too late." He had the ending all right and should've been happy with it. If only he knew then what he did now.

"Don't let me stop you. Go catch her if you want."

"I don't want."

Magee angled a look at him. "You sure about that?"

"Absofuckinglutely positive. The only thing I intend to catch in the next few minutes is another glass of my favorite uncle."

"You asked once what it felt like those days before, during and after the hurricane. You asked if I wanted to share what I remember, if I got scared."

Devon nodded. Yeah, he asked those very questions the day he first met Magee. "You admitted you did." But not about the storm, he recollected. Magee admitted to feeling fear when he realized his future step-son had gone missing, feeling terror for his wellbeing and that of the woman he had grown to love. He shocked Devon to the soles of his feet because he never expected an admission of fear out of a strong former SEAL like Magee.

"Tina turned out to be a far different woman than I thought her to be. I'm not going to go into the details. I'll simply say that the impression I had built of her, the image I carried around fell so far from the true Tina that when I discovered the real her, it knocked my dick and my heart in the dirt."

Devon pursed his lips. "That different, huh?"

"To put it mildly. Anyway, my point is, I learned during those hours when Hurricane Emilio raged his worst that she felt obligated because of her son, because of her *job* to do the things she did to form that wrong impression in my head."

Devon heard every word Magee spoke, but the heavy emphasis Magee put on the word 'job' struck home most. He sighed. "I know where you're going with this."

"Good, because I'm not sure I could spell it out any clearer."

"It's not the same, though. There is no son to consider." Damn if the realization of that didn't twist the fucking knife in his gut to another angle for another slice. He wanted to have children with Tess. He freaking wanted to marry her. Maybe he hadn't come around to thinking that vividly a week ago. At least not on a conscious level, but he knew it now. He started heading that way the moment he watched her toss her keys in the expensive ass antique bowl that first night.

"But there is a job," Magee reminded him. "One the woman obviously enjoys. I've never been a cop, but I've been a SEAL and I am a firefighter. I've held down careers that are demanding of both body and mind that require sacrifices and monopolize trains of thought you might not otherwise travel. It's hard to separate the job from the personal life sometimes, and when the two intermingle, sometimes you have to shut off your heart and let the job take the pilot seat."

"I hear you, man." Devon drank from his glass, getting only a mouthful of melted ice. He needed a refill. Hell, the whole bottle would be even better. Good old Jack didn't hold his happy ending, not for the long haul, but a night or seven would put him in a state of able-to-deal once he turned the page again. "Really, I do."

Tess had taken that pilot seat, too. She fully ejected and parachuted away with the damned thing leaving him in the co-pilot's seat to crash and burn. But he hadn't crashed. He found his altitude and intended to embark on a one-way flight straight for Los Angeles. He glanced at his wristwatch. His flight left in less than an hour.

Across the room, Tess walked out the door without a backward glance.

Good riddance, he thought sourly and walked to the open bar for another drink.

\* \* \* \*

"You should talk to him." Angelina's relentless insistence finally hit Tess the wrong way.

Tess stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and whirled on her sister. "I have tried talking to him." Anger made her voice rise, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. "He won't take my calls. He's ignored every e-mail I've sent. He wouldn't even *look* at me in there." She threw a hand up, gesturing back at the building where the cast and crew of *Danger Storm* had their final binge party. "Tell me, sister dearest, how do you propose I talk to a man who won't even get near me?"

"You be persistent," Angelina answered patiently. "I know you know how to do that. I grew up with your pushy, I'm-not-leaving-you-alone-until-I-get-what-I-want attitude."

"And calling him twenty times a day, writing him five hundred e-mails isn't being persistent?" Okay, maybe she exaggerated the numbers a bit. Her fingers ached from hitting his number on speed dial, and she nearly wore out the button on her mouse clicking on the send icon.

"Apparently, not persistent enough."

"Ugg, why did I invite you tonight?" The slight twitch at the corner of Angelina's lips only served to elevate Tess's fury.

"You love me. You're a great sister and you thought Jason and I would really like to attend our first and probably only Hollywood movie party."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Tess rolled her eyes. "Don't go getting all sappy on me."

Angelina shrugged. "Can't help it. I'm too sappy for my own good sometimes. Come on, Tess. You can't really be giving up after a few phone calls and e-mails."

"Oh yeah? Watch me." Tess turned and stomped down the sidewalk. Each step put more and more distance between herself and Devon Gerard. And with each step, her heart broke a little more.

"I have been." Angelina's footfalls on the concrete let Tess know her sister kept pace right behind her. "I've seen the way you look at him. I've seen how badly you want him." She closed a hand around Tess's wrist and Tess stopped. "I've seen how much you love him."

Tess shook her head even though she knew she couldn't deny the obvious. "It doesn't matter. None of that matters because it's over."

"You're just going to walk away?"

"It won't be the first time."

"No, I guess it won't be. I forgot that's become your personal trademark these last few years."

Tess saw red. "You bitch!"

"Takes one to know one."

"You're so fucking childish."

"Really? Well, if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black. How's that one?"

"I'm being childish?" Tess spun toward her sister, one finger poking into her own chest. "I'm childish because I won't chase after a man who obviously no longer wants me?"

"No, you're childish because you're running from the boogieman. He scares you so much that you're afraid to fight for him. You would rather go home, pull the covers over your head, and what?"

"Get up tomorrow morning, put on my uniform, and report to work as scheduled."

"Okay." Angelina nodded. "That's how you're going to do it. You plan to forget him by burying yourself in your work. Forget that the job is what caused this rift between the two of you in the first place."

"Are you telling me now I should quit my job for the bastard? I don't think so."

"Of course not. I'm simply—"

"My not trusting him, my believing the cold, hard evidence right in front of my face rather than presenting it to him for questioning is what caused us to break up. I hurt him." Her voice cracked, and she squeezed her eyes shut as they started to burn.

"Oh, Tess." Angelina hugged her. "Remember how badly I pissed Jason off when we first met? Remember how much I hurt him? I thought I had lost him. He wouldn't talk to me. He avoided me much in the same ways Devon is doing to you now. Jackson is the one who wouldn't let me give up. He encouraged me to stay on Jason until he listened, until he understood. That's what you have to do with Devon. Stay on him. Corner him someplace where he can't get away from you and make him listen." She pulled back, gripping Tess's shoulders and turning her to face the building behind them. "That place right there is probably one of the best opportunities you're going to have to corner him. No way will he make a scene in front of all those people in there."

Tess took a deep breath and let it out on a hard push through pursed lips. She didn't want to walk away. She wanted to strut her stuff right back into that party and do exactly as Angelina advised. She wanted to make him listen. But her legs suddenly felt like steel poles driven into the concrete. She couldn't move.

"Do you love him?" Angelina stood behind her and rested her chin on Tess's shoulder. "Do you, sis?"

Tess answered with a slow nod. She couldn't speak around the lump that continued to expand in her throat.

"Then, damnit, go after him. Be the hard-headed, unrelenting, pain-in-the-ass sister I've known my entire life and don't leave him alone again until you get what you want."

Tess smiled, albeit shakily. She reached up, covering Angelina's hand that rested on her other shoulder. "I love you, sis." Not so long ago such a declaration would've left a horrible taste in her mouth. She felt grateful tonight that had changed.

"I love you, too." Tess didn't see the tears in Angelina's eyes, but she heard them in her sister's voice. "Now go get your man."

Tess inhaled another steadying breath and stepped out of Angelina's embrace. She made the walk back to the building with slow, purposeful steps. Each one this time brought her closer and closer, *please, God*, to the man she loved.

It took her less than thirty seconds of scanning the party crowd to note with a heart-wrenching pain beyond any she ever felt in her life that Devon had already gone.

## Epilogue

Devon felt like he raged an ongoing duel with Death. Death and his razor sharp scythe seemed to be currently in the lead. He shuffled his feet over the marble floor of the foyer. With one hand, he massaged his temples in a vain attempt to rid himself of the headache growing stronger by the second. The other hand reached for the key pad of the house alarm system. Only when he started to punch in the first digit to his pass code did he note the rapidly flashing red light indicating something tripped the silent alarm.

Adrenaline, more than fear, made his pulse speed. His mind raced and he quickly forgot the severity of his headache. Why hadn't the alarm company contacted him? Why weren't the police here? Had the invader gotten inside? Was he *still* inside?

Devon dug his cell phone out of his pocket, fully intending to call the police when he glanced at the top of the alarm panel and spotted the small object resting strategically on the upper ledge. He flipped his phone closed and grabbed the foil-wrapped triangle. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, staring at it as if it came from outer space rather than the Hershey factory or wherever it was purchased.

Excitement moved through him next, white-hot and all consuming. He turned. His cock stiffened even as his mind rebelled against his body's reaction. A line of tiny foiled candies led up the stairs to the second floor. He didn't see a note. There seemed to be no sign of intrusion but for the flashing light on the alarm panel and the little candies tossed like pebbles on the floor creating a path to be followed.

It was decision making time.

He knew without a moment's thought who broke into his home, set off his alarm, and put the candies on his floor. He followed that path first with his gaze, noting that it branched off toward the front door, or maybe away from the door. It all depended on how he chose to look at it. The fork created the choice—go back outside or follow through to the end.

*Outside.* He knew he should head straight back out, finish that 911 dial he already started, and wait for the reinforcements to arrive. Instead, he bent to pick up the first triangle by the white and blue flag peeking out of the foil on the path leading up. It stopped at the door to his bedroom standing slightly ajar. His hand now nearly overflowing with the sweets of the course, he pushed the door open with his knuckles. What he found inside proved to be an even bigger surprise.

Candles, Christ, there had to be fifty of them, lit the room from every available flat surface. The end tables, dresser, the chest at the foot of the bed, the porcelain ledge around the hot tub, all glimmered in a yellowish-orange glow.

He took one step into the room and felt the presence at his back a split second before the lithe body pressed to his. His eyes closed involuntarily as sensations swamped him, emotions making his bones ache and his nerves twitch. Arms enveloped him, one at his waist, the hand splaying over his abdomen. The other reached under his armpit to flatten on his chest. As debilitating holds went, it failed miserably. As a position meant to arouse, it sang of pure mastery. His blood pumped spasmodically through his veins and straight to his groin, hardening his cock in a burst of painstaking stages.

"Don't move." The command came with full authority. The two words sparked burning embers through his shirt between his shoulder blades where the lips moved against his back. The hand on his abdomen slid down in a leisurely drop to cover his package. His cock flexed beneath the touch, eliciting a low groan from his groper.

Devon swallowed. "How did you get in here?"



"If I told you, I would have to kill you." The hand on his chest started to move, gliding slowly from one pec to the other, back and forth. Could she feel the way his heart beat so rapidly against her palm?

"You tripped the silent alarm." He sounded breathless, the need her touch instilled already strong enough to assimilate his senses. "The cops will be here any minute."

"They're already here." The hand on his groin squeezed ever so slightly. His breath dislodged on a ragged burst.

She somehow did something to his security system. She would know how, of course, being a cop herself.

"W-what do you want from me?" He put just the right amount of fear in his question to make it sound realistic. Shit, perhaps a bit too realistic. Her hands stilled on his body. He felt her forehead come to rest between his shoulder blades and thought he heard her take a shaky breath.

"Your attention. Your forgiveness. Your love." The last words drifted to his ears on a barely audible whisper. He felt more than heard the catch of emotion in the way her body jerked against his, and his eyes filled.

She started to cry. Christ, not just a single tear, but giant sobs that racked her body and soaked his shirt. Her arms tightened around him like bands of human flesh. He wanted to hold her, to pull her head to rest on his chest and caress her back until she got it all out.

He couldn't move. She held him that snugly. He could only stand there, his eyes closed, his own hands reaching to cover hers, his mind reeling. In all the time he had known her, he never knew his Theresa to cry this way. Her sobs hadn't even been this bad the night he broke her in his trailer on the movie set. The soft sound killed him. It tore at his heart, ripped at his soul, until he felt the slightly warm slide of a tear down his own cheek.

"Theresa, baby, please." He grazed his hands up the parts of her arms he could touch, trying to soothe her while at the same time

coaxing her to let him go. He didn't know how long they stood there that way, Tess clinging to his back, him with his eyes closed and body rigid to support her weight. Finally, her body started to go limp enough for her embrace to loosen and he slowly turned.

She kept her head bowed, her eyes closed. Her shoulders still quivered from her crying jag.

Devon planted a kiss to the top of her head first. Then he hooked a finger beneath her chin and pulled her face up. When she still didn't open her eyes, he brushed his lips to first one and then the other, the sight of the reddened and swollen lids another slice to his heart.

"You have my attention." He buried a hand in her hair, not fisting the strands but simply running the silk through his fingers. "You're forgiven as long as you agree to forgive me in return." He licked his way down the bridge of her nose and then planted a kiss on the tip. "You have always had, do have, and will forever have my love." He covered her mouth with his in quite possibly the softest, sweetest kiss he had ever given her.

She tasted of salt from her tears and lipstick. At that moment, he loved her so fucking much he thought he might die from the pain. Her lips parted hesitantly as if she thought for even an instant that he might not want to deepen the kiss. He showed her how badly he wanted exactly that by delving his tongue into her mouth, stroking over hers in a measured glide. His hips rocked into her middle at the same pace.

"Do I have your forgiveness, Theresa?" He pulled back to ask. Maybe her reaction should've been enough, but he needed to hear it, and he felt fairly certain she needed to say it. "Do I have your love?"

She opened her eyes, meeting his gaze for the first time and exposing the world of pain and grief her tears had given away. "Yes."

"Say it for me, baby." His hand cupped the side of her face, and he caressed her temple with his thumb. "Tell me you love me."

"I love you, Devon. I—" Her voice broke, her eyes filling once more. He held a finger to her lips.

"Shh, that's all I need right now, all I'll ever need. We'll take care of the rest as it comes."

She nodded slowly, her gaze never leaving his. She licked her lips, and his cock gave a little jump inside his pants. "Please."

He didn't have to ask what she wanted. He saw his answer in every blotchy inch of her beautiful face. She had lost control of her emotions, had been unable to stop herself from shedding those gut-twisting tears. She might have broken into his home with the full intent of being in charge of the situation, but she hadn't been able to hold onto it, nor could she get it back just yet. She needed time to give, time to relax, time to be his the way they both wanted.

Devon released her, dropping his hand from her face, her hair. He stepped back until he put an arm's length of space between them. Her eyes widened, a tear spilling over, and he couldn't help it, he reached to wipe it away.

"I'm not going anywhere," he assured her quietly. "I'm going to take off my clothes. You're going to stand there and watch."

Relief moved through her face followed immediately by a wave of heat rushing over to tinge her already puffy eyes and swollen cheeks as he yanked his shirt over his head. He caught the material with one finger, twirling it playfully before he tossed it across the room. She smiled, the corners of her lips quivering in her amusement and showing him the first evening's glimpse of the Theresa Keaton he had fallen for.

The smile faded, giving way to a pout of pure sex appeal when he reached for the button of his pants. He took them off quickly, shedding shoes, pants, and boxers with a practiced ease. His cock, now rock hard and throbbing, stood erect against his stomach. He saw her gaze drop to his cock, saw the way she licked her lips in a slow glide of tongue over flesh that made his balls tight and his shaft pulsate in jealousy.

"You want to taste, don't you?"

She nodded and licked her lips again.

*The damn vixen.*

"Yes."

"I might let you in a minute."

He let his own gaze glide over her. She had left her hair down, knowing exactly how he liked it. She wore her button-down uniform shirt, the buttons from neck to the middle of her breasts left unfastened in a most un-uniform of ways. Rather than the uniform pants he saw her wear in the past, she wore a skirt that stopped a fraction of an inch above her knees. Her feet were clad in high heeled boots. He lifted a brow at those.

"What regulation book added shoes like that to the uniform code?"

"Yours." Her simple, succinct answer made his balls sting. If he had any doubts of what she wanted in this moment, what she needed, that single word erased them all.

He grabbed her hips and felt the flames lick at the air between them. "What other rules did you follow?" The look in her eyes turned challenging. He bit back a smile. "Or do I start exploring and discover the answer on my own?" Even as he asked, he reached down, catching the hem of the skirt and tugging it up. His knuckles grazed the smooth flesh of her outer thighs and hips causing a tingle to travel from his hands up his arms.

Tess shivered, her breath becoming quicker, the flames between them growing to an intensity that promised to engulf them both.

"Ahh, Theresa, my darling, you aren't wearing any panties." He flattened his hands on her hips and skimmed them around her body to cup her bare ass. His cock nudged at her belly, weeping at the obstacle of the material bunched at her waist. He had grown hard the instant she curled her arms around him. His arousal escalated to painful territory when he realized exactly what she desired. Agony swamped him at being this close to her with his cock pressing at the unrelenting smooth flesh of her pussy but not able to thrust inside her

channel. "I told you not to. That first night at your house, I told you not to wear them."

"I didn't forget. I couldn't go without them beneath my uniform before now." He closed his lips around her lobe, and her head fell to the side, exposing more of her ear and neck for him to enjoy.

"You can always obey me. Next time, don't wait so long, or I'll have to punish you."

She groaned, her ass flexing in his hands and something clicked. He licked his way down the silky expanse of her neck while simultaneously spreading her rear end with one hand. He slipped a finger of his free hand between her ass cheeks, expecting another sexy groan. The groan rumbled from his own throat instead when his finger grazed over the cool plastic lodged in her anus.

Devon bit her shoulder, marking her, claiming her. His finger drew a circle around the outer edge of the plug, gauging its size. His mind calculated. His cock screamed in torment. Finally, he pulled back. "Who put it there?"

"I did. You left it at my house the last night you stayed there."

Yeah, he knew. He left three different size butt plugs along with several bottles of lubricant fully intending to work her into accepting the full girth and length of his cock. He put the smallest of the three inside her that night. He traced another circle around the one she wore now. Her tight little hole had sucked the largest of the three in until only the flair at the end prevented it from becoming lost in her body.

"Christ, Theresa." His groan turned to a growl. His hips gyrated. The contrast of the roughened skirt material and the smoothness of her belly did magnificent things to his shaft. "Do you know what this does to me?" He threw his head back, closing his eyes as he continued to fondle the plug. His cock pulsed to replace it, to be the object lodged deep inside that tense, forbidden hole. "How long have you been wearing this?"

"Tonight? A few hours. I wanted to be ready for you. I started using them right after you, um, left. I—"

Devon silenced her by fisting the sides of her shirt and yanking them apart, effectively popping the few fastened buttons. She wore a black lace bra beneath. He got rid of it just as quickly. Her breasts flushed with arousal, her nipples hardening to peaks of temptation. His mouth watered. His tongue ached to flick over them. His cock throbbed worse, the need to be buried inside her secret entrance, a hole she prepared for him, impossible to ignore.

"I can't wait. Damn, woman, I have to have you now. Go to the bed. Lay on your stomach with your hips elevated. Use a pillow if you want." He caught her with a hand to her chin before she could move to follow his order. "Thank you for this. You have no idea how much it means to me that you would do this for me."

Her eyes filled with tears, but when she spoke, her words rang with conviction. "I love you."

He kissed her, a tender brush of his lips to hers that made his eyes misty. He swatted her smartly on her ass and stepped back. "Now get on the bed."

\* \* \* \*

Tess walked easily to his bed. Her body had become accustomed to the invasion of the plastic in her rear over the last three weeks. Embarrassment swamped her the first time she put the plug in herself. Thank God no one had seen her. No one knew she walked around for a good hour on shift with it inside her before making a quick escape to the bathroom to take it out. No one knew how many hours after that on various days she hid her dark secret beneath her uniform or designer clothing. After a while, the embarrassment faded and she felt strangely empowered. Her reasons, her intent, her desire drove her to prepare herself for her man. Her determination and resolve brought her here. Her victory claimed control of her limbs, put her face down on his bed, her hips raised by the thickness of a pillow exactly as he ordered.

"Does it hurt?" His closeness startled her. She hadn't heard him move across the room, hadn't felt his presence as he came up behind her. She felt him now, the heat of his proximity, the tantalizing combination of his skin, rough in places atop the smoothness, palms that glided up the backs of her legs to her ass.

"It does at first," she admitted. She turned her head, letting her cheek rest on her clasped hands. The position offered comfort, but gave no glimpse of him. "Not hurt really. More like a slight sting that turns to a low pulse after a few seconds."

"And when you take it out, how do you feel then?" His hands worked her cheeks, kneading them, spreading them.

"Empty." She gave him the most honest response she could. She hadn't expected to like it, had always feared such a thing. And to think she wasted all those years of sex when she could've gotten pleasure like this. Well, okay, so she hadn't had the full promised bliss yet, but she would soon.

"Take a deep breath and let it out slow."

Tess did, feeling her body adjust to the withdrawal of the plug. She recognized the sting, the stretch and give of her muscles, the sudden emptiness exactly as she said.

"Are you telling me you enjoy having your ass filled? Please say yes, because once I do this, I'm going to want it again and again."

"Yes." Tess didn't know for sure if she said the word aloud, but she thought it over and over and over. Not because she wanted him to fuck her in the ass, but because she wanted him to do anything he pleased with her again and again. She wanted it forever.

"Take another breath, Theresa."

She felt the head of his penis at her back door and she breathed in slow, deep, the action mirroring his as he slipped inside her slow, deep. His shaft was wider than the largest plug she had used, his length filling her more completely than any plastic could have. Heat flamed in her cheeks, her anus, burning a trail through her very soul. Her inner walls stretched and stretched some more, her breath ragged,

her mind near delirium by the time he finally pushed past the tight ring of muscle that gave way to hormonal paradise. He stopped, buried inside her ass to the hilt. His hands gripped her hips so firmly she knew they would be marked for days. She, however, would be marked for life.

"Christ, that feels so fucking good." He growled, the sound more animalistic than any she ever heard him make. He eased his cock back and slid it home again. "Theresa, being inside you this way, God, baby, it's amazing."

Tess smiled. She closed her eyes. Lights exploded in a riot of colors behind her lids, and her lips curved in a grin at the pure satisfaction moving through her. It did feel good, fucking amazing! He folded himself over her back. His lips cruised along her shoulders. His cock kept that same snail-paced rhythm. Did he plan to kill her this way?

"Please." She thrust her hips back when he drew out, causing him to sink deeply inside her in a rapid push.

"Damnit, Theresa." His hand pushed between her body and the pillow holding her up and found her cunt. He pinched her clit between his thumb and forefinger and she gasped, rocking back on his cock as the string between pleasure and pain snapped.

"Please," she said again, but when she attempted the same move this time, his grip on her clit closed like a vise. He rolled her clit, pulling it, working her to the most sensational orgasm she ever experienced with his hand on her pussy and his cock in her ass. Then finally, finally, he moved faster.

Tess's head came up, her back arching, her body squirming with nowhere to go as he held her immobile and fucked her. He slammed his cock in her ass until the explosive lights gave way to dancing stars and her mind lost a grip on reality. She screamed. She begged. She loved every thrust, every stroke, every moment of her body's escalation toward this new and most powerful orgasm. When she uncovered its roots, she let it rule her. Her inner muscles fisted on his



cock, milking him for all he was worth as her juices flowed to coat his hand and the pillow.

It was madness, a true and complete out of body craze. Her body fell, only to be left with the low burn of desire to do it again as soon as she became able.

"Can you move?" Devon kissed her shoulders, her nape, and her cheek, his breath warm and still a bit ragged against her flesh.

"Hmm, I think so." Tess stretched languidly beneath him. She remained on her stomach. He still laid on top of her, though the bulk of his weight seemed to be rested on his knees. He slid his cock free of her body shortly after they both climaxed. She felt it limp and wet between them.

"Good. Meet me in the hot tub." He pushed himself off her. She shivered from the immediate cold that came from the desertion of his body heat.

"There's a bottle of wine chilling in a bucket." She rolled to her side and watched him walk across the room. Damn skippy, the man had a hell of an ass. She wondered if he would go for a little role reversal, perhaps a strap-on one night. Hmm, what would that be like? "I would really love some." He couldn't know the double entendre flittering through her mind with that comment and yet when he shot her a glance over his shoulder, the mischief in his amber eyes almost made her think he read her mind.

"I bet you would. *Danger Storm* went into post-production today. It looks like it's actually going to see release after all. The buzz is putting it as one of next year's fall releases."

Tess sat up, trepidation moving through her. It surprised her that he would bring up the movie tonight, especially after the magic they just shared. "Movie of the year," she predicted and frowned at the remains of her uniform shirt on the floor. "I have to pay for those, you know."

"Let's hope so." He snagged the two wine glasses she had set out by the ice bucket and grinned. "Better buy several more of those

while you're at it. That might have been a first, but I promise it won't be the last."

Her heart tripped, and she got to her feet. Her hands shook ever so slightly as she unfastened the skirt still bunched around her waist and pushed it off, letting it fall in a pool around her feet. All the while, her gaze remained locked on him. "Do you mean that?" Her voice quivered the same as her hands, the emotion too thick within her to attempt to hide.

Devon popped the cork on the wine, filled the glasses, and then replaced the bottle in the ice. "Come here." He held the glasses in one hand, his fingers laced around the stems, his free hand reaching out for her.

She didn't hesitate. She went to him, letting his arm envelop her, allowing her body to mold to his. The cold she suffered only minutes before warmed with his embrace. He kissed her forehead.

"I mean every word. I overreacted."

Tess burrowed her face in his chest. "I hurt you."

She felt him nod. "You did."

"I had you arrested."

"We'll chalk that one up to an interesting experience." He chuckled lightly and she lifted her head, surprised he could find any humor at all in the events of the past month. "Research, getting into character, it's all a trick of the trade."

"The character you played didn't get arrested for dealing drugs," she reminded him.

"No, but who is to say the next role I get won't be? You did your job, baby. It took me a while to come around to that, but you did what you had to do. Maybe I should've told you about December, about my trying to help her." He brushed his lips to the tip of her nose and handed her one of the wine glasses.

"She'll get the help she needs now," Tess commented and stayed where she stood while he moved away. He walked to the hot tub, settling to sit on the edge, the frothing water clinging to the hairs on

his shins. Sitting like that, surrounded by the candles she had lit, his wine resting on one knee, his other hand poised behind him on the marble for support, he looked like an ad for super charged romance and eroticism all tied into one. Her nipples beaded, her folds pulsed and her heart swelled. Time for phase two of her plan.

"In jail?" Both brows shot up.

Tess shook her head. "Rehab. She turned on her supplier, gave the DEA a list of contacts far beyond Sanchez and his homies. To use Michael Cosmos's term, they flipped her. She won't be acting for a while but..." She ended the sentence with a shrug. "How's Milton?"

"Fucked, and not in the best of ways. Sabrina left him, no surprise there. He weaseled his way out of jail time. I suppose they couldn't throw him behind bars when he knew even less, did far less than December. As for his career as one of the top directors in the business," Devon pushed a hard breath through pursed lips, "if he gets the call to handle anything more than a B-list production in the next decade, he should count his lucky stars."

"And they all live happily ever after," Tess murmured.

"Don't you know every story in Hollywood deserves a happy ending?"

"I know one story that's still waiting for one." She walked slowly to the hot tub, loving the way his gaze moved over her like a physical caress. The amber darkened, turning a deep emerald when she started to bend. She placed her wine on the floor at her foot while she removed her boots, and then shrugged out of the remains of her shirt. She used the opportunity of picking up her glass again to slip a hand beneath the edge of the towel she had placed near the tub. Magic seemed to flow into her hand as her fingers curled around the silver and platinum band.

"So do I." Devon set his glass on the marble, freeing his hand to point between his spread legs. "I want you right here, so we can talk more about how this grand finale is going to work."

Tess palmed the ring in the same hand she held her glass and stepped into the hot tub, moving to stand between his legs. His hands immediately caught her waist. He pulled her closer, leaning in to kiss her at the apex of her thighs. His tongue snaked between her sopping folds, finding her clit with a quick flick of the tip and she gasped.

"Mmm, so sweet, so delicious," he whispered against her flesh.

"And so not talkable." Tess fisted a hand in his hair and pulled his head back. His dominance snapped a warning in his expression even as his lips twitched, his forehead wrinkling in question.

"Is talkable even a word?"

Tess scoffed. "Like I would know." She leaned down, blindly putting her wine glass on the floor even as she caught his mouth in a kiss that went deep in an instant. She fed off the power it gave her. She could taste her juices on his lips and tongue and loved the way they mixed with his innate flavor to create one all their own. She wanted exactly that, a mixture of the two of them forever.

"Do you like the way you taste, Theresa?" he asked when she finally eased back, her tongue licking the last remains from around his lips.

"As a matter of fact, I do." She shot a pointed glance at his rock hard cock as she sank to one knee between his legs. "I like the way you taste more. It's been a lot longer than a minute."

"Yes, it has. Do you think you've earned that taste?"

She shook her head, surprising him if the expression that moved over his face gave any indication. "Not yet." She curled the fingers of her free hand around his rigid shaft and opened her other hand to reveal the ring. "Will you marry me, Devon Gerard?"

"Theresa." His gaze danced from her eyes to the ring and then glazed over when she began to stroke his cock. "That's some interrogation technique you have there, Officer Keaton."

She smiled. "It's too enticing. I'm ruining it, I know, but when I get this close to you, I can't help but touch you."

"Stop." The single command had her hand stilling in mid-stroke. The trepidation she felt moments before returned with a vengeance. "Put the ring on my finger." He held out his left hand.

Tess let out a breath she hadn't realized she held. The trepidation morphed to instantaneous arousal at the wave of dominance that settled in the air. She slid the band on his ring finger with a hand surprisingly steady. Her gaze locked with his.

"You're mine." He grazed the backs of his fingers down her cheek, the coolness of the platinum sending an electric jolt of a deeply won power to her toes, a power only derived from love. "Every sexy, delicious, wicked inch of you. In domination to the culmination of pleasure in the bedroom, in equal sharing of our lives outside, I'll marry you, Theresa, and be the happiest man alive."

Tess could hardly see him through the tears filling her eyes. He offered her exactly what she wanted, serenity to everything she feared in the brightest of suns, all she longed for in the darkest of nights. He would allow her to maintain her control over her life while indulging in the submission she craved in sex.

"Those are some vows, Mr. Gerard. Do think they'll let us use them in the ceremony?"

"We'll elope to Vegas. We can say what we want in the ceremony there."

"And you'll get no arguments from me. I want to keep my job, Devon, on the Silver Springs Department."

"And you will. I would never expect you to give up something you've worked so hard for. We'll work it out. Los Angeles to Silver Springs, it's not that many miles."

"Nearly two thousand." She should know. She had taken a week off from work and spent close to six hours of her first day on a plane to get here.

"I've been thinking of another house, a second one antebellum style. Silver Springs looked like a great spot."

"So it is." Emotions swamped her so heavy and potentially debilitating she needed to change the subject or dissolve to tears. Since she already did the latter once this evening, she went for the first. She tightened her grip on his shaft and giggled at the low groan the move pulled from his throat. "I'm still waiting for that happy ending."

"Do you want to suck my cock, Theresa?"

"I do."

"Practicing your lines, too? That's my girl." He grinned, quick and sexily, but it faded fast, morphing to the dominant set of his lips she found to be such a freaking turn-on. "Say it. Tell me what you want."

"I want to suck your cock. I want to pleasure you with my mouth. I want to milk you with my lips and throat. I want to feed off your cum."

"Jesus, I should know by now to be careful what I ask for," he said on a shaky laugh. "You may have your taste now."

Tess closed her mouth over his cock, feeling more complete than she ever felt in her life. She fled from this, fearful of the demon inside her that craved this control only to find herself here again. But this time would be different. This time, she could allow herself the satisfaction knowing she wouldn't feel horror from her actions come morning, but an intense gratification and anticipation to do it again. She had her control, her submission, her career, and her man. She was happy.

When she sucked him deep in a rapid swallow, she groaned as lights of love and pleasure exploded through Hollywood spelling out the words every story deserves:

# THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tonya Ramagos is a bestselling author of contemporary, fantasy, paranormal and cowboy novels. She spends most of her time in a fictional world dreaming up hot hunks and head-strong heroines. When she's not writing she's reading. Anything from legal and military non-fiction to any genre of romance can be found on her bookshelves and flash drives. Her music tastes are just as varied with artists ranging from country to rock to heavy metal loading her MP3 player. Her idea of relaxing is curled on the sofa or on her back deck with a book and a cup of coffee, glass of wine, or an MGD 64. A wife and mother of 2 fantastic boys, she enjoys playing games, dancing, and walking the nature trails around her home in Harrison, TN.

### *Also by Tonya Ramagos*

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