



# *Lust Bites*

**SIMON SAYS**

**Ashley Ladd**

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

# **SIMON SAYS**

**Ashley Ladd**

## *Dedication*

To all the musicians who keep me sane while writing my stories, in particular David Cook, Daughtry, Bo Bice, Constantine, Carrie Underwood, and the Beach Boys.

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## Chapter One

"Simon says I have a dangerously fun assignment for my three favourite men, today." The loud speaker crackled and echoed through the luxurious white-on-white offices of *Simon's Detective Agency*.

Private detectives Marco D'Angelo, Raphael Chico, and Cary Lombard stared at one another in turns.

Cary, the computer nerd, shifted in his comfy armchair, leaned against the side, and sat Indian style. He tied his long golden blond hair into a silky ponytail and squinted in the direction of Simon's voice. "How much fun is 'fun'?"

Marco, the ex-New York cop, scowled. "What do you mean 'dangerously'?"

Rafe, the ex-actor-makeup artist, ran his fingers through his dark curls and made a moue of his lips. "Do we get to dress up?"

"Yes, indeedy, my pretty one. You'll get to play with your makeup and costumes to your heart's content. In fact, that's an integral part of this assignment."

Glee glowed in Rafe's heart and he rubbed his hands together. "I can't wait. Do tell."

Cary cast an indulgent look at Rafe as he scratched his chin. "You made the diva very happy, but is there a part for me?"

"Patience. I'm getting there. There'll be plenty for all of you to make your little hearts happy. You get to bug lots of rooms, run videos, and fool with sound equipment. Will that keep your nerd heart happy?"

Cary keyed notes into his laptop as he balanced it on his knees. He cracked a lopsided grin. "I'm good."

Marco linked his fingers behind his head and leaned back. Raphael wasn't surprised when he kicked his booted feet up on the desk. "Cut to the chase, boss. Give us the nitty gritty."

"I'm trying to." Simon's fingers drummed loudly through the speaker. Glasses chinked. "You, my sweets, are going to be in a transvestite beauty pageant in Ft. Lauderdale. Have I caught your attention yet?"

Salivating, Rafe scooted to the edge of his chair. He hadn't been in a pageant for ages, not since long before joining Simon's agency. "We all have to have a talent. I sing, act, dance, play wicked piano—"

"Sprout wings." Marco added, glaring at him.

Rafe was sick of Marco's derision. The tough guy ex-cop thought he was such hot shit, so big and bad. Rafe longed to wipe the smirk off his mug. "What's your talent? Scratching your balls?"

Cary snickered and gave an air high five. "Good one."

Marco gave them both the finger. To Cary he said, "At least, my idea of a hot Saturday night isn't breaking and entering into private individual's internet networks."

Simon clucked his tongue. "Now, now boys. Let's stop the bickering. We all know one of Cary's most invaluable talents is hacking."

Cary gave a toothy grin, stood and bowed. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

Marco's brow furrowed. "If I were still on the force, I'd have hauled your scrawny ass into the pokey a long time ago."

"Bite me, pig. You wouldn't have a halfway decent firewall or free satellite if not for me."

Rafe couldn't wait to get started. He would be "Raquel Chico" for this tasty little job, with long, flowing curls, and rhinestone-studded lashes. He debated whether to be an average, sedate C-cup or a vivacious DD. Of course he'd have to get a manicure and pedicure straight away. The tough part would be dragging the butch cop and computer nerd with him.

He went over his wardrobe and knew he couldn't wear any of his old gowns. They'd be so 1999 he'd die of humiliation. "Will we have time for a shopping spree? Oh! And a bikini wax?"

Marco groaned and rubbed his temples. "Do we all have to play dress up and prance around on stage like Diana Ross? Please say no."

"No, not all. Only two of you," Simon said.

Marco let out a huge sigh and smiled heavenward. "Thank God. Cary and Rafe look much better dolled up as babes."

Cary gave him the double finger. "I'll get you for this, D'Angelo."

"But, Marco, I think you'd make a very beautiful, sexy woman. You're dressing up and in the show. Cary will be a technical assistant and busy bugging all the rooms. Your dossier says you used to do ballet. Brush up on it for the talent portion."

Rafe hooted and slapped his thigh. "This is too good. The big, bad cop's a ballerina. What colour's your tutu, big boy?"

Marco growled and snarled. "I ain't wearing no frickin' tutu. I quit that shit when I was eleven."

"Well, brush up on it. That's an order," Simon said.

Marco jumped up and paced the room, shooting death ray glares at the speaker phone. "Are you going to dress up like a dame, too?"

"I'm the boss. I don't have to."

"I really gotta?"

Rafe twisted in his chair and batted his baby blues up at the cantankerous one. "Really. Truly."

"Bite me."

"With relish." Rafe missed their wild, raucous sex, and all this foreplay, but he did get tired of the bitching, bellyaching, and moaning, like now. "Oh, suck it up. Be a man."

Marco screwed up his lips. "By dressing like a dame? Right."

"Do it for me," Simon said with a pretty pout in his voice.

Rafe smiled up at his ex and let his dimple out to play. "Trust me. It'll be fun."

"Yes and no," Simon said.

"What's the 'no' part?" Marco perched on the desk and folded his arms over his chest.

"The reason we've been invited to crash this shindig is to protect the crew and contestants and hopefully to catch a killer."

Marco's eyes lit up, and he licked his lips. "Now you're talking. Do you mean the guy who..."

"Or woman," Simon said.

"...who's murdering gays in Ft. Lauderdale?" Marco finished.

"And transvestites," Cary chimed in, nodding at each word in punctuation. "You know, not all transvestites are gay."

"The same. We don't think he'll be able to stay away. It's also ripe to bring out the copycats. And thank you, Cary, for that bit of information."

Cary groaned and typed furiously on his keyboard. "You mean we could have more than one nut case on the loose?"

"Yep. Very possible. And it's your job, if you choose to accept, to catch them."

Cary put his hand in the middle of the room. "Count me in."

Rafe slapped his hand on top and when he saw how raggedy his nails were, wrinkled his nose. "Me, too."

He pivoted around and looked at Marco who hung back.

Rafe dangled yummy bait to the ex-homicide detective. "You get to catch nice juicy murderers."

Marco tented a bushy brow. "Can I carry a firearm?"

"But of course, if you have a place to conceal it," Simon said as if to a child.

Marco slid his hand on top of the stack. "Okay, I'm in."

Rafe bit back a sarcastic reply about how ratty and dirty Marco's nails were and how much work it would take to get them in shape. Not that Marco would care, but the part demanded it.

Simon clapped. "Excellent! Now open your envelopes for all the nitty gritty details Marco's dying to see."

\* \* \* \*

"No! No! And no!" Marco glared at Rafe and then the room. "I am not going to share a room with you."

Rafe, dressed in fetching short shorts that showed off his cute tush and toned thighs, bounced on the bed and coyly batted his lashes. Then he patted the empty side of the mattress. In a husky voice, the one that used to drive Marco crazy, he drawled, "Would you rather chance shacking up with a killer and be murdered in your sleep?"

Well, Raphael was a known evil and a rather benign one at that. Marco had once had the Rafe virus, and now, he was immune. He hoped. "You gonna prattle on all night and keep me up? Or sing opera shit?"



Rafe scrunched his nose and smoothed his gorgeous mane. "I have to practise my talent. We may not have been original competitors, but I think I can win. Did you see that sorry bunch of transvestites? Only a couple will be any competition."

Marco swore under his breath. "For once, will you take my advice? Keep your big head in the right game and quell that little one that always gets you into trouble."

Rafe dug out a pillow and hurled it at his face. "You used to love my 'little head' only you used to moan and dream about how 'big' it is."

Marco didn't need this shit which was exactly why he feared being cooped up in the same room with his ex. Worse, he bet Cary had already bugged the joint, and the nerd was getting his jollies off on this. Probably Simon, too.

Marco itched to get to work and went online to reread the dossiers on all the staff and contestants. These bimbos made all gays look ditzy, and he didn't appreciate it.

Three late entrants after he and Senorita Raquel Chico had entered so he checked them out first: Sugar Lips Johnson, Dominique Dupres, and Candy Kane.

Their photographs weren't much brainier than their names. Sugar Lips was covered in big boa feathers. Dominique was decked out in Caribbean ruffles and wore a tall hat of fruit, and Candy Kane was sugar-coated like a cavity waiting to happen.

He clucked his tongue and shook his head. None of them looked bright enough to get away with murder, or strong enough to asphyxiate muscle-bound men, but maybe one was a clever cover.

He looked deeper into their histories and found that Dominique was an ex-Marine, dishonourably discharged for being gay. Before that she, or rather Dom Clarke, had earned a couple purple hearts for bravery in Iraq.

Candy had been arrested numerous times for minor infractions with the law and moved from place to place at an astronomical rate. She had fathered two children before coming out of the closet and ditching his wife.

Sugar Lips was a real estate attorney in West Palm Beach. He owned an impressive mansion where he and his long-term partner lived. His record was squeaky clean.

A shadow fell over him then Rafe's distorted image flitted across the monitor before his large hands fell onto Marco's shoulders. "Find anything interesting?"

Marco shook off Rafe's hands, but not before frissons of awareness shot straight to his cock. Willing his dick to go back to sleep, he glared at his ex. "No touching."

Rafe pouted and sniffed. "But no one will believe we're lovers if you won't let me touch you, if you're so aloof and crabby. Do you want to blow our covers? We might as well go home right now, and you can live with all that guilt on your conscience when that killer goes on a carnage spree." After his tirade, he huffed and flounced off. "Some undercover cop you are."

Marco shook his head at the drama queen. "If you want to act so badly, go back to the theatre."

A microphone squealed then Cary's voice boomed into the room. "This is God, and you two are hereby commanded to stop bickering. Cut it out, girls. How about we work together?"

"Do you have video running on us in here, too?" Marco asked, not at all happy about the intrusion on his privacy.

*"Moi? Perish the thought."*

Marco looked to Rafe and knew they were on the same wavelength so together they gave Cary the finger and the Bronx cheer. "Go bug someone else's room."

"I'm God, remember? I hear everything in all the rooms, and I can tell you they're a lot more interesting than you two harpies."

To ensure the moron would tune them out, Marco asked as sweetly as he could, "Sing for me, Rafe."

Raphael twirled around and saucily winked. "Gladly. If you ask nicely and say 'pretty please, sweetie'."

Marco would rather eat a gecko raw but having 'God' listen in was even worse, so he cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles. "Pretty please, sweetie."

Rafe began his vocal drills, slaughtering several notes and Marco's ears in the process. It was all Marco could do not to cover his ears and run for cover.

'God' screamed in terror. "No! Stop! I'm meeeelting."

Rafe scrunched his nose and punched at the air. "You happy? You just killed God."

"One down. One to go." Marco rubbed his hands and gave his roommate a maniacal grin. He hoped his hearing would come back, but it was a long shot after that awful carnage.

Rafe stopped and gave him a quizzical look. "What happened to make you so cynical? I miss the old Marco."

Marco tightly clamped his lips. The old Marco had witnessed a group of innocent kids get slaughtered, and he hadn't been able to do a damned thing except sink to his knees and sob like an imbecile afterward. He'd been unable to work the streets after that, and he'd eventually quit like a sissy. He'd had nightmares almost every night and nearly peed his pants every time he heard gunfire.

He didn't like the old Marco. He didn't want to be the old Marco anymore. The only way he could cope was to be the new, improved, gutsy Marco. It was better to be an asshole than a pussy. "What you see is what you get."

Rafe shook his head, removed his wig, and carefully put it on its mannequin for the night. "Pity. I liked the old Marco."

Marco told himself he didn't care, that Rafe was better off without an emotionally crippled, gutless guy like him, but he felt a pang of regret. No one had gotten to him like the sweet, if sometimes melodramatic, Raphael. But he squashed the hint of emotion threatening to make him breakdown and give in to his baser emotions. Until Rafe stripped and, naked, climbed into their bed.

"Whoa! What do you think you're doing?" Marco's blood boiled, and his mercury hit the roof. A scowl stretched his face so far it ached. He wanted to punch something, the wall, a pillow, anything to get rid of his pent-up rage.

Rafe spread his hands and stuck out his lower lip. "Going to bed. You know, to get some shut-eye. Tomorrow's going to be a busy, busy day."

"Not in my bed you don't. Cover up that thing."

Rafe laughed out loud. "No. You know I can't sleep covered up. I'm sure you remember."

*Too well...*

Marco hissed and tried to banish sudden unbidden thoughts of Rafe soft and pliable in his arms, in bed, making sweet magical love, of myriad bewitching emotions only Rafe had ever been able to weave in his soul.

*Damn!* If he let those soft, warm feelings back in, he'd have to deal with the others, too. And he couldn't. Maybe never. They wanted to eat him alive.

Keeping his eyes averted, Marco moseyed into the bathroom to change and take off the goop on his face that made his skin crawl. Then he put on a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt though he usually didn't wear anything but underwear to bed. He wasn't going to chance skin to skin contact in the middle of the night, and his thirty-six year old back was too old to handle the hard floor.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe usually didn't remember his dreams and assumed he wasn't a dreamer. But tonight he was having a very vivid, very wonderful dream.

For so long his bed had been empty and lonely but not tonight. Tonight, he snuggled up to a warm, solid body. Soft yet hard. It smelled like Marco – sandalwood aftershave and his special shampoo. He snuggled up to the warmth and curled his arm around the man he wished was Marco. His heart fluttering, his flesh tingling, he hadn't felt so content, so whole, in ages.

Unable to stop himself, he feathered kisses across the man's wide, powerful shoulders, delighting in the flutter of his muscles beneath his lips. Wanton, his hips moved slowly and sensually against the firm ass, the cotton-covered thighs, and his cock nested between the man's legs, seeking entrance to nirvana.

Answering moans rumbled against his chest, and the man turned in his arms and sought his lips. Firm, possessive lips plundered Rafe's and drank deeply of him. He returned the favour, savouring the swirl of emotions threatening to drown him.

A telltale bulge inside the man's pants teased him, and he murmured, "Get naked with me."

He'd never wanted anything more in his life. He craved Marco.

The thought of having sex with Marco stole Rafe's breath.

Marco swore Rafe hadn't done anything wrong, and yet, he'd grown cold and distant until they never talked except to argue. One day, he'd come home to find Marco moving out. Hurt and angry, Rafe had hurled insults and accusations he hadn't meant until now they were barely civil co-workers.

He'd been shocked to find out when Simon's job offer had come out of nowhere that it had been Marco who'd recommended him. Hopeful, but mistaken, he'd thought Marco wished to reconcile. But the other man had changed. He was barely a shell of Rafe's former lover. He'd forgotten how to smile, laugh and love. The more he tried to find out why, the more Marco shut him out.

But Marco wasn't shutting him out now. He was gentle, tender and loving. He shucked off his clothes and cuddled up to Rafe and chased away his loneliness and sorrows.

Rafe longed to utter, "I love you," but feared the words would shatter the spell, so he stored them away for a later time, hoping he'd get to say them aloud. Instead, he murmured, "You're so hot. You feel so good." He nibbled Marco's ear. "I can make you feel *much* better. Let me."

Marco crushed him close, and their hearts beat. His dick worked between Rafe's legs so far it tickled his balls, making him shudder in ecstasy beyond imagination.

Breathless, his mouth watering, Rafe moaned against the curve of Marco's throat. "Fuck me. I need you. I can't wait any longer."

The smile Rafe loved and cherished so much curved Marco's mouth. He nipped Rafe's shoulder. "Turn over."

Rafe didn't need to be told twice. He lay on his back and hoisted his hips off the bed. When Marco fit himself between his thighs and worked his cock inside, Rafe closed his eyes and almost cried with joy. His world was right again.

"Oh, yeah. You're so tight, so hot."

Marco's words were an aphrodisiac, propelling him so high he could hardly breathe. Although the atmosphere was thin and growing thinner, he wouldn't have it any other way. Marco's cock was so big, so heavenly, stretching him as he surfed the crashing waves to shore. Over and over, he came with a thundering crescendo.

He clawed the sheets, bunching them in his fists, and his toes curled. God, he could take a lifelong vacation like this. Visions of warm, lush, exotic places like the Bermudas, the Bahamas, and the Florida Keys made him long to escape further down the Florida coastline to paradise. He could get lost there with his lover and forget everything else. Who was he kidding? Any place would be paradise as long as Marco was by his side.

Marco dug his fingers into Rafe's hips, threw back his head and howled.

Rafe couldn't imagine a werewolf sounding sexier, more primitive and predatory. He'd played one before, and it had been one of his all-time favourite roles. This role of making Marco fall in love with him again would be the toughest, but if successful, the most rewarding.

The phone shrilled, dragging him out of his half-sleep and when he found himself in Marco's arms with his cock still inside, he didn't know whether to thank or curse God.

Marco swore and pulled out of him so fast Rafe wondered if someone forgot to tell him he had the plague.

Marco leapt off the bed, and in his rush got tangled in the sheets and did a nose dive to the ground. "Damn it!"

Rafe's sentiments exactly, if not for the same reason. At least, he doubted it. Who could be calling now and why?

"I knew something like this would happen." Marco scowled as he picked up the phone while he did an awkward dance of dressing with one hand.

His words echoed in Rafe's head. So Marco had expected to make love to him? So he wasn't so immune and impervious. Thus it was another minute before Marco's shocked expression and words registered.

Sick to his stomach, Rafe stared at the ceiling, wondering yet again where they'd gone wrong, why Marco was so angry at him. And now this.

He asked, "There's been another murder?"

Marco punched the speaker phone button and pursed his lips.

Simon's angry voice flooded the room. "While you two were screwing around, Candy Kane was found in the pool, drowned. The killer could have asphyxiated her and dumped the body in there."

Rafe rubbed the back of his neck as he crossed the room and peeked out the curtain at the courtyard where a bunch of uniformed and plain-clothed cops milled around the pool and a lot of others gazed on in shock. Yellow 'caution' tape was around the pool's deck and a covered body was being loaded into the county coroner's wagon.

Several of the onlookers were dressed in a variety of frilly, lacy robes in the spring line up of pastel pinks, lilacs, and buttercup yellows. More than one had rollers in their wigs. Others wore mud packs and beauty masks on their faces. A couple guys sported only skimpy

thongs and their packages bounced around. One was covered by only a novelty G-string with a huge elephant trunk.

Despite himself and the gravity of the situation, Rafe snorted.

"It's not funny." Marco shook his head beside him. "We have to sleep sometimes. What about Cary? Did he hear anything suspicious? Aren't his ears always on?"

"He hasn't been able to get into all the rooms yet. Your job tomorrow will be to let him know when it's safe to go in and keep the occupants away long enough that he won't get caught. Cary will be by before breakfast to wire you two for sound."

"We'll wear ear-thingies and talk into our boobs?" Rafe fingered his ear and looked down at his chest wondering how conspicuous that would look. He'd never talked to his tits before and being a gay man, wondered at his motivation.

Marco gave him the thumbs up and a cynical grin. "Real technical lingo there, pal."

Rafe grabbed his balls in a rude gesture.

"Boys! Do I have to send you two to your separate corners? We're a team. Act like one! Now get some sleep and be ready to work tomorrow. Cary will be there at six a.m. Sweet dreams."

Marco pulled two chairs together across the room and made a bed. He stretched out his long length and punched his pillow. With a grunt, he rolled over, turning his back on Rafe.

Tired of kowtowing to the man's ego and apologising for living, Rafe enjoyed having the big bed to himself.

## Chapter Two

Marco balked at getting a chest and bikini wax and cursed when tears sprang to his eyes when a less than apologetic technician yanked a wide patch of hair off his chest. "You'll be gorgeous," the haggled-tooth woman crooned.

He didn't want to be gorgeous. His ambition in life wasn't to be a dame. He longed to get revenge for this torture.

When another patch of hair was yanked off, he yelped and almost decked the worker. Serious thoughts of putting out his resume jogged through what was left of his anesthetised mind.

When the woman got near his dick, he snarled. "Be very, very careful or you die." For the umpteenth time he cursed his competition and he hexed the beauty contest.

\* \* \* \*

At the swim suit preliminaries that afternoon, he met up with Rafe who would have looked like one of the most gorgeous women in the world if he hadn't known better. Before he realised what he was doing, he checked out his groin to see how well his bikini bottoms hid his pride and glory.

Rafe caught his look, winked and blew him a smooch. Then he sashayed over and laid some lip lock on him. Against his lips, Rafe reminded him, "We're on, lover. Make it look good."

Trying not to move his lips, he muttered, "Stop calling me that. We're just roommates."

To his chagrin, Rafe sensually rubbed against him and batted his lashes. "Do you really want a murderer to try to make out with you? It might look suspect if we don't flirt *unless* we're already an item."

Marco wished he could fault the actor's logic, but he couldn't. Against his better judgment, he murmured grudgingly, "Oh, okay, but if you slip me tongue, you're a dead man."



Rafe rubbed against him again, like a cat in heat until his right boob became dislodged and hung askew. His eyes widened big as spaceships.

Afraid the surveillance wiring would fall out and blow their cover, Marco scrambled to put the other man's tits back in place. Not used to this part of a person's anatomy, he fumbled and almost ripped it off the rest of the way. "And stop rutting around like a ferret in heat."

Rafe glared. "Then stop going so Neanderthal on me – unless you really mean it."

*Ugh!* Marco wanted to deck the bitch and haul him into his arms and kiss him silly all at the same time. Much more mad at himself than he was at Rafe, he marched away to a sane distance. He roiled about this recipe for disaster.

"Did you hear?" Sally Valentine whispered to his neighbour, Pinky Cavallero.

Marco's ears perked up, and he sidled closer, hoping he wasn't obvious.

Sally tossed his long, blond hair behind his shoulder and thrust out his breasts. "Well, someone suspicious was seen coming out of Sugar Lips' room."

"You think it was the murderer?" Pinky clapped his heavily bejewelled hands over his mouth and trembled. "Do you think we should pack up and get out of Dodge before we're next?"

Marco moved his boobs as close as possible to the conversation hoping 'God' would pick up on it. He felt funny shoving his breasts in someone's face. 'God' was going to have to come up with a better way to hear all and see all. This was intolerable! If Marco wanted to bury his face in tits, he wouldn't be gay.

All this transvestite stuff was beyond him. He hated to play dress up. He didn't like silly games, and contests annoyed the crap out of him. The only person he was in competition with was himself, and no one needed to know he was losing.

He moved to a secluded corner surrounded by tall bushes. Grimacing, he folded his hands, bowed his head and pretended to pray in case someone overheard him despite his best efforts. "God, were you in Sugar Lips' room? Did you see who it was? Was it you or the murderer?"

"Nope. I hadn't been in that room yet. It must've been the perp. Who's there so I know which room's safe to get into now?"

Cary spoke so loudly in Marco's ear, he jumped and swore. Then he held his aching ear, longing to rip out the lousy ear piece.

Marco turned and surveyed the transvestites then rattled off names. He'd gone over their files so many times he probably knew way more about them than their mothers. His bet was on Will Jones, one of the temporary hotel staff who had been hired to accommodate this party. Unless the guy was gay, too. But then why would he have it out for other gay men?

Marco examined the murders and what little evidence they had. Maybe they weren't random hate crimes aimed at the gay community like everybody thought. Maybe the victims were ex-boyfriends or business partners and the killer had made it look like hate crimes to cover his tracks?

Although he knew the cops had looked at that, he doubted they'd given it much effort as their minds had probably seen the obvious.

'God' boomed in his ears. "Go seek thee more suspects, my son. Pray often and speak loudly into thy boobs."

Marco's fists clenched and unclenched, and for the first time in his life, he considered murder. When he caught site of a crew member giving him the eye, he lifted his hands high and bellowed. "Amen and hallelujah!"

Cary swore. "Dang! I didn't say to puncture my ears."

When the uninvited guest moved on, Marco hissed and longed to get his hands around the techie's scrawny neck. "Hey, Blondie. You told me to speak loudly."

Cary ratcheted up the whine in the speaker until Marco had to take off the ear bud.

## Chapter Three

Rafe made a perfect pirouette on his spindly high heel then pranced down the runway, his hands held out like a model as he beamed at the audience, in particular the judges. Determined to win, he put a jiggle in his walk and thrust out his DD boobs so that his nipples were barely covered. If their mouths didn't water, they were dead men. Hell, he was gay, and he thought he was smokin'! Marilyn Monroe looked like someone's kid sister next to him.

As soon as he reached backstage, he slashed on a new layer of lipstick then smacked his lips. Then he swatted Marco on his sexy tush and whistled long and low. "Tonight it's you and me, lover."

He dared the cop to refute him in front of everyone, and he enjoyed watching Marco squirm especially when his cock made a telltale bulge in his bikini. Enjoying this way more than anything he had in a long time, he suggestively murmured, "A quickie in the corner would relieve your pain, lover. How about it?"

At the thought of Marco pumping his hot, wet dick into him here and now, Rafe shivered and his cock almost popped out of his skimpy bottoms.

Devilish glints lit Marco's eyes and with a growl, he tugged Rafe into an empty room and closed the door. Then he jerked off his panties and his beautiful cock popped out. "I'm gonna hate myself later, but get on your knees, bitch. I'm gonna fuck your brains out."

His heart catapulting into overdrive, Rafe licked his lips, tore off his bottoms and wiggled his eager ass in the air. "Promises, promises. Stick it to me. All of it."

"Be careful for what you wish." Marco spit on his hands, lubricated his cock, then grabbed Rafe's ass and plunged into him over and over.

Rafe was so overjoyed, so carried away, tears filled his eyes and he ground his butt against Marco's gorgeous cock. "God, you're so hung, so powerful. I'm all yours, baby."

'God' spoke in their ears. "You rang? Did I hear my name?"

Rafe and Marco swore in unison between their ragged pants and grunts.

"Not now, you pervert. Take off your damned ears." Marco drove in with a deeper urgency and spread Rafe's cheeks wider.

"You two are supposed to be on duty, or is it the talent competition? Of course, I wouldn't exactly call screwing your brains out your talent..."

Jealousy ripped through Rafe, and he wondered how Cary would know? With what little breath he could muster, Rafe said, "*Au contraire*, but Marco is an extremely talented fucker."

Marco coughed, and his fingers bit into Rafe's tender flesh. "Thanks. I think."

He knew what Rafe meant, and his heart warmed. Testosterone flooded him and with one last, wild stroke, he drove into his lover. Too far gone to care who heard, he let loose his screams of ecstasy. As wave upon wave of rapture carried him away, he clung to his ex.

In a raw voice, Rafe muttered, "My turn. Get on your knees."

Surprisingly, even though he'd been sated and had regained his sanity for an instant, excitement anew thrummed through his veins, and he longed to feel Rafe's long, thick cock penetrate him again.

Rafe worked in his cock then rocked back and forth in the lover's dance. "Don't worry, this won't take long. I know you're up soon."

Impatient, Marco impaled himself on his lover then ground his ass against him. "G—" He bit his tongue just in time to keep from accidentally summoning 'God', although he bet the pervert was still listening.

Rafe's breath came in quick, shallow pants again, and his grip tightened. "I'm going to explode. Oh oh oh!"

Marco milked Rafe's cock in a beautiful frenzy and came again.

"Are you two through yet?" Cary asked. "Dirty Harry's up next. Get your buns out there."

Rafe pulled out with a satisfied sigh. Then he gave Marco a love pat. "That was awesome. How about an encore later tonight?"

Marco's heart froze, and he cursed himself. It was just as he'd predicted. Whereas he was more than ready for sex, he wasn't prepared for mushy, romantic long-term stuff as he

feared Rafe was. In a voice gruffer than he'd intended, he said, "Don't go reading anything into this. We were just getting our rocks off."

Shock warred with pain across Rafe's beautiful face. With a flick of his locks, he flung his words over his shoulder, "Well, I never."

The door was flung open and a maintenance man gaped at them. The worker muttered under his breath, "I hate these damned conventions!" then pushed his cart down the hall, leaving the door open and Marco and Rafe exposed.

Cheers and cat calls deafened Marco as Rafe slammed the door in the onlookers' faces and made a mad dash for his bikini bottoms. "See what you made me do?"

Marco didn't feel sorry for him. He well knew how much the drama queen loved to make a scene and be the belle of the ball. Rafe loved it when people oohed and ahed over him, and with his extra big dick there as surely some oohing and ahing going on.

Despite his assertion, spurts of jealousy coursed through him which he clamped down on. Baring his teeth, he growled at himself. He was no good for Rafe. He wouldn't be good for anyone. Damn, but he had to get better control of his dick!

\* \* \* \*

Two nights later, Marco rubbed his red, sore eyes. His love affair with the computer was about to make him go blind. For the second night in a row, he'd stayed up late sleuthing on the internet in his hotel room, sure he'd missed valuable clues.

Simon, who was out on the West Coast and didn't realise how late it was, had just called.

"What'd you find, boss?" When he heard Simon's newest boy toy in the background, he grimaced. The boss must be in his fifties or close, but he usually dated men in their twenties and thirties. Normally, Marco stayed out of other's private affairs, but tonight, the boyfriend was making it hard to hear the boss with his incessant chatter and loud music.

"Lulu Akamatsu once worked with one of the victims. The local police missed it as he'd used an alias and got paid under the table," Simon said. In a lowered voice, he said in an aside, "Turn down the volume. I can't hear."

"What type of work?" Marco swigged down an energy drink then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was glad when the music on the other end of the phone stopped blasting.

"Apparently, he's a computer software and hardware specialist. He does a lot of small on the side jobs for people. Most pay him cash so it's hard to trace."

Marco rubbed his aching temples. "Great. That's all we need. Another computer geek."

Cary's face appeared on the computer, glaring at him. "Hey! We computer geeks make the world go 'round."

"I have a special assignment for you, my little computer nerd. Hack into Lulu's computer and dig up all the dirt you can," Simon said.

Cary's blond brows waggled, and he rubbed his hands in glee. "Already on it, boss. He's got awesome firewalls so it may take some time."

Rafe breezed into the room, fresh from a shower, water droplets still kissing his bronzed skin. The only thing he wore was a towel slung precariously around his hips. "What's the latest? Any new clues?"

Marco gulped, unable to unglue his gaze from the slipping towel. His cock leapt to life and demanded to be let out to play. He cursed himself for being so sexually needy.

Cary saved him from talking, "Yep. We found a connection to one of the dead guys and Lulu."

Rafe froze and his towel slithered to the floor revealing his cock at half mast. "Lulu's been coming onto me. He asked me out for drinks."

Marco bit down on a growl and tried to look away. He didn't want that slime bag anywhere near Rafe.

Simon asked, "So what did you say?"

Rafe glanced at Marco and blushed then he veiled his eyes. "That I'm in a committed relationship."

Cary shook his head looking ridiculous in a blond Chinese top knot. "Buzz. Wrong answer, dude."

Simon said, "I have to agree with Cary. You need to go on that date and see what you can find out about him."

Rafe paled and without trying to retrieve the towel, he ambled to the monitor as if in a daze. He stood front and centre, his dick in the spotlight.

Emotions he didn't like slamming fast and furiously into him, Marco snatched up the towel and draped it around Rafe. "Cover yourself, for God's sake."

Rafe gave him a startled glance. Then heat kicked in and his eyes crinkled. "You do care."

Marco wanted to say no, but the word stuck in his throat. Moreover, he hated the idea of Rafe going one-on-one with a suspected killer. "I'll have drinks with the guy. Keep Rafe out of this."

"But you weren't invited." Simon's tones were smooth and rich, and his words too dead on.

Rafe twirled around and balled his hands on his hips as the towel fell again. He arched his thin brow and lifted his chin. "Is that because you don't think I can handle myself or because you're just jealous?"

Marco wasn't sure himself and so bit his tongue. He couldn't wait to catch the guy and get out of this impossible situation with Lady Godiva who pranced around nude. He was a mere man and unequipped to handle such temptations of the flesh.

Again, his dick swelled so big it ached. Somehow, some way, it had to be assuaged and soon. To relieve the intolerable ache he reached under his T-shirt hem and unzipped his too tight jeans.

Rafe's intelligent eyes followed his every move, and his cock now hung hot and heavy like a racehorse. It was velvety softness surrounding molten steel. As if on fire, it glowed crimson. Shiny liquid coated its even brighter bulbous tip.

*Damn!*

He'd have to be dead or a machine to ignore that luscious cock and all it promised. His heart beat like machine-gun fire. His pulse was about to hammer out of his wrist. His cock poked up a telltale tent in his underwear.

"Over and out for tonight." Before Cary could say a word, Marco cut off the machine and hoped he wasn't still listening.

Pain slashing through him, Marco shook his head and looked deeply into Rafe's inscrutable eyes. "What are you trying to do to me? How much do you think I can take?"

Still standing, Rafe caressed his simmering cock but kept his distance. Something unfathomable flickered through his dark eyes. "What about me? You think it's easy for me, either? You're giving me mixed signals. You never told me why you broke up with me. What did I do wrong? Or did you just fall out of love with me?"

Guilt and shame slammed into Marco's chest, and he felt terrible for hurting the man he loved. But the memories of the kids and the shock and horror on their faces, his impotence to save them, and his crushing guilt was again too much to bear, and he slid back into himself, unable to speak aloud the horror.

After several ripe moments, all he could get out was, "I'm sorry. None of it was your fault. I accept all the blame."

By now, he'd lost his erection as well as his manhood. Miserable, he massaged his thumping forehead. He didn't want to look at Rafe, and he darned well didn't want to look at himself, afraid of what he'd see. Or what he wouldn't see.

Rafe closed the gap and knelt by his side. He rested his silky head on Marco's lap. In a sad, broken-hearted voice he murmured, "I don't care about assigning blame. I miss you. I miss us. We were so good together, and I want that back."

He spread his hand over the inside of Marco's thigh and slowly, hypnotically stroked his thighs. He never once touched his penis, but it was all the more erotic and moving for that.

Marco gritted his teeth, and all he could think about were Rafe's hand and mouth so close and yet so far from his cock. If he shifted even a tiny bit, he'd touch his ex with it.

Again his penis sprang to life, heedless of the pain in his heart. As if it had a mind of its own, it pointed at Rafe, calling to the stud. Marco no longer knew which one of them was the tempter and which one the tempted, and frankly, he no longer cared.

*To hell with it!*

With a rugged grunt, he pulled Rafe into his hungry arms and smothered him with ravenous kisses. Not enough, he drank deeply of the siren and let his hands roam Rafe's naked, delectable body.

Bewitched he scooped up his lover and carried him to the beckoning bed and ever so gently laid him down.



So much love and longing shone from Rafe's eyes, his heart lurched. Addicted against his will, Marco was drawn down to him.

*Here we go again.*

But when he was caught up in the magic, everything, the case and his hard-won resolve, could go to hell. His dick was in charge, and right now, it yearned to be inside Rafe.

*I'm so fucked.*

Rafe held out his arms. His eyes were so dark, so dreamy that Marco drowned in them.

"Love me," Rafe said.

How could he resist? And on a personal level, he was eager to keep his demons at bay. So he sank into the exquisite man and gave himself permission to get lost in ecstasy.

Rafe was so soft yet so hard, a paradox that enraptured Marco. Dim light from moonbeams trickling through a slit in the curtains bathed his perfect physique.

God, but as much as he pretended he no longer cared, he was hooked. As much as he feared losing control, he couldn't keep it together. Not here. Not tonight. Not with Rafe naked and willing beneath him.

He was sucked into oblivion and gave of himself as if it was his last night on Earth. Rafe tasted so delicious he licked and nibbled every inch of him. He feathered kisses along his swarthy flesh. He licked his toes, his fingers and, finally, his cock.

They kept perfect rhythm as if they heard the same song. A song filled with pathos and longing and yet had a driving beat building up to a glorious climax.

With a moan that edged on a scream, Rafe came long and hard inside Marco's mouth. Greedy for his lover's sweet cum, Marco sucked him dry. Then he licked every last drop off the softening cock.

But his cock throbbed and demanded release. He wasn't about to use spit for lube again. "Damn! I don't have any lube."

Rafe gave him the sexy lopsided grin that always turned his world upside down. "I do. Look in the top drawer of the bedside stand."

\* \* \* \*

Marco itched to check out the crime scene and the victim's room for himself. He had to get into Lulu's room, too. But the only way he could think of without garnering suspicion wasn't safe or palatable. Besides, the guy had the hots for Raphael, not him.

He didn't like Simon's idea, but he couldn't come up with a better one. "You have to get Lulu to invite you into his room so you can look around," he told Rafe.

Rafe cupped his boobs with his hands. "And if he tries to get lovey dovey, he'll find I'm Hi Def. Then what?"

Marco worried about that, too, and he fought back twinges of jealousy but mostly worry. Somehow, he managed to mask them. "We'll see if 'God' can hook you up with two less visible bugs. If not, you'll just have to keep him at bay."

Rafe frowned and pushed off his top to let his boobs hang out. He stared down at his chest and fingered the protruding wires. "Look! I'm an android. Man, am I glad I don't have to put up with these globs of flesh all the time. I wonder how women do it."

Marco agreed, annoyed with his own prosthetics, but he had to chuckle at the strange picture of Rafe fondling his fake tits. Then a less than appealing thought struck. The effervescent, gorgeous Rafe was impossible to ignore, and men fell at his feet in lust all the time. Just one unauthorised grope would unveil their secret.

Rafe continued to play with his tits. "Doesn't Cary have all the rooms wired so he can see and hear all?"

Marco linked his hands behind his back and paced. "As long as you stay in the room. What if he forced you to go somewhere else? What if he plays music loud? What if—"

Rafe glared. "Gotcha. But I'm a full-grown detective, and I can handle myself. I'm doing this."

Primitive possessiveness attacked Marco, and he fought the overwhelming desire to throw Rafe over his shoulder, carry him to his lair and lock him up for his own good. As angry as he was at his ex, he was angrier at himself for caring and for suggesting he join their team.

Tired of battling his wayward emotions, of fighting with Rafe, he flung sarcastic words over his shoulder as he slammed out the door, "Fine. Date the creep. Marry him. What do I care?"

He had other important things on his agenda such as checking out Lulu's apartment across town.

\* \* \* \*

Rafe wasn't sure if he'd just gained a victory or defeat in the war of love. Trying to read Marco gave him migraines and put a crimp in his dick. And Marco called *him* a drama queen!

He hoped Marco's sour mood meant he'd gotten under his skin, that Marco still cared, and then smouldering, Rafe snarled. Marco didn't want him but didn't want anyone else to have him either. He couldn't expect Rafe to wait forever or keep himself chaste. Oh no, no, no! Marco couldn't have it both ways. Rafe was no slave to Marco's insanity.

Maybe Lulu was a nice guy, and they'd already tried, convicted, and sentenced him. Rafe would be careful, but he'd also keep an open mind, unlike Mr. Tall, Dark, and Grouchy.

Longing to free himself of this impossible situation, he buzzed Lulu's room. His anger at Marco gave extra oomph to his flirting. "How about meeting me for those drinks. I'm ready and raring."

There was a pregnant pause, but Lulu finally asked, "What about your boyfriend? Won't he get bent out of shape?"

Genuine chuckles burst from Rafe's lips then he turned rueful. He flicked his wrist and rolled his eyes. "Him? He's always bent out of shape. Besides, he just stormed out of here saying I was free to date whomever I please."

"So I'm a revenge date?"

Not liking the word 'revenge', Rafe pulled a frown. "Let's just say I'm a free agent and do as I please."

"Fair enough. I'm free now. How about you cry on my shoulder in my room. I have a private suite and lots of Southern Comfort."

Excited but scared, Rafe nodded before remembering Lulu couldn't see through the phone. Even though he knew exactly where the man was staying, he asked, "What's your room number? Are you in the Double Tree Hotel?"

He called Cary and let him in on the plan but only left a cryptic note for Marco in case someone stole into their room and saw it.

He stuffed his wires back in his boobs, put on a pretty dress with a high neck so he wouldn't worry about anything falling out then strapped on sexy high heels. Then he smoothed foundation on his face, blended it in and painted his eyes. In love with his female alter ego, he blew himself a kiss.

Before he left, he asked, "Cary, can you hear me?"

"Not too well. Talk louder into your boobs. See if you can get Lulu to speak to them."

Rafe inhaled deeply and smoothed his hair.

"Won't that be obvious?"

"Get him drunk. Then he won't think anything's strange, and he'll spill his guts."

"And hopefully not mine."

As much as he loved to see his face in the spotlight, that didn't extend to the six o'clock news special crime report.

"The guy we're looking for asphyxiates people so you're guts are safe." Cary chuckled at his own joke.

Rafe wasn't laughing and swore under his breath. Like that made him feel better. "I'll be in room 1114. Write that down and send in the cavalry if things get weird. Got it?"

"Ten-four. My ears are on, good buddy."

"You're weird." Rafe locked the door and dropped his card key in his gold lamé purse.

"Thank you. Thank you very much," Cary said in a feigned baritone.

Rafe's nerves ricocheted around his head louder than the clack of his high heels on the parquet floor. *Get a grip. It's just another case.*

Or as Marco would say, "Just another scumbag."

But this was their first murder case. Usually they solved jewel heists and other high-end thefts. Marco thrived on the homicide stuff, but Rafe was shaking in his Manolos.

When Lulu answered the door he licked his ruby-red lips and let his gaze unabashedly roam over Rafe as if he were eying a buffet.

It was all Rafe could do not to shiver his distaste. He was impressed by Lulu's French manicure. His gaze glued to Lulu's nails, he asked, "Wherever did you get those done? They're exquisite. What craftsmanship."

Lulu clucked his tongue and held the door wide, inviting Rafe to enter. "I don't give away my secrets so easily. Maybe if we get to know one another better, I'll let you in on some of them."

"You must be thirsty. Let me get you a drink." He grabbed a glass already filled with wine which he held out to Rafe with a wicked wink.

"Ditch the drink," Cary whined in his ear. "You're supposed to get him drunk, not the other way around."

Rafe wondered what other secrets Lulu hid and itched to learn them. Agreeing with Cary's assessment of the situation, he held the drink without taking a sip then set it on the table.

His gaze scanned the room for clues, anything that could be used as a weapon or for asphyxiation. His gaze landed on the pillows and he gulped. When Lulu brought over his drink and pressed it into his hand, he had to suppress a shiver. "Drink up. Let your hair down."

Rafe forced light laughter to his lips although he felt anything but amused. He waved off the drink afraid it could be tainted or loosen his lips. "I can't mix it with my meds. We don't need another death around here."

Taking in a deep breath, he segued into the topic uppermost on his mind. "Isn't it terribly spooky how Candy Kane was killed right here during our pageant? Do you think it's the work of the gay murderer all the newspapers are talking about?" Rafe's shiver wasn't fake, and he could still see Candy's lifeless body being carried away.

Lulu sidled up to him and ran a knuckle along his jaw then nuzzled his neck. "I think I don't want to think about such gruesome things. I just want to enjoy you."

When Lulu's hot breath coasted down his neck, and the man nibbled his ear, Rafe backed away. "I hardly know you."

Lulu scowled. "Since when do gay men care about things like that?"

Insulted and wary, Rafe crossed his arms over his chest and ratcheted up his jaw. "That's a very sexist remark, especially considering you're gay, too. And I do care. I've been a one-man man for years. I don't sleep around."

Lulu hooked up a dyed red brow. "Even though he ditched you?"

"I'm not that loose." Rafe felt sick to his stomach but wondered if he'd found their murderer. "You have an awfully low opinion of me and of the gay community, in general."

Lulu sloshed his drink in his flute then took a long swig. "No. I'm just realistic. You're not like most I've met. More power to you. I guess that's not good for me tonight, though. I was looking for some loving."

If Rafe had been in the market, Lulu's attitude would have revolted him. This guy was the last man on earth he'd jump into bed with. But he wasn't about to antagonise a murderer by stating that aloud. "Well, I guess, I should get going and let you find someone else. Do you mind if I freshen up first in the little girls' room?"

Lulu shrugged and made a moue of his lips. "Sure. Be my guest."

Rafe nosed around a bit but found nothing suspicious. Let down, he exited and made his escape. Some detective he was. Or actor.

"Well?" Cary asked in his ear.

"Nada." When he spied a group of laughing transvestites coming towards him, he dug out his Bluetooth and hung it on his ear, kicking himself for not thinking of it before.

"Newsflash. Sugar Lips' partner was just found murdered in their hotel room. Cops have blocked the Ninth Floor," Cary said.

Gruesome images of another strangled body filled Rafe's mind. "Damn! Asphyxiated?"

"Right-o. He came to support his honey for tonight's evening gown competition. Sugar Lips is over his head with grief."

Sympathy welled in Rafe. If it had been Marco, he'd be distraught, too. As it was, bile bubbled up in his throat, tasting like acid. He presumed the bunch laughing like hyenas didn't know the latest.

Knowing he couldn't afford to lose his grip, he reined in tight control, even if it was just acting and in reality, he quaked in his heels. "Never let 'em see you sweat," he remembered his first acting coach's advice.

But there was so much more at stake on this stage than on Broadway. If they screwed up, there'd be no curtain call for sure—ever. For them and perhaps not for other unfortunate souls. He vowed not to forget his lines.

"Simon wants you to swing by the crime scene and see what you can see. Better yet, he wants you to offer your condolences to Sugar Lips and see if you can gently coax some info out of him," Cary said.

Rafe wasn't sure he had the heart or soul to approach Sugar Lips for anything other than condolences and to lend sympathy right now. Pumping the poor guy for information so soon after losing his partner seemed in poor taste. "For real?"

"Don't shoot me. I'm just the messenger. That's what the boss man wants."

Rafe wanted to swear under his breath but remembered in the nick of time he was supposed to be a lady and he was in the spotlight. As summer sweat trickled down his chest, he hoped the wires wouldn't electrocute him. He wondered if the Bermuda Triangle had moved to include South Florida in its deadly clutches. It sure felt like it. He couldn't wait to finish this case and go home to the safety of Columbus.

"Don't worry. I've got your back," Cary said as solemnly as a Boy Scout.

That would be good if Cary had ever been a Boy Scout, but Rafe seriously doubted it. He'd been too busy hacking into his school's computers changing his D's and F's to A's and giving the vice principal new passwords. Rafe had heard the notorious stories and laughed at several. Now, he wished Cary had been the trustworthy Boy Scout.

"Where's Marco?" He'd do anything to have Dirty Harry by his side, professionally and personally. The more intimately the better.

"His ten-twenty is across town checking out Sugar Lips' and Lulu's home bases for clues. You know him. He doesn't trust anybody's police work but his own."

Too bad the ex-cop didn't trust himself, either. At least, that was the vibe Raphael was picking up. He just couldn't put a finger on why, and Marco was being his usual closed-lip self about whatever it was bugging him. As Marco's lover, Rafe should've been the first person Marco had opened up to. It bothered him no end that Marco had shut him out.

Didn't the guy know that there was such a thing as being too butch, too stoic and too strong? He needed to have some give in his architecture if he wanted to bend to storms instead of crack and crumble.

Rafe's heart breaking off a little more every time he dwelled on Marco, he decided he was about to the point of no return. He wasn't going to wait forever for Marco to get his act

together. He could only take so much and right now, he needed his own head together if he wanted to get through this investigation alive.

With every step he took, he felt as if he moved nearer to doom and gloom. Something or someone followed him, and fanciful as he was, he pictured the Grim Reaper. Every time he stopped and looked behind him, nothing was there. Nothing corporeal.

"Stop getting freaked out," he murmured under his breath as he dug his fingernails into his palms.

"What's freaking you out? Examples?" Cary asked. "Talk to me, my child. God hears all."

Too bad 'God' hadn't given him a boob cam or a shoe phone like Maxwell Smart. But then Agent 99 didn't get those neat gadgets, did she? He seriously considered filing a discrimination suit with 'God's' boss. The butch guys and computer geeks got all the good stuff. "Where am I going?"

"Room 902. Just follow the chaos. I'm sure the cops are thick as flies, and you can't miss them."

Rafe hoped the corpse was already gone. Seeing one dead guy in a lifetime was way more than enough. He wondered how Marco handled it. Just the thought sent shivers down his spine, and he misstepped on his five-inch heel and stumbled.

The elevator looked and felt like a crypt when the door slid open with a hiss. Rafe pushed back the bad feeling trying to smother him. His intuition had never been more revealing than his dreams so he pushed it aside. "I'm putting my trust and faith in you, God. Don't let me down." He meant both the real one and the psychotic geek.

"I'm with you all the way," Cary said.

That only made Rafe feel slightly better. When he exited the elevator into the mass confusion, he thought he'd stepped onto the set of CSI Miami meets Rocky Horror Motion Picture Show. Sugar Lips ran around like a chicken with its head cut off, only half dressed in a black lacy camisole, black leggings, and strappy, black, high heels at least two inches taller than Rafe's spikes. He looked as if he'd been pulled out of a seduction scene. His makeup was smeared. His curly black wig sat askew on his head, and hair stood out on end as if pulled by tortured fingers.



Rafe wondered if anyone had ever told him his big frame didn't look good in the sexy outfit? That he should stick to mu-mus and tents? Now wasn't the time, however, and Rafe wasn't the one to do it.

Then Rafe chastised himself for thinking about appearances in the face of Sugar Lips' loss. The guy must be out of his mind with grief. So he put on his most sympathetic expression, opened his heart and his arms and held him against his heart. "My poor, Sugar. I'm so very sorry. How'd it happen? It wasn't the gay murderer was it, do you think?"

Sugar's lips trembled uncontrollably, and tears anew washed rivers through his too heavy makeup leaving zebra-like stripes. "I think so. He was as-asphyx-asphyxiated." The man's breath came up in a loud huff.

Rafe's heart sank to his knees. Not another one. "You poor, poor dear. Can I do anything for you?"

Sugar Lips slid a glance at the crime scene with distaste pooling in his eyes. "I'd love to get the hell out of here. Can we find somewhere private? The cops are through with me. For the moment, anyway."

Sympathy welled up in Rafe, and he nodded. He took the man's elbow and guided him back to the elevator. "Of course. Come along, dear."

"You're so very thoughtful. Your partner's a blessed man."

Rafe got choked up at that, and all he could mutter was, "Yes." If only Marco felt that way. Hell, they weren't even 'partners' in that sense anymore and never would be.

\* \* \* \*

Once outside the hotel, Sugar Lips broke down and sobbed on Rafe's shoulder. He held him too close for comfort making Rafe more aware than ever of his wiring, but he didn't want to be too obvious to pull away, either, so he gritted his teeth and patted the mourning man's back.

'God' bellowed so loud it made Rafe jump out of his skin. "Are you still with Sugar Lips? Get the hell away from him. Marco thinks he's the murderer. What's your twenty?"

Rafe blinked and realised they'd walked a distance from the hotel and were in the deserted parking lot. There wasn't a soul in sight. He pivoted on his heel to return to the hotel but Sugar Lips stepped in front of him and blocked his way.

"What was that?" Sugar Lips asked, his tears instantly swallowed by a scowl.

Rafe's heart stopped, and his pulse froze in his wrist. Lord have mercy. Had Sugar Lips heard Cary? He played dumb and adopted his most innocent, wide-eyed look that never worked with Marco but was worth a try. "What was what?"

Before Rafe could stop him, Sugar Lips snatched his ear piece and inserted it in his own ear. "This. I heard voices. I swore I heard my name."

Afraid the gig was up, Rafe tried to skirt the man and run back to the hotel and safety. He damned himself for getting caught out in the deserted parking lot alone with one of the suspects. But the guy tripped him then hauled him into his arms. "You're a stinking cop! You're not going to stop me from getting away with this. Marv deserved to die! We were partners for thirty years, and I never once cheated on him, never dreamed of it, but I found out he's been cheating on me for years with every young stud he could get his hands on. And he was going to bleed my bank account dry, put my house in foreclosure, and leave me. Me! The only man who truly loved him."

A maniacal gaze lit his eyes. Insanity blazed brighter than the South Florida sun beating down on Rafe's head. Sugar Lips pulled a rope from his pocket and wrapped it around Rafe's neck and dragged him towards his van before Rafe could utter a scream for help.

Panicked, Rafe kicked and thrashed, but Sugar Lips put his spike heel in his stomach and doubled him over with slashing pain. "You're on *his* side. You want to save all those stinking men who've cheated on their loving, unsuspecting partners. Don't you see? I had to murder those others to cover my tracks. But I should be applauded as a hero! I freed all those innocent men from their cheating boyfriends. But you no good, lousy cops won't do anything about them. You think I'm the criminal."

If Rafe could talk, he'd tell the guy he had a right to feel bad but not to kill, but Rafe could hardly breathe. Not only that, but the rough, burning asphalt was scraping the hell out of his skin and had claimed several layers of flesh. Bruised, battered, and gasping for air, he couldn't say or do a thing to help himself. He knew Cary would have sent the cavalry by now, but feared they wouldn't find him in time.

Where the hell was everyone? Up on the ninth floor? Did everyone have to gape at the morose scene? Wasn't anyone around to help him?

He tried to loosen the rope around his neck but couldn't work his fingers in. Though he vaguely thought it was mid-afternoon, the sun became hazy when it should be at its brightest. Even his tormentor's voice became muddy and incomprehensible.

## Chapter Four

Marco swore and tore out of Sugar Lips' house clutching the thumb drive with evidence downloaded from his computer. "Cary, do you read me? Sugar Lips' is the scum bag. He's been planning this to cover up the murder of his significant other. I've got the proof."

Cary came in low, breathless, his words slurred. "Rafe's in big trouble. I think Sugar Lips has him. But they've gone off the radar. The sound went dead outside the hotel five minutes ago."

Marco's heart stopped, and the pain was so swift and acute he doubled over. Visions of the kids dying before his eyes paralysed him. Then that was superimposed by pictures of Rafe in pain and agony, possibly dying, calling out to him as those children had and he was just as impotent to save the man he loved.

The man he loved? Fuck, yes! He could no longer deny it. Why did it take this to spell it out? To make him admit it? For the billionth time, he cursed his stupidity and pigheadedness.

Marco ran to his car and jumped in, revved the engine, and raced towards the hotel, not caring that he was obliterating the speed limit or that he ran several stop signals. "So what the hell are you doing about it besides jawing to me? Call the cops! Get an all-points bulletin out on Sugar Lips' vehicle. Does he have a LoJack? A cell phone? Put tracers on them. You're 'God', find them!"

As if his teeth were gritted and grinding, Cary grunted. "I'm working on it. Simon's here with me, and he's on the horn, too, getting backup."

Palm trees passed by so swiftly they were blurs. The sun's glare was an annoyance, and he grabbed his sunglasses and pushed them up his nose. He was so sick of sunny South Florida he could scream. If this was paradise, then what was hell?

He was in hell. If anything happened to Rafe, what little bit of Marco still alive would perish. Without the Rafe's sunniness in his life, he'd freeze to death. He thought he'd died when those kids had, but he'd merely buried his soul deep inside his skin. He'd hidden his

heart and shut out everyone and everything that might turn on his feelings and make him cry and shout and scream until he was so raw he couldn't utter another sound. His wounds festered, seeping into his soul, building thick scars around his heart.

He'd been wrong to shut out Rafe. He'd been an idiot to push away the one person who could make him whole again, and now, he might have lost him forever. Unblinking, he stared straight ahead barely noting vehicles swerving out of his way.

"Talk to me. Any news yet? Do we know where they are?"

"The guy's smart. He took out his LoJack and ditched his cell phone in his room. But the cops spied a white Chevy van heading down I-95. They think he might be heading towards Alligator Alley."

*Alligator Alley?* That desolate stretch of highway through the Everglades that was infamous for a gazillion deadly wrecks? The place where alligators and boa constrictors fought it out for ownership of the swamp? If Sugar Lips turned off onto some deserted side road, no one would see Rafe again. His body and the crime would be hidden by the mysteries of the unforgiving swamp forever. He stomped on the brakes and made a U-turn so fast in the middle of the road his tires burned rubber and he almost sideswiped two cars. Then he gunned it to I-95, hoping the street signs were correct and wishing he knew the area better. "Shit!"

"God," and Marco meant the real God. "If you save Rafe, I swear I'll beg forgiveness and make atonement for my sins."

"Tell Rafe, not us," Cary said.

Through gritted teeth, Marco said, "I will if we get to him in time. How did Sugar Lips get his slimy hands on him? I thought Rafe was with Lulu?"

A pregnant pause threatened to turn into a millennium. Finally, Cary cleared his throat. "Well, Simon and I sent him to get more info on Sugar Lips. There were a million cops in his suite. We thought it would be safe."

"You did *what?*" Marco didn't care if his bellow could be heard clear across the other side of Florida in Naples.

"We think we've sighted them. Sugar Lips' van is turning off I-95 to Alligator Alley, just as we feared. How far are you from there?"

He checked his GPS unit as he sped around a line of cars going so slow they looked like they were sitting still. "According to the GPS, I'm still five miles out. Any idea how fast he's going?"

"Lucky for us, he's abiding by the speed limit. He probably doesn't want to stand out for breaking the traffic laws and get pulled over."

Marco never would understand sleaze balls. He itched to get his hands around this one's neck, and he didn't care if a boa constrictor beat him to the pleasure so long as someone stopped his heinous crimes. Snake that he was, it would be a befitting end.

So anxious his lungs burned, he stomped the accelerator to the floor and prayed to God to close the distance before anything happened to Rafe. "What's the make and model of the vehicle? How was Sugar Lips dressed?"

He listened carefully to Cary's description while he scanned the vehicles eating up the asphalt in front of him. When he got stuck behind side-by-side slowpokes, he laid on the horn then drove onto the shoulder too close to a murky canal for comfort. A chain link fence stood between them, but at his speed, it wouldn't be much of a deterrent and hadn't been for many unfortunate drivers before him. He couldn't wait to get out of Florida with its swamps and concrete jungles. It had been nothing but trouble.

Finally, he spied a white Chevy van, and he asked again for the license plate number. When it didn't match he swore. But as he passed it, he recognised Sugar Lips in a long, silky blond wig. "Damn it! I just past him. Now what? He'll know something's fishy if I slow down too much or I could drive them into the canal." And a whole lot of other people who also populated the stretch of highway.

"Give us your twenty, and we'll send backup. There're already patrols out that way. We'll get the guy. Don't you worry," Simon said in his best soothing voice Marco knew too well. It was the one he used when things were at their most hopeless.

Telling him not to worry was easy for them. Although he knew they cared for Rafe as a friend, maybe as a sort of brother, he wasn't the love of their lives, their soul mate. If Rafe died, so would Marco.

He watched Sugar Lips in his rear-view mirror, trying not to make his perusal too obvious, trying not to touch his brakes. When he spied a turn off, he slowed down and got

off, hoping the other car would, too. He also hoped that Rafe was in the car, that he still had breath, that Sugar Lips wasn't merely on a burial run.

What ifs were making him crazy so he did his best to drown them out. "I just turned off. My gut tells me he will, too. Is there any backup nearby?"

"Closing in on you. There's a couple unmarked police cars behind him, and he's turning off. The three of you should be able to apprehend the guy," Cary said. "Keep us posted."

Marco waited impatiently, his fingers drumming a tuneless rhythm against his steering wheel, one that was out of sync with his swiftly beating heart. "I see them, and I'm blocking his path. I'm going to end this now."

"Good luck."

Marco didn't believe in luck, at least not good luck. When Sugar Lips veered around him and gunned the car, he knew why.

All three cars chased Sugar Lips and soon surrounded the murderer. With his gun loaded and drawn, Marco carefully approached the van while holding his breath. There was still no sign of Rafe so he prayed harder than he had ever in his life. He exchanged grim glances with the other cops as he identified himself as a detective on the case.

Sugar Lips jumped out of the far side of the vehicle and tried to run, but a young and buff cop easily caught up to the old, out-of-shape transvestite and collared him. That didn't stop Sugar Lips from biting and kicking and kneeing the guy in the groin.

At the moment, Marco couldn't be bothered with Sugar Lips. He had to find Rafe so he ran for the van and yanked open the side door. To his relief, Rafe lay on the floor. To his horror, Rafe was bound and gagged and wasn't moving.

"Please, God. Let Raphael be okay. Let him live." Silently, he added, "Let him forgive me and take me back."

With a sob choking him, Marco knelt to Raphael and gingerly put his thumb on the other man's wrist. A faint pulse gave him hope, but not as much as he'd like. Ghostly pale, deathly still, Rafe didn't respond to his murmurings of love and pleas for forgiveness.

Louder, with a rasp in his voice, Marco called out to his fellow cops. "Call for an ambulance. He's not doing well."

"Shit!" Cary and Simon echoed in unison. "Tell us more."

Marco didn't have time to be a reporter nor did he have the inclination. "Send medical help now. It looks like Sugar Lips tried to strangle him, but he's holding his own."

Barely...

Tears stung the back of Marco's eyes, and before he knew it, he balled like a baby as he cradled Rafe to his heart and feathered kisses across Rafe's beloved face. "I love you. Don't leave me. Not like this. I'm so sorry for everything. You don't deserve a crippled and grizzled ex-cop like me, but you got me anyway, and you're not ditching me again."

Rafe's eyes fluttered open and tried to focus. He coughed, and his lips moved, but no sound came out.

Marco's heart was jump started and he let out a howl of ecstasy. "He's alive! He's awake. Yes!"

His comrades dragged a struggling but cuffed Sugar Lips to their car and shoved him none too gently into the backseat. Madness screwed up his face, and he screamed, "I was doing everyone a favour. You should be thanking me! I'll be a hero, you'll see."

Marco spat his response on the ground and glared at the parasite. "You make me sick, and I'll see you rot in hell for what you did. If he dies, heaven help you."

The other cop walked over to him and dropped a commiserative hand on Marco's shoulder. "Medical help's on the way. It should be here momentarily. How's he doing?"

Marco was no medic, but Rafe's pulse felt stronger every moment and he was smiling up at him. After Rafe surprised him with a hefty kiss and a strong embrace, Marco laughingly answered, "I think he's going to make it."

Rafe squirmed in Marco's arms, curled up on his lap and leaned his head against his shoulder. He gazed deeply up into Marco's eyes with askance, hope, and so much love it stole Marco's breath. "Does this mean you've chased away your demons? That you're ready for love again?"

Marco wasn't sure on the first count but dead sure on the second. "No and yes," he murmured against Rafe's quickly warming lips. "Some of my demons are still there, but I'm ready to talk about them and try to vanquish them. And yes, I'm ready to love again. To love *you* again. Will you have me? After the way I pushed you away?"

"And made my life hell? And how you unmercifully teased me? And sent me mixed signals?" Rafe asked with a saucy wink and moue of his sexy lips.



Marco didn't realised he'd crossed his fingers until Rafe clasped his hand and, laughing joyously, held it up to his face. "I've never heard sweeter words, except maybe, 'will you marry me'?"

Speechless, Marco gulped. *Marriage?*

"I get to be best man," Cary said, yelping and clapping. "Let me hop on the internet and scout out the states where gay marriage is legal..."

Still in a daze, Marco gazed deeply into the love of his life's eyes, the shade of the clear blue Florida sky on a cloudless day. His heart catapulted into a rapid, happy tattoo. "I guess we have lots of things to celebrate. We caught a murderer, and we're getting married! Congratulate us!"

The ambulance arrived, and he lifted the slighter man onto the stretcher. Not wanting to let him go ever again, still holding his hand, swearing to stay by his side forever, Marco climbed into the vehicle beside his lover. To his co-workers, Marco murmured, "Have someone pick up my rental car. No way am I letting Raphael out of my sight."

Rafe squeezed Marco's hand then with love overflowing from his eyes, he caressed the hand in his with his lips. "Nor I you."

Simon said in a happy voice, "Congratulations! Simon says the next mission is a big, beautiful wedding, and it's on me."

## About the Author

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

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

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