

**Safe Words**

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eISBN 9781623007041

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Cover Artist: Syneca Featherstone

Published in the United States of America

Loose Id LLC

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San Francisco CA 94104-0806

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## Chapter One

Killing someone is hard work. Harder than it looks in the movies.

It didn't help that the air-conditioning in the cheap highway motel was crap. Everyone was saying this was going to be a long one, the kind of heat wave the Greatest Generation used to talk about when they reminded you that they had no air-conditioning or shoes, for that matter, and movies cost a nickel.

It didn't help that the girl kept crying as if she really had something to live for. He chose whores because they were disposable people. Already broken, so no one paid much attention when one turned up in the trash. They were good practice, and tonight he was surer than ever that he needed the practice.

Mistress Leia. What a terrible facade this girl had chosen. She was cheap plastic in a world that demanded rich leather. If you were going to hide yourself, it needed to be done with commitment. If he knew one thing in life, that was it. Hiding himself.

The mewling cow that was bleeding out on the motel floor had no commitment. Not to her identity, not even to life. And for someone who made him work so hard, she was still dying easy.

He was naked now except for the latex condom rolled over his erection. The cow had one use to him besides practice. It was a shame that she was so much less than advertised. *Mistress* Leia would have been fun. Strong women were what he loved. The kind of women who could make his heart beat with a touch of fear and his skin flush red with the slap of a commanding hand. This one was dying as much from fright as from the cuts of his knife.

Kneeling down, he brushed the hair from her face. The one eye not pressed to the carpet moved, but it wasn't seeing him. She still breathed too, but it was more the reflex

of life. Everything she was or had ever been was pulled inside, looking to shed its last moments in memory. It would never be like that for him, he promised himself. Memory was worse than death.

Her facedown and backside-up posture was too much to resist. Maneuvering himself behind her, he used his knees to spread the whore's legs. Then he pulled her bottom up a little and pushed himself deep inside. Her back was not as marked by knife cuts as her front. It was still pretty and feminine. He imagined having a shape like that. He imagined slipping inside her until he could wear her body like the pretty dresses he lived his other life in. Big, round hips and a soft pair of breasts that rippled like waves when he walked would make him look so good, feel so good. He loved the idea, and he hated it at the same time.



## Chapter Two

Brutus always used his .38 revolver in bed. At least he did with me. I don't know about other women; don't care. If I had to think about it, I would guess not. The badge bunnies who sniff around just want to bag a cop, and a big man like Brutus, a barrel on legs with gym-built arms, and a detective after all, is just like bitchnip for them. But they want the cop and not the baggage.

His revolver was short-nosed and nickel-plated, bright, smooth, and still warm from where he had been carrying it all morning, close to his body in the summer heat. He put it to my mouth and pushed it in, wanting to watch my tongue on the barrel. I try not to disappoint—cops love their games—but I was bored with it. Bored with him. As much as anything, I was bored with wallowing in the deep end of the human cesspool, pretending to be a lifeguard. I was bored with pretending at life.

"Come on, Silver, you like that, don't you?"

I didn't like it, and I didn't like the fact that even in bed he used my last name. In or out of bed, I don't think he'd ever once called me Eleanor. It's part of the way cops are, nicknames or last names, like boys on the playground.

"Come on, baby," he said, "don't fight it. Suck it."

Twisting my face away, I grabbed his wrist and urged his hand to set aside the revolver, at the same time shushing him gently.

"Just touch me," I said. "Just let me touch you. No more playacting today, okay?"

He grinned in a way that said he hadn't paid any attention to my words, then slipped his left hand under my head and gripped my hair hard. As soon as I opened my mouth, he shoved the gun barrel back in.

"Look at me. I want to watch your eyes as you suck it."

There had been other times when he'd gotten rough, but he was a dish-it-out kind of guy and couldn't take it when I pushed back. He wanted compliance, and we'd both been learning more and more that's not who I am.

Pushing the gun deeper into my mouth, he expected me to gag. Instead, I reached up and wrapped my fingers around his. Until then, I wasn't afraid at all. There was no reason to be. It was all standard play, even if he was being more of a jerk about it than usual. But when I put my hand on his, I could feel his finger within the trigger guard rather than outside. That was stupid and dangerous.

Gently, I pulled his hand away. When the barrel had cleared my lips, I twisted his wrist outward and sank my teeth into his hand. Maybe I bit harder than I needed to, but it wasn't hard enough to leave a real mark. Pain, and a bit of anger, flashed in his eyes as he jerked his hand away. I knew what he wanted—apologies, cast-down eyes; a little begging for forgiveness would have made him purr. Not today.

"That's never happening again," I told him.

"Why do you have to be such a ballbuster?"

The first response that came to mind was to ask why he didn't grow some balls to bust. Instead, I said, "Why can't you play nice?"

Smiling a shark's smile, he snaked the barrel down my neck and chest before he dragged the front sight across my nipples. The old revolver had been dropped too many times to count, and the sight was rough with burrs. It got a reaction, all right. I used my forearm to sweep the gun upward. That knocked the ragged sight right into Brutus's lip. After a shocked second, he dropped the gun, and me, to the mattress. Then he pushed himself inside me. It was as gentle and thoughtful as it sounds.

For several minutes he thrust away like a jackhammer, neither classy nor skilled, but eventually effective. Well, it would have been, if he had stuck it out a little longer. As soon as I got close, he pulled out, rubbed the wetness of his erection in his hand, then rubbed that wet hand on my pubis and belly. Brutus was the kind of guy who still thought a woman with no pubic hair was exotic. I spread my thighs wider and tried to

pull him back in, but he wasn't having it. With no more effort or concern than a bear turning a dead branch to look for grubs, he twisted my leg, put a hand under my hip, and flipped me over. At least I finally got what I needed after a few minutes more, but then he spoiled what was barely tolerable to begin with by pulling off the rubber and ejaculating on my back. Leaving the limp sheath discarded on my backside was a nice touch.

His name wasn't really Brutus. In his younger days he'd had a thick black beard to go with his thick frame, and someone at the police academy had noted the resemblance to the bully from the old *Popeye* cartoons. Since then only his mother called him Merin. Cops called him Brutus. Mr. and Mrs. Public called him Detective Pierce. The nickname fit more than his appearance. He wasn't really a bad guy. It's just that it took me a while to find out he wasn't really a very good guy either. He was a cop, and police work attracts a lot of big guys who like to get their way. And the freaky-sex thing? That was another tweak that went with being a cop. We're all a little twisted in that department.

I showered and dressed in a silk-blend suit, dark but summer weight, getting my kit situated under my jacket, 9mm and cuffs, tac light, and telescoping baton, before making sure my badge and credentials were at hand.

Brutus was still naked and wadded up in the sheet. It was his house.

"We need to talk," I said, but I didn't sit down.

"Crap." Brutus rubbed his face hard, then sat up.

He was steeling himself, but at the same time he let a little cocky upward tick slip into his lips. *Here it comes, he's thinking. She's going to tell me she loves me.* I couldn't have read the thought any easier if he had set it to a tune, and I could see him already working the let-her-down-easy story. Men speak so much more honestly with faces than with words. Not that I was any less guilty of working the truth. I had never actually said that the time we spent together was just time, nothing more.

It's funny. You look at someone and wonder, *How did I ever let myself fall in bed with a man like this?* What's the answer? Sometimes you get bored or just horny, or

sometimes you feel so lonely in your bones and your skin you reach out. You reach out with your eyes closed. You reach out for that little bit of life that reminds you of the spark you lost someplace.

I think it would be better for us all if we could reach further. We all tend to stay in comfort zones in relationships. Doctors and nurses are almost a given. Pilots and flight attendants. Cops aren't any different; it's just that there aren't that many women on the job. You'd be surprised how many cops fall in with hookers. They won't marry them, but they'll cry to them and screw them and whisper their shameful secrets.

"This is the last time," I said. "Us. Here. Anywhere. It's over."

"What?"

"It was fun for a while, but now, well, now it's not, and..." And I ran out of steam. I didn't really have any more to say anyway.

However, he had his mind working around a situation that didn't nestle neatly into his expectations. I could see his confusion, and he was the kind of man angered by confusion. Ambiguity was hard for him. That was who he was as a cop too. "Why" never got in the way. He only asked who did what, and could you take them in for it. I could see the little light of anger start to brighten his eyes.

"But I thought—" he started.

I interrupted, "You thought what? Exactly?"

His eyes took on that inward glaze of someone looking for words that weren't there to express something he didn't really feel. He didn't want me; he simply didn't want to be the person left behind. No one likes rejection. That's the funny thing about our relationship: every moment with him felt like a rejection to me, but even rejection is some kind of connection to another person. I needed a warm body close to me so badly I neglected the cold heart. Now it felt like an infection. I had to get away from Brutus, or I'd end up like him.

"It's okay," I told him. "Some things are not meant to be more than they are."

"What does that mean?"

Behind those eyes you could see the glaze churning into a curdled anger.

"Nothing, I guess, but this isn't about you. It's about me. I need something better."

Then I shrugged. "More." Poor choice of words. I knew it as soon as I said it. I could already see the wound settling on his face. You can't tell an alpha guy that you need something better after having sex with him without his testosterone dyslexia reading, *I need better sex*. Problem was I'm kind of alpha myself and didn't feel like explaining myself anymore.

"Whatever," he said, surly and pouting.

That made it easier.

"Look, I've got to go, but you can call me if you want to talk later."

He wouldn't, but that was fine. Over is over, and I was only then realizing how over I was. If Brutus had had any real feelings to hold on to, or even a personality, it might have gone more than those couple of months. But that was me placating my inner relationship demon. We were an experiment. When I learned, after he made a few overtures, that Brutus had a thing for bondage and the rougher stuff, I was curious. It was all very professional at first. I had a case that involved some things I knew nothing about. He said he could teach me, but he wasn't much of a teacher. Then it wasn't very professional.

Parts of the experiment were interesting. One thing I did learn is that I'll never be the damsel in distress. Not that that was any surprise. Forget damsel; I wanted to be the same kind of woman in bed I was on the job. I just didn't see it happening.

Heading out the door, I was blinded for a moment, first by the relentless brightness of the day, then by the blast of heat. Not yet July and Kansas City was already hitting 100. Summer was shaping up to be a nightmare. Brutus had kept the house so cold that when I walked out, the humidity condensed on my skin like I was an iced bottle of beer. I was very glad that the departmental Crown Vic had great AC.

Thinking of beer reminded me of just how much I wanted a drink. Not beer. Not after that. I wanted—I needed—something different. More. Just like with Brutus. Just like with my life.

His house was one of many that look just like it, on a street that looks just like many others in Overland Park. According to a lot of the magazines and news channels that keep track of that sort of thing, OP is one of the best places to live in America. That is to say, it has money and jobs and low taxes and always votes for the guy who promises things will stay that way. It's on the Kansas side of the Kansas City metro and where Brutus is a detective. I'm a homicide detective on the other side of the state line, in Missouri. No magazine calls it the best place to live, let alone be a cop. But it's home.

I decided I wouldn't miss coming down here for my morning liaison meetings and lunchtime wrestling matches. I knew I wouldn't miss him bucking into me from behind and yelling, "Hi ho, Silver." He thought that was funny because of my name.

Over, I reminded myself.

I fired up the Ford and threaded it through the suburban maze into the real America, a business loop of colorful fast-food places, banks, and car dealerships. I wasn't thinking about any of that; I was thinking about a drink. An old-fashioned would be good, the perfect kicking-the-ass complement to a son of a bitch of a day. Morning, I reminded myself. It wasn't yet noon, and I was already playing the game of choose the day's drink.

To get my mind off the lonely hunger of my body and the thirst that ran from my gut to just behind my eyes, I tried thinking of Leilani Faber. She had been on my mind for quite a while even though her case had stalled. Other things had come up. Other killings. But she was one that had gotten under my skin.

Leilani was an out-call escort who advertised on the Internet as Mistress Leia. That always made me wonder if she catered to the *Star Wars* crowd. I had printed out a few examples of the ads she had run on a couple of billboard sites. They were all variations of *Your Bitch Goddess!!!*

*Relentless auburn-haired dominatrix is accepting new worshippers. Must be submissive and compliant, ready to be dominated by a strong woman and service her every wish. Relinquish all control to the goddess who will have it no other way. All fetishes welcome; Bondage, Discipline, Humiliation, Smothering, Peggung, Sounding, Forced Fem, GS, CBT, and much more, just beg.*

*Only serious and generous subs need apply.*

Humiliation was obvious. I had to search the Internet for the other fetish specialties. Smothering was sitting on someone's face just to shame them with the act or to force oral sex. Either way the cutting off of breathing was a part of the fun for some people.

Peggung was my favorite. At least in my imagination. It involved a dominant woman wearing a phallus and using it to penetrate the man for either oral or anal sex.

God, I needed a drink.

I imagined myself with a leather harness around my hips, holding in place a penis made of silicone. That led the thinking to the feeling of it rubbing me as I pushed it in. Grabbing hips and watching a lover thrust back under me. It was a fantasy I had never had until I learned about Leilani. It was a darn good fantasy too.

Ever since I had discovered sex, I thought I was kind of worldly, experienced, open. But the one thing I had learned in the past few years was that being open to sex wasn't the same as being open to experience, and everyone seemed to have a more interesting and exciting sex life than I did.

I contacted dispatch and gave my status and ETA. The car was already gloriously cold by the time I hit the freeway. I had to turn the fan down to basic refrigerator level.

Out the front windshield there was a great view of the KC skyline as I rolled into the core and headed for the headquarters building. Things slowed down. The brisk suburban flow to the traffic bled out into the creeping start-and-stop city stuff that twists that little psycho knob I think we all have in our heads. Downtown KCMO has federal courts and municipal courts, a US Marshals office, FBI offices, police

headquarters. Any given weekday around 9th and Locust, most every available parking space will be filled with dark Crown Vics, and I needed to find a spot to put my own. Finally I got a space on street, and it was under a tree. What more could a girl ask? After parking the car, all I had left to do was park my butt behind the desk for an afternoon of paperwork. Who says a cop's life is boring?

Truth is, mine really wasn't, but that was more by circumstance than by plan. Sure, I had joined to catch the bad guys and kick some ass, but so had everyone else, and a lot of us ended up doing traffic for twenty years or, even worse, working fraud, spending months on a criminal investigation that took place entirely through accounting. Not me, though. I would have just found the suspect and killed them outright if I had to follow paper trails to bring them in.

I'm lucky, the rarest of the rare, a female homicide detective. If you ask most of the men I work with, neither luck nor talent would have anything to do with it. Even a lot of other women on the force seem to think I must have some kind of magical oral talents.

To my experience, it's the women who keep their mouths and legs closed who get further along in a good-old-boy job like this. One more reason to kick myself for the time I wasted on Brutus. It felt good ending things with him. Clean. Honest. Then I realized I was giving it an awful lot of thought.

Is this all there is? Unsatisfying sex with someone you don't really like? Work that held so much promise hanging on your shoulders like a stone? I couldn't face that office. Not the building, not the men inside, not the job, and certainly not myself at that job. I needed a drink.

After a quick call to dispatch, I was checked out for the day. I had some time built up and no one waiting on me. I could think about Leilani just as well someplace else as I could in the squad room. Better, even.

*Better with a drink in my hand.*

I had the thought, then tried to erase it by turning the key. The Ford throbbed to life, and I felt it under my thighs. Was it normal to feel this horny? Especially when you'd just had sex? Crappy sex, but still. If nothing else, my squirming libido pushed back the thoughts of getting drunk. Maybe I'll hold myself to one.



## Chapter Three

I had the old-fashioned at Hog Heaven, a Northtown bar. It's not a biker bar exactly, more of a bike-friendly place with a big patio that has a good view of all the motorcycles lined up and showing off outside. In the evening, mostly new Harley Davidsons and a small but good mix of Japanese and domestic cruisers were parked outside in crowded rows.

The riders were more likely to be dentists or salesmen or cops, for that matter, than they were to be what people considered real bikers. You could tell by the bikes. They were all new and polished to a gleam, and they were all factory. Not a homemade paint job or bit of shade-tree customization in the bunch. Probably less than a handful of the bikes in the lot cost under fifteen grand.

The hog in Hog Heaven was about the two-wheeled variety. Mostly, the food was traditional Kansas City barbecue, more cow than pig. Out back, there was a huge smoker you could smell a mile away. I love the burnt ends and the huge cheeseburger served with a heaping mound of home-cut fries. It's been my favorite place since I discovered it, but not for the food. Hog Heaven had a bar to die for with a real bartender who could make anything, including a mean old-fashioned or a White Russian, the drink of choice for the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. Her name was Marsha, and she was right where I wanted her when I walked in. Behind the bar.

"If it isn't my favorite customer," she said.

"Your favorite customer?" I asked. "Is she better-looking than me?"

"No," Marsha said, smiling. "But she is a better dresser."

"Ouch, that hurts."

I looked her up and down behind the counter and saw baggy faded jeans over lace-up, low-heel boots all topped off with a black T-shirt printed with the name of a rockabilly band, Rumblejetts. In the winter it would have been the same thing, except there would have been a flannel shirt over the T-shirt.

I smiled back and said, "I guess I'll have to up my game."

"Honey, you're wearing a pantsuit and panty hose, for God's sake. You got no game."

"Tell me about it," I answered, putting my butt on a stool. "How'd you know I was wearing panty hose?"

"Please," she said, and she rolled her eyes as if that said it all.

"Anyway, I don't think we call them pantsuits anymore."

"Anyway," she said with a big smile, "at least it's not that *Men in Black* thing you were wearing last week. So. What's your drink?"

"I've been thinking about an old-fashioned all day."

"Must have been one bad day. Whiskey or brandy?"

"Whiskey."

"Good thing," she said, turning right to work. "I would've made one with brandy, but I would have had to spit in it."

"Are you sure you should be telling these secrets to the customers?"

"Of course. Everyone should be aware that stupid choices have risks."

"That's kind of you."

"It's all about service, Detective."

"That so?"

At first she didn't answer, just finished up with what she was doing, and then she set the glass down in front of me on a napkin. "That is so. We all service someone."

That made me think of the ad Leilani Faber had posted on the Internet as Mistress Leia. *"Must be submissive and compliant, ready to be dominated by a strong woman and service her every wish."*

"Well, there's service, and there's *service*," I said. Then I took a long sip of the cocktail.

"Don't I know it," Marsha said while I savored. "That's why I'm behind the whiskey bar rather than the legal bar."

"Oh, that's so goood," I said.

"High praise indeed." She did a little curtsy.

I stirred the ice around the drink, letting it get colder.

"What's that mean," I asked, "legal bar?"

"Mixologist by trade and lawyer by training."

"Really?"

"You'd be surprised; most of the best bartenders are lawyers who started the job to work through school and ended up staying with it."

"Why would you stay with bartending if you'd spent all the time and money to go to law school?"

"Because no one tells you when you enroll that there are a lot more lawyers out there than the world needs and not nearly enough good bartenders."

I took another long sip, then raised my glass to Marsha. "Well, if you were half as good at briefs as you are at drinks, the legal world is missing out."

"Oh, honey, you don't even want to know what I do with briefs."

We laughed, but I was glad I was a cop and not a lawyer.

When the glass was empty on my third old-fashioned, Marsha took it away without asking and then whipped up a Shirley Temple. She served it up in an English highball glass with a skewer of fruit and a lime on the lip. It was as colorful as candy, and it tasted like it looked. After the first sip there was no way to hold back a smile.

"That's amazing," I said.

"I'm a bartender," she said, as if that was the answer to everything in the world.

"Well, thanks."

"*De nada.*" She used a bar towel to wipe down the smooth top. "Food's moving now. The bar won't be hopping till tonight, but I always feel better having a lady cop around. A sober lady cop."

I decided to ignore that last part. "This place doesn't strike me as the dangerous type."

She smiled at that. It was a knowing smile of experience.

"Any bar can get dangerous, even the Applebee's down the street. All it takes is the wrong idiot getting the wrong snoot full."

"Well, it's good to be wanted."

"Why not? I like a girl with handcuffs."

Her smile had changed, but I still saw something there that, once again, said experience. Before I could find anything to say back, she burst with a strong, wonderfully happy laugh.

"Oh my God," she said. "You should have seen your face. That was priceless."

"This whole day just seems to have picked up a real theme."

"No worries. And as much as I do love handcuffs, you're not exactly my type."

"Just more of today's theme."

I took a long drink from the Shirley Temple, draining it until I was sucking ice. "Wonderful," I said. "Any chance I can get another just like it?"

"Good?"

"Don't change a thing."

"So tell me about this theme," Marsha said as she went to quickly building the drink. I noticed that her secret was just a splash of pineapple juice to the mix. "Is it about not being the right type?"

I took the glass and brought it straight to my lips. It was just as good as the last one.

"That's part of it," I said when I set the glass back on the bar. "But the troubling part is the handcuffs."

"I don't believe that."

"What?"

"That you have any trouble at all with handcuffs. You do look like the type for that."

"Type for what?"

"You're a lady cop. Tall and pretty, a little butch without being dykey. I bet you kick ass and take names in bed. Makes me almost wish I was one of those pretty girls. I bet you like those really fem types, all dresses and pearls."

I started laughing with the Shirley Temple at my lips, and half a swallow came out my nose and back into the glass.

"You okay, honey?" Marsha asked, taking the glass from my hand.

"Oh no, no, no," I finally said. "That's the funniest thing I've heard in forever." If she could've only seen me this morning.

She dumped the glass and made me another drink.

"I'm straight," I finally managed to say.

Marsha smiled again—grinned, really—and stood back from the bar, using the drink in her hand to gesture up and down her body like she was showing off a ball gown. "So am I," she said. "Mostly. I might have played a few innings for the other team, but it was never the main event."

I picked up the cocktail napkin and dabbed at my upper lip.

"Well, lucky team is all I have to say to that."

She handed over the fresh drink and said, "Damn skippy. But if that's not the problem with handcuffs, what is? Lost your key?"

"No. Cuffs in general. Ropes and whips and, I think, making grown men cry."

"Ohhh, a little bondage, a little rough-and-tumble, leather, and amazing shoes. Now you're talking my language. So what's the problem? Just hurt him if he likes it. You're a tough girl; you can dish it."

"True enough, but it's not about me. It's about a dead hooker who was into that kind of stuff."

"Hard-core?" Marsha's tone had changed; she dropped the jokes and the smile.

"Yeah, and it's a whole other world that everyone seems to know more about than I do."

"Yeah, I think I understand," she said, nodding. "You can't just Google who's into bondage, Kansas City."

"Well, I could. I just don't think it'll do any good."

"You came to the right place. Not because I'm involved. I'm a dabbler at best. A willing amateur and lover of good spankings. Don't ask. But I've bartended a few events." She tilted her head as if to say, *These are beans I don't really want to spill*. "I may have a friend."

"Friends are good things to have."

"And it's good to have a cop owe you a favor."

"That too."

"Do you want to talk to him?"

"Couldn't hurt," I said and lifted my drink in salute before taking a good long sip.

Marsha pulled a cell phone from her pocket and strolled to the other end of the bar to talk. With no conversation, I was actually able to hear the light buzzing in my head from the old-fashioned. One more would have been nice but maybe too much. When she returned, I thought I heard Marsha tell me I had a date.

"What?"

"You've got a date. Tonight at nine thirty. His name is Dr. Anderson Wells, but not that kind of doctor. You're not going to dress like that, are you?"

\* \* \* \*

I wasn't drunk. Three old-fashioneds are just enough to cut a few of the strings that keep me tied up without completely cutting me loose. I was buzzing, though, and decided that a little workout would be just the thing to tame the frustration I was still feeling. It hadn't helped that Marsha told me a bit about the guy she wanted me to meet, and some of the things she said took my imagination back to the realization that everyone has better sex than me.

"*He's a submissive,*" she had said with an inflection that suggested something rare and surprising. "But, and probably more important to you, he's a professor of psychology and writing a book about bondage lifestyles."

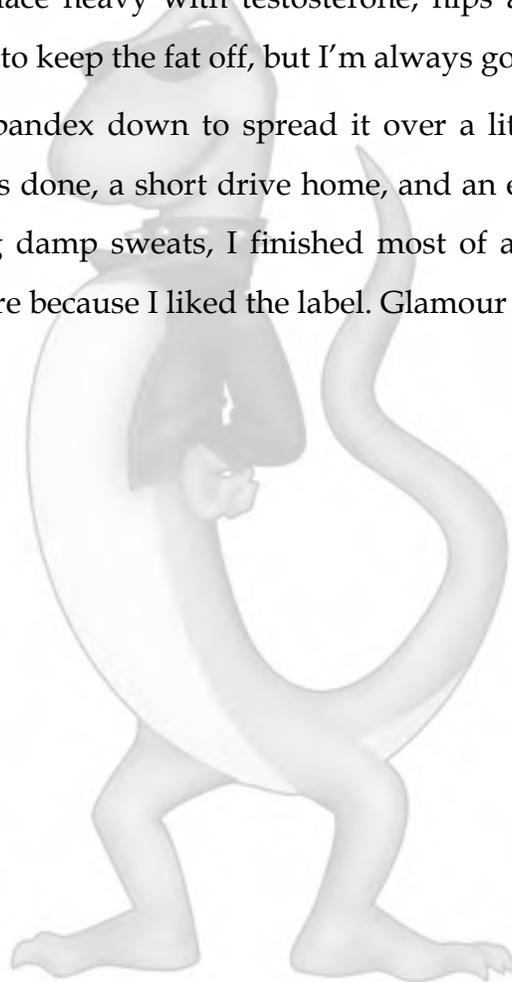
Professor of psychology made me immediately think of tweed jackets with patches on the elbows. Then she told me more about his involvement in the world of bondage. That got a little motor going in my brain. I knew a bit from what Brutus had talked about and shared, but I had always felt like I was on the wrong side. He had told me that I kept trying to be top. Once he had just come right out and told me I was being the man. From what Marsha had told me about the professor, it sounded like he wanted someone else to be the man. I erased the image of elbow patches and imagined him as a prissy guy who lived with his cats. No, thank you.

Oh well, if nothing else, at least I can get exhausted. To do that, I headed over to the community-center pool. Before Hog Heaven, it used to be my home away from home.

In the locker room, I changed into my functional, blue one-piece suit. It's not meant to be either revealing or sexy, but I've had it for years, and there just seems to be a little more me than there was in college. I checked myself out in the mirror, tucking my boobs in, pulling the bottom out, and stuffing my professionally short black hair into a swim cap. Not so bad for thirty-three.

That's another thing most people don't get about women cops; we aren't the size-zeros you see on TV and in movies. Most of us are less than dainty because the job requires a level of body strength that only comes with body mass. If you're ninety-eight pounds, you won't be the one cuffing a three-hundred-pound Aryan Brotherhood biker type. So I'm a woman, not a girl in body type, almost six feet in stockings and one hundred sixty-five pounds. The only really unfortunate thing about the weight is the distribution. In a workplace heavy with testosterone, hips and boobs attract a lot of attention. So I work hard to keep the fat off, but I'm always going to look like a woman.

I pulled the blue spandex down to spread it over a little more of my womanly assets. An hour later, laps done, a short drive home, and an early dinner alone in front of the television wearing damp sweats, I finished most of a bottle of red wine that I bought at the grocery store because I liked the label. Glamour all the way around.



## Chapter Four

It hit me, probably around seven thirty, when I had just woken back up with the taste of a monkey house in my mouth, and I was thinking about going back to Hog Heaven for a drink and telling myself that I wouldn't, that Marsha had set up that meeting. My date, she called it. Then the other thing she had said struck me. *"You're not going to dress like that, are you?"*

When Marsha had said that, I had thought for a moment that she was confused and had actually set me up with a date. To my relief, and her endless amusement, it was just a meeting with a friend of hers who was deeper into the lifestyle that I needed to know about. But she hadn't been kidding about the clothes, suggesting I wear something that would give me a little more "credibility."

*"What's more credible than a dark blue Liz Claiborne suit?"* I had asked.

Marsha had laughed again, as if I was just the funniest woman she'd ever met, and then she gave me some very specific hints about what to wear and why. They made a lot of sense, but her suggestions were really much more suited to someone else's closet.

I went to *my* closet and started digging.

It took a while, but I found a couple of things and matched others in a way I had never even thought about before. Once I had my clothing planned, I showered and brushed my teeth three times. Then, just for good measure, I showered again, turning the water to cold and giving myself a jolt.

Once dry, I slipped into my best black panty hose and a black leather pencil skirt. Don't ask me how long that'd been hanging around, but it was much snuggier than I remembered. Up top I added my lowest-cut bra and covered that with a slightly sheer white top and covered that with a black leather bolero jacket. I felt like a biker librarian.

I went the extra mile and added makeup that was a lot more forceful than I would usually wear with smoky eyes and bright red lipstick.

"This had better be worth it," I said to no one in particular as I checked myself in the car's mirror again.

I said the same thing to Marsha when I got back to the bar.

"Oh, it was so worth it," she said. "Turn around and let me see."

Hog Heaven was a different place now; food was taking a far backseat to the bar. It was louder too, full of people and music and eyes of all sorts.

"Come on," she urged, "do it, or no drinks for you."

I stepped back from the bar and self-consciously turned a full circle.

"Oh my God," Marsha said, loudly enough to be heard over the whole room. "Those shoes are skyscrapers."

"So," I said, "does this hit the mark?"

"Come here."

I came over to the edge of the bar, and Marsha reached up to open my top button.

"That just split the arrow, Robin Hood."

"I need a drink."

"Hit me with your best shot."

"Gimmie a zombie," I said.

"Are you sure? That's a lot of drink."

"I'm going to need a lot of drink if I'm going to have this conversation."

Marsha raised her eyebrows but said, "You got it. I saved you a spot." She pointed to a small booth in the back that had a chair upended on it. "Thought you could use a cozy place to talk."

Not that any part of the bar was quiet, but it was the most private. The booth looked like an afterthought. When someone noticed an empty bit of floor, they said put

a booth here. It had high wooden backs and divider so it looked like a cave. Add in the fact that it faced away from the main seating area with a nice view of the emergency exit, and you had private but without the cozy.

"It looks like a place for a mugging," I said.

"I'll put a candle on the table," she answered instantly. "It'll be *intimate*."

The way she said the word made me want to ask a few questions, but Marsha was already on her way, lighting a candle in a glass vase and putting it on the table. As soon as she had it placed, she turned and waved at someone behind me.

Anderson Wells was not at all like I had expected, and he wore not a bit of tweed. He was tall, still taller than I was in the heels, but slim. If he hadn't been standing so straight, you might have called him gaunt, but his bearing suggested athletically thin rather than underfed. It was the face that struck me most, though, sharply angled, already darkening with the day's beard, but it was nonetheless bright because of his lively brown eyes. Over it all was a shaved head that was almost elegant in its smooth shine. Could a man wax his head? The style wasn't a new affectation; the warm tone of his tanned face seamlessly carried over his skull.

I realized that I had built up an image of a mousy little man who blushed and stuttered when he got flustered. And I imagined him always flustered.

I offered my hand, and he shook it firmly without trying to show his strength, but he did hang on a bit long, I noticed.

"You want a drink?" Marsha asked him.

He looked at me with eyebrows raised, and I rattled my glass to show I was taken care of. He just nodded at Marsha, and she went to work.

"You're over there." She pointed again to the dark booth that the candle tried hard to cheer up, then set his drink on the bar. "Have fun, you two."

"So, what is it you'd like to know?" he asked as soon as we were seated. His voice was confident, and again I realized that what I had expected was something else.

"Everything. Right now I know nothing about any of it. But I have a case with a girl who seems to have been into the bondage thing."

He watched my lips as I talked. Really watched. The lipstick had been a good idea.

"The bondage thing." He smiled and held up his hands in a gesture of gripping something like air. "That's a big thing. It's a whole world for the people in it." He nodded up over his shoulder at a TV high on the wall showing a baseball game. "Think of it like if you were asking one of those die-hard sports guys, the ones who know everything and every player, to tell you about the sports thing. See what I mean?"

"Or asking one of those science-fiction guys to tell you about *Star Trek*?" I said.

Anderson laughed hard. It was one of those you-surprised-me gut laughs that you can't fake. Then he said, "Oh, I like you."

He did too. I could tell. And I was liking him. We spent over an hour with Anderson tutoring me on the basics of fetish lifestyles, and we could have spent days longer. I learned a lot more in our talk than I had ever picked up from Brutus. He was just as much an amateur as I was.

What I did learn was that bondage was not just bondage. People involved called it BDSM, for bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism and everything in between. There were a lot of distinctions and a whole special language to cover the varieties of activities within the BDSM world. Doms or Dommies were male and female dominants. Those in the submissive role were subs. They even used capitalization to make the point. There were slaves who were more sub than subs, and switches who could be Dom or sub depending on the situation and mood, I guess. Some are sadists, some masochists, pain freaks, control freaks, leather freaks, and rubber freaks. But the one distinction Anderson really tried to make was the one between people who played at it and the people who lived it.

"I'm not really sure I get that," I told him. My head was buzzing with the half of my zombie I had already swallowed. My face was probably a little flushed, but not all the heat I was feeling was coming from the alcohol. Anderson was an intense man,

looking right into my eyes as he spoke, but he had a way of doing so that wasn't challenging or aggressive. It was more open. He was smart too, without any smugness about it. He was who he was and not trying to impress anyone.

"It's like the sports thing." He nodded back up to one of the TVs. "Some people never miss a game and can tell you every stat. They invest in their sport and their team, right? Then you have the guys who watch for fun. There are casual fans and people living for the sport and everything in between. But here's what's important to your case. BDSM tends to attract the people who go all the way. The obsessive and meticulous. They define their lives around the codes of the lifestyle and sneer at the people who see the leather and whips, the handcuffs and rope as kinky sex toys. It's not a game to the people living it."

"Okay," I said, "but how does that help me in my investigation?"

His eyes were a deep brown that lightened when he talked about things he cared about. I hadn't noticed that he had pushed forward and was sitting as close to me as the table would allow. A few minutes ago I had thought he didn't care about impressing anyone. I was wrong. He wanted to impress me.

For just an instant he glanced down, then back up to my face. It wasn't rude or indiscreet, but all of a sudden I was aware of how hard my nipples were. I sat up a little straighter, inviting him to look.

He did, and then he shifted in his seat, and I felt his foot bump mine. Another invitation?

"I think you're looking in the wrong place," he said.

"What?" I pulled my foot away from his and felt a tiny pang of disappointment somewhere south of my belly button.

"Your investigation. You'd only come to me if you were looking at someone in the BDSM world for the killing."

My face flushed harder, spreading a blush down my throat and chest. I felt the heat, and I was sure Anderson was seeing it. His eyes were on my nipples, and I let my

foot return to touch his but without my shoe. His eyes came back up to mine, and I was sure he was picturing my breasts. I wondered if he was picturing them just bare or in some sexy getup. Was he wondering how they would feel in his hands or his mouth?

"I'm looking at every possible angle," I said, getting back to work. "There's not a lot to go on, though, and the bondage connection is pretty obvious."

"Too obvious," he answered. Was his voice just a shade rougher? "There are really only two ways of seeing it from my point of view. Just a coincidence. The hooker was killed because she was a hooker and BDSM was just on her menu. Or someone wanted to make a point about the BDSM. People really in the lifestyle are all about power and restraint. What little you told me about your victim suggests a kind of rage. That kind of loss of control would be a huge red flag in a bondage community. Everyone would know to stay away."

I put my bare foot on his knee, wishing I had worn a loose skirt. It would feel good to have my legs open under the table.

"So you think people who tie one another down and use whips on bare skin are above killing?"

His knees moved apart. It was a careful but definite invitation that I took.

"No. I think people who tie others and whip them or lock lovers in cages or put them in a collar and leash are operating on a level of trust. They have their rage under control. They have to."

Anderson's eyes fluttered, and his hips jerked in a tiny spasm of desire, but other than that, he accepted my foot on his thigh calmly.

"The person who did that to the girl was most likely someone who had lost control. So from my point of view, the bondage was either a fantasy for someone who didn't really understand it, your usual hooker bondage customer, *or* it was part of a message. What's more likely?"

Anderson was hard. Using my toes I could feel the upward arc of his erection, tracing it up to his belt until my foot covered the length of it. I pressed gently with my whole foot, grinding his hardness and feeling the heat of it against my sole.

His breath caught in his chest, and then he said, "Miss Silver... Detective..."

All of a sudden Marsha was standing beside the table and asking, "Everything all right here?" She glanced at my drink, judging it with a professional eye, and then to Anderson she said, "Another drink?"

He nodded.

"You guys want any food?"

I realized as soon as she had said it how hungry I was. The little diet microwave thing I'd had at home wasn't going to carry me. Anderson nodded in my direction as if to say it was up to me, and I ground my foot onto his hot erection as I said, "How about one of those big chef's salads? You'd share with me, wouldn't you?"

You would have had to be watching his eyes pretty closely to see the struggle and the flash of pleasure within them. I was. I liked it.

"That sounds good to me," he said.

And Marsha was off.

"Tell me about being a submissive man," I said.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered without a trace of irony. "It's easier to show you."

"How?"

I had never noticed his hand leave the table, but I felt it stroke my foot then. One finger, running from ankle, along the curve of instep, to my toes.

"Just tell me what you want. I want what will make you pleased with me and what will make you feel good."

"That easy?"

"It can be as easy or as difficult as you like."

There was nothing about his smile that suggested he was trying to be cute. In fact everything about his attitude and his body language was genuine. He was having a good time, and that helped me have one too. I got the impression that he had a good time pretty much wherever he went.

"Do you know what the difference is between sexy and kinky?" he asked with a twitch at the corner of his mouth that telegraphed a laugh.

"No," I answered. "But I bet you're going to tell me."

"Sexy is when you use a feather while making love. Kinky is when you use the whole chicken."

It took me a second, because the smile stayed in his eyes and didn't break on his lips. Then I laughed, and he laughed with me. Anderson Wells didn't feel so much like a stranger anymore, and it seemed perfectly natural to sit there with my foot on his crotch.

"Feathers," I said, still laughing. "I don't know about chickens, but I could use more feathers in my life."

I urged my foot deeper into the valley between his thighs, rubbing his erection to make sure he understood what I was saying.

He did.

"That's kind of my job," Anderson said, "finding out what you need in your life."

I pressed my foot harder, rubbing his penis up and down through the soft khaki of his trousers. This time he pushed his hips forward into the contact.

"Just me," I asked, "or anyone?"

"Would you be doing this to just anyone?" His eyes were on mine, and they carried a weight. He wanted this as much as I did, but that didn't make it meaningless to him.

"Take it out," I told him.

There was nothing coy, no asking what I was talking about. There was just the glint of pleasure in his eyes, then compliance. He reached under the table and opened his pants, pulling out his erection, and then he held my foot and guided it back to where we both wanted it to be. He caressed me as my foot took all the sensation it could from him.

A part of my mind was trying to tell me to be ashamed. When I was a girl, my friends would have said something like this was slutty. That's what they would have called me: slut. The word was the high school scarlet A. But women aren't girls anymore, are they? Every other part of my mind was finding joy. Not just in the touch but in the adventure of choice. This was my choice. My action. My beautiful heart-pounding moment.

I curled my toes around the shaft of his cock, then found the head and stroked the sensitive flesh on the underside. I used the fabric of my hose to enhance the friction and watched every bit of pleasure that crawled up Anderson's body.

"Here you go." Marsha slid the salad and plates onto the table. She placed a fresh drink in front of Anderson.

He was sitting, as solid as and shaped a bit like Rodin's *The Thinker* statue with his arm closest to Marsha propped up on the table.

"Anything else I can bring you?" she asked.

Anderson shook his head quickly, and I squeezed his penis with my toes. He stopped and then looked at me.

"We could use some feathers," I said.

Anderson and I laughed together. Marsha knew an inside joke when she heard it, but she was still game.

"No feathers," she said, "but I have lots of little umbrellas." She winked and left us alone.

That would have been the moment to back down. It was the moment I could slip my foot back into my shoe where it belonged and play it all as a joke without looking completely foolish. Backing down felt too much like running to Brutus or any other man in my life and being his good girl. Not this time. This time I'm a woman, and I'm taking my moment.

"Do it," I told Anderson.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. Then he gripped my stockinged foot hard and rubbed it up and down his erection.

Something in my heart broke free. It was like an idea, half-formed and carried around for years, was finally understood. I could take what I wanted and still be desirable. All of a sudden, giving a footjob under a bar table seemed like the most beautiful thing in the world. I pictured myself as a girl, getting my hands on my first cock. I felt all that same arousal and promise. There was no innocence, just youthful awe that being naughty felt so good.

A sound called me back to the here and now. Anderson had half grunted and half moaned. It was a bedroom sound, out of place in our little booth. I watched his face and body with a growing sense of enlightenment. As good as it very obviously felt for him, this was not the same act that I would see in most other men. He was giving what I wanted and taking pleasure in that. How many times had I been in that position with men and gotten nothing in return?

Working my toes, I gripped and stroked. Anderson made sure I had complete access, putting the head of his cock right into the little gap between my big and second toes, letting me pinch or caress as I saw fit.

The contact and situation were having their effect on my body as well. I'm a girl who gets very wet in her arousal, and I was drenched by then. On one hand, I wished I had worn panties under my hose; on the other hand, I was so glad I hadn't. As my legs moved, the moisture lubricated my swollen labia against the nylon. Every time I stroked my foot on Anderson, there was an echo of the pleasure in my sex. I could smell

the heat and musk coming from under my skirt, and I wondered if Anderson could as well. I hoped so.

God, he was a handsome man. He was a handsome man I was fucking with my foot under the table in a public bar. They used to say, *I am woman; hear me roar*. I got it now. It occurred to me that someone here could end up with a broken heart. Immediately I pushed that idea aside. I had fallen in love with the moment, that's all.

I don't think at that point either one of us noticed that we had stopped talking. With words, at least. He was holding my foot against him and quietly thrusting against it until I could feel his hot pulse in my soft instep. My mouth and my pussy were both hot, wet, and open. Both were hungry as well for the taste of his seed.

I wanted...I wanted a lot of things. I wanted to come. I was so ready and wet. I wanted to open my thighs and let Anderson Wells watch as I pushed my fingers into my dripping sex. I wanted to hold his hair and make him drink me as I cursed every filthy word I knew at him. He wanted a woman to tell him what to do, and I was feeling pretty bossy by then.

"Do you know how wet I am?" I asked, hoping to shock him a little.

"Yes," he answered, and his voice was definitely rougher with his arousal. "I think so."

He jerked his hips hard, and my leg followed the motion, opening me up a bit more. A thick, warm dollop of wetness flowed between my cheeks. The tight opening of my bottom was as wet as my pussy. God, I wanted to be touched.

Sitting there in that booth, teasing and playing, made me feel more alive than all the time I had spent with men like Brutus. As a matter of fact, the joy, the pure sexiness of being in this booth with Anderson was erasing all the frustration and anger the day had been heaping on me.

I felt good. I felt in control. I felt sexy and horny and slutty and beautiful. I felt exactly like what my girl self, holding her first cock, had always imagined a woman was

supposed to feel. All it took was giving an under-the-table footjob to someone I didn't really know.

"Do you want to fuck me, Anderson?" I looked right in his eyes as I asked the question. I had never asked anyone that so directly before.

"You're playing with me," he said.

"Do you?"

"I want so much more than that."

It was my turn, and the breath caught in my throat. He was right. I was playing. I wanted this, but if I was honest, I would have said I wouldn't want it to happen again. But he wanted more.

Too late, I decided. Too late to worry about feelings and tomorrows. I wanted what I wanted, and he was willing to give. It was my turn to take. I bent my toes over the head of his cock, splayed as wide as I could get them.

"Do it," I said, and it was as much a command as my desire.

He understood and started to rub against me more rhythmically.

"Put your hands on the table."

He did but kept working his hips, urgently fucking my toes.

I made sure he was looking, and then I reached into my top and pinched my nipple through my bra. Cursing the tight skirt that kept my hands away, I twisted the sensitive tip of my breast harder, and I watched Anderson watch me. He swallowed hard.

"Please," he said.

I thought about saying no, but I wanted it too. I said, "As soon as you can."

He closed his eyes, letting me know he was giving in to the feeling.

"No." I stopped him. "Keep your eyes open. Keep looking at me."

He did, even though he had to keep renewing the effort when the sensations got too strong. The rhythmic thrust of his hips became erratic, and tremors spread over his body as he approached the final moment of control.

"Please?" he said again.

It was important to him to be given permission. I was just beginning to understand that that made it my orgasm. It was a situation I found I liked.

"Do it."

Hips pressed to me, and his cock throbbed against my foot.

"Anderson," I said. "Do it. Do it now. I want you to come for me."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

He'd barely gotten the words out when he bucked against my foot again. After that, he began moaning a low growl in the back of his throat. A hot jet of his cum pulsed between my toes, coating the nylons and wetting me.

It was thick and slick, and I felt like I owned every drop. Four more spurts of his passion splashed on me, each one weaker than the last. When his orgasm passed its peak, I rubbed the wetness up and down his shaft, then pulled my foot away. I tucked myself back into my shoe, cherishing the warmth between my toes. It was like my little secret. A bit of stolen passion no one else would ever know about.

All of a sudden it was like a dam burst, and we started laughing. The tight looks on our faces blossomed with the thrill of our shared crime. All of a sudden everything was normal.

We spent the rest of our time just having fun and sharing the salad. Anderson told me about teaching and his research into bondage communities. I told him about being a cop and surprised myself. Telling him about it, sharing with someone who had fresh eyes, I felt kind of good about my job again for the first time in a while.

The whole night had been something completely different for me. Yes, I had been drinking, and *yes*, I had been in a bad place that needed something bright in it, but that

didn't change the rightness of it. That's what I kept telling myself anyway. It was just one night of fun, not like I was going to get involved.

At the same time I wasn't going to let it end before I was ready. I asked Anderson for his address. That is to say, when we were finished and ready to leave, I told him, "I'll come to your place. Just give me your address."

I'm not sure if the look on his face was relief or annoyance, but he gave the address. The look changed when I kissed him in the parking lot. It was a real, honest-to-goodness, toe-curling kiss with my tongue dancing on his. Then he looked happy. Happy in the way only a man who knows he's about to do really naughty things with a willing partner can look.

\* \* \* \*

Want to know what happens next?

<http://www.loose-id.com/safe-words.html>

