

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

HANDS-ON JUSTICE

Laurie Terson

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

HANDS-ON JUSTICE

By Laurie Terson

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two naked men lie facedown on a flat rock, the man on top has his left arm on top of the lower man's head. The lower man has both hands under his head. The upper man may be restraining the lower man, preventing him from escaping.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He used to be a damn good agent until he threw it all away. He's been on the run for two years, but we finally pinned down his location. They sent me to bring him in. I've got him, but he's fighting me every step of the way. He won't go in willingly, and I won't go without him. Oh, and I'd really like a gun fight between them at some point...

A couple of notes: No ménage or paranormal please. A little D/s is ok (perhaps even encouraged) but no hardcore BDSM. HEA not required, but at least a HFN would be nice.

Sincerely,

Ariadne

Story Info

Genre: action, contemporary

Tags: law enforcement, bounty hunter, outdoor sex, enemies to lovers

Content warnings: some graphic violence

Word count: 20,529

HANDS-ON JUSTICE

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CHAPTER ONE

July 2010, 0200 hours – Stateside, somewhere in a U.S./Mexico border town

No moon hung in the sky, making the night overcast, dark and sultry. Storms in the Gulf of Mexico had brought showers earlier in the evening. Without a breeze, the moisture steamed off the pavement and the humidity hung like a breathable blanket over the sleeping city. The citizens rested as easily in their beds as they could in this crime-riddled town. Tonight, they slept unaware of the movement of black-clothed figures easing their way out of the few shadows surrounding the derelict warehouse on the east end of town.

The governmental alphabet soup was cooking tonight. Ten men total, two each from the FBI, ICE, DHS, the local Sheriff's Department, and last but not least, the DEA. It had taken almost two years to get the intel they needed from the various informants, stakeouts, and wiretaps. A raid on one of Mexico's biggest drug lords took a lot of planning.

The team all wore full tactical gear, which held the heat like a mother. Drops of sweat rolled from under their helmets, down their faces, soaking into the black T-shirts they had on under their body armor. None of them gave away their positions by even a twitch. Huddled by the edge of the door with the team leader, five of them waited for a sign from him to surge through it. The other four crawled around the back of the building, waiting for the sound of the door being busted in as their signal to move.

Crouched on one knee, DEA Agent Justice Thornton—JT to his team—listened for any sound that shouldn't be there. Other than the muted murmurs of activity inside, and the far-off barking of a dog, he didn't hear a thing. The quiet scared Justice, it reminded him of how still a forest got when a predator lurked close.

His gut burned. Years spent as a sniper in the Army taught him to listen to his gut. He felt again the tingle of his spidey-senses—they had gone into overdrive with the change of personnel on his nine-man raid team. He still had no idea why Agent Adrian Guzman had been switched to his team. The only reason a member got pulled days before an assignment was due to illness or injury. Neither applied here, since no one on his team had either problem.

But he had been ordered by the higher-ups to accept this substitution, and he always obeyed direct orders. Everything in him said this mission was FUBAR—he just hoped no one got killed. With a quick glance back at the man behind him, he realized that some of his discomfort came from the fact that he and Agent Guzman—Guz to his friends—were more than fellow agents. Just a little under two years ago they'd become lovers, and had been off and on ever since.

With his left hand raised, Justice fanned his fingers, curling them down one at a time. The team knew to rush the door when he got down to just his fist. His second in command hit the door with the battering ram, popping it open on the first try. Immediately, shouts in English and Spanish sounded, along with the pop of gunfire.

Scanning the room in front of him, JT could see all the drug cartel men were down, either dead or on their way to being dead. So far, his team was unharmed. He motioned for the two junior agents to secure the room and keep an eye on the dead. Pairing off, the rest of the men moved out toward the other doors that their intel had said they'd find.

JT needed to secure the rest of the building before assessing the merchandise that was on the tables. With silent steps, he went up the staircase to where the office was reported to be, Guzman behind him. Reaching the top, JT silently indicated that he would bust the door, going in low and to the right. Guz nodded toward the left. With the slight nod of Guzman's head, JT straightened up and kicked the door in, diving to the right. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Guz do the same in the other direction.

There was no sound in the room. What the hell? Coming up on one knee, he made a quick scan of the room. It ran across the full length of the building,

and toward the far end, closer to the window, sat a table. There was no one there.

Their intelligence had said this was the money room, the place where they'd find Miguel Castaneda, known as *El Ángel de la Muerte*, the Angel of Death. He started as an enforcer for his uncle's drug empire, then the rumors had it he killed his way to being the boss. In the room, Thornton could see that someone had been there recently. Whoever it was had left in a hurry, though.

Stacks of money, still in their ten-thousand-dollar bundles, sat in neat little rows marching across the table. As he walked to the table, a quick glance showed more than two hundred thousand dollars there. Chump change to a man like Castaneda, but it was more than he'd want to lose to the DEA. Rumor was that he disliked losing at anything or to anyone.

Lost in his thoughts for just those few seconds, the kiss of a cold steel gun barrel against the base of his skull caused him to freeze. He then heard Guzman's voice in his ear, *tsking*, telling him to not even think about trying anything, that they both had the same training. That he would be dead if he even twitched. Then Guzman's hand came around to remove his communications earbud, and with a hard yank pulled the microphone attached to his collar loose, too, tossing both to the far end of the table. The hand came back, taking his AR-15 out of his hand, and sliding it next to the earbud. Next, it reached into his thigh holster and removed his SIG Sauer. After tossing it to join the rest of his gear, next came the SOG knife from his vest. The pressure from the gun barrel disappeared as Guzman stepped back. JT had no idea where the traitor was standing, and it was obvious now that Guzman *was* a traitor.

"Why, Guz? All I want to know is why?" Although he hadn't turned around to verify it, he knew that Guz had been holding the gun to the base of his neck. "None of it was real, was it? I'm just the willing patsy in all of this? Are you even gay, or did you just take one for the team, pardon the pun, to get in good with me?" JT couldn't believe he'd been played for such a fool.

When he heard an exhale behind him, he waited for Guz to give him an explanation. Instead he heard the sound of a door opening behind him. It

couldn't have been the door they came through, so there must have been a door on that wall that didn't show on the blueprints they'd been given. Damn him for not noticing. But then he'd thought Guzman had his back. How many other surprises did this building hold? JT heard Spanish spoken behind him, telling someone to close and bar the door. Steps were heard again and the sounds of two doors being closed reached his ears. When another noise reached his ears as well, he assumed it was the outer door being barred. Footsteps—dress shoes, going by the crisp *click* of the heels—made their unhurried way across the room, coming around on his left-hand side.

Castaneda stood on the far side of the table smirking at him, and his two bodyguards stood behind him, one off of each of his shoulders. For someone who was the head of one of the most bloodthirsty and ruthless cartels in Mexico, at five foot nine inches tall, he didn't look all that intimidating. Until you looked into his eyes, and saw a cold look of pure evil. JT didn't see any humanity left.

“So, Agent Guzman, everything you said was true.” He placed his hands on the table between him and the two agents. Miguel Castaneda leaned forward, the smile on his face not reassuring in the least. A shiver ran up JT's back. The insincere smile was malevolent. Looked like it was enough to unnerve Guz, too, as he heard the sounds of nervous shifting.

With an ingratiating simper, Guz spoke up. “Señor Castaneda, *Jefe*, I delivered an agent like I promised I would. To show proof of my loyalty to you. I have done all that you've asked me to.”

“Yes, you did.” Castaneda walked to the end of the table where JT's earbud, AR-15 and SIG Sauer were. He casually started playing with JT's discarded property as he talked. “Your information wasn't as reliable as I hoped it would be. I have five dead men downstairs and I'm about to lose product. I don't like to lose.” Cocking his head, sporadic gunfire was heard coming from downstairs. “Ah, yes that would be the rest of my men, so maybe more than five men. Maybe some of your team as well, *si?*” Pausing, he picked up the earbud and flipped it a few times in his hand before setting it back down next to the handgun. Casually picking up the SIG Sauer, he said, “I don't like to lose anything or anyone.” He made a show of looking the gun over, then

putting it down. Reaching into his pants pocket, Castaneda pulled what looked like a backup gun, a Glock 23. It wasn't one of JT's.

Raising the Glock to chest level, he pointed it in the direction of both Guzman and JT. "You recognize your gun yet, Guzman? It was so easy for *Agente* Thornton to remove from your house."

JT's gut was screaming FUBAR now in an insistent voice—this was going to blow up in a major way. But was he going to be the one taking the bullet, or was it Guz—or both? That Guz had called Castaneda "*Jefe*" was a very telling clue. Now the question became, how long had he been working for them? It was unlikely that it was a coincidence that Adrian had come on to him about the same time JT had started gathering the needed information to put this operation in motion. Guess he'd been stupid thinking that it had been real. When Guz asked to stay on the down-low, he thought it was because of work. Guess he knew better now.

The sound of Thornton's team's footsteps pounding up the stairs caused a knee-jerk reaction in everyone in the room. Castaneda's bodyguards started yelling in more Spanish as they raced toward what appeared to be a blank wall. Castaneda turned toward JT as he backed away. "And you, you are of use to me, as the man who gunned down a fellow officer. As the dead rat... no, it is mole, correct? Yes, as the mole in your office, you will be a small use when dead. You, *agente*, you are killed as the brave Guzman takes his last dramatic breath. It is, how you say, loose ends tied up? *Sí*, yes, *agente*?" Castaneda pulled the trigger of Guzman's gun and fired a single shot at Guzman, nailing him right between the eyes. With a calculating smile that twisted his lips, Castaneda shook his head ruefully. "*Agente*, that is now one problem I no longer must worry about."

The dead weight of Guzman's falling body started to pull JT down, he went with the motion since it took him out of Castaneda's line of fire. As JT hit the floor, he rolled under the table, hoping for a small measure of shielding. Fuck, he had to get out of here. Running through what he'd just heard, his brain reached the conclusion that he'd been set up too well—his team was going to believe that he killed Guz. He also didn't think Castaneda was going to stay and explain. *El Ángel* and his men were busy spraying the door with

gunfire as they kept backing up to that blank wall. Out of the corner of his eye, JT caught the sliding of a panel start to open. Fuck, something else that hadn't been on the blueprints he'd gotten.

Seeing his chance, JT did a visual check of the windows. He didn't want to die in the crossfire; better a flying leap out of the middle window that should land him in a trash Dumpster in the alley, if he remembered the layout correctly. As the door crashed open, JT took the running, flying leap out of the window. A last look back showed his team entering and no sign of Castaneda. *Fuck!* But JT decided that getting out of the window with his life and not losing it hitting the ground took precedence over seeing how the chaos in the room finished.

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day, May, 2013 – Somewhere in the Appalachian Mountains

Scratching at his face, JT wondered again why the hell men grew beards. It did nothing but itch, catch food and drink, and if he wasn't careful it got stuck in the zipper of his jacket.

He peered into the small mirror of his postage stamp-sized bathroom. He almost had to stand in the bathtub to wash his hands. He stroked his hand down the length of his beard. After the three years he'd been growing it, it now reached his chest, and his hair was even longer, well past his shoulders. It had taken a lot of getting used to, going from his military high-and-tight to what looked back at him in the mirror now. Even his own mother wouldn't have recognized him.

Both the hair and the beard helped him to blend in here in this rural part of the Appalachian Mountains, as did his overalls and flannel shirts. But damn, he was getting tired of the hair. Maybe it was time to get rid of the scruff and start over again. He thought he'd gotten to know most of the locals well enough now for it to not be a problem. Reaching for the scissors, he made the first snip of his beard.

Living here, he'd figured out this was the kind of place where if you didn't bother people, they didn't bother you. In fact, most were more than ready to shoot your happy ass if you got too close to their property. Not having anyone butt into his business worked just fine for JT. Strangers were not welcome in any manner, but if one showed up—well, then the locals all had your back. Usually with a double barrel shotgun in the stranger's face.

JT understood that there had to be bodies buried in the hills surrounding him. Lawmen didn't make calls out here, mainly because they'd end up getting a butt-load of buckshot in their britches, and that hadn't changed for at least a couple hundred years from the stories he'd heard. The folks were still heard to mutter comments about the *durn revenueurs* under their breath. JT was glad he'd been forced to come to some of the family reunions over the years. While he still wasn't considered a local, he was given more leeway than others.

He'd been living in his Great-Grandpa Thornton's little one-room cabin for about two years. Before that, he'd spent twelve months crisscrossing the country to make sure nobody could track him. Lucky for him, he'd been smart enough to always have another identity and matching bank accounts at the ready. In his previous line of work, it had been as necessary as breathing. You never knew when you'd need to disappear in undercover work, and disappearing with ready cash always worked out better. In this outback, so far away from regular civilization and all things civilized, barter or cash worked best.

He was also fortunate that Great-Grandpa Thornton had seen fit to use some of his money to put in plumbing. There was a septic tank attached to the two-seater outhouse, so he had the luxury of flushing the toilet. The story was that Great-Gramps hadn't wanted to flaunt his money around by installing the toilets inside the house, so in the dead of winter you still had to freeze your sorry ass off out in the cold. You just didn't have to hold your breath from the stench while trying to peel said ass off the frozen toilet seat. Which had always made JT wonder, did frozen shit stink? Hey, inquiring minds and all that. Still didn't keep his ass warm in the middle of a snowstorm, though.

Okay, he'd been alone too long now. He was thinking about frozen shit. Instead, he should be working on who the other mole had been—because another mole much higher up the food chain could be the only explanation for Guzman being inserted into his team.

Someone had to make the order for the switch—Guzman couldn't have done that himself, he didn't have the authority or the access. JT hadn't thought to check where the order had come from, he'd just accepted it. It would also explain why Guzman had been killed. The excuse that Guzman had caused Castaneda to lose product and men didn't fly—in *El Ángel's* world that was just the cost of doing business. If Guzman had been on *El Ángel's* payroll for almost two years or more, that was an investment of time and money wasted by killing him.

Nope, Guzman's death didn't make sense. There had to be another mole in the office, one that Guzman knew about, and he had been killed to protect that source. There was no way *El Ángel de la Muerte* could have known the raid

was happening. None of the team had known the location until JT texted them just a few hours before the operation. Only he knew what the signal was to start the raid, and yet Castaneda been waiting for them. So there were two mysteries to solve—the reason for Guzman’s death, and how Castaneda found out about the raid.

It had been three years, but damn, it still felt like yesterday.

CHAPTER THREE

Conrad Walters, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Tucson office, stared at the light blinking on his desk phone, line five. It didn't have a ring tone, it just blinked in a bright, flashing red. It was his private line, which very few had the number for, and most of them were not the kind of people that he would want to hear from. His heart rate jumped to a level that his doctor would be worried about, if he ever heard about it. This increase in beats-per-minute wasn't from fear though—he was hoping that this was the call he'd been waiting for. The call giving him the information he needed to take down Justice Thornton, the man who'd been a pain in his ass for the last three years.

Hell, he was no more than a pencil-pusher these days, and the whole office knew it. His own agents didn't even want him as backup, it had been so long since he'd been in the field. If he took down Thornton, it would be his ticket for the promotion that had been denied him, and he'd finally get what he thought he deserved. Every single one of the promotions that would have gotten him out of this stinking-ass town of Tucson had been given to someone else for one stupid reason or another.

When he finally answered the phone, the heavily accented voice of a native Spanish speaker just gave him the name of a place smack in the middle of hillbilly country, in the Appalachian Mountains. Then it told him to meet them for lunch at a bar in Rio Rico, just this side of the border checkpoint, to get the rest of the information he needed.

“I can't be seen meeting you,” hissed Conrad. “Do you realize what would happen if I'm seen by anyone?” Sweat was starting to gather along his forehead as he imagined it. This wasn't how these things were supposed to go.

Laughter met his statement, followed a *click* and then a dial tone buzzing in his ear. *Shit!*

A few minutes later, he strode out of the building that housed his office. He'd told his secretary that he had a dental appointment and then he would be at lunch. Crap, yes, he'd be at lunch, but he'd be risking everything he'd been working for with this meeting in a shit-hole cantina near the Mexican border—

a meeting that no one could know about, given the person he was going to see. Hopefully, that close to the border, the place would be mostly locals only in the middle of the week.

Why the stupid, arrogant jackass needed a face-to-face was beyond him. Was Castaneda wanting to see how high he could make him jump, pulling the puppet strings? He couldn't be seen with the known top assassin for Castaneda. *Tres Dedos* was as well known as Castaneda was in these parts for this meeting to mean anything other than what it did—that Conrad worked for Castaneda. And how the hell did *Tres Dedos* keep getting across the border in the first place? How far a reach did *El Ángel de la Muerte* have? How many agents in how many different agencies were owned by him?

Smirking, then outright laughing nervously, he thought about having to meet with Castaneda's right-hand man. *Right-hand man* being kind of ironic, as the man only had three fingers left on that hand. The rumor was that after the drug raid had gone south three years ago, Castaneda had taken the failure out on *Tres Dedos*, and had calmly clipped off his pinky and ring fingers with a cigar clipper. Well, he *did* need his index finger to pull a trigger, so the boss had left it. Too bad Castaneda hadn't remembered that more than the three remaining fingers were needed to keep a gun stable enough for shooting.

Fortunately, *Tres Dedos* learned to shoot left-handed, so he could still be an effective enforcer for Castaneda. And now, everyone called him *Tres Dedos*, or Three Fingers, when they were laughing behind his back. However, anyone who he caught laughing wound up dead or disappeared.

Sliding into his government car, Walters made a quick trip to his house. No way was he taking the company car to his meeting. He needed to get into the beater car that he'd bought for a few hundred bucks in untraceable cash. He'd left it in the previous owner's name, who'd mysteriously and sadly disappeared before he could file the transfer of title. Feeling less conspicuous, Walters pulled out onto the road and headed toward his meeting.

Pulling into the parking lot of the tiny cantina bar, Walters noticed that *Tres Dedos* at least had the smarts to find an out-of-the-way place. It looked like locals only, the non-English-speaking kind. Good. Sneaking a look

around, he saw there was no unusual movement. Walters exited his car and strode into the bar hoping he showed more confidence than he felt. But he believed that old saying of never showing fear or letting them see you sweat.

At the threshold, he paused to let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the interior. Floating in the smoky air hung the stale odor of old fryer oil and tortillas, along with the smell of beer and a hint of lime. Spotting *Tres Dedos*, he moved to the booth in the back corner. Walters skirted the edge of the room, staying in the shadows as much as possible. When he made it to the table, he watched as *Tres Dedos* tossed a shot of tequila back. Grimacing when he saw the three fingers holding the glass, his fear of Castaneda rose. Taking the bench seat, his discomfort with having his back toward the door must have shown in his eyes. *Tres Dedos* grinned at that, he seemed to love the look of fear on a man's face.

“Señor Walters, *El Ángel de la Muerte* wishes for you to follow the instructions in here.” Pushing an envelope across the table, *Tres Dedos* poured two shots from the bottle in front of him, handing one to Walters.

“Keep your voice down, and don't use my name or his. And I'm not drinking that rotgut with you. I only drink with family and friends. You are neither.” Walters pulled a couple of sheets of paper, as well as a map and a photo from the envelope *Tres Dedos* handed him.

A devious grin crossed *Tres Dedos*' face. “This is extra añejo tequila, aged for five years. Eh, Señor, after this, we will be very good friends.” The grin widened as Walters' face paled at what he was reading.

Perusing what was on the paper, Walters gasped, grabbed the shot from the table and downed it. Coughing from the burn of the tequila incinerating his throat, he sputtered, “I can't do this, the risk is too high. What reason would I have to send retired agent Harte to retrieve Thornton? He'll want to know why I wouldn't have an agent just go get him. And Harte would be able to tell the authorities that I was the one who called. And how is this going to take care of Thornton anyway?”

“Señor, you will set this up as asked and all will be taken care of. You have no need to worry about Harte.” *Tres Dedos* leaned forward, getting into

Walters' face. "You do not want to know how you will be taken care of if this is not done as asked."

Walters' face blanched even more, going beyond his usual white to pasty. Quick movements had the papers shoved back into the envelope. Beyond caring about appearances at this point, he just wanted to get out of the bar and back to his office. He was close to running as he hit the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Simon Harte had cowboy-booted feet up on his desk again. Watching the activity in the outer office, where his secretary-slash-office manager's desk was, along with those of the two men that worked as his agents, he was pretty damn pleased with how far his little company had come in the city of Tucson. When he had first started out, it had been him and Jesse Moreno, another ex-agent. They had worked the first year together just the two of them. Then a year ago, he added the other agent and the office manager. They now had enough work that he could pick and choose which jobs they took. He could have hired more men, but he feared he'd lose the family feel of the business. Well, as much as a private investigation and bail enforcement agency could have that type of feel.

He hadn't wanted to lose the ability to take off when he needed to search for clues. He kept thinking that Justice Thornton had to have left one someplace. He just had to find it. In the two years since he'd left the DEA, after his partner at the agency had been killed by Thornton, he hadn't given up tracking the man down and bringing him to justice—no pun intended. He just couldn't let the man who had killed Guz get away with it, even if he hadn't been able to stay working with the agency. His heart hadn't been into doing the job anymore. He kept seeing good men get killed and the killers walk free. What was the point? So that more drug lords could buy their way out of jail, if they ever went into jail in the first place?

Scrubbing his hands over his face, he still couldn't believe he'd been so wrong about Justice Thornton. Though they hadn't spent much time together in the office, Simon had seen him around enough to have believed that he was a dedicated agent, honest and hardworking. That he was doing the job they all thought was worth the risks. And then there was the fact that everything about Thornton had pushed his libido buttons and made every part of his body want—need—to feel the man under him. He'd been ready to ask the man to meet for drinks, just the two of them, to see if there was any interest on Thornton's part, when the drug raid had gone to shit. He always did have the worst timing. It was almost as bad as his taste in men. He had to choose a traitor, but damn, that didn't jive with the man he'd seen around the office.

He watched as his office manager Sarah, a mom-type woman in her late fifties, pushed the button to answer the ringing phone. She still used a handset instead of the wireless earpiece with microphone that he'd gotten her. She said the headset made her feel like she worked at McDonald's or something. He watched her place the caller on hold, laughing again when instead of buzzing on the intercom like most people would do, she rose from her chair and headed toward his office.

Seeing where he was resting his feet and shaking her head, she pointed a finger toward his feet. "Simon Joseph Harte, you get those dirty boots off that desk. Poor Lulu doesn't need more to clean than she already does. And she wouldn't have to work so hard if you didn't always make such a mess of things. You, getting that darn mud everywhere."

With a laugh, Simon swung his legs off the desk, "Yes, Mom."

"Don't you sass me, Simon Harte. I'm the same age as your mama and I am best friends with her, so you watch yourself, young man. And I know for a fact your mama raised you right." Wagging her finger, she tried to hide her smile. She'd known Simon since he was a twinkle in his parents' eyes. And when her dear sweet husband died and left her with nothing but bills, Simon had stepped in, giving her a job when she'd had no skills. "Oh, and the whole reason I came in, you have a call on line one from a Conrad Walters. He said you knew him."

He scooted his chair forward so fast he almost tipped it over. "Conrad's on line one?" What the hell did his old director at the DEA want? Did he have news about Thornton? Praying to whoever would listen, he hoped that was the case. "Sarah, please close my door on your way out. Thanks."

Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the handset and pushed the button for line one on his desk phone. Leaning back in his chair again he said, "This is Simon Harte speaking."

"Simon, Conrad Walters here. I have some news for you," Pausing to let that sink in, Walters continued when he got no response. "I also have a job you might like to do for the agency, freelance."

“What, Walters? No hi or how are you doing?” Simon had never quite trusted the Branch Office Director of his previous employer. He’d always thought the man resembled Brain, the mouse from the *Pinky and the Brain* cartoon. He had the same pale complexion, bulbous forehead, bald head—the whole package. He also had those little beady eyes. Walters even had some of the same arrogance that Brain had, a small man’s complex. Assistant Special Agent in Charge—yep, he was special all right.

“I don’t have time for bullshit. Do you want this job or not, Harte?” Pausing for a breath, Walters continued, “I figured you of all people would want to bring in Justice Thornton. Was I wrong?”

Sitting up ramrod straight at the name Thornton, Simon spoke with deceptive calm. “No Walters, you weren’t wrong. I’ll take this job. But I’m wondering how or where you got your information when none of my sources could get any.” In two years Simon only had a couple of leads, both of which had gone nowhere fast.

With a disgusted snort Walters tried to put Simon in his place. “I have more sources than you could ever imagine. And this isn’t the time to question the how. Do you want the job? If yes, just say so.”

“I already said I’d take it,” Simon growled.

“Then I’ll send you the intel and wire money to your account. This job is strictly off the books, no one here at the agency will have any knowledge about it. I am your contact and your only contact.” Walters rattled off a phone number that, even after two years, Simon knew didn’t belong to the agency. Focusing again, he heard Walters continue “Let me know when you leave. I think about two weeks should do it, for the retrieval.”

Simon’s trouble radar started beeping with every word, but his excitement at a chance of capturing Justice Thornton overrode his good sense. There was a question he knew should be asking, something off with how Walters got his intel, but his focus was on getting his hands on Thornton. Little bits of knowledge floated in the back of his mind, things he’d heard and rumors that had run through the office—stuff that he hadn’t paid any attention to at the

time. The devil on his shoulder was asking if he really cared, and the answer was definitely *no*.

When he realized Walters had hung up, Simon's mind went to all of the things he needed to get settled around the office before he left. He wasn't going to inform his crew. He was going to have to take a vacation somewhere remote. His crew would never believe him since he hadn't taken time off since he'd started the business, but they wouldn't ask questions. If he needed help, he'd call. They'd have his back.

CHAPTER FIVE

Not for the first time, or the second, or even the third, Simon cursed a blue streak as he once again slid halfway back down the muddy embankment. The stench of rotted vegetation assailed his nose and mud oozed its way into his boots. Who knew mud could smell so bad? It was a thick, black, viscous slime that was working its way into his gloves, too.

Who in the fucking hell lived so far out of civilization, in a place that time forgot? This made no sense, and it was making him angrier with every slide back down the slope. The steady drizzle and misting that wouldn't stop had water running down his neck. His pant legs were soaked, mud caking everything from his knees down. He didn't think he could get any more miserable. He was cold, wet, and just plain pissed.

Was he turning into a wuss? Two years out of the business and he'd lost some of his edge already? This was really no worse than the mud course in Basic Training. Okay, so he'd been cutting his gym workouts, but damn, not that much. If he ever got Thornton and got back out of this hell on earth, he had a new boot camp workout to recommend to his gym. "Mudbog-Hill Climbing 101". He could make an infomercial and make a fortune.

Grunting with the effort needed to slog his way back up the bank for the fourth time, he'd have whooped with glee at the top if he hadn't looked up into the barrels of a shotgun pointed right at his face. Damn, those barrels didn't look that big when you were on the other side of them.

Pushing himself up slowly, he took a good look at the man. At least he thought it was a man—maybe he'd found Bigfoot's cousin. Damn, the man's eyebrows almost met his beard, but then his beard started right under his eyes. Hell, Simon couldn't really tell which hairs were from his head, his beard or eyebrows. They all seemed to grow together, meeting in the middle of his face. What little bits of weathered skin he could see were around tobacco-colored eyes. He didn't want to check the nose hairs, the ones that looked like they made up part of his mustache. Dang, the top of his nose had one that looked at least a half inch long. This man was one hairy, matted, walking fur-ball. He took a deep breath, and then wished he hadn't. Seemed Sasquatch hadn't had

his annual bath yet. Given how much Simon could smell him over the rotted vegetation and mud made him real glad he wasn't downwind of the man.

Simon raised his hands into the air. "I'm just going to stand up now." He thought he heard a grunt, but wasn't sure. But then, he wasn't sure what was standing in front of him was human, so who knew? With his hands raised above his head—which just galled him—he said, "I'm standing up now. I don't mean you any harm. I'm just looking for the Thornton place."

The... hairball in front of him grunted again, and lowered the shotgun. "Well, ain't too many folks knowing 'bout the Thornton place still being here. Being as you do, guessing it be okay to tell ya where it be." Swinging the barrel of the shotgun around, he pointed to a spot. "But most folks woulda used the road yonder to get here. Yep, be tad easier that way."

As he turned to where the man pointed—and he thought only DNA testing could prove that he was a man, notwithstanding the fact that his speech seemed to be a form of English—Simon thought he saw a couple of parallel ruts in among the thigh-high weeds. The weeds weren't disturbed often from the looks of them. Guess traffic jams weren't a problem around these parts.

This little trip just kept getting better all the time. It had taken a day for Walters to get the information to him. Then it had taken him a couple of days to get his jobs squared away at the office, and then he had to fly halfway across the country to the great Appalachian Mountains. To a place time hadn't just forgot but flat-out ignored.

"Son of a fucking bitch, there's a road?" Simon was going to kill the rental car agent who had given him the directions and GPS coordinates to this lovely little corner of the world. And damn Walters for not having all of this in the intel, so that he'd had to rely on the rental people.

With a deceptively fast move, the shotgun barrels were pointed back to his face. "Son, we don't abide to that kind of talk 'round these parts. We're a God-fearing folk living here. We read our Bible, be respecting our elders." Turning to point back down the other direction he said, "The Thornton place be down that way a piece. And folks 'round here will be a watching y'all. We don't take kindly to strangers 'round here."

Simon looked in the direction the old man had pointed. Swinging his head back to ask a few questions, he was startled to see no one in front of him. “What the hell?” Surveying the surrounding area, not even a leaf moving indicated where the man had gone. It was eerie how there was no sound and no movement around him. And yet, he could still feel the man’s eyes on him, watching every move like the old man had said.

Muttering to himself, “*That way* he says. And just how far *that way*? And how do I know when I get there? Is there a sign that says ‘you’re here’?” Stomping his feet to remove more mud, he heaved a heavy sigh. Hiking up his backpack, he started to scuffle his way down the rut that passed for a road in these parts.

A look to the sky showed that the sun would be setting in about an hour. Simon wanted to get into place, set up a blind and keep a watch on Thornton. He was going to have to wait till dark to scope out any kind of security Thornton might have. And he knew there would be some serious systems in place. He’d wait till just before dawn before confronting him.

CHAPTER SIX

A feeling of *déjà vu* woke JT, caused by the brief touch of cold steel being pressed against his neck before it backed away. How the fuck had someone gotten around all of his security systems? Why had he not heard anything? Goddamn moonshine he'd had last night to forget. He'd just wanted to get through a night without the nightmares that had plagued him since *that* night. Finding the mole in the agency was all he wanted. He knew there had to be one, there was no way Castaneda should have been able to get away without help. Finding them would clear his name and let him get back to his old life. It was a fact that without the agency's assets, he had a much harder time getting the information he needed, much less getting anyone to help or the access to resources and the databanks.

The voice was barely above a whisper, and the words sent a suppressed shiver down JT's spine. "Just give me any reason to blow your head off instead of taking you back in to face justice. Please, just do it."

JT *knew* that voice from somewhere, flipping through the names and faces in his mind. Fuck! Simon Harte, Guz's old partner. Damn, of all the voices that he could have heard, this was one that he dreaded the most. But he guessed it made sense because Harte and Guz had been partners at the agency for years. Last he'd heard, the man had left the agency about a year after everything had gone to hell. So why was he the one coming after him now? Had the agency sent him?

He'd seen the man around the office. From what he remembered, Harte was—or had been—the stuff of his dreams. Almost the same height, maybe a bit taller, with light brown hair and a body that had rivaled his own. Harte's body might have had wider shoulders, but he had the better abs. He worked hard to keep in shape, and he'd seen Harte at the gym, so he knew Harte took care of his body, too. JT appreciated a fine looking body like Harte's.

Simon Harte had those intense amber eyes—except there always seemed to be chips of ice in them when he'd been in agent mode. He had always appeared to be a cool and controlled bastard. It was one of the things that made him a great agent, total focus. JT had spent time wondering what it would take

to make those eyes melt or if Harte even kept his ice-cool demeanor while getting his dick sucked. Or if the ice melted when someone was balls-deep in his ass, or if he ever let anyone tap that ass. The fantasy of melting that ice had taken hold in his mind and dreams back when he'd first been introduced to Harte. While he didn't know for sure, he suspected that Harte was gay, but had never been able to get any real handle on if he was or not. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part. JT had always wanted the chance to find out.

“Now you're going to pay for Guzman's death. It's taken three fucking years, but I'm taking you back. You're cuffed to the bed and I need a few hours of sleep. But we'll be out of here before the good folk of this Godforsaken area start stirring.” Harte's barely audible voice got harsher and louder with each word until he was almost snarling. “I'm light sleeper, as I'm sure you know, so don't try anything. Or do, and you'll save me the time and effort of dragging your ass back to civilization. Now nod once that you understand.”

Swallowing hard, JT did just that, the slightest nod. For the first time he felt the flex-cuffs around both wrists. He didn't want to give Harte any reason to kill him before he got a chance to prove that he was innocent, and wondered if anything he could say would make a difference. It startled him a bit when Harte lay down on the bed beside him. “Didn't realize you were into kink, Harte. If you wanted to play bondage games, you just had to ask.” He wasn't imagining the spark of lust he maybe saw flash in Simon's eyes, was he?

Simon paused for the barest fraction of a second before stating emphatically, “Like I'd play any kind of sex game with you? I believe in keeping your friends close, and your enemies closer. I'll feel it if your breathing pattern changes even a little, or if you twitch a muscle.” Harte made a show of crossing his left arm across his chest showing that he had his gun in hand. Reaching out to the small pine table next to the bed, he placed the gun well within his reach.

With a cough to clear his dry throat, JT wanted to make one statement before closing his eyes. He was resigned to having to convince this man he'd been set up. No time like the present. “I didn't do it.”

The derisive snort from beside him was followed with a quiet but emphatic, “Shut the fuck up.” Well, he hadn’t thought it would work, but he was going to keep hammering the point until he forced Harte to believe him. He also tucked away the fact Harte hadn’t denied his statement about bondage a second time. That was something to explore when they got out of this mess.

With a sharp tug on the cuff on his right wrist, he realized that Harte was smarter than he’d thought. Harte had cuffed him to the bed rail on the right side and his left wrist to Harte’s own right wrist. JT knew that like most of the agents, Harte had military training, so he was able to fall asleep at the drop of a hat, and unlike most people, who had to toss and turn, sleeping flat on his back was no problem. From the steady, even breathing beside him, Harte was already asleep. But JT knew that if he made any move, Harte would be awake instantly.

His own sleep was going to take a bit more work. The heat from Harte’s body felt way too good. And he’d been without sex for way too long. JT told his dick to behave and his mind that any warm male body would have given him the same response. It couldn’t be anything else, since this man hated him with what seemed a justifiable reason. It just wasn’t a real reason, but JT was the only one who knew the lies. Closing his eyes, he willed his mind and body to the oblivion of sleep.

It felt like several hours had passed since he’d closed his eyes, aware of the warm hard body next to him the whole time. A cycle of dozing for a few minutes here and there during the night didn’t cut it anymore. Damn, why did it have to be *this* guy that was pushing his dormant sex drive into overtime? It had been just him and his right hand—a few times the left for variety, of course—but just the three of them since all this shit had happened. The man next to him wanted him locked up for years—or better yet to stand in front of a firing squad—and still made his dick want to stay hard all night. Morning wood, they all got that, but the rest of the time? Hell, what was he going to do then, how did he explain that he’d been lusting from afar after Harte for years?

He'd always known that Guzman was a pass-the-time, scratch-the-itch, kind of guy. Lying next to Harte and waking up next to him in the morning, even in this fucked-up situation, made JT think about waking up next to someone every morning. Shit, under other circumstances Harte would have been the kind of guy JT had been looking for, that would bring the word forever popping to mind. How fucked up was that?

Harte had caught his interest more than three years ago, and that hadn't changed any over all this time. Back then JT had watched Harte every chance he had when Harte wasn't looking. Most things that appealed about Harte were the very things that JT was looking for in a relationship. He treated everyone with respect, both fellow agents and the public. Any suspect they had in custody got the courtesy due any human being. While he didn't appear to most as real friendly, JT thought that was because he was so dedicated to the job. He was serious about the oath he swore and making a difference in the world and keeping people safe.

His sleep deprived brain suddenly realized that Harte wasn't in the bed anymore. How the hell had he slipped the cuff off and slid out of bed? Pulling his left arm, he realized it was now cuffed to the left side of the bed. And Harte had done this all without waking him up. No wonder he'd heard people calling Harte, "the ghost". JT lay there listening for sounds that would pinpoint where in the cabin Harte was, or if he was even still in the cabin.

Hearing nothing, he lifted his head and did a scan of the room. In the dim light of pre-dawn he found Harte peering out of the window. And damn, if JT didn't see Harte packing some wood too. If the situation wasn't so fucked up he'd be laughing. Then he noticed the pair of backpacks sitting by the door. It looked like he was on his way back to civilization. The time to clear his name on his own had run out. Would he have the time to air his case, would Harte listen to anything he had to say?

"Unless you have a vehicle of some kind hidden around here, we have a two-day hike out. So let's move." Harte moved to the bed and cut the flex-cuffs, releasing JT's wrists. "Use the john, shower, and you can leave the bathroom door open. Then get dressed. I left some of your clothes on the sink. We'll eat a couple of hours from here."

A controlled snort escaped JT, “The john, as you call it, it is the two-seater outside.” At the look that snapped around to face him, he lost it. “We can even take a shit together so you don’t lose me. Won’t that be fun?” He was still laughing when Simon pushed him through the door, making rude comments about bat-shit crazy backwards people, hairy walking fur-balls, and time warps.

They hiked for several hours, eating a protein bar for breakfast as they went. Some of the time, Harte let JT walk ahead of him. Before they had started out, Harte had used flex-cuffs to secure JT’s hands to the belt loops on either side of his jeans. He had attached one cuff around JT’s wrist before sliding another cuff through that one and attaching it to the belt loop. It left JT with a small amount of room to move his arms, but Harte knew it was not enough to attack. JT had protested, asking what happened if he fell. Harte looked at him and gave the answer he knew JT expected. “Don’t fall.”

It was just after noon, and they both needed a break. Neither was in the same shape they had been in their agency days. Thorton had used the hike to keep a running commentary going with all of the questions and a few statements he had about that night.

He’d thrown out questions like, *why would I have betrayed a mission I was leading?* And then pointed out that it would have made more sense to sabotage someone else’s raid. Or wondering out loud how the blueprints had been so fucked up. Why did the building have doors—and maybe rooms—that hadn’t shown up on them? Who had gotten the blueprints? How had Guzman’s backup gun shown up at the raid? And if his gun had been found on the table, why was it there? He sure wouldn’t have put it down willingly in the middle of a raid until everything was secure. And the big question of the day—how and why had Guzman been transferred to his team at the last moment?

The steady monologue of questions and statements were things that Harte didn’t have answers for. Reverting to what he always did when he didn’t know what to say, he’d given a few grunts and told JT to shut up a few times. Otherwise, Harte didn’t respond to JT’s babbling. But damn it, some of the

questions made sense and that pissed Harte off. Because then he had to start questioning what the agency had told everyone.

Simon finished securing JT to a tree using a cable mostly used to attach bicycles to posts, making sure that JT had enough slack to lie down to sleep and not much else. JT's sleeping bag was laid out and close to his tree. He'd already let JT take a leak and eat his MRE. At least the drizzle had stopped, but the damp earth left a chill in the air. He wished he could light a fire, but that might bring forest rangers or other campers, if there were any out in these woods. He didn't need or want to explain why he had a man tied to a tree. Sitting down with his coffee, he just stared at the enigma that was his prisoner.

With the full moon out, there wasn't enough light to see the expression on JT's face. Finishing his coffee, he laid down on top of his sleeping bag, waiting to see what JT would do. The look on the man's face when he'd locked him to the tree had been priceless. None of this should have been funny... but some of it was.

JT tugged at the cable attached to his waist. Well, hell. JT liked to think he was a cool, calm and collected, hard-core DEA agent. And being captured, frog-marched back to civilization was bad enough, but tied to a tree like a dog? He was tired, cold, still hungry and fucking pissed. Pissed because he'd talked his head off and Harte hadn't reacted to any of the things he'd said. Grunted—the man had just grunted. Like a pig. He did a lot of grunting and not for any of the right, fun reasons. And now he was going to sleep? *Fuck that!* Squirming, trying to get comfortable, he made as much noise as he was able.

“Would you fucking stop with the whining, you're worse than my sister's five-year-old.” Simon gave JT a stare with enough frost in it to freeze hell. “It's been a really long day, I just want to get some sleep. Do not make me get up because if I do, I'll be putting a gag in your mouth. Or just shoot you instead and save the taxpayers a lot of money.”

“Shoot me? *Shoot me?*” A snort of disbelief erupted from JT, “Really? Well fuck you, why don't you try having my day?” Frustration laced his words. “*I shouldn't whine—well let's trade places if you think this is so much*

fun.” JT was feeling equal parts of mad, exhausted, and though he wouldn’t admit it, a small bit scared. Plus there was a tiny part of him glad to have this forced resolution. He was tired of always looking over his shoulder.

Turning his eyes toward JT, abruptly Simon sat up, pulled his gun and...

“Harte, what the hell are...?” Crouching, JT tried to make himself a smaller target. The shot whizzed by JT’s shoulder and he heard it ricochet off a rock. He also heard a yip and the sound of running paws.

Harte rose and went over to JT’s backpack pulling out a pair of boxer-briefs. “Coyote, I saw the eyes glowing behind your tree.” Fighting a smirk, Simon tossed the briefs to JT. “Here, I figure you need to change now. Since you won’t be sleeping for awhile, shout if they come back.” He stretched out on his back, pulling his sleeping bag up, calmly going to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunrise had come too early and another long day of hiking had come to an end. *Tres Dedos* had never been so tired. As the right-hand man and assassin for *El Ángel de la Muerte*, he shouldn't be out here in the wilds chasing these men. His dignity had taken a major hit when *Jefe* had ordered him to eliminate them. But ordered he had been, and he knew that he couldn't come back—or didn't dare come back—without taking care of this problem. And *El Jefe* wanted proof, which meant he either had to capture a picture on his cell phone or maybe—Smirking at the thought that crossed his mind—maybe he should bring back a finger or two. An eye for an eye, so, eh, a finger for a finger.

Tracking his targets wasn't *Tres Dedos* style, he'd never had to before. *El Jefe* was still punishing him for the raid gone wrong. None of it had anything to do with him, and yet he was the one missing fingers. It was these gringos' fault, now he could get some payback. *El Jefe* may have been right to send him. If he brought back two fingers from each of them, he would have his dignity back, *como no?* That would be a type of poetic justice for him. People would have to stop laughing behind his back.

Another day in this wilderness, when it should have already been done with. He'd been almost to their campsite when one of them started shooting. *Locos Americanos*, crazy Americans. He'd made a quick retreat, knowing that they'd be on high alert now.

He'd had to find a place to camp for the night, sleeping in the dirt. Bah, why do people do this? The forest is filled with bugs, and is dirty, there is no coffee in the morning, no room service. No cute *putas* to take care of his needs. No tequila to ease his thirst.

This part of the job should be done today. Then he could head for home and regroup. He still had his new friend Conrad to pay a visit to, so yes, today. All of it had to be over and done. He wanted his life to go back to normal. But for now, it was more hiking and climbing, keeping them in his sight. Then when they settled down for camp, he would take his shot. Tonight it would go as he planned.

The routine had continued, same as the day before, when they stopped to make camp. He'd once again let JT piss and eat, and then tied JT to a tree. And the same as yesterday, JT was moaning and groaning. Simon decided he wasn't going to let part of last night happen again. He really would cap JT's ass.

Simon listened as JT started bitching about a bug bite on his ankle and watched as he stretched to scratch it. He opened his mouth to ask a question when he heard a familiar *ping* and wood splinters filled the air. Diving flat, he scanned the area.

What the fuck, someone was shooting at them! When a second shot pinged, sending more wood flying from the tree just above JT's head, Harte realized that no, they were shooting at *JT*, not him. If JT hadn't bent over to scratch a bug bite on his ankle, the shot would have hit him between the eyes.

"Well, someone doesn't want me to make it back to stand trial, now, do they?" muttered JT. "I wonder why, when I'm so guilty. What would anyone have to gain by me not making it to trial? And, by the way, I'm also a sitting duck tied here, so if you don't want my life expectancy greatly reduced, fucking release me!"

As Harte tossed JT the keys to the lock, Harte decided it was time to at least listen to—and maybe even believe—what JT had been telling him this whole hike. He had to at least consider that with all that JT had thrown at him there was some truth in it, otherwise someone trying to kill JT made no sense whatsoever. The agency wanted JT back to stand trial, which left a very small pool of suspects wanting or having any reason for JT's death. "So you figure it's one of Castaneda's men maybe?"

"That makes sense to me. He's the only one I know that wants me dead. Well, besides you of course." Shrugging, JT went to work on the lock, trying to keep a low profile to avoid becoming a target again. Glancing up he added, "Or whoever the real mole in the agency is."

Ouch. Simon deserved that comment. He didn't really want JT dead, he only wanted justice for Guz. He had hated the idea of a dirty agent, but it being JT had bothered him even more. Harte didn't know why, other than he got a

good case of lust every time he saw JT around the field office, saw his tight ass in those jeans he wore. They'd never had the chance to work together, maybe hanging out after work a few times for beers and to shoot some pool with the guys. That had been enough, though, to pique Simon's interest in the man.

Sadly, more often than not, they weren't even in the office at the same time, since frequently he and Guz would go out on a mission and then JT's team would be out when they got back. Also, he'd never been a hundred percent sure which team JT played for. He'd never seen JT with any kind of date, never even heard him talk about a date. Unlike his partner, who bragged about every pussy he had bagged. But then in all honesty, he didn't either, because he was gay. He didn't try to hide it, but he didn't wave a rainbow flag in anyone's face, either.

In Simon's defense, all of the evidence pointed to Thornton. He hadn't even considered there being a mole in the agency. He'd gone with the information that he'd been told about that night from Walters and the other agents there. Why wouldn't he believe what they all had told him? Shit. None of the agents had thought to question what they saw. A doubt built in Simon's mind where there had only been complete certainty before. With that doubt also came the possibility that his partner of five years hadn't been the man he thought.

"But hey, it can't be Castaneda. No... I did him a favor, right? I took out Guzman and let him escape." Derision laced his voice as JT made his move on his belly over to Harte's location. "Do we make a stand here or try to get away?"

Simon shook his head at both the sarcasm and about making a stand. "Not here, when we don't know who's doing the shooting. I'm going to fire to see if I can run him off." Without taking his eyes off the area he thought the shooter was hiding in, he reached for his hunter's backpack and his AR-15. All he needed to do was fire several shots off to make the shooter retreat so they could get the hell out of there. "Gather all of our gear together, pack it up and be ready to run." Crawling forward a bit, Simon asked, "Did you get any sense of where the shooter was?"

“Someplace across the ravine, about five hundred yards. Whoever he is, he’s a damn good shot at this range. But not great. At this distance, he shouldn’t have missed that second shot.”

“Hate to tell you this, JT, but if you hadn’t leaned when you did, you’d be sporting a hole in the middle of your forehead from the first shot.” Simon tried to make light of it, figuring that with all of the bodies he’d seen over years, what was one more. But this felt different, seeing JT go down—nope, not the time to think about that. “I think he’s over by the stand of trees, near the outcrop of rocks.”

JT must have nodded, forgetting that Simon couldn’t see him, because Simon got nothing but silence. He turned his head slightly toward JT, who must’ve realized that Harte hadn’t seen his head shake, because JT said, “Yeah—there, between the two of those rocks, in that little niche.”

“As soon as I fire, grab the gear and let’s go.” Chambering a round, he threw over his shoulder, “When you hear the first shot, make a break for the trees to our right.” With an exhale of breath, Simon pulled the trigger several times in rapid succession. He figured if he got the shooter pinned, it would be enough to let them get away. “Go, go, go!”

By the time there was return fire, JT and Simon had already disappeared into the brush.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sun was just starting to set as they made their camp. The spot they chose was on a small outcropping of rock near a stream. They couldn't light a fire since they didn't know if they were still being followed. The circuitous route they'd been forced to take had added at least another day to their journey. While Harte hadn't cuffed him back up while they had been running, JT wondered if he would now that they were down for the night.

"Thornton, I don't think we should set up the tent tonight. If the sniper is still following us, we'll need to be able to make a fast escape. So just get the sleeping bags out."

JT nodded. "First I'm going to take advantage of the water, though, and take a quick wash." He waited for a reaction from Harte. Was the other man going to go back to playing the hunter with his prey? Hadn't they gotten past that yet? He thought Harte had started to believe him.

"Don't take too long. Maybe I should be with you and stand guard. We have no idea where that fucker is." Harte picked up his rifle and motioned for JT to precede him to the water.

JT started stripping at the water's edge, while Simon planted himself on a rock. JT realized that Simon was trying to ignore him as he peeled his clothing off. Damn! Simon kept his eyes moving, surveying the surrounding forest, but JT could sense every time Simon's gaze touched him. He hoped Simon liked what he saw. JT had muscles, but they were the lean runner or swimmer type and he knew his abs were rock-hard. While they were the same height, Simon had more mass—and a fine mass it was.

Harte cleared his throat, and JT paused hip-deep in the water to look at him. Was Harte staring at his ass? He *was*, and JT blinked at the flush he could see on Harte's jaw. Harte announced, "You know what? I need to get clean too. As long as we stay close to shore and make this fast, we should be okay." Standing, he peeled off his clothes, leaving them in a pile next to JT's, laying the rifle on top. Keeping his sidearm, he placed it on a flat rock within arm's reach of the water.

JT frowned. “Okay... This water is just barely tolerable and I think my dick is trying to climb inside my body, so let’s make this real fast. It’s not like we have a lot of soap to use anyway.” As he watched the reveal of Harte’s body, he was glad that his own dick was under water. The water wasn’t cold enough to keep his blood from filling it.

Harte had the type of body that had always pushed JT’s buttons. Wide-set shoulders, a sprinkle of hair on his chest, and a hint of six-pack abs. His stomach was flat, with a dark-blond happy trail leading to a semi-flaccid cock that was way more than average-sized. Strong thighs that weren’t overdone. All in all, everything JT was seeing seemed to be a tasty-looking, well put together package.

Turning his back as Simon made his way into the water, he kept his back to him so Simon didn’t see him staring. Hearing the splash of water, JT figured it was safe to turn around. It wasn’t, Simon hadn’t gotten into the water any farther than mid-thigh. JT gave a choked laugh and told Simon, “Just take the plunge, make it fast and maybe your balls won’t try to crawl back up into your body.”

JT wanted to laugh at how hard they were both trying to keep from staring at each other. He’d seen the quick glances Simon had thrown his way. And he could read the sexual tension in Harte’s body because it matched his own. And it wasn’t like he was doing a great job of keeping his eyes where they belonged, either. Shit, maybe they just needed to get each other off or fuck each other, do something to relieve the pressure building up inside his balls.

Deciding to see what kind of reaction he’d get, and since he still had the soap, he lathered his hands and ran them over his chest, over his tight nipples and down to his abs. Dipping his hand into the water, he ran them around his cock. Oh, yeah, that got a response from Simon, who was standing there not moving a muscle. Moving slowly, he made his way over to Harte. Hoping that he didn’t get his lights punched out, he reached for Simon’s cock.

“What the fuck?” Harte pushed JT away. JT watched several emotions play across Harte’s face. There was indecision, followed by a small bit of fear and what JT hoped was a good deal of lust. As much as his show had seemed

turned Harte on, he could see that he wasn't sure this was the right thing to do. God, JT wanted Harte to stop thinking. He needed to get Simon past thinking and into doing. If they got to that place, then maybe Simon would start to believe that JT had been set up.

“What do you think? I want to fuck you, and I think you want to fuck me. God, I hope you want to fuck me too.” JT moved back toward Simon. “I’ve been wondering what it would be like to fuck you off and on for about five years.”

Simon shook his head, eyebrows raised in apparent disbelief. “You’re gay? I wasn’t sure. I’d heard a few things around the office, but I never saw you with either a man or a woman. And you never talked about your dates, never bragged about your conquests like the rest of the guys did. So, sure, I noticed you around the office, I wondered. ’Cause yeah, I’ve thought about you, too.” Clearing his throat, Simon shrugged one shoulder, and JT thought, what the hell? Did they just have a greeting card moment?

“Guz never told you that we were a couple? He never talked about me?” Reaching out with his soap-covered hand, he pushed Simon toward the bank until the water hit them mid-thigh. Simon’s glorious cock was now exposed, filling to what had to be an eight-inch length. Thick and veined, the sight made JT drool.

“Guz and you were a pair?” Simon snorted. “I don’t think so. Guz chased and bedded more pussy than any man I’ve ever seen. And not once did I ever see him with a man. Not fucking once. So I’m supposed to believe Guz switched teams?”

JT decided now was not the time to get into it. He had to get his hands on that beautiful cock. But later they were going to hash it all out, and Harte was going to learn a few things he wasn’t going to want to believe. To distract Simon from the unpleasant conversation, JT reached out and stroked the semi-hard length from the nest of curls to the mushroom head. After several strokes, it filled some more, so he added a rotation to the up and down movement. The head was turning a delicious plum color, the shaft thick and dark with blood. A

moan left JT's lips as he thought about having it pounding into his ass. JT took it for granted that Harte was a top, but he realized that maybe he should ask.

Simon gasped, drawing a deep breath. Damn, the man had fine hands and knew how to use them. That subtle twisting motion around his glans had him going from zero to sixty in nothing flat. Earlier, watching JT wade into the water, Simon had JT's beautiful, tight ass pointed right at him, and God, he'd wanted to take a bite out of it, just before he spread those cheeks and sank his prick deep inside. Thinking of that tightly-packed ass had him thrusting his hips, pushing his dick through the tunnel of JT's hands. He needed to sink between those cheeks, but for now he'd settle for the other way around or any way as long as he got off. Taking the soap, he started working JT's dick. It wasn't as thick as his, but it still was impressive in size, nice and long.

JT looked up from what he was doing, heat glowing in his eyes. "I'm a switch hitter. I think both feel equally good. What about you?"

"I switch too—it feels too good to not do both. But right now, I'm pitching," Simon told him. "I have got to feel your tight ass in my hands and bury my dick inside you. And soon—I don't think I can last much longer. We need to make this fast, though, we're too out in the open here. By now, whoever was shooting at us may be getting close."

JT waded over to a large flat rock on the water's edge, and he had to be feeling Simon's eyes following him. It was just high enough for him to lie on and keep his butt at the right level. As he lay down on his stomach, he looked back over his shoulder. "Is this what you had in mind?" Then JT laughed, probably because Simon almost did a face-plant splashing his way to the rock.

Simon reached out to massage those beautiful ass cheeks. They were a thing of beauty—tight, firm and oh-so-slightly bubbled. Running his fingertip down JT's crease, he circled the rosette now exposed. With every pass, it winked at him as the muscles loosened. "Fuck!"

JT moaned, "Ah, yeah that's what I was hoping for."

“We don’t have condoms.” Water or spit would work for lube, but Simon had never barebacked anyone, and now wasn’t the time to start.

“Harte, check my jeans’ pocket for my wallet. There might be one there.” At Simon’s look, he shrugged. “Hope springs eternal? Or I was a Boy Scout? Or they were just there? I have no idea how long they’ve been there? No? The truth? I was hoping I’d get lucky? No, really, I have no idea how long they’ve been there. I always have some in my wallet.”

What the hell, how come he hadn’t checked JT’s clothes and wallet before they’d moved out? Jesus, that was a rookie mistake. “Yeah, whatever, just glad you have one.”

Harte rifled the pockets, coming up with a couple of condoms. Lubed, thank God. Taking one, he returned to JT. With the spit on his finger, he gently circled JT’s pink little hole. Adding pressure with each pass, he started to sink his fingertip in, then his whole finger. Heat and tightness gripped him. He kept working until he had three fingers inside JT’s ass.

JT sounded like he was in heaven. He wasn’t able to keep the moans to himself as he reached down and started jerking his own prick to the rhythm of Harte’s fingers. After putting on the condom, Simon gathered his spit and slicked up his cock as best he could, starting to push the tip past the guard muscles and stopped.

JT growled, “Don’t you fucking stop now, move, move it now!”

“I just didn’t want to hurt you. And I needed to slow down a bit or this won’t last too long.” Harte panted, retreated, and then pushed until his pubic hair settled against those cheeks. Stopping again to let JT adjust, he got the hint when JT pushed his hips back to take more of Simon’s cock, that he wanted it harder.

“You’re not going to break me, so move! I like it hard and deep.”

Harte decided to take him at his word. Setting a pounding rhythm, it wasn’t long until he was ready to spill, but he didn’t want to go alone. “I’m so close. Damn, it’s been too long. Come with me.”

“Been too long for me, too.” JT was stroking his cock faster and faster, and then he was over the edge. With each pulse of come shooting out of his cock, his ass clamped down on Harte’s dick. As the warmth of Harte’s release filled the condom there was a strangled gurgle of sound that he realized was coming from JT’s mouth.

Simon thought maybe he’d shot his brains as well as his come out through his dick. Collapsing on top of JT, he waited for his breathing and heart rate to get back to a semi-normal level. He grinned when he realized that JT was breathing just as hard. “Let me catch my breath. We should rinse and get back to camp.”

Once they had rinsed, dried, and gone back to camp, Simon pulled out his satellite phone.

“Who are you calling?”

Simon smiled at the worry in JT’s voice. “I’m calling my office team and having them start to do some digging. Things aren’t adding up and I want to know why.” While the phone rang, he thought back to the call from Walters.

“Harte Investigations, how may I help you?”

“Sarah, Simon here. Can I talk to Jesse?” Hearing a sharp inhale of breath, he added, “Please.”

“That’s much better, Simon.” Sarah replied. “Let me put you on hold and go get him.”

Simon suppressed a snort, knowing that Sarah had put him on hold and was walking two desks over to tell Jesse he had a phone call. Some things would never change in his office.

A click on the line sounded as Jesse picked up the line. “Yo, boss-man. What can I do for you?”

“Jesse, look, I need you to do some discreet but thorough digging. Adrian Guzman, I need you to look at his financials, bank accounts—look for something offshore maybe. Sudden inflows of cash. And his phone records too, check for anything that possible links him to Castaneda. Track his

movements too, if you can. Did he take any trips out of the country? You know the drill.”

“Ah, boss, wasn’t he your old partner at the agency?”

Simon heard the unasked question. “Yep, he was. But I’m finding some things about him aren’t adding up.”

“Will do, boss. You want me to call when I get something? And this has to do with your ‘vacation’?”

“Yeah, Jesse, I do.” Harte replied. Looking at JT, he told Jesse, “My vacation got very complicated. And while you’re at it, get someone to do the same for Conrad Walters.” The more he thought about that call from Walters, the less he liked it. Deciding to come clean about his mission, “I was sent by Walters to retrieve Justice Thornton. Now that I have him, we’re—or more precisely JT is—being shot at.”

“You need a team out to help?”

Simon thought about it. “Not yet, but if we can’t shake this guy then I’ll have the team come to the rescue.” After ending the call, he put the phone back in his pocket, turned and grinned at JT. “And now to more pleasant pursuits, like sleep maybe.”

JT shook his head. “Walters sent you after me?”

“Yep, he did. And he had the map and coordinates for your location. Which is one of the reasons I added him to the list my team is going to dig into.” Simon added, “How did he get his information when nobody could find you?”

Dark had settled, and without a fire there wasn’t much to do. JT looked at him. “I think we should turn in and get an early start in the morning.”

Simon nodded. “Yeah, that sounds good. Why don’t you zip the sleeping bags together? It may get cold tonight since we won’t be in a tent and that way we can share body heat. I’m going to pack everything else up so we’re ready to roll at first light.”

“I’ll get right on that.” JT felt better than he had in a long time. Harte was starting to believe him. That felt almost better than the sex had. He had hopes for tonight too, since they’d be sleeping next to each other. Maybe it would be his turn to tap Simon’s ass. He placed a condom and a one-time-use lube pack just inside the bags.

When they crawled into the bags, they made some small talk, which led to kisses, then to hands stroking bodies. JT rolled Simon, putting that hard body under his, getting no protest from Simon.

This was starting to feel like more than sex, this was what JT thought lovemaking was. And it was every bit as good slow and languid as the fast and furious fucking they’d done in the water had been. It was all about them taking the time to see what pleased each other.

They explored, kissing and licking, finding all of the hot spots on their bodies. It was a slow building of passion and sexual tension. Taking the lube packet out, JT coated his fingers and prepped Simon’s hole, smiling when Simon jerked at the cool liquid. He worked his fingers in one at a time until he had three inside. Rolling on the condom, he finished using what lube was left in the packet on the condom and lined up his cock with Simon’s well-oiled channel. Exerting a steady pressure, he sank into the warm heat of Simon’s body.

The pace was slow and steady, yet it still didn’t take either of them long to reach their orgasm. Lying together, neither said anything as they waited for their breathing to return to normal. Both men were lost in their own thoughts as they continued to stroke hands up and down each other’s bodies. They couldn’t seem to stop touching. And although they weren’t spooning, they were pressed together from shoulders to hips, with their legs tangled. It seemed to JT that they were maybe both were thinking that maybe they wanted to continue to explore where this was going when they got back. At least that’s what he was hoping for.

Once Simon caught his breath, his thoughts turned to the man at his side. He was glad to know that he hadn’t been all wrong about JT. This man

matched the guy he'd seen in his office, the agent with honor and integrity. The man that was accused of killing a fellow agent obviously hadn't, and yet that's what the evidence had said. Shaking off those thoughts, he wondered where the two of them were headed relationship-wise. Would they have one when they got back?

Then another random thought crossed his mind. Snuggling together, Simon asked, "And where did you get the lube? Were you planning on this?"

"No, that was in my grooming kit. I always have that in there. Hey, I was a Boy Scout. And no I didn't really plan on this, you and me. But I hoped, and I can't say I'm sorry it happened. I hope you're not sorry either. And I hope we get a chance to do this again and to see if we can make this work between us. I like you. I think you might like me. And I'm babbling, sorry. Usually I'm way more suave than this," JT said with a sheepish grin.

Simon sighed. "I want to see where this goes, too, JT. But first we need to get some sleep and see what my team digs up." Simon reached out and pulled JT close as they settled in for sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

At dawn, they were back on the road, trying to make up for the time and miles they lost yesterday trying to avoid the sniper. They decided to continue in the circle they had started, aiming for getting back on the trail they'd been driven from. They spent much of the hike trying to learn more about each other. Likes, dislikes, favorite foods, movies, all the normal things people talked about while getting to know each other, beyond the stuff they'd known while working together.

Simon looked across to JT. "I have to confess, I used to watch you at the office, at least whenever I got the chance. We weren't in the office at the same time very often."

"I watched you, too. And the never being in the office at the same time is why you probably never knew about Guz and I. We really never got to spend a whole lot of time together. Those few times we were all in the office, I couldn't take my eyes off of you. And that made me feel like the biggest ass in the world when my lover was right there too." Heaving a sigh, JT continued. "I guess I knew that Guz and I weren't in it for the long haul, but hell, I don't know what I thought. As trite as it sounds, I guess I was just lonely. I couldn't seem to get your attention at the time as much as I wanted it. Guz showed up after work one day when I was having a beer, seemed interested and things just took off from there."

Just as they decided to take a break and eat, Simon's phone rang. "Harte here."

"Hey, boss-man, we worked all night digging and called in a shitload of favors. But damn, JT is in a world of hurt—and you are too, since you were sent to get him. There are some nasty people pulling strings here, and some of those are attached to your Mr. Walters."

"Jesse, we figured that. We just need to know who it is pulling those strings. Is it Castaneda?" Harte leaned over putting the phone between their ears so that JT could listen in too. "And we need the fucking proof, too."

“That would be my guess. All the evidence we’ve gotten so far seems to be headed that direction. We found secret bank accounts, for both Guzman and Walters.” Jesse whistled. “And man, they were pulling in some serious cash. Like twenty grand a month.”

JT leaned in closer. “But why target me?” He had to know the answer.

“It looks like you just were in the wrong place at the wrong time and got handed the wrong assignment. Not that it will make you feel any better, but whoever got this handed to them was a dead man, no matter who it was. From what we could find, Guzman had been on Castaneda’s payroll for about four years. Walters seems to have been collecting payments for a couple of years longer than that.” Jesse continued, “As far as the shooter goes, we got a report that *Tres Dedos* was seen crossing the border from Mexico, but we have nothing on him since.”

“Well, I think we all know where he is. He’s here taking potshots at us.” JT ran his hands over his face, then through his hair.

Jesse had to know Simon’s answer, but asked anyway. “Boss, you want us to come out and help you?”

Harte smiled. “No Jesse, stick to digging some more for now. This is personal now, and I’ll take that fucker out myself.”

“Ah, boss, wouldn’t it be better to bring him in for questioning?” asked Jesse.

An exasperated exhale left Simon’s mouth. “Yeah, of course it would, that was just wishful thinking on my part. Just keep working on the evidence, if we get this bastard, I’ll send for you.”

“You got it, boss-man, but ask for help if you need it.” Jesse hung up.

JT and Simon sat just looking at each other. JT probably didn’t want to say “I told you so” and Simon didn’t want to hear it. But they both were thinking it.

“Simon, I don’t think *Tres Dedos* is going to give up. So... I’ve heard that the best offense is a great defense.”

Harte nodded. “I agree. When the sucker shows up this time, we’ll be ready. As much as I hate to do it, I think we need to use you as bait. When he shoots, you go down like you’re hit, and stay down. Then I’ll run, circling back. He’s either going to chase me, so he leaves no witnesses, and you can take him down, or he’ll check to make sure you’re dead, and I’ll get the privilege of taking that bastard down. I’m betting he’s going to check on you. He’ll have to have some kind of proof you’re no longer a problem. He may figure that I’m done hauling your traitor’s ass back or I want to save my own. Or he’s as stupid as we think and forgets about me altogether.”

JT swallowed. “Um, and what if he really does hit me? He could get lucky, you know.”

Simon snorted at that. “If he didn’t hit you yesterday, I doubt he’d be able to today. Besides, we’re going to set it up so that he only has one direction he can be shooting from. And remember, he’s not a sniper, he’s a paid assassin.”

“Oh and that makes me feel so much better... Not!” whined JT. “It’s my ass on the line here. And if you like the way it feels, you better make damn sure I don’t lose it.”

“And a damn fine ass it is—I don’t want it damaged either.”

They decided to do some more hiking until they found a location that would work for the trap they wanted to spring. It took them more than an hour, almost two, but they eventually found it. By that time, it was about an hour before sunset. The location was closed in by rocks on two sides of them with a forested slope on the third, leaving just one direction that *Tres Dedos* could hide and shoot. They figured the nearest cover was close to the same five hundred yards as yesterday.

As they went through the motions of setting up camp, they both could feel the hair on the back of their neck start to stand on end. The feeling of eyes on them grew stronger. No sooner did they both sit down, JT with his back against the rocks, than the first shot ricocheted off the rock above his head. Diving to the side into a crouch, trying to keep his head down low, meant the second shot grazed his shoulder. *Fuck, that hurt!*

Playing it up with a loud grunt of pain, JT went down in a heap, falling into some bushes for cover. He stayed still like he was either dead or unconscious. Simon took off, winding his way through the thick trees, grabbing his rifle from where he'd stashed it earlier. The urge to return fire was strong, but for this to work they had to lure *Tres Dedos* to their camp.

For fifteen long minutes, there was no sound and no movement of any kind. JT lay there not moving. His sniper training had taught him how to stay still, breathing shallow so that *Tres Dedos* bought the setup and didn't suspect a trap. The sting of the shot was down to a throbbing ache, and he thought the bleeding had stopped. With his face in the dirt, he couldn't tell what was going on or where Simon was. He tried to listen for sounds that would let him know what was happening.

Simon had stopped, and he was having a harder time not moving from his tree perch. His every instinct was to check on JT's wound. He had to hope that it was a flesh wound and not serious. Simon was starting to think that they were going to have to give up on their plan when he saw movement coming from the open side of camp.

Tres Dedos, coming to check his handiwork. Simon held his breath as *Tres Dedos* crept up on JT, watching him lean over JT's prone body.

Silently, Simon climbed out of the tree and snuck up behind the assassin. He really wanted to kill him, but knew they had to take him in for questioning. Just as he got within reach, *Tres Dedos* must have heard him and started to turn.

Simon made sure he got up close and personal with the butt-end of his rifle. He wasn't going to give the other man any chance to fight back. *Tres Dedos* went down hard, unconscious. In minutes, Harte had him trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

With a tug on the rope and using absolutely no care at all—so what if he got a few scrapes and bruises to go along with the lump on his head?—Simon dragged him over to a tree, and using the same steel wire cable that he had on JT, he locked him to it. But unlike JT, he didn't give the guy any slack. As he

looked over his handiwork, *Tres Dedos* started moaning. Simon decided that he wasn't going to listen to that all night, so he searched for something to gag the man. Not seeing anything close to hand, he ripped a strip from *Tres Dedos'* T-shirt, stuffing a wad in his mouth before using another strip to form a gag, and tying it behind his head.

“JT, are you all right?” Helping him to sit up, Simon checked the furrowed flesh where the shot had grazed JT's shoulder. It had bled a lot but it wasn't deep. “It needs cleaning and a bandage for now, or at least till we can get you to a doctor. I don't think its deep enough for stitches. But I see a tetanus shot in your future.” Then he couldn't help himself, he had to gather JT in his arms and kiss him. How the hell this man was already coming to mean so much to him was a little scary. He had never done the strong emotions thing before. He'd never believed in love at first sight—although that wasn't really the case here, since he'd been quietly lusting after JT for a while—but this was darn close. He felt bad that it had taken something like this to allow him to spend time with JT and get to know him.

JT kissed Simon right back. Relief was making it feel good, and it also felt just right, having JT in his arms. It felt like long term, at least on Simon's part, and he was sure hoping for at least a chance to see where this thing between them would lead.

“So how do we get him and us out of here? I am not carrying him! I suppose just leaving him for the animals to take care of is out of the question?” JT grumbled.

Simon sighed. “No, we can't leave him here for the animals. I'm going to have my team send a chopper to pick us all up.” Resting his forehead against JT's, he continued, “Babe, it's over. We can go home. I'll call for the chopper to pick us up in the morning. One more night out here, that's it. Now let's get you fixed up. I should have antibiotics and painkillers in my kit.”

Simon gave JT the painkillers before cleaning the wound. He could only get JT to take one, when he should have had two. Having been shot before, Simon knew how bad the shoulder had to be throbbing. And having it

scrubbed to get the dirt and pieces of shirt out wasn't going to make it feel any better. "Are you sure you don't want another pill?"

JT shook his head, gritting out the words between his teeth. "No, just get it over with. If we had some bourbon, I'd take that instead of the pills. Those pills make me way too fuzzy and stupid. Besides, if I take another one, I won't be able to stay awake long enough for you to fuck me six ways to Sunday."

"Uh, JT, I don't think fucking is in the cards tonight." Simon shook his head in disbelief while cleaning JT's shoulder.

A smirk on his face, JT answered, "I can fuck just fine, if I let you do all the work."

"But then you're not fucking, I am, if I'm doing all the work." Simon wondered how much more bizarre this conversation could get. "And I don't believe you when you say you'll let me do all of the work."

"Ha! I'll let you cuff me again so I can't move. So there, smarty-pants," JT giggled.

Had he just heard a giggle come out of JT's mouth? "Did you just call me smarty-pants?" It was getting harder by the minute to hold back his laughter. Simon now knew that even one of the painkillers was too much for JT. Some people had the strangest reactions to pain pills—JT seemed to be flying higher than a kite.

Wagging his eyebrows, JT leered at Simon, telling him, "We can get kinky. You can tie me up like you did at the cabin." Simon bit the inside of his cheek to keep a straight face when JT blinked at him like an owl, and said, very seriously, "But no spanking, nope, not into the whole spanking thing. Not into pain."

Grabbing the bandages and straightening JT's body to keep him from doing an end-over, Simon couldn't hold back his laugh this time. "Have you ever been spanked?" Folding a gauze pad, he gently placed it over the wound. "If not, don't knock it till you try it. I think you'd like it. Maybe if I'm the one doing the spanking you would." He finished bandaging the shoulder, just as JT slumped over. Laying him down on the sleeping bag, Simon laughed again

when a gentle snore issued from JT's mouth. "I should tie you up, just because. Or at least gag you before you start snoring like a freight train." Lying down, he pulled the other bag over them and hoped he got some sleep.

The sun was rising when they broke camp and started dragging the unwilling *Tres Dedos* to the closest landing zone for the chopper. It was several hours of hiking away, down out of the mountains. As they moved along, Simon kept pulling on the wire cable attached to their prisoner to keep him going. *Oh gee, Tres Dedos stumbled and fell.* Maybe he'd have a few falls along the trail. Too bad.

JT knew they were going to have to stop every so often for him to rest. It wasn't a real bad wound, but it still would be taking something out of him. He'd woke up unable to remember much of what had happened after he'd taken the painkiller. He thought he'd talked about sex, but he couldn't remember if they had followed through. Had he made a total ass of himself? He knew he shouldn't have taken that pill, they always messed him up. "So, did I miss any fun last night, Simon?"

Laughter poured out of Simon's mouth. "You don't remember any of last night, do you?" JT's headshake sent Simon into even more snorting and choking, trying to catch his breath. "Well, let's see, you said you knew you could fuck. And you would even let me tie you up so you wouldn't move and hurt your shoulder more. Then you started snoring."

"Just shoot me now." JT couldn't remember the last time he blushed, but he figured he was doing it now.

Chuckles erupted from Simon again. "Oh, and you don't do spanking. Nope, no spankings for you." Simon burst out laughing at the grimace that crossed JT's face.

"Just fuck my life!"

"Oh no," Simon said, leering into JT's face. "I'd rather fuck you."

After another few hours of hiking and dragging the uncooperative prisoner along, plus several rest breaks, they made to the pickup site. The chopper was

already there waiting for them, and they both agreed that it was a damn pretty sight. As they approached, the side door slid open and a man in fatigues jumped out and rushed over to greet them.

“Hey boss-man, been having a nice leisurely stroll through the mountains and forest, have you?”

“Oh yeah, Jesse, it was lovely.” Tilting his head toward *Tres Dedos*, Simon added, “And being ecologically minded, we even picked up some trash on our way out.” Turning to JT, Simon made the introductions. “JT, meet Jesse Moreno, Jesse, JT.”

Jesse’s eyes widened a bit before he schooled his features. Simon tried not to bristle—he knew JT was exactly Jesse’s type, and Jesse enjoyed looking at great scenery just as much as the next guy. After a second, he exchanged a rueful look with Jesse—Yeah, that’s how it had gone down. Jesse’s mouth quirked and he gave an almost invisible shrug, and Simon relaxed a tiny bit.

Jesse nodded and said, “Hey boss, let me take that trash off your hands for you.” Reaching out, he roughly jerked *Tres Dedos* forward to the waiting bird.

Pushing JT ahead of him, Simon said, “Let’s get out of here. We still have some work to do once we get back home.” Climbing into the chopper, they strapped themselves in. JT turned as far as his harness would let him and leaned into Simon. By the time the chopper had banked toward the nearest airport, an hour away, JT was sound asleep.

Fighting to stay awake, Simon caught the grin Jesse sent their way—and knew exactly what he was thinking. “Take that picture and I will make you one sorry bastard,” he grumbled, the last thing he managed to say before the stress and lack of sleep finally caught up to him and he went under.

After the helicopter landed at the nearest private airport, they put *Tres Dedos* in holding, in the care of Simon’s team. They had to hold him someplace safe while they waited for Castaneda to make a move. That is, if Castaneda even tried to retrieve his assassin—there was a chance he’d write him off as a liability. Chartering a small plane, which was all the local airport had, Simon and JT headed back home to confront Walters. They wanted to get back as soon as possible. Jesse would be following them back by SUV,

stopping at a safe house to drop off their prisoner when they got back to town. They didn't want all of them together at the same place at once, on the off chance that someone now knew *Tres Dedos* had failed and would be looking to finish the job.

CHAPTER TEN

It was late evening when they reached home. Simon had Sarah from his office pick them up at the airport and drive them back to his condo. JT's shoulder was starting to ache and it needed to be dressed again. Even with the catnaps they'd had on the plane, they were both still exhausted. Neither one of them had the energy to take a shower before they crashed on top of Simon's bed. They'd catch a few hours sleep, clean up, and then confront Walters in his office. Simon was betting that seeing them together was going to send Walters into a panic.

Waking up feeling only slightly more rested, they took their showers. Together, which of course led to various parts of their lower anatomy getting cleaner than other parts of their bodies. There wasn't much better than shower sex. Simon found some clothing that would fit JT, since they were more or less the same size. They decided to get some breakfast before confronting Walters.

"JT, I have eggs and bacon, or I can make pancakes. I also have cereal. What would you like?"

A huge grin crossed JT's face. "Look at you being all domestic-goddess-like."

"You want to fix your own breakfast?" Seeing JT shake his head, Simon retorted, "I thought not." Simon was enjoying the easy banter between them. It felt good, easy—none of the awkwardness that usually came with meeting someone and dating. He'd been afraid that some of their feelings stemmed from the situation they had found themselves in.

JT cleared his throat. "How are we going to do this? Are we just going to storm the office or what?"

"I think we should act like I'm doing what Walters wanted, bringing you in. I was supposed to call him when I got you back here and make arrangements for transfer, but I think we should just show up and give the man a big ol' surprise."

The smile on JT's face was full of mischief. "Works for me. Does this mean you're handcuffing me again? You do seem to have this thing about tying me up, you kinky little bastard you."

"Yeah, well you just wait till I get you into an actual bed and have my wicked way with you. Then you'll see how kinky I am... or not." Simon tried to give his best dirty-old-man-leer look to JT, which must not have been very good. JT snorted his milk through his nose, laughing.

Huffing out a sigh, Simon told him, "Enough with the making fun of me, finish eating and let's get this started."

Over breakfast they had continued getting to know each other. "JT, do you still have a place to stay here? Didn't you have a condo or something? Will you be able to go back to it?"

Nodding, JT replied, "I still have my secret condo here. I had the property manager have someone go in and clean and do any upkeep needed. I also had them pay the bills from a fake account I set up." JT chewed his bite of bacon before continuing. "My car should still be in the garage, too."

Simon was a little disappointed, but then he didn't want to rush things, either. But he would have offered his place for JT to stay if the other man hadn't still had his condo.

"Why do you ask? Would you have let me stay here?" JT had a speculative look on his face, and Simon guessed JT was wondering the same thing he was—how much of what had happened with them was just a "heat of the moment" thing?

"Yeah, I would have, if you didn't have anywhere else to go. But I want to take this slow, and you moving in seems like it would have been rushing it a bit. But I wasn't going to let you have to stay in a hotel or anything like that." Picking up his dishes and placing them in the sink, Simon turned back to face JT. "This place is a two bedroom, so you would have had your own space if you needed it. And damn, I don't know, I just want to keep seeing you."

"Well, I want to keep seeing you, too, and if it ever gets to the moving-in stage, we'll have to flip a coin and see whose place we move into. I have this

lovely wrought-iron headboard that's just screaming for someone to be handcuffed to it."

Simon groaned. "You are never going to stop riding me about that are you?"

JT laughed. "Oh I'll never stop riding you. It's the handcuffs that are the optional part." Placing his dishes alongside Simon's, he said, "You ready to roll?"

"As that group, shit—what group *was* that?—said, 'let's get this thing started.' Fuck it, let's just go." Simon snagged the truck keys, and they went out the door and into the parking lot. Simon started the truck and pulled into traffic for the fifteen-minute ride to the office.

As they pulled into the parking lot, they noticed that Walters' agency car was in its assigned spot. Reaching the office, they pushed through the doors. Every agent in the room gasped then stood, most of them moving their hands to rest on the butts of their guns. Most of them knew Simon and JT on sight. Since none of them had been told about Simon being sent to retrieve JT, they were clueless about what was going on. They just saw a fugitive standing in their office with an ex-agent.

"Back off—I have the prisoner I was sent by Walters to retrieve." Simon flipped his jacket back, resting his hand on his own gun. They had decided to have JT back in the flex-cuffs for show. They were so loose that JT had to hold them on. "I'm just taking him back to Walters' office."

Striding down the corridor, Simon rapped once on the door and then opened it.

"Fuck! Where is that goddamn little weasel?" Turning in a circle, Harte saw that the office was empty. Walters had somehow gotten the news that they were there and fled.

JT looked at Simon. "Bet when *Tres Dedos* didn't check in, Castaneda and Walters went into panic mode. Walters is probably halfway to the border by now."

Sitting down on the couch in the room, JT felt like this had been the longest fucking week and it wasn't over yet. He just wanted to sit there and rest a while.

Harte went to Walters' desk and picked up the phone. He dialed the Southwest regional director and gave him the full rundown. The director, in turn, started the ball rolling with getting a BOLO out to every border crossing across four states and Canada, just in case. The agency would be using the information that Harte's team had come up with regarding the various warehouses and other possible leads, but it was going to take a bit of time and planning to gather enough teams to start the sweeps.

"Sir, we also need you to clear Justice Thornton of all charges and remove him from the wanted list." He listened as the director told him that as far as he was concerned, JT's name was in the clear.

The director would take care of that after they finished their phone call, but it would take some time to make it all official. He also informed Simon that they both would need to come in for a debriefing. The director would have someone make the arrangements for them to fly to Dallas and would get a hotel room for them as well.

"Yes sir, we will in a couple of days. I'm sorry, what did you say? Yes sir, we would be more than happy to pursue this. We'll be sub-contracted for this assignment, I understand." The phone call continued for the better part of an hour.

After hanging up, Simon turned an incredulous look on JT. "The director just gave us the okay to continue searching for Walters and Castaneda, with the use of as many of the agency's resources as needed. The director just made a comment that my company may be getting a contract for sub-work." A smile broke out on Simon's face. "Dude, we've got it made in the shade. We get to do the same job as we did when we worked for the agency, but without all of the red-fricking-tape."

JT smiled at how happy Simon was—it was obviously a big deal for him to get a sub-contract with the agency. But he was more concerned about his own status right now. "Simon, is it really over? All charges are being dropped? I'm

off the most wanted list?” After living with this over his head for three years, it felt a bit surreal that it was done.

With a pull, Simon had JT up and in his arms. “Yes, babe, it’s finally over.”

“*Babe?* Did you just call me *babe?*” JT stared at Simon in disbelief. “I am not a babe, not for you, not for anyone.”

“Well, how about cuddle-bug or sweetie pie or my little stud muffin?” Simon snorted with laughter at the look on JT’s face.

JT retorted, “Yeah, that works just fine, honey-bunny.”

Simon was sure his face now had the same expression on it. “We’ll work on the pet names. For now, let’s get busy catching Walters. That man will not be getting away. We can work out of my office downtown. We need to see what else the team found. And since we are allowed access to anything we need, let’s grab Walters’ desktop and see what my tech guru can pry out of it.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After a month of calling in favors and searching everything they could get their hands on, Simon's team still didn't have anything concrete on Castaneda's whereabouts. They would need to be careful, because until he went down, JT and Simon were both still at risk.

They had found a bunch of information about warehouse locations, suppliers, and dealers on Walters' computer. Raids at several of the warehouses had netted several million dollars' worth of product, a large amount of cash and a huge arsenal of weapons. Most of Castaneda's pipeline had gone down. He was going to have a hard time getting his drugs through to the United States. Hopefully they had scared him enough to keep him lying low for some time. *Tres Dedos* still wasn't talking; his fear of *El Ángel de la Muerte* was greater than anything the US government could ever do to him. And after looking at where his missing fingers should have been, most of them could understand his fear. It just wasn't helping them get any closer to Castaneda's capture.

Simon and JT had also spent the month trying to track down Walters. He'd gone into hiding. JT had wanted to go chasing any and all clues, but Simon was smart enough to wait Walters out. He just knew that Walters would make his move when he thought things had cooled off enough.

When the end came, it was all too easy. Walters was caught trying to sneak across the border into Mexico. The facial recognition program matched his facial structure even under his disguise—not that the wig had made that much of a difference in Walters' appearance. Border Patrol held him until Simon and JT could pick him up, as they had wanted to do the job personally. He wasn't saying how he'd gotten out of the state and to the next. The interstate check points had been given the same BOLO as Border Patrol had gotten. The careful digging Simon's team had done unearthed hidden bank accounts, an electronic paper trail of e-mails as well as phone calls, and cars bought with cash but never transferred into his name. The BOLO had listed the license plates of all vehicles they found for Walters.

Having left Walters in the care of the DOJ's Bureau of Prisons, Simon and JT pushed through the office doors and out into the sunshine. JT had been officially cleared of all charges, and now needed to figure out where he went from here. The only thing he wished for was to finish pursuing this thing that had started in the woods with Simon.

Simon nudged JT off balance, bumping him with his shoulder. "You want to go back to the new office with me?"

JT frowned. "What new office?" He didn't have a clue what Simon was talking about.

"Well it's not really a new office. We're adding another room for your desk and just expanding the office name to that of Harte and Thornton Investigation, of course. You've been working with us there for the last month anyway." At the puzzled look on JT's face, Simon grinned. "What, you thought we were done? Not going to happen any time soon. We're too good working together, and I know you need a job now. Well, I need a partner. One at work and one in life—thought maybe you'd like both jobs. I'd like to see where this can go between us. I'm hoping you do too." With a whistle, Simon strode off, leaving JT with his mouth hanging open.

JT didn't stay that way long. A smile crossed his face as he ran to catch up with Simon. With a slap on Simon's ass, JT smirked and said, "About that partnership? Yeah, I'd like that, both of them... and you still owe me a bondage session, too. Since you cuffed me to the bed first, guess that means it's my turn. And... do I remember something about spankings? You do like spankings, right?"

THE END

Author Bio

Hi all! I am a married mother of two grown children. Hubby and I had our twenty-ninth anniversary in June of 2013. I live in the San Diego area, and have for most of my life, though now in a semi-empty nest. The kids are out, but now we have a fifteen pound cat and a five pound dog.

I was always the daydreamer in school and have been creating worlds and characters in my head most of my life. And I've always, always, always been a reader. Now I've decided to try my hand at getting some of those worlds and characters on paper. This will be my first work to be available for public consumption.

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