

Devil's Orchestra



Sydney Molare

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Tab McGrifh

1

WJZU screeched with activity—phones rang, voices boomed out messages, people zigged and zagged. As the number one station on the Eastern seaboard, it was all in a day's work.

The double doors banged open. An imposing, white-haired figure stood just inside, arms akimbo, his aura nearly visible to the naked eye. It wasn't that he was extremely handsome, because he wasn't. The timeworn face was often described as plainer than plain and the paunchy body, definitely not pin-up material. However, it was the POWER emanating from Tab McGrifh which made people take notice...just as they did now.

His mouth lifted at the corner; hard eyes surveyed the room, his lair, his domain. Conversations interrupted or halted as people greeted him—lips pulled back in pleasure or in some cases, fear. For Tab was what one would call “The Franchise.” The top radio personality on the East Coast, his program *Living Life as Your Right* was carried in more than two thousand stations worldwide. Advertisers, the lifeblood of any station, loved him. In fact, two nearly came to blows trying to waggle one of his commercial spots.

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He was a cash cow and he knew it. Hell, the world knew it. Station owners from New York City, LA and London practically drooled oceans trying to court him away. Not for Tab, though. He was a big fish in a pretty big pond and he liked it that way. No way would he risk everything he had, what he had worked and cheated to get, for *maybe* more. To say he was totally indispensable without a major “F” up—and even that was debatable—was an understatement.

With a strut of learned arrogance, he moved further into the room. Hearty slaps peppered his back; lips stretched even further, distaste swallowed behind porcelain veneers. Tab barely acknowledged the giver; accepted the fawning as his due.

A studio technician scuttled towards Tab, stopping six feet shy. “Ah, ah...we’re ready if you are,” he mumbled, eyes shifting behind, above and beside Tab. He didn’t have the guts to look him straight on...few people did.

“Lead on, son! My people want to hear from me!” Tab boomed.

“Ah, ah, yessir.” The stuttering tech stumbled over his feet and crashed into a waiting desk. Face beet red, he snapped back upright, ignored the coffee he’d spilt on the secretary sitting at the desk—as well as her papers—and threw open the studio door. Tab winked at the pissed woman but offered no assistance. *That* was beneath him.

As he entered the door to the studio, a voice stopped him. “Mr. McGriffth. Wait!”

What the hell? Tab glanced at the clock above the door. Only five minutes before air time. Anybody that had been at the station more than a day *knew* he arrived ten minutes before his program aired,

accepted five minutes of compliments and brown nosing then entered the studio promptly at five until. He prided himself on a live broadcast. Being a minute late or taping his program early was *not* an option. His egomaniac opinion: Canned stuff was for woozies. And he'd be *damned* if they called him one.

Lips sneered, eyes narrowed, he turned to confront the voice. "Yes? Make it quick!"

The tech edged further into the studio, crossed his legs and discreetly pushed on his now irritable bladder.

The room mimicked a tomb—eyes riveted, mouths hushed—as a too perky, too young woman ran up and handed him a note. "This person said it was *very* important they speak to you immediately," she gushed, head bobbing like a duck.

Stopped for a message? Tab's eyebrows lifted heavenward. *God, she must be an intern.* "Is that it?" he asked, since the woman still bobbed before him.

"Yes. *Very* important," she nodded her assent before continuing, "I got the feeling you should really call him before you go on air and since you just got here and all, maybe you could take a minute and see what he wants. Follow up and all. I'd hate for it to be an emergency and you didn't talk to them—"

"Thank you," Tab interrupted, ready to get the hell away from the babbling woman. "Thank you very much ah...ah..."

"Sally," she finished for him.

"Thank you, Sally. I'll give them a call as soon as I can." Tab turned to leave.

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“Good. Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Tab glanced back, a tart remark tickling the edge of his tongue. “I just *love* your show. It’s the best.” Sally winked with this statement.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? Thank you, again, ah...”

“Sally,” she supplied again.

“Sir, you only have three minutes until airtime,” the tech squeaked out. He wouldn’t have interrupted at all except he knew if Tab were late he’d lead the unemployment line by morning.

“Yes, thank you, Sally.”

Tab entered the studio, the unread note jammed into his pocket.

#

The program went off without a hitch. Tab patronized, gushed and fawned over his guest, The Honorable Judge P. Hiram Hirsch. Didn’t matter that Judge Hirsch was often his guest, it was a matter of principle since he stood for everything Tab held important—the Christian right wing and tough justice for juvenile lawbreakers amongst the foremost.

After the Judge exited, Tab took a moment to visit his office. His importance to the station was mirrored in his suite—top grade leather furniture, a granite desk, adjoining bedroom with bath and most importantly, a bank of windows which allowed him to survey the city and the mountains behind.

He grabbed an imported cigar before he sifted through his messages. That smoking was prohibited in a public building was of

no importance to him. Hell, he was the reason they were able to keep the light on for Christ's sake.

As he threw messages deemed unimportant into the trash can, he heard the crackle of paper in his pocket. *Ab, the message that silly girl gave me*, he thought as he fished it out. Hmm. It was from Whitehall Fordham. Whitey Ford as Tab called him.

An old mentor from his first station WDMN, Whitey took a young, inexperienced DJ—as Tab was at the time—and molded him into the man he was today. Every thing Tab still did had Whitey's touch on it—his views, mannerisms and most importantly, his power moves.

With eager fingers, Tab dialed the number. Whitey answered with his customary greeting.

“Talk.” One word, always.

“Whitey. Tab McGrifh here.”

“’Bout damn time you called back. I expected to hear from you more than an hour ago,” Whitey growled.

“Just got the message,” Tab lied.

“You should fire that girl I gave it to then. It was something important and she's just walking around with it. In fact, I stressed how important it was so she should have told you.”

That Sally had told him exactly that didn't pass Tab's lips. “Rest assured, I'll deal with it in a few minutes. So why'd you call?”

Tab heard Whitey's long, deep sigh before he answered. “Well...the fact is I need to talk to you. Need to get some things off of my chest that's been held in too long. *Way* too long. I need to explain...just...we need to talk.”

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Tab was puzzled. Whitey Ford admitting he needed a confidant was nothing short of a miracle. That he wanted the confidant to be Tab was mind boggling. "Okay," Tab began slowly, "Where do you want to meet?"

"There's a pub just out of town, *The Shoat's Head*. Meet me there around eight."

Tab sifted through his mind bank. "I've never heard of this pub before. Where is it?"

"Old Hwy. 92 South. The new highway by-passed it so it's not so easy to spot anymore."

Tab scribbled the information on a pad. "I'll find it. What time again?"

"Eight o'clock on the dot."

"I'll be there."

"See that you do."

"Whitey?"

"Ah huh?"

"It's good hearing from you. See you tonight?"

"Bye."

Tab leaned back in the chair, euphoria making his blood hum. He absently fondled himself as he was wont to do whenever something made him pulse, feel alive.

What was that girl's name again? Susie...no, Sally. That's it. Sally.

Tab reached for the phone. Perhaps his newest fan would enjoy showing him just how much she *truly* liked his show...on her knees, of course.

Deva

2

The music was loud, the beat thumping.

“Would you cut that off?” The young woman lying across the lounge whined at her companion. “I’m sick of hearing it! Matter of fact, I’m sick of everything. Ugh!” she ranted before she covered her head with a pillow.

Lena, her assistant/personal secretary/Girl Friday, rolled her eyes. *What’s she tired of anyway? Being the number one pop star in the world? Selling millions of albums? Anyone would just about kill their mother to be in her shoes and she’s tired of it. Well, just let me get the chance and I’ll definitely show more appreciation than this.*

Lena sauntered over and turned down the music anyway. “That good?” she smirked.

“Yeah,” the muffled voice replied. “Don’t they want to play anything else on these stations?”

“Girl, you know they play only the top songs and right now you’re hot and have been for the past few years. You’d be fit to be tied if they didn’t play your music and we both know it.”

A tousled, blond-streaked head emerged followed by gold, feline eyes set in a narrow face. A face splashed worldwide from billboards,

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television stations and magazines in various looks, styles and poses. Deva, hip hop princess extraordinaire. Her bullet ride to the top of the pop charts had oft been described as phenomenal. Her voice placed in the realms of the angels.

Early on, people assumed that there was nothing behind the looks and great voice. But she'd proved them wrong. Deva's net worth was now in the nine digit range thanks to her shrewd business mind. Her signature clothes could be spotted on the backs and behinds of millions of adoring fans, and her perfume, Devaour, flew off the shelves.

"And you know this. Shit!" Covers are flung back and the voluptuous body—nearly as recognizable without the face—was revealed. "What do I have planned for today anyway?"

Lena retrieved the PDA always by her side and pressed the front with her stylus. "Looks like you have an interview in two hours at a television station, lunch with some studio execs then another interview—this one radio—after that. Nothing's scheduled for tonight though."

"Thank God! I need some rest right about now. This tour has worn me out."

And it had. A nine million dollar set and fifty cities in three months would wear out anyone...if not for the expected sixty million dollar payoff in the end. It wore out the staff too, but unlike Deva, they wouldn't get anywhere near sixty million. Lena held her tongue and waited.

"Can't you cancel everything and I sleep in?" Deva moaned.

Lena shrugged. "Wish I could but you know sucking up is a requirement not an elective."

"Shit!" Deva ran fingers through her mane. "I am drained. *Drained*, I tell you. I'll be *so* glad when this whole tour thing is finished and I can spend some of that money my accountant says we're making."

"It'll be here soon, chick. Just keep singing and packing them in and time will fly by."

"That's easy for you to say. You aren't up there on stage with the hot lights, costume changes and fans that get out of control." Deva shuddered as she relived the crazed fan that ran up on stage and managed to tear her shirt from her back before the guards reached them. "That was the worst."

"I was there, remember?" Lena replaced her stylus before walking towards the door. "I've got to check on some things for tomorrow. You want to shower and I'll send Cayman over in fifteen?" Cayman was Deva's hair stylist. His flaming personality often clashed with Lena's no nonsense one. Nonetheless, they managed to temper their anger in Deva's presence. She hated petty arguments and neither one of them was looking for a one-way ticket to the house.

"How about I take a shower and you tell Cayman I ran away." Deva grinned.

"Naw. He'd just cuss me out and find you anyway," Lena groused.

"You're right, too." Deva's laughter tinkled in the air. "I guess we'll just go with your first plan—me shower, then Cayman."

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“Good. I’ll be back in thirty minutes or so. Get to moving.”

“I’m moving. I’m moving.”

The door closed and Deva slumped back into the covers. The pillow followed and covered her face, all thoughts of a shower gone.

#

The ringing cell phone woke her. Deva tried to ignore it but the *Mission Impossible* tune it shrieked wouldn’t allow it. *Where is Lena when you need her?* Rolling the covers back, she slid her lace-covered torso from the lounge.

Where is the damn phone? The ringing seemed to be coming from the direction of the chair in the corner. She grabbed her purse first. No phone. Next, the clothes in the chair. No phone. “Where the hell is it!” She finally located it between the boots she had worn the night before. Just as she reached for it, it fell silent.

“Great! Just dammit great!” Deva pushed the Menu button and groaned as she read CALLER ID BLOCKED. *Shoot that could be anybody.* Dropping the phone, she walked back to the lounge, intending to continue her sleep party. Just as she gave the pillows a final fluff before reclining on them, the phone began singing again.

“Argh! Who the hell can this be!” Deva yelled to herself. Tromping to the blinking phone, she stared at the screen. CALLER ID BLOCKED. She stabbed the button.

“Hello?”

“Yes, Lenora?” a male voice asked.

Who in the world is this? Only a few people, usually family and close friends, called her by her given name. The rest used Deva. “Ah, yes?”

“How's it going?”

“Ah...fine...ah...” Deva had no clue to who she was speaking with but after a fan had stalked and killed that actor, she was always cautious when dealing with unknown people on the phone.

“You don't know who this is, do you?”

The voice seemed familiar but...“Not even a clue,” she finally admitted.

“I can tell. Let me help you out. It's Ed. Ed Burris. You know, your old running buddy?”

And did she. She and Ed Burris managed to get into more than their share of trouble from grade school until they graduated. Over the years, they had progressed from water balloons and silly pranks to slipping out of windows—a stunt that got her behind reddened and grounded for six months. But Ed had been more than her partner-in-mischief, he was also the tenor to her alto. They'd sung a million and one duets, winning every talent contest they entered.

When Ed wanted the relationship to go beyond platonic, Deva rebuffed him and their buddy days died a slow, painful death. They'd drifted apart and begun avoiding each other. She'd finally lost touch with him once they went off to college.

As the memories washed over her, she exclaimed, “Oh, my goodness...Ed! How are you?”

“Great. Bet you're wondering how I got this number, huh?”

“Uh ugh. I know Mama probably gave it to you.” Her mother always said that Ed would make Deva a great husband if she would give him a chance.

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“Congratulations! You’re the grand prize winner!” Ed mimicked a commentator.

“I knew it. Mama is always giving out my cell phone number. I heard from so many folks that said we went to school together that I threatened to change it and not give it to her. Where’d you see her anyway?”

“At her favorite store—Wal-Mart.”

“Now you know that’s everybody’s favorite store. If Wal-Mart doesn’t have it, then nobody does.”

“You’re right, too.” They both laugh at this. “Hey, the reason I’m calling is, I’m in town and I really need to see you. It’s been only, what, five years or so?”

“Gosh, yeah. Right after graduation.” Deva remembered the stilted conversation followed by an awkward hug at the post-graduation party; the hungry eyes which tugged at her heart. But Ed was just too...familiar. She wanted and needed something more. A more that Ed just didn’t possess for her.

“So if you’ve got time, let’s meet. There a tavern just out of town called the *Shoat’s Head*. I don’t think you’d be recognized if we went there. You can’t wear your flashy clothes, but if you dress regularly and clean some of that war paint off your face—”

“War paint!” Deva wailed.

“Yes, war paint. I don’t know why you slather that mess over your face when all you need is Noxzema and cocoa butter.”

Ed had always hated how Deva dolled herself up for the contests. But stage presence was a must and makeup was part of her stage

presence. "I'll have you know I pay somebody forty thousand dollar a year for my makeup."

"Your accountant should be shot on sight."

"Quit." Deva giggled a bit before her gaiety sobered. "Ed...is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No. Why?"

"Well...I mean...we haven't kept in touch or anything and...you just call me out of the blue."

"I caught your show and wanted to see how you were doing in person. That's all."

Relief flooded Deva's body. She was afraid he had bad news he needed to tell her face-to-face. "Oh. Well yes, I can meet you. You're lucky that I have a free night."

"You know I always had great timing." He chuckled.

"Yes, you did. So what's the name of the place again?"

"*The Shoat's Head*. It's a tavern on old Hwy. 92. Your driver shouldn't have any trouble finding it but you probably shouldn't arrive in a limo. That would be a dead giveaway for you."

"Right."

"I'll see you, what, around eight or so?"

"That's fine. Ed...great talking to you again."

"I can't wait to see you in person. Until tonight?"

"Tonight."

"Bye."

Deva regradled the phone. *Ed wants to see me again*. Even though she'd never wanted Ed for anything more than a friend, there was an allure to knowing that a man she hadn't seen in years still wanted to

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see her for some reason. Maybe it was the fame...maybe not. Either way, she planned to give him something to remember her by.

Deva flung open the door. "Lena!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Juan Rodriguez

3

The Latin face concentrated on the computer screen while his fingers flew over the keyboard, frantically keeping pace with the scene playing out in his head. The unexpected way the chapter unfolded had him hunched over, pecking furiously, the world blocked out. He knew his editor was going to have an early martini after reading this material!

And he would. Juan Rodriguez was the current “Golden Boy” of Oscan House books. They had taken a chance on an unknown author, with a controversial manuscript, and it had paid off in spades. His novel, *See Me for Me*—written by a gay man about gay culture—had amazingly, shot to the top of bestseller’s lists across the country.

Accolades were heaped on him left and right. Gay activists trumpeted the book as the new “Alternative Lifestyle” bible. The books flew off the shelves and the money poured in. His sophomore novel, *Two Daddies*, followed the same course. All and all, Juan’s star was shining pretty bright in the literary world right now.

He was so engrossed in the scene, the closing door of the front door barely registered. Not until hands touched him and a small

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voice said "Daddy, I'm home!" did he reluctantly tear his eyes away while his hands continued on autopilot.

"Hey, Loam!" Juan squealed at the cherubic face staring into his.

Loam pulled himself into his father's lap and gave the biggest hug a five-year-old could. Juan smiled back at the child, love glistening from his eyes, and tousled Loam's hair. "Where's your other papa?"

"I'm right here, Babe," a voice answered.

Juan smiled as the man stepped into sight. Zeus. His partner for life. Six feet and muscular, Zeus was the poster child for tall, dark and handsome. Juan always thought it should be tall, dark and pretty because he *was* man-pretty with his long eyelashes and lush lips. Juan swung Loam onto his hip as he stood and hugged Zeus.

Zeus pulled back and stared at the computer screen. "I see you've been working since we left."

"Yep, almost got two chapters done. Matter of fact, would have had three if you guys hadn't arrived."

"Saved by your boys." Zeus laughed, showing a row of perfect teeth.

"That what boys are for...amongst other things." Juan wiggled his eyebrows.

Loam patted Juan's face focusing his attention back to him. "Can we watch *Power Rangers* now?" His eyes pleaded.

"Sure," Zeus replied before Juan could answer. "Let's just get out of your daddy's hair and you and me can bond some more."

Loam transferred from one set of arms to the other. "What's bond mean, Daddy?"

Zeus' response was lost as they turned the corner. Juan settled back at his keyboard, his mind already returning to his scene. *Let's see, where was I?* As he reread his writing and sifted through his mental notes, the YOU'VE GOT MAIL! icon popped onto the screen. With a perfunctory double click, the message opened.

Message dated 1/15

From: Bodie40@zapnet.net

To: Juan Rodriguez

Hey. Long time, no speak. Sorry how things went down. Please forgive. We need to talk. Face to face. Guess you might not want to talk to me but I need to SEE you. So, dump Romeo and meet me at the Shoats Head Tavern out on old 92 at 8.

Bodie :)

Juan's chest slammed to the floor, breath nearly ceased as he read, then reread the email.

Bodie. English professor, advisor...Juan's first lover. Blond, beach-boy tanned, model's body...he was everything Juan wanted *except* he put the w-h-o-r in whore. He'd taken Juan's love then used, abused and dismissed him without a backwards glance. God, how he'd loved him.

He couldn't stop his eyes from reading the message for a fourth time. *Why now*, just when life was going so well. Didn't matter that Juan Rodriguez had sold millions of books, had all the money he

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needed, a man he loved and a son...Bodie still managed to pop up like a stinking, dead fish.

"Babe, wanna order pizza tonight?" Zeus' voice drifted out, his footfall coming closer.

As Juan jumped to click the email closed, he upset the glass of cola next to the keyboard and soda gushed across the keys. "Damn!"

"Hey, what happened?"

Juan grabbed a dishtowel and began mopping at the keyboard. "Nothing. Just spilled my drink."

"Damn. Let me help." Zeus grabbed some paper towels and turned to offer assistance.

"No!" Juan stood stiffly in front of the computer, arms outstretched.

Zeus looked askance at him. "The soda will make the keys stick." Zeus shifted to the left. Juan blocked his progress. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." *Calm down and sound normal.* "It's just that I don't want to mess up what I've written so far and you know swiping at the keys will do that and then I'd have to start all over." The explanation sounded lame even to his ears.

"Yeah, right." Zeus shifted right. Juan blocked left.

"I've got it. Really. I can...I can take care of this." *God, please don't let me accidentally pop that email open! Not now.*

Zeus stared into Juan's eyes, the "something's wrong" look on his face and sighed. "What's the deal, Juan?"

"Nothing. Why?" Juan rocked from foot to foot.

“You sure? I mean, I just wanted to help and you’re acting strange.”

Juan slid a shaky smile on. “You know how wiggled out I get when I’m working. It’s just that this project is so important and...” Juan stepped to take Zeus into his arms, “...and I don’t want anything to go wrong. You know we *are* spending the advance on this baby already,” he laughed.

Zeus hugged him back. “That is true.”

“So just let me take care of this little accident and you go on back with Loam. OK?”

“All right.” Zeus pulled from the embrace, no trace of worry evident on his face. “So, do you want pizza for dinner or what?”

“Oh.” Juan turned his back and began mopping at the desktop. “I think I’m going out to the poetry reading at *Zinzibaz*.” The deep need, no want, to see Bodie one last time forced him to lie.

Zeus cocked an eyebrow. “Really? I thought you were going to pass on that.”

“I was but it’s important to keep the exposure up, you know.” Sweat popped on his forehead. He felt a bead coursing through his hair on the way to rolling down his face as Zeus stared at him. After a few tense seconds, Zeus replaced the smile and said, “Yeah, I do know. Well, what time do you think you’ll be home?”

Juan shrugged. “I imagine around ten or so.”

“OK. I guess me and Loam will just have to split the pizza.”

“Save a slice for me, will you?”

“You know I will. Let me let you get back to work.” Zeus gave him a peck on the lips then left.

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Juan sent a hasty reply before he shut off the computer and carefully mopped at the keys. As he did, he couldn't shake the feeling that he had just made the biggest mistake of his life.

Tab McGrifh

4

The fog was heavy on old Hwy. 92. No lights were visible, no cars had passed. Tab drove slowly, body tensed, eyes straining for stray animals along the sides of the road. The last thing he needed was for a damn deer to hit his Mercedes convertible.

He sighed in relief as he spotted a glow of neon up ahead. The *Shoat's Head Tavern* sign came into view.

The establishment itself was a disappointment—a seen-better-days building no bigger than a tract house with a gravel parking lot. Three cars were parked there already.

Why the hell did Whitey want me to meet him all the way out here?

The gravel crunched loudly as Tab slowly navigated the lot, watching for beer bottles. Parking near the door, he heaved his bulk out and looked around. The air was acrid from the smoke billowing out of the chimney atop of the building. A skinny dog sniffed around the trash cans propped and overflowing besides the building. With a sigh, Tab headed toward the front door.

The inside was just as pitiful as the outside. A large bar was positioned by the door and mixed-matched tables and chairs seemed to be randomly placed around the remainder of the small room

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whose focal point was a huge fireplace. From what Tab could see, only three people were inside—two men at the bar and the bartender who sported a Mohawk, muscle shirt and earrings embedded along his lobe.

What the hell kind of place is this?

If Tab were honest with himself, he would realize that his reaction was born from a fear that had plagued him since he'd left his poverty-stricken beginnings: That one day he'd slide back down the ladder to end where he'd left.

"Evening. Welcome to the Shoa't's Head Tavern," the bartender greeted him lazily.

"Evening." Tab inclined his head.

"What'll you have?"

"Nothing right now. I'm waiting for someone."

The bartender indicated a seat. Tab slid onto the stool and nodded at the men sitting there. Both of them looked like they were on hard times—bad haircuts, polyester suits, shirts with ties pulled away, and scuffed shoes. Tab dismissed them without another glance. He'd lived in the lap of luxury too long to remember when he had been their identical twin.

"Nasty night out there, isn't it?" one of the men said. Tab turned towards the voice. He stared at the speaker's dirty blond hair before traveling down to the craggy, pitted face.

"Yeah," he said before glancing away.

"If you don't mind me asking, who are—"

"I mind," Tab growled and shifted on the stool, his back now to the man.

The man held his hands in front of him. "Sorry, bub. No harm meant."

"No offense taken."

All eyes turn as the door opened...

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Deva

5

No one would recognize the woman riding in the back seat of the Pontiac Grand Am. Minimal makeup, plain clothes and a short black wig ensured that.

“Jarrel, are we almost there?” Deva hugged herself as she stared out in the darkness. They hadn’t seen a house or lights for miles.

“I’m not sure, Ms. Deva, but the guy at the tavern said to stay on old 92 for ten miles and we should see the sign.” Jarrel stared at her in the rear-view mirror. Though he’d never admit it, he was apprehensive about this whole setup. Seems like if some old friend wanted to see Ms. Deva, he could have come to the hotel. No need to drag her way out to the boondocks. He shifted his eyes back to the road.

“How many miles have we gone? It must have been at least ten by now.”

Jarrel glanced at the dashboard. “Only eight. I’ve got the counter set so I could keep track.”

“If we don’t see something soon, we’re turning around.”

We should have just stayed at the hotel. But Jarrel didn’t voice his opinion. He was paid to drive and protect, not give advice.

A neon light seemed to spring out of nowhere, surprising him. Jarrel braked hard, throwing Deva against the side. "What's wrong!" she screamed as the car skidded to a stop.

"Sorry about that. The place just seemed to sneak up on me. Guess I didn't spot it in the fog and all."

"Oh, we're here?" Deva straightened and glanced out of the window. The *Shoat's Head Tavern* sign glowed back at her. Her nose wrinkled at the scene before her—a raggedy old hole-in-the-wall building just like the juke joints she'd left behind in Mississippi. *How the hell did Ed find this place?*

Jarrel studied the area. "This is it. Not too much to it, is there?"

"Doesn't look like it. Well, just park and I'll see what Ed wants and we'll be out of here in a minute."

"Let me get close to the front door. Don't look like they get much traffic, so I'm gonna just park right out front."

"That's fine."

Jarrel parked and slid out to open Deva's door. She looked at him in surprise as he offered his arm. "What?"

"I'm not letting you go in there alone. I'm here to protect, too."

"You don't have to do that. I'll be fine." She waved him off and began walking towards the front door.

Jarrel's hand stopped her. "I'm sorry, Ms. Deva, but either I go with you or I'm taking you back to the hotel. You can fire me in the morning."

Deva stared at his stoic, unmoving face. In all few years he'd been driving her, she'd never seen him this way before. After a few

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seconds, she took the proffered arm. "We'll do it your way, but I don't think it's necessary."

"I know you don't, but this way, I would sure feel better about things."

"I understand. Let's get on inside."

Jarrel pushed the door open...

Juan Rodriguez

6

Juan's heart thumped in his chest. He was a fool and he knew it. He'd lied to Zeus to drive out to God knows where to see an old don't-give-a-shit-about-him lover.

Bodie writes a damn email and I jump like I'm still his love flunky.

His attention was split between the road and the rear view mirror. The fact that he'd seen nothing resembling human or animal existence since exiting onto this stretch of highway made him edgy. Maybe it was the weather. The heavy fog and now drizzle would keep the animals in the woods where they could stay dry. He knew he should turn the car around and write Bodie out of his life for good...but he couldn't. On some subconscious level, he *needed* this closure, needed to get him out of his system for all eternity.

"God, just let me be strong when I see him. I don't want to make an ass of myself like I did before," Juan prayed aloud as he remembered the last meeting with Bodie. A begged for reunion evolved into a flash lovefest quickly turned loathfest when Bodie jetted out while Juan slept. "I just want to see what he wants and that's the end of it. Please let me get out of here safe and please, *please* don't let Zeus find out. Amen."

Sydney Molare'

His mind was so jumbled he barely registered that he'd reached the tavern. The neon sign seemed to sprout out of nowhere as he passed it. He cursed his lack of concentration as he slowed and backed up.

There were four cars in the parking lot and one out front of the run-down building.

This looks like something you see on a documentary.

Nevertheless, he pulled behind the Grand Am parked in front and cut the engine. With a deep breath, he opened the door then closed it quickly. He rummaged around in the glove compartment a minute before he found what he was searching for. Placing the beads in his pocket, he reopened the door and strolled to the entrance. After another glance around, he pushed the door open...

Tab McGrifh

7

Interested eyes drank in the sight of the young, black couple coming through the door. Tab gave them a once-over and dismissed them. She was probably a prostitute and he, some married sucker trying to get as far away from anybody that might see them. Without a word to anyone, they settled at one of the tables near the fire.

Tab glanced at the Budweiser clock over the bar. Seven fifty. Whitey should be here any minute.

“Hey Bartender, give me a Coors if you’ve got one.”

“Sure. Want a glass with that?” The Bartender asked as he wiped the counter with a dirty rag.

Tab looked at the dust-laced glasses hanging over the bar then the Mohawked man. “Got a plastic cup?”

The bartender smirked before reaching under the bar and placing a Holiday Inn cup on the counter. The Coors followed.

“That’ll be seven-fifty.”

The hand reaching for his wallet stilled. *How the hell was a dollar-fifty beer worth seven-fifty in this hellhole?* “Little stiff, don’t you think?” Tab barked.

Sydney Molare'

"The plastic cup makes things cost a little more," the bartender deadpanned.

"It's not even your bar's cup, for Christ's sake."

"Because we *imported* it in, it costs more. You want the beer or not?" The bartender reached for the Coors.

Tab pulled it away. "I want it." He threw a ten on the counter.

"Keep the change?" the bartender pushed.

"Nope and here's your tip: Quit ripping people off." Tab poured the contents of the bottle into the cup and ignored the glare from the man. Seemed like this bar might need some free "advertisement" on his show. This thought made him smile.

The door pushed open and Tab turned yet again...

Deva

8

Deva and Jarrel faced the door. Jarrel had already done a scope of the tavern and concluded that there was only one way in and one way out—a bad thing if trouble started. Not that he couldn't hold his own. Being six-four and two hundred and fifty pounds made a man think twice before taking him on.

“What a dump! What in the world was Ed thinking when he chose this place? I can't see him even visiting here at all!” Deva whined.

“Yeah, but this is the place.” Jarrel kept his eyes trained on the door and the men at the bar. The fat one and the two down-on-their-luck cases didn't seem to be a problem. However, the bartender, who leered and blew kisses at Deva, might be a different case. If he kept on, he might get another hole placed in his body...by force.

“What time is it?” Deva asked while looking at the clock above the bar. “Ed should be here any minute. I sure hope he's not late because I'm not waiting around too long,” she huffed.

Jarrel eyed her for a moment before asking quietly, “Who is this guy you agreed to meet here anyway, Ms. Deva?” Normally, he didn't

Sydney Molare'

pry into Deva's life, but the way she had dropped everything to meet somebody out in the boonies made him curious.

Deva leaned back in her chair, trying to think of way to describe why she'd agreed to meet an old friend without giving out too much information. She might be a public personality, but her life was very private and she planned to keep it like that. "Well, Ed is...from my hometown, Yokel, Mississippi."

"So this is somebody from way back."

"Yeah. Like from childhood way back."

"Ahuh. Old flame?" Jarrel smiled while he ventured this question.

"No! I mean...I mean Ed *might* have been interested at one time but...nothing ever came of it." Deva wrung her hands together, a sure sign she was flustered.

"Ahuh. And?" Jarrel let the remainder of the question hang in the air.

"And what? Ed was in town and just wanted to see me again."

"The hotel wasn't good enough for him?" Jarrel's eyebrows quirked. "Is he running from the law or something?"

The question made Deva pause. She hadn't seen Ed in more than five years and she had no idea of what he might or might not be running from. *God, please don't let me have stepped into some mess.*

"Is that a 'yes, he is' or a 'no, he isn't' or just an 'I don't know?'" Jarrel leaned forward, fingers tented over his nose.

"I don't *know*." Deva forced herself to look into his eyes. "The Ed I remember wouldn't be running from the law. He wasn't...that type of man. Besides, my mother wouldn't have given him my number if he was into some shady stuff."

Jarrell lolled his head as he spoke. "Mamas forget and forgive a lot of things *especially* if they like you."

And that was true. Deva's mother loved herself some Ed. Enough to overlook any wrongdoing on his part? She couldn't be sure. Deva wrapped now shaking arms around her torso. "You might be right, Jarrel, but let's just wait and see for ourselves."

"As you wish." Jarrel leaned back slowly, a look of censure on his face.

Both of them turned as the door opened...

Sydney Molare'

Juan Rodriguez

9

Juan entered what he would have described in one of his novels as a dive—cheap furniture, tacky floors and cheesy patrons. A Mohawked man sporting way too many earrings stood behind a classic bar. The bartender, Juan assumed. The man nodded but offered no greeting. After a quick glance around the room, Juan headed for the rear of the place. No need for anyone to see him with Bodie.

A couple seated near the fire made him pause. She looked familiar but...oh well, he couldn't place her right now. The setting wasn't right. One thing for sure, she looked *way* too high-class for this crappy place.

Juan settled into a booth lining the back wall and slightly out of direct view of the door. He had to be cautious because everything was on the line if Zeus found out where he was...and why. *Lord, please don't let there be any fans here tonight!*

Bits of conversation drifted to him as he drank in the scene before him. He played the 'Guess What They Do' game in an attempt to relax.

Hmmm, the dried up blond man at the counter? Juan betted he was a salesman of some sort. As he glanced at the clock, he surmised that the man either had no wife or didn't want to go home to the wife and family.

The guy sitting next to him with the dark hair— probably in the same field. The way they carried on an easy, loud conversation and the fact that they were nearly identically dressed indicated that they might know each other; be friends.

Now the fat guy a few stools down had him stumped. His clothes looked expensive and his haircut, top notch. Even with his back turned, he exuded power...but here he was in the middle of Podunk, nursing a cheap beer when he looked like he should be holding court in an upscale restaurant. An executive cutting an after-hours deal? But why here? After a few minutes, Juan gave up on him.

The couple seemed to be...waiting. The no contact between them indicated either they weren't a pair or that they were having some problems in the relationship. As big as the man was, Juan would definitely say he was professional football player material but his face didn't ring any bells to him. The woman was gorgeous even with that ugly wig on. Though she kept the shawl wrapped tightly around her, it only emphasized her curves versus camouflaging them. Juan finally decided that she was a model probably in a mess of some sort and the man was helping her out.

The bartender, well, we know what he does. However, the way he kept eyeing the woman *and* the way the man with the woman eyed the bartender made Juan's stomach flip-flop.

Bad Karma there.

Congratulations! Because you have exhibited true interest in my novel's excerpt, I am providing access to the entire ebook. Here is the link:
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Sydney Molare

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Juan wished for the hundredth time he'd never come...or that Bodie would hurry up.