

JUSTICE SERVED

by

RADCLYFFE



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CHAPTER ONE

Monday

I don't think the doctor wants you going up and down stairs yet," warned the small blond in the skintight black Capri slacks, white ribbed tank top, and open-toed stack heels. October was around the corner, but Sandy Sullivan rarely wore more than the bare essentials.

"Have to try," Officer Dellon Mitchell grunted. Grimacing with the effort, she swung her injured left leg free of the crutch as she maneuvered up the first stair in the hospital stairwell. "You live on the third floor, remember?"

"We can stay at your place, Dell. *You* have an elevator and a doorman, *remember?*" Hands on hips, Sandy stepped back to allow the young, dark-haired police officer to set her crutches onto the next stair, but stayed close enough to catch her should Mitchell lose her balance and topple over. Considering that Mitchell was a head taller and twenty pounds of muscle heavier, Sandy might have trouble breaking her fall, but she was not about to let anything else happen to her new lover.

"I don't want to lie around in my apartment." Sweating, Mitchell paused long enough to brush her forearm across her forehead. The shock of jet-black hair promptly tumbled back into her eyes. Her bad leg felt like it weighed fifty pounds, and she couldn't believe how much her arms were shaking. She didn't want Sandy to see that or she had a feeling she would be forcibly dragged back to bed. Even if Sandy *was* half her size, when she was fired up, she was unstoppable. "I want to be able to get back to work."

Mitchell also didn't want to point out that it would be better for both of them if they remained visible on the streets in Sandy's neighborhood, a part of town known for its small-time hustlers, corner drug dealers, and prostitutes. Mitchell had just begun an undercover assignment, and Sandy was supposed to be her girlfriend. The fact that

the cover story had suddenly become the truth complicated issues, but they still needed to maintain appearances.

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid you’ll get a bad reputation if you have a hooker in your swanky apartment?” Sandy’s tone was less accusatory than anxious as she watched Mitchell, still in her hospital gown. The young cop was as pasty white as she had been the night before, her dark blue eyes clouded with pain that she thought Sandy couldn’t see. “Getting soft, rookie? I didn’t think you cared what your *doorman* thinks.”

“I don’t,” Mitchell said through gritted teeth. “Especially about you. But I care about people tying me *or* you to the action the other night.”

Thirty-six hours before, Mitchell had been stabbed while apprehending several key suspects in an Internet pornography ring. Those arrests had climaxed weeks of work by an unusual team of Philadelphia police officers and civilian consultants led by Mitchell’s mentor and role model, Detective Sgt. Rebecca Frye. Mitchell wanted back on that team more than she’d ever wanted anything in her life, except the young woman who peered at her anxiously with a frown on her pale, worried face. And the fastest way to get back on the team was to get back on her feet. “If I didn’t blow my cover already, I don’t want to now.”

“Screw your cover. You’re shaking, Dell.”

“I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not.” Sandy moved closer and wrapped her arm around Mitchell’s waist. “You’re just as stubborn and blockheaded as a certain *other* cop I’ve met. But you don’t have to be like Frye all the time.”

“It’s not about Frye.” Mitchell allowed herself to lean against Sandy while she caught her breath and swiped futilely at the sweat now beaded on her entire face. “I’m just not used to these crutches.”

“Yeah. And it doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that you just got operated on yesterday morning and lost a couple of buckets of blood before that, either.” Sandy snorted in disgust. “Jesus, cops are such a pain in the ass.”

“Are you going to bitch at me the *whole* time I’m laid up?” Mitchell feigned distress, but she was grinning. She leaned back against the wall,

angling her body to take the weight off her leg while making room for Sandy to snuggle up against her.

“I don’t know,” Sandy replied, wrapping her arms around Mitchell’s waist before kissing her neck. They’d been lovers for less than a week, and Sandy couldn’t look at her without getting wet. “It depends on how long it takes you to get better. If it takes *too* long, I could get very cranky.”

“You think I won’t be able to take care of business?” Mitchell dipped her head, brought her mouth to Sandy’s, and ran her tongue lightly over the surface of Sandy’s bottom lip. Sandy moaned softly, and Mitchell’s heart rate skyrocketed. *Oh man, now I will fall down.* With the heat of Sandy’s body warming her all the way through, she didn’t care a bit if they ended up in a heap on the floor. As she flicked the tip of her tongue over the inside of Sandy’s lip, she snaked a hand beneath the back of Sandy’s tank top. She could practically span the entire width of her girlfriend’s small waist with one hand. “God, you feel good,” she muttered.

“I don’t think this activity is on the prescribed list of treatments for stab wounds,” a voice on the verge of laughter announced from behind them.

Mitchell, sliding her arm protectively around Sandy’s shoulders, jerked her head up. Her gaze met the laughing brown eyes of her surgeon, Ali Torveau. Mitchell blushed.

“Uh...morning.”

“Good,” Sandy grumbled, lifting her chin in Dr. Torveau’s direction. “Maybe Dell will listen to *you*.” Carefully, she disentangled herself from her girlfriend and moved away. “She won’t admit she’s about to keel over.”

“Sandy,” Mitchell complained with a sigh.

“It’s true, Dell.”

Torveau leaned against the wall in the stairwell and folded her arms across her chest, her eyes narrowing as she watched Mitchell maneuver down to the landing. “How do you feel?”

When Mitchell hesitated, Ali added, “And don’t try to snow me.”

“Uh...”

“That bad, huh?” Ali pushed away from the wall and eased over to Mitchell. Casually, she slipped her hand under Mitchell’s elbow. “Come on. Let’s go back to your room and have a look.”

Once Mitchell was back in bed, Ali collected disposable gloves and dressings from a cart in the hallway and prepared to change the dressing on Mitchell's left thigh. She glanced sideways at Sandy, who was standing by the head of the bed, her hand on the police officer's shoulder. "You okay with this?"

"I've probably seen worse."

Ali merely nodded. There was something in the young woman's eyes that spoke of hard truth. A minute later, she had the bandage open and perused the row of sutures that extended for ten inches from the top of Mitchell's midthigh down the inner surface. Carefully, she probed along both sides of the incision, then straightened. "The wound's nice and clean. Let's see how the artery is doing." When she finished palpating the pulses in Mitchell's foot, she nodded with evident satisfaction. "Everything is in working order."

"See. I knew that." Mitchell's voice was breathy with relief.

Sandy snorted again.

"However, your blood count this morning was lousy. If you were any older, I'd transfuse you. But I'd rather not unless it becomes a problem." As she spoke, the surgeon rewrapped Mitchell's thigh. "You feel crappy because you're weak, and you're not used to that."

"When will I feel better?" Unconsciously, Mitchell had reached out for Sandy's hand, and now she entwined her fingers with Sandy's much smaller ones. The strength in Sandy's grasp was comforting, and she held on tightly.

"It will probably take several months for your counts to come back up to normal, but you should start feeling better day by day." Ali smiled. "It just takes a little patience."

"Oh yeah, she's got *lots* of that." Although her tone was laced with sarcasm, Sandy regarded Mitchell tenderly.

"It seems to be an occupational trait," Ali replied. "If you've got someplace to stay where you won't have to do too much walking, you can go today."

"Okay! Yeah, we can make that work." Mitchell looked to her girlfriend for confirmation. "Right, San?"

Sandy sighed. "Yeah, yeah, rookie. If that's what you want."

The truth was, Sandy wanted Mitchell out of the hospital every bit as much as Mitchell wanted to go. The place scared her under the best

of circumstances, and seeing her normally strong and capable lover weak and in pain was scaring her even more.

Softly, she stroked Mitchell's cheek. "We'll figure something out, baby."



Dr. Catherine Rawlings pushed a stack of file folders aside and reached for her phone. "Yes, Joyce?"

"Rebecca's here," her secretary announced, adding without needing to be asked, "and you've got thirty minutes before your first appointment."

"Thanks. Tell her to come in."

Catherine waited behind her desk for the simple pleasure of watching her lover cross the room. They had met in this room not quite half a year before, when Detective Sgt. Rebecca Frye had been in the midst of a harrowing serial-murder investigation. They had begun their joint involvement in the case as polite adversaries and ended as passionate lovers. As if the whirlwind onslaught of unexpected love had not been enough, Rebecca had nearly died from a gunshot wound, and both she and Catherine were still recovering, physically and emotionally. Even had she not nearly lost Rebecca, Catherine doubted that the pleasure of seeing her for the first time after they'd been apart would have been any less. Rebecca, more than any woman she had ever known, moved her in the deepest reaches of her being. She smiled as the door opened and her tall blond lover, slender in her trademark tailored dark suit and coolly beautiful, entered her office.

"Hey," Rebecca said as she walked around the side of Catherine's desk and leaned down to kiss her. "Got a few minutes?"

"Mmm. On your way to see Dellon?" Catherine replied.

"That too." With an uncharacteristically self-conscious expression, Rebecca suddenly stepped back and slid her hands into the pockets of her trousers. "But I wanted to talk to you first. I...have some news."

"Oh?" Regarding her with concern, Catherine rose, walked around her desk, and slid an arm around her lover's waist. "Did something happen at your ungodly-early morning briefing with Captain Henry?"

"A lot," Rebecca conceded. "We worked out a compromise to keep the team together so that we can finish hunting down the leak in

the department *and* have a shot at breaking this prostitution network, or whatever the hell it is, wide open at the same time.”

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” Catherine kept her voice neutral, a practice that was second nature to her from her many years of practicing psychiatry. She was still adjusting to the fact that her lover’s profession carried with it the daily risk of injury or even death. Balancing the desire to support Rebecca in her work while dealing with her own fears and uncertainty was a constant challenge. Nevertheless, it was a struggle she kept to herself, knowing that Rebecca was a cop to her core. “To keep the team together?”

“Oh yeah. Absolutely.” Rebecca curled an arm around Catherine’s shoulder and rested her cheek against Catherine’s thick auburn hair. “We’re close to putting all the pieces together—who’s been leaking confidential information and altering sensitive police files, who fingered Jimmy Hogan and Jeff Cruz for assassination, what’s going on with the girls in the skin videos and the sex clubs, and how it all ties into organized crime. If we just have a little more time, we can break it.”

It was impossible to miss the undercurrent of excitement and determination in her lover’s voice. But Catherine, sensitive to nuance and inflection, heard something else there as well—reservation and frustration. Being next in line for the chairmanship of the Department of Psychiatry, she was no stranger to politics. “You said *compromise*. What did you have to give *him*?”

“It’s not what I had to give,” Rebecca grumbled. “It’s what I had to *take*.”

“Come sit down and tell me,” Catherine murmured, drawing Rebecca toward the sofa opposite her desk. When they were settled side by side, she turned and rested her fingers on Rebecca’s thigh. “So?”

“Avery Clark.” Rebecca named the Department of Justice agent with obvious displeasure.

“He’s back in the picture?” Catherine exclaimed with surprise. Avery Clark had been the federal government’s liaison with Rebecca’s team during the initial phases of their investigation into a widespread Internet pornography ring. However, when the joint task force had successfully made a key arrest, Clark had asserted jurisdictional primacy and cut Rebecca and her colleagues out of the information loop. Catherine couldn’t imagine Rebecca or any of the other members of the team willingly working with Clark again.

“Oh yeah, he’s back. And how.” Rebecca blew out an exasperated breath. “No Clark, no team.”

“Ah, so no choice.” Catherine squeezed Rebecca’s thigh sympathetically. “Sorry. But you’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Probably, but I don’t know how I’m going to convince Sloan of it.”

JT Sloan was the civilian computer consultant and a past DOJ agent herself whose history with the government was still shrouded in mystery. Whatever the unhappy association had been, Sloan’s animosity toward the agency had grown exponentially when her lover Michael had been nearly killed in an assassination attempt. Sloan had been the intended target and, nearly wild with grief and guilt, she had attributed the tragedy in large part to Clark’s withholding of critical information from the team.

“Sloan won’t be a problem if you present it to her correctly.”

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Your suggestion, Doctor?”

Catherine smiled softly. “Darling, what is the most important thing in the world to Sloan?”

“Michael,” Rebecca answered immediately.

“Yes. Sloan wants to find the person who hurt her lover, but even more than that, she doesn’t want to hurt Michael any further. You and I both know that the safest place for Sloan is on your team, not running around by herself. And Michael knows it too.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Rebecca said, frowning. “Using Michael against Sloan.”

“I love how honorable you are, but there’s nothing *dishonorable* about this.” Catherine leaned forward to brush her mouth over Rebecca’s. “You’re not using Michael. You’re just offering Sloan the solution that’s best for everyone.”

Rebecca sighed. “You’re right, but I’ll bet she doesn’t see it that way.”

“She will. Just give her a little time.” Catherine rested her cheek against Rebecca’s shoulder and wrapped an arm loosely around her waist. “So it will be the whole team together again. Sloan and Jason on the computers, you and Watts on the street, and Dellon? What about Dellon and Sandy?”

“It depends on how quickly Mitchell recovers and if there are any

problems as a result of the stabbing. You know she's going to need to be cleared by psych now."

Catherine, a civilian psychiatric consultant to the police department, stiffened nearly imperceptibly. "Yes. It's departmental policy after an officer is injured in the line of duty."

"So that could really hang her up—the paperwork and everything."

"You're not suggesting that I facilitate getting her back to work prematurely, are you?" Catherine's tone was still mild, but the question was edged in steel.

"I know better than that," Rebecca answered evenly. She kissed Catherine's forehead. "I *want* her to see you. I told you that before she was even injured. She's got some problems with her temper, and it's going to get her into trouble. This might be the perfect opportunity to get that all sorted out."

Catherine tilted her head and regarded her lover intently. "I do believe you're becoming a fan of psychotherapy."

Rebecca blinked and then laughed. "Well, maybe a fan of a certain psychiatrist."

"Oh, aren't you clever," Catherine murmured as she kissed Rebecca's neck. Tightening her grip on Rebecca's waist, she moved her lips to the corner of her lover's mouth before remembering where they were and what time it was. With a faint groan, she drew away. "Now I remember why it's a bad idea for you to visit me in the middle of the day."

"Seems like a really good idea to me." Rebecca's voice was husky and low.

Catherine moved back even further. "*You* might be able to recover from a quickie and head right back to work, but I don't think that I can."

Rebecca grinned. "Wanna try?"

Laughing, Catherine rose and held out her hand to her lover. "Tell Dellon I said hello and that I'll be over later to see her."

Catherine was the only one who called Mitchell by her full name, and it always gave Rebecca pause. It was a little disquieting, knowing that her lover had a very private and singular relationship with one of her officers—a young officer whom she had taken under her wing and whose career she intended to guide. She knew that Catherine would

never discuss the details of her therapeutic relationships with anyone, but nevertheless, now and then, she wondered just what Mitchell said to Catherine in the quiet intimacy of their hours together.

“I will,” Rebecca said, before adding, “Mitchell’s being promoted. She’s going to get her detective’s shield.”

“Rebecca, that’s wonderful! Did you have something to do with that?”

Rebecca shook her head. “Absolutely not. Mitchell earned it, on the last operation and on this one. She’s been an important part of the team, and she handled herself well under difficult circumstances.”

“I’m so happy for her. It will mean so much to her.”

“Yeah.” Rebecca hesitated. “So am I.”

“What?” Catherine asked, not following.

“Being promoted. Detective lieutenant.”

Catherine stared. “And you’re just telling me now? Rebecca! And you said *yes*?”

The possibility of Rebecca being promoted had been something the two of them had discussed before. Catherine had been in favor of it, secretly hoping that a more supervisory position would keep Rebecca off the streets and further away from potential harm—precisely why Rebecca had resisted.

Rebecca nodded.

“What part of this are you *not* telling me?”

“I more or less had to accept in order to keep the team together. And in exchange, I get to head the High Profile Crimes Unit within the division.”

“I see,” Catherine said slowly. “So in this case, a promotion doesn’t mean a desk job.”

Silently, Rebecca shook her head, watching Catherine intently.

Catherine walked behind her desk, sat down, and folded her hands in the middle of her blotter. After a few more seconds of silence, she said, “Congratulations. I’m very proud of you. And I’m glad you aren’t being forced into a position where you would be unhappy.”

“But you’re not happy, are you?” Rebecca asked quietly.

“I *am* happy. I’m happy for you.” Catherine lifted one hand and smiled. “I just need to rearrange my thinking a little bit.”

Rebecca glanced at her watch. “We only have a few more minutes.”

“That’s my line, darling.”

“Catherine,” Rebecca said intently, moving around the side of the desk and leaning down over her lover. “I love you.”

Catherine reached up and stroked Rebecca’s cheek. “Go to work, Detective. Everything is all right.”

“You’re sure?”

Of one thing, Catherine was certain. She needed Rebecca more than she needed air, and Rebecca needed a clear mind to do the work she did safely. Whatever misgivings or disappointments she might have, she would not burden Rebecca with them now. “Of course I’m sure. I love you. Call me later?”

Rebecca kissed her swiftly. “You bet. I’ll even bring home dinner.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Catherine called as the door closed behind her lover. Then she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She too needed to be focused for the work she did, and she resolutely forced down the nagging kernel of fear beginning to grow in her depths.