

MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **A RISKY AFFAIR**

(From Chapter Two)

Two days later, Solange Washington stepped through the double glass doors of Roarke Investigations, a private detective agency housed in a single-story brick building located ten minutes away from the hotel she'd called home since arriving in San Antonio.

Her days at the Alamo City Inn were numbered, according to Crandall Thorne's secretary, who'd called Solange with the unexpected job offer. Solange had been scouring the Help Wanted ads when she received the phone call, and two days later, she was still in shock. Not only would she get the coveted opportunity to work for Crandall Thorne, but she'd do so while residing at his sprawling country estate, with its breathtaking views of the surrounding valley and mountains.

All she had to do was pass a background check, and then she'd be on her way to achieving her goals.

Finding no one behind the large oak desk or seated around the brightly furnished reception area, Solange ventured further into the office. From somewhere down the narrow corridor, she could hear voices, male and female, and what sounded like the rapid clicking of a camera.

“Hello?” she called out.

There was no answer. She hesitated a moment, wondering if she should just wait for someone to emerge from the back to assist her. But then she heard the low, husky rumble of masculine laughter, and she found her legs moving of their own accord, drawing her toward the owner of that voice.

The first thought that occurred to her when she reached the open doorway at the end of the corridor was that she’d made a wrong turn somewhere and wound up at the wrong building. The large conference room had been converted into a photography studio. In the center of the room, a slender, twenty-something Asian woman wearing baggy jeans and a blunt pageboy haircut was crouched on the floor, snapping photographs of a man who stood against a white canvas backdrop with his back to her. Solange’s mouth went dry at the sight of him.

He was tall, at least six-three, with skin the color of mahogany, broad shoulders and hard, sculpted muscles that bunched and flexed beneath a pair of suspenders. Charcoal trousers hung dangerously low on lean hips and hugged a firm, muscled rear end you could bounce quarters off. He was stunningly, brutally masculine—so potently male he stole her breath. Solange couldn’t tear her gaze away.

He wore a black fedora, the kind sported by ace private detectives in the hardboiled mysteries of old. With his face averted and the hat slanted low over his eyes, Solange had only a teasing glimpse of his profile—the ruthlessly square jaw and sensual mouth were enough to whet her appetite for more.

And then, suddenly, she got her wish.

At the photographer's flirtatious coaxing, the man slowly turned and flashed a dazzling white grin that set off a flurry of flashbulbs—and jack-hammered Solange's pulse. Before she could catch her breath, he noticed her standing in the doorway. Beneath the low brim of his fedora, the killer smile wavered and a pair of black, piercing eyes locked with hers.

If Solange thought she'd had trouble looking away before, it was now an impossibility. The stranger's heavy-lidded eyes probed hers with searing intensity, trapping the air in her lungs. He was as darkly handsome as his profile had suggested, with razor-edged cheekbones, a strong, masculine nose and those full, sensuous lips that ought to be registered somewhere as a lethal weapon.

As Solange stared at him, his gaze slid down her body as if he could see through her creamy silk blouse, through her tan slacks, her mismatched lace underwear, right down to the quivering flesh beneath.

To show him she could, she returned his bold appraisal, letting her eyes trace the wide expanse of his shoulders and the hard, sinewy muscles carved into his chest and abdomen. Without warning, she envisioned herself standing before him and dragging the suspenders off his shoulders, then lowering her head to flick her tongue over one flat dark nipple. She imagined taking it into her mouth and gently suckling, teasing and pleasuring him. The thought was enough to make her shiver.

When one corner of the man's mouth lifted, Solange was surprised to find her own lips curving in response.

A movement to her right caught her eye, and she suddenly remembered there were two other occupants of the room, including

the photographer, who had followed the direction of the man's stare and was now looking at Solange with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

"I'm sorry," Solange murmured, stepping into the room. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I must be at the wrong address. I'm looking for Roarke Investigations."

"You've found it." The sexy stranger came toward her, moving with the fluid ease and grace of a panther. As he drew nearer, Solange didn't know whether to look at his face or bare chest—both were equally riveting.

"Dane Roarke," he introduced himself, wrapping his big, warm hand around hers. Tingles of awareness swept through her body. Their eyes held.

Solange's mind went completely blank.

"You must be from the temp agency," he said. His deep, resonant voice brushed across her awakened nerve endings like a slow, hot caress. "We've been expecting you."

She swallowed hard, and shook her head. "No, actually, I'm not from the temp agency. I have an appointment with you this morning. My name's Solange Washington." She glanced around the room at the camera tripod, lighting equipment and the young woman who was now packing up her supplies with the help of her assistant. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Not at all. In fact, you rescued me," Dane Roarke confided with a chuckle, and her stomach bottomed out at the low, sexy rumble. He was wrong—*she* was the one in desperate need of rescuing.

“Hey, I heard that,” the photographer retorted as she approached them. Smiling easily, she passed a business card to Solange. “Hi, I’m April Kwan. I’m shooting a calendar featuring twelve of San Antonio’s hunkiest men in law enforcement. Dane graciously agreed to be Mr. January.”

“I don’t know about the ‘gracious’ part,” Dane grumbled. “My cousins didn’t exactly leave me much of a choice, telling me at the last minute that their wives wouldn’t allow them to pose for the calendar and volunteering me instead.”

April grinned. “Well, thanks for being such a good sport about it. And remember that all proceeds from the calendar will benefit breast cancer research and education in San Antonio, so your willingness to be photographed half-naked was for a good cause. The women of San Antonio will thank you.” Her dark eyes danced with mirth as she looked at Solange. “I’m taking orders, if you’re interested. These calendars are gonna sell like hotcakes.”

Solange could definitely believe it, especially if the rest of the models looked anything like Dane Roarke. Before she could respond to the girl’s inquiry, Dane said, “I’ll send her an autographed copy,” and proceeded to usher Solange from the room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said, his warm breath fanning the nape of her neck as he guided her down the hallway with a hand at the small of her back. She could feel the heat from his body and wondered if he’d forgotten he was shirtless. *She* certainly hadn’t. “The photo shoot ran a bit longer than I’d expected.”

“That’s all right,” Solange said. “I was a little early.”

“The early bird gets the worm,” Dane murmured whimsically. He stopped outside a small, windowless office dominated by a large wooden desk and black metal filing cabinets that marched along one wall.

“Have a seat,” he said, waving her into one of the visitor chairs.

As she sat down, he rummaged through the clutter on his desk until he located a manila file folder labeled with her first and last name.

He opened the folder and pulled out a small sheaf of papers, which he passed to her, along with a pen and clipboard. When their fingers brushed, a melting warmth spread through her veins.

Their eyes met and held for a prolonged moment.