

Terry Campbell



Fat Chance

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

“So long, good-bye, it’s been fun, and you can forget ever getting between my legs again!” Lindsey Michaels’ voice burst with self-confidence.

“Hey, that Thigh-Grasper will bring good money at the Trading Post.” Sam Davis lunged for the cardboard box. “You could make a fortune off this stuff. Why’re you giving it to the Salvation Army?”

Lindsey tossed her Crunch and Win Ab-aciser into the box next to the discarded Thigh-Grasper. “Get real. If I sold this stuff, I’d end up in court as an accessory to murder. And I’d deserve it, too.” Her gaze drifted over Sam’s figure. “You have no concept of what I’ve endured. You haven’t gasped, grasped, crunched, and pumped, all in an attempt to lose extra pounds.” She glowered at her best friend. “While I arched to Classics for Calves, you visited the Golden Arches. While I crunched sit-ups, you crunched bags of potato chips. And what do I have to show for it? Saddlebags and a big butt. What do you, Samantha Davis, have to show for being a junk-food junkie? A tiny waist and a model-thin body.” She sighed and flopped onto the floor. “There’s no justice in the world.”

“Then why are you, an excellent paralegal, leaving the office and acting like some P.I.?”

“Not funny, Sam. This is serious. I’m going undercover so I can help trap a bunch of scheming, conniving crooks.”

“Sure.” Sam sat next to the box full of videos. “Like you’ve ever been able to keep a secret in your life.”

Lindsey picked up the paper and pointed at the ad. “Look at what this promises. I may be naive, but this time’s different. This scam has me ready to do battle. Believe me, Sam, this is one thing I can keep secret.”

“Bull. You’re doing this because Kenny asked you, all the while praying it isn’t a scam.”

Lindsey mentally cringed. She hated that Sam read her so easily. She produced a nonchalant shrug. “There’s always a chance Kenny’s wrong. After all, FRAT, Incorporated has been in business over ten years.” She grinned. “Besides, what’s wrong with losing twenty pounds while trying to prove whether Kenny’s on to something? It’s a win-win situation.”

“You don’t need to lose twenty pounds.” Sam picked up one of the discarded videos. “Did this Yoga for Youth tape do anything for you?”

Lindsey shook her head. “None of this stuff did any good. I’d lose five pounds, then pow! It was right back plus some.” Of course, that was after two or three sessions with the Colonel and a half-gallon of cookie dough ice cream. She

tossed the paper across the room to Sam. “Read this and tell me FRAT doesn’t sound like a reputable company.”

Sam fished her Ben Franklin reading glasses out of her pocket and stuck them on her nose.

“Have you tried everything on the market to get the body you want and failed? Are you still overweight? Or are you one of those who’d do anything to gain weight—to get rid of stick-thin ‘chicken’ legs? We have the answer. After ten years of research, the Fat Removal & Transplant Institute, Inc. (FRAT) is ready to conduct clinical trials on a new fat inversion process. You may qualify as either a donor or recipient of healthy fat. ‘Trust Your Fat to FRAT.’”

She threw the paper down laughing. “‘Trust your fat to FRAT’? Oh, come on, Lindsey, you can’t be serious. This sounds like the biggest scam on the planet.”

Lindsey stuck her nose up in the air. She secretly wanted to believe the process would work. “I’m sure Kenny will be so happy you agree with him.”

Sam peered into a box of discarded exercise equipment. “It’ll be the first time I agree with him. Why do you keep dating such a loser? Kenny Kramer’s a jerk. How can you let him use you this way? You’re the one who’ll do all the work, and he’ll get all the laurels and be on his way to political office.”

“He’s a reputable lawyer.” Lindsey thought of Kenny Kramer in his Armani suit and starched white shirt and smiled. “A mite stuck up, but reputable.”

“Yeah. He’d never enter a fast-food hamburger place, go to Water World, or even barbecue on the back patio.”

“Well, he asks me out.” Lindsey looked down at the floor. “For God’s sake, I’m thirty. I’m not getting any younger and, with my figure, you take the men you can get, especially if you want a sex life.”

Sam let out another hoot. “Come on, Lindsey. You’ve told me he’s the ‘ninety-second man.’”

“At least he’s honest. Besides, ninety seconds is better than no seconds at all.”

“Now there’s a romantic notion.”

“I’m too old for romance. As for questioning Kenny’s motives, you can’t blame him for trying to improve himself. If we ever take our relationship a step further, it’ll benefit me, too.” Lindsey stared at the box of diet junk and sighed. She was reluctant to admit it, but Kenny wouldn’t ever benefit anything or anyone except himself.

She glanced out the window and spotted the first star of the evening. Closing her eyes, she made a silent wish. Just once she’d like to find a man who was serious, but occasionally reckless. Intelligent and cautious, but ready for adventure. Someone who wanted her and could make her lose herself in the throes of passion.

Lindsey shook her head to clear it. It would never happen. She was asking for too much.

“Too much? You think I’m asking for too much?” Hal Randall yelled into the telephone receiver.

“Yes. Another hundred grand is out of the question,” Jeff Drake growled. “This is a government project that’s stayed hidden so far because it’s buried in the military budget. Ask for another cent and Congress will be all over my ass and yours. I can just see *The Washington Post* headlines now, ‘Secret Military Brainwashing Experiment on Civilians.’ Forget the money. We’ll be lucky if we don’t end up doing time.”

“It isn’t brainwashing. It’s behavior modification.”

“Do you think *the Post* will care? They won’t. They’ll do everything possible to discredit the program. Behavior modification?” Jeff snorted. “Yeah, right! Why is the military testing behavior modification?”

“Hell, the military’s nothing but one big behavior modification experiment.” Hal collapsed in his chair. “Damn it, Jeff, if they want the experiment to succeed, it’s critical that the operation look legit. How can we do that on a shoestring? We’ve almost shot our entire budget on the set-up. Construction on the building alone cost a mint. Of course, if you hadn’t stuck us out in Dickens, Texas—the middle of nowhere—we might have had some money left.”

“We put the project out there to avoid attention.”

“Yeah, well, it worked. Why do you think the natives’ town motto is ‘Where in the dickens is Dickens?’” Hal glanced down at his wingtips and frowned at the dull spot near the toe. *Have to polish that*, he thought, then refocused on the conversation.

He felt a brief spurt of guilt at Jeff’s sigh. He knew his boss meant well, but this budget crisis was driving him to distraction. He refused to allow ten years’ worth of work to go down the drain without a fight.

“Look, Jeff, screw the original plan. The institute needs a ‘spa-like’ atmosphere. Otherwise, we’ll never attract the right subjects.”

“Do you honestly think the pigeons will care, especially if we’re successful and they lose weight?”

“They’re test subjects, Jeff, not pigeons,” Hal said harshly. “Now, back to the problem. Aside from the large whirlpool, we need a decent low-cal chef. And it isn’t like I can place an ad in the local paper and find someone who can be creative with tofu and bamboo shoots. We’re in the middle of friggin’ refried-beans-and-beef-brisket-with-plenty-of-fat country.”

Jeff sighed again. "I'll try to scrounge up another fifty-thousand dollars, but that's it. If there isn't a chef out there who'll work for thirty-five-thousand, learn to make those cute little flower vegetables yourself."

"I'll do my best."

"Make it work. Otherwise, the Department of Defense will have both our heads for blowing ten million down the tubes."

"It'll work. This is my chance for a Lone Star Award. Aside from the fact that every scientist and physician in Texas dreams about winning it, it's one of the few prizes you can win, other than the Nobel, and still be running a government project."

"The Lone Star Award? Hell, Hal, we'll be lucky if *ABC News* doesn't use the project in one of their 'This is Your Money' segments showing how the government's wasting the citizens' defense dollars."

"If you think it's a waste of money, why'd you go to bat for the project?"

"Because it's a good one. What'll get our tits in a wringer is that the DOD is funding it."

"I told you to go to FDA or one of the science endowment agencies. But no, you had to get it from defense."

"I didn't notice you refusing when it was the only friggin' department with the cash!"

Hal glowered at the silent phone, then replaced the receiver in its cradle. Grim-faced, he rose from his chair. Pacing the office, he mulled over his options. There weren't many. The institute was supposed to be open for business in a week. The whirlpool was a cakewalk. But how in hell was he supposed to find a four-star chef and talk him or her into coming to Dickens, Texas? The yellow pages?

With a growl, he glanced at the stack of folders on his desk. The subjects still needed to be categorized in the limited time left before they arrived on his doorstep.

An hour later, Hal flipped open Lindsey Michaels' file. He stared open-mouthed at her picture. This woman could bring a man to his knees. He hoped the photo was an old one, and that she'd blimped up since it'd been taken.

As he reviewed Marie's comments, he noted Lindsey Michaels' only fault, aside from overeating, seemed to be her acidic wit.

According to Marie, Lindsey was orphaned at fourteen and moved in with her overweight Aunt Sadie. Her main goal had been to please the aging woman. To that end, she'd studied hard, making straight As, and tried to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities.

Cheerleading had been out. She'd been too heavy and suffered from "innate klutzitis." Her Aunt Sadie had suggested the band, but that had also been out. Lindsey didn't play an instrument. Then the aunt had begged her to join the chorus.

Since she loved to sing, Lindsey had immediately tried out and been told by the choral director that her voice was her fortune. People would pay a lot of money not to hear it.

Spotting a star by this paragraph, Hal flipped to the back of the file to read Marie's side note:

I asked Lindsey to sing a song. She chose her favorite, "Summertime." In fact, she sang it twice, because the first time her voice "wasn't loose." To call her tone-deaf would be a kindness. Hal, whatever you do, never ask her to sing. She's the only person I've ever met who gets worse with each practice session.

Chuckling, Hal returned to the interview. Moments later, he frowned at the notation that Lindsey had joined her high school Latin and Debate Clubs. He had also. In fact, he credited the debate club with his triumph over his persistent stutter.

"What a shame," he muttered. Between her aunt's death during her first year of law school and a mountain of debt, she'd been forced to leave school and become a paralegal.

He quickly scanned the rest of the interview, pausing only at the section dealing with her sex life. This, he knew, as did all therapists, was important to a woman's self-image:

Her sex life is almost nonexistent. In thirty years, she's had three encounters. The first in college with an "arrogant jock" who stole her virginity as part of a bet with the football team that he could seduce the "ice princess." The second was an unconsummated infatuation with a married man, who'd initially said he was single. By this time, Michaels worked for an attorney and no longer trusted men at face value. (Wise woman.) She investigated the jerk, then dumped him. Her third relationship (?) involved a mysterious, nameless person, who "is true to his profession, mother, and lack of 'carnal desire'."

Hal frowned. How could Marie have approved her? What had happened to his assistant? Marie's expertise lay in finding the chink in a person's armor, yet with Lindsey Michaels, who needed intensive one-on-one therapy rather than their program, she'd given her seal of approval.

"This better be good." He turned to her justification for Lindsey Michaels' participation in the project:

This woman proves the nurture over nature theory. She passed all psychological examinations. She's one of the most well-adjusted humans I've ever interviewed. She's openly caring, affectionate in tone, and protective of those close to her.

"Where were you ten years ago, Lindsey Michaels?"

Too bad they hadn't met while he'd still believed love was possible. From the file, he'd say she was the woman of his dreams. Well, that is, if she were twenty pounds lighter.

As he set the file aside, his office door opened slowly and Marie Poppokowsky eased into the room.

"You can't procrastinate any longer, Hal. Sign the letters." She slapped a stack of mail in front of him. "It's past the deadline when we said we'd respond to the applicants."

"Maybe tomorrow, Marie."

"No. Now." She handed him a pen.

Hal grabbed it and then sped through the stack. As he reached the last one, Lindsey Michaels' name jumped out at him. "I'm not sure about her," he said, tapping the name.

"Why?"

"She's too good to be true."

"Are you talking as a man or a doctor?"

Gritting his teeth, he scrawled his name on the letter of approval. "There." He shoved the stack back at Marie, then rose and crossed to the window looking out on the flat dry land as sand blasted the window and a stray tumbleweed flew across the open countryside. "I've got less than a week to turn this place into a spa."

Marie pushed her glasses back up her straight narrow nose. "Good luck. It's more likely to be a mirage out here than an oasis."

He stared at the landscape. "The west Texas countryside is our best asset. Next to it, our interior will look lush."

"Once our female clients get a look at you, they won't care about anything else." Her gaze drifted from Hal's face, down his body and back up to his narrowed eyes. "Although, I can't, for the life of me, figure out what they see in you."

He exhaled. "I hate it when you're right."

"Of course you do. Between the number your former wife and your so-called lover did on you, you're entrenched behind a wall that screams 'stay away.'"

Hal rolled his eyes. "Sure I am. That's why women still come on to me." He winced at her disgusted snort.

"God save me from the male species. Don't you know anything? It's your air of emotional detachment that attracts women."

"Emotional detachment?"

"You're a human Mr. Spock. You know, from *Star Trek*? All logic, no emotion. There isn't a woman alive who doesn't want to be the one to make him feel. The situation's no different with you," she said with a small shrug.

“They’re doomed to failure. I’m not interested in having another woman in my life. I refuse to deal with the whining when I get involved in a—”

“Obsessed.”

He sighed. “Okay, obsessed by a project. Then there’re the killer tears they turn on when I’m gone for a week or two. God, I hate tears!”

She chuckled. “Your problem isn’t women. It’s meeting the right woman, as I have.”

He glanced at Marie. “I don’t understand how two women can—”

“They—”

He held up his hand in protest. “I don’t want to know.” His gaze narrowed on his assistant, then he snapped his fingers. “You can run interference for me. Be my decoy.” Hal grinned at her suspicious gaze.

“What do you mean, decoy?”

“You can be my girlfriend.”

“Forget it. That’s a disaster in the making.”

“Wrong. It’ll keep me out of trouble.”

She shook her head. “Leave me out of it. I have all the confidence in the world that you can handle a roomful of panting women on your own. You’re a big boy,” she said seconds before bursting into laughter.

“Can it. This experiment,” he pointed his finger at her, “is as much yours as it is mine.” At her scowl, Hal bit back a grin. He knew just which buttons to push. She loved her work. It consumed her.

Marie stepped sideways and sank onto the oversized leather sofa. “I may love my work, but I’m going to have to burst your bubble on this one, old boy. Wanda has a black belt in karate. Do anything she doesn’t like, and she wouldn’t leave enough of you to put into a trash compactor.”

Hal had a momentary vision of a riled Wanda and self-consciously crossed his legs. “You’re right, it was a lousy idea.”

“That isn’t fair!” Kenny Kramer stomped his Italian loafer. “It was my suggestion that you expose FRAT. I should be the one to take you to orientation.”

“Stop being such a big baby.” Lindsey placed the last few articles in her suitcase and zipped it shut. “Make yourself useful. Carry this.” She shoved the luggage at him.

He grabbed the case and stumbled backwards. “My God, Lindsey. Do you have a dead body in here? It weighs a ton.”

“I don’t believe in traveling light.” She lifted her chin. “According to FRAT, I need casual clothes: jeans, sweatsuits, bathing suits, and a robe. But I believe in

being prepared.” She grinned. “Who knows who I’ll meet there?” She walked to the door of the bedroom.

“There you go again, cracking jokes,” he said, trailing after her.

Without looking, Lindsey knew he was scrunching up his face, the way he did when he didn’t get his way.

“That’s why I should take you to the institute. It’s not just a matter of seeing you on the right track, but of protecting my interests.”

“Interests?” She stopped short, spun on her heel and stared up at him. Acid rose in her throat. Please Lord, don’t let him suggest a commitment. She really didn’t want to deal with his emotional outburst when she told him she’d never marry him.

“You’re my only hope, Lin. You’re smart enough to catch these creeps and expose their con.”

“Oh, now I get it. You want to protect your business interests. Your political future.” Her stomach calmed. Turning, she headed toward the hall.

“Well, it’ll be good for you, too. Talk about the prestige. Think about the money. And then there’s the power when you work for me as Aide to the Attorney General.”

As they reached the living room, Lindsey plopped into her grandmother’s old rocking chair. “Gee, and I’ve lived my whole life for such an honor, too.”

His eyes widened as if the light bulb had suddenly flickered. “Of course, I want you next to me for other reasons, too.”

“Of course. Put the bag down next to the door, come over here and sit.” Lindsey gestured toward the sofa. She watched, amused, as he meekly followed her directions. Once he’d settled, she leaned forward. “I’d love for you to take me to FRAT.” She held up one hand and Kenny closed his mouth on command. “But I don’t want anyone getting wise to our plan. The fact is, you’re well known as a lawyer. Someone may put two and two together. Once I’m there for a week or two, you can visit on the weekend. You’ll be less visible then.”

She watched as he absorbed her words.

“You have a point.” He jumped up and puffed out his chest. “Everyone in this part of Texas knows me on sight or has heard of me. I wouldn’t want to spoil the plan because I’m so well known.”

He smoothed his sandy hair back with his palm and stood with his other hand inside his jacket. Lindsey stifled a snicker at his unconscious Napoleon impersonation.

“You’re absolutely right, Kenny. Sam can attend orientation with me. Then, when you show up, you can pose as Sam’s boyfriend.” Lindsey smiled. With luck, she’d manipulate the staff at FRAT as well as she did Kenny. “I have everything under control.”

“Control. That’s the key.” Hal looked at his reflection in the mirror as he shaved the last part of his lower chin. He stared at the dark circles. They were almost the same color as his blue eyes. “You look like you’re in charge, all right. Of a morgue.” Hal set down his razor and turned on the faucet. The project implementation phase had almost done him in. Talk about burning the midnight oil. He splashed water on his face. Now he had to go out to the auditorium and convince fifty hopeful fatties that he had the key to their future.

He’d become a psychiatrist because he’d wanted to learn people’s motivations for lying, for loving, and a thousand different emotions. Too bad lying was something he did with the same level of success as maintaining a loving relationship. As he opened the door to his office bathroom, he straightened his shoulders. “Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung.”

He continued to repeat the words as he walked down the corridor. As he approached a woman near the front doors to the auditorium, she dropped her orientation packet on the floor.

Suppressing a chuckle, he stopped to help her retrieve her scattered papers, then swallowed hard as she squatted and leaned forward to scoop up the sheets. His gaze locked on the tops of her thigh-highs peeking out from under her short black skirt.

“Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung,” he muttered again. At the sound of his voice, the woman twisted and glanced up at him.

His jaw clamped shut. Lindsey Michaels! Damn! The picture hadn’t done her justice. Her reddening face told him that his staring embarrassed her, yet he couldn’t stop. At least, he consoled himself, his mouth wasn’t hanging open with drool falling onto the floor.

“Excuse me, I didn’t know anyone was behind me.”

Hal mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, then shoved it back into his suit pocket. Projecting a calm he didn’t feel, he held out his hand to help her up. “I’m Dr. Randall.”

“Lindsey Michaels.”

He knew he was in trouble. Big trouble. The moment they’d touched, he’d seen electricity arc between their fingers. In fact, he could still smell the ozone and hear the energy crackling in the air around them.

He watched Lindsey’s beautiful golden brown eyes widen. Yup, this woman could destroy everything. Worse, he was on the verge of blowing the experiment of a lifetime.

“Hal, are you okay?”

He dropped Lindsey’s hand and spun toward Marie’s voice.

Saved.

He nodded to Lindsey. "I believe you've met?"

"Yes, we have," Marie said with a smile.

He watched as Lindsey raised her hand to brush her hair from her face and didn't know whether to feel relieved that her hand shook or even more unnerved.

Lindsey rose to her feet, her packet clutched to her chest. "Nice to see you again, Dr. Poppokowsky."

Hal almost groaned. In desperation, he grabbed Marie and pulled her against his side, then draped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm lucky to have Marie. Both as an assistant and as my wife." He mentally winced as Marie's body tensed against his. Afraid to look at her, he kept his gaze on Lindsey.

At her shocked expression, he wished he'd never blurted out the outlandish lie. He knew after Marie got through with him, he'd want to walk off the cap rock and never be seen again.

"I didn't know you were married."

"The world is full of surprises," Marie muttered through clenched teeth.

Hal jammed his fisted hand into the pocket of his slacks and tightened his grip on Marie, afraid he'd confess the truth in the face of Lindsey's intense gaze.

"Excuse us, Ms. Michaels, but I need to discuss a few things with my husband." Marie jerked him by the arm.

"Of course," Lindsey said before walking into the auditorium.

"We need to talk. Now." Marie dug her fingernails into his sleeve.

"After the opening session." He struggled to free himself from her ironclad grasp. "Can you believe it? That Michaels woman just proved one of Murphy's Laws: When everything's going well, a woman will screw it up every time."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," she hissed.

"What happened to you?" Sam looked up as Lindsey sat beside her in the front row. "You were right behind me, then poof, you disappeared."

"I dropped my packet on the floor. Suddenly, there was this to-die-for all-male with jet-black hair staring at me. He's Mr. Perfect, except for one thing. He's Dr. Randall."

"Wow. You weren't kidding." Sam nodded at the man on stage. "That him?"

"Yessss."

"He's dynamite. Why is his being Dr. Randall a problem?"

Lindsey sighed as Dr. Poppokowsky joined Randall on the stage. "You'll find out. And, believe me, it's a major blow." Dr. Randall tapped the microphone. "This adventure may be more than I bargained for. I'll never make it. Hell, Sam,"

she glanced at her friend, "I'll be lucky if I last the day. No way I can see him every day and not reach for a candy bar. And now that I know he's—"

"Shush. Be quiet." Sam reached as if she were going to throttle her. "I'm here as your 'family support.' I want to hear what 'to-die-for' has to say." With a wicked grin, she leaned over and whispered just before Randall began his speech. "Personally he's not my type."

"Hmm, how did I forget tall, dark and dangerous turns you off?"

"Knock it off, Lin. Make one mistake and no one ever lets you forget it."

"One? You wish."

"Keep it up and I'll—"

"May I please have your attention?"

Lindsey stared at the stage and sighed. She'd died and gone to hell. Yup, that was the only explanation for being at a fat farm where the head man was someone who made her dream the impossible dream and, failing that, crave a candy bar so badly she'd sell out Kenny.

"For those of you who didn't see me during your pre-acceptance interview, my name is Dr. Halloran Randall. Please feel free to call me Hal."

"How about hunk?" Sam muttered.

"About twenty of you were interviewed by Dr. Marie Poppokowsky. For those of you who might not know, she's my wife."

Sam's eyes widened. "What? Lin, how could that man be married to that mousy little woman?"

Lindsey shook her head. "I don't know, but it's true. He told me so himself out in the hall."

"Well, so much for gorgeous. Wouldn't you know someone's already snapped him up."

Lindsey shrugged her shoulders, then put her finger to her lips. No way was she going to let Sam know how this development disappointed her. Okay, so they'd just met. Yet how often did a man's handshake leave you tingling from head to toe and wanting more? In her experience, never.

Randall cleared his throat. "Each of you was selected to take part in a special clinical trial involving the revolutionary Ches-Wrap procedure. It's not cheese wrap as I've heard some of you call it. Ches-Wrap stands for chemical shrink wrap. It's a painless method Marie and I have perfected for removal of fat."

"Hallelujah! A man after my own heart. I wonder how long before he sucks out these fat cells and shrinks my boobs," Lindsey whispered to Sam.

Her shoulders shaking, Sam clapped a hand over her mouth, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her giggles.

"I see some of you find it amusing."

Lindsey looked up and saw Doctor Randall staring directly at her.

“All of you passed the entrance exam, although looking at some of you now, I’m not sure how. Just because you passed entrance doesn’t mean you’ll pass all of your tests tomorrow.” Randall slammed his fist on the podium. “Only those who qualify and have the grit to see this through, will stay.”

Lindsey gripped the arms of her seat. That remark had been personal, aimed at her. Why?

CHAPTER TWO

“Wife?” Marie grabbed the edge of his desk. “Since when did I become your wife? How could you?”

“Now, Ma—”

“Don’t you dare ‘now Marie’ me! First you tell Lindsey Michaels, then you announce it to the whole damned audience!”

Hal cringed as her voice rose with each word. He slanted a glance at the open door. “Shush, someone will hear you.” A quick look at her white-knuckled grip convinced him she wasn’t going to calm down anytime soon.

“Wife!” she yelled, her voice bordering on hysteria.

“Shut up, Marie.” He sprinted to his office door. He searched the hallway and spotted Lindsey exiting from the auditorium with her blonde friend in tow. “No one heard.” He quickly closed and locked the door, then he raised his hand and pointed his finger at her. “How could you admit that woman to the program? She could ruin everything.”

Marie slammed her hand down on the desk. “That woman won’t have a chance to ruin anything. When Wanda finds out about this, you’ll be pushing up daisies from six feet under.”

“Come on, Marie, Wanda’s not going to know I made that comment unless you tell her. None of our subjects know us nor have any reason to tell your significant other I’ve claimed you as my wife.”

“Wanda’s going to demand answers if I start wearing a wedding band.”

“Relax. You and Wanda had that exchange of vows ceremony and it included rings. Remember?”

She eased into a chair facing his desk. “Yes.”

“Then wear the ring she gave you. As I recall, it’s a looker.” He collapsed in his chair. His damned accelerated heart rate was all their fault. As he rubbed his hands together, he noticed his palms were sweating. “You have a lot to explain, Marie. Like why that woman is here!”

She stiffened. “Why do you keep talking about that woman? Her name is Lindsey Michaels.”

As he stared at her, he was thankful four feet separated them. If the desk had been any smaller, he’d have been tempted to lunge across it, grab her by the throat, and strangle her for allowing Lindsey Michaels into the program. “I know her name. She has dark-brown hair, wore a black skirt that barely covered her a—” He paused and cleared his throat. “That’s too short, and she wears thigh-highs.”

“How do you know she’s wearing thigh-highs? And more importantly, why do you care?”

Hal went on alert. For the first time since they’d entered the room, Marie was smiling. If she found the situation amusing, he was in bigger trouble than he’d thought. “That’s not important.” He leaned back in his high-backed chair. “You still haven’t answered my question—why’d you admit her to the program?”

She shrugged. “And you’re avoiding my questions. You know what they say, Hal, avoidance is an indication of fear, disinterest or overwhelming desire. Which is it, Doctor?”

Scowling and muttering curses he hadn’t used since he’d discovered his former wife in bed with his best friend, Hal rose, then walked to the chair beside Marie and sat. “It’s fear, my little Freudian assistant. Fear that a poor choice of one experimental subject will jeopardize years of work and the Lone Star Award.”

“Yep. I see it all, now. Helen destroyed Troy with a look, and Lindsey Michaels, better known as ‘that woman,’ toppled you with black stockings.” Marie chuckled as she eased back into her chair.

“Yeah, right, laugh. Just think about how thrilled Wanda will be when you come home with a pink slip and a Congressional subpoena demanding you appear before the special committee that’ll be investigating this fiasco. How in hell did I agree with your approval of Lindsey Michaels for fat removal?”

“She’s overweight.”

“Like hell, she is.” He bolted out of his chair, strode to the window and stared out, trying to collect the last remnants of composure.

“Since she carries the bulk of her excess weight on her top and bottom, she wants them reduced via liposuction and our Ches-Wrap procedure.”

He faced his assistant. “You’ve got to be kidding. She’s rounded in the two most important places.” His gaze narrowed. “If you’d told me that when I initially questioned you about her, I never would have given approval.”

She waved off his comment. “It isn’t important. She meets our requirements by being at least twenty pounds overweight and is a compulsive consumer of everything. Besides, when she loses the weight, she’ll also lose the excess baggage.” Marie crossed her legs and placed her forefinger on her chin. “What I find interesting is that, for the first time in the ten years I’ve known you, you noticed she has a chest and a rump.”

She jumped up and stalked over to the filing cabinet in the corner of the office. Opening the top drawer, she thumbed through the blue folders. Finding the one she wanted, she removed it and flipped it open. “She’s a compulsive buyer. She speaks before she thinks. She binges on food when she’s anxious, when she’s depressed, and when she’s happy.” She slammed the drawer shut, then walked over to Hal and slapped the folder against his chest. “She has the perfect psyche for the

experiment, remember? Reread the file and you'll see where the only time she's thin is when she's in love. And that hasn't happened since high school."

"I don't need to read the file. I know it by heart!"

"No kidding?" Snickering, she walked to the office door. As she opened it, she turned and blew him a kiss. "See you later, hubby."

Hal tossed the file onto his desk. The last thing he needed was to moon over Lindsey's psychological work-up. "There has to be a logical and rational reason why this is happening."

"There has to be a rational explanation for the angry look he threw me."

"Maybe he doesn't like attractive women." Sam held the door for Lindsey. "That might explain why he married his assistant."

"Cut the pep talk. We both know I'm plump, not attractive." Lindsey frowned at the thought of Dr. Randall and Marie Poppokowsky in bed together. "Ms. Poppokowsky, that is, Mrs. Randall, probably has a great personality. Although she didn't seem overly bubbly when she interviewed me."

"Is this your room?" Sam pointed at a door marked two-oh-five.

She nodded. "If I'd had to carry this suitcase another step, I'd flunk tomorrow's tests because I'd be in the hospital being treated for exhaustion."

Sam put a hand on her shoulder. "Honey, I carried it from the car to the elevator. You only carried it from the elevator, ten feet down the hall and through the door."

Lindsey shrugged. "Well, I haven't worked out since I got rid of the exercise equipment."

"Yeah, a whole week." Sam opened the door to her room. As the door swung back, they saw a large woman with long red hair seated in the middle of one of the two bare beds eating a large éclair.

"Caught in the act!" She giggled and nervously gestured at the pastry. "This is my last hurrah. You know, good-bye to old friends and old fat."

"You don't have any more, do you?"

As Lindsey asked the question, Sam elbowed her in the ribs and moved forward with her hand extended. "I'm Samantha Davis, Lindsey's friend, but everyone calls me Sam. I'm assuming you're her roommate?"

"That's me." The woman wiped her cream-covered fingers on the front of her denim dress and shook hands with Sam. "Name's Hilda Housemann."

Sam smiled weakly as she shook her hand and then stepped back, pulled a tissue from her pocket and wiped her fingers.

"Sorry 'bout that. It's hard to get the stickiness off without water."

Lindsey put her suitcase on the other bed and waved back at Hilda. “Nice to meet you, roommate. So, that one goodie was your last high caloric treat, huh? I wouldn’t have trusted myself. I don’t have much willpower.”

“Neither do I. That’s why I only hid one, and I had to smuggle that past my boyfriend.”

“You have a boyfriend?” Lindsey saw Sam dart her a sharp glare. “I mean, is he here?” It was a weak attempt at covering her unintentional insult.

“No, he had to get back to work.” Hilda tossed her hair over her shoulder. “He’s the foreman on one of my father’s demolition crews.”

“He works for your father?”

“For now.” Hilda looked down at the floor. “After we’re married and I get my inheritance, we’ll buy him his own ten-ton truck and he can start his own company.”

“I see.” Lindsey bit her lip. The poor thing was probably being courted for her money by some Neanderthal with a beer-barrel waist and an Iron Man belt buckle. The poor girl needed a sincere friend who wasn’t blinded by all this love nonsense.

“Well, you certainly have an incentive for joining the FRAT program.” Sam was still wiping her hand with the tissue.

“I want to look pretty for once.” Hilda looked at Lindsey. “How did you get into the program? You’re already pretty.”

Lindsey smiled. “We’re going to get along just fine with compliments like that.” She pointed at her backside. “I need about fifteen off here.” Then she pointed at her breasts. “At least ten off here.” She pulled at the waistband of her skirt. “And an extra five wouldn’t hurt around here.”

As Hilda struggled off the bed and to her feet, the bedsprings pinged in relief. “I wish that’s all I had to lose. But according to Dr. Randall, the machine that does the fat removal can handle it all in one operation and remove all the excess skin through the Ches-Wrap without any pain. Isn’t modern science wonderful?”

“Sure is.” Lindsey looked at Hilda’s hopeful grin and sent a silent prayer. Please, Lord, let Hilda be right. Let the next four weeks be life-altering.

Hal scowled at the phone. “What do you mean the Associated Press doesn’t believe it’s real?”

Jeff Drake sighed. “You know, for a psychiatrist, you’re one uptight dude. Have you considered giving yourself a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication?”

“You’d be uptight too if your superior kept calling you from D.C. with nothing but bad news.” Hal paced the room with the cordless phone, watching out the window as his subjects filed into the solarium for breakfast.

They were all still in their robes as they’d been instructed they could do. He scowled as he spotted Ms. Michaels in a Tweety Bird-yellow chenille and a pair of matching fuzzy slippers. Damn, she even looked good as a canary.

“You haven’t heard everything yet.”

His attention leapt back to the telephone receiver. “What exactly does that mean?”

“Um, it seems Larry Darrow wants to see the Institute firsthand.”

“He what?” Hal winced, realizing he’d screamed when his voice reverberated off the wall. When several of the subjects turned in his direction, he moved away from the window. He took a deep breath and cupped his hand around the mouthpiece. “Keep that S.O.B in Washington,” he hissed. “If he shows up here, I won’t be responsible for what’ll happen.”

“I know you’ve hated him ever since he axed your experiment on the mating habits of the X-Generation.”

Hal inhaled sharply.

“Okay, hate’s a mild word, but get over it. He’s part of the Advisory Board for the National Science Endowment, and although we’ve arranged for the foundation to pretend they’re funding this, Larry doesn’t know that.”

He drummed his fingers on the top of his chair and shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Look, the reason I don’t like Larry Darrow goes a lot deeper than a failed experiment. Have you forgotten Cindy?”

“No. But that’s old news.”

“Or old wives.” Hal rubbed his forehead with his left hand. “I wish I could say what’s past is past and that, because my marriage to Cindy is over, the relationship is behind me. But it isn’t where Larry Darrow’s concerned. The bastard betrayed me. I’m warning you, keep him away from me, Jeff.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Do better than that.” He slammed down the receiver. Larry Darrow’s face swam in front of his eyes. He could still see the man, naked except for his tux bow tie, pouring champagne for Cindy—his wife. She’d been laughing at him from her position on the bed—Hal’s bed, their bed—wearing nothing but a matching bow tie.

That night had been the last time he’d seen Darrow and the last time he’d drunk champagne, toasting his misfortune and wishing he were dead.

He’d rebounded, as he had all his life. A life of momentary hope followed by crushing disappointment.

Hal sighed. He knew he shouldn't tread this road. It brought up too many bad memories: his mother's death, then, a month later, his discovery of Cindy's betrayal with Darrow.

He didn't need anyone to remind him of his shortcomings or past failures. He was aware of them. But the last thing he wanted or needed was Darrow disrupting his comfortable and unencumbered lifestyle.

Okay, so most people wouldn't find waking at five A.M. and studying research papers exciting, then going to the office, that is, if he weren't already there from the night before, but he did. He loved his work. He lost time and himself in his work. Nope, Larry Darrow wasn't going to spoil his routine, and neither was anyone else.

At the knock on his door, Hal answered without thinking. "Come in."

A pair of yellow Tweety Bird slippers appeared just past the doorjamb followed by an angry pair of honey-brown eyes. Ms. Michaels held a bowl of cold cereal in her hand as if it contained a toxic substance. "If you'd planned on killing me, the least you could have done was give me a cigarette and a blindfold."

"I didn't know you smoked." He stared at her, astounded that she was more beautiful when she was angry. Not a good sign. The woman was disaster with a capital D.

"I don't smoke. Obviously, I don't eat, either." She slammed the bowl on Hal's side table.

He gritted his teeth. Every one of the subjects had to be happy. They had to believe in the experiment. He counted on it and so did the outcome of the project, as well as the way in which the National Science Endowment publicized it. "Puffed wheat is good for you."

"Sure, if you like toasted air." Lindsey Michaels crossed her arms and pumped her Tweety-covered foot.

"Puffed wheat is full of fiber and vitamins. I should know. I've eaten it for breakfast for the past twenty years."

"Well, all I can say, Dr. Randall, is you must be full of wind, because not one speck of self-respecting sustenance made its way anywhere near my stomach."

She stomped toward him, and he swallowed hard. He wasn't prepared to see how the light caught the dark red sparks in her hair or the soft texture of her perfect complexion. He was equally unprepared to see the cleavage through the now-parting folds of her chenille bathrobe. For one desperate moment, he'd thought the robe was all she had on.

"Get this, Doctor, your advertisement said I'd lose weight by getting it sucked out by a machine. I didn't expect to be hung to dry like a piece of beef jerky. This place looks like a spa and you advertised a chef who could 'make low calorie food taste like the best French cuisine'." She stopped just inches from his

chest, and he struggled not to moan. “I’d love to meet the chef who so tenderly spent all night forming all these little kernels of gas-makers. His last name doesn’t happen to be Kellogg, does it?”

Hal frowned at the woman who spelled trouble for the Institute. “A chef isn’t easy to find in Dickens.” He winced at the defensive sound in his voice.

“So, did you find one? Or did you make a deal with the nearest grain storage silo?”

He backed up as he reminded himself that he was in control, not the little hellcat in front of him. He knew it was a lie! Cripes, he couldn’t even control his own libido. “The chef starts tomorrow. He’s a...a former M. S. S.”

“What’s that?”

“A Mess Management Specialist. In the Navy, that’s the cook.”

“Navy?” Her eyes flared once again, and she advanced until her face was just inches below his chin. “Get this, Dr. Perfect. I have no intention of going through basic training. In your ads and all the literature you sent me, you promised to suck out this excess fat. You never mentioned a downside like starvation.”

“The experiment requires a complete inventory of special programs. I’m afraid modification of your diet is one of them.”

“Modification and starvation are two different concepts. I consider myself the spokesman for all those other poor, overweight dupes out there. Just get with the program. We’ll form a lynch mob if you don’t give us nourishment that tastes like real food.” She stood on tiptoe, and stared into his eyes. “We need protein and comfort food. There’s got to be something enticing that doesn’t have any calories.”

You’ve got that right, but it isn’t professional to take a patient to bed. Hal backed up another step as the thought raced across his mind. “The staff will see what they can do.”

“That’s more like it.” She moved to the door and nodded at the discarded bowl of cereal. “Maybe you can use the puffed wheat to float your next experiment.”

CHAPTER THREE

As she stared at her plate, Lindsey's grip tightened on her fork. The doctor had promised better fare. He'd lied. Lunch consisted of a cup of clear chicken broth, a globule of tomato aspic, three carrot sticks, and a large piece of Wasa Bread. At least bread is what the waitress had called it. Lindsey called it cardboard.

"They sure know how to time their twenty-two page questionnaires for effect. Imagine having to answer our food preferences right before they served us this." She stabbed the tomato aspic. "They said they had to know that stuff because it was the only way they could serve us food we'd want," Hilda said, her normally hearty voice thin and whiney.

"The word they used, Hilda, was palatable. Damn, I'm so hungry, I don't care if it's corrugated." Lindsey grabbed the dried cracker bread and crunched.

Hilda looked at Lindsey's full plate longingly. "I thought this was the appetizer. If I'd known this was all we were getting, I'd have eaten slower."

Lindsey glanced up, her mouth full of shredded sawdust, and realized Hilda's plate was empty. Her gaze widened. She could see her reflection in the bottom of Hilda's plate, it was so clean. "Mmmfff. Thorry."

A tear drifted from the woman's right eye. "I'm so much bigger than you. They could have at least made my portions bigger than yours."

Lindsey swallowed hard. "Want my bread?" She held out the cracker toward Hilda. Her roommate grabbed it, and Lindsey watched, awed, as she inhaled it in three quick bites. Her eyes narrowed. "Dr. Randall promised the chef would be here tomorrow. Why don't you ask Marie if they can increase your portions?"

"I hope the chef is good."

She cringed, unsure if Hilda was remarking on his culinary talents or his flavor. "Anything he makes has to be an improvement." For a minute, she envisioned a plate full of creamed beef, and her stomach rumbled in unfulfilled angst.

"What I wouldn't give for one cheeseburger with extra mayo, a super-sized fries and some onion rings—with extra grease."

Lindsey's stomach turned a flip flop at Hilda's words. "I don't think I'd go that far. Maybe a lean piece of ground round and a salad?" Sure, she was craving calories, but she hadn't gone that far over the top. Yet.

Her attention flew to the front of the room where Marie Poppokowsky thumped her finger on the standing microphone. "Could I please have your attention? I understand how difficult this new regime is and also how all of you will take some time adjusting to your new diets."

“Got that right,” Lindsey mumbled in Hilda’s direction.

“Once the new chef is on board, the dietician will be working with each of you individually to assure proper caloric intake and balance.”

“You mean someone’s going to make sure we don’t starve to death?” Lindsey saw Marie Poppokowsky glance in her direction with a raised eyebrow. She bowed her head and whispered. “Whoops, better not rile the headmistress or I may be doomed to a life of gruel.”

Hilda snickered. “Mrs. Scrooge needs to be visited by the Ghost of Cheesecake Past.”

“I believe some of you aren’t paying attention.” Dr. Poppokowsky angrily peered in Lindsey’s direction.

“Shush. You’ll get me in trouble. If they get mad at me, I’ll only get two carrot sticks tomorrow.” Lindsey smiled.

“Ms. Michaels, is there anything you’d like to share with the group?”

She shook her head. “No, ma’am.” She sneaked a glance at Hilda. “But I sure wish she’d share her husband.”

Hilda’s body shook with restrained laughter.

Marie cleared her throat. “As I was saying, we hope to tailor your individual routine so it will benefit you the most before your liposuction. Some of you may think this is a joke.” She stared directly at Lindsey. “It isn’t. We’re attempting to change your life, your habits. Without doing so, the liposuction won’t be a success. We need your complete cooperation.”

Lindsey grabbed a carrot stick and crunched. Easy for Dr. Poppokowsky to say. She wasn’t confined to fat farm hell.

She thought about the woman’s husband, the gorgeous Dr. Randall. Yup, no doubt about it, she’d be much more cooperative if he asked her. Heck, he wouldn’t even have to bribe her with a hot fudge sundae and an extra squirt of whipped cream.

Then Lindsey paused. She was in bad shape. The man was married. Off limits. Untouchable. She had to put him and his incredible navy-colored eyes out of her mind. Focus on her job. That was the key.

Hal stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. “I’m not interested in her, no way, no how. She’s dangerous. She’s destructive to my program.” He leaned forward and glared at himself. “I will not cross the sacred doctor-patient barrier.”

He shook his head. He was in sad shape. God, help him if his peers discovered he talked to himself, trying to shore up his badly slipping id. They’d drum him out of the Fraternal Order of Shrinks.

Scowling, he left the bathroom, muttering his touchstone, “Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung. Everything can be explained by...”

His office door flew open. Marie stood dressed in a starched white uniform.

“Stop doing that. I told you to knock, then wait until I asked you to come in! It makes me crazy when you do that.”

“That isn’t all that’s making you crazy. I suspect it’s a certain someone who’s ruining your sleep and breaching your boundaries.” She flashed the Cheshire cat grin he was growing to hate. “Are you ready to conduct Ms. Michaels’ donor readiness testing?”

Hal stalked to his desk. Once seated, his back rigid, he adjusted his papers. “Show her in. And, Marie, refrain from having any more fantasies.”

“Sure thing.”

She slipped out of the room only to be followed by a knock on the door.

Hal cringed as he ran a finger between his neck and shirt collar. “Come in.”

Lindsey Michaels entered the room wearing a pair of skin-tight leggings and an oversized shirt with the inscription “Born to be Wide” plastered over her bust line.

He grabbed the sides of his chair, his gaze glued to the words. Prior to Ms. Michaels and a dark-red pen, the word wide had been wild. With a swipe of red ink, she’d drawn a line through the l and added an e.

“Thank God, you saved me.” She collapsed in a side chair and wiped her forehead with a cotton wristband. “If I’d had to do one more sit-up to that song about giving the chicken fat back to the chicken, I would’ve laid an egg.”

“You have a very colorful sense of humor, Ms. Michaels.” He actually enjoyed her acidic wit. He looked forward to it. Not a good sign. “Do you find everything amusing, or just this project?”

She leaned back as if struck. Now what?

Hal watched as she leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs, recovering from his sarcasm. Her pride and humor formed her shield against the world. He slowly exhaled. This was more like it. He was in control, reading people and their motives.

“You’re the first person I’ve known who objected to a little humor,” she said, folding her arms beneath her breasts.

He gritted his teeth. His grip on the arms of his chair tightened. A tremor of foreboding rippled through him. As he loosened his stranglehold on the wet leather, he mumbled, “Everything can be explai—”

“Doctor Randall? Are you okay?”

He clamped his mouth closed, reached out and straightened an already perfectly aligned stack of papers. “Back to your comment about humor. I enjoy it as much as the next person, Ms. Michaels. Preferably in moderation, as in all

things, and in the correct setting. This office and institution aren't such settings. FRAT's clinical trials have reached a critical stage. From your words and actions, I question whether you're serious about the project."

Lindsey Michaels bolted out of her chair. As she stormed his large desk, Hal leaned further back in his chair. For a moment, he worried she might crawl over the desk to get to him. Now that was an interesting thought that held a number of opportunities, his traitorous id whispered.

"Dr. Randall, I've spent the first thirty years of my life dieting. I've been to Jenny's centers; I've eaten enough boiled eggs and bowls of oatmeal on Weight Watchers to explode. I drank hot lemonade on the Diet Center diet, I took water pills, and I even tried the now-off-the-market fat-burning toxins." As she leaned closer, Hal felt her heat enfold him. "I've also jumped, pushed, crunched, jogged, stretched, danced, and swam to lose weight. Yet, here I am," she gestured at her body, "all blubber."

Before he could say anything, she darted around his desk and stood towering over him. He knew he should put an end to this outburst, but he was paralyzed. Hell, he was insane. Over the edge. Ready for the chuckle farm. And it was all her fault. Why'd she have to be more beautiful than in her photo?

She poked his chest. "I'm beginning to believe this whole project is a fake. You and your Gestapo wife plan to force us to lose weight by putting us on starvation diets and exercise programs that put you in Doctor Mengele's league."

Hal desperately wanted to retrieve his handkerchief and mop his forehead, but he refused to give her the satisfaction of knowing she was getting to him. Okay, had gotten to him. Her scent was enough to jumpstart his libido into super-stud status. Worse, the hairs on his arms were standing at attention.

That happened every time he let a woman get under his skin, but never this intense before. Not even with his ex-wife. Of course, that could explain why she was now his ex-, and Darrow's part in the break-up of his marriage. Obviously, his body and brain weren't thinking with the same head.

"Doc, you've got that weird look again. Are you okay?"

This had to stop... immediately! It was simply a matter of ignoring her effect. He was a man of science. He prided himself on his control and ability to dominate any situation.

"You smell like vanilla." So much for control. He sighed as she moved several feet away from him.

"I wear it all the time, but if it's a problem, I'll stop."

Refusing to meet her gaze, he grabbed her file and opened it. "Let's play it by ear. If it makes the other clients crave food, then you'll be asked to cease wearing it." You can count on that happening as it makes me want to eat...He cringed at his train of thought. Definitely time to start therapy sessions with Marie.

Her cheeks turned red, and she self-consciously brushed her fingers through her dark brown hair as she returned to her chair.

At his body's automatic response to her nervous action, Hal dug his fingers into the chair arm. What had he been about to say? Oh, yeah. "Our intent at FRAT is not to starve you. Nor is it to make you exercise like...Doctor Mengele?"

She nodded.

An irrational surge of triumph soared at her refusal to meet his gaze. "It's our responsibility to make sure you follow through with a controlled lifestyle once the liposuction occurs." God, he hated lying to the woman. "The procedure isn't cheap and is funded by the National Science Endowment. We have to prove their money was well spent. There's a collective consciousness involved."

"You sound more like a psychiatrist than you do a plastic surgeon."

He flashed a self-deprecating smile. At least he hoped it held the right touch of reserve and self-mockery. "Between repairing disfigurements, breast augmentation and reduction, and transplants, I've learned a lot about psychiatry. Dealing with patients who want to change how they look requires a lot of armchair psychoanalysis."

"Do you think you could downsize these jugs?" she asked, her hands framing the perfect mounds of her breasts.

He gripped the edge of his desk. "There's nothing wrong with your breasts!" Large, honey-colored eyes stared back at him. "Really?"

Afraid he'd drown in her gaze, he looked away. This was uncharted territory. Quicksand was going to suck him, his project, and the Lone Star Award so far under they'd never be seen or heard from again. "Once we liposuction the excess fat from other areas, your breasts will stand out as a pleasant feature."

"I don't think so. They've always been too large. Say, why don't you check them and you'll see what I mean?" Lindsey pulled at the bottom of the shirt.

Hal vaulted from his chair and ran, grabbing both of her hands before she'd raised the shirt past her bra line. "That's not necessary at the moment. As you should know, for medical and legal reasons, all examinations are done with a nurse in attendance." He tugged her shirt back into place, careful not to touch her. "This session is focused on your questionnaire."

"Which one?"

He frowned. How could she be so calm when he'd swear he'd just popped the zipper on his slacks? Obviously, the attraction was all one-sided. Just as well, considering what was at stake. "The one on food preferences."

"I've filled out so many reports and questionnaires, you guys should be able to file my income taxes for me next year."

"Why don't you sit on the sofa while I look through your responses?"

“What’s wrong with the chair?” she asked, looking at the side chair in close proximity to the desk.

It’s too close. “The sofa is much more comfortable.” For me.

She shrugged. “Whatever you say.” Lindsey walked across the room and sat on the sofa, then turned, throwing her legs up onto the leather surface. “My weight problems started when I was thirteen years old. My father beat me regularly. Then, I was sold to a wealthy landowner as his sex-slave for the taxes on my family’s land. Food was my one escape.”

Hal shot her a warning glare.

She straightened into a sitting position. “Sorry. Can’t help the theatrics. It runs in my family. Besides, a sofa is for lying and a chair is for sitting. Are you sure you’re not a psychiatrist?”

Hal cleared his throat and looked at her questionnaire. “I’m sure. Are you ready to stop the games and answer a few simple questions, Ms. Michaels?”

“If you’ll call me Lindsey instead of Ms. or Miss Michaels.”

At her warm, welcoming smile, his resolve melted again. “Fine.” He reached for his reading glasses and perched them on the end of his nose. “You may call me Hal.”

“I wondered how you shortened it.”

“I beg your pardon?” He crossed his legs.

“The name. Halloran is such a long first name for a person to have to use all the time. Especially when the name owner’s a child or when you’re having sex.”

“Excuse me?”

Lindsey pumped her left leg, which she’d crossed over her right. “Come on, Doc, we’re too old to rest everything on convention. No woman is going to cry out ‘Oh, Halloran!’ in the middle of a...well, you know.” She looked down at the floor.

He stared at the questionnaire and wondered how in the hell he could get this meeting back on track. After clearing his throat, he said, “It says here that you like all greens except for Brussels sprouts, and you have no food allergies.”

He looked up, surprised to see Lindsey blushing.

“You’ll have to forgive my runaway mouth. I’ve been that way all my life. When I was in first grade, I had to stay after school for three consecutive weeks to write ‘I will not talk in class’ on the board a hundred times—one hundred times every day. When I was a senior in high school, I almost got suspended for three days when I said my geography teacher was gay—he was. Things just pop out of my mouth before I think about them.”

Hal tried to concentrate again on the paperwork. Unfortunately, he couldn’t get rid of the image of Lindsey Michaels going wild in his arms, screaming, “Yes, yes, oh, God, yes, Halloran!”

Through force of will, he focused on the sheet before him. "It says here that you order a twelve-inch pizza at least twice a week."

"Yes?"

"How many slices do you eat?" He picked up a pen to make a notation.

She shrugged. "The entire thing. Doesn't everyone?"

"No."

Grinning, Lindsey waved off his answer. "That's because they haven't had one from the Pepperoni Palace." She stood. "Look, is it all right if we finish this later? I really need to take a shower," she said, walking out the door.

Mind if I join you? Hal thought as he stared at the closed door. "Some d-days it doesn't p-pay to get up."

His gaze widened in horror. "N-n-no! N-n-no!"

"What happened after Ms. Michaels started to remove her shirt?"

Hal repositioned himself on Marie's sofa, then laid an arm across his eyes. "I stopped her."

"And?"

"And we refocused on the food preference survey."

"Come on, Hal, you know the drill. For therapy to work, the patient needs to talk. So talk."

"She discussed sex." He slanted Marie a glance. His frown deepened as she began furiously scribbling on her legal pad. "How many notes are you planning to take and how detailed?"

She grinned. "You can't stand to be the one on the couch, can you? It's killing you that, for once, I'm the therapist and not you."

"Damn it, Marie, you ju—"

"So what'd she say about sex?"

He threw his arm over his eyes again and recounted their conversation.

"I see," Marie muttered as her pen raced across the pad.

"You see what?" he growled.

"You identify with her."

"I what?" Hal bolted upright. "And you call yourself a therapist? I don't crack jokes all the time. I don't open my mouth and let loose with whatever thought pops into my brain. I don't eat to comfort myself. And I sure as hell don't wear vanilla perfume!"

"Vanilla perfume?"

"Yes," he hissed. "Vanilla perfume."

"You've read her file, Hal. You and she aren't so different. You're right, you don't crack jokes to keep people from getting too close. You clam up. You don't

talk without thinking. Instead, you're stern and paternalistic, Doctor Know-it-all. Lindsey uses food for comfort and solace. Your method of choice is to hide in your work. What's the difference?"

"I'm a psychiatrist. I'm non-threatening and easy to talk to, not stern."

"Bull! When you're emotionally cornered or your work's in danger, you're the most rigid and taciturn man I've met. Granted, I've never seen a patient get to you before, but there's always a first time. I'm guessing Lindsey Michaels is the first."

Hal stood, clenching his fists. Afraid he'd beat the wall, he jammed his balled hands into the pockets of his slacks. "You're out of your mind."

"Oh, really. How long have we known each other? Twelve years?"

He nodded, his gaze narrowing. He didn't like nor did he trust Marie's serene yet implacable expression. "You'd better solve this problem and PDQ."

"How? What am I supposed to do about Ms. Michaels?"

"Forget Ms. Michaels. You'd better decide what you're going to do about Hal Randall. For all our sakes."

A shudder ripped through Lindsey. "Mary, mother of—" She gasped as the shower spray stabbed like a million needle-sharp icicles. Hands shaking, she grasped and spun the water spigot into the off position. Whipping the towel off the rack on the shower door, she rubbed herself dry with brisk motions.

What could she have been thinking about to turn herself into a blue Popsicle?

Dr. Randall...Hal.

She groaned. Why had she suggested they call each other by their first names? "Damn his black hair and the dimple in his chin! Damn his open collar and that chest hair! Damn his marriage!"

A heavy fist pounded on the bathroom door.

Lindsey clutched the towel closer to her.

"Lin? You all right?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed. Hilda didn't need to know her roommate had gone whacko over a married man. So far, she'd successfully hidden her attraction from Hal.

She doubted she'd be as fortunate where Hilda was concerned. Given that she was known to talk in her sleep, Lindsey figured it was a foregone conclusion that her preoccupation with the good doctor would be discovered sooner rather than later.

Better to come clean and request Hilda's assistance in fighting her lecherous thoughts.

"I'm okay, Hilda," she said, slipping into her robe. "I'll be out in a sec."

Grinning, she cinched the belt. At first, she'd been hesitant to slip between the sheets in the all-together in front of Hilda. Her chubby friend had giggled and said, "I'm from a family of five girls. You don't have anything I'm interested in staring at. The only reason I wear a nightgown is I'm afraid I'll see myself in the mirror and die of horror."

Lindsey took a deep breath, then opened the bathroom door and walked over to her bed. "Sorry about the noise. Just letting off a little steam."

Hilda lay back on a large cushion shaped like the back and arms of a chair. "Doesn't look like any's comin' outta the bathroom. Don't you believe in using hot water?"

She struggled to remain calm and placid under Hilda's scrutinizing stare.

"What's going on? You're hyped over something. Come on, spill the beans."

"What the hell." Lindsey fell back on top of the covers, and grabbed her latest romance novel in both hands. "I saw something I can't have and it makes me really angry that I want to sacrifice my principles and go after it anyway." With a sigh, she rolled onto her side and faced her roommate. "I feel horrible. Like crap. I was brought up to know better, Hilda. All my life, I've towed the mark, knowing that an affair is destructive to both parties involved."

She frowned. Hilda refused to meet her gaze. Instead, she bit off the eraser of the pencil she used with her crossword puzzles.

"Yeah, I know what you mean, Lin. I feel that way all the time."

"You do?" Talk about surprises, this was one for the record. What would Hilda's fiancé do if he knew she lusted after a married man?

"Yup, I know just how you feel. It's hard to watch someone eat everything they want. But what I want to know is, where'd you find the chocolate, and why's it gonna hurt the person who has it?" Hilda nodded wisely. "Ah, it must have been the last piece."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hal crunched on a chocolate-covered nut. "It's the last piece." Chewing, he paced the room.

"You don't eat candy! You're a health nut."

"Desperate times require desperate measures. My life's work is about to disintegrate, and there isn't a damned thing I can do about it."

"Why?"

"Lindsey Michaels." He glanced at Marie. "And more importantly, Larry Darrow."

"Darrow? What's the problem with him? It isn't like he can deny us funding. We already have the money."

Hal turned and faced the window. "He's a longtime enemy. For years, he's done everything in his power to make my life miserable. And now he's in a position to act on our mutual antipathy." He turned back to Marie. "He's on the Board of Directors of the National Science Endowment. When he spotted my name and our project on their books, he started asking questions."

"So what? The Endowment isn't funding this project," she said.

"I know that. You know that. So do a half-dozen other people in the U.S. government. Larry Darrow isn't one of them. He's coming down here to make sure I don't succeed."

"Why?" She picked up the empty candy box and dropped it into the trashcan.

His training had taught him the need for balance and complementing personalities. He was honest enough to admit that, even if she hadn't been compulsively neat, he'd have hired Marie because she was a lesbian and would never think of him romantically. Which was more than he could say for Robin, his last assistant, who hadn't just hit on him, but she'd done everything to assure his complete capitulation.

Good thing only his body had been involved while his brain and emotions had stood on the sidelines. Never let it be said that Robin wasn't fast on the uptake. The day he'd told her she'd been transferred to West Palm Beach, she'd called him a bastard and stormed out of the office.

He glanced at one of the engraved wedding invitations that had cost a minimum of fifty dollars each. It now appeared as if all were forgiven.

Marie punched him in the arm. "Why does Darrow hate you?"

“Because I was first and he was second in our graduating class at Duke University. Then I got the only slot on the NASA research team. He’s spent the rest of his life doing his best to destroy mine.”

“Come on, Hal. You’re exaggerating.”

“You think so? What do you call stealing my wife, marrying her, and then sabotaging my chances at a research position and full professorship at Oxford studying the X-Generation?” he asked, raising a finger for each item he ticked off.

“I’d say awesome.”

He stared at her. “Thanks, Marie. Your adoration is comforting.”

She laughed. “Fill me in on the man, what makes him tick, and I’ll come up with something.”

“Women find him handsome.” Hal looked at the floor. “But he’s a lousy psychiatrist. He doesn’t believe in dream theory, but does believe all psychiatry can be based on anything except human sexuality.”

She shook her head. “It amazes me he got away with it. You’re such a careful planner—even if you are a disorganized mess.”

“I’m cluttered, not dirty.”

“Okay, you’re cluttered.” Marie grinned. “And you also have the best polished shoes in town.”

He smiled as he looked at the high sheen of his loafers. His Dad had said, “A high sheen shows a high esteem.” Just what you’d have expected from a Freudian psychiatrist. “As for Darrow, I never got the chance to CYA. I discovered his agenda when I found him in bed with my wife. The SOB laughed, then gave me the news he was going to Oxford, not me.”

Marie sat on the sofa. “Did you book a room for the home-wrecker in Lubbock?”

He felt a small smile break free. “Yeah. Down at the Loop close to the Strip.”

She grinned. “I’m sure he’ll love it.”

Unable to restrain himself, Hal laughed. “At least he’s an hour away.”

“And near every topless bar in town.”

“Maybe there is something good about having FRAT in the middle of nowhere.” A reflection in the window of his office drew Hal’s attention. Hands clenched, he looked over at Marie, still chuckling. “It’s him.”

She bolted off the sofa. In two strides, she stood behind him, on tiptoe, looking over his shoulder. “Wow.”

Hal glanced back at her, his eyebrows raised. “What’s that supposed to mean? I thought men didn’t attract you.”

“I’m just like anyone. I can appreciate a perfect body, female or male.”

Hal glared out the window. From a purely objective position, he had to admit Larry Darrow could have been a Hollywood star with his height, dark-blond hair and good looks. Or so Cindy had said.

“Will you look at that physique? It’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s the kind that drives women mad.”

“Geez Louise, get a load of those buns. And his face, wow!”

“Can it now or I tell Wanda why you drooled all over my jacket.” First Darrow steals Cindy, now he’s driving Marie, a confirmed lesbian, wild. Hal hated to think what effect Darrow would have on the institute’s female clientele, especially Lindsey.

“Come off it. You’re envious.” Marie laughed. “He’s a perfect specimen.”

Hal looked at Darrow and grimaced. “Perfect specimens should be kept in closed jars of formaldehyde.”

“Put a lid on it, Kenny!” Lindsey propped her elbow on the shelf of the payphone. “I wish you could hear yourself. You sound like McCarthy during his witch hunt for communists.”

“Well, it is sort of like that—people defrauding the government. I’m tellin’ ya, Lindsey, Dr. Randall and his wife are frauds, and I’m on my way to Duke University to get the proof.”

“Duke? What does Duke have to do with West Texas?” She shifted from foot to foot.

“That’s where both Randall and Poppokowsky were suppose to have attended medical school. Guess what? They don’t come up on Duke’s database under plastic surgery. Beginning to get the picture? Bet ya a hundred bucks, the only medical school they attended was the one that taught how to surgically remove money from the client’s wallet and transplant it into theirs.”

“I don’t think you’re right on this one. Granted, Dr. Randall is a bit scattered, but during the several talks we’ve had, he’s seemed very intent on his research.” She bit her lip, remembering she’d been more interested in the man, not the professional.

“Yeah, I bet he was intent, all right. Intent on duping you. Probably thinks you’re a pushover for a wink, a smile, and an offer to get you into bed.”

Her mouth went dry and her knees weakened at the thought of going to bed with the doctor.

“Lindsey, you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here, Kenny. Just trying to hold onto my temper. You know darned good and well I’m not the kind of woman to get involved with a married man.” She swallowed hard at the word married. “Nor do I believe Dr. Randall

would cheat on his wife. In any case, it's a moot point. As we both know, I don't inspire lust in men."

"The man will do anything to pull off this scam."

She frowned at Kenny's words. Then she heard him cough and realized he, himself, had just noticed the implication in his words.

"I didn't mean it that way, Lindsey. You are attractive, in a cute sort of way."

"Right. In my own pudgy, overstuffed sorta fashion."

"Aww, Honey. That's not what I meant. I just mean you're not the Jacqueline Bisset kind of pretty, or even Marilyn Monroe. You're more like..."

"Roseanne?" She grimaced at the dead silence from the other side of the phone. Then she heard a sigh.

"Look, it's obvious that food deprivation is making you cranky. I'll talk to you this weekend when I come to visit."

"Go have a hot fudge sundae for me." She slammed down the receiver. "With my luck, he'll eat it and I'll gain the weight."

Lindsey stomped back down the hall to her room. A movement out the window at the end of the hall caught her eye, and she walked over to it. A black limo had parked in front of the spa entrance.

She leaned forward, her breath fogging the window. "Good lord. I didn't know they came packaged that good," she sighed, her gaze glued on the man who looked like a cross between Val Kilmer and Harrison Ford. "How many good looking men can one starving female take?" So what if Hal epitomized what she preferred in a man. If this gorgeous hunk were unattached, she'd make an exception. It wasn't as though her preferences ever panned out and gave her Mr. Right.

"Well, I wonder who you are, Harrison Kilmer?" She smoothed down the front of her sweatshirt self-consciously. "FBI, CIA, or just plain DDG?" She scratched her head. "Yes, definitely DDG—drop dead gorgeous."

"Drop dead gorgeous. Those are the only words to describe him." Marie continued to stare out the window.

"I'm calling Wanda to tell her you're ready to switch genders."

She glanced at Hal. "I know you're over Cindy, but while this guy showing up is irritating, it doesn't explain your reaction. He can't hurt you. He can't take the project away from you. And he sure can't poach your territory since you don't have anyone you're interested in." She walked back to the sofa and sat down. "So, what threat can he pose?"

Hal tore open a chocolate bar and jammed it in his mouth. “Hmmp-hrmmp-hrmmp-fe-hrmmp.”

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to talk when your mouth’s full?”

He swallowed hard. “Sorry. He can uncover the whole operation.”

“I sense there’s more than you’re telling. But never fear, I’ll figure it out eventually.” She slung one leg over the other.

“Great, Dr. Watson. Do that. Right now, I need you alert and at your most professional self. Get ready to meet a real, live shithead.”

She shrugged. “Well if you’ve gotta be one, you might as well have a nice covering.”

At the knock on the door, Hal tightened his shoulders. “I never thought I’d have to talk to this creep again.” He walked to the door and opened it, then struggled to maintain a neutral expression at Darrow’s toothpaste-perfect grin. “Randall. Long time. I wondered if you’d given up research and settled down to be a nice country club headman.”

“Locker rooms never interested me.”

Hal forced himself to extend his arm for a handshake. “Too bad. I thought cleaning johns would be your forte.” The hand barely touched his. He didn’t miss Darrow’s dismissive glance toward Marie or his sneer as he moved to the corner of Hal’s desk.

“So how are things going? I was surprised to discover you were working on a weight-reduction experiment. The Board said you have a process for transplanting fat. Who’s in charge of the actual liposuction and transplant?”

Hal squirmed uncomfortably. “For obvious reasons, we haven’t told the subjects there’s another person assigned. They think I’m the plastic surgeon.” Hal walked to the window and stared out at the harsh Texas landscape. “That’s necessary so the control group—the one that won’t actually have liposuction—will lose weight the old-fashioned way.”

Hal turned back to Darrow in time to see him blink and look away. Great! Just great! That’s what the bastard did whenever he smelled blood.

“What are you going to tell them when the surgeon shows up?” Darrow’s gaze narrowed on Hal.

“I don’t anticipate difficulty. We’ll tell them the truth, but we didn’t want anything to disrupt the experiment.”

“Who’s the plastic surgeon?” Darrow strolled to the back of Hal’s desk.

Hal forced himself not to move when Darrow plopped in his chair, then propped his feet on top of the desk and folded his hands behind his head.

“I’m afraid that’s top secret. Only a few top officials know who we’re flying in. You understand how it is.” Hal smiled. “I could tell you, but then we’d have to hold you in solitary confinement until the experiment’s over. Can’t afford a leak.”

“Yeah, right.” Darrow bolted upright. “Just what kind of fool do you take me for, Hal? I’m representing the Board that’s funding this damned experiment. As such, we want to know how our money is being spent.”

“I suggest you stay for a few days and observe. I think you’ll be pleased with the structure.” Hal started to reach for a handkerchief, then dropped his hand. Darrow’s ability to smell fear was greater than a Great White’s to smell chum. “Sorry I can’t tell you who the surgeon is. Let’s just say there’s no one better.”

“We’ll see.” Darrow stood, then straightened the cuffs of his custom suit. “It shouldn’t take more than a couple of days for the endowment to get me top secret clearance.”

Scowling, Hal watch him saunter to the door.

“In the meantime, I’ll enjoy observing. Let’s see if your technique has improved over the past few years.” As Darrow’s hand touched the doorknob, he paused and glanced back. “I know mine has.”

Marie quickly closed and locked the door behind him. Turning back, she grimaced. “He’s a real piece of work. By the way, what kind of technique was he talking about?”

“Got me. I’m going to order pizza, a twelve-inch supreme. What size do you want?”

“Okay, DDG, you’ve got to be here somewhere. Now, where did you go?” More than mere curiosity prompted Lindsey to see him up close. She hoped—no, prayed—he’d break Hal Randall’s spell. Anyone would be healthier for her than good old married Hal.

She inched down the stairway and peeked over the curve of the banister in time to see DDG coming out of Hal’s office. As she eased down another couple steps, she heard him say, “I know mine has.”

His has what?

She grinned. Nothing like a little spying to put the bloom in a woman’s cheeks. Wanting a better view, she leaned forward, lost her balance, and careened down the last few stairs, stopping only when she slammed into the hard wall of DDG’s chest.

“Well, well. What have we here?” he said as his hands caressed her upper arms. “Hal didn’t tell me he had additional staff I hadn’t met.”

Lindsey listened to DDG’s smooth words. There was a practiced ease she didn’t like.

“I’m not staff.” She watched as he raised one eyebrow.

“You’re a client?”

“If you want to call me that. I’m taking part in one of FRAT’s clinical trials.” She sucked in her gut. She knew how men saw her, but that didn’t mean she had to look any dumpier than necessary.

“I don’t know how you made it into the experiment. You don’t need to lose any weight. At least, not much.”

Once again, she got the strange prickly feeling on her arms that she only got when something wasn’t kosher. “Thank you. Are you just visiting or will we be working with you?”

DDG shook his head. “I don’t work for FRAT. I’m here to guarantee the clinical trials are done by the book.”

Lindsey choked back a chuckle when he drew himself up into what he no doubt thought was a sexy, powerful stance. Lord have mercy, what a pompous, pretentious ass.

“I’m a board member of the National Science Endowment, the not-for-profit foundation supporting this experiment.”

“I had no idea a foundation was worried about my little ol’ twenty pounds.”

“It’s not.”

Lindsey glanced behind her. Hal reminded her of a warrior ready to do battle. Hands clenched into fists. His stance balanced with knees slightly bent, enabling him to move with speed in any direction.

“Mr. Darrow was just leaving, weren’t you, Larry?”

Lindsey turned back to Mr. Larry Darrow, now Mr. Not-So-DDG.

“What’s the matter, Hal? Afraid I might mess up your experiment by talking to your client?”

Lindsey watched Darrow blink, then looked away. A split second later, she gasped as Hal silently moved between them.

His face inches from Darrow’s, Hal said in a quiet voice, “You are not to talk to Lindsey or anyone else but Marie and myself, understand? Do so, and I’ll kick your ass off the grounds so fast, you won’t feel the boot. FRAT is in this secluded spot for a reason. I won’t take any chances with my—”

“Experiment?” Grinning, Darrow looked back at Lindsey and winked. “Why do I think you’re talking about so much more? I’ll see you around, Lindsey.”

Lindsey knew better than to respond with so much as a nod. Hal looked ready to kill someone, and there was no way she was going to put herself in the line of fire.

Darrow glanced at Hal. “And you can plan on seeing a lot of me over the next several days.” Whistling “I’ll Be Back”, he left.

Lindsey leaned against the banister. “Who does he think he is?” she asked, unable to keep the distaste out of her voice.

“A government official determined to prevent or, better yet, destroy this experiment.”

“That seals it. When Hilda and I get finished with him, he’s toast.” Lindsey grabbed her left thigh with both hands and nodded at it. “This fat is screaming, ‘Give me a new home!’ It’s begging to be transplanted into someone who’ll love and cherish it.” She walked up to Hal and tapped his chest. “No one’s cheating me out of my liposuction. That is, not if he plans to live.”

Hal turned her toward his office and gave a small push. “We need to talk. Now.” As he walked past a stunned Marie, he said, “We’ll talk later.”

At the sound of the door closing behind her, dread filled Lindsey. She’d blown it. She’d be lucky if he didn’t kick her out of the clinical trials. After all, he’d made it plain she was here on sufferance. Gathering bravado around her like a cape, she turned and, smiling, faced him. “Guess I said one word too many, huh, Doc?” She glanced at his hand, clenched in a fist, and swallowed hard. “I haven’t driven you to violence, have I?” One look at his stormy gaze and she moved backward until she hit the seat of the straight-back chair and collapsed into it.

“Sit in the other chair,” he said, pointing to the one facing his desk.

She waited until he’d passed her before standing. Once settled in the chair, she glanced at Hal. Fascinating. She wondered if he knew how much his eyes showed. The man was a seething caldron of emotions—anger, frustration, and, most surprisingly, disappointment. For the first time, she felt a twinge of shame over her behavior. It had been a long time since anyone had cared enough about her actions or runaway mouth for them to be disappointed in her.

“This project’s very important to me, Ms. Michaels. It has to succeed.”

“No complaints from me on that one. This bod’ wants a success, too.” She pinched an inch at her waist. “You can have it all. After the experiment, you can have tours past my fat. You can say, ‘There’s the fat of the now-famous swimsuit model Lindsey La Mour.’ I’ll change my name, of course. Along with my nose and maybe part of my jaw. How much would you charge for some additional reconstruction?”

“This isn’t a joke, Ms. Michaels.”

“No kidding. I need a new face to fit my new body. One that any man wants to caress and kiss.”

“Lindsey!” He leaned forward. “You’re causing a problem for me.”

“I am?” she croaked.

“Yes, you are. I haven’t stuttered in years, yet one day in your presence and...after analyzing the situation, I now realize it happened because I admire you as a person. In some ways, you remind me of myself. We both need approval. We both crave affection.”

She stared mutely. How could he know her so well? They'd barely talked. Her interview! Marie must have shared it with him!

"Not only am I married, but I'm your doctor. Therefore, there can't and won't be anything personal between us."

Her eyes widened. Oh, my God, he knew how she felt about him! "Of course there can't. I understand fully," she said with as much conviction as she could muster.

"No, you don't. There's something about you that draws me." He picked up his pen and began tapping it on his desk. "It isn't physical, but it's there all the same."

"You're right. It sure can't be physical, not with this fat."

"You aren't fat!"

She frowned, unable to hide her confusion.

"I'm talking about you—your brain, your love of life, your loyalty to your friends, and the needs you keep buried that I'm trying to ignore." She stared as shock filled Hal's face. Then he bolted out of his chair, walked to the window and stared out at the countryside. "The man who was here, Larry Darrow, would love to see me fail." He turned back. "He'll stop at nothing to see that I do. Don't go near him again. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "Got it." She glanced at her watch, then rose from her chair, surprised she could move with the two-ton boulder sitting on her shoulders. "Gotta go. Water aerobics is waiting."

With a smile, she strode from the room. Once outside, she leaned back against the door and rapidly blinked. "Well! What was that all about?" Her brain whirled. "It was a stupid dream anyway." One she had no business entertaining.

Stamping hard on each stair, she went in search of Hilda. Forget her usual, Lindsey needed a double order of ribs tonight.

"This doesn't make sense," Marie said, shaking her head as she stared at the scales. "You've been here six days and haven't lost a pound! If I didn't know better, I'd swear you've eaten foods off your diet, but that's impossible. You're in a controlled environment."

"Controlled is right." Lindsey sniffed. "I'm surprised you don't monitor our sleep."

"You're allowed to withdraw from the trials and leave at any point."

"I don't give up that easily. Although I've got to say this 'pre-conditioning program' is a farce. I mean, y'all are planning on sucking out all the fat. So, what's the difference between sucking fifteen pounds or twenty?"

"I'm not your enemy, Ms. Michaels," Marie said. "And you will lose weight. I'll talk to the chef about decreasing your fat portions."

"You can't decrease something that doesn't exist. I guess you could take away the Wasa Bread. Sure am going to miss that!"

Dr. Randall's wife crossed her arms and shook her head. "I don't understand why you haven't lost weight. You've exercised every day. You've eaten the same food as the others who've lost an average of seven pounds. It defies logic."

"No, it doesn't. My fat is invincible. Faster than a treadmill workout, able to leap tall celery sticks in a single bound. Look, up in the sky. Is it a bird, is it a plane? No, it's Superfat!" With her arms wide open and chest thrust out, Lindsey grinned.

She watched Marie's lack of response. Man, she could give the sphinx lessons. The woman gave a new meaning to unresponsive. Hmmm, wonder if she's that uninvolved in bed? Nah! For whatever reason, Hal struck Lindsey as a man who'd love lovemaking.

"Ms. Michaels, your fat has the same chemical makeup as anyone else's. It also breaks down with the same speed. No, there has to be another reason why you aren't losing weight, and I'll find it."

Lindsey self-consciously played with the weights on the scale, trying to avoid Marie Poppokowsky's probing gaze. She looked ready to put Lindsey in solitary on bread and water.

"Hey, here's an idea. Why don't you suck out my fat, clone it, and use it to fight world hunger?"

"Spend the next hour doing exercises." Marie pointed to the room next door. "The next class is about to start."

Shoulders slumped, Lindsey plodded from the examination room. She hated aerobics, especially stair stepping.

No ifs, ands, or buts. Tonight, Hilda was smuggling in two racks of barbecued ribs, and she was getting one. Good thing Hilda had friends in the right places. Or was that low places? Not that it mattered.

Lindsey knew there was a special place in heaven for Hilda's sister-in-law's babysitter. The sweetheart worked at the 24-hour "Pig Out" franchise and she delivered. Okay, so it was in the back bushes of the institute at 3 A.M. What the hey, as starving camp victims, she and Hilda were damned grateful.

She stifled a laugh. Lordy, eating those ribs gave new meaning to "eating high on the hog."

She wondered what Marie Poppokowsky, or, as Hilda called her, Frau Mengele, would say if she discovered the pile of bones hidden behind the dumpster.

Lindsey frowned. She knew she'd just been put on FRAT's official watch list. Make that she and Hilda. So that meant they'd better find another way to dispose of the evidence. Maybe they could bury the bones wherever FRAT dumped the bodies of the patients who'd died from starvation. After all, who'd notice a few more bones here or there?

Her steps slowed the closer she got to the exercise room. Maybe she could at least be a few minutes late. Hell, maybe she could hide until the blasted class was finished.

"Ms. Michaels?"

At Hal's voice, Lindsey momentarily froze, then pivoted slowly.

"Marie tells me you haven't lost any weight."

Her stomach dropped to the floor. It's all over. They've found the bones!

"Would you please come to my office? We need a conference." Turning on his heel, he headed down the hall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Warily, Lindsey eased onto Hal's sofa. "I thought we'd already had our heart-to-heart talk," she said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"This is about your weight. Or should I say your lack of weight loss." He tried to look stern. Not an easy task considering her dress—black biker-shorts and a neon-green T-shirt with *There's no life without chocolate* stretched across her chest in bold, black letters. "Do you think it's a good idea to wear that T-shirt? It'll only remind you of what you can't have."

Lindsey looked down at her bust line and then back at him. "It doesn't say anything about sex."

His legs gave out. Luckily, he landed on his chair. Freud was right. Everything always came back to sex. Worse, it was as if she sensed that any mention of their mutual attraction was sufficient to throw him for a loop. But not this time. "We've had our one and only conversation about sex. But, since it always seems to be in the forefront of your thoughts, go ahead and talk." He flipped open her chart, then picked up his pen and positioned himself for note taking. "So, what kind of sexual fantasies do you have?"

"About my T-shirt? None. Since I can't eat it, it doesn't remind me of anything. At least, not yet. Who's to say what'll happen when I get hungry enough."

Hal relaxed back into his chair and sighed. A joke. It was a standard Lindsey defense mechanism. Damn, it felt good to have the sure footing psychoanalysis afforded him. Whenever she felt threatened or pinned in a corner, she cracked a joke.

"Let's sidestep the jokes, shall we, and get down to the basics."

Lindsey crossed her legs and began to pump her foot. "Basics?"

"The basic facts. There's a reason behind every action. A logical explanation. If we review the basic facts, perhaps we can come to a well-founded conclusion."

Just as he'd expected, she rolled her eyes. Since humor hadn't deflected him, she'd no doubt try another tack. Analyzing her should prove interesting.

"Sure thing, Doc. I've been under the magnifying glass since I got here. Might as well go under the microscope."

He shook his head. "I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, only trying to determine the why of this illogical phenomenon."

"Whatever you say, Doc."

“My name is Hal or Doctor Randall, not Doc. I may be many things, but I’m not Bugs Bunny.”

“Really?” She shrugged. “Personally, I’m going a little Looney Toons in this place.”

Hal smiled. He hoped it was warm and inviting. He needed her to lower her defenses, to relax and feel comfortable enough with him to tell the truth.

He didn’t doubt for a minute she was smuggling in food. How was the big question. He and Marie had talked through dozens of scenarios before they’d designed the program. One thing they’d assured was no deliveries to the clients. They’d given generous donations to all the fast-food restaurants within a reasonable delivery area and had agreements from the owners that they’d ignore the pitiful pleas from his starving subjects.

None of the subjects had transportation on site, went off the grounds, or had company—except on Sundays—and all packages were searched for food before entry. Still, Lindsey hadn’t lost weight, and he smelled a rat. Correction—he smelled a pizza.

“You’ve been here almost a week.”

She nodded.

“You’ve been on a diet. Everyone else in the clinical trial has also been here a week. They’ve all been on the same diet.”

She nodded again and sat forward. The neck of her oversized T-shirt drifted down her arm, revealing a soft, rounded shoulder.

Hal pulled himself upright and rose out of his chair. He circled the desk slowly, pacing back and forth, avoiding eye contact. “Everyone but you has lost over five pounds.”

“But...”

He walked to Lindsey and stopped in front of her. “Except you.” She shrugged and gave him another blank stare. “In fact, you’re the only one who’s lost no weight. Not an ounce. Don’t you find that peculiar?”

She smiled. “Like my aunt used to say, there are some things that flat-out defy logic.”

Hal stiffened. He wished he could say her words hadn’t thrown him, but they had. The scent of vanilla she wore surrounded him. It was security, warmth, and forever. All the things he’d wanted and never gotten.

He flopped onto the chair across from her and leaned forward. Resting his elbows on his legs, he draped his hands in front of his knees and took shallow breaths. Control. He needed control.

Perhaps Lindsey’s aunt had been right. Although, he’d be damned if he’d admit it.

“You don’t look good. Are you okay, Doc? I don’t know what else to tell you. I’ve eaten the same minuscule portions as everyone else. With your security, I haven’t had an opportunity to cheat. So, I really don’t know what to tell you, except my metabolism is famine-resistant,” she said, tugging the neck of her T-shirt back in place.

As her shoulder disappeared, Hal shuddered. A man would have to be cremated not to be affected by her sexuality. She was dangerous that way, especially since she didn’t have any idea of her effect on him. She touched him on an elemental emotional level, and it scared the hell out of him.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and forced himself to concentrate on the problem at hand—her lack of weight loss. “Tell me how you’re doing it.”

“Doing what?”

Her wide-eyed gaze had the same effect as a tornado. Swift and thoroughly devastating.

“Food. I’m asking how you’re bypassing our security system and smuggling food in here?”

“I’m not.”

Sure she wasn’t. That’s why she couldn’t meet his gaze and a blush covered her neck and cheeks.

“As I said, it’s my lethargic metabolism. Say, isn’t there a way you can attach a few electrodes to my thyroid and jolt it into fast forward?”

He struggled with licentious thoughts. Even his id was deserting him. He couldn’t afford to become sidetracked. He had to concentrate on being the professional he claimed to be. The success of the project and his future depended upon it.

He gave Lindsey his best psychiatrist’s probing stare. The one he used when a client was guilty of lying, cheating or eating a hot fudge sundae. “Let’s suppose, just for the sake of argument, your metabolism isn’t sluggish. Using logic and a scientific perspective, what other reasons could cause your lack of weight loss?”

He placed his hand on hers. His fingers tingled, then spread to the rest of his body. He looked up and saw her eyes wide with surprise. She felt it, too! Hal slowly removed his hand and shifted back in his seat.

“Scientific?” Her question escaped in a squeak.

He nodded, then closed his eyes and focused on calming his shallow breathing. “Science. Empirical evidence. R-reason. T-there has to b-be a r-reason.” The stuttering had started. He needed to get rid of her quickly.

Lindsey jumped up. “I don’t really think I want to talk about this right now. I’d better go to that aerobics class. After all, I need to lose weight.”

“R-right. L-later.”

The moment the door slammed, he began his litany, “E-everything c-c-can be exp-plained by F-Freud and J-Jung.” He took a deep breath. “E-everything c-can be explained by Freud and Jung.” Better. Hal forced another deep breath. “Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung.”

He staggered to the sofa and collapsed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he stared at the floor. The woman was a witch. There could no other explanation for his stuttering. Cripes! This was just what Darrow needed to be able to finally destroy him.

He sat up and glared at his office door. He was a doctor, a psychiatrist. He’d be damned if he’d allow Lindsey to ruin his career or his shot at the Lone Star Award. Never again would anyone, even the woman who was everything he’d always dreamed of, come between him and his goals.

“So what happened after she suggested you jolt her thyroid with electrodes?” Marie asked in a calm, professional voice as she wrote on a legal pad.

From his reclining position on the sofa, Hal slanted her a glance. “That’s when I touched her hand.” He shook his head in disgust. “It’s also when everything fell apart, again. There’s something about her that attracts me.” He pushed himself upright and swung his legs off the couch. “I enjoy her sense of humor. It gets me every time. Then there’s her perfume. Until she wore it, I never knew how sexy vanilla could be. But it’s her air of innocent sweetness that blows me away. I mean, she’s thirty years old and I’m almost forty.” He watched Marie scribbling like mad. “It’s lust, that’s all. Good old fashioned lust,” he finished with an air of desperation.

“Yeah, right. And I’m straight.” Marie set her pad and pen on the table beside her. “Maybe she’s what you need, what you’ve always needed. Ever since I’ve known you, you’ve been searching for the one ingredient that would overcome the hands-off-I’m-an-emotional-iceberg psychiatrist.”

Hal stared, then took a deep breath and pulled himself together. “When did you go nuts? You were a damned good psychiatrist. That’s why you’re my assistant.”

She reached out and patted his fist. “I’m also a woman. Every woman believes in true love and happy endings. I found mine with Wanda. Maybe you’ve found yours in Lindsey.”

He stood and glared at her. “It’s lust. I’ve been without a woman in my life for too long.” Turning, he stalked over to the window and stared out at the desert.

“Whatever you say, Hal. But I’ve gotta tell you, I’ve never known the scent of vanilla to be considered sexy.” Laughing, Marie headed for the door. “Think

about it. And while you're at it, consider coming clean with Lindsey about our marriage. She isn't someone who handles guilt well."

"What about fair homes?" Sam leaned closer as she whispered the words.

"Not fair homes—pheromones. It's sensory awareness of smells—human smells. Like those lovely, wonderful, male odors that drive women wild."

"What about them?"

Lindsey frowned at her friend. "I'm telling you Hal Randall emits an irresistible scent—musky, yet not overpowering. It isn't an aftershave or cologne. It's just him, all-male." She bit her lower lip. "And it calls to me."

She moaned and braced herself. Sam's delicate eyebrow had gone up the way it did when she suspected someone had eaten the last croissant, grabbed the last ticket to the Garth Brooks concert, or nabbed the last single man on the planet.

"Just how far have you and the good doctor gone?"

"We haven't gone anywhere, and we won't." Lindsey frowned.

Sam bit on a carrot stick. "I haven't seen you this jazzed by a man since...come to think of it, I've never seen you like this."

"In a long time? Try never. Whenever we're near each other—" Lindsey shrugged. "He's straightforward, has no hidden agenda. He's also honest and loyal to his vows. He's already told me that we'll never, well...you know."

Sam's eyes widened. "You've already talked about having sex?"

"No! We talked about a more elemental connection."

"There's something more elemental than sex?"

"Yes," Lindsey hissed. "Souls searching for each other across centuries. That kind of thing."

"Sounds more like hands groping across marriage licenses."

Lindsey shot her friend what she hoped was a killing glare. "I made a mistake once with a married man. I don't plan to do it again. Besides, I told you, Hal said we're never going to happen. Now, do you mind if we talk about something else? Anything else."

"No problem." Sam groaned and nodded toward the approaching Kenny Kramer. "We don't have to worry about talking. Kramer will do it for both of us."

"You really can't stand him, can you?" Lindsey laughed at Sam's horrified expression.

"How can you say such a thing, Lin. I adore him. Why, I'd put my affection for him right up there with having a root canal without Novocain."

Lindsey shook her head. In the three years since she'd begun working with Kenny, then dating him, she'd tried to get her best friend and her boyfriend to

tolerate one another. And, failing that, to be civil when together in her presence. So far, she'd been as successful as Hal had been in finding her outside food contact.

"Hey, Lin, why've you been crying over the food here?" Kenny placed his plate on the table beside her. Sitting, he scooted close to her. "It looks great. And here you had me believing they were starving you."

Lindsey scowled, and again wondered if Kenny had truly passed the bar exam. Forget that, considering he survived in the office because of her paralegal skills, how had the blind moron gotten through school?

"Has it escaped your notice, Sherlock, that you went through a buffet line and I didn't?" Lindsey waved her hand at Kenny's plate, overflowing with breads, cheeses, cold cuts, and potato and macaroni salad. "And that some of the items on the buffet line aren't on my plate?" She motioned to her plate and its two thin slices of low-fat cheese, one hard-boiled egg, three apple slices, two celery sticks and a carrot curl.

"Just three more weeks," she mumbled as she salted and peppered her hard-boiled egg. She bit and chewed quickly, then swallowed. "I can do this—despite traitorous friends who eat nourishing food in front of me." She threw a murderous glare in Kenny's direction.

Sam laughed. "Kramer was brain damaged at birth. He doesn't know any better, Lin."

Kenny leaned over Lindsey's plate and snarled, "Yeah? Well, that's better than coming out the way you did, with all your flaws exposed."

"You little worm." Sam started to rise from her seat.

"Stop it! Both of you!" Lindsey tugged Sam back down into her chair. "Where's all my friendly support? I'm the one who's food-deprived and supposed to be in an ugly mood, not you two."

"If you were surrounded by real friends, your friends wouldn't eat anything you couldn't have. Exhibit A: my plate—celery sticks, low-fat cheese, hard-boiled egg. Exhibit B: Kramer's plate—Bacchus revisited."

"You don't fool me for a second." Kenny shook his fork at Sam. "The only reason you didn't pile your plate is because you're going home for a binge session of buttered popcorn and buffalo wings. You're one of those TV bingers."

"Enough already." Lindsey looked around to see several people at the next table staring at them. "Can't you two try to pretend to co-exist for my sake?"

"Okay." Staring down at the table, Kenny nodded.

Sam looked at him for a full minute, then nodded. "All right. Just don't make me promise to be civil for too long."

"Then let's change the subject." Lindsey patted Kenny's hand. "How did your trip to Durham go?"

"Shhh. Not so loud. This is undercover stuff."

“Like in *Macgyver*?”

“More like *Get Smart*,” Sam sneered.

Lindsey slanted Sam a glare, squelching any future outbursts.

Kenny puffed out his chest. “I have to say that I’ve really taken to this investigative stuff. It took awhile and a lot of charm, but I finally got the medical librarian to show me the records on all of Duke’s residents in plastic surgery from nineteen seventy-eight to nineteen eighty-eight.” He threw down his napkin as if he’d tossed a dueling glove. “He wasn’t there. No mention. He’s not who he appears to be.”

“Maybe he didn’t go to Duke.” Sam leaned forward, her mood changing as Kenny talked.

Lindsey shook her head. “No, the diploma in his office is definitely from Duke. But it isn’t for completing his residency, it’s his graduation from Medical School.”

“It’s a fake.”

“No, Kenny, it isn’t a fake,” Lindsey said through clenched teeth. “He graduated from Duke. Where he did his internship and residency may not be at the same location.” She suddenly felt like a fool. “I never checked where he did his residency in plastic surgery.”

“Well, damn, Lin, why’d you think I wanted you here to begin with? To lose weight? Get real, this is a scam. I can’t expose it if you don’t uncover accurate information.” Kenny crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“There’s got to be a logical explanation.” Lindsey blinked as she heard the words and remembered Hal saying them just yesterday. Yesterday, when she’d bolted from the office before she grabbed him and pulled him into a major lip-lock. “Hal Randall isn’t a fake.”

“You’re right there, Honey. He’s definitely a man. Nothing fake about that.” Sam smiled. “I don’t know that I’d trust him to save my life on the operating table. Then again—”

Lindsey slowly turned the doorknob and peeked into the office. Drapes shut, lights off, clean, quiet and vacant.

“So is he in there?”

Lindsey spun around and pressed her forefinger to Hilda’s lips. “Shush. If we get caught, we may be out of the program. You do want to get that liposuction, don’t you?”

Hilda nodded and drew a circle with her size eleven foot. A water trail marked her path on the floor.

“Oh, for heavens sake, you didn’t dry off after water aerobics! If you leave a trail of water to our room, they’ll have an easy time figuring out we sneaked into Dr. Randall’s office.”

Lindsey whipped the turban-style towel from her wet hair, then grimaced as her hair fell in tight tangled curls. “I can’t believe the sacrifices I’m making for the cause.” Not that she’d told Hilda her cause was to prove Hal was legit.

Kneeling, she mopped up the puddle, then pushed Hilda into the room ahead of her and shut the door after them.

“So what’s it we’re looking for again?” Hilda cocked her head sideways. Long, sodden red hair dropped dribblets onto the floor.

Lindsey tossed her the damp towel. “Wrap your hair in this.” She bit her lip. She hadn’t told Hilda about Kenny and his obsession to expose FRAT. Better for her to think Lindsey was only trying to prove something on principles alone. “I told you, my friends don’t think Dr. Randall is a board-certified plastic surgeon. We’re here to prove them wrong.”

“He’s a doctor.” Hilda pointed to the diploma from Duke as she squinted to read it. “Boy, he sure is old.”

Lindsey stiffened. If Hal hadn’t had any detours during college or medical school, the diploma indicated he was around ten years older than she. “Fortyish isn’t old.”

“Well, it all depends on what you define as old. Bet he doesn’t remember his prom.”

Lindsey held up her palm. “Enough already. We can’t waste precious time debating his age and its merits. We’ll do that tonight over some ribs. Right now, we have to prove Doctor Hal Randall is a plastic surgeon.”

Hilda walked aimlessly around the room, picking up pillows, examining picture frames. “I’m sure Colombo could find a clue, but all I see is furniture.”

“You’re not looking in the right place.” Lindsey stalked to Hal’s mahogany desk and began to carefully thumb through a pile of papers. She frowned as she saw a number of documents from the Justice Department. What did that have to do with the National Science Endowment and a project to help people transfer fat? “This is more like it!” She picked up a file and opened it. The file was on her! She started to scan the several loose pages of handwritten notes.

“Look what I found! Truffles.” Hilda came closer with a gold box as she stuffed one of the dark, sinful concoctions into her mouth.

Lindsey folded the papers, stuffed them into the pocket of her cover-up, then grabbed the box out of Hilda’s hands. “He’ll know someone was here if a truffle’s missing.”

With mouth bulging, Hilda chomped the candy. “Ish a bg bx.”

She nodded. “True.” Her eyes narrowed. “And who’s to say we ate a couple of them? Frau Mengele? I mean his wife might have had a few.” Lindsey grinned and crossed the floor. Placing the box down on the end table where Hilda had found it, she ran a finger over one of the dark chocolate delicacies as the door creaked open.

Lindsey did the only sensible thing. She popped an entire truffle into her mouth.

CHAPTER SIX

“Well, well. You’re the last person I expected to find here, Ms. Michaels.”

Lindsey almost swallowed the chocolate whole.

Better act cool and controlled. She clasped her shaking hands behind her back. “I could say the same, Mr. Darrow. Why’d you come into Hal—I mean, Dr. Randall’s office when he isn’t here?”

She winced as his gaze scanned the room, briefly stopping on Hilda, whose eyes had widened to the size of hubcaps. Lindsey knew she was in trouble when he dismissed Hilda without a nod and focused his entire attention on her.

“I-if you don’t mind, I’ll go back to my room now.”

Fight as she might for an air of nonchalance, she couldn’t keep from gaping as Hilda charged from the room faster than she did for their nightly deliveries. As the door slammed shut, Lindsey mused that her roommate gave new meaning to not letting the door hit your backside.

As she turned back to Darrow, she frowned. “You haven’t answered my question, Mr. Darrow.”

He sat in the chair just inches from where she stood. “I was looking for Hal Randall, of course. Now, why don’t you explain why you’re here?”

Lindsey moved back a few feet. She’d swear the man was an energy vampire the way he seemed to drain hers. What now? She sucked in her gut and stood tall. “Do you usually enter someone’s office without knocking?”

“Ah, answering a question with a question.” He smiled, the left side of his upper lip curling slightly more than the right. “Perhaps you’ve had some psychoanalytic theory?”

“No. Just people-analytic bullshit. I’m a paralegal. I see people—guilty people—try to worm their way out of situations all the time.” Like her, right now. She folded her arms and moved her left foot forward into a “power stance”, just like Kenny had taught her. “You’re good, Mr. Darrow. You still haven’t answered my question.”

He eased back into the chair, stretched his legs out in front of him, and crossed his ankles. “Why knock and give the two dripping wet women entering Hal’s empty office an opportunity to escape or hide their agenda?”

Her shoulders sagged. Damn.

“So, why are you here, my fair-skinned, dark-haired beauty?”

His eyes narrowed again, and his gaze was so intense, Lindsey could almost feel the heat. She took another two steps back and bumped against the wall. “If you must know, Hilda and I discovered Dr. Randall was hiding a stash of chocolates.”

She waved her hand at the box. “We were desperate. Breaking and entering wasn’t on our minds. Just smooth, silky satisfaction.”

“Really?”

She swallowed hard. The words hadn’t come out the way she’d intended. “Chocolate satisfaction. You know, the kind induced by high caloric intake with just the right amount of caffeine.”

Darrow rose from the chair and glided across the floor until he’d cut off her exit. His palms came forward, resting against the wall on either side of her.

She didn’t know whether to be furious at his effrontery or frightened by his presumption. She was sure she couldn’t trust this smooth conman. Yeah, that’s what he reminded her of, a flim-flam artist.

“We both know you were snooping. And I don’t believe you’d want Dr. Randall to know that, would you, my little pigeon?”

Lindsey met his leering gaze with the same one she used in Kenny’s office—cold and in control. “No. I don’t.”

“Well, then, I’m assuming you are prepared to, say, help me play a little joke on Randall.”

She clenched her hands at her sides as his gaze slid over her. Suddenly, she knew what hell felt like. “That depends on the joke.”

“Randall once told me I could never attract a woman. He seems to think I’m too cool to bring out a passionate response.” Darrow reached with his forefinger and curled a damp tendril of Lindsey’s hair around it. “Of course, he didn’t know then, nor does he know now, how hot I can be.”

Got that right. He could be Satan’s right-hand devil. Lindsey blinked, afraid for a moment she’d said the words out loud. She wiped her forehead with the back of her terrycloth-covered arm. “I’m sure you misunderstood—”

He shook his head. “Not likely. He said it in plain English.”

He licked his lips and Lindsey shivered.

“I understand FRAT is having a party tomorrow evening for its clients.”

“It’s not really a party. It’s a way to prove we can have fun without eating fried food and exercise through dancing.”

“It’s a party. Here’s the deal. In return for my silence about today, you’re my date tomorrow night.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I invited my friend Kenny.”

Darrow pulled back from Lindsey. “Un-invite him. That is, unless you want to be ejected from the program tonight?”

She shook her head. “No! No more Thigh-Graspers, never again!”

He laughed, a chuckle from deep in his abdomen. “I’m glad we understand each other.” He removed his arms from either side of her. “Better go check your wardrobe. I’m only seen with those from Blackman’s Best Dressed List.”

She took the opportunity to break away, appalled at the sound of more laughter.

“Lindsey, are you okay?”

She glanced at Hilda, huddled on her bed. “We should have never gone into Dr. Randall’s office.”

Hilda’s face paled. “I-I’m not going to be thrown o-out of the p-program, am I?”

“I hope not.” Lindsey threw her body onto the other bed and sighed uneasily. “That man, Larry Darrow, is a piece of work. He controls part of the money for this venture, but I don’t know how much clout he has or how he’ll use it.”

Her roommate grabbed the brass headboard. “All we wanted to do was check Dr. Randall’s credentials.”

Lindsey patted her whitened knuckles.

“We just wanted to know if he could vacuum fat.”

“Yeah, right.” Lindsey flopped onto her bed. After plumping her pillows, she laid back against them. “Anyone can vacuum, Hilda. Unfortunately, fat and normal household dirt are two different things. It takes a lot more skill to suck a pot-load of cellulite than to Hoover a throw rug.”

“What about plain old fat?” Hilda sobbed.

“Fat’s fat, Honey.” Lindsey looked at Hilda and realized just how worked up the girl had gotten herself.

She studied Hilda. Today, she’d pulled her hair back into a severe bun. That alone had probably cut off most of her brain’s supply of blood. Her jeans looked like they’d been painted on and left too long to dry. With her gut bulging against the front button like an overfilled balloon waiting to burst, it wasn’t a pretty sight.

Somehow, someday, she was going to teach Hilda how to dress like a woman, not a Texas tart. “It might be a good idea to change into a looser jumper. After all, if we practice dancing for tomorrow night, those jeans might be a tad uncomfortable.”

Hilda nodded and the tears stopped. “You’re right, of course. Jerome says I look better in a dress.”

“Jerome?”

“My fiancé.”

Lindsey sat up. “Your fiancé’s named Jerome? Unlikely name for a demolition man.” Retrieving her brush from the bedside table, she began to pull it through the tangled mess of curls, wincing with each snarl. “What happened to Tom, Dick or Harry?” She immediately regretted her words. “I’m sorry, Hilda. That was uncalled for. If your boyfriend’s name is Jerome...”

“Actually, his name’s Jerry. Nothing else, just Jerry. But he thinks he’ll do better in the world as Jerome.”

Lindsey shook her head. “No way. That sounds like an old man from a gold mine somewhere in the middle of the Nevada desert. Either that or a waiter at an overpriced restaurant.”

Hilda shrugged. “It’s hard to make a name for yourself when you work for Horace Housemann.”

“Horace?”

Hilda nodded. “My father. He’s granite.” She shook her head. “Correction. He’s granite with harder bedrock underneath. No one likes him except my mother. And she only likes him when she’s gone to her sister’s.”

Lindsey looked down at the table and tried to look solemn. Another’s life wasn’t a point of ridicule. Hilda frequently uttered the most absurd comments. “I think Jerome needs to tell your dad he isn’t scared of him. And where Larry Darrow’s concerned, he isn’t a threat to you because he’ll never talk to your dad.”

Hilda nodded and smiled. “You’re right.” She frowned again. “But what about you? He seemed overly interested in your relationship with Dr. Randall.”

Lindsey shot her a quick glance. “What relationship? There’s no relationship between me and Dr. Randall except for that of patient and doctor.”

Hilda nodded, her eyes growing almost as wide as they had downstairs when Darrow had surprised them. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

Lindsey watched her roommate disappear into the bathroom. Once she heard the sound of water filling the tub, she pulled the folded papers from her pocket. With luck, Hal’s notes on her should answer all of Kenny’s questions about the project’s legitimacy.

Her eyes widened at the first words.

Lindsey Michaels is TROUBLE. With her around, the project is in danger. She’s too much what I need. Worse, I want her more than is healthy.

“My, lord, it’s a diary. Not my chart.” He’d know these pages were missing as soon as he went to make another entry. She had no business reading his innermost thoughts. She should take the papers back this instant and not read another word.

“Who am I kidding?”

Marie’s right. Lindsey’s me ten years ago. Before Cindy. Before Darrow. She still believes in people, love and happiness.

Who’d believe two people could have gone through so many similar experiences? Loss of family, loss of approval from an authority figure, loss of self-esteem due to the betrayal of someone we loved and trusted? I wish we’d met

before...just before. If it weren't for the project and the inability to act on my desires, I wouldn't let her leave me, ever!

He knew her. He felt the same things she did. She wrapped her arms around her waist and rocked. "Damn him!" How could he discover her inner core, what made her tick, from a few words?

Her gaze drifted back to the first line. *Marie's right*. "Double damn him," she whispered. "How could he tell his wife about his feelings toward me? No wonder she looks at me funny." Lindsey grabbed a tissue and mopped her face, then blew her nose.

She had to get these papers back, now, before he missed them.

"I've got the urge to run away from the institute for the remainder of the evening. I can't believe I let you talk me into having this dance for the clients." Hal fiddled with the knot on his tie.

"It was an excellent idea. Good for patient morale and good for keeping Larry Darrow from suspecting our real intent here." Marie stood in the middle of the room, pulling on the bottom of her short skirt. "Although, I don't care to wear dresses. I much prefer slacks and flat shoes."

Hal glanced at her feet. She was wearing three-inch heels. "Well, those aren't flats. Better be careful. Given the budget, we can't afford a worker's comp claim." He opened the door to his office and gestured for her to exit in front of him. "May the show begin."

"See you there." She tottered down the hall.

As Hal closed the door, a flash of bright color on the stairs caught his attention. Looking up, he spotted Lindsey. Her strapless, bright orange spandex top barely covered her full bosom. Bright orange polka dots covered her black, mid-calf skirt. With white face makeup, she could have passed as a clown.

His gaze drifted back to her chest. No, there wasn't anything funny about the female vision before him. "What's with the outfit? It doesn't look like your usual attire. I'd have suspected something a bit more subdued."

Lindsey walked down to the last step and held her arm out as if she were modeling. "I dress for the occasion. Do I look like Blackman's Best Dressed List?"

Hal cocked his head to one side and slowly studied her. "No offense meant, but more like Bozo's Best Dressed. I know you look like this for a reason, so what's with the show?"

He laughed when she stuck out her lower lip in a fake pout.

"Just trying to live up to expectations." Lindsey grinned.

He wasn't sure, but he'd swear her smile held more than a little mischief and relief. "And whose expectations might these be?"

“Never mind, Doc. It’s not anything for you to worry about.” With a wave, she headed for the exercise room.

She was up to something. Staring at the back of the outfit, Hal admitted to himself it would be impossible for her to hide food and smuggle it out for later. So, that meant something else was going on, but why would Lindsey turn herself into a caricature?

Standing next to the food table, Lindsey swirled the liquid in her glass cup and wrinkled her nose. It didn’t smell any better than it looked. She was willing to bet that, with two sensory exploratories down the drain, taste would be the next loser.

She took a quick swig. “Blah!” she sputtered. She set the glass on the edge of the table and ran for the water fountain.

Returning to the room, she saw Frau Mengele propped against the wall, rubbing the sole of one stockinged foot while her black shoe lay discarded on the floor. Get a load of those heels. The woman even tortured herself!

Chuckling, Lindsey approached her. “What’s the matter, was the air too thin up there?”

“I beg your pardon?” Marie let go of her foot, and attempted to straighten her position, weaving on the one heel.

“The heels.” Lindsey pointed at the floor and watched her wince.

The woman carefully extended her toe and slid it back into the empty shoe. Standing tall, she attempted a smile. “Just taking a rest.”

“Yeah. Been there, done that, and posed for the poster.” She wanted to laugh at Marie’s look of relief, but knew better. The woman held her life in her hands for the next two and a half weeks. “Say, what kind of punch is that?” She nodded towards the orange liquid with the foul taste.

“Carrot surprise. Carrot juice, liquid vitamins and seltzer water.”

Lindsey’s stomach churned. “I’m sure it’s very nutritious. A word of advice, though. Don’t tell anyone else what’s in it. The description’s worse than the real thing.”

“Good point. Where’s your date?” Marie moved tentatively away from the wall and walked in tiny baby steps.

“He’ll be here. He said he had to take a long-distance call first, then he’d be on his way.”

“Ah. The young man who was here last Saturday?”

Lindsey shook her head. If only it were someone as innocuous as Kenny. “No. My date’s Mr. Darrow.”

“Larry Darrow?” Marie toppled sideways. As she grabbed for the wall, her feet almost slipped out from under her.

Lindsey caught her arm and steadied her. “Whoa. I really think you need to trade in those stilts for a pair of lace-ups.”

“How do you know Dr. Darrow?”

Lindsey studied her ashen face. “We met in the hallway, remember?” she said, searching her brain for a plausible explanation of her date with a stranger. In a dark corner of her left lobe, she found the answer. “Then I met him again... outside. When I was jogging.” She hoped Marie bought her white lie. The last thing she needed was to give Hal’s wife a reason to toss her from the program. “He said he wanted to see us in action, so I invited him.”

“Of course.”

Lindsey watched perplexed, as Marie chewed on her bottom lip.

“I think you’re right about the shoes,” she finally said, hurrying off in the other direction. “I’ll go change them.”

“We’re in big trouble, Hal.”

“I know. I’ve already had fifteen complaints about the carrot punch.”

Marie clutched his arm and dragged him from the party. “Noooo. That’s not what I meant. I’m talking major, big-time serious trouble. The kind where I get fired and you get life in Leavenworth.”

“What are you ranting about? Neither of us has done anything illegal.” He jerked his arm free and straightened his suit sleeves. “What’s got you all tied in a twist?”

She pointed down the hall to his office door. “What I have to say may require you to lie down, Dr. Randall.”

Once inside, Hal relaxed against the edge of his desk. “Since I’m not in therapy at the moment, I’m not the problem. So what is?”

“Your worst client, the one who hasn’t lost weight, has joined forces with your worst enemy.”

Hal pulled into a sitting position on his desk. “Darrow is collaborating with Lindsey?”

Marie nodded. “They must be on to something. Otherwise, why would they suddenly be together? Unless...unless Ms. Michaels is a plant.”

“No.” Hal refused to believe it. He’d never believe that. There had to be a logical explanation. “What makes you think they’re sharing information?”

“He’s her date. Darrow’s joining Lindsey tonight as her escort.” Marie walked briskly across the room and grabbed a tissue from the box on the windowsill. “If Wanda finds out I’m embroiled in national intrigue, she’ll dump

me. I won't have a chance to explain." She blew her nose with a resounding honk. "You don't know what it's like. I love Wanda. I can't lose her. If I did, I'd never be able to find someone like her."

"There's always L.A."

As she dissolved into hysterics, Hal admitted that hadn't been one of his more brilliant comments. Damn it, how could he forget. Tough-as-nails Marie turned to mush at the mention of Wanda. The thought that her relationship might hit rough waters transformed this cool, logical woman into a quicksand of emotions.

Bolting from his desk, he rushed to her. Pulling her against him, he patted her reassuringly on the back. "Listen, Lindsey Michaels is too straight-forward to be plotting against us. Whatever caused her to accept Darrow's invitation for a date has to be because of something Darrow said or did."

He nodded, using his own words to massage his battered ego. Two women lost to the same man in one lifetime was one woman too many.

Marie blinked back the tears. "Do you think so?"

Despite the desire to curse loudly, Hal smiled and nodded. "The woman's a freaking accident waiting to happen. She talks too freely, walks too boldly, and lies too poorly. She'd never make it in the British Secret Service, much less Darrow's snake-crawling league."

"So why's she dating him?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The fine hairs on Lindsey's arms stood at alert and her heartbeat kicked into overdrive. Only Hal made her feel this way, damn his hide. She turned and scanned the room.

The moment her gaze caught his, she shivered and eased back a step. She didn't like the scowl. She liked it even less as he plowed through the crowd like an icebreaker, straight toward her.

"Uh, oh. Looks like Frau Doctor Randall's sicced the dogs on me," she muttered. Other than looking like a member of the Lost Lambada Dancers, she couldn't think of a thing she'd done to incite either Randalls' wrath.

Well, that wasn't exactly correct. But she'd bet her next pizza neither was aware of her break-in.

Hal glared down at her, his face inches from hers. "It's time we talked, Ms. Michaels."

"Again? I don't know why, Dr. Randall." She paused as his scent seeped into every pore and heat flooded her body. She was in worse shape than she'd thought. Every time the man got within three feet, she got a hot flash. Pulling herself erect, she reminded herself that he was married and off-limits. "I haven't gained an ounce. I've dutifully jogged every morning, done my aerobics in the afternoon, and, in general, followed the program like the good little soldier I am."

"Marie's informed me Larry Darrow's your date tonight."

Lindsey recoiled at what she saw in his expression. Hatred. If what Darrow had said was true, Hal had no reason to hate him. In fact, it should be just the opposite. "That's right, I have a date with Larry. We hit it off the first time we met." Considering I slammed into the man, that much is true.

Hal's face flushed and she noted his hands clenched at his sides. "I don't recall your first meeting being that convivial."

She exhaled, trying to blow cooler air up onto her flushed face. "Well, then, you missed it. Guess you were too busy being Mr. Big in front of your buddy."

"Don't ever call him my buddy."

She bit her lip. That's right, his diary mentioned Larry's betrayal. There was no way she could admit to knowing the truth without exposing her duplicitous behavior. She had no choice but to play the hand she'd been dealt. "What's your side of it? Why are you two so polarized?"

"Polarized? We're farther apart than that." His eyes flashed dark sparks again. "Let's just say Larry Darrow's not exactly Santa Claus."

Struggling to remain calm and retain a modicum of self-control, Lindsey exhaled slowly. “No kidding. Since the not-exactly-Santa isn’t here, want to dance?”

“I don’t like to dance.”

She cocked her head. “Why?”

“My mother forced me to take lessons thinking doctors are required to know how to dance.”

She hadn’t missed the flash of pain on his face or in his voice. “No problem, then. Just try for tonight to forget you’re a doctor. I’ll bet, if you focus on the company and not the mechanics, it’ll be fun. Want to give it a try?”

He shook his head. “We’ve already discussed this. We, or at least I, enjoy our time together too much. At the moment, keeping our distance is the only safe, prudent, and professional action open to me.”

“It’s a simple dance, Doc. Nothing more.” Right, a small voice whispered inside her. Shame filled her. She wanted to be held and was using any excuse to be in his arms, even if it was for one dance in front of a roomful of people. Of course, that was as far as she was willing to let it go. One dance with the man of her dreams, then she’d beat her desire for him into submission.

Lindsey reached and clasped Hal’s hand. How could merely having their hands touch while they danced arouse sensations she hadn’t known existed? How could she and Kenny have made love and not felt this connection? Grim realization set in that this was probably a once-in-a-lifetime attraction. One that wouldn’t disappear just because she willed it.

“This isn’t a good idea, Lindsey.”

“Maybe not.” She scanned the dance floor and spotted Marie, minus her high heels, with another patient. “Your wife’s dancing, so it should be safe enough.”

“Wife?”

She felt him tense, then relax.

“Oh, yeah, Marie.”

“Who’d you think I was talking about?”

“My wife, Marie, of course.” He slid his arm around her back and pulled her close.

As their bodies touched, she heard a low groan, and knew they’d both made the sound at the same time. They fit together perfectly. She closed her eyes and let her daydreams take over as they waltzed around the room.

Every nerve in her body screamed she’d been with this man before—many times, through many centuries, and always as lovers. No wonder she felt drawn to him. He was her other half, the missing part of her that she’d spent her life looking for.

She nuzzled the side of his neck. "See? Dancing isn't that bad. It all depends on who's your partner."

"I guess that would depend upon your definition of bad," he murmured in a husky voice against her ear.

"Sometimes, on very rare occasions, it can be a way for two souls to touch." She pulled back and gazed up at him. "And, sometimes, that's all God grants you." Feeling like a sappy fool, she immediately switched gears. "Now, after this dance, don't you know me better than from reading those interviews?"

He nodded.

"I feel like a princess in your arms."

"I thought you were a princess. Unfortunately, I'm no Prince Charming."

She blinked back the moisture threatening the corners of her eyes. She was in love with a married man. Head over heels in love, and there wasn't a blasted thing she could or would do about it. He had obligations, and his notes had made it very clear he wouldn't put those commitments in danger.

"Telling Ms. Michaels a bedtime story?"

She glanced over Hal's shoulder and spotted Larry Darrow in a tux, complete with black bow tie.

Hal stopped dancing but refused to release her. He cocked his head and glared at Darrow. "I warned you about talking to my clients."

"I believe Ms. Michaels is a consenting adult. She has the right to ask whomever she pleases to this event." Darrow's eyes gleamed wickedly.

Lindsey's mouth dropped when Hal stepped between her and Darrow as if to shield her. Like a dripping candle, she almost melted into a puddle on the floor when his hand slipped behind him, grasped her fingers and squeezed.

"Any interference from the outside jeopardizes this experiment."

Lindsey knew he was lying, not just for his and Marie's sake, but hers as well. She wished he weren't so noble. Then again, if he weren't, she wouldn't love him. How could she continue without her other half now that she'd found him?

Darrow's right eyebrow raised. "Seems to me you're concerned about more than an experiment. Step aside, Randall. I haven't had a chance to say hello to my date."

"Date?"

Lindsey mutely nodded. She wished she'd called Darrow's bluff. After reading Hal's notes, she knew that's all it was. Hal loathed the man. He wouldn't have allowed Darrow in his office unsupervised.

Shoulders sagging, Hal stepped away from between Lindsey and Darrow.

Lindsey wanted to hang onto his arm and confess everything, yet knew she couldn't.

As Larry Darrow's gaze raked over her, she fought the urge to plant a right cross on his perfectly straight nose. Then he laughed, not from his upper chest, but a real belly laugh, the kind that makes everyone else want to join in the fun. Except her, of course. She was the joke that had brought about this burst of hilarity.

"No one told me this was a costume ball." He looked down at his sleeve. "Of course, no one told me it was informal, either."

"I thought you had your finger on the pulse of society," Lindsey snapped back at him. The man really was insufferable. "As for my attire, I wanted to make sure I lived up to your expectations."

"What expectations were those?" Hal started to step forward, then stopped.

"Those of an attractive woman starved for the companionship of a successful man," Darrow said with a sneer.

"Baloney. You said I should look as if I belong on Blackman's List, and I think I accomplished it."

He glanced at her. "Ah, but which list?"

"Why, the one I was sure would please you."

"Naturally. And you exceeded my wildest expectations." He stepped forward and took her hand. "Let's not keep Dr. Randall, my dear. He has so many other clients with whom to circulate. Right, Randall?"

Looking over her shoulder, Lindsey caught Hal's smoldering gaze. She didn't know whether to rip off her clothes or run for her life. She never wanted to see him looking at her like that again—at least not in public.

Sitting on his office sofa, Hal repeatedly punched a pillow, then pitched it across the room. Damn! How did he do it? How in the hell had Darrow nabbed the first woman who'd made his blood boil in years?

He'd only arrived, yet Hal knew he was in jeopardy of losing his experiment, his reputation, and his woman. He had to do something, but what?

"Damn poacher!" Getting to his feet, he started to pace. With each pass in front of the bookcase, he glanced at the thirteen-inch television screen.

He'd been watching it for the past forty-five minutes, as most prudent West Texans did when tornadoes were popping up in the area.

Shortly after arriving in Dickens, he'd discovered to his horror and delight that, unlike the East, tornadoes were easily sighted out here. The land was flat with few trees to block the view. Of course, that caused storms to develop quickly and the wind to accelerate faster. Between the flat ground and the clash of hot and cold air from a vacillating jet stream, the area had gotten its name "tornado alley" the old-fashioned way. It had earned it.

Today, the weather reflected his mood.

He wanted to confront Lindsey and find out exactly what she knew about him and FRAT. He doubted she knew very much. He also doubted she had “a thing” for Darrow.

Okay, she’d danced almost every dance with Darrow last night, but she’d looked sad and, on occasion, angry while doing so. More than once Hal had thought her glances looked as if she were begging him for rescue—a plea she’d communicated with each desperate look she sent his way. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do. Darrow had already smelled blood.

The mystery of Darrow’s relationship with Lindsey was still a problem, and he had to know if she’d conspired with him. He didn’t want to believe it was possible, but given Darrow’s track record, it was conceivable.

A loud knock on his door snapped him back to the present. He inhaled, then frowned. “Vanilla?” he muttered before calling out, “Come in.”

He stared as Lindsey entered, wearing a hot pink leotard and tights. *Okay, doctor, where’s your logical, scientific mind?*

She stepped into the room and closed the door. “I needed to see you.”

He stiffened. He needed her, too, but right now the issues were still confused. “It’s all right, Ms. Michaels. You’re still in the program.” He crossed the room to the meager protection his large desk afforded.

“What are you talking about?” She eased forward.

“Isn’t that why you needed to see me? To make sure your romantic interlude with Larry Darrow hasn’t cost you your precious liposuction?”

Her gaze widened. “I never—”

“You never meant to consort with my enemy?”

“Your enemy? Consort? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Of course, I know there’s little privacy around here. Still, a few hot kisses in the dark, a feel here, a grope there—”

She lunged across the desk, arms outstretched, fingers splayed as she tried to throttle him. Hal pushed his chair back far enough for safety, then grabbed her arms and jerked her into his lap.

“How dare you, Dr. Randall!”

“What happened to Hal?”

“I felt it was better than calling you an SOB. I’ll have you know that I have a very high moral character.”

He laughed. “Sure you do. That’s why you came to the party dressed as Polly Pureheart.”

“Yes, well, there was a reason for my outfit.”

“Right! And every man knew exactly what it was. I’m surprised you stopped at Darrow.”

She slammed the palm of her hand against Hal's chest. Gasping for air, his grip weakened and she escaped.

"You stuck up, scientific, sanctimonious pig! Don't tell me you aren't like any other man. For your information, I don't like Larry Darrow. I went out with him because...because I had a reason that I can't explain. But one thing's for sure, I may see him again, now that I know how much it irritates you."

Hal bolted from his chair.

Lindsey took off for the door.

In three steps, he had his arm around her waist and reeled her in. As she tried to pry herself free, he growled, "You crazy woman. Don't you realize the man's poison? He wants to destroy me. It's a repeat of ten years ago."

She went limp, and he turned her toward him. Dismay and shock were clearly written on her face.

"Ten years ago? When you told him he couldn't attract a woman?"

Stunned at his own words as well as her response, Hal stared into her puzzled eyes. In the recesses of his brain, he heard the television.

"...residents of Dickens are advised to take cover. A tornado's been spotted heading directly toward the town."

Tumbleweed crashed against the window, splintering. Hal dropped Lindsey's hands and ran to the window. A swirling black funnel cloud had replaced the horizon's yellowish-green tinge.

"The closet!" He pointed at Lindsey, who was stunned and immobile. "It's the safest place, Lindsey. The structure's reinforced. Move it, now!" He shoved her into the closet, then followed, shutting the door behind him.

"Hal, I can't breathe," she mumbled against the coats.

He pushed the jackets to one side. Once they had some space, he turned her so they faced each other, then he drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her.

The smell of vanilla engulfed him.

He almost threw open the door and leaped out. No tornado could be as dangerous as his present position. While he might not be able to see her face in the dark, he could feel her curves, smell her fragrance, and hear the deep rasp of hunger in her voice.

"What happened to Dr. Randall?"

"He disappeared along with the SOB."

Hal groaned as her hands encircled his waist, pressed her abdomen against his groin, and nuzzled his neck. "Honey, you do that again, and I'll show you just how unnecessary horizontal is."

Lindsey responded by melting all over him.

His last shred of resistance collapsed faster than a sand castle during high tide. He lowered his head as his thumb lifted her chin. Slowly, with great care and savoring every second, he covered her mouth with his.

He didn't immediately take possession of her. Instead, he teased her with small love bites. When she moaned, his tongue slipped inside her mouth, learning her taste and feel.

His body quivered. In response, hers shook. Suddenly, he realized their trembling wasn't just desire, but the enormous wind shaking the building. He knew it was insane, yet refused to lift his head. If the tornado carried them away, at least it was during the most intensely passionate moment of his life.

Lindsey clung to his neck and held on for dear life. She dueled with his tongue, even playfully bit his lower lip.

Her muscles had melted. Her body had liquefied, pouring itself into and over what she knew was a magnificent body, one she'd like to see nude. Now. This minute.

Slowly, she realized the loud roar from outside had subsided while the roar in her world grew. It would never quiet. Not after Hal.

She sagged as he stepped back and opened the closet door. Her eyes flew open. Light flooded the tossed room. Broken glass from the windows littered the floor.

He drew her from the closet.

Her hand flew to her lips. "Oh my God! I've compromised a married man!"

His forehead wrinkled in confusion. "You've done what?"

"I've committed adultery. I'm a scarlet woman. Just call me Hester." When he grinned, she wanted to knock him into next year.

"For God's sake, we only kissed. We didn't have sex."

"Maybe you didn't, but I sure did. In my mind. And that's just as sinful." She raced to the opposite side of the room. As he moved toward her, she threw out her hand. "Don't come closer. I need to think. And when you're close, thinking is the last thing I can manage."

"Lindsey, you're overreacting."

"Right. Whatever. Let's see, it was a reaction to the storm. It means nothing. It was a reaction to danger. A simple cry for human contact. It was—"

He strode across the room and gave her a sharp shake. "For crying out loud, woman. Stop it!"

She glared. "You don't seem to be the least bit disturbed by this."

"Why should I be?"

She knocked the side of her head, trying to clear her ears. "I never took you as being shallow or taking a commitment lightly." She crossed her arms and tapped her foot on the floor. "You're married."

"I'm what?" His face suddenly went white. "Oh, that."

"Oh, *that*?" She threw her hands up in horror. "That's all you have to say? Where's your moral compass?"

He combed his fingers through his hair and cleared his throat. "No, you don't understand. Marie and I...our relationship isn't like that."

"Isn't like what?"

"That."

"You're married, right?"

He wrung his hands together, then unfastened one cuff, then the other, rolling them up one at a time. "Uh, yeah, we're married and everything, but not really. I married her to save her reputation."

Lindsey grabbed the back of a chair. "What do you mean?"

"Lindsey." He walked toward her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Marie's pregnant."

"Pregnant." Her knees crumbled. Hal caught her elbow. Wrestling free of his hand, she stalked to the broken window. "You married her because you knocked her up?"

He momentarily looked blank, then vigorously shook his head. "No! And no, again! We've never had sex. Nor will we. It's someone else's baby."

She collapsed onto a chair. "I'm having a nervous breakdown. Do you have any Valium?"

He knelt in front of her. "Lindsey, Marie and I don't live together. She has her own home on Sagebrush Road, and I have mine down a dirt road just west of here." He placed his hand across his heart. "I did it for Marie, but I've never loved her as more than a friend."

She was in shock. "You're still married." She felt a tear course down her right cheek. Jumping from the chair, she made her way to the door. "I need some space." She turned the knob.

"Lindsey?"

She turned back and saw the passion still shining in his eyes.

"What just happened wasn't a reaction to the storm," he said, his tone unyielding. "It was the result of our mutual attraction, and I don't think we're through analyzing it."

"You can analyze some things too much, Hal. One thing you can't put in a test tube or chart is love. I'm not even sure if that's the emotion we're talking about. Lust is more likely."

Lindsey fled from the office.

From down the hall, she heard Marie calling, "All clear. The tornado didn't do any real damage."

No real damage? Just to her life and heart, she thought, running for the stairs.

"Where were you during the twister?" Marie stood in the threshold of Hal's office. "I thought you'd be supervising everyone's safety, but you were nowhere to be found."

He lifted his head off his desk. She'd been angry at being married. He couldn't wait to see her reaction when she found out she was pregnant. God help him when Wanda heard of this latest development.

He stood and brushed a stray hair out of his eyes. "Marie, how do you feel about children?" He scowled at the unnatural squeak in his voice.

After carefully closing the door, she advanced. "Either you've flipped or I'm in a whole lot of trouble. Tell me you've flipped." She clasped her hands together. "I can help you if you've flipped. Tell me you haven't been spreading more lies about our fake marriage."

"How can I put this?" He paused. He held his hands six inches from his stomach, then moved them in and patted his abdomen.

She stared. "How could you?"

He frowned at her disintegrating composure. "I didn't want to tell Lindsey we'd lied about our marriage. I didn't want to explain that we'd said we were married only to make me unavailable."

"You lied. You said. Not we."

He waved off her comment. "So I told another small fib," he said, holding his thumb and index finger so closely together a breath couldn't make it through the space. "A positively tiny fabrication. An insignificant stretching of the truth."

"Out with it." She jabbed his chest. "What did you tell her?"

Ignoring her wild-eyed stare, Hal smiled. "We don't live together, and the only reason we're married is because you're pregnant with another man's child."

She let loose a wail of fury and launched herself at him.

Hal took a step back, turned to the side, wrapped one arm around her waist and clamped his free hand over her mouth. "I had no choice. We were in the closet, and things...well, they kinda got out of hand. Then guilt overwhelmed her because of my being your husband. So, you see, don't you, that I didn't have a choice?"

She bit his hand.

"I'm bleeding! Do you have any idea how dangerous a human bite is?"

"If you think that's dangerous, wait 'til Wanda hears about this development," she sobbed. "I now know how it feels to be on Death Row. There's

the feeling of utter hopelessness. The knowing someone is going to kill you—deliberately—at point-blank range.”

“No one’s going to find out. Lindsey’ll keep quiet.”

“Sure she will,” Marie sniffed.

Hal handed her his linen handkerchief. “I’m telling you, she’s a good egg. She’d never do anything to embarrass either of us. And letting this story out will—”

“Promise to put fresh flowers on my grave, okay?”

As she burst into a fresh round of crying, Hal walked over to the broken window. “We’d better get maintenance to fix this.”

“There’s no need.” Marie shook her head. “Why bother? We’re both going to be dead when Wanda finds out.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Stop whining, Kenny. It’s not an attractive feature in a man.” Lindsey glanced around her. The last thing she wanted was someone eavesdropping on her conversation. Cringing at his continued loud protests, she set the phone on the table and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Or in a woman for that matter,” she muttered, retrieving the receiver. “Stop right there. I told you why I went to the dance with Larry Darrow. He caught me rifling papers in Dr. Randall’s office.”

“Why don’t you ever listen? I told you not to take any chances, Lin. I should have handled it last weekend. I’m a man. I’m good at this undercover stuff.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you and Underdog.”

“You sound like Sam. I thought you respected me.”

She only hesitated a second before answering. “Kenny, you’re a consummate professional all the way to your fine leather shoes. It’s just that you’re a professional lawyer, not a P.I.”

“Yeah, well, the dance was the perfect chance to snoop without getting caught. And what happened? You, the amateur, blew my opportunity.”

Lindsey held her hand over her mouth, hoping to muffle her hysterical laughter. When she’d started on this mission, her goal had been to help Kenny expose a fraud. Now, she knew in her bones the entire operation was legit. Worse, she was nuts over Kenny’s chief suspect, a married doctor, whose wife was pregnant with someone else’s child, so he didn’t consider himself really married, therefore, it was okay if he and Lindsey pitched a little whoopee in the coat closet.

“Lin, are you there?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Who’s this fellow Darrow, anyway?”

She closed her eyes. Whenever Kenny hit that particular high, nasal intonation, it felt like the Rockettes tap-dancing across her eyeballs. “He says he’s from the National Science Endowment. Why don’t you check him out? Could be he’s Spock’s evil twin beamed down to save the world from skinny people.”

“Have you been drinking?”

She sighed at his abrupt, icy voice. “Sorry. I’ve had one very strange day. A tornado hit us.” She wished that were the only thing to hit her.

“Are you okay?”

She grimaced at his softened tone. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.” When hell freezes over. “Get Sam and have her do the research. She works part-time, she’ll have time to spare.”

“You expect me to work with that witch?”

“Sam’s okay. She’s very protective of her friends—a true Taurus—and is afraid you’ll hurt me.”

“Maybe I’ll ask her, but only as a last resort.”

“Whatever. I’ll call you when we have our best chance of uncovering anything.”

“You better.”

“Bye.” Lindsey dropped the receiver in the cradle. “Good ole Kenny, he’ll never change,” she muttered in disgust.

Turning, she headed for her room. She knew her gut instincts about Hal were on target. Kenny was out for only one thing—Kenny. She refused to help him destroy a good, honorable man; witness Hal rescuing poor pregnant Marie. The man wasn’t a fraud. He was a hero, and a great kisser.

“Where’ve you been? Everyone was worried about you.”

Lindsey jumped at Hilda’s voice. Shutting the door, she glanced at her bed. Hilda was in her usual position, propped on her chair pillow, wearing a pair of black stretch sweats.

“Hal saved me from the tornado.”

“Oh, my.” Hilda stuck her finger in her mouth, biting her nail. “You’ve been pinged!”

“Pinged?” Lindsey stared at her roommate. “What’s that?”

Hilda made a sweeping motion in the air and laughed. “You know, like when Tinker Bell waves her magic wand, and goes ping! I got pinged last night.”

Leave it to Hilda to come up with something innocent. The woman was as sweet as she was ignorant. She viewed everything like a child in terms of The Wonderful World of Disney. “If I were you, I wouldn’t use that expression. People might misunderstand.”

She nodded solemnly.

“So what’s this about your getting pinged last night?”

“You told me not to say that.”

Lindsey grinned at her obvious frustration. In a struggle not to laugh, she bit the inside of her cheek. “I meant with other people, not me. So what happened last night?”

“Jerome, uh, Jerry, was here.”

Lindsey nodded as she collapsed on her bed. “He was your date for the dance. Speaking of which, what happened to you? I never saw you.”

Hilda giggled. “That’s the ping part. Right after he kissed me, Jerry took me out for a walk. With Dr. Randall’s permission, of course. First we went to the back of the property, then we slipped behind the dumpster. That’s when he grabbed me by both shoulders and stared into my eyes.” She sighed. “And said the most wonderful thing.”

“I love you?”

“No, he said, ‘Hilda, Honey, I smuggled in homemade enchiladas’.”

“Enchiladas, and you didn’t tell me!”

“Couldn’t. They were all gone by the end of the dance. He’d hidden them in a covered pan, complete with lots of sour cream.” Hilda ran her tongue across her lips.

Lindsey studied her, enjoying the woman’s complete happiness. “I don’t get it. I thought Jerry was gung-ho on you losing fat.”

She crossed her heart with her hand. “That’s just it, Lin, don’t you see? I thought it was important to him. It isn’t, and the enchiladas, which he made, were his way of telling me. Isn’t that romantic?”

“Whatever you say. I wonder if Hal will ever bring me enchiladas.”

“I’m sure he wants to, Lindsey, but what about Marie? You’ll be breaking up a home.”

“I’m about to tell you a secret, but you have to promise not to tell anyone. It’s the reason I don’t feel guilty about my feelings for Hal. At least, not as guilty. Not that it makes a difference. He’s still married. Promise?”

Nodding, Hilda leaned forward. “Marie’s frigid? I knew it. She looks like she would be.”

Lindsey shook her head. “No. She’s pregnant.”

“She’s going to have a baby?” Hilda’s face lit up. “Oh, babies are such wonderful things. I’m going to have at least a dozen.”

“That’ll teach Jerry to bring you enchiladas.” Lindsey crossed her legs on the bed.

“We’ll have to give her a shower.”

Lindsey put her fingers to her lips. “No, Hilda. It’s a secret, remember? Marie doesn’t want anyone to know.”

Hilda smiled. “You can count on me, Lin. I promise I won’t do anything to embarrass her. Your secret’s safe with me.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

“I understand you don’t want me to antagonize Darrow. But I’ve had about all of him my stomach will allow, Jeff.” Hal rubbed his face with the palm of his hand. “Now I find out the Endowment Board has gotten clearance for him to see all my records on the experiment, and all you can say is play along?”

“Hal, you know we’ve planted phony records as a backup. There was always a chance someone might get wise. Just make sure that the real records are locked in the safe, and that includes anything on Defense Department and White House stationery.”

Hal's eyes widened. Damn! How could he have been so stupid? With quick, economical movements, he leafed through his in-box, removing all incriminating correspondence—three letters and two reports. Good thing Darrow hasn't tried to spy so far. "I understand, but I don't like it."

"Relax. What can go wrong? Besides, you only have seventeen days to go."

"Right, just seventeen days to go," Hal muttered, replacing the receiver. "Why should I worry? There's nothing to worry about. Nah, of course not. Why, look at how smoothly everything has gone so far. In just two weeks, I've gotten engaged, married, become an expectant father, and an ardent lover to Lindsey Michaels."

He propped his elbows on his desk and buried his face in his hands. With Lindsey around, who knew how much trouble was headed his way? Now, on top of everything else, he had to be Mr. Nice Guy to Larry Darrow, suffer watching the SOB leaf through his files and pour over his memos.

The door flew open, smashing against the wall, as Marie charged into the room. "Darrow's out front with a smirk on his face. Says he's been cleared to review our study."

"Afraid so." Hal played with his letter opener. Perfect for between the shoulder blades. He wondered if he could make a case for justifiable homicide. Nah, he'd have to stab him from the front, not the back. "I just got off the phone with Jeff. He called with the good news. He says not to worry. We're to show Darrow the planted fake records."

He stood and picked up the stack of confidential correspondence. "Stall him for five minutes, then let him in." Turning, he walked to the safe.

"Right." Marie raced for the door, then hesitated before opening it. "I'm not sure a pregnant woman should be mixed up in this. You know, the stress and all."

"Ms. Michaels, so nice to see you again."

Lindsey froze two stairs from the bottom. She looked down as Darrow stepped out of the shadows next to the front door. The dark suited him. Especially considering he was an energy vampire. "Hello, Mr. Darrow. What brings you back to FRAT?"

"You, of course."

She stared at his grinning mouth, searching for fangs. "Little ol' me? Why I'm flattered beyond words," she said, fanning herself.

He laughed. "I do enjoy your sense of humor, Lindsey. Unfortunately, it's really my job that brings me here today, not you."

"You never told me what you did, Larry. Just that you're on the Board for the National Science Endowment."

“I’m on the Board because I’m a well-known scientist. I study things and people.” His eyes fell to her chest.

“Well, you better study these real fast, Mr. Darrow. Because they’re going to be vacuuming history in two weeks.”

His eyes shot to hers.

Lindsey faked a grin. She suspected few women called him on ogling their breasts. She had no such qualms. Other than being an annoyance, he meant nothing to her.

“What do you mean?”

She grabbed the undersides of her bust and lifted. “These babies are going to be sucked down to a thirty-four B. No more wire supports for me. Is that clear, or do you need more time to examine them?”

“I’m a scientist, Ms. Michaels, not a voyeur.”

“Of course you are. Rest assured, I don’t jump to snap judgments.”

Darrow threw the preliminary study report onto Hal’s desk. “It looks legit, but I’ve never read anything about Ches-Wrap in any of the literature. How do you explain that, Randall?”

“The process is a carefully guarded secret. It’s the key to our success, Dr. Darrow. I only finished the first experimental phase last spring, and Marie was my first human guinea pig.”

Marie jerked to attention at his words. “Uh, that’s right.”

Hal draped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “I know it’s hard to believe, but she was once over three hundred pounds.”

She began to cough.

“You?” Darrow stared at the woman for a brief instant, then turned his hard gaze back to Hal. “Amazing, Randall. Truly amazing. Although, if I’d undertaken Ms. Poppokowsky’s transformation, I wouldn’t have gotten quite so carried away. A little fat is considered attractive.”

“Some people think I’m perfect. Right, Hal?”

He grunted as she jabbed him in the ribs with her bony elbow. “Right.”

“I meant no disrespect.” Darrow returned his attention to Hal. “Now I’d like to see a client record. I want to discover the criteria behind your choice of patients.”

Releasing Marie, Hal ambled over to the filing cabinet. He made a show of unlocking it. “Certainly. Let me pull one.”

“Ms. Michaels.”

“Excuse me?” Hal asked, too stunned at Darrow’s words to fake nonchalance.

“I said I’d like to see Ms. Michaels’ chart.”

“No.” He slammed the cabinet shut and locked it.

“Hal, there’s no harm.” Marie surged forward, grabbing his arm and reaching for the key. “Everything is in order.” She valiantly tried for the key, but he held it just out of her reach. “You’re supposed to be cooperative!” she shouted while throwing him a killer glare.

“Dr. Darrow dated Lindsey Michaels.” Hal embedded the key in his palm. “No one with personal knowledge of a patient should be privy to scientific research on that individual. At least, that’s what I was told in medical school. What about you, Darrow?” He smiled as his nemesis dipped his head.

“Touché, Dr. Randall. Just checking to see if your ethics were still intact.” He stood and saluted. “Enough for now. I’ll be back later.”

The moment the door opened and Darrow crossed the threshold, Hal breathed a sigh of relief.

Pausing, Darrow glanced back at Hal. “Dr. Randall, you don’t, by chance, have intimate knowledge of Ms. Michaels, do you?”

“Of course not.”

Darrow blinked, then looked away. “Just checking,” he said with a snicker as he left, closing the door after him.

“Do you think he knows something?”

“There’s nothing to know.” He kissed Marie’s nose. “Lindsey and I have never had sex.”

She took his hand in hers. “For the sake of the experiment—and me—keep it that way.”

As he entered the hotel room, Larry spotted his phone’s blinking message light. Who would leave him a message? Not Randall, that’s for sure. He’d be happy if Darrow never surfaced at FRAT again.

Larry smiled. A child could see Randall was hiding something. Given Randall’s reaction to the jab about Lindsey Michaels, he figured the secret involved her rather than information on the clinical trials.

He rubbed his hands together. “God, I love giving it to Randall. Too bad he’s so easily transparent.” He sighed. “I do appreciate a greater challenge.”

As he passed the dresser mirror, Larry smiled at his reflection. He had the ammunition to ruin Randall one way or the other. Although he’d prefer revealing Randall’s experiment as a failure, he’d take destroying Randall anyway he could. If that meant hurting the voluptuous Lindsey Michaels, then so be it.

Picking up the phone, he dialed his voice mail.

“Mr. Darrow, my name is Kenneth Kramer. I’m an Assistant D.A. here in Lubbock, and I need to speak with you as soon as possible. You can reach me this evening by phone.”

Larry quickly jotted down the phone number Kramer recited, then hung up the phone and stared at the number he’d scratched on the pad. Why would the local district attorney want to speak to him? With a shrug, he dialed Kramer’s number. A few minutes into their conversation, he began to smile. “So you think Hal Randall is a fake?”

“I believe so, but I can’t prove it yet. I discovered your position with the NSE and thought you might be able to help us out.”

“Us?” Larry scratched the back of his neck.

“My girlfriend’s undercover out there. She’s getting the goods on the doctor.”

“Who’s your girlfriend?” Larry drew a scaffold with his pencil while he talked, then a rope and noose hanging from it.

“Lin—Lindsey Michaels. I believe you escorted her to the dance at FRAT.”

He smiled. “Yes, I did. Nice girl.”

“Will you help us?”

“I’d be happy to. Can you meet me in the hotel lobby in, say—” He glanced at his watch, “—thirty minutes? We’ll have a drink and discuss plans.”

“See you then.”

He carefully set the receiver in its cradle. “I think you’re right, Mr. Kramer. Your girlfriend is undercover. But I’m not sure you’ll like the covers she’s under. I don’t doubt for a minute she has the goods on the good doctor. Nor would I mind her having the goods on me. So to speak.”

He opened his briefcase. After removing a small tape recorder, Larry sat down on the edge of the bed and pushed “Record.”

“I’ve received new evidence of Dr. Randall’s improprieties at six-thirty P.M. this day, April twentieth. It appears I’ll have all the information I need to expose him.” Flicking the off switch, he chuckled. “And I do mean, expose.”

Just after five in the evening, Hal returned to his office. Darrow’s leering suggestions had shaken him. At first, he’d worried his feelings for Lindsey were so transparent that even a self-absorbed jerk like Darrow could spot them. Then the horrifying truth hit. He’d left his notes, diary as it were, of his feelings toward Lindsey in her file.

Damn! Darrow had spent part of the day reading patient files.

He never should have written down his thoughts. Yes, it was a good technique for purging unwanted emotions or discovering the truth behind feelings.

So what had happened? He could now admit he'd fallen for Lindsey because of her mind and personality. Big deal. Unfortunately, honesty wouldn't change the situation. She was a client and he was the project director. That was, until Darrow blew him out of the water.

He rounded his desk and spotted two stacks of files, one undisturbed, the other obviously examined. He found Lindsey's file three down from the top in the unread stack and exhaled harshly. "Thank God." He tugged her folder from the pile, then opened it. His jaw dropped. "What the hell!" Dots of sweat beaded on his forehead. With jerky movements, he flipped through the pages, one at a time. "I'm dead."

Hal sank into his chair. The file slipped from his limp fingers and fell to the floor. Closing his eyes, he leaned against the back of the chair. He needed to think, calmly, rationally, not emotionally. That was the only way he could hope to beat Darrow.

After a few minutes of deep, cleansing breaths, he felt steadier, not yet on terra firma, but out of the waist-deep quicksand of fear that had paralyzed him moments before. Logic, that's what he needed. Logic.

Yes, Darrow had smelled blood, but he hadn't found the corpse. Not yet, at any rate, of that Hal was certain. If he had, the bastard would have notified the Endowment Committee and brought him up on charges of professional impropriety.

No, his first move would be to notify the different TV network news departments of a government scandal, as an unnamed source, of course. Which, in turn, would mean Jeff, along with several DOD's, would have been on the phone to him and the mud-raking reporters would be camped outside the fenced grounds.

If he didn't want to become front-page news, he'd better solve this problem PDQ. He needed to think. Hal leaned forward. Resting his elbows on the desk, he steepled his hands and absently tapped his lips with his forefingers. Jeez, what a hell of a time to get baby-boomer's Alzheimer's.

"Of course! Marie! She purged the files."

Relieved, Hal settled back into his chair. He locked his fingers behind his head, then placed his feet on the edge of the desk and crossed his legs at the ankles. Logic, that's all it had taken. Calm, well-reasoned logic.

The office doorknob slowly turned. His eyes narrowed. Someone was sneaking into his office! Hal bolted to his feet. Keeping his gaze on the door as it inched open, he squeezed into the space between his filing cabinet and the wall.

A grim smile spread across his face. At last, he'd have Darrow by the short hairs.

A small, flip-flop-shod foot snaked its way through the slightly open door. Hal's eyes widened. Lindsey?

Moments later, her face peeked through the opening and she scanned the room. Her whispered “Empty” reverberated in his head. He watched in growing disbelief as she silently closed the door, then raced to his desk. After a quick rifle through his in-box, she searched the two stacks of files.

“Damn it, where is it? It was here earlier.” As she turned toward the file cabinet, she stepped on the fallen folder. “Ah, so that’s where you are,” she muttered, picking it up.

Dumbstruck, Hal watched her replace the missing papers, then put the folder back in its correct location before walking to the door.

He eased from his hiding place. As her hand touched the doorknob, he asked, “Are you sure you’ve seen everything you wanted to see?”

She spun around so fast, she fell back against the door. “Y-you’re s-supposed to be g-gone.”

“Surprise.” Hal felt no victory at her stunned, open-mouth gasp. “If not, tell me what more you need, and I’ll get it for you.” He jerked her file free of the stack, then strode over to her.

Lindsey slid down the door, landing on the floor with a thump. “Why couldn’t you be home like you’re suppose to be?”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call the cops.”

“I just wanted to return some papers.”

He removed the loose papers. “These?” Ignoring her contrite expression and nod, he continued to glower. He reached down, grabbed her hand, and jerked her to her feet. “Talk now or at the police station, it’s your choice.”

“I found them when I—when we—when Hilda and I...well it’s...”

He clasped her elbow and guided her to a chair. “Sit, then talk.” As she collapsed into one of the chairs, he sat on the coffee table facing her.

“I didn’t want to snoop. Honest.” Her guilty gaze met his. “I only wanted to prove you were who you said you were and not a fraud like Kenny said.”

He continued to stare. “Explain everything, from the beginning.”

“Are you going to have me arrested?”

Hal knew he wouldn’t. To do that would draw unnecessary attention to the project. Besides, this was Lindsey. Label him a sentimental fool, but he still wanted to believe she had a logical explanation. He was already weakening. “It depends on what you say.” When she lifted her face, he sighed. “Why did you take my notes, Lindsey?”

“M-my f-former boyfriend Kenny thinks you’re a fake.” He watched her struggle for composure. As she calmed, her posture straightened. The only elements missing were the blindfold and cigarette. “Kenny wants to prove you’re a fraud, make a big case out of this. He’s a district attorney and wants to be attorney general and, someday, a senator. A Texas big-wheel.” She shrugged. “I hoped he

was wrong. On the off chance he was right, I agreed to help him. Then everything went wrong.”

“Everything went wrong?” He bit back a smile at her hissed “yes”. “How did it go wrong?”

“I fell for you, a married man. And then, when I read those,” she waved at the papers in his hand, “I realized you knew the real me, and still liked me a lot, more than was safe for either of us. I’ve told Kenny you aren’t a fraud, that this...” She waved her hand around the room. “...is for real. But he doesn’t believe me.”

Hal’s shoulders slumped. He felt lower than pond scum, yet he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Why did you go to the dance with Darrow?” He enjoyed her snort of disgust.

“The jerk caught Hilda and me in your office. I barely had time to hide the papers and pop a truffle in my mouth before he was on us.”

“He blackmailed you?”

At her miserable nod, he reached out to touch her, then stopped at her flinch. He watched her square her shoulders and regroup her shattered dignity.

“Are you going to call the police?”

“No, I’m not. I’m sorry, Lindsey, more sorry than you’ll ever know.”

“Sorry about what?”

“Misjudging you. Reacting in a knee-jerk fashion. Although I don’t deserve it, thank you for believing in me. It’s been a long time since anyone’s come to my defense.” He smiled weakly.

“Who’s Cindy? And how did she and Darrow betray you?” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry.”

He smiled. “Lindsey, you’re unique. As for Cindy and Darrow, I came home from work to find Larry had not only screwed my career, but was also doing my wife in our bed. Needless to say, Cindy is my ex-wife.”

She jumped to her feet. “I knew it was something horrible. That Larry Darrow is so smooth, he’s smarmy.” She rushed to his side. “You poor, poor man. How that must have shattered you.”

He couldn’t figure out whether he wanted to laugh or cry or do both as she pressed his head to her abdomen. Without conscious thought, his arms slid around her waist and cupped her derriere as he planted small kisses across her exposed stomach.

Her moan and weakening legs snapped him to attention. Pulling free, he stood and forced a smile. “You’d better leave. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

CHAPTER NINE

Marie threw open Hal's office door then slammed it shut.

Looking wildly around his office, Hal bolted upright off sofa. "Oh, it's you." He returned to a slumped position, fighting to calm his racing heartbeat.

"We have to talk. Now."

He stared at his watch and then back at her. "G-good m-morning to you, t-too."

She hesitated on the other side of the desk. "You look like hell. You even sound like hell."

"I knew there was a reason I hired you. The v-voice of t-truth." He attempted to straighten his skewed tie and the sleeves of his wrinkled white shirt.

"You're stuttering!" She inhaled sharply. "We've been through this, Hal. You promised—"

He almost gave himself whiplash shaking his head. "I-I j-just had a v-very v-vivid dream."

Her gaze narrowed as it drifted over him. "Why did you sleep in your office? She was here last night, wasn't she? What happened between you two? Out with it, now!"

With a grimace, he told her what had transpired the previous night. "I don't trust Darrow. If Lindsey and Hilda hadn't been in here, he would have tossed the place. Hell, knowing Larry, I'll bet he examined all the files yesterday and just left some out for an excuse to return today." He rubbed his face. "N-need a s-shave."

"You sound like you need a Valium or, failing that, a strong cup of coffee."

Hal held up his hand in protest. He took a deep breath and began his chant. "Everything c-can be exp-plained b-by Freud and Jung. Everything c-can be explained by Freud and Jung." He took one more deep breath. Then exhaled sharply. "Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung." He grinned. "It's just a matter of mind control and simple deep breathing. It was nothing more than a bad night."

"Yeah, right." Marie sank into his side chair. "News flash, I didn't get my M.D. out of a cracker box. You're in love."

"Lay off, Marie." He pinched the bridge of his nose, then sat up. "I can't believe the stupid ass stuff I've done. Hell, the lies alone are enough to bring this experiment—forget that, my whole life down around my ears." He shook his head. "Make that, my neck," he said, grabbing his neck and squeezing.

Marie grasped his tie and yanked. "Get a grip. You're a psychiatrist, top in your class. Tops at Duke University. And I'll be damned if you're going to saddle

me with a bad reputation by losing what's left of your common sense." She leaned forward and pushed him back against the sofa cushions. "Time to come clean. What was your dream?"

Visions of Lindsey danced before his eyes. She shimmied across a platform in a black lacy bra, g-string and a pair of black thigh highs. Then she sauntered down the stairs toward him, lifting her breasts as if in offering. Suddenly, with gun in hand, Darrow sprang from the shadows. He lunged, grabbed Lindsey, and jerked her back against his chest. "Too bad you lied," the man said, laughing as he disappeared with Lindsey into the shadows.

"Hal, did you hear me? What was the dream?"

Hal closed his eyes, then shook his head before focusing on Marie. "No way. I'm not letting you psychoanalyze my dreams. I've had as much Freudian theory as you have. I don't need your professional assistance to understand the dream."

"Fine." She relaxed in the overstuffed armchair. "So, what're you going to do about your feelings for Lindsey?"

"Sublimate them." He glanced at his watch. "You don't understand. It's bad enough I'm almost over the edge because of her presence, but she's damn near toppled the whole project and given Darrow the ammo he's looking for."

"Sounds more like she saved your ass by snooping and taking those pages."

He winced. "You never miss, do you?"

"Nope. So, when are you going to come clean with Lindsey about *our* marriage?"

"After the experiment." He glanced at his watch once again. "That's in exactly thirteen days and seven hours."

"Why not now?"

"I told you before, I want to write my final report, release it to the Lone Star Committee, win the award, and get another job."

"What makes you think you can't have both the award and Lindsey?"

"She hates liars and cheats. And when she discovers the truth, she'll know I'm both because I've lied about everything." As he stood, his gaze drifted to the closet door. Sighing, he paced the length of the room. "Does the French Foreign Legion still exist?"

"Sorry, don't know. I haven't thought about joining."

"You're right, that's running away." He scratched the stubble on his chin. "There's no reason to high-tail it out of here. I can handle Lindsey Michaels. She's a minor complication. Nothing more."

"Right, a minor complication." Marie folded her arms across her chest. "How did you ever become a psychiatrist? If you think you can walk away from Lindsey and survive, then I'll make sure to keep my calendar open to handle your therapy. Because you're going to need it. Now, focus, Hal," she said, gripping his

chin between her thumb and forefinger. "Compared to Lindsey and your feelings, however hard you try to deny them, the problem with Darrow is insignificant."

Hal scowled at her smirk. "I won't have trouble. I'll handle each and every situation as I do everything else, with calm, cool detachment. I'm concerned about our other clients. When they learn there's no liposuction, we may have an angry mob when this experiment's over." He scowled. "With Lindsey leading the charge."

"Everyone has lost more weight than expected...make that almost everyone."

"Except Lindsey, who else?"

"You'll be happy to hear that Lindsey's now lost one pound."

"One pound. One lousy pound." Hal growled the words. "Not that I think she needs to lose any."

"There's never a one hundred percent success rate in any experiment, Hal. Especially when dealing with diet. Just because the Michaels woman didn't lose doesn't take away from the fact that most of our clients have lost twenty-plus pounds. In fact, the only two who haven't lost what they should have are Lindsey and her roommate, Hilda."

"Hilda? How many pounds has she lost?" Hal rubbed his chin again, then winced at the raspy noise.

"Six." Marie laughed. "Considering her size, she should be down by at least fifteen to twenty pounds."

"Interesting. The two share a room?" Hal stared at Marie, then frowned at her nod.

"For the next two weeks, these two are getting personalized attention from you." He lifted his shoulders and shrugged in defeat. "I can't do it. Live up to your nickname, Frau Doctor Mengele. If the rest of the subjects do water aerobics for an hour, Lindsey and Hilda get one and a half. When everyone else gets four hundred calorie meals, Lindsey and Hilda get three hundred."

"I can't starve them."

"They won't starve. If needed, we'll supplement. But only if needed."

"Lindsey Michaels already thinks I'm from the Fourth Reich."

"I know. That's why you can enforce it." Hal chuckled.

"It won't work!" Marie grabbed his shoulders and shook them. "If Lindsey is as close to the truth as you say, she'll see right through me. At least around you, she's distracted by love and guilt. Not so with me."

He kissed the tip of her nose, then grinned.

"Coward!"

"You're right. I'm a lily-livered coward. Then again, if I can last another thirteen days, we'll succeed. With Freud and Jung at our side, how can we fail?"

“Easy for you to say. You’ll be hiding in the closet.” Marie turned and started for the door.

“Wait. When you blew in here, you wanted to tell me something. What is it?”

She shook her head. “No, actually I wanted to show you something.” She pulled two small, knitted baby booties from her pocket. Hal squinted at them.

“So much for my *situation* remaining a secret.” Marie flicked one of the little pompom balls at the end of one of their strings.

“I can’t believe Lindsey would do something like this,” Hal muttered.

“You’re right, this is ‘Hilda the Homemaker’s’ work. Brace yourself, if Hilda’s in the know then the secret’s out. If Wanda gets wind of this and goes ballistic, I swear, Hal, I’ll do this to your balls.” She jerked a pom-pom off its string.

Not trusting the evil glint in her eyes, Hal squeezed his knees together. “I’ll tell Lindsey the truth and get her to call off Hilda.”

Marie flipped him her middle finger. “You better. Or so help me, the first person who calls me ‘Little Mommy,’ gets it in the breadbasket. Then I’ll come looking for you.”

“Stop worrying. Everything’s under control.”

Every hair on Lindsey’s arm stood at attention. Torn between the urge to flee or rip Kenny’s throat out, she chose a third, less appealing option—a deep, calming breath and a controlled voice. “What do you mean you’ve got everything under control?”

“Just what I said.” Kenny looked at his plate with an expression of delight. “I’m surprised you haven’t lost weight on this food. Chinese, yum.” He bit into an egg roll.

She watched as sweet and sour sauce clung to the corner of his mouth. Rather than wipe the spot with her finger, then lick said finger clean, she stared at her plate with disgust.

Unlike Kenny’s savory meal, hers had consisted of a few rice grains clinging to the backs of some water chestnuts. They’d called her dish FRAT rice—in other words, faked fried rice. The grains had been baked in low sodium, no-fat vegetable broth and mixed with raw vegetables. They hadn’t even allowed her soy sauce.

She guessed the Navy chef was reserved for the staff and visitors, because he sure wasn’t doling the delicacies in her direction.

“Oh yeah, nothing beats FRAT’s food for flavoring.” She shoved her plate aside, then leaned over and got right in Kenny’s face. The fact he was shoveling another fork full of lo mein in his mouth and it went into hers instead didn’t bother

her one bit. “Tell me what you’ve done,” she said behind her hand, trying to hide her full mouth from Hal’s curious gaze.

“I called Larry Darrow and asked for his assistance.”

She gripped the edge of the table. “You did *what*?”

“I checked him out. He’s for real, not like that Dr. Randall.” Kenny jerked his head in Hal’s direction. “I asked him to help us nab Dr. Randall and party.” He laughed. “Sometimes my brilliance surprises even me.”

“Brilliance? Try stupidity!”

He slammed his fork of sesame chicken back onto his plate. “Where do you get off saying that? In the twenty-two days you’ve been here, you’ve come up with zip, nada, nil.”

“Believe me, Darrow’s not the answer. I’ll have everything within a day or two.”

“Too late. Your time’s run out. Aside from the fact Darrow can help, I’ve discovered Randall isn’t a plastic surgeon.” Grabbing his fork, he stuffed the piece of chicken into his mouth and dripped sauce on his tie.

Distaste filled Lindsey. And she was supposed to be the glutton! “And just how did you make that brilliant discovery about Dr. Randall?”

“Darrow told me.” His eyes danced.

“Yeah, like I’d believe Darrow. He refuses to make eye contact when talking.”

“Big deal, a lot of people don’t maintain eye contact.”

“Yeah, well, Darrow maintains eye to chest contact. He’s a boob-watcher. That makes him a creep. Creeps can’t be trusted.”

“You may not like the man, but he’s telling the truth. Here.” Kenny stopped stuffing his mouth, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a copy of a newspaper clipping. “See?”

Lindsey stared. “Where did you get this?”

“From Darrow.”

Blinking, she reread the headline. “Psychiatrists Named as Fellows.” With a hard swallow, she scanned the article. It was a list of psychiatrists who’d received their fellow designations through the American College of Psychiatry. The paper crinkled and tore a bit as she read the alphabetized names. She wasn’t surprised to see Lawrence Edward Darrow. After all, he was great at playing head games. Then she spotted Halloran Randall and her heart imploded.

She tossed the paper at Kenny. “It doesn’t mean a thing,” she choked.

“Oh, really? In law, we call this evidence. I figure I’ve got Randall on false representation. Darrow says to hang loose because Randall’s said a plastic surgeon is coming in at the last second—a big secret hotsy-totsy doctor. Neither of us believes that cock-and-bull story, but we’ve gotta let Randall play his hand before

we can hoist him by his own petard. Then I've got him. One call and the sheriff'll cart him off to jail."

"Very clever." A shiver raked her from the inside out. She couldn't believe Hal, the man she loved, had played her for a fool. How he must have laughed after she'd left his office.

She stared down at her heavy thighs, then squeezed her eyes closed against tears that refused to stay hidden. He and Marie had probably kept each other up at night laughing over her stupidity. Especially the way she'd melted all over him in the closet.

Opening her eyes, she once again saw her legs. It looked like there'd be no saying good-bye to thunder-thighs anytime soon. She glanced at her chest. Looked like the jugs were sticking around, too.

Lindsey lifted her gaze and glared at Kenny. "What can I do to help?"

"We need to wire the doctor's office. A plant just inside the window would do the trick. You can show me on the outside wall which room is his."

"No problem." Suddenly, she felt ill. "Excuse me," she whispered, clasping a hand over her mouth and running for the bathroom.

Sitting in front of the porcelain bowl, she reviewed what *she* knew about the players. In the end, she decided she couldn't wire his office. No matter how dishonest he'd been, she refused to betray Hal. His private, hand-written notes had told the truth. He loved her, for herself, but that didn't mean she wouldn't confront him. Oh boy, would she, but in private.

Lindsey bit her lip. Kenny expected her help. He expected an office, by tomorrow, to wire. Okay, she'd give one, just not the one he expected.

Then, she'd bring Halloran Randall to his knees.

She folded her arms across her chest, then beat her arms as she jumped up and down. "For such a warm day, it sure is cold out here at night. And it's only ten-thirty."

"Quiet down. Someone'll hear you." Kenny crouched next to a bush with a flashlight in one hand and binoculars around his neck.

"Trust me, Kenny, there's no one around at this time of night."

He faced her. "How do you know?"

"Hilda and I've been outside at night several times."

"Why have y'all been doing that?"

"Fresh air." She wasn't about to confess their midnight picnics. If it hadn't been for this wiring idea, she'd be crouched behind the dumpster this minute, chowing on another batch of ribs.

"Talk about weird, you take the cake."

She shrugged. "To each his own."

"Are we still divvying-up the tasks?" Sam asked as she touched Lindsey's shoulder.

Lindsey's head jerked up, hitting Sam on the chin.

Kenny dove face first to the ground and waved his hand in the air. "These damn stickers in the grass hurt."

Lindsey rubbed the top of her head. She glanced over at Sam, massaging her chin. "Did I hurt you?"

"Nah, nothing a dentist or orthopedist can't fix."

She crawled over to her friend. "I'm really sorry, Sam."

"Don't worry, Lin. I'll be fine." Sam hugged her.

"Lin, get back here." Kenny turned the flashlight on his hand and held it out to Lindsey. "Pull these stickers out."

"Without the magic word?"

"You don't want to know what the magic word is right now."

"I know you can't help yourself, Conan, but try some politeness," Sam sneered.

"Help! Would you please pull these damned stickers out of my hand."

Moments later, Lindsey scooted back. "There. All the thorns are gone." She glanced at the glasses around his neck. "I've been meaning to ask you, why'd you bring the binoculars? You can't see anything at night unless you're using infrared."

Sam crossed her arms. "He probably saw it in a rerun of the *Rockford Files*."

Kenny jumped up. "Save your snide comments until after we're finished."

"Right, Chief." Sam grinned. "In case you want to know, the coast is clear. I checked the other side of the property. It's clear except for Hilda. She says she's waiting for something. I think I about scared her to death. When I told her I was looking for you, Lin, she said I'd find you over here with Kenny."

"Yeah. She knew I was meeting him." Lindsey leaned against the building.

"She what?" Kenny stood up with a start.

Lindsey appreciated his wild bug-eyed stare.

"Why'd you tell Hilda you were meeting me?"

"Don't worry. She keeps secrets better than I do. Besides, I didn't tell her why you're here, just that I had to talk to you."

"When do you need Sam along to talk to me?" Kenny hissed. "Hilda may not be the smartest person in the world, but even she's gotta think that's a little kinky."

Sam muffled a laugh. "Kenny Kramer, your idea of kinky is doing it with your socks on."

"You don't have any idea what I'm capable of."

“Look, guys, she’s involved in her own subterfuge. She’s, uh, meeting her own boyfriend,” Lindsey said, grateful the dark hid her betraying blush.

“That explains her look of excitement. She told me she was waiting for something. Even said, if he didn’t hurry, she was going to die from anticipation.”

“Come on.” Lindsey pushed Kenny. “Let’s get this over with.”

Sam pointed toward the roll of wire. “Where’s the mike?”

Kenny held up a small round chip and flashed his light on it. “Here.”

Lindsey squinted and still had trouble seeing it. “Are you sure that’ll work?”

“Guaranteed.”

Lindsey watched Kenny stand, his chest puffed out further than a Bantam rooster during mating. “Did you get a free decoder ring with it?” At his scowl, she bit her lip, then smiled. “Time to go. We need to finish this.”

Sam nodded. “Which window is it?”

Lindsey pointed to Marie’s office window. “That one, right there.”

“Are you sure that’s the right one? I could have sworn his office was one more down—”

“No, Sam! It’s definitely that one. After spending over three weeks here, I should know.”

“I guess.”

Kenny placed the microphone back in his pocket. “Let’s get to it,” he said, unrolling the wire.

Lindsey silently crept up behind Hilda. “What’re you still doing out here?” Hilda let loose with a squeal and stumbled forward. Lindsey grabbed for her, missed, then winced as Hilda hit the ground face down. “Are you hurt?” she whispered, helping her up.

“Yes,” she whimpered, wiping some blood from her mouth. “And our food hasn’t arrived yet. Gary’s late.”

“Who’s Gary?”

“My cousin. The one who works at Pepperoni Palace. We’re getting the giant supreme with extra cheese.”

“No, kidding.” Lindsey licked her lips. “Ah, nothing beats a pizza from PP’s. Now, go back to the room and get cleaned up. I’ll take care of it tonight.”

Lindsey sighed. This midnight snacking had been fun when they’d started, now it was a pain in the ass, mainly because she hated lying to Hal. “Not that the deceitful, lowlife doesn’t deserve it,” she muttered, walking to her covert, midnight drop-off spot. “This is the last time I do it, I promise. Starting tomorrow, I’ll be good, stick to my diet and exercise like crazy. Right after I confront his Royal Jerkness, *The Shrink Extraordinaire*.”

Hal rolled off his office sofa and onto the floor. “Damn, not again.” He pushed himself upright, then gathered the scattered file from the floor. When was he going to learn he couldn’t read while relaxing on the couch if he didn’t want to fall asleep within minutes of stretching out?

Standing, he rolled his shoulders. It was almost midnight. If he left now, he could head home and still get in a few hours of sleep in his bed before having to face Lindsey and tell her the truth about his and Marie’s *marriage*.

He snagged his jacket. As he jammed his left arm into it, he spotted the shadow of someone running from the mesquite trees toward the dumpster. Thanks to a full moon and no clouds, he’d seen the intruder.

Opening the top drawer of his filing cabinet, He removed his Glock, then headed for the door.

A few minutes later, he checked his clip, flicked the safety off, opened the door and eased outside. A shiver raced through him. Nothing like having a hundred degrees in the daytime and bottoming at night to around fifty. At least it was a calm West Texas night, not one with the normal April twenty plus mile per hour wind.

As he approached the corner of the building and the dumpster, he gained a level of comfort from the weapon. Hopefully, only *he* was armed. He slowly raised the handgun, readying himself to face the intruder.

At the sound of voices, he paused, then frowned.

“Extra cheese, just as ordered.”

He sniffed. *Pizza!* He didn’t need to hear the woman’s voice to know who was behind this delivery. He inched his way to the corner.

“You’re late.”

“Hey, I just got off work.”

“Hmm umm.”

“You better slow down or else Hilda’ll kill ya for not leaving her half. Where’s the money?”

“Hmm umm.”

“Let me know when you want another pizza.”

“Hmm umm.”

Hal pushed the safety back in place and stuck the gun in his waistband. He doubted he’d need it. Unless she planned to kill him with calories.

He pressed himself against the wall as the young man disappeared behind the mesquite trees. The sound of a motor broke the night’s silence, then he saw the Pepperoni Palace emblem shining from the roof of a compact car. He ambled forward, certain what he’d find. As he rounded the side of the dumpster, he spotted

his prey sitting cross-legged on the ground. He had to hand it to her, she was true to her cause. He grinned at the pizza box open in her lap. She'd already started on her second slice. "So much pizza, so little time."

He raised an eyebrow at her frozen expression. *Let's see you wiggle your way out of this one.*

"It's about time you got here. I'd just about given you up."

Hal snickered. "Sure you had."

"I told you that you had to try this pizza, remember?"

"Right." Shaking his head, he settled beside her, then took the proffered slice with one, large bite taken out of it. "For some unknown reason, I never envisioned dining behind a dumpster."

Lindsey shrugged. "It's a great windbreak."

"Ah, I knew I could count on you to have a good reason." Hal bit into the pizza. Flavors exploded in his mouth, basil, oregano, and tomato. The cheese had melted to the soft, yet chewy consistency that made grown men weep for joy. As he finished one slice and reached for another, he said, "You were right. I could eat a whole one."

She lifted another piece. "Yup, there's nothing like the Palace's pizzas." Her tongue snaked out and caught a strand of cheese.

He bit back a moan. Without thinking, he leaned toward her. His free hand cupped the back of her head, holding her steady, as he lowered his mouth.

As his lips brushed hers, she murmured, "Since it's tomorrow, I guess it's time we had our talk, right?"

"In a second," he said, before crushing her to him, then immediately releasing her when she bit him, hard.

"I don't do tongue with married men."

Hal slumped back against the wall. *It's now or never.* "First, no more renegade deliveries. You're single-handedly ruining my experiment."

"Talk about your non sequiturs!"

"I want your promise on this before we discuss anything else." He chuckled at the look of lust on her face as she stared at the pizza. "Lindsey, your promise, now."

She exhaled heavily. "I promise not to call for any more deliveries."

He frowned at the grudging tone that didn't quite hide the hint of laughter. She was up to something. What, he didn't know, but if she thought he wasn't going to be pulling late night patrol duty, she had another thing coming.

He reached down and pulled her to her feet. Then with a wicked grin, grabbed the box of pizza and tossed it into the dumpster. "Now, we can have that talk about Marie," he said, brushing his hands together. "Let's go back to my office. We'll be more comfortable, not to mention warmer."

As he moved between the wall and the dumpster, his shoe landed on a small pile of bones. He bent and inspected the scattered remains. "Jeez, it looks like something died here."

"Sometimes 'the balance of nature' just isn't fair."

His gaze narrowed on her lips and the small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Yeah, isn't it though." He pulled her clear of the area. "Listen, Lindsey, I'm trying to explain about Marie."

She pressed her hand to his chest. "That's okay, Hal. I understand. Even if you don't love her, a marriage is sacred and its vows should always be honored. That's one of the things I respect about you, your loyalty."

His shoulders slumped. *She's going to hate me when she hears the truth.* As much as he'd like to avoid telling her, he couldn't. He owed it to both Lindsey and Marie. "You're wrong. I didn't promise her anything." He tightened his hold on her hand.

"Yes, you did. You promised fidelity when you married her." She jerked free of his hold. "I thought you were honorable, yet here you are trying to deny one of the most important promises in the marriage ceremony."

"Of course I am! We aren't married!"

She looked up and, in the bright moonlight, examined his face. "Want to run that by me again?"

Hal raked a hand through his hair, then stared at his feet. "We aren't married."

"But what about the baby?"

He lifted his gaze to hers. "There isn't a baby."

"Oh, no. She miscarried? Oh, the poor woman. She must be heartbroken."

"No, you don't understand. She didn't lose the baby. She was never pregnant."

"If she wasn't pregnant, than why did you marry her?"

"I didn't marry her. We aren't married. Not now, not ever." He swallowed hard and took a step back. It wasn't that he was afraid, exactly. He didn't like the menacing gleam in her eyes or how her back was beginning to stiffen like a flagpole.

"Why the lie?"

"Lindsey?" He reached for her, but was waved away. He clenched his hands at the devastated look on her face.

"I'll bet you two had a real laugh."

Unable to stand it another second, Hal grasped her shoulders and, ignoring her rigidity, pulled her to him. "You scared me, Lindsey. After reading your file, the thought of meeting you, dealing with you, terrified me—"

She jerked free. “Yeah, right. Me, the woman who wears ‘sucker’ branded on her forehead, frightened you. Give me a break.” She scooted out of his reach. “The only time you were worried was when I told you about Kenny.”

“Wrong! I talked Marie into posing as my wife because I didn’t want any complications. The moment I saw you, I knew I needed a wife. Then everything spiraled out of control. One lie led to another.”

“Why, Hal? Why the lies? Why the pretense? Why?”

“I think I could easily fall in love with you.”

She took a tentative step forward. “When will you know for sure?”

He knew if he wanted to salvage anything, he’d have to be honest. Hold nothing back. Well, almost nothing. He couldn’t admit just how big a lie he’d told. Nor could he tell her the whole truth about the experiment. Maybe in a few days or weeks, but not yet. “I already know. I love you. If I didn’t, we wouldn’t be in this mess. That doesn’t change anything. At least, not for the time being.”

“Why?”

He hated the hope and pleading he heard in her voice, and wondered just how much of the truth about him and the project she knew. “Because you could cost me my career. This project is very important to me. It holds the potential to make or break my future. And around you, I forget I’m a doctor, *your* doctor.”

“Okay. What about after this gig is over?”

“Hey, I’m not stuttering.” Hal grinned. “That means, I’m comfortable, finally at ease with you.” He hugged her to him. “Once the project’s over, we can date like real people. You know, date, then live together for, oh, a year, and then, if we’re compatible, move on to the next step.”

“No thanks.” She broke free of his hold. “Been there, done that, and posed for the poster.”

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants. “So, w-where d-do we go from here?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugged. “Is there anything else you have to tell me?”

Hal studied her expression. It was obvious she expected him to admit something, but what could it be? She didn’t know anything about him, except what he’d told her. He opened his mouth and almost confessed the rest of the truth about the project and himself, then clamped his teeth together. No, he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t jeopardize the entire operation, along with any career he might still be able to salvage from this debacle.

Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling she knew something about him. “Yes, there is something more. Marie’s gay. That’s why she got so angry at my lies about her being my wife. She also said I wasn’t being fair to you. That you weren’t the kind of woman who handled guilt well.”

Lindsey shook her head. “I’m not, but I’m learning fast.”

CHAPTER TEN

Early the next morning, a muffled knock shattered Lindsey's sleep. Rolling onto her side, she groped for her bedside clock, then partially opened one eye and squinted at the illuminated dial. Seven o'clock. Damn, she'd counted on having another forty-five minutes of sleep. "Hilda, can you answer that?"

Hilda tumbled out of bed. Grabbing her robe, she grunted and headed for the door.

Lindsey rubbed her eyes and yawned. As nerve-racking as wiring Marie's office had been, it was nothing compared to how it could have been had Hal caught them. She pulled her sheet higher and snuggled under the covers. As upset as she'd been at his refusal to tell her the truth about his profession, she couldn't get too indignant, given the illegal act she and her friends had just committed.

Usually she envied Sam, but not today. Today Sam had the joy of spending eight hours with Kenny, trying to discover something criminal over the wiretaps. Unfortunately for them, Marie had the day off. Although, come tomorrow, they'd be hearing all of Marie's conversations. That is, if they were patient enough to wait for a second day.

Lindsey grinned. She wondered how long it would take them to discover the wrong office had been bugged. As the memory of Hal's lies returned, she frowned. What else was he hiding, aside from the bit about him being a shrink? It had to be something big, otherwise he wouldn't be so evasive. If it killed her, she was going to discover the truth and nothing but the truth before the day was out.

Hilda opened the door an inch and peeked out. "Oh, hi, Carla," she mumbled, then yawned.

"I just came back from a morning swim."

Lindsey cringed at Carla's high-pitched voice and early morning energy. The woman had become the FRAT poster child during their stay. She'd lost the most and exercised the hardest. No doubt about it, she was true barf material.

"Great, Carla," Hilda said as she yawned once again. "So what'd ya want from us?"

"Just came to give you some money for the surprise. Boy, I can't wait to see her face when she sees it."

Lindsey bolted upright in bed. Money? Her face when she sees it? Just what was Hilda up to? She bit her lip. Maybe she should ask. Then again, sometimes ignorance was bliss.

“Thanks, Carla. Uh, I gotta go now.” Hilda palmed the money and slipped it into her pocket as she began to close the door. Not fast enough for spunky little Carla.

“I almost forgot. Dr. Randall saw me coming up here and asked me to tell Lindsey that he needed to see her first thing this morning.”

Lindsey pulled the bed covers up over her chest, then leaned toward the door. “Did he say what he wanted me for?”

Carla pushed the door back into Hilda, causing her to stumble backward, trip over her long flannel nightgown, and fall, landing on her well-padded bottom.

“Don’t know, Lindsey. He just said it was real important.”

“Thanks.” Hal was in for a big surprise. Wait ’til he got the big question. *So, big man, when did a shrink become a plastic surgeon?* Then she’d hit him with *How dare you lie to us? We don’t want to be analyzed by a lying, two-faced shrink. Where’s the plastic surgeon who’s gonna suck all this fat out?*

Hilda threw her weight against the door. “Thanks for the information. Bye!” she called out as she slowly pushed it shut. Once shut, she locked the door, then sat on the edge of her bed. “Wow! Talk about a workout,” she said, wiping her forehead.

Lindsey jumped out of bed. After slipping into her robe and Tweety Bird slippers, she glared at her roommate. “What’s the surprise you’re collecting money for? And how come I haven’t been asked to contribute?”

Hilda’s hand shook as she grabbed the headboard of her bed. “I-I...we were just trying to do something nice for someone who’s down and out. You know, a kind of anonymous gift.” She smiled weakly.

Lindsey’s stomach dropped to her feet. “It wouldn’t be for Marie, would it?” When her roommate refused to meet her gaze and focused on the bouncing Tweety Birds, Lindsey knew the awful truth. “Hilda, how could you? You promised!”

Lower lip trembling, she slowly raised her head. “I didn’t mean any harm, and she won’t get it here. I told them to send it to her house.”

“To her house?” Lindsey’s foot escalated from tapping to pounding the floor.

Hilda nodded. “One of the guys said she lived on Sagebrush Road. Do you know she’s listed under Poppokowsky instead of Randall? ’Course, we put Mrs. Randall on the card—under the circumstances.”

“Oh, my God! What did you send?” Lindsey tried to rein in her mounting fear and shock. No wonder Hal wanted to see her immediately. Lord have mercy on her soul. She’d never get the opportunity to bash him for his deception. She’d be too busy defending herself against breaking a vow of silence and, in the process, being a complete screw-up.

“Um. Well, we sent her some balloons in pink and blue with baby rattles and other baby stuff to put on her mailbox.”

“Is that all?”

Hilda tried to shove her toe through the tile floor. “Not exactly.”

“What else have you done? All of it!”

“Well, yesterday I slipped a pair of hand-knitted baby booties into her office. And around noon today, a sky writer’s flying over her house.”

Lindsey stumbled backwards. “Sky writer?” Her knees hit the edge of her bed, and she collapsed. She missed the mattress, slid down the side, and landed with a thud on the floor.

“Yeah. It was my idea, too. With the sky being so big out here in West Texas, we decided to have Texas Sky Rangers—you know, the same company that did that writing over the Willie Nelson concert two years ago?—handle it. They gave us a special deal, fifty dollars ’cause my cousin owns the company.”

Lindsey drew her knees to her chest and buried her face.

“We decided to have them fly over Marie’s house and write in big puffy letters, ‘Baby Makes Three—Congrats Marie.’ Pretty neat, uh?”

“Damn!” She should’ve told Hilda about Marie and Hal not being married. Maybe it wasn’t too late. Lindsey lifted her face. From her roommate’s reaction, she knew she looked like a ghost. “Cancel it. Cancel it all, the balloons, the sky writing, all of it, now!”

“I can’t. The balloons were to be delivered by seven-fifteen. And the Rangers were doin’ a job in Midland last night, then flying here to write the message at noon.”

Lindsey once again buried her face and moaned, “And tomorrow they’ll be skywriting, ‘Lindsey’s the key—she’s dead—Marie’.”

Hilda rushed to her side. “It’ll be okay.”

Lindsey turned her head sideways, exposing only one eye to Hilda. “Sure. It’ll be hunky-dory. Of course, you may never see me after Hal Randall discovers what’s happened.”

Marie’s going to kill Hal for telling me, then me for trusting Hilda with the secret. Which begs the question, why did I open my mouth?

“Dr. Randall won’t really kill you, will he?”

“No, I suspect it’ll be Marie who does that. After she knocks him off.” Lindsey patted her hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll probably be used for some experiment, possibly thrown to the coyotes. Who knows? You’ll find me behind the dumpster with the bones.”

She sighed, as Hilda’s eyes grew wide in horror. “Why, Lin? Are you gonna hide a cake there?”

“Never mind, Hilda. It doesn’t matter.”

“Never mind, Jeff. Darrow didn’t find anything. He’s just bluffing.” Hal’s grip tightened around the phone. He just loved these seven-fifteen alerts.

“Hal, the man told me that he’d already discussed you with some D.A. down there. Seems they’ve been watching you since the clinical trial group arrived. He also grilled me again about the plastic surgeon.”

“Darrow’s supposed to leave before this weekend. I’ll tell him that the specialist is coming next Sunday. That leaves us looking like we have plenty of time for a surgeon to do the liposuction.”

“He mentioned something else.”

“What else?” Hal drew in a sharp breath and held it.

“He said you’re having an affair—with a client.”

Hal’s breath exploded out of his mouth. “He said what?”

“Darrow says he can’t prove it. Not yet. But he says he’s ninety-nine percent sure that a woman named Lindsey Michaels has been...shall we say, getting special attention from you.”

“Damn straight.” Perspiration beaded his forehead. “The woman’s lost one measly pound. Her lack of weight loss will skew the test results.”

“I hear she’s very pretty, despite a few extra pounds.”

Hal forced himself not to squirm. “Yes, she’s attractive. You know me well enough to know I’d never get involved with a patient. I’m a professional.”

“So was Darrow when he became involved with your wife.”

“Cindy wasn’t his patient.”

“True, but we’re all also human. Tell me the truth, Hal, have you been to bed with her?”

“No!”

“All right.” Jeff paused. “You’ve never lied to me before, hedged sometimes, but never straight-out lied, so I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and support you on this one. What you do after the project is over is your business. But if I discover you’ve played me for a fool, I’ll personally hang you.”

Hal whipped his handkerchief from his coat pocket and mopped his forehead. “No problem, Jeff. Just make sure Darrow leaves as scheduled.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Hal replaced the receiver, then stared blankly at his desk blotter. Damn! How’d he get in this mess? He’d known Lindsey Michaels spelled trouble the first time he’d caught sight of her thigh-highs. This was all her fault.

One week, six days and seven hours was all that was left of the experiment. Surely the flesh wasn’t that weak—at least not his. He was a physician. Hell, he was a psychiatrist! If anyone could control his id, it was him.

Yeah, right, like he'd done such a great job so far. Who was he kidding?

Okay, he'd confessed the truth about his phony marriage, but he still hadn't come clean where the experiment was concerned. The hell of it was, he couldn't. Not without violating what little was left of his code of ethics and honor.

He grabbed his box of chocolates. He downed two pieces, chewing quickly, and tried to think about the Lone Star Award. Instead, he saw Lindsey's face filled with hurt and disappointment, and the flash of pain in her honey-colored eyes when she learned just how much he'd deceived her. God, he'd miss her. He'd even miss her Tweety Bird slippers and the way she tapped them when angry or nervous.

Maybe he should confess everything. She might forgive him and not expose him. Not that it mattered, given how close Darrow was to blowing the entire operation.

A loud knock on his door jolted him back to reality.

"Stay behind your desk," he quietly ordered himself. With a sigh, he looked up at the door. "Come on in, Lindsey."

Gingerly, Lindsey turned the knob and entered the room. She walked forward, head down. At his desk, she slowly lifted her gaze from the floor to Hal. She felt the burn from his searing look down to her toes.

"May I have a seat?" Relief filled her at his nod. Strange how something so small, so insignificant as a nod, could prove reassuring. Of course, she reasoned, it's difficult to attack someone when you're seated behind a massive desk. Why, by the time he got to his feet and was around the desk, she'd be out of the office and in hiding.

She sat ramrod straight in the chair, her legs crossed at the ankles, then ground her teeth. It was hard to be taken seriously with Tweety Bird staring up at you. "Carla said you wanted to see me immediately."

"That's right."

Here it comes. The verbal blast about not keeping a promise. About humiliating Marie. For punishment, he'll kick me out of the program. Yup, no doubt about it, my life is over.

He leaned forward, twirling a gold pen through his fingers. "I need to talk to you about two things. No, make that three. Three things."

She glanced back to his eyes. Naked passion roared to life in his gaze. "Three things?"

"Yeah, three things." He started to stand, then eased down in his chair. He tilted backwards so far, he almost toppled.

Lindsey bit her lower lip as he grabbed the desk edge and righted himself.

"First, there's your weight loss. Or, that is, your lack of weight loss."

She nodded. Thank goodness. “It’s awful when those pesky little pounds don’t want to leave. I’ve begged them to go and never darken... pardon me, fatten my hips again, but they don’t listen to me. It’s my metabolism. It’s just not normal.” She waved a hand. “In fact, I could survive a one-year famine and still be overweight. Why, there’ve been times when I’ve gained three pounds from just one bag of M&Ms.”

“A bag of M&Ms?”

She nodded, trying her best to look solemn, as if someone had robbed her of her rightful weight loss.

Hal leaned forward, his elbow on the desk and chin resting on the palm of his hand. “What size bag was it?”

“Pardon me?”

“What size bag of M&Ms?”

Lindsey wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know. It was a tiny little bag.”

“How tiny? How little?”

For the first time, she squirmed. “It wasn’t much... that much I’m sure of.” She rubbed her hands together. “Oh, maybe a pound, pound and a half. As I said, not much.”

He cleared his throat. “Right, not much.” He relaxed into his chair. “Lindsey, Lindsey, Lindsey,” he said. “That tiny little bag could and did cause your weight gain.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would one little bag of candy put three pounds on me? It only weighed one pound—or so. I can understand one pound, but three?”

“It doesn’t work that way!” Once again, he started to rise only to settle back in his chair. “Then there’s last night’s pizza party. How can you expect to lose weight when you self-sabotage? Do you really think any program can work when you systematically insure its defeat by your behavior?”

“Did you have too much coffee this morning?”

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, they’d turned black with smoldering desire. “On to question number two.”

“That’s nice, but I want three.” As long as she provoked him, she was able to keep him off-balance. Then when the time was right, she’d beat him into the ground for being a liar. For being a headman, not a fat-sucking-out man.

“Three what?”

His look of confusion tickled and re-energized her self-confidence. “Ask me question three first.”

Hal raked his hand through his hair. “There’s an order to this type of conversation.

His forehead looked damp and she smiled. She leaned further back in the chair and allowed herself to appear relaxed, as if she weren't ready to jump across the desk and attack at the slightest provocation. "Why can't you rearrange it?"

"I can't." His voice was wavering and she noticed that his hands were shaking.

"Why not?"

"Never mind. I can't. Number two. Did you tell anyone Marie was pregnant?"

He stared into her eyes and her composure slipped. Lindsey nodded. "Only one. Hilda."

He nodded. "Did Hilda tell anyone else?"

She avoided eye contact. "Mmmm-hmmm."

"Is that a yes?" His eyes bored into her.

She pulled on the shawl collar of her robe, feeling her blush creep up from her chest.

"Answer me, Lindsey. Do you think Hilda's told anyone else?"

"I think that's a safe b-bet."

"Do you have any idea how much trouble that could cause? No, of course you don't." Hal rubbed his face.

"I'm sorry. She promised. I had to tell someone. I didn't know what to do. Not after we kissed—"

"That's number three."

"Number three what?"

"The third question."

"Which is?" She stood and walked several feet closer to his desk.

Hal stood as well, circling the desk halfway, then stopping. "It's important you understand that what happened...in the closet...and other times can never happen again. You do understand, don't you?"

She took several more baby steps, stopping inches from him. She stared up into his dark navy eyes. "I understand."

"Good. I refuse to cross the sacred doctor-patient boundary. It's unprofessional."

"Yes, it is."

"Exactly."

She'd never know which of them made the first move. Not that it mattered. One minute they were apart and next they were in each other's arms, sharing the most passionate kisses she'd ever experienced.

She marveled at how his mouth fit hers without the two of them wrestling for the right position. He traced the edge of her lips. She felt and tasted his sense of urgency and it fed hers.

For a few seconds, anger, disappointment and mistrust were forgotten. No wonder people in love lost weight. Who wanted to eat when they could make love?

One minute, she was Eve to Hal's Adam, and the next he thrust her away from him as if she were the apple.

"How d-do you d-do t-this to m-me?"

She didn't move, didn't speak. She couldn't. She didn't know what to say. She suspected "I'm sorry" wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"This m-must stop. S-stay away f-from me 'til t-the exp-periment's over."

"Why? Are you going to turn into a toad?"

"Y-you're c-comprom-mising t-the t-test results."

"I've never been very good at tests or following orders." She sidled closer. Ignoring his panicked expression, she caressed his face as she spread feather-light kisses over his jaw, chin, and lips. "Besides, you're a fraud. You're a psychiatrist, not a plastic surgeon," she whispered between each kiss.

Before she could blink, she stood alone and Hal was back behind the safety of his desk. "How did you know I'm a psychiatrist?"

He watched Lindsey blink, then shake her head in seeming confusion. "I'll ask you one more time, how did you know I'm a psychiatrist?"

She took a few steps back. "F-from Darrow."

"He told you...about me?"

She nodded. "Sort of. A friend told me. Even showed me the article about you getting the Fellowship."

Hal felt his face flush with anger. Darrow needed to be eliminated. If he could afford to hire a hit man, he would. Unfortunately with his luck, he'd be discovered and jailed in a maximum-security prison for life. "What friend?"

She drew a circle with her Tweety Bird slipper. "My friend...Sam. You know, the blonde?"

He stared at her and knew there was something she wasn't telling him. "How does she know Darrow?"

"I-I introduced them last Saturday. Sam's from Lubbock, and he needed someone to show him the hot spots. The prairie dogs, Buddy Holly, the Llano Estacado Winery."

"Yeah. Hot spots."

She jutted her chin in the air. "Don't make fun of my hometown."

"Don't change the subject." He took a long breath.

"I'm not."

She leveled her gaze on him. He suspected her eyes showed the same emotion as his; white-hot desire cooled to sparks of anger.

“I’ve been here for almost three weeks. I was promised a makeover. All the fat sucked out of here.” She pointed to her legs and hips. “And here.” She pointed to her stomach. “And most of all, here.” She pointed to her breasts.

He broke out in fresh perspiration. Not that it mattered. His entire body had turned into a puddle. “Are you insane? They’re beautiful. Magnificent. A God-given miracle.”

A split second later, he clamped his mouth shut as her glare cut and sliced him faster than a vegemetic. “I’m sorry. It’s just that women seem obsessed by their breasts. They’re either too small or too large.” He tried a smile, hoping it would defrost her frozen expression. It didn’t work.

“That’s all you have to say? Is your concern over my body so shallow that all I deserve is a shrug and an offhand response that, just because you like my boobs, it’s okay you’ve lied to us—to me?”

Digging his nails into his palms, Hal jerked his eyes from her chest. “No. That’s not what I meant. I mean, there is a plastic surgeon. I’m just not him, er, he.”

“And just who in Sam Hill is he?” She crossed her arms and began tapping her foot.

“Um. He’s from Europe. He’s world-renowned.”

“What’s his name?”

Hal fumbled for an answer, knowing whatever he said would be a lie and she’d be furious when she learned the truth. “He’s so famous, his name is top secret.”

She put her hands on her hips. “How can he be famous if no one knows his name?”

“Uh...” He paced the floor, trying to find a quick answer. “He keeps a low profile and works only on the super-rich and famous. He takes patients by referral. This way, he keeps his name and those of his clients out of the tabloids. If you haven’t been to him or know someone who has, you’ll never hear his name.” He tried to slow his breathing.

“So what’s his name?”

Hal glanced around the room for a name. Name, he needed a name. His gaze drifted to his bookcase, pausing on an early copy of Sigmund Freud’s *On Dreams*. “His name’s Sigmund.” His eyes darted across the room, searching for a last name. He stared at his drapes. “Draper. Sigmund Draper.”

“Wow. With a name like that, no wonder he keeps it a secret.” Lindsey sat down on the sofa and crossed her legs. “So why didn’t you tell everyone you were a shrink?”

He breathed a sigh of relief. If she could accept his sorry excuse of an explanation, there was no reason why he couldn't buy hers. "Psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, not shrink," he corrected as his neck muscles eased.

"Sure thing, Doc. One more question—what about Marie?"

He pulled on the side of his tie. "What about her?"

"You said she was gay, but you didn't tell me if she was, you know..." Refusing to meet his gaze, Lindsey stared at her slipper as it made a circle, "involved."

"Oh, yeah. Believe me, she's involved."

"So, is her significant other understanding and forgiving?"

At her blush, Hal laughed. "Not exactly. Let's put it this way, if you make a mistake, Wanda will make sure you pay. In fact, calling her a ball-buster would be a kindness."

Moaning, Lindsey pulled at the top of her robe. "Guess that means she doesn't believe in an honest mistake, huh?"

He shook his head. "She'd have tied George to the stump of his cherry tree and burned him." He watched Lindsey's sudden look of panic, bordering on tightly leashed hysteria.

"Promise me something."

"What?"

"If I suddenly disappear, you'll go on with your life and not hunt for me."

He chuckled. "You're not going anywhere without me. I won't let you."

"No one knows what the future holds." On the way to the door, she threw a glance over her shoulder. "I love you. Even if you are a shrink and not a plastic surgeon."

Her weak smile did nothing to calm his growing worry that something was wrong, very wrong.

After the door closed, Hal banged his head on his desk. Love! She loved him! But for how long? How many lies could a person layer on top of each other before they exploded? Who'd detonate him—Marie, Wanda, Larry or Lindsey? He knew in his gut he could survive any and all of them turning on him, except Lindsey. He'd never recover from that loss.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You mean Marie’s not having a baby?”

“No, she’s not.” Lindsey pulled her T-shirt over her head. “She’s not even married to Hal.” She walked over to the mirror, trying to stall while she figured out how to tell Hilda the entire truth. She wrinkled her nose at the snarled mess. Unwilling to search for her brush, she finger-combed her hair. “Yuck, that didn’t help much.”

Hilda tapped her on the shoulder. “If they’re not married, then why’d they say they were?”

Lindsey shook her head, then laughed. “He said he didn’t want anyone, especially me, being attracted to him.”

“Why?”

“It seems he’s been attracted to me ever since he read my file.”

“That’s so romantic. Uh oh.” Hilda covered her crimson face with her hands. “That means...our balloons...and the skywriters...and she’s not...” She gulped. “What’re we gonna do? She’s gonna be so embarrassed, and it’s all my fault.”

Lindsey wrapped her arm around Hilda. “Honey, you don’t know the half of it. She’s not only not married to Hal, she’s gay.”

“Gay as in happy or you know...the other type of gay?”

Tugging the brush through her hair, Lindsey faced the mirror. “The other type,” she said, watching her roommate collapse on her bed.

“Wow. And in West Texas.”

Lindsey set her brush on the dresser and faced Hilda. “I’m grateful to the powers that be. I love Hal and he loves me.” She sighed. “If, for some reason, this liposuction surgery doesn’t end well, please tell Hal—”

“Of course it’ll be all right. It’ll go perfectly. Love always conquers all, don’t you know that, Lindsey? You two are gonna live happily ever after. Just you wait and see.”

He stared at his reflection in his office bathroom’s mirror. “You, mister, are the most callous, insincere man in existence.”

Suddenly, Hal remembered the old joke about a restaurant that served calf fries—better known as bull testicles. When one customer asked why his calf fries were so small, the waitress answered, “Sometimes the matador wins, sometimes he loses.”

Turning, he headed back into his office. Well, he'd lost, that much he knew. When she learned he hadn't told her the whole truth, and she would, Lindsey'd never forgive him for all his lies. She'd join Darrow, her friend Sam, some unknown Texas Assistant D.A., and who knew who else to do him in. Then she'd serve his crown jewels for dinner with a smile of satisfaction on her face.

He grabbed the phone on its first ring. Please God. Just one piece of good news. "Hello?"

"Hal Randall?"

He flinched at the rough and grating voice. His neck muscles went rigid and stood at alert. "Hi there, Wanda. What's up?"

"A yard full of balloons and a sky full of writing. A sky full of bullshit caused by you. That's what's up. An' I'm going for your balls."

He pressed his knees together. "Calm down, Wanda, and tell me what you're talking about. I don't know anything about balloons or skywrite—"

"Like hell you don't!"

He moved the phone six inches from his ear. He studied the receiver just to make sure no smoke was coming from it, or Wanda's hand, for that matter. The woman made Medusa look like a sweet old white-haired lady. Wincing, he held the phone back against his ear. "Look, I don't know what Marie told you—"

"She hasn't told me squat. All she did was start crying when the balloons came. I tried to talk to her, but she didn't make sense. She seems to think I'll ask for a divorce. Then she locked herself in the bedroom when the skywriter started his crap, screaming 'It's the end.' The end of what? That's what I'd like to know."

"Balloons?"

"Yeah, balloons...to Mrs. Randall."

The memory of Lindsey's ashen face as she questioned him about Wanda slammed into the forefront of his mind. "Oh, no!" He closed his eyes and covered them with the palm of his left hand. And he'd thought he was in trouble before. "Look. Marie was trying to help me out, that's all. When they can't eat, some of my clients become sex-starved. We figured if they thought I was married, it would keep me hassle free."

"You don't know what a hassle is, Dr. Randall, 'til you've messed with me or the woman I love."

His grip on the phone tightened into a death clench. "I apologize for any misunderstanding. The charade's over. I've admitted I'm not married."

"Not soon enough."

"Obviously. But now that I have, everything will settle down."

"You've got that right. The dirt will settle over your coffin if I hear or see one more prank like this one." Wanda's voice grew softer with each word.

Hal couldn't hang up or he'd be hanged. No doubt about it. "You wouldn't dare." He noted his voice had become weak and high pitched, as if his lower regions had gotten the message that they were about to be severed.

"Try me. I mean it, Randall. One more stunt and your career as a doctor will come to a screeching halt. I'll make it my life's work to ruin you in this town, and then I'll start on the rest of the country. Hell, I'll fix it so you won't be able to set foot in Texas again until Jim Bowie rises from his grave at the Alamo."

"Wanda, I'm sorry I asked Marie to pose as my wife."

"Guess it was easy after that to get her pregnant."

For the first time in his life, he felt faint. "No, you don't understand. I wasn't the one who made her pregnant."

"What?"

He clamped his hand over his mouth. Dumb! Dumb! Dumb! "I mean, I've told everyone she wasn't pregnant and that I'm not married to her and never was. I told her... I mean, I told them I'd lied."

"Well, you won't have to lie when you tell your new state of residence you had your license stripped in Texas. Good luck working as an orderly. Because that's the only work you'll get from here on out."

"If you'd just put Marie on the phone, I'm sure I could fix everything."

"Good luck finding her. She ran outta here with a suitcase five minutes ago, sobbing something about saving me the trouble."

Hal recoiled as the other receiver slammed home, deafening him in his right ear. Maybe the Foreign Legion took disgraced, over-the-hill shrinks. Neutered ones.

An hour later, Marie marched into his office, slamming the door behind her.

"Don't enter without—" He rushed to Marie. He'd never seen her look so pathetic, not even when she and Wanda had had their first lovers' quarrel. Red, puffy eyes weren't a good look on Marie. "I've talked to Wanda."

"You did?"

There was a small note of hope in her voice, and Hal might have bought it, if her bottom lip hadn't trembled.

"Did you tell her that it was all your idea and you screwed up?"

"Yes."

"What did Wanda say to you?"

"That she loves you, and she's ready to kill me for hurting and embarrassing you."

She collapsed onto the side chair and dissolved into convulsive sobs. "Right after the ba-lloo-ons came...the blue and pink ones with the rattles and big

cardboard booties...and then skywriters came.” Uncontrollable sobs ripped from her.

“What did you say?”

She shook her head as she honked into the handkerchief. Raising her swollen face slowly, she looked like she was trying to bring her slit-hole eyes into focus. “I didn’t say anything. I just ran into my room, locked the door, threw some things into a suitcase, grabbed my purse, and raced from the house.”

“You ran away from home?” He was shocked. She’d always been a tiger when it came to defending herself. Of course, that was in a professional sense and not having to face Wanda the Barracuda.

She nodded in response to his question. “I’d rather run away from home than be part of its foundation forever. And she could do it. Wanda knows every concrete foreman in Lubbock.”

Hal rubbed her back as he handed her his handkerchief. “Wanda loves you. She wouldn’t hurt you. Me, yes; you, no.”

Looking through streams of tears, she sniffed. “Wanda believes in old-fashioned justice. Why do you think she lives all the way out here in Dickens? The jailhouse looks like something out of a Clint Eastwood movie.”

Hal nodded in agreement. She was right, of course. Still, he knew the two of them had been together for too long to let his crazy lies foul them up. “Call Wanda. Tell her what happened in your own words. Remind her about the time she went to Dallas and that other woman answered the phone in her hotel room.”

“It was just the maid. Wanda was in the shower and asked her to.” Marie blew her nose again.

“I know. It was a misunderstanding—just like this one. Besides that, she’s already gunning for me, so just lay it on thick.” He rubbed her back one more time.

“Maybe you’re right.” She attempted a weak smile.

“Of course I’m right. I’m a psychiatrist. I know how the human mind thinks.” That was also the reason he’d fouled up his own life so well.

“I’ll call her from my office.” She rose from the chair. “She gets angry, but she also calms down quickly.”

“You won’t regret it.” Hal smiled as he watched her head for the door.

Marie paused and glanced back. “I know my reaction seems stupid and irrational, but I’m afraid I’ll lose her.” She shook her head. “I don’t understand why, either. I’m smart. I’m a doctor. Yet, for some reason, I don’t feel like I deserve her. Does that make sense, Hal?”

“Yeah, it does. Just tell her all of it, including your insecurities.”

As she closed the door, Hal prayed their talk would rectify matters.

“This should give us the evidence we need. His name will be written on rolls of toilet paper. I bet he’ll have to go into the witness protection program.”

“I’m telling you, you won’t hear one conversation today. Hal’s, er, not in his office. He’s working with some of the men on their exercises.” Lindsey closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She felt like a fool.

She’d slipped out of the institute and into the alley where Kenny had established his surveillance station in an old van with a peace symbol on the side, which didn’t help her feelings of foolishness or duplicity. What would or could she tell Hal if he caught her? How could she make Sam and Kenny believe he was clean? Maybe, if all they heard was silence, they’d leave.

“I talked to him earlier in the hall. The plastic surgeon is named Sigmund Draper. I think he’s German. Anyway, he’s legit. Besides, he told me he lied about his marriage. Draper’s real. Hal wouldn’t lie to me about something this important, not after having come clean about Marie.” She sighed again. She couldn’t believe she’d found her own prince on a white stallion.

“Yeah. Well, I don’t buy it.” Kenny made a face. “Seems to me this Randall guy’s gotten to you. Thought you were my girl.”

Lindsey shook her head. She glanced at Sam, then decided she had no choice. She had to tell him. “We aren’t working, Kenny, and you know it. In fact, we aren’t working so badly, you’d have a better time with Sam.”

Sam held up her hands. “Whoa Nellie. Not me!”

Kenny glared. “And what’s wrong with me?”

Sam backed up her chair. “Nothing a walk on the wild side with a good prostitute couldn’t cure.”

“Then you’re perfect for me.” His grin went from ear to ear.

“You bas—” Sam’s hand shot out.

Kenny caught it in mid-air. “That’s a no-no. Don’t make ‘em if you can’t take ‘em.”

“Hey, you guys, reality check. We’re here to listen to Hal’s—that is, Dr. Randall’s conversations. I’m telling you, you won’t get any tape today.” Lindsey waved her hands in front of Kenny’s face.

Kenny grabbed the side of the bench where the equipment was set up. He pointed at his earphones. “Oh yeah? Well, someone just came in.” He reached over and switched the sound to the speakers.

Lindsey dropped onto the van’s carpet and crossed her legs. Surely Hal wouldn’t have gone into Marie’s office.

From squeaks on the wooden inlaid floor, she figured out that someone in rubber-soled shoes was walking across the floor. “That’s not Hal. He wears leather shoes,” she blurted.

“Shush,” Sam and Kenny said simultaneously, then Kenny motioned to her. “Turn up the volume.”

They heard Marie sit as the air escaped from the leather overstuffed cushion of her chair. Then there was a rattle.

“I knew we should have bugged the phone, too.” Kenny started to wave his arms in the air. “Whoever it is is calling someone.”

“It’s Marie.” Lindsey stared at her feet.

“How do you know?” Sam asked.

Lindsey looked up at her friend. “‘Cause that’s her office.”

“What?” Kenny spun toward her and bumped his head on the ceiling of the van. “Why’d you tell us it was Hal’s?”

She grimaced. “I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Why not?”

“Shut up, both of you. She just said, ‘Hello, Snookums.’”

“Who’s ‘Snookums’?” Kenny crouched next to the speakers.

“Shush,” Lindsey hissed as she leaned closer to the speakers.

“Wanda, Honey. I’m sorry about everything. There’s been an itsy bitsy misunderstanding.”

Lindsey closed her eyes and waited for Sam and Kenny’s light bulbs to go on. There was momentary silence, then Marie blew her nose.

“I know, I know. Remember when you asked the maid to answer the phone? That was me jumping to conclusions. You don’t really think Hal and I are involved with each other, do you?”

Lindsey pulled her legs up, crossing them, then slanted a glance at her friends. It was only a matter of time.

Marie sniffed again. “I’ve been in love with you for eight years. I wouldn’t think about seeing another woman, much less a man.”

“My God.” Kenny’s gaze flew from Sam to Lindsey, then back again to Sam. “Marie’s a...Marie’s a...”

“Honey, she doesn’t like men.” Sam finished it for him.

“Be quiet,” Lindsey muttered.

Marie giggled. “Wanda, you shouldn’t say things like that. What if someone overhears?”

“No chance of that.” Kenny snickered.

“No, I promise I won’t let Hal talk me into anything else. As soon as this thing’s over, the two of us can take off on that vacation you’ve been planning...Bye, Honey.”

“Doesn’t sound like the good doctor came clean with you, Lin,” Kenny said with a grin. “Don’t think I’d trust him far enough to throw him.”

“As a matter of fact, he’s already told me about Marie.” Lindsey thrust her chin up a notch. “I just hadn’t gotten around to telling you.” At Kenny’s glare, she grimaced. “Okay, I should have, but that doesn’t change the fact that I believe him about the plastic surgeon.”

Kenny grinned. “I’ll get Darrow to do a trace on—what did you say his name was?”

“Draper. Sigmund Draper.”

“Are you sure everything’s arranged? Is there really gonna be a plastic surgeon?” Hilda’s eyes narrowed. “If he’s messed with us, my Daddy has some connections with the Mexican Mafia. We can have Dr. Randall eliminated.”

“No way.” Lindsey patted her shoulder. “He lied to me twice, then admitted everything. There aren’t anymore secrets. I’m sure of it.” As she said the words, she couldn’t shake the small, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes, and bent her head. *Please, Lord, don’t let this be another lie.* “But, if Sigmund Draper doesn’t materialize, I plan to chain Dr. Randall in my basement and force-feed him pizza until he gains as much weight as I have. Then he can understand what it feels like to be fat.”

“Yeah.” Hilda nodded in agreement.

Lindsey looked over at her.

Hilda smiled. “Do you think there’ll be enough pizza for me, too?”

Lindsey shook her head. Her roommate was sweet, but her picture had to be next to the word gullible. “I need some real food, Hilda, and this time it won’t be delivered behind a dumpster. Especially since Hal’s onto our delivery schedule.”

“If it’s not delivered, then how are we going to eat it?”

“Ever heard of a road trip?” She grinned as Hilda’s eyes assumed their Moon Pie stare.

“Lin, we’ll get caught.”

“No way. We’ll put our pillows under the covers and make like we’re asleep. If men can escape from Alcatraz, then we sure as shootin’ can escape from FRAT for a few hours.”

“What’s Alcatraz?”

She exhaled. “Hilda, haven’t you ever been to California?”

Hilda shook her head slowly. “I’ve never been east of Abilene, west of Albuquerque, south of Midland, or north of Amarillo.”

“Figures.”

Hilda leaned forward, licking her lips. “Where’re we going?”

“When the going gets tough, the tough go to Dairy King.” Lindsey laughed as she rubbed her hands together in anticipation of several pounds of pure fat.

Marie's gaze flew between the scales and Lindsey. "You've gained three pounds!"

Lindsey moved nervously from her position on what she called the tattletale. "I told you, Dr. Poppokowsky, my blubber could probably be used to begin a new colony on Mars. It grows on its own, takes little food or water, and laughs in the face of all scientists and doctors—you included." She leaned forward and whispered in Marie's ear. "Try to starve me, you witch, but I'll be back," she said in a German accent. "Fat and all. We are invincible."

Marie blanched. "I've had it, Ms. Michaels. You've done nothing but ridicule me since you came. Dr. Randall will have to deal with you from now on!" She started to leave.

"Uh, Marie," Lindsey grinned as the other woman turned. "Sorry about the skywriters."

She screamed.

A wave of guilt hit Lindsey. Marie hadn't deserved that swipe she'd given her. Why had she attacked the innocent party? True, Marie had agreed to Hal's deception, but only after the fact. Lindsey scowled. She should have known Hal had masterminded the whole charade. He zigzagged the line of the truth worse than when he'd caught her with the half-eaten pizza.

She looked up to see him in the doorway. She tried to ignore his gaze burning a hole through her as he took long, loose, easy strides across the room.

He stopped a few feet from her. She frowned at his sad and disappointed expression. It didn't make sense. He should look happy.

"I thought you were going to follow your diet."

"Yeah, well, I didn't."

"You promised," he continued, watching her intensely.

"No, I didn't." She shook her head. "I promised I wouldn't call for any more deliveries. And I haven't."

"So, who did? Hilda?"

"Nope." Lindsey grinned. "Neither of us ordered in."

He jammed his fists into the pockets of his white coat. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" At her nod, his fists tightened. "I have enough problems without these little mind games of yours."

"Like you've finished playing your own?"

He scanned the room for anyone who might be listening to their conversation. He zeroed in on Mr. Crumpton, a three-hundred-pound man in his seventies who'd been lifting free weights across the room.

After a smile and a wave, Hal grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the exercise room. "In my office."

"Ouch. I didn't do it, teach. Do I have to stay for detention?"

He hauled her into his office. As he closed the door, she felt trapped. The look in his eyes told her, no matter how much she thought she was in charge, she wasn't the one calling the shots.

"What's going on, Lindsey?" He stared at her in an emotionless gaze. "You told me you'd follow the rules for this last week."

She moved further away from him. His smell and body heat were making her crazy. She sidled over to the sofa several feet away and flopped down. "That was right after I'd been brainwashed. Brainwashed with kisses and words of love. What can I say? You're too good to be true and I was afraid something would spoil it. You're the first man I've ever known who's been totally open with me. Who's told everything. Who's kept no secrets from me." She flashed him a saccharine smile, one she hoped he saw was patently false. Given his grim expression, she was fairly certain he had.

"What can I say? Your honesty scared me. Scared me into going on a road trip with Hilda." She shrugged. "I was so shook up, I ate a Colosso Burger, an extra large order of fries, an apple pie, and a giant Chocolate Freez. I would've eaten the other burger, it was a special, buy one, get one free deal." She sighed, with she hoped the right touch of sad regret. "But Hilda got to it first."

Hal's gaze met and held hers. "You're blaming your binge on me because I was finally honest with you?"

She frowned. Much as she hated to admit it, he was right. "No, you aren't responsible for my behavior, I am. Yes, I can and should control my eating." She paused, her eyes narrowing as she noted his relief. Time for a reality briefing. "I know you've confessed that you've lied to me, but have you told me everything? The entire truth? Because I have to tell you, Hal, I have the distinct impression you're holding something back. Something critical. Call it female intuition or my legal training, but I've this sense that's warning me the other shoe's about to drop."

"It took a lot for me to admit I'd lied." He moved closer. "Why can't you accept that I've told you the truth?"

Blinking furiously, trying to forestall her tears, she shrugged.

He rubbed his forearms. "I t-told you the t-truth. I-I've t-told you everything I c-can."

"What do you mean you've told me everything you can? And how come you're stuttering all of a sudden?"

He paced the floor. "I d-do this w-when I-I'm...when I'm—"

"Lying?"

He stopped in front of her, clutching his chest as if he were having a heart attack. "I-in l-love. I-I t-told y-you t-the ot-ther n-night."

"In l-love? With m-me?" She stuttered back, clutching her own chest.

He nodded.

"Oh, Hal, I love you, too. And you don't have to say another word."

Still looking wild-eyed, he took one step forward, flopped beside her and pulled her into his lap. Before she could object, he'd covered her mouth with his.

In seconds, their kiss went from hungry to desperate. Lindsey clutched his neck as he lay her on the sofa and covered her with his body. He traced the outline of her mouth and chuckled ever so slightly. "Damn straight." Then he kissed her again. While hunger still lurked in the wings, this contained all the vows of love and the future. Every muscle in her body turned to gelatin.

She tilted her pelvis.

He groaned. "Too many clothes."

She unhooked his buckle, then unzipped his khakis.

"Not mine. Yours," he growled. He stripped off her warm-up jacket and tossed it onto the floor. Next, he effortlessly unclasped her bra and pitched it on top of the jacket. His hands were everywhere, caressing, learning the curves of her body, cradling and massaging her breasts.

Lindsey held his face in her hands. "I love you, Hal Randall." As he lowered his mouth to hers, she tugged at his pants, urging them slowly down to his hips with her free hand. His arousal pressed against her, its heat penetrating her clothing, but she pushed him back for a brief instant. "Wait. I want you. Now. Here. But I have to get these damn clothes off."

He nodded. "Don't let me stop you." He rolled off her and immediately tried to pull her sweats down.

"I can do it faster," she said, getting to her feet.

Her pants hit the floor as the door swung open, slamming against the wall.

Darrow entered the office. Three policemen followed on his heels.

Lindsey lunged for the sweats pooled around her ankles.

Hal bolted to his feet. He placed himself between Lindsey and a leering Darrow, then glanced at the folded legal document in the hand of the tall Sergeant. *Arrest Warrant, Halloran Randall.*

He inclined his head toward the paper, then faced Darrow. "I see you got the D.A. to do your dirty work."

"Yeah, Kenny was real obliging."

"And there's a sucker born every minute."

CHAPTER TWELVE

With arms folded across his chest, Hal leaned against the cell wall. Over the past five hours, he'd seen enough of the Dickens jail to last him a lifetime.

If only he could forget the look of horror and shame on Lindsey's face as Darrow and the police had burst in on them. He prayed she was okay. He also prayed he could make her understand that he truly loved her. Something told him, given the way his day had started, that wasn't about to happen anytime soon.

He grimaced. In less than a day, he'd gone from being a respected research psychiatrist to having his career in the cesspool and rooming with a couple of men from spaghetti-western hell.

Slowly, he turned his head and once again studied his companions. One was a real cowboy. He was scruffy and one of the poorest-dressed and filthiest men Hal had ever seen. He also had one hell of a hangover. In fact, Hal was willing to bet his last paycheck—and he did mean his last paycheck—the man was still drunk. Normally, drunks didn't bother him. Drunk cowboys were another matter.

His other cellmate was what Wanda and Marie snidely referred to as a Sunday cowboy—a wannabe Roy Rogers wearing a pair of stiff, new jeans and shiny, black bull-hide boots.

Leaning against the wall, Hal studied the wannabe cowboy. He couldn't figure out what the man could possibly have done to end up in jail. Pushing away from the wall, he strode the three steps necessary to arrive at the cell's door. He angled his head, looked out between the bars and stared at the solid door leading to freedom.

Grinning, Wannabe ambled over to Hal. "Howdie," he said in a thick Boston accent.

"Hi," Hal replied, struggling to keep a straight face. The boy didn't have a prayer of a chance of getting out of West Texas alive. In that moment, Wannabe's name became "Boston."

Boston joined him in resting against the cell's bars. "Do either of you guys know where that rattlesnake roundup is happening?"

The real cowboy pulled his dusty black Stetson off his face. Rolling into an upright position, he threw the hat onto his cot. "Where you from, boy? 'Cause it sure ain't from 'round here."

Boston pushed his hat back, so it rested on his head John Wayne style. "True, but that doesn't mean I can't handle anything you're dishing out."

Hal's gaze drifted between the two men. Boston knew all the right moves, assuming he was filming a movie for Hollywood and it was camp. Unfortunately,

the other man looked like a live grenade with the pin pulled. Hal moved closer to Boston, wondering if he should throw himself on top of him as the grenade exploded.

Instead, the real cowboy laughed, surprising Hal and embarrassing Boston. "You ain't worth swattin', let alone gettin' up to do it."

How long does it take to wire bail money? He'd called Jeff before they'd thrown him in this single-cell jailhouse. Jeff had promised immediate action. Of course, immediate took on a different meaning when one was trapped behind bars.

One thing for sure, he wasn't going anywhere until Sheriff Girard received the bail money, so he might as well investigate the psychological make-up of his cellmates. Who knew, he might even get a paper out of the experience.

The cowboy swung his legs off the cot and sat up. "Aw, hellfire and damnation. I wuz jest tryin' ta get my jerky back," he muttered into his hands. "Trailed that sneakin' scoundrel from the meat packin' plant at Slaton clear down through Post, over to Clairemont and up to Spur. Jest as I was layin' a trap fer the good fer nothin' jerky thief, that dadnabit Sheriff come up from behind and hog-tied me."

Intrigued, Hal moved to the cowboy's cot. "Why'd the Sheriff arrest you for trying to get your property back?" Not that he could understand why anyone would want a few pounds of leather.

At the cowboy's murderous glare, Hal had an inkling why inmates were killed in their sleep.

The other man stood and faced Hal. "Damned jackass says it ain't legal to use a Colt revolver on a state highway. He even called me drunk."

Hal's eyes watered. Whiskey still clung to the man like mud on a pig. "No kidding. Wonder where he got that idea from?" he ground out, trying to take shallow breaths.

"A real Colt?" Boston asked, awed.

The cowboy slanted the kid glare. "Is there any other kind?"

Hal moved a foot away. "So, how much drinking did you do?"

"Not much. Jest while I chased the sonofabitch. What's a quart of Tennessee Bourbon anyway? Wasn't even hundred proof. Half water."

"Yeah. That water'll get you every time." Hal moved to the barred window. More than water had snuck up on him. Lindsey, the pizza-eating, vanilla-smelling tornado, had picked him up and he still hadn't landed. Hal glanced around the small cell. Or maybe he had. He could only hope Lindsey was as forgiving as she was luscious and loving.

The cell door creaked open. "Let's go, Randall."

Hal smiled. Finally. Jeff had come through with the money.

“Great.” He flashed Girard a grin. “Just have to pick up my stuff and I’m outta here.”

“Not so fast, boy.” Girard grabbed his arm as he headed toward the exit. “First, you gotta see the judge.”

Hal looked back at his cell. “I’d rather stay here if you don’t mind.”

“No can do. The judge is waitin’.”

Hal wanted to cry. Anything was better than meeting Judge Garraway. Judge Wanda Garraway.

He carefully entered the old-fashioned courtroom. After Marie’s description, he was relieved at not finding gallows standing at the ready outside the window. He looked up at the elevated platform and swallowed hard. Judge Wanda Garraway sat stock-still and, not for the first time in the past few days, Hal squeezed his legs together.

He’d never understood it, but this small, rather plain woman struck terror in his heart. Maybe it was her contempt of him and his profession. Or maybe it was—

“Hal Randall, step forward.”

For some insane reason, he always expected her to say, *Nothing beats a nice glass of Chianti and a slab of liver with some fava beans*. His liver, of course.

He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut.

“What’s the matter? Having trouble concocting another lie?”

He had to say something, otherwise he’d be fried where he stood. And under Wanda’s searing gaze, he’d turn into cinders within a second. “I-I-”

“He stutters when he gets nervous.”

He spun toward the familiar voice behind him. Relief washed over him as Lindsey walked to him. Her complexion was a brilliant crimson. Her clothing rumpled. And she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

Wanda glared at her. “What are you doing here, young lady?”

“I’m his witness. I was with him when he was arrested.”

Hal touched her shoulder. “Don’t do this, Lindsey.”

Wanda pounded her gavel. “I’ll decide who has to do what.”

She smiled at Lindsey, and Hal went into shock. He’d never seen her in such good humor, at least not around him.

“Are you the girl with the Tweety Bird slippers?”

“Yes, ma’am. How’d you know?”

“Marie. I thought she was weaving a fantasy for my amusement.” Wanda shook her head. “Imagine, a grown woman—” She stopped herself. “You two deserve each other. Bail’s been met. Court date’s one week from today.” She

banged the gavel, then pointed the gavel at Hal. “Better get yourself a really good lawyer.”

Hal wondered if Johnnie Cochran was available. He could hear the man now, chanting, *If the shrink’s an idiot, you must acquit.*

He nodded. “Sure thing.” He grabbed Lindsey’s hand and dragged her toward the back of the courtroom. “Let’s get outta here.”

Once outside, he looked at a now pink-faced Lindsey. “Why did you help me? Especially after the humiliation you suffered in front of Darrow and the police?”

“Don’t worry about it. When I was younger, in college, I mooned some people from my dorm window. Not that I’d planned to ever do it again, you understand. Especially without a lot of money riding on it. Besides, I don’t care what Larry Darrow thinks of me. Only what you think.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and stared up at him. “I might as well say it. You have. I love you. I’ll wait for you until you serve your sentence for fraud. Even if it’s years.”

He ground his teeth. Now what did he do? How could he tell her the truth? She’d feel like a sucker—worse, a fool, someone he’d used to further his own career. Unfortunately, she wouldn’t be wrong, at least about some of it.

“Dr. Randall, we need you to come with us.”

Startled, Hal and Lindsey turned as one toward the man standing beside a black car.

“Why? His bail’s been paid,” Lindsey said.

“Yes, ma’am. The Defense Department is grateful for your assistance.”

Hal braced himself. He’d known this moment was coming, yet no matter how much he’d tried to prepare himself, he wasn’t ready.

“Why does the Defense Department want to talk to you?” Her confused and frightened look demoralized Hal. There was nothing left for him to do. If they were to have a future, he had to come clean.

He placed a hand on either side of her face. With his thumbs, he gently, tenderly caressed her cheeks. “The clinical trials? They were a classified Federal project.”

“You mean everything you did was under government orders?”

He nodded, then trembled as she inhaled sharply.

“Another lie!” Without warning, she pulled back and punched him, almost knocking him to the ground. “I-it was a-all a joke—me, you, love, wasn’t it? Oh, God!” With one last anguished look, she bolted down the street.

“L-Lind-seeey!” He started after her.

The government man’s hand clamped down on him. “We have to go, sir, now.”

Lindsey sat in her car in front of Sam's house with a box of tissues in her lap and a bag of candy bars at her side. Sam would understand. She'd help Lindsey get past this...shattered heart.

She stroked the candy. At least she hadn't come empty-handed. After all, if she was going to ruin a friend's day by blubbering all over her furniture, it was best to bring a bribe.

Lindsey eased out of her car. Clutching the candy and tissues to her chest, she slowly shuffled up the front walk. "I shouldn't be here. It isn't fair to dump this on her. She doesn't deserve to have her day wrecked." She paused, remembering all the times she'd been there for Sam.

With renewed purpose, she climbed the stairs to Sam's house. Sniffing, she pressed the doorbell. The door flew open.

Lindsey wasn't sure which of them was more shocked. She, at seeing Sam in an oversized shirt and nothing else, or Sam at seeing Lindsey.

"How did you get out of the correctional center?"

"I was released for good behavior." She walked past Sam and flopped onto her sofa. "Candy bar?"

"Uh oh." After shutting the door, Sam studied Lindsey sitting on the long couch. "Your eyes look like two ripe tomatoes. What did that damn doctor do to you?"

She pulled three tissues from the box and blew her nose. She lifted her head, waiting for Sam to beg her to spill her guts. When her friend didn't say anything, she blew her nose again. Still no response. "Don't you care? Aren't you going to force me to tell?"

Sam reached for the bag of chocolate and selected a Nuts & More bar. As she unwrapped it slowly, exposing the chocolate a bit at a time, Lindsey thought of Hal and how he'd stripped her, physically and emotionally.

Grinning, Sam said, "I'll force this candy bar down your throat unless you talk."

"Hal's legit. Have you ever heard of anything so underhanded?"

Sam frowned at her. "You always said he was, so where's the problem?"

"You don't understand, he's a Federal flunkie. His experiment wasn't real... at least the part about the liposuction and Ches-Wrap. But because it was a government project, it's okay."

Sam set the candy down on the table. "Lin, Honey, I'm not following you. Are you sure food deprivation hasn't affected your brain?"

She broke off a piece of chocolate, then stuffed it in her mouth. "No way." She quickly chewed and swallowed. "Hal Randall was conducting some kind of

mind experiment, and it's so top secret, the Defense Department whisked him away somewhere."

"The nerve. Here we thought he was some kind of criminal trying to take government money, and all the time he was a Federal research physician." Unwrapping another candy bar, Sam smirked. "You just can't trust people anymore."

"Sam, you're supposed to be my friend!" Lindsey reached for the candy. "Don't you see? He lied to me, even after we'd been in the closet."

Sam grabbed her hand before she popped the candy in her mouth. "The closet?"

She nodded. "It's a long story. The point is, he said he loved me. Then I found out he's not planning to suck out anything." She wrenched her hand out of Sam's stronghold and bit into the chocolate-coated nut bar.

Sam crossed her arms and leaned back into the sofa's side cushions. "Hmmm. My little friend's got it bad."

"Got what bad?" Lindsey glanced at her, her gaze narrowing on a small bruise on Sam's neck.

"Love. You're in love, even though you think Hal's a rat."

Lindsey shrugged. "It doesn't matter. He's gone, and I'm left with all my fat." She pointed at the candy bag. "And it looks like I'll have even more fat to keep me warm." She blinked fast and hard. To maintain control, she diverted Sam's attention. "Is that a hickey?"

Sam laughed and fingered the area surrounding the bruise on her neck. "Yeah. He wasn't very careful. But then, I'd been a bad girl right before that."

"Who's the guy?"

Sam released a deep sigh. "Kenny."

"Kenny who?"

"How many Kennys do we know?"

"Only one, but he'd never...Kenny Kramer?"

Sam nodded.

"No way! He's passionless. He only lasts the length of a commercial—a very short commercial." She watched Sam twirl a strand of blonde hair around her finger. "Tell me, Sam, what's going on?"

"He's wonderful." Sam's sheepish eyes met her gaze. "He's a ninety-minute wonder."

"I don't believe this. Hal uses me as a lab rat and his fat bimbo on the side. Kenny goes from the ninety-second slam-bam with me to the ninety-minute Energizer Bunny with you. What's wrong with me?"

Sam hugged her. "Maybe you weren't using the right kind of batteries." She pulled back. "Cheer up, Lin. I know you think Randall's gone, but I bet he isn't. And I'll bet he's the perfect positive for your negative charge."

She stared at Sam in disbelief. "Don't tell me you've stopped being a cynic and become a dreaded romantic instead."

"Amazing what love can do, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's absolutely, heartbreakingly amazing."

Lindsey bit into a carrot stick, forcing herself to eat. She'd cried so often in the past few weeks, she was dehydrated. Not wanting to forget her misery, she'd captured all her tears. The discarded tissues now littered her coffee table. Of course, they weren't alone. They had company. Bottles of diet cola bottles and empty carrot bags.

Who would've thought the secret to losing weight was to fall in love?

"It isn't the falling in love that does it, it's the getting your heart trounced."

Nothing made sense. She'd never reacted this way before when a relationship went south, so why now?

Lindsey stood. Wonder turned to shock as the waistband of her once-tight knit pants slipped down around her hips.

Lindsey Michaels didn't lose weight. Fat tracked her down and found her no matter where she hid. She frowned. Still, there was no denying the baggy clothes or the lower number on her bathroom scales.

"Great, just great. I'm losing weight, and the only ones who're gonna see it are Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall." She picked up the now-empty tissue box and pitched it at Humphrey's face on the TV screen.

The doorbell rang.

An electric shock shot through her. Hal!

Her eyes widened in horror as she took in the disaster surrounding her. "Just a minute!" She scraped old tissues into empty carrot bags. Running to the TV, she grabbed the empty tissue box, then, with arms filled, raced into the kitchen and everything into an over-flowing trashcan. The extra items started an avalanche. With a shrug, she left the kitchen and closed the door.

She ran her fingers through her knotted hair as she passed the dining room mirror. Catching sight of herself, she recoiled. "Think not swollen. Think happy. Think I-haven't-thought-about-him-for-one-minute-after-I-left-him-at-the-jail." She bit her lip. "You're out of your mind. You'll never carry it off." She stiffened her back. "But you can try."

She opened the door. Her feigned disinterest didn't last.

Hilda and a young man stood grinning at her. Hilda with additional weight and a very good-looking man.

"Hi, Lin." She held up a box of fried chicken. "Look what I brought. The Colonel himself. We thought you'd like to hear the news and celebrate with us."

At the smell of the greasy chicken, Lindsey's stomach did a series of jumping jacks. "Come on in." She smiled at the man, who was a number ten on anyone's scale. "You must be Jerome."

"Jerry. I'm Jerry."

They entered the house.

"What made you decide to drop Jerome for Jerry?" Lindsey almost gagged as Hilda opened the container and the smell of grease surrounded her.

"Hilda told me what you said."

"Don't listen to me, Jerry. I don't give very good advice."

"Yes, you do." Hilda laughed, then took a big bite out of a chicken leg. "Have some?"

"No, thanks. I just finished lunch."

"Bet it wasn't carrot sticks." Hilda laughed again.

"Why do you think I gave you good advice?" Lindsey gestured for the two of them to be seated and pulled over a fresh box of tissues for Hilda to use on her fingers.

"Well, ma'am," Jerry began.

Lindsey's head dropped against the back of her chair. "I'm only thirty. Call me Lindsey."

"Right." Jerry stopped again. "You're really thirty years old?"

She forced a grin. "Time flies when you're havin' fun."

"Well, Lindsey, Hilda told me what you said, about me being what I am, not something I'm not. I went back to Mr. Housemann. I told him my name was Jerry, and I was the best foreman he ever had. I reminded him that I'd helped him demolish more property than anyone else in the past year. Then I bit the bullet and told him, if he wanted me to stay, he'd have to double my salary. If not, I'd walk that same day."

"And he doubled your salary?" Lindsey looked over at Hilda as she placed her chicken bone, polished to a soft patina, on the coffee table.

"No!" Hilda and Jerry said simultaneously.

Hilda laughed. "Daddy wouldn't take Jerry up on his offer. So Jerry left and went back to his own Daddy. Guess what? Jerry's Dad's gonna finish paying for his education."

"I didn't know you'd been in school." Lindsey couldn't believe how happy these two were. Obviously, ignorance was bliss.

Jerry was still nodding. “Yes, ma’am. I had a fight with my Dad six months before I graduated.”

Lindsey settled back in her chair. “What’s your degree in?”

“Culinary Arts. I’m going to be a chef,” Jerry said with a grin.

Hilda held up her hand. “And we’re engaged. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Lindsey nodded and tried to look happy. Hilda had found her hunk, Jerry had found his ham, and she’d found her lemon.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You should have seen him, Jeff.” Hal massaged his temples, trying to ease the throb that had plagued him all morning. “Darrow was in his element. He stood there grinning as I deplaned, escorted by DOD officers, which of course, he took to be FBI.” He kicked the office trashcan. “He had a leer on his face.” Hal glanced at Jeff. “So there he stood, and all I could say was ‘Jackass.’ Like that’s going to dent his ego. Then he said, ‘Paybacks are hell, aren’t they?’ What payback? That’s what I want to know. He got my wife, destroyed my experiment, career and good name, not to mention ruining my one chance at happiness. And he’s paying me back?” This time, when he kicked the can, it slammed into the wall and left a gouge.

Laughing, Jeff pulled his dinner from the microwave. “He’s right. Paybacks are hell. You remember the old saying, ‘What goes around comes around tenfold’?”

“Yeah, but what’s that got to do with the price of a pizza?”

“Everything. Darrow’s gonna love his new assignment.” Jeff walked to the lunch table and sat down.

“What new assignment?” Hal leaned back against the wall, crossed his ankles and jammed his hands into his pants’ pockets.

Jeff snickered as he dumped hot-pepper sauce on his food. “It’s beautiful, really beautiful. Couldn’t happen to a more deserving man.” Between shakes of the sauce bottle, he raised his gaze to Hal’s. “Hear Cindy’s leaving him, too.”

“That’s a twist. Cindy swore she’d never leave his side. But then she swore she wouldn’t leave mine either.”

“That’s probably the only good thing about the new assignment... losing Cindy, I mean.”

Hal pushed away from the wall. In two strides, he reached the table, jerked the hot-pepper sauce bottle out of Jeff’s hands and set it on the table with a bang. “Enough, already! What’s the SOB’s assignment?”

“If you’re sure you want to know.” At his growl, Jeff chuckled. “His current employer, Psychological Research, Inc., made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. Either go to Africa—some new and very little country I can’t find on the map—to study the psychological changes of the female bare-chested baby-machines when introduced to modern education or find another grant to support him.”

“I thought he had the company in his hip pocket. Why’d they do that?”

Jeff swallowed a mouthful of Mexican food. “Beats me. Guess he pissed off somebody.”

"I'll be damned." Hal grinned. "I guess good things do come to those who wait. Given that Darrow's always been a chest man, I doubt he'll find it a hardship. Particularly with Cindy out of his life."

Jeff nodded, his cheeks full of food.

"How can you eat that stuff?" Hal frowned as his boss swallowed, then scooped up a fork full of refried beans. "If you're going to eat all those fat grams, at least eat the real McCoy, not something made in Maine."

Jeff looked up from his plate and pointed his fork in his direction. "That job at FRAT has changed you, my boy. You used to live on TV dinners."

Hal rolled down the sleeves of his shirt and rebuttoned the cuffs. "Not anymore. That stint in Texas taught me there's a whole lot more to life than tasteless cardboard meals and city traffic."

Jeff swallowed and grinned. "Yeah. Well, I'm sure your experience with FRAT didn't teach you that, nor did you come to that great revelation in the Dickens County Jail."

"No, actually, I discovered it in my closet."

Jeff paused mid-bite. "In your closet?"

"Never take life for granted when Mother Nature decides to rebel."

Jeff nodded. "Right, the tornado."

Yeah, Lindsey.

"I've been approached by Texas Tech's Health Sciences Center about a job. They have an opening for a staff psychiatrist. The pay's even better than here."

Jeff placed his fork on his plate. "This wouldn't have anything to do with a former female client, would it?"

"Maybe. Since I returned, I've spent a lot of time thinking about Lindsey. I can't get her out of my mind. I keep remembering some of the oddest things, like her insistence that one pound of M&Ms should equal a one-pound gain, not three pounds."

"I don't follow."

"Neither did I until a few days ago. But researching the phenomenon might turn out to be a lot of fun." He nodded in Jeff's direction. "Better wish me luck, because I've got a feeling I'm going to need it."

Lindsey stared at the new machine in disgust. "Why'd I buy this? I can't even pronounce the name." It was French, and she didn't speak the language. All she remembered was it sounded sort of like "Fall on your Fanny." "Serves me right for watching the shopping channel."

The slim, trim, toned saleswoman had boasted the machine was a new method to work the body's fine muscles without heavy effort. Just six weeks on

your rump supposedly raised everything back to where God had originally intended.

“Yeah, if you can get off the floor.” She folded the machine, then pushed it back under the sofa. “Only workout I’m gonna get is pulling the sucker out and putting it away.”

With a scowl, she collapsed on her couch. Who was she kidding? She was born anti-workout. It took more than a machine to make her exercise.

As she retrieved the TV remote, the doorbell rang. Sam. She’d said she’d come over and coach Lindsey on her first day using the “Fall on your Fanny” machine.

She hoped Kenny wasn’t with her. The last thing she wanted to deal with was Kenny and Sam’s nauseating, lovey-dovey coos. It was enough to put a person off romance.

Lindsey took her time easing off the sofa, then walking to the door. She knew Sam too well to even hope her friend would let her sit on the sofa and watch old movies. She’d made it her personal crusade to make Lindsey firm and tone the now-shrinking mass around her middle.

“Come on in. Let’s get it over with.” She opened the door with a flourish. “But I’m warning you, I’m not up for this, so—” Her mouth dropped open. “Hal?”

He leaned in and kissed her nose. “May I come in?”

“W-what? Oh, yes, of course,” she stammered, unable to move or take her gaze off him. In a cream-colored sweater and a pair of tight jeans, he looked better than she remembered. And, over the past weeks, she’d imagined him looking mighty fine.

He looked at her questioningly. “I was hoping you’d want to see me.”

“I do!” She grabbed him and jerked him into the room. “For you, I’ll exercise.” Remembering his office, she decided hot sex on a sofa still sounded like a good idea.

“I didn’t come here to continue harassing you. This isn’t FRAT.”

She nodded her head. “It’s okay. Harass me.”

He chuckled. “You’ll never change.”

“But I have.” She pulled out her pants at the waistband. “See? I’ve lost ten pounds.”

He stared at her waist, then his gaze slowly drifted up to her chest and back to her face. “It seems some places have remained unaffected.”

She shook her head. “I know! It makes me so damn angry. I’m only losing the weight from my middle and my face.”

“Don’t worry about it. You look great.” He moved closer. When he got within six inches, he stopped. “I meant it when I said I loved you, Lindsey. That was no con.”

“I’m glad.” She stepped close and wrapped her arms around his waist. “I like this,” she murmured, nuzzling his neck.

“So do I. Want to do it for the next fifty years, give or take a decade?” His voice dropped to a low rumble.

“Does this mean that your annulment is final?” She pulled back for his reaction.

“Honey, you know I wasn’t married. I was once, but I was young and stupid and we’re divorced. I hadn’t met you yet. I didn’t know what I wanted.”

She held onto him for dear life, afraid if she let go she’d collapse in a heap and discover this was just another dream. “Do you really want me? Truly?”

“Yeah. I want my girl back. The one with the stubborn fat and the Tweety Bird robe and slippers. The one who’ll bail me out of jail even though she knows I’m guilty.” He leaned down and kissed her softly. “I want the one who’ll always be a little overweight and doesn’t care.”

“Does that mean you want to marry me?”

He nodded, then started to lower his head.

“Me, my thunder thighs, big boobs and chocolate addiction?”

He nodded again. “And don’t forget the pizza. In fact, why don’t we order a large supreme?”

She shook her head. “In a little while. But when we do, let’s make it two. By then, we’ll have burned off the calories,” she said against his lips.

As she deepened the kiss, she decided pizza, along with chocolate, had definitely moved down a notch on the list of things she loved.