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# To Catch a Cop



**Elle Druskin**

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*By*

*Elle Druskin*



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ISBN: 978-1-60435-715-8

Cover Artist: Shirley Burnett

Editor: Crystal B.

Line Editor: Red Rose™ Publishing

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## Chapter One

*We're all smart after the fact, isn't that right?*

Right from the start, I should have known the day would be a stinker. A run in a brand new pair of pantyhose, my son couldn't find his sneakers for gym class, and the toilet backed up, flooding the bathroom with a nauseating mess that you don't want to know about. We drove halfway to school, only to have to turn back to get my daughter's forgotten lunch, since I couldn't spare lunch money in its place.

It would've almost been a relief to get to work, where I was planning to teach my nursing students how to prime an intravenous line. That seemed a lot easier than the morning bedlam which reigned at my house.

I hurried down the hall, already two minutes late for class. As I rushed to the classroom, I could hear students' excited voices echoing down the corridor.

"What are you doing Saturday night?"

"Have you seen the latest issue of *Cosmo*?"

"What mark did you get on the essay for Gloria?"

Twenty students clustered in the hall, chattering loudly outside the nursing lab, in anticipation of my arrival. They parted like the Red Sea, clearing the doorway for me, as I furtively clutched a scrap of paper with the series of numbers I had to punch into an electronic keypad, in order to unlock the door.

The lock pinged and the door swung open. I stepped inside, my nose a twitch from the stench of alcohol enveloping the lab.

In the dim light, I glanced quickly at the lifeless mannequins tucked into bed, their glassy eyes staring up at the ceiling. There were notes clipped on the bed frames for students to decipher, oxygen tanks and masks were scattered between the beds. A locked drug cabinet, filled with simulated medications, perched on a table beside the motionless dolls that were supposed to be hospital patients. Shelves filled with syringes, needles, dressing packs, and all sorts of paraphernalia used in hospital wards were stacked neatly, ready for practice sessions with students.

Reflexively, I flicked the switch for the overhead fluorescent lights as I started forward, almost stumbling. It wasn't that there was anything unusual about the odor, nor the neatly stacked plastic chairs against the wall, ready to be set up around the five work tables.

What stopped me dead in place was the unexpected discovery. Another patient. But there was no lesson plan for this one.

Close behind me, twenty sets of eyes focused on the ghastly sight, putting an abrupt end to the loud chatter, which now gave way to a chorus of gasps.

Wide-open grey eyes stared up at the ceiling. Dirty blonde hair stuck up at odd angles, adding to the ghoulish spectacle. Prominent cheekbones, bleached of color, and the tongue protruding from his mouth, seemed fairly

conclusive evidence that the lifeless body splayed on the floor of my classroom had been dead for hours.

A scream that would have rivaled Fay Wray pierced the silence. A second later, I realized that I was the one who had screamed.

I jumped in place as a hand tapped my shoulder.

“Gee, do you think he’s dead?”

I whipped my head around to see who had asked such an incredibly stupid question, as the shocked students pressed over my shoulder, like a brood of chicks gathered around a mother hen.

“What kind of clinical skills are we teaching you if you can’t even recognize a dead body?” I said, in a panic.

Uncontrollable shudders racked my body; I could sense hysteria breaking out like hives that no antihistamine would ever relieve.

*Breathe deeply. Do it again. You’re in charge here.*

Still shaking, I steeled myself to get control of my own emotions, lest pandemonium break out. Another deep breath and I pointed with an index finger to the door, my eyes never leaving the gruesome sight at my feet.

No one moved. Our legs seemed to have lost their ability to function, as if the body had paralyzed us all against our wills.

“Everyone out, now!”

Obediently, the group shuffled backwards as one, towards the door.

One student cried silently, huge tears streaming down her cheeks, as a

couple of others patted her back for comfort, and still others exchanged whispered comments. One miserable student retched, the disgusting mess only adding to the macabre scene in the room.

Pale, frightened faces stared back at me, more of them reacting to the initial shock as tears dribbled down their cheeks.

A shiver ran up my spine as I stood over the supine male. His denim clad legs were spread-eagled like a carelessly-thrown rag doll. I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to take anymore.

*Maybe this is a hallucination. Please let me open my eyes and let there be nothing there.*

*Fat chance.* I knew even before I opened them he'd still be there. Sasha. A macabre remnant of the young man who had been my student only the day before.

I drew a deep breath in an effort to get a grip on my jangled nerves, forcing myself to recall the crisis training from my own undergraduate nursing studies years before.

*The best way to handle an emergency situation is to give people something to do.*

The drone of the psychology professor's voice echoed through my foggy brain, as I visualized his stuffy lecture theatre and the hundreds of bored students, carelessly jotting down notes.

I blinked, desperately trying not to gawk at the sickening corpse, but I seemed unable to avoid staring at Sasha's chalk white face. I had seen plenty of dead bodies as a nurse over the years, but not someone I had personally known.



Another deep breath and I was ready to face the crisis.

Right. A plan. I always feel better when I have a plan.

*Give people orders and they'll do what you say.*

I squared my shoulders and addressed the horrified students.

“Pam, go upstairs and get a security guard. Kate, go straight to the Dean’s office and get someone down here from administration. Try to get Bill Kingsley.”

*Bill, the pain in the ass. He was the faculty manager. Let him manage this.*

“Tell them to call the police.”

Years spent engrossed in crime shows on television, and a small fortune spent on hundreds of mystery novels had finally paid off. Janet Evanovich would be proud of me. I had some semblance of how to react, thanks to multiple re-runs of *Law and Order*.

“Nobody touch anything. Kerry, take Louise to the toilet and help her wash up. Don’t leave her alone.”

The others clustered outside the door, stunned into silence. Profound shock radiated on their faces, pale and wide-eyed, their brows furrowing in thought at the sight they had just stumbled upon. Several slumped on the floor, backs braced against the brick wall. Backpacks, notebooks, pens and other assorted student paraphernalia were scattered on the worn, beige carpet.

I backed out of the doorway, crouching among them.

Despite their distressed state, one of the girls leaned over and managed to

whisper softly in my ear.

“Lindy, are you okay?”

I nodded grimly, grateful that in their shock, my students had thought of my feelings, too. This particular group of students had bonded well. They had formed solid friendships and I knew that, in some way, they thought of me as friend, too, even if I was their teacher.

Years ago, I had a professor who told me that whenever a crisis occurred, she would delay getting hysterical until later. That advice served me well. I shoved aside my own revulsion, knelt among the girls, and spoke quietly. I did my best to soothe them, trying to alleviate a palpable rising sense of panic. I knew without a doubt that none of them would ever forget what they had seen, but that they would also never forget how I had handled this fiasco.

“It’s okay. Whatever happened, the police will take care of things.” I sounded like a broken record that skipped over and over on the same phrase of music, but it seemed to help.

They settled, several of them whimpering. Their arms wrapped around each other, all of them gazed up at me, as if I could magically change what had happened.

Nineteen heads in various shades of red, brown, blonde, and one student with green punk hair turned at the sound of rapidly striding feet. Wearing a designer grey-pinstripe suit and scowl, Mr. Manager, Bill Kingsley marched down the hall.

He stopped in front of me, frowning.

Ridiculously, I wondered if he was judging my appearance. I looked away, discovering that the run in my pantyhose had widened and now appeared to be a peculiar stripe down one leg. I gazed up again but kept silent.

His eyes flickered at the teary-eyed group. Mascara lines ran down their faces, several had red noses, and they were passing tissues back and forth.

“What’s the problem down here? Can’t you handle one simple class? Fail too many on the last assignment? Student issues aren’t in my portfolio of tasks.” Sarcasm fairly dripped from his voice, matching the smarmy look on his face.

*Wise guy.*

Bill had ambitions, and minor student problems were definitely not on his agenda. He had other matters to occupy his time, being too busy playing politics around the university. Ambitious and more than a little ruthless, he wanted to move up, and he had no patience for what he must have presumed was something minor to distract his attention.

Obviously, Kate had been so upset that she hadn’t told him what awaited him in the classroom.

As I boosted up on one knee, a snag caught on my other leg. A matched set, two prize-winning runs in the pantyhose.

*Small potatoes compared to Sasha.*

I lifted my chin defiantly, pointing towards the lab.

“In there.”

One rapid glance inside at the sight of Sasha sent Bill gagging, and running towards the men's room.

"I bet that wasn't in his job description, either," I murmured innocently, sinking down to sit on the carpeted floor with the girls.

Disappointed by Bill's less-than take-charge response, I prayed for the arrival of the security guard to take over.

*Surely he would know what to do and get me off the hook. How long could it take to get down a few floors of the building?*

One of the girls giggled, a nervous reaction to the gruesome situation as Pam panted toward us, her legs striding down the corridor, followed by one of the security guards.

After a quick glance inside the open door, he bolted like Bill. One more for the men's room.

"Men. Real wimps," muttered Pam.

"Are the police on the way?" My hands shook, although I desperately tried to hold myself together for the sake of the girls who counted on me.

In the back of my head, I had the crazy thought that I hoped this wouldn't take too long. I was supposed to be at an open day at my kids' school in two hours.

An involuntary shiver went through my body. I was unable to control my sick reaction to Sasha's death as I considered various explanations, none of which made the slightest sense.

*What did I know about him? Not all that much.*

Sasha Azimov was never one of my conspicuous students; the ones you know will do well, no matter how much work you give them. Nor was he outstandingly bad at his work, which also draws attention like a radar signal. It's only the really exceptional ones, at either end of the spectrum, that stick in your mind. The students who are so keen and interested, that they do superb work, no matter how much you dump on them. At the other end were the failures. You can't wait for the semester to end so you can get rid of them.

Sasha really didn't fall into either category, although he was a candidate for the failure crowd.

Despite my offer, he never came to my office for extra help, although he certainly could have used all the help he could get, based on his latest assignment.

Like the majority of his fellow students, he usually managed enough work on an essay or exam to scrape by, and was satisfied at that level.

You could honestly say the most distinguishing thing about Sasha was the way he died. That, and the place he had chosen.

*For that matter, what could he have done to deserve death? Did he commit suicide deliberately in my classroom, as a pointed reminder that he had failed his last essay? Was this my fault?*

A twinge of guilt made me gulp as I recalled that I had awarded him a low, failing grade only the day before yesterday. Had that been enough to send

him hurtling over the edge?

Try as I might, I couldn't seem to recall anything distinctive about Sasha, other than his overpowering lack of oral hygiene.

He had stormed into to my office two days ago after I had handed back the assignment. The smell had been enough to make me choke. Sasha had reeked of enough garlic to ensure that I would be safe from vampires well into the next century. Despite my calm attempts to explain the reasons he had failed, he refused to listen, shouting abuse so loudly, I was certain all my colleagues could hear the harangue, in his heavily-accented English.

"You be sorry, Missus Keelman," he had threatened, wagging a dirty index finger at me.

*Was this what he had meant?*

It seemed excessively dramatic to commit suicide over a failing grade in my lab as a pointed comment on my marking procedure, but it certainly made a point.

*Where were the police? How long could it take?*

I didn't know how much longer I could hold myself together. My small sob was interrupted by the sweetest sound I could possibly imagine at that instant. Wailing police sirens made me jerk towards the deafening blare with a start. *Thank God.*

Loud footsteps, sounding like a stampede of buffalo pounded down the steps to the classroom. No Old West Posse. Something better, as far as I was

concerned. The cops had finally arrived.

The girls gazed up at them with shining adoration on their tear-streaked faces. *Hallelujah!* Their saviours had arrived, minus horses and lariats. No cowboy chaps or ten gallon hats either.

Instead, several cops, dressed in navy-blue jumpsuits, complete with nightsticks, handcuffs, pepper spray, and revolvers, flicked eyes over the group. One held his hand on his revolver, his chocolate eyes narrowing as if one of the girls was about to pounce and attack him. Another swivelled his head over the group like a periscope, seeking out the enemy.

From my vantage point, I could only see more feet as they thundered down the steps. Reebok sneakers and Doc Martens seemed to be the preferred footwear for Sydney's boys in blue.

One pair of Reeboks came to a halt in front of me. My eyes traveled upwards, over worn jeans and a navy-and-yellow rugby shirt.

Like a toddler staring up at an adult in awe, my eyes continued the upward climb to the face that frowned down at me. Fine lines etched around the bluest eyes I had ever seen. Those eyes reminded me of a pair of lapis earrings I hadn't worn in ages. They stared over a long, straight nose that complimented the full head of salt-and-pepper hair. Hard, chiseled features revealed nothing of what he was thinking, as if he had pulled on a mask to hide his emotions. About forty-two, I quickly calculated.

"Detective Fraser MacKinnon. You in charge here?"

The low, gruff voice had a rough quality. I swallowed hard, boosting up on one knee again. This time the pantyhose run turned into a hole over the knee.

His hand reached for mine as I rose to meet his hard glare. The second it touched mine, I felt a zing up my arm.

My body had decided that the police had arrived, and now I could finally relax and get hysterical. Fuchsia and purple dots danced in front of my eyes as I pitched forward into the waiting arms of Fraser MacKinnon.



*Screams echoed down the grey, drab corridor. Several nurses in starched uniforms and caps, and white-coated physicians glided past the room, none of them reacting to the high-pitched shrieks.*

*The sounds were muffled in the treatment room.*

*“Draw up sodium pentothal,” the doctor ordered. “Patient number 7703 requires further persuasion. She needs some help telling the truth.”*

*The nurse blinked at him, but trained to follow a physician’s orders, she unlocked the drug cabinet from a set of keys around her neck. Her hands withdrew the glass vial, laying it beside a syringe and large-bore needle.*

*The doctor’s eyes scanned the writing on the vial, and he nodded.*

*“Bring it to the room.” Without another word, he turned on his heels, leaving the*



*treatment room, the white coat flapping as he strode away.*

*The nurse snapped the glass vial open, carefully withdrawing a large dose of the drug into the syringe, and squinted at the tiny numbers that marked the side.*

*Satisfied that she had withdrawn the correct dose, she locked the cabinet again, placed the syringe on a tray, and walked in the direction of the room from which the screams had come.*

*The doctor was inside, standing at the foot of the bed. An exhausted woman lay on white sheets, her body in shivers from the cold.*

*“Here you are, sir,” the nurse said, offering him the tray that contained the syringe and an alcohol saturated cotton ball.*

*“Hold her arm,” he ordered.*

*Quickly, she strapped the tourniquet on the woman’s forearm. Dark blue veins stood out from the increased pressure.*

*The patient moaned softly but offered little resistance. Deep lines on her face made her look much older than her thirty years. She’d look much worse if she didn’t admit to her crimes, but that wasn’t the nurse’s worry.*

*Grasping the arm, she pressed firmly against the hard mattress. The physician leaned over, withdrawing the cap from the syringe. He pressed lightly on the barrel; a tiny drop of liquid dripped from the needle’s tip. Tapping a prominent vein, he injected the full amount into the woman’s arm.*



Pungent whiffs of ammonia made me cough, as I struggled to sit up, forcing myself to blink open my eyes.

A rainbow forest of denim surrounded me, like something out of a weird fairytale. For a second, I couldn't remember what had happened. My amnesia was cured when I stared up at the face that frowned back at me, and I became conscious of a strong arm wrapped firmly around my waist.

In my delirium, I thought I sniffed a trace of *Cool Water* aftershave. I blinked again, wondering if this was another hallucination. Unlike Sasha, this one looked pretty good.

"I just loved you as Dirty Harry," I mumbled. Girlish titters echoed in the silent corridor.

A cold, wet paper towel pressed down on my forehead, and big drops of water dripped down my face. I looked bad enough today, this would only add to my less-than-alluring appearance. Still trying to get a grip on myself, I hoped the Clint Eastwood clone didn't lean in too closely.

He might have smelled of aftershave, but I suspected that my aroma was the seductive fragrance of *Eau de Barf*, courtesy of my son's early morning upchuck, the tail end of a stomach virus. Kids. It's always something.

I squeezed my eyes shut again for several seconds to savor the unusual sensation of someone supporting me, in any capacity, for a change. I wanted to

lean back in those arms and stay there forever. There was something safe and secure about the feel of them around me. Regretfully, I forced a reality check on myself, opening my eyes.

“Feeling better?”

Still dazed, I nodded as he helped me stumble to my feet. I swayed again and felt his hand slip snugly around my waist. All my nerves were on edge, even though I knew it was probably defensive action on his part.

He must have figured I would pass out again, and it would be easier to catch me if he had a secure arm around my waist. His touch was the closest I had come to a man since my divorce, several years earlier.

Even in my stupefied state, I noticed that he was at least several inches taller than I, no mean feat at my own five foot, eight inches.

MacKinnon dug into his jeans pocket for a mobile phone. Still supporting me with one hand, he punched in several numbers, holding the phone to his ear.

“We’ve got a coroner’s case. We need the medical examiner on site right away and a photographer. The guys are cordoning off the area now.”

For the first time, I noticed that he spoke with a slight accent. Nothing overt, merely a soft *burr* on his r’s, not the typical Australian speech that dropped the letter so that here sounded like he to my American ear.

He clicked the phone off and gripped my forearm.

“You okay now?”

Like a speechless idiot, I nodded again. His eyes raked up and down my

disheveled attire, and I felt blood rush to my face. *Who did this guy think he was?*

“I think you’d better invest in another pair of pantyhose. Yours would be better off dead and buried,” he commented dryly, a note of amusement in his voice. His lips curled up slightly as he stared at my face.

*Great. Another wise guy. What is it with men?*

“What’s your problem? Is this a new detail, the fashion police?”

*Big mouth.* One hand clapped over my mouth in horror. *Oops.* Like a Britney Spears’ tune. I’d done it again. Things seem to jump out of my mouth from nowhere. When was I going to learn to shut up? I should have kept the snide remark to myself, but this time I was too annoyed to care.

This guy irked me. He made me nervous and I honestly couldn’t figure out why. It wasn’t like I’d done anything wrong.

“There’s a dead person in there! Why don’t you do something about it?” My voice cracked and I wobbled again. My hysteria was back, and I could feel it peak like the waves that broke over Bondi Beach.

Here I was with a dead student in my classroom, twenty distressed young women, and all this guy, okay, a *great* looking guy, I’ll grant him that, could talk about is my less-than-fashionable appearance.

*So what if I looked like a mess. Cops! What are we paying taxes for?*

He bent his head so close to my face that I caught a whiff of breath mints.

“You heard me call the medical examiner. The guys are cordoning off the room. They’ll start to take statements from your students, so what else did you

have in mind? A call to Patricia Cornwell?”

I was right. Mr. Hotcop was a smart ass. *How do I find so many of them?*

His cool, superior attitude grated on my already overstretched patience. I glared back at him, but could tell he was amused with me by the quirk in his lips. With a determined shove, I peeled his hand away from my waist. I couldn't help but wonder if he had noticed the definite roll of fat around my middle. I could only hope his powers of observation had a temporary power outage.

In my heart I knew I had to find an exercise program and this time, stick with it. I started hundreds of them, but inevitably stopped out of boredom or lack of time, or whatever other excuse I could find.

I cringed as I recalled the binge the previous evening. A whole carton of Haagen Dazs cookies and cream ice cream. *Eat it today, wear it tomorrow.*

With a start, I reflexively turned away from the lab, where plastic bands of yellow with the black, bold words CRIME SCENE. DO NOT CROSS. were already being taped in place over the door. My mouth tightened in a grimace.

Who cares about my most recent sugar overdose? What did that matter in the big scheme of things? A student, my student, was dead on the floor of my classroom and someone had to find out why.

I was about to open my mouth to ask what had been the cause of death *I could only hope the cop wouldn't say 'essay failure,' like some new academic variation of heart failure*, but before I could steel myself to ask, he cocked his head at me with a one-word question.

“American?”

I nodded. My accent still gave me away the minute I opened my mouth. Nobody would ever mistake me for an Aussie *sheila*.

Two younger cops were busy in the midst of the group of students taking down names, addresses and phone numbers.

A few of the girls giggled with the one that resembled Paul McCartney, in his better days. The other one was already asking one of the girls for a date.

I couldn't get over their callousness, and the rapid recuperative powers of the students. *A date, as if a dead body wasn't lying on the floor of my class!*

Before I could open my mouth to criticize the heartless attitude of law enforcement, Bill hurried up to the group followed by Barbara, our Dean of Students.

Ever gracious, her carefully styled blonde hair perfectly in place, Barbara is always dressed in beautiful designer suits. Her closet was the antithesis of my wardrobe of no-iron skirts and sweaters, mostly acquired when I could afford them at sales. Divorce settlements don't seem to cover clothing allotments.

Today, she was wearing a dark-green, flowing top, and pants of a silky kind of material. The stores probably have some sort of name like moss-fern green, like one of the crayons I used as a kid.

I gazed down at my appearance ruefully. Ripped tights and a coffee stain that had appeared out of nowhere on my black skirt. My concession to the fashionable color of the season was a purple bruise on my knee that clashed

with the dull red scrape next to the mark, a legacy from the early morning mad-rush to get the kids off to school on time, before racing down the road in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, over the Sydney Harbour Bridge to work.

“Bill told me what happened. I’m Barbara Atwater, Dean of Faculty. How can I help?” She extended her hand to MacKinnon who shook it briefly.

Barbara spoke in a calm, authoritative voice that made clear she was used to being in charge, but MacKinnon put her in her place. I thought I was off the hook now that Her Majesty had arrived, and sighed loudly with relief. I should have known better.

“The room is now being cordoned off until the medical examiner arrives. Until that time, no one enters the room. My men will take down any statements from your students, and I’d like to see—” He fumbled with some crumpled notes that he had jammed into his jeans pocket.

“Mrs. Keeler. On her own.”

“Kellerman,” I mumbled.

“Right, Kellerman.”

Barbara nodded her understanding, leading the way to her office, a gracious suite full of light and fresh flowers, always neat and tidy, never a book out of place. Even the coffee table in her office had carefully arranged journals, placed in a precise, geometric display. Her fancy office was a complete contrast to my cubbyhole where books, papers, and stacks of work piled up on chairs, shelves, my desk and most of the time, the floor as well. I keep making a mental

list of chores that need to be done, but cleaning the mess in my office always magically seems to end up at the bottom of the list.

I glanced down at my watch. Nine-thirty. *The kids' open day at school.*

I had sworn that I would be there, and the one thing I never do is make promises to the kids that I can't keep. Kids never let you forget them

"Will this take long?"

My voice wavered, and I knew that I sounded like a student called for an interview that reeks of bad news.

MacKinnon didn't look like the type to sympathize with parental assurances that I would be at the kindergarten presentation, and I decided to keep that commitment to myself.

Despite what you see on television, this cop didn't seem to be the empathetic type.

MacKinnon shrugged.

With a sinking heart, I knew I was right, and turned back to the girls, still busy giving their details to the cops. They included their availability on Friday night to the two policemen. All of them laughed together as if the whole thing had turned into an impromptu party.

I sighed at the incredible change in tone on the worst morning I could imagine. Nobody asked what I was doing Friday night. The same thing I always did anyway, spend it at home with my kids.

The last time I had been on a date had been about sixteen years in the



past.

“Nothing like youth for resiliency.”

Jolted out of my reverie, I squared my shoulders and met MacKinnon’s face, but his expression was unreadable. I tried one more time to escape.

“I’m very busy, so if you’ll excuse me—”

One arm grabbed my elbow.

“Not so fast. I want a word with you. A few words. The sooner we get started, the better for you, since you’re so busy.”

I cleared my throat, turning back to the group.

“Class is cancelled.”

MacKinnon snickered as Barbara did an about-face and proceeded to walk regally back to her office. Like courtiers, we were obviously supposed to follow.

“That was an understatement.”

Before I could reply, MacKinnon’s fingers touched my elbow.

“As for you, I wouldn’t make any plans for Friday night.”

Without another word of explanation, he strode ahead, following Barbara through the glass doors marked SCHOOL OF NURSING in heavy black letters, and continued into the administrative wing.

I trudged behind, wondering if the Dean’s petty-cash fund covered bail. It was starting to feel as if I might need to dip into the cash box. Not a happy perspective.

## Chapter Two

“Feel free to use my office,” Barbara offered, quickly bowing out.

With a curt nod of his head, MacKinnon dismissed the Dean, as my eyes widened in astonishment. Never had I seen Barbara so cowed. Anxious to disassociate herself with the dead body, she ducked out the door. *The Great Escape*.

I could bet she headed straight into the office next door, where she could safely station herself to eavesdrop through the paper-thin walls. Bill Kingsley was probably right behind her. Two rats bailed out, leaving me on a rapidly sinking ship. *Correction. One rat and the Queen Bee. So much for collegial loyalty.*

MacKinnon settled himself into a leather chair in front of the coffee table, indicating with his index finger that I should take the seat opposite him.

Like a dutiful child, I parked myself in the chair, tugging at the stained skirt in a failed attempt to cover the bruised knee and artfully hide the coffee splotch. Knees pushed together, I folded my hands in a prim pose in my lap.

A glimmer of amusement lit MacKinnon’s face as he stared at me so long that I began to squirm in the chair. Any attempt on my part to remain calm and stare back was failing miserably. I fidgeted in the seat, eyes cast down as I picked absent-mindedly at a piece of lint, avoiding his gaze.

“Are you always so nervous, or is it me?”

The question made me sit up with a start.

“You could show a little compassion. You can’t blame me for being agitated, after what happened this morning. It was hardly a good start to the day,” I shot back, with a bit of a whine.

MacKinnon considered my hot retort, easing back in his chair, giving me a chance to study him better.

Worn jeans, and the rugby shirt did nothing to disguise the muscles that spoke of frequent gym workouts. They only made me feel guilty about the state of my own body, and the cellulite that had seemed to appear overnight.

“Let’s start with the beginning.”

His suggestion seemed sensible enough as I cleared my throat to begin.

“Should I have a lawyer present?” My heart skipped a beat at the thought of lawyers eating up more money. I had finally gotten my lawyer paid from the divorce, and the thought of more bills sent my blood pressure momentarily rocketing. At forty, I didn’t know how much more strain my body could take.

“Not at all. We don’t know what happened to the student.” He consulted a scrap of paper that one of the younger cops had handed to him.

“Sasha Azimov. Don’t know whether this is a suicide or accidental death.” He paused and waited a full beat. “Or a murder.”

That did it. That last word was enough to drive me over the edge. The enormity of the tragic start of the day hit me in a delayed reaction. A lump

formed in my throat and one big tear trickled down my cheek. I sniffed, feeling my face crumple, as MacKinnon handed me a white handkerchief. I blew my nose, wondering if they hand out hankies, along with all the other cop paraphernalia they take to investigations. He waited several seconds as I gulped, forcing myself to meet his grim expression.

“Right. For now, this is a suspicious death, and until we see the medical report, we won’t know what’s behind it. Since you were the first to discover the body, it would be helpful if you could describe the scene.” His blue eyes softened along with his voice, like a parent wheedling a child to behave. I drew a deep breath before beginning.

“I got up at six and had coffee, before I started the daily battle with my kids to get ready for school.”

MacKinnon smiled at the statement and held up one palm.

“I think we can skip that part. Let’s pick up at your arrival at work.”

“I got to my office around half past eight, had a coffee.”

“Which you’re wearing,” he interrupted with a grin.

My eyes darted to the stain. Blood rushed to my face as I tugged futilely at the skirt. Trying to maintain whatever shred of dignity I still possessed, I forced myself to continue.

“As I was saying, I answered my voice mail messages, my email, and then went down to the classroom to unlock the door. The minute I opened the door we all saw him at once. We didn’t touch anything.”

Every police show from *Cagney and Lacey* to *NYPD Blue* always said never to tamper with a dead body. Any dope knows that.

“I took the students out and sent one of them for security and the police. That’s it. Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“How do you get into the room? I noticed an electronic keypad on the lock.”

MacKinnon indicated that he had excellent powers of observation. Not only did he take in my appearance, but in all the commotion outside the classroom, he noticed the electronic lock system. The system was the university’s latest attempt to let us all know that Big Brother was watching us.

“The university installed the locks a few months ago. No more keys. Everybody on staff has an individual code number, so they can track who was the last person in the room.”

That made MacKinnon sit up, eyes narrowed on me.

“Students don’t have pass codes?”

“Definitely not.”

He sat back in the chair, studying me so obviously that I squirmed in the seat.

“So how did Sasha get in?”

I shook my head dumbly, but he didn’t give up. Like a terrier who had sunk his teeth into the bone, he gnawed away at me.

“Someone had to let him into the room. The locks click shut

automatically. So how did he get in?" His voice lowered to a growl and I couldn't suppress a whimper.

My shoulders lifted in a helpless gesture, palms extended up. I was as clueless as he, but clearly this was important. If I hadn't been so shocked when we first discovered Sasha, I would have asked myself the same question. *How the hell did he get in there?*

MacKinnon cursed under his breath. I remained silent as he jumped to his feet, unhooking the mobile phone again. He punched numbers and held the phone to his ear.

"Matt, when you finish taking statements, go up to security and see if they can access the last ten numbers punched into the classroom keypad. Get a printout that goes back to last night. Mrs. Kellerman says there are no master keys, only pass codes."

His voice rang with authority, and I couldn't imagine anyone who would dare to disobey a MacKinnon order. I hadn't the slightest doubt that the Paul McCartney clone would immediately dash up to the security office. In all likelihood, with a couple of the girls, who would be happy to show him the way.

MacKinnon clicked off the phone, pacing to the window. Rainbow lorikeets swooped past the glass, settling in the leafy trees outside the building, their brilliant scarlet and green feathers a contrast to the urban landscape of tall office buildings of the university campus.

Mackinnon seemed to be staring at the birds, but whirled around to face me again. The bright sunlight on his features highlighted several lines in his forehead. He was older than I had first imagined, and I upped my original assessment to around forty-eight. Even so, he looked great. Sexy.

For some reason, men's faces still seem appealing with little wrinkles and lines as if it enhances their character, while women resort to the frantic use of expensive skin creams in desperation.

"Mrs. Kellerman." It was a statement rather than a question.

"You don't wear a wedding ring. Are you married?"

I swallowed hard before I answered.

"Not any more." I had removed it after the divorce. I couldn't bear the sight of it on my finger afterwards, a painful reminder of everything that had happened. Funny, how it still stung to say that to a stranger.

"Is that relevant to your investigation?"

Grinning, he said nothing.

"Let's get back to the pass codes. How do they work?"

I drummed my fingers on the chair's armrest, recalling the system's installation of the complicated series of numbers used to enter any classroom.

"I don't know why it was put in, but a while back, the university changed over to electronic locks. Everyone was issued a nine digit number that you use to open doors, open offices, enter the staff garage and so forth."

"Like an ATM?"

My head bobbed up and down in confirmation.

“Yes, only a longer number.”

“Did you get to pick the number so you can remember it?”

I shook my head dumbly.

“Nope.”

I wrote mine down in a couple of places (even though they told us not to), but kept this lame-brained failing of mine to myself. Okay, the truth. I copied it in a lot of places. I can’t help it, I’m hopeless with numbers. I’m always in and out of the bank because I forget the number on some card or other.

I also left out the detail that included how many times I had lost the scraps of paper. I had extra copies hidden in a file cabinet in my office, organized in my own system under FORGOT IT AGAIN, right in between FOREIGN STUDENTS and FINAL EXAM FORMS. A copy was tucked inside my handbag too, since the file cabinet was in the office, and I needed the stupid code to get into the office to begin with.

No way was I telling him about this. It was patently clear that this man already thought I was an idiot, and I didn’t intend to contribute any other tidbits to feed his delusion.

His chuckle only made me feel more uncomfortable, as if he could somehow read my mind and I glanced at my watch.

“Are you finished with me yet? I really have to go.”

I rose from the chair, smoothing out my rumpled appearance, determined



to bring the interview to an end.

“Not so fast. What was the relationship of the deceased—” His head bent again to the notes, “Sasha Azimov, with you?”

*Relationship?*

Like a fool I plopped down again, too stunned to stop myself from blurting out my shock.

“Relationship? I don’t have relationships with my students!” My cheeks burned with righteous indignation. Did he think this had something to do with sexual harassment?

Clicking his tongue, he shook his head, a small smile curling on his lips.

“Not that kind of relationship. So he was one of your students.” Again, a statement rather than a question.

I nodded.

“I don’t know much about him. We’re not supposed to get personally involved with students.”

I kept to myself that all too often, students drop into my office to moan about their personal problems. Boyfriends breaking up with them, financial woes, parental pressure and a whole range of reasons why they couldn’t submit their work on time. We had been warned repeatedly by the Dean not to get involved in students’ personal lives. Mostly, I just sat and listened without offering advice, although I itched to do so. *Lindy Kellerman, Student Social Worker Extraordinaire.*

Instead, I was directed to suggest they study harder and seek counseling.  
*So much for academic sympathy.*

Sasha, however, had never come to me as a confidante, and I knew literally nothing about him, other than the fact that he could have used some mouthwash and a dandruff shampoo. The snowy flakes on his black sweatshirt were still prominent in my mind as I visualized the last time I had seen him alive, when he had made that threat.

I rose from my seat, certain that the interview was over. What else could he possibly ask?

“I’m very sorry that I can’t be of more help, but I have a previous commitment.” My underarms were damp, and I was dying to get out of the room like a claustrophobic locked in a closet.

MacKinnon was right. He made me nervous for no reason that I could put my finger on.

“Where do you think you’re going?” His brows quirked in question.

With a toss of my head, I strode towards the door, anxious to get away. In two swift steps, he was right on top of me, one hand pressed over my own on the doorknob. I could feel his warm breath on my neck. It zapped my nerves like a sudden jolt of electricity.

“I told you. I have to be somewhere.” I lowered my voice to hide my destination from the snoopers next door.

MacKinnon cocked his head at my secretive behavior. He leaned forward

to listen, close enough for me to catch another whiff of the clean-smelling after shave.

“School,” I whispered. “I have to be at my kids’ school. An open day.” I know it sounded lame, but it was the truth.

He laughed out loud, a rich rumbling sort of laugh that only annoyed me, and in a flash I knew what he had been thinking. Did the man really believe I was getting it off for a quickie somewhere? In ripped tights and a soiled skirt? Not to mention the plain cotton underwear I had yanked on in the early morning bedlam rush. It felt as if he had x-ray eyes and could see the dull white bra and panties.

My lips tightened in a grimace as I made up mind that I had to get away from him. This man got under my skin faster than any man I knew, excluding my ex-husband. Nobody could outclass Michael on that score. If they had an Olympics pain in the butt competition, the only contest would be for second place.

His hand on the door handle prevented my exit.

“I’m not finished with you, Lindy Kellerman. I wouldn’t make any long term plans.”



“Looks like you wasted your time, huh?”

Matt Pacula’s question interrupted Fraser MacKinnon’s musings. His

fingers raked through his hair as he mentally reviewed all the details, beginning with the initial early morning hysterical phone call from the university, to the dead student sprawled in a laboratory classroom.

*Strange situation.* His gut told him there was more to the student's death than the easy write-off of suicide.

Ambling over to a coffee-maker, he poured a cup, gazing around at the local police station. Not exactly a hotbed of activity. One cop was at a desk, busy with a pencil, filling in a crossword puzzle. Another was on the phone, leaning back in his chair, his feet planted on his desk.

Matt followed him, pouring a coffee for himself. MacKinnon sighed. *When had they started recruiting cops in kindergarten?*

Matt Pacula was a baby; a nice guy but inexperienced. Pacula reminded him of a puppy, with his chocolate brown eyes that stared up at him, and an eagerness in his face, as though he expected a pat on the head.

For some reason only known to the rookie, he'd glommed onto MacKinnon, aping his movements. Every time MacKinnon appeared at the station to investigate a suspicious death, there was Pacula, doggedly shadowing him.

"Pretty clear that guy at the university was a suicide. You didn't have to come with us."

MacKinnon sipped his coffee, remaining silent. It wasn't all that clear to him; the death of a young, male student fit the profile for high suicide risk, but

there were some troubling questions. *Too many loose ends that didn't add up.* MacKinnon didn't like loose ends. Most disturbing was how did the student get into the lab without a pass code?

Shrugging his shoulders, he studied Pacula, who had written the whole episode off already, along with everyone else. *Suburban cops. They were fine with traffic violations and parking tickets. Not murders.*

*Too soon. Too quick to make a judgement. Typical kid. Not much older than his own boys, come to think of it.*

"Kind of early to make that call," he said.

"You want to see a murder 'cause that's all you investigate," Matt said. "You got a one-track mind."

MacKinnon snorted. "Nobody wants to see a murder. There's a few things that I want answered. Until I'm satisfied, it's a suspicious death."

Matt didn't seem convinced. "Knock yourself out. At least, it wasn't a complete waste of time. She was kind of cute," Matt said in between slurps of the hot liquid.

*Cute.* MacKinnon could hardly suppress a small smile. She was, in an unconventional way. With the ripped tights and stained skirt that she kept trying to hide in that Dean's office. And a smart-ass, American mouth. Nervous, too. *Why was she so agitated?*

"I asked her out for Saturday night. Kind of a perk of the job, meeting

chicks.”

MacKinnon arched his brows. “Isn’t she kind of old of for you?”

“Huh? She’s only about nineteen or twenty. Who are you talking about?”

“Sorry,” MacKinnon apologized. “I was thinking about the teacher, the professor.”

“That Kellerman woman? She’s really old. Must be forty.”

*Really old. Forty.*

MacKinnon narrowed his eyes on the younger cop. *Since when was forty decrepit?*

“I’ll be sure to drop you a line from the nursing home,” he said sarcastically.

Pacula, he noted with satisfaction, had the brains to be embarrassed by his thoughtless remark. His face reddened up to the roots of his dark hair.

“I didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” he said by way of an apology. “She was kind of cute, for an older babe.”

MacKinnon drained the coffee, crushing the Styrofoam cup in his fist and tossed in an overflowing rubbish bin.

*An older babe.*

Lindy Kellerman seemed young to him; at forty-six, forty seemed like adolescence. And she wasn’t married.

*Was she involved with someone? Was she mixed up in Sasha’s death?* Maybe he should check out Lindy Kellerman. Check out a few things about her. He could

start with a visit to her office. An unannounced visit, to catch her off-guard.

MacKinnon couldn't suppress a smile. She'd been really riled when she thought he'd implied an affair with the dead student. Her face had flushed and she'd tried to bolt out of the room.

Matt was right; she was cute, especially when she was angry. *Yeah, he should definitely check her out.*

"Smart. She must be smart. Universities don't hire dummies," he mumbled.

Pacula eyed him. "Yeah, your type, huh? Smart."

"Smart mouth, too," MacKinnon replied.

"What's the big deal about smart women? Who cares if they have a brain?"

MacKinnon snorted. "At least if you wake up next to a smart woman, they can talk about something. Politics, history, something besides the latest celebrity scandal. That's all you see on the news. Like it's entertainment." He made a disgusted noise.

Matt shrugged. "Whatever. Think she's got something to hide?"

MacKinnon clapped him on the back. "Students and faculty flings are nothing new. They were going on when I was a student." He shot the younger cop a glance.

"Yeah, yeah. I know, ancient history to you. They went on then, and they probably go on now, too. That Kellerman woman is hiding something, and

maybe that's her big secret. You should have seen her in that Dean's office. A nervous wreck."

A small smile curled on his lips. "She's not in her office. Said she had to go to an open day at her kids' school. Good. I can check out the office and at the same time, find out about those electronic pass codes. That made her nervous too."

"You think she gave her code to Sasha?"

Good question. At least Matt used his own brain once in a while.

"Maybe. Maybe she arranged a little *rendez-vous* with him."

Matt's brow furrowed. MacKinnon sighed, trying to hold his temper. Matt was so dense sometimes.

"*Rendez-vous*. French. It means a meeting," MacKinnon explained.

"I'm heading back to that university," he said. "There's a few things that don't add up."

"I'll go with you," Matt volunteered.

MacKinnon mentally counted to ten. Having Matt around was like having another son as a responsibility.

*Too bad his real sons didn't live with him.* Guilt flooded him; no matter how often he saw the boys, it wasn't the same as living together. Doing all the mundane things that people never considered special, until they were snatched away.

Getting up and having breakfast together in the morning, driving them to



school. Tyler and Andrew were teenagers. Soon they'd be all grown up, and he'd missed out on so much with them. It was lonely, too.

Lindy Kellerman wasn't married. She was divorced, like him. *Was Lindy Kellerman lonely? Lonely enough to get involved with a student?*

For some reason he couldn't understand, Fraser MacKinnon didn't like the idea of Lindy having a romance with one of her students. Yeah, he'd better check out her office. See if there were any notes or anything else that indicated a secretive relationship between the two.

"You might as well come, too," he said to Matt. "Just do me a favor, don't go looking for your girlfriend. We're there to work."

*Yeah. Work. Checking out the Kellerman woman. That was work, wasn't it?*



Minutes after the interview, I drove over the coat hanger-shaped Sydney Harbour Bridge, still trying to calm down after MacKinnon's inquisition. About the only thing he didn't do was stretch me out on the rack, or use some other medieval torture. That wasn't true; he'd done it verbally.

I maneuvered the car in the one lane that still took cash. All the others were now electronic, beeping as a tag attached to the car passed under the radar.

*When had the whole world decided to go electronic?* First the university with its endless pass codes, now all the tolls on the roads had gone the same way.

Why was I one of the handful of people who didn't have one of the darned tags? Because they automatically deduct on credit cards and, all-too often, mine was at the limit and refused any further transactions until I had made a dent on the bill. It was too humiliating.

I paused at the toll booth, fishing for coins to feed into the automatic basket. I hoped my toss wouldn't miss and that I wouldn't end up having to crawl around the asphalt, searching for them, like I had the day before, to the accompaniment of blaring horns and some rude remarks.

My eyes wandered to the harbor, glittering with sunshine on a perfect mid-afternoon. The azure sky, dotted with cotton flecks of clouds and the sails of boats bobbing in the water somehow seemed too beautiful for the somber start of my day.

The glistening white sails of the Opera House, just next to the bridge, never failed to enthrall me, even after so many years of living in Sydney as a transplanted American.

When I had married Michael, I hadn't dreamed it would end the way it all did, but then who does?

Resolutely, I put that thought out of my head as the boom gate lifted and I gunned my little Ford through the traffic, heading to the North Shore.

"Why would Sasha commit suicide in my classroom?" No matter how I turned the question around in my mind, I couldn't come up with a reasonable answer. I racked my brain for any research information about youth suicide.

Young and male fit the highest-risk profile, but there had to be another reason. *A failing mark on a paper surely couldn't cause someone to want to die, could it?* And it still didn't explain why he had chosen to do the deed in the nursing lab. Nor how he had managed to override the system and get inside.

"I wonder if he left a suicide note? I hope it wasn't addressed to me!"

*God Almighty.* MacKinnon would be on my back and arrest me, for sure. "Cause of death: excessive stress due to failure grade." Was that possible?

It couldn't be. I had standards to uphold, and I was hard, but fair.

The thought of another interrogation with MacKinnon sent a shudder through me. He spooked me. *How could a man be scary and sexy at the same time? He was the good guy, right?* A cop, not a bad boy. I've never been attracted to them, anyway. Not to cops, either.

Shaken at the prospect, I barely noticed that I was speaking aloud. Passing drivers must have thought a lunatic was whizzing down the freeway.

Still lost in thought, I gripped the wheel, braking so hard that the loud screech of my tires sent my heart into overtime. Palpitations thudded in my chest as a menacing truck veered sharply into my lane.

"I hate truckies," I muttered. "Nothing but roadhogs."

*No, I didn't go for bad boys, cops or truckies.*

I was scared to death of left-side driving, terrified that, despite all the years of life Down Under, I might daydream at the wheel and veer off to the right. I'd end up a splatter on the highway.

My thoughts drifted back to the unbelievable events of the morning. *How did Sasha get into the classroom without an access code?* Only staff had those numbers, and that meant a staff member had to open the door. Someone had let him in and if someone had, had they gone one step further and gotten rid of him for good? No, that didn't make any sense. For what reason?

I quickly discarded a failing paper, or any other academic problem, as ridiculous, but couldn't come up with a better explanation.

Besides, it would be absurd to consider any of my academic colleagues as potential murderers. Academics don't do things like that. They debate and research and generally compete to be as boring as possible. If you can say something in two hundred words instead of ten, they invariably choose the former.

I ditched that theory; no one on staff could possibly be involved in something so distasteful. At best, they would turn the whole mess with Sasha into a research project on the problems and issues of male students.

"Nope. Not a possibility. Sasha was a suicide and that's definite. He must have conned some dopey cleaner to open the door." I held onto that thought as I zipped through leafy suburban side streets, toward the school.

"Mommy, you're late." Greg, my five-year-old son greeted my arrival in his class. "You almost missed my experiment."

*Experiments.* Kindergarten had changed considerably since my time. All I could remember about the experience were two things.

Milk and cookie time was the first. The cookies tasted like straw and the milk was always white, no matter how much we wished for chocolate.

The other was Irene Trumbull, who terrified all of us and beat up everyone, boys included. I heard she was arrested for assault a few years ago. Apparently, Irene had set off on an early career track in kindergarten.

“Were you late because of the dead body?” Carla Evans, Greg’s teacher, lowered her voice at the end of the sentence.

Astonishment must have shown on my face.

“How did you know?”

She shrugged her shoulders as if I had asked an incredibly stupid question.

“Actually, I heard on the staff room telly when I stopped for a cup of tea before class. It said that a body was discovered at your university. I don’t suppose it had anything to do with you?”

Her tone was hopeful, but I wasn’t going to reveal anything other than what I knew to be the truth. MacKinnon hadn’t said anything was confidential.

I blinked at Mrs. Evans, noting her size-eighteen frame stuffed into a size-twelve, hot-pink dress that would have looked great on my twenty-something students, but looked out-and-out ridiculous on such a big-boned, fiftyish woman.

I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of wisecrack MacKinnon would make about her appearance. MacKinnon. I had to get that guy out of my brain.

Why did thoughts of him insist on coming back?

“Actually, it was my classroom, but I really don’t know anything.”

“No kidding!” Her lips puckered, making her look like a fish, at my disclosure.

Children’s quarrelling voices distracted her from further investigation. One child shoved another and she clapped her hands, the authoritarian façade back in place. A stern expression crossed her face. Like magic, all chaos immediately halted. I bet she would have been able to handle Irene Trumbull.

“Settle down. Gregory, you may now explain about your experiment with seeds to your mother. After that, you may show her your book with your illustrations and tell her about your findings.”

Greg’s little hand tugged mine as he led me proudly to his table, dark eyes bright with excitement. A drooping plant and a lopsided block-lettered booklet that detailed his work, with multiple spelling errors, made me duck my head to hide a smile. The earnest expression on his face as he proceeded to explain the work filled me with pride.

No matter what I had lost, I had my kids, and they were my greatest joy. I listened carefully to Greg, letting him finish, and planted a kiss on his dark head.

“Mom, please, the guys are watching. It’s embarrassing!” Gently, he tried to shove me away from him, his chipmunk-round cheeks scarlet with mortification.

Disgusted with the display of affection, he yanked himself away from my embrace, clearly wanting me to disappear now that I had fulfilled my part as a proud parent. I waved goodbye and proceeded on to my daughter Tessa's class.

Ten-year-olds were leading befuddled parents around the room and Tessa's face lit with pleasure as she caught sight of me. Dimples deepened in her pink cheeks as she grinned, and my heart sank at the sight.

*Crooked teeth, top and bottom. Major orthodontics. Was Michael going to pay for it or would I be stuck yet again?* With the work necessary on Tessa's mouth, an orthodontist could plan on retirement.

Bills, bills, bills. All I could see were money hassles. Single motherhood is not for sissies.

I had gotten the house in the settlement, with a big fat mortgage, but it was falling apart. It needed new plumbing, the roof leaked in heavy rain, and the kids' needs only got more expensive, never less. They hemorrhaged money out of me. Was there ever going to be an end to it? At this rate, I'd have to work until I was eighty.

I commiserated more than once with my best, and only wealthy friend, Julie. Ever since I had arrived in Sydney, Julie has been my best friend.

We met at a Jewish women's function, which was eminently forgettable. She had noted my boredom, signaling with a toss of her glorious red hair that we should beat a hasty retreat. Over coffee, we began a friendship that has lasted years.

“Don’t worry about it so much,” she had said recently. “Worry doesn’t help, anyway. Maybe you’ll get married again.”

Married again? *To whom?* The only men I ever met were the plumber and the postie, who roared up on his motorcycle to deliver the mail that he generally dumped on the driveway. Them, and Mr. Nelson, who did my hair.

None of them seemed like marriage prospects. They didn’t even seem like date prospects. Meeting men is something that doesn’t happen at a School of Nursing.

“I should have studied law, or business,” I commented more than once to Julie. “I got into the wrong profession to meet men.”

The local rabbi’s wife had tried her hand at matchmaking, kindly offering frequent invitations to dinner, as a not-very-subtle ploy to introduce me to men that were also invited.

I’d been to so many of those, I should have enrolled in a Frequent Flyer program.

Too bad for me that the men always turned out to be incredibly old, and were attracted to my background in nursing. Their conversations invariably turned to discussions of prostates and hernias, as if they were quizzing my ability to handle their medical problems.

“Sure. You’re a terrific investment from their perspective. They’re all probably looking to save on nursing home bills,” Julie had suggested, after the latest fiasco, who had regaled me for two hours with horror stories about his



recent bypass surgery.

Fraser MacKinnon was the closest to a hot male that I had come across in ages, and he was hardly suitable material, either. Indignation burned in my heart at the thought of his probing questions earlier that morning.

*“Are you married?”*

*What did that have to do with his investigation?*

Nosey. The man was nose-y, and did that deliberately to upset me and catch me off guard. All the other questions were more than enough proof to me that he thought I might be a cold-blooded murderer.

MacKinnon might have bloodhound instincts, but I knew he was definitely barking up the wrong tree. Sasha must have killed himself. That had to be the answer, as sad as it was.

Still, one part of my brain had to acknowledge that MacKinnon was a great-looking man. I couldn't deny that I would enjoy another good look at him whenever he decided to have me sign a statement of the morning's interview.

Cops always ask for signed documents on television. But that would be all. Next time, I'd be prepared. He wouldn't spring any surprise questions on me, and he wouldn't catch me upset and off guard.

No sir, Detective Smart-mouth MacKinnon would face Lindy Kellerman, doctoral candidate, a cool and collected academic. I'd be calm, sensible, and articulate.

There was a bright side to the whole thing. I perked up at the notion that

he had believed I was about to run off to meet a man. Maybe I didn't look as bad as I thought.

## Chapter Three

“So what are we looking for, exactly?” Matt asked as he gazed around the office, a puzzled expression on his face.

MacKinnon could appreciate the younger cop’s bewilderment. He wasn’t sure himself what they sought. One quick glance around the office indicated that it would be like a treasure hunt.

Lindy’s office was stacked with papers and books in every possible space. All the shelves that lined the wall were filled with scholarly-looking, thick volumes, papers were bundled all over her desk, interspersed with photos of kids.

Hers, MacKinnon supposed.

He glanced at one in a silver frame and bent to examine the figures. Two little children, a boy and a girl, both with dark hair and eyes, dressed in shorts and tee-shirts. The pair was engrossed in catching soap bubbles with their fingertips.

The girl’s expression was intent, the boy’s round face full of delight.

Lindy Kellerman knelt on the grass, opposite the children, blowing the bubbles for them out of one of those plastic things with a hole on the end of the stick. Tanned skin and a pink halter-top dress that exposed plenty of skin,

indicated the photo must have been taken during the summer.

A broad smile lit her face, her hazel eyes bright with amusement. The three were having the time of their lives with the simple toy; that was obvious to anyone who glanced at the photo.

Matt tripped over a stack of papers on the floor. He stumbled and swore at the same time, balancing himself on the edge of a plastic chair for visitors to the office. More papers piled up on the rickety seat.

“Geez, this place is a mess,” he muttered.

“Housekeeping skills don’t seem to be a priority of Mrs. Kellerman’s,” said MacKinnon. That figured. The state of her office wasn’t dissimilar to her appearance earlier that morning with the ripped tights.

Still, she had been kind of cute, which was more than MacKinnon could say for her office.

MacKinnon yanked open a file cabinet, sighing deeply. Same thing: jam-packed with more stuff.

“Start pulling books off the shelves. See if any papers fall out that mention Sasha,” MacKinnon ordered.

He started combing through the files, arranged alphabetically.

ACADEMIC BOARD, CURRICULUM CHANGES, DRUG CALCULATION QUIZ. Nothing unusual about those file headings, nor the papers inside them. He thumbed through the crammed file cabinets and stopped abruptly.

FORGOT IT AGAIN.

*What was that?*

MacKinnon yanked out the file, unable to hold back a snicker. Lindy Kellerman had hidden her pass code number in a file. *Multiple copies*. He replaced the file where he had found it and continued. Nothing else unusual.

“Hey! Get a look at this!” Matt laughed out loud.

MacKinnon’s gaze turned to the bookcase. Leaning closer, he saw immediately why Matt had laughed.

Hidden behind a thick book entitled *Pediatric Nursing and Care of Sick Children*, was a racy romance novel. At least, it looked racy. Bare-chested guy with long, dark hair on the cover embracing an auburn-haired woman. The title was something about a laird’s legacy.

“I dunna know, but this doesn’t look like something a professor would read,” Matt mumbled.

MacKinnon kept silent, pulling several other thick books off the shelves. A few other lurid paperbacks, similar in style, were stashed behind them.

*Where else would she hide stuff?*

Matt continued searching the bookshelves, while MacKinnon pawed through her desk drawers.

“Looks like you hit the mother lode,” Matt said. Inside a deep drawer were stacks of romance novels. And every single one of them seemed to be about Scottish heroes, lairds, soldiers, or who knew what. Tartan decorated most of the covers. Scraps of papers in between the books carried copies of her

pass code number.

“Mrs. Kellerman seems to have a few faults,” MacKinnon said, with a grin. “She can’t remember numbers.”

“I’ll say. She’s got one taped behind the picture of her kids,” Matt said. “She must be crazy about those crappy books. It just proves all women love that junk, even a smart lady reads ‘em.”

MacKinnon said nothing. Matt was right. Probably all women, even the most intellectual, dream of romance, or at least, enjoy the escapism. But Lindy Kellerman had selective taste.

“She’s what you might call a discriminating reader,” MacKinnon said. He wondered if Pacula would get it.

Matt picked up another one of the trashy books. “Did you notice, they’re all about Scotland? And get a look at this.” He pawed underneath a pile of papers on the visitor chair. “Calendar photos. Sean Connery, and a couple of other actors in kilts. Geez.”

MacKinnon said nothing, but couldn’t hold back a smile. Yes, Lindy Kellerman was choosy about what she read. She didn’t go for cowboys or bikers or anything so crass. Nope, she honed her tastes and went for Scots. Had a real thing for them. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of that; but filed it away in his brain. Almost like Lindy’s crazy filing system. This was entered into a mental file in MacKinnon’s head under Lindy Kellerman.

*Can’t remember numbers.*

*Has a thing for Scots.*

No obvious connection with Sasha, but Lindy Kellerman was turning out to be a very interesting woman. He wondered what other secrets he might discover as he hunted through her office.



*Fever.*

I woke the next morning burning with a temperature and staggered into the bathroom. The electronic thermometer that I finally located, buried under cotton balls, skin cleanser, and toothpaste, beeped at 101.

Scarlet stains on my cheeks should have been enough to confirm that the migraine, exhaustion and achy feeling that had begun the night before had developed into a rip-roaring virus, rather than an over-reaction to the day's events. Even the kids had heard about it.

"A man got deaded," Greg announced solemnly, watching the television news before we set out again on another round of after-school activities.

"Dead, stupid."

"Shut up, dumbbell."

That was it. I couldn't stand any more fights. I had had enough on the car ride home, after our detour for Tessa's dance lesson. Quarrels, shouts and general mayhem reigned in the car, as it coughed and sputtered down the road.

Morgan Freeman thought he had it tough driving Miss Daisy. He should

have spent a day driving Greg and Tessa. He would have gone screaming to Jessica Tandy to plead for his job back.

Aching all over come morning, I straightened my shoulders with considerable effort, gulped down some Tylenol and lurched to the phone. I was too sick to drive safely, and would have to expose my children to the ultimate torture.

The ring on the other side was finally answered by a bleary voice.

“Susan, this is Lindy. I’ve got a very high temperature. Could you possibly take Tessa and Greg to school today? I feel rotten and I don’t feel well enough to get dressed and drive.”

*Susan Berman, the Mother Theresa of suburbia.* Not a bad sort, but she did tend to be annoying. I can only handle small doses of her, kind of like some foul-tasting medicine.

Predictably, she immediately perked up at the mention of illness. Any grogginess disappeared from what Tessa calls her “do-gooder” voice. On and on she droned, with a litany of assorted treatments for my flu. I couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“No worries, not a problem. You should gargle with echinacea and take super doses of Vitamin C. Are you sure you get enough anti-oxidants? And don’t forget to eat toast with cinnamon. Cinnamon is a proven remedy for colds.”

With a sigh, I assured Susan that I would follow all her instructions, to



the letter, but Saint Susan wasn't finished.

"I'll bring you some homemade carrot juice, just the thing for boosting your immune system," she offered generously, as I made a face at the phone.

If you couldn't guess, Susan had a tendency to waffle on about herbal remedies and healthy eating whenever she got the chance. I'm all for healthy eating, at least some of the time, but Susan was so single-minded, she had a boomerang effect. My first inclination after an hour in her company was to pig out on a bag of chocolate chip cookies.

By eight o'clock, I had safely tucked Greg, Tessa, their politically incorrect lunches, homework and extra drinks into Susan's car. I was treated to another harangue as Susan wrinkled her nose at the sight of plastic bags that contained the white bread, tuna fish and mayo sandwiches that my kids devour.

"You could at least add some lettuce," she said pointedly. "And you shouldn't use plastic, when you could use paper, to recycle. Aren't you concerned about climate change?"

My temperature was inching up by the minute and if I'd had an icepack on my burning forehead, it would have melted faster than the polar icecaps. Sensibly, I kept my mouth shut around Susan. No point in prolonging agony.

Being the concerned soul that she is, Susan peered at my appearance. I knew what she could see from a quick glance in her side view mirror. Cheeks aflame with color, bleary eyes, and my worn flannel nightgown, stained with sweat from the temperature. She couldn't help trying to make me feel better in

her own perverse way.

“You look awful,” she breathed.

“Thanks.”

She pinkened at the obvious insult.

“Sorry. I meant that you should stay in bed and I’ll bring the kids home.

Even keep them for the afternoon, if you like.”

I appreciated the offer and took her up on the lift arrangement.

“Lucky I don’t have any teaching today. I’m going to have a shower and go right back to bed.”

“You do that.”

Revving the motor, she backed out of my driveway in her Land Rover, sideswiping the magnolia tree as she reversed.

Doesn’t anyone drive a normal car anymore? Everybody but me zipped around in Land Rovers and Jeeps, like they were heading off on safari.

Come to think of it, chauffeuring kids all over the place is sort of like a jungle adventure ride.

Exhausted and dizzy, I trudged back into the house.

The cascade of hot water nearly soothed me back to sleep. Relieved to feel clean again, I donned a fresh, lemon-yellow nightie, one of the few nice things I still had left in my lingerie drawer. Spaghetti straps and dainty lace around the bodice made me feel feminine and attractive, although it wasn’t for anyone other than myself.

I quickly brushed my copper-tinted hair, courtesy of Mr. Nelson (who is the world's greatest hairdresser), boiled the kettle for tea and settled back in bed with my doctoral dissertation and a pencil on my lap, two pillows propped behind my back. I sipped the fragrant chamomile tea, pencil poised over the manuscript to circle errors.

Without tenure, and with my contract due to expire in a few months, I had to demonstrate some progress on my dissertation, or I could find myself out of a job. All too vividly, I could imagine my supervisor, Professor Enderby frowning at me. I could picture his pursed lips, the deep frown lines on his forehead and his shiny bald head in the harsh office light.

*"What on earth have you been doing for the past three months Mrs. Kellerman? Practicing recipes for the Women's Weekly cooking contest? It certainly hasn't been spent on research."*

I squirmed at the thought of how our next meeting would go if I didn't have any work to show for the last month. Glumly, I wondered whatever possessed me to undertake the study of children as victims of war in the first place.

"Must have lost my mind when I signed up for this," I muttered to myself. I had dutifully combed through the Australian archives, a short car trip away in Canberra. It had been a nightmarish weekend. I had dragged down with notebooks, children, two Gameboys and one hamster in tow.

In my heart, I had thought that I could somehow contribute knowledge

to my profession and do something to improve the world for children, my area of practice. It was an uphill battle. Unless I could travel to Britain to interview former children who lived through evacuation from Europe and the Blitz, the work couldn't be completed.

Professor Enderby didn't have a clue how difficult it was to hold down a job, raise two kids, and try to undertake a doctorate too. That didn't begin to take into account no money for overseas travel.

My eyes wandered to my night table. The romance novel carelessly left open from the previous evening began to look more and more inviting. I devoured romance novels with an eagerness that would have warmed Barbara Cartland's heart.

Tartan-clad beefcake hero on the cover, and a half-naked, blonde woman who gazed at him in adoration.

My eyes yo-yoed from the dissertation back to the novel. It couldn't hurt to read just one chapter. I was dying to see if Kara and Douglas, the laird of whatever clan, were finally going to get it together.

"Just one chapter," I promised myself. Then I would stop, no matter what.

I was in the middle of the third chapter when the doorbell bonged. "Oh damn."

Just when Douglas had Kara in a passionate smooch, the doorbell had to ring. It's like a commercial for detergent in the middle of a great scene in a soap

opera.

With disgust, I threw the book down on the table and stomped to the door, yanking an old flannel robe my former husband Michael had left from a hook on the way. The red flannel robe was so ratty and threadbare that even the Salvation Army wouldn't take it. I belted it loosely around my waist, more annoyed by the second. Irritation flamed into fury. *Can't a sick person get a day in bed without every nut case in town ringing the bell?*

"Probably some charity worker, selling raffle tickets," I muttered.

Or worse. My neighbor, seventy-year-old Mrs. Gallagher. Don't ask me how, but the three of us produce enough rubbish for a landfill. When my bin is full, I sneak out and toss it in Mrs. Gallagher's garbage can. Hers is always empty, anyway. Go figure. The trouble is when she catches me.

I braced myself for her sharp tongue as I flung the door open. No Mrs. Gallagher. No do-gooder with raffle tickets to something I wouldn't have won anyway.

I staggered back when I discovered the Aussie Clint Eastwood on my doorstep. He was a lot easier on the eyes than Mrs. Gallagher, but I had a bad feeling about this visit. I didn't think he was selling raffle tickets for the Policemen's Benefit.

A look of incredulity spread on his face, slowly changing into a smile. He stared pointedly at my exposed cleavage, barely hidden under buttercup lace. I tightened the belt of the robe, tugging the frayed collar over flesh that was as

red as my burning face. Was I crazy, or did his expression turn to disappointment?

I stood gaping, unable to speak as he held out his hand. As it grasped mine, I felt that electric shock again. His touch on my skin sent my temperature rocketing even higher.

“Weren’t you expecting me? I stopped by your office and when you weren’t there, I asked one of the secretaries to phone your house.”

Obviously, MacKinnon hadn’t cottoned on to the fact that lowly lecturers don’t get services from secretaries. Only deans get assistants. Maureen, the general dogsbody, probably hadn’t even heard his request. Even if she had, it would go to the bottom of the list of chores. With luck, I would get a call in a month’s time to let me know MacKinnon had been asking for me.

Without another word, he strode past me and into the living room, sitting on the worn sofa and making himself at home, as I continued to gawk from the open front door.

*What the heck did this guy want from me now?* I wasn’t too crazy about the way he sat down as if he had all the time in the world.

“Feel free to make yourself at home.”

MacKinnon chose to ignore the sarcasm dripping from my voice as he settled his large frame in the faded, floral patterned two-seater that had seen better days. It groaned as he shifted his weight, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

He looked even better than he had yesterday, hair slightly ruffled, he was dressed in a pale blue sweater and perfectly-fitted jeans. Men who wear loose jeans usually look awful; it doesn't give you a chance to check out their butts.

He eyed me, still standing at the door.

"What are you doing here?"

"Do you always greet callers in a nightgown and old robe? I hope you didn't intend to distract my attention in that get-up. Police corruption isn't on my agenda," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

My hands flew to the belt around my waist. I tightened the cord until I thought I would cut off my circulation, which only amused MacKinnon further. A broad grin spread on his lips. He continued staring at me, despite my now being covered like Mother Hubbard.

His voice dropped to a husky tone, eyes narrowing on my chest.

"I did warn you I was coming. You would have known if you had checked your email."

Without another word I marched off to my bedroom to find a pair of slippers for my bare feet. Anything for an excuse to get away from that penetrating gaze. This man acted as if he could look right through me.

I tiptoed to the bedroom door and peeked around the doorway to the living room. MacKinnon hadn't magically disappeared in a puff of smoke, nor was he a mirage I had conjured up in a fever-induced fantasy. He was still there,

crouched in front of the television set, his position giving me a terrific view of a tight butt, outlined by the jeans.

I was enjoying the unobstructed scenery while he fiddled with the remote control. He swiveled slightly to one side, a frown on his face as the instrument failed to respond to any efforts on his part.

“Don’t bother trying, it’s broken,” I announced in a cool voice that I hoped didn’t betray the alarm bells in my head. “The kids broke something and I can’t afford to get it fixed right now.”

He pivoted towards me, the sapphire eyes raking up and down. I could see the disappointment in his face before his cop mask went up again. *What an annoying man! Did he think I disappeared into the bedroom to don a peignoir for his benefit? What colossal nerve!*

Standing with hands on hips, I confronted him again.

“What are you doing here?”

“Do I get to ask a question if you do?”

That did it. My temper snapped.

“I’m not interested in playing games. If you’re here for a social call, you can get out.” My foot tapped in annoyance.

A lazy grin spread on his face again, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement.

“If you must know, when you failed to appear at your office this morning, it seemed suspicious enough to consider making a house call.”



“Suspicious? Of *what*? Surely you don’t think I had anything to do with Sasha’s death? I merely walked in and found him. And I made a point of not touching anything, I told you everything yesterday.”

“Questions, questions. You’re a *verra* curious woman, Lindy Kellerman. Of course, now that I know you’re partial to Scots, that more than makes up for your failings.”

My cheeks, already crimson with fever, burned with anger at his teasing. And I didn’t miss the pronounced *burr*, far stronger than his accent had been yesterday.

“So what? What does that have to do with anything? And how do you know that?” My fingers twisted the worn flannel in nervous agitation.

I knew the answer to the question before he answered. It hit me like a punch to my already aching head. He’d been in my office and discovered my secret weakness. A hidden cache of Scottish folk music and calendar photos of Sean Connery, Ewan MacGregor and Liam Neeson in kilts. Not to mention my hoard of Scottish romance novels. Men in kilts make me drool, I can’t help it. Any novel with a kilted hunk on the cover, and I’m a sucker, no matter how cheesy it might be.

*Some women go for spandex, I go for kilts. I don’t know what they wear under them, but I’d love to find out.*

My lips tightened in a grimace.

“You have some nerve,” I fumed. “That’s a violation of private space.

Where do you come off with the audacity to search my office?”

“I have every right,” he answered easily. “This is a suspicious death and don’t forget it, because I haven’t. I did discover something else. You don’t remember numbers. Lots of hidden scraps of paper with your pass code, all over the place. Quite a filing system you have in there. Sort of like a squirrel hiding food for the winter, aye? You might be interested to know that I was born in Dundee. My family came out here when I was thirteen. I’ll even put on my kilt for you if you really want to know what a Scotsman wears underneath.”

The sexual implication was all-too clear, even if his tone was light. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go through a hole in the floor or dare him to haul out the kilt. *What was wrong with me?* My brain must be fried from the temperature. Or MacKinnon. I had a deep suspicion it was the latter.

His teasing, coupled with the notion that someone had searched through my things without my express permission, riled me thoroughly. I felt violated, as if I’d been touched without permission. The man had raped my office. He knew private things about me. Things that embarrassed me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but before the words were out, he rose from his seat in one swift, graceful movement and stood beside me.

“My turn to ask a question. You’re nervous again. Are you always this way, or is it just around me? You’re not very good at hiding it. It shows on your face. Do you have anything else you’re trying to hide?”

“Nothing but the flu, and I feel so rotten I wouldn’t mind giving it to

you.”

The lazy grin on lips was the last straw.

“I’m very ill so you’ll have to excuse me,” I blurted with as haughty a demeanor as I could muster.

“Not quite yet.”

The words were barely a soft whisper, but there was no doubt about the authority in his tone and I gaped at him. *What colossal nerve!* I was appalled.

A middle-aged hunk actually noticed me, and it was only because he was crazy enough to think I had something to do with Sasha’s death.

His palm flattened on my forehead. It felt as icy as a popsicle on a hot summer day, and I actually moaned with pleasure at the sensation.

MacKinnon demonstrated that he had great clinical skills. Better than some of my students. “You’re burning up.”

My head bobbed in confirmation.

“Nice work, Sherlock. I told you I was sick,” I whined.

He frowned, the fine lines in his forehead deepening.

“You should be in bed.” It was an order, rather than a statement.

“That was where I was when you decided to check up on me.”

MacKinnon glanced at my slippered feet peeking out under the frayed robe as I fidgeted. I couldn’t help it. He was standing so close that the heat from his body turned me into a nervous wreck. My students weren’t the only ones who would need counseling, if this continued any longer.

Before I could make a break and dive for the safety of my bedroom, he lifted one brow. His hand reached for mine, the fingers lacing together tightly. He led me back to my bedroom, his eyes scoping out the room. I could see him quickly taking in the butterfly-patterned quilt and curtains, and the assorted knick-knacks and photos of the kids scattered on my bureau.

*Ever the cop!* I knew what he was up to. A quick observation, to discover who-knew-what. First my office, now my house.

One finger pointed to the bed and obediently, I crawled back between the covers. I had no strength to argue with him; my head was reeling, either from the virus, his closeness, or a combination of the two. My dissertation fell to the floor. Stooping to lift it, he glanced momentarily at the title.

*“The Effects of War on Children.”* He read the title aloud in his low voice. Dark brows arched quizzically as he handed the work back to me, making no further comment.

I snatched it back with a glare, but he remained silent. His eyes darted to the night table, where the romance novel still lay open. His lips curled upward into a smile as he took in the seductive looking couple on the cover. I burned again, squirming in the bed.

MacKinnon’s gaze turned to my face and I licked my dry lips as I lowered my lashes in embarrassment under his penetrating stare. A ribbon of heat curled through me as he leaned closer that no Tylenol could treat. For one split second I thought he was going to kiss me.

*Did I want him to?* I wasn't sure, but I could bet this man was nothing like the boring fogeys I had met through the rabbi's wife. This man knew how to kiss a woman senseless.

Instead, he leaned over and grasped the bottle of Tylenol. He rattled the bottle and popped the safety cap, tapping the last two pills into the palm of his hand.

"Here," he said, offering the pills to me. "I'll get you some water. As quietly as a cat, he padded off to the bathroom. I could hear the water running as I settled back against the pillows. He carried a plastic cup, decorated with dinosaurs that Greg used to think was cool.

"Drink up."

I knew an order when I heard one. I gulped the pills and slurped down the water as I settled again.

Despite his presence, the warm quilt, the fever and the Tylenol must have combined to relax me into drowsiness. Waves of exhaustion washed over me. As I dozed off, a pair of hands tucked the quilt around my shoulders.

His fingers brushed lightly over my forehead, the touch an aching tease for more. I was unable to suppress a sigh of pleasure before he drew away. My eyes flew open in shock. The quilt fell away from my shoulders as I struggled to sit up, his hands gently pushing me back down. He tucked the covers around me one final time and winked before he strode out the door wearing a decidedly male, satisfied grin.

## Chapter Four

Overwhelming ecstasy must have dulled my senses into a state of delirium, and I drifted off into a deep sleep. I tossed and turned restlessly as my brain whirled with peculiar dreams of Fraser MacKinnon dressed in a kilt.

In the dream we were in the middle of a field of heather, doing a lot more than holding hands.

I woke with a start as Susan Berman's car horn tooted in the driveway. I must have slept for hours. So *much for any work on my dissertation*. I was disgusted with my lack of discipline and inability to control my wild fantasies.

I snatched the ratty-looking robe flung carelessly across the tangled bedclothes, belting it quickly, and shoved my feet into the pair of fluffy old slippers, noting with grim satisfaction that everything seemed in place as I dashed to the front door.

My glance swiveled rapidly around the house as I lurched on shaky legs, idly wondering if MacKinnon had taken advantage of me again after I conked out. Maybe he had searched my kitchen for the murder weapon. He wasn't likely to find one, unless a year's supply of peanut butter made him suspicious. Anything was possible with that man. And yet, he had been so gentle and solicitous when he tucked me into bed.

"Probably a performance so he can get me to confess." I simply couldn't

believe MacKinnon seemed so fixated on me as a suspect and I knew in the end the medical examiner would find evidence of a suicide. I could hardly wait for MacKinnon to admit his mistake and apologize.

Greg and Tessa shot past me like bees heading for the hive. They yanked open the fridge to search for sustenance. They stood side by side, shoving each other as they jockeyed for position, the fridge wide open.

“Don’t take a guided tour of the fridge, just take out something and shut the door.”

They poked and shoved each other again as Tessa withdrew a loaf of bread, peanut butter and jam. She rapidly smeared thick layers of the stuff to make enough sandwiches to feed the armed forces. Blessed quiet ensued as they chomped their way through the food as if they hadn’t eaten in days, rather than a mere few hours.

“Mrs. Berman tried to feed us beets and carrots with soy milk and homemade brown bread. It was disgusting,” Greg informed me, his chipmunk cheeks bulging with food.

“She never gives up,” Tessa confirmed, guzzling a glass of orange juice. “What’s for dinner?”

*Dinner. How could they ask about food again?* I hadn’t even thought about it. A pizza delivery seemed like a good idea, as I was far too ill to think about cooking anything. I rifled through my wallet, but even with coins couldn’t come up with enough change for a delivery. I was rescued from contemplating what

would be quick, easy and acceptable to the kids when the phone rang.

“Taking a day off for a change? I rang your office but all I got was that blasted voice mail.” Julie’s clipped London accent sent a wave of relief and disappointment through me. For a wild second, I had imagined I would hear that soft *burr*, making an outrageous suggestion.

“I’ve been sick in bed with a temperature,” I began.

“Spare me the details about cold sores. Give me the dope on the murder at your university. Academia must have changed dramatically if your students are getting whacked.”

“Murder? No, I don’t think so.” My brow furrowed as I tried to recall the previous day’s events. It seemed like a lifetime ago, instead of a mere twenty-four hours. My eyes wandered back to the glassy-eyed kids, now gorged on after-school food, and undoubtedly in sugar-overload.

“Go do your homework.”

One look at the expression on my face and the kids took off like missiles. They left dishes, sticky knives, and a general mess to clean.

*Just like Michael.* He never cleaned up after himself either, although I had tried for years without success to get him to. Babied and pampered by his mother, he had expected me to do the same.

I waited until the kids were safely out of earshot and cupped the phone closer to my mouth.

“What murder?”



“Didn’t you hear or were you out for the count with the flu all day? It’s been all over the news,” Julie reported, then waited. Julie clearly relished the dramatic build-up.

“What news?”

“Put on Channel Ten. They just had a flash report about the student was who found dead. They didn’t actually say ‘murder,’ but I’m sure it must be. At least, that’s what the reporter implied. ‘Suspicious circumstances,’ that’s what she said. No details yet but this is bound to be juicy.”

Julie’s voice rang with glee as she chattered on about the news report, adding her own commentary.

“The ivory tower must have changed a lot since I was at university. Nothing exciting like this ever happened when I was a student. The best we had was a protest and occupation of the vice-chancellor’s office, that lasted about ten minutes.”

I trailed the phone cord behind me and punched the television buttons.

“I have it on now.”

Weather report, rugby results, and sure enough, there it was in the headline news. A breathy platinum-blond reported on the case. She enunciated every word in a bored, blasé tone that said she had seen it all before.

“In a breaking story, we have further information regarding the dead student found yesterday on the university campus in Sydney. The student has been identified as Sasha Azimov, a recent *émigré*, and police have indicated that

they suspect foul play was involved.” The film showed the sheet-covered body being removed from the classroom, and a quick shot of Fraser directing men, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Break for commercial for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

My pulse raced like an engine at the Indy 500. “Wow. I didn’t hear a thing all day. Julie.” I hesitated, checking around to be sure neither of the kids had tried to sneak out of their rooms and eavesdrop on my conversation, but I could hear Christine Aguilera blasting in Tessa’s room.

Nevertheless, I lowered my voice.

“Did you see the cop in the news clip?”

I could hear Julie’s yawn before she replied.

“The guy with the bushy hair, who looked like Albert Einstein? Is this another one of the losers you’ve met at those awful set-ups? He looks more than ready for the nursing home,” she said. Her bored tone was more than apparent on the phone.

“No, the one next to him.”

“That one? Hunky. That was one sexy man. Get it off with him in your office for a quickie, or did you just exchange longing looks? Spare me if that’s all it was.”

“Not exactly. He was here today. And that isn’t all. He’s interested in me.” I thought my legs might give way, they were shaking so badly. I eased myself into a chair, awaiting a reaction from Julie. I could hear her breathe over

the phone.

“I’m impressed, darling. You never struck me as the cop-type. Lots better than the nursing home crowd you attract. Did he use his handcuffs to persuade you to do wicked things? The possibilities with the nightstick are mind boggling.”

“Cut it out. This is serious.” My voice lowered again.

“I don’t mean interested that way. At least, I don’t think so. For some crazy reason, he came around to hound me for information. And then he touched me. He tucked me into bed. No matter what I said, I know he thinks I have something to do with this,” I wailed.

Julie snorted. “If that guy was interested in me, I guarantee we’d be doing more than touch. He didn’t happen to get into bed with you?”

Her tone was full of optimism.

“Does your husband know you talk like that?”

Alvin, Julie’s husband, hasn’t said more than fifty words to me in the last five years. Every time she invites us to dinner, he shakes my hand as if we’re meeting for the first time. Alvin always peers closer through his thick wire-rimmed glasses at my mouth, as if he’s examining my teeth. He’s a dentist, so maybe he can’t help it. An occupational hazard.

“Maybe he’s looking for cavities to fill,” Julie would explain. Still, they seemed happy enough together. He tolerated his wife’s quirks, and she put up with his laconic personality.

Julie seriously ogles every reasonable-looking male that she comes across, and she comes across a lot. Plenty of them ogle her back, but as far as I know, she's never gotten involved with any of them. She has her own public relations firm, but she's never admitted to any indiscretions. If she does, she keeps that part of her life to herself. To be truthful, married to Alvin, I couldn't have blamed her.

That was the reason for the break-up with Michael. *He was filling a few cavities too, only he isn't a dentist, and they weren't teeth.*

"Alvin is at a Dental Association Dinner. They're probably trialing mint floss techniques for dessert. I'll be right over and cater dinner, too. Beef and chicken fried rice and veggies. I want the juicy details in person."

"But Julie—"

She cut me off before I could protest.

"I'll dish up dinner. You dish up the dirt."

The phone banged down before I could stop her.



*She's got a thing for Scots.* Fraser MacKinnon couldn't restrain a chuckle. Her office had been full of those trashy romance novels hidden in file cabinets, tucked behind scholarly tomes. Every single one of them had a tartan-clad male on the cover. And one of those dopey books had been wide open on her bedside table.

He studied his own appearance critically in the bathroom mirror. No gut, thanks to early morning runs and visits to the gym. Not too bad. Greying hair, but at least he had all of it. Okay, so he was no Ewan MacGregor.

Maybe he should call her. She was sick. She'd conked out as soon as she'd swallowed the pills. It was the polite thing to do, wasn't it? See how she was feeling. She'd been burning up with fever. He picked up the phone and dialed her number.

"Hello?"

A kid answered the phone. A little kid, from the high pitch of the voice.

"I'd like to speak to Mrs. Kellerman." He could hear some pop singer on a CD blaring in the background.

"She's sick and in bed," the kid said. He hung up the phone with a bang.

MacKinnon stared at the phone. *That was it? Sick and bang?* He punched in the number again. Once again, the kid answered the phone.

"I'd like--"

"I already told ya, she's sick and in bed and don't call back again." Bang.

*Kids.* Lindy's kids were a lot younger than his, from the sounds of it. At least she was lucky in the fact that they lived with her.

Good thing they weren't home when he'd paid that surprise visit to her house. She sure hadn't been expecting him; opening the door in that filmy nightgown that had showed a lot more than it hid. It didn't matter that she'd burned with humiliation and wrapped that hideous, old robe around herself.

Too late. The image had already imprinted in his brain.

Cute *and* sexy. Very appealing too, the way she'd curled up in bed. Her cheeks had been a becoming scarlet with temperature, and her hair all mussed up, but in a sexy way. Like the morning after. He'd been tempted to kiss her.

*Kiss her. God. What was wrong with him?* Lindy was involved in a suspicious death. Cardinal rule. Never, but *never*, get involved with a suspect.

Wandering into the living room, he sat down on the sofa and picked up the newspaper, but couldn't concentrate on the print. *When was the last time he'd been out with a woman, let alone slept with one?* A long time.

Everyone had finally given up after a few years of trying to set him up on dates with sisters, cousins, and friends. They'd all been a nightmare. Women who had been total strangers, had had no compunction whatsoever in asking all sorts of personal questions. They weren't even subtle, and had quizzed him immediately on his financial status, whether or not he wanted more kids, even sexual preferences.

At least Lindy Kellerman didn't ask anything; hell, he was the one asking all the questions for a change.

Picking up the phone again, this time he called the station. Some cop he didn't know answered.

"This is MacKinnon. Any word from the medical examiner on the Azimov death?"

He heard the guy shout. "Hey, Pacula! MacKinnon's on the line. Wants to

know if we got anything on that dead student.”

Pacula coughed as he got on the line. “Mack? Not yet, too soon. But something funny came up. Not so funny.”

All of MacKinnon’s instincts screamed bad news. His shoulders tensed in anticipation.

“You know those pass codes? The electronic ones.”

“What about them?”

“I got the report from security at the uni. The last one entered in the system was that Kellerman woman’s. Around nine in evening.”

*Shit. Lindy’s number. Had he been wrong about her? She was smart. Smart enough to put on a good act and dupe him? And he’d thought she was a total innocent. Allowed himself to be less than objective because he wanted her to be blameless. What was wrong with him? He inhaled deeply.*

“Anything else?”

“Nope. The photos should be here tomorrow. The blow-ups, so we can check out any little details.”

Well. Now he had a partner. MacKinnon worked alone; he didn’t need an infant cop helping him out.

“I’ll be there first thing in the morning.” He slammed the phone down.

*Dammit.* MacKinnon grimaced.

Lindy Kellerman had those pass code numbers scrawled on scraps of paper all over her office. An idiot could work out that she couldn’t remember

them. Even Pacula would come to that conclusion. A no-brainer. She had them stashed all over the place. Inside a drawer, in a file that she marked 'Forgot it Again'. Despite the gravity of the situation, he laughed softly.

Still, this didn't look good. Especially, if she'd somehow managed to put one over on him. First stop in the morning, the local station. Second stop, Lindy's office, to see what kind of explanation she'd have. And to get a good accounting for all her movements the day before, right up to the evening.

"It better be a good one," he said aloud.



By the next day, my fever had dropped to functional limits, no cold sores had erupted around my mouth, and a dull headache and stuffed nose were the only persistent relics of my cold.

Torrential rain bucketed down, autumn leaves whipping past the window in gale-force wind. It took every ounce of strength I possessed to force myself out of bed, and I could sympathize with the kids, who snuggled under quilts like little hedgehogs. Both ignored my pleas to wake up.

We sat together over a rushed breakfast. Greg spooned CoCo Pops into his mouth, while Tessa nibbled at a waffle. Considering yesterday's events, I virtuously pecked at a miniscule portion of cottage cheese and fruit.

"Mommy?"

I snapped myself out of my reverie to gaze at my daughter.



“Was the student that died one of yours?”

Obviously I couldn't protect the kids from the media reports, and even if I had banned the television at home, they would have heard it from their friends. Besides, who knew what they had overheard, courtesy of Julie.

As a precaution, I had sent the kids to their rooms because Julie wouldn't quit. She babbled about the early news report all evening, obsessed with the idea that Sasha was a murder victim.

“Of course it was a murder,” she had insisted, to my horror. “It would be too boring if it turned out to be a suicide.”

That was fine, for Julie. She could enjoy it all vicariously. *She* wasn't Suspect Numero Uno. I hoped she was planning regular visits to me in the Women's Penitentiary.

Silently, I nodded my head at the worried kids, a grim expression on my face.

“Does that mean the police might think you had something to do with it?”

Tessa's little face crumpled, the fear clearly apparent to me. Horrified, I hastily scotched that notion.

“Whatever would give you that idea?”

She shrugged. “I know you wouldn't do anything wrong, but on the telly, everybody is a suspect.”

Sadly, I noted silently that her observations were correct, but I was

determined to defuse her worry.

“Mommy had nothing to do with it. The police might want to talk to me and the rest of the faculty. They’ll investigate and they’ll find out eventually what happened. It’s very sad, but nothing for you to worry about.”

I forced myself to believe my own words. Tessa’s sigh of relief made me certain I had said the right thing. She rose silently, taking her plate and cutlery to the dishwasher without any prompt from me, and stowing them inside.

Greg followed his sister’s cue after tipping the remnants of the chocolate cereal into his mouth. He slurped from the lip of the bowl to get the last bit of chocolate milk. Without a warning, he returned to the table, kissed my cheek and grinned bashfully.

“I love you, Mommy.” He dashed off after his sister to get dressed for school. My finger rubbed the damp mark on my cheek, a small smile on my face.

*Did Greg think I was going to be sent to jail and I needed some comfort in anticipation of the ordeal?* Whatever the reasons, I appreciated the show of affection and wondered how much longer my little boy would be so generous with his kisses. He was growing up and so was his sister, and what kind of future could I offer them? I had to finish that doctorate and finagle a tenured position with some security.

Determined to turn over a new leaf, I dressed in a cranberry knit dress, one of my better finds at last year’s sales, and herded everyone to the car for the daily drop off.

I arrived at the university later than usual, due to traffic snarls from the stormy road conditions. My car had stalled once, setting up a symphony of blaring horns, to my humiliation. I noted with relief that other staff members also straggled in late, probably due to the rainy weather.

“Still feeling crook?”

I couldn’t suppress a giggle at the Aussie vernacular for illness. I had laughed myself sick at a recent newspaper headline that announced

PRIME MINISTER IS CROOK.

“I had a temperature yesterday, but it’s down to normal today.” Gloria Tinsdale nodded her head, dark curls bouncing, as she stooped to fill a styrofoam cup with steaming coffee. She handed it to me and I sipped the liquid, gratefully.

“Can you imagine someone killing that awful Sasha Azimov? I had him last year and he was a lousy student,” confided Gloria, her green eyes narrowing over a nose speckled with freckles.

“I failed him on his last assignment,” I added glumly, overwhelmed with guilt.

“I failed him in the research subject, and I’m not sorry. That was the grade he deserved. I didn’t fail him, and neither did you. He failed all by himself. I’m sick of overseas students who claim to be nurses and doctors from some godforsaken place. They can’t even pass our subjects when the Board of Registration sends them in for assessment to us,” chimed in Brian Lockhart. He

had managed to sneak up behind us, hands playfully around my throat, making my heart jump.

“Don’t do that, Brian!”

Tall and good-looking, being one of the few male members of the faculty ensured that Brian had hoards of female students who trailed around after him. *Groupies*. Like some academic version of a rock star, he always seemed to have a cadre camped outside his office, and more than once, I wondered exactly what went on inside. Rumors circulated that he paid a little too much personal attention to his students, but no one knew for sure.

I hoped his wife didn’t pay any surprise visits and find what I had at my ex-husband’s office.

“Everybody is on edge,” I added as his dark eyes darted between the two of us.

“Talk about murder. Reading his assignments could genuinely be considered manslaughter,” Gloria said between sips.

Barbara swept into the room, followed by her stooge, Bill Kingsley, and Professor Catarina Borowski. All the chatter came to an abrupt halt. *What a trio*.

Borowski. My *nemesis*. I had tried to be pleasant when she first arrived a few years ago. Barbara had preened when she succeeded in poaching her from a British university to come to Australia. I always wondered what she had offered to induce Borowski to make the move.

“An eminent scholar, she’ll boost our research profile,” Barbara had

announced at the time, proud of her coup.

Borowski might be an eminent scholar, but I always felt that she looked me up and down and found me wanting. She trashed any application I submitted for grant money or research proposals, implying that I was little more than an idiot. Her entire life, as far as I knew, was her work. No one knew anything personal about her, and the cold set of her facial muscles didn't encourage chitchat.

Borowski came from one of the places that used to be part of the Soviet Union, but for the life of me I could never remember which country it was. She spoke precise English with a thick accent. When she got excited, her accent sounded like Natasha on *Rocky and Bullwinkle*.

Her thick body was clothed in masculine, dark-colored suits, worn with a plain white shirt and sensible oxfords, like some NKVD uniform. No make-up. Short, dark hair, cut close around her head made me wonder if perhaps she was a lesbian, but such matters are politically incorrect in universities, and I kept my suspicions to myself. As long as she didn't make a pass at me, what did I care?

Still, she made me feel nervous and inadequate with one cold glare of her steel-grey eyes. Not nervous and jittery the way MacKinnon did, but more like a total moron.

Barbara rapped on the conference table as staff drifted over to their seats. Everyone sipped paper cups of coffee or tea. She looked tired, a few lines etched

around her eyes, but her hair, as always, was beautifully coifed. Barbara wore a peach wool suit that probably cost more than I made in a month.

“I appreciate all of you coming in early today for this extraordinary meeting. I want to apprise you of the latest information regarding the death of Sasha Azimov.”

All eyes stared at Barbara, who was clearly disturbed by the situation. Her manicured fingers, drumming absentmindedly on the table, were a dead giveaway that she was upset, no matter how controlled she kept her voice.

I hastily hid my hands under the table. Nail polish chipped and cracked, I would have to do my nails tonight. *No manicures, too much money.*

“Since the police are still investigating this tragic incident, I will expect everyone to cooperate with them. Each of you may be called for an interview. I expect you to be helpful and courteous. However, should any member of the media approach you, don’t answer their questions. Be polite and direct them to my office, where Bill and I will field reporters. Does anyone have any questions?”

“Do the cops know how he died?”

Holly Whitefield, the only other pediatric member of the faculty, asked the question we all were thinking. Dressed in form-fitting leather jeans and expensive leather boots, Holly’s fashionable wardrobe was a stark contrast to my appearance on most days.

Barbara shook her head.

“No, or if they do, they aren’t saying anything, and I think it unlikely that they will confide in us. Any other questions?”

“What do they want to ask us?”

Gloria, blunt as always, blurted out another question that everyone must have been considering.

Barbara drew a breath before she spoke.

“I think it is likely that they will want to know anything useful about Sasha. Perhaps the last time any of you saw him, or anything that he might have said.”

She rifled through a pile of papers on the table.

“The police will also want to know which of you were in the building the previous evening. I know that some of you were teaching evening classes. Just be as pleasant as you can and cooperate, so that we can move on and forget this terrible business. Please go on with classes without any digression from students. They’re all upset, and since we have no answers, there’s no point in discussion. Any other questions?”

Utter silence. Eyes darted around the room, all of us glancing nervously at each other. I thought I had seen Bill Kingsley wince when she had mentioned evening classes, but I must have been wrong. Bill had nothing to do with teaching, he was strictly management. The tension must be making me see things.

The meeting ended and everyone shuffled towards the door, ready to

start classes in ten minutes. I was scheduled to give a lecture in one of the large halls and collected my notes from the table when a finger poked my back.

“You have a meeting with me at noon. I reconsidered your grant application. It needs work. Be in my office.”

As always, Borowski was blunt to the point. Not my favorite person for a lunchtime *tête a tête*, but with no choice, I nodded to indicate my understanding.

Grant funding could enhance my chances of contract renewal, and I couldn't afford to ignore the opportunity.

“Too bad, kiddo. We'll miss you at lunch,” Gloria muttered as I headed to the lecture theatre.

Two hours later, I was exhausted from the effort of speaking the entire time without any break. I had lectured on pediatric respiratory distress to two hundred glassy-eyed students. The meeting with Borowski was equally draining. For now, my only thoughts were to kick off my shoes and slump over my desk.

I was prevented from doing so as I rounded the corner to my office. I had to fumble in my purse for the scrap of paper with the pass code, when I was halted in my progress by an unlikely wall. Blue eyes that spit fire glared down at me as I slammed into his chest.

The Scot from Down Under, Fraser MacKinnon, was on guard duty in front my office, and he didn't look like a happy camper.



## Chapter Five

My heart thumped wildly in my chest. I inhaled, trying to force myself to speak calmly. I couldn't understand why I was so happy to see MacKinnon, because at the same time, I had to acknowledge that his unexpected appearance, yet again, could only spell more trouble.

"So nice to see you again, Inspector. Or is it Detective?"

He gripped my shoulders so hard, I yelped.

"Inside. Now."

An Arctic chill emanated from his voice. His cold eyes narrowed as I fumbled with the lock on the door. My fingers shook as I punched the numbers into the keypad. It occurred to me that he could shoot off the lock and open the door a lot faster and save me all this misery.

*Say good-bye to any more tender caresses, I thought. And forget any dreams of walking hand-in-hand in the heather.* Maybe he expected more from me yesterday and was disappointed. Somehow, I didn't think so.

I could only pray that he had discovered that Sasha had indeed picked a strange place to kill himself, but his expression certainly wasn't apologetic. Obviously, he wasn't here to tell me he'd been all wrong about me and was sorry.

He was steamed. I could tell by the vein that throbbed in his forehead.

The ping of the lock signaled that I could push the door open. I stepped inside, slinging my lecture notes on my desk, on top of a stack of student papers, still in the pile to be marked. An orange light on the phone indicated a message awaited, while my computer lit up with a notice that more email required my attention. Most of it was probably junk, full of unsolicited offers to buy Viagra, order yet another credit card, or re-finance my mortgage. I get hundreds of them no matter what I do.

Still, I needed to wade through another tedious chore and couldn't get started until MacKinnon finished with me. Permanently, judging from the scowl on his face. He slammed the door shut behind him, making me jump from the crash.

"Do sit down," I offered graciously, as I tried to defuse his black mood.

Mine wasn't much better. Borowski had thrown me out of her office with a stack of reading that would keep a normal person busy for the next six months. She had waved me away as if I were stupid, insisting I read it all within a week and write a new grant application.

"When you finish reading and get serious, come back." Her finger had pointed to the door and I had stumbled out. I staggered under the pile of reading; the only bright spot was that it must count as weight-bearing exercise.

I slung books and papers to the floor from the one shabby visitor chair that graced my office, thinking longingly of Borowski's office. It was three-

times the size of my cubbyhole.

MacKinnon's eyes flickered around the room, from the finger painting by Greg framed on the wall, to photos of both kids on my desk, to the shelves crammed with books spilling everywhere. His silence was beginning to unnerve me.

"I'm exceedingly busy today and I have to teach again in another hour, so if you wouldn't mind—"

"Do you want to explain to me why your pass code is the only one entered in that lock? Security traced it back to the night before."

My jaw dropped in astonishment.

"I don't know." I stammered like Porky Pig.

"Try coming up with some explanation." He folded his arms over his chest, one foot tapping as he waited impatiently.

"I told you, *I don't know*."

My heart palpitated wildly and I wondered if I was about to have a heart attack in front of him. His brows narrowed, his lips, which had seemed so kissable to me, tightening in a grimace.

"Does anyone else have access to those codes?"

Dumbly, I shook my head. I was in big trouble. The news report had said foul play. Julie must have been right. It was all too clear from MacKinnon's attitude, I was now Suspect Number One.

Unable to control my fear, I felt my legs shake. The pumps on my feet

rattled against the metal desk with a Salsa-like rhythm. A large hand on my knee stopped the musical interlude. With disgust, I kicked off the shoes under the desk.

I was saved from making another stupid remark that would implicate me further, by the ring of MacKinnon's mobile phone.

Cold eyes glared at me as he snapped it open, his voice lowering almost to a whisper. He cupped his hand around the phone and listened. Unable to stop myself, I leaned closer, not making any attempt to pretend disinterest.

"Yeah, right now."

His head bobbed as he continued the guarded conversation.

"That's right, the only one for now."

Clicking the phone shut, he shoved it in his pocket and with a sudden jolt of clarity, I knew exactly what he had been trying to hide.

"Sasha didn't kill himself."

MacKinnon's eyes narrowed but he said nothing. His silent treatment lit the slow fuse burning in me.

"Don't tell me you really think I had something to do with it."

Silence again.

"Crazy! You're absolutely crazy! Do you really think I would do something that stupid? And leave my children to the clutches of Susan Berman?"

I was shouting and making no sense at all, if MacKinnon's expression

was any indication. Then again, he had never been treated to her vegetarian hot dogs. *As if I would ever do anything that would separate me from my kids!*

I felt tears welling in my eyes, along with the anger that flamed inside me. I had to get a grip on myself and convince this lunatic that he was wrong. No matter how sexy he looked, he had to be a few slices short of loaf to really believe I had anything to do with Sasha's death.

I needed time to concoct an argument to completely convince him. Truth hadn't worked and I was stumped.

"I think I'd like a coffee. Can I get you one?"

As if I needed any more caffeine to stimulate my overwrought nerves.

He nodded and I could feel his eyes scorch my back as I boiled water in the tiny kettle on my desk. I spooned coffee into mugs, adding sachets of creamer. No sugar for me. It would go straight to my hips. Of course, in prison, no one would be likely to notice that, especially in the shapeless dresses they give the women inmates.

I swiveled in my chair, rising to hand him the coffee. My foot hooked on the chair's wheel and I stumbled, the hot drink flying straight to MacKinnon's crotch. His howl from the sudden burn jolted me to a new level of hysteria. He'd arrest me for assault, for sure.

One hand flew to my mouth in horror as I hastily grabbed a stack of paper towels from my desk. I industriously mopped the wet stain until I noticed a hard bulge under the zipper. It didn't seem a likely place to carry a

service revolver.

Despite his discomfort, MacKinnon's lips spread in small smile. He was clearly enjoying my rattled state as I dabbed at his crotch. My face burned with embarrassment. *How could things possibly get worse?*

"Here."

I handed him the paper towels, wishing I could fall through a hole in the floor like Alice and the White Rabbit.

"There's still a half cup left," I said.

MacKinnon stared at me and I flinched. I had to distract his attention from my hot face. No matter how I tried, I couldn't seem to avert my gaze from the wet bulge. It had been a long time since I had noticed anything along those lines, but it seemed fairly large to me.

"I could have you arrested for obstructing an investigation and inflicting grievous bodily harm," he said lightly.

"Please don't. I have to get my kids at school," I said, like a fool.

He settled back in his chair. The paper towels had now sopped up the worst of the mess, and he took a sip of the coffee.

"So why was your number in the keypad?"

"I honestly don't know." I didn't know for sure, but I had a good hunch.

"I wrote the number down on pieces of paper. I could have lost one, but someone would have to know what it was to use it."

MacKinnon nodded.

“Your office is full of those numbers everywhere. Can I assume you carried them in your purse too?”

My confirmation made him stroke his jaw thoughtfully.

“Knowing you, you could have lost those too.”

My sigh of relief made him blink at me as he stared ahead. Downing the coffee, he exhaled loudly.

“You’re not off the hook yet, Lindy Kellerman. The best thing you can do is tell me everything you recall from that day. I want to know everything about Sasha that you can tell me. *Everything*. Even the tiniest detail. And I want information about you. All your movements the day before. I want the names of anyone who could have witnessed you.”

I gnawed on a pen lying on my desk, the end already chewed to a mess, as I recollected the day before Sasha turned up like an uninvited guest on the classroom floor.

“I went straight from the university to pick up my kids at school, to their tennis lesson and right home. The tennis coach can verify that.” At least I hoped he would. I owed him money and just for spite, he might turn me in for a reward.

“I made them dinner and stayed home the whole night.”

It sounded fairly lame even to me. I could tell what Fraser thought, although he remained silent. With a start, I sat up. *When had I started thinking about him as Fraser and not MacKinnon?* I pushed that thought aside and tried to

concentrate.

I had to examine the situation the way he would. *Could she sneak out of the house once the kids were asleep, drive to the university, kill Sasha and be home in bed before the kids even knew she was gone?* The answer was yes in theory, but anyone who knew me knew I would never desert the kids.

Michael might take malicious pleasure in my being in trouble with the law, but he'd have a seizure if I went to jail and he had to take care of the kids.

*Jail.* I could hardly believe this was happening to me. It was a lot worse than not having tenure. One big tear dripped down my cheek and I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

Fraser dabbed at my face with a handkerchief he pulled from his pocket. *Did the police keep a supply of them?* The man always seemed to have one on hand.

“Get a grip on yourself, Lindy. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you did anything. I know you had those damned notes to yourself all over the place. It just doesn’t look good because whoever let him in had to have something to do with his death.”

I sniffed into the handkerchief unable to prevent more tears welling in my eyes.

“Try to think who might have found those numbers.”

Fraser was throwing me a lifeline, but he knew as well as I did that anyone could have found them. It didn’t take a genius around the campus to work out what they were. Maybe Sasha found them and let himself in. I



brightened at that prospect.

“Sasha found them and used them to get into the lab,” I said with relief. That made sense and I was off the hook.

“Maybe. Depends on what killed him. I told you, this is a suspicious death.” Fraser refused to say more than that and I had a sick feeling that I wasn’t off the hook.

“I’m going to get some photos of the crime scene from the lab some time today or tomorrow. When I do, I want you to have a look. Maybe there’s something relevant that you might notice.”

I nodded, sniffing again.

“How did he die?”

Fraser scratched his head, a few strands of hair standing up on end.

“No blunt instrument, no physical violence, no choke marks. They’re still trying to establish cause, but the time was definitely the evening before, sometime between nine and midnight.”

“Overdose?”

He nodded grimly.

“Maybe. We considered that and it seems more and more a possibility. Could still be accidental, but we can’t figure out why he would choose to commit suicide in a classroom. It doesn’t make sense. Most suicides of this type take place at home.”

I nodded in agreement. He was right and I knew it.

“I know. I checked out the recent research on youth suicide and this didn’t seem to fit the pattern.”

MacKinnon only grunted in response.

“That’s why it seems so suspicious to us. It takes a while to get the different substance reports, so we don’t know yet.”

Rising from the chair, he tossed the soggy paper towels, now shredding into pieces, into the wastebasket.

“Take it easy and give it some real thought. And don’t make any plans for the weekend. You have to be available for further questioning.”

“Fine. I’ll cancel my plans and won’t run off to Bali with a half a dozen lovers in tow.”

*Big mouth again.* My hand flew to my mouth in horror. Despite the gravity of the situation, MacKinnon grinned for the first time that day.

“You look nice in that dress,” he said. He stood directly behind me, one hand lightly pressed down on my shoulder. It gave him a bird’s eye view of whatever cleavage was visible. Thanks to a Wonder Bra, it was a considerable amount.

“You look even better than you did yesterday in yellow.” A soft caress brushed across my hair.

“By the way, I brought you this. I figured you could use it.”

Reaching into his pocket, he tossed a bottle of aspirin on my desk. He was gone by the time I whirled around on my chair, the only evidence that he

had been there, the soaked paper towels, the wet carpet and the lingering scent of after shave on the hanky I dabbed on my damp cheeks.

I lowered my head to the desk, let loose, and cried until hiccups punctuated my breathing. My eyes widened at my watch when I glanced at the time. *Late for class.* With a quick sniff and a wipe with the hanky, I pulled my shoulders back, to head to another grueling hour of teaching frightened students.



*Holy God, she'd all but fainted when she dumped the coffee in his lap.*

"I'm sorry, my God, I'm so sorry!"

Good thing the denim material had absorbed most of the hot liquid, or he might have had to turn up at an emergency room with a second degree burn on a very embarrassing part of his anatomy.

*Her face.* He'd never forget the burning humiliation on her cheeks after she'd grabbed the paper towels and started to blot the stain on his crotch. It had been all he could do to fight off the laughter when she had realized what she had been doing and what was all too obviously his response to her touch.

If it hadn't been serious, it would be hilarious. Never had Fraser MacKinnon been involved in an investigation with anyone like Lindy Kellerman. She had looked like she had wanted to disappear through a hole in the floor. *Too bad for her that wasn't possible, and good luck for him.*

She was equally puzzled about her pass code being entered into the lab on the night of Sasha's death. It had shown on her face, her brow furrowed in worry.

"I could have lost one on a piece of paper," she'd offered as a lame excuse when he'd confronted her with that cache of notes.

*A no-brainer. For God's sake, she had them hidden everywhere in that office.* How she got into the office without them was no big deduction.

"Got them in your handbag, too?" he'd asked. *Sure. She must. How else would she get into the office to begin with?*

And since she had so many of them, it indicated that she lost them all the time.

*Could she have lost one of those scraps of paper and someone else have found it, known what it was, and used it? Was it a coincidence that Lindy had lost her number? When had she lost it? Recently? Or had someone been saving it, with the knowledge that it would be useful at some future point in time? A time when Sasha could be lured to the lab? Who?*

All Lindy had managed to do was generate more questions in his mind. And the more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Sasha had been murdered. This was no simple suicide. He'd said it was suspicious all along; Pacula and the other local cops had fluffed it off as a suicide. That didn't add up. And MacKinnon knew he was better at math than the idiots who had agreed with Pacula.

“Simple one plus one,” one of the other cops had declared. *Dummies.*

His mind turned back to Lindy. *God, she was funny.* Without trying to be humorous.

“Where did you go after you left work?” He’d wanted to know all her movements and she’d detailed her children’s activities. *Tennis lesson and home for dinner. That figured.* She was a single mother.

“I made spaghetti bolognese for dinner.” She’d had an earnest expression on her face as she related the dinner menu. *As if that was vital information in the investigation.* He had ducked his head to hide a smile.

*Could she sneak away from sleeping children, drive to the university, meet Sasha, kill him, and get back home without anyone knowing?*

*Nah.* It didn’t add up. Wrong math, again.

*For one thing, would her kids even be in bed by that time?* She would have had to leave a little after eight in the evening for that to be feasible. Not likely.

When Tyler and Andrew were younger, they’d fought over bedtime. Always with an excuse to delay the inevitable. A drink of water, a trip to the toilet. Kind of like a holding pattern to keep from coming in for a landing. *Kids.*

For another, Lindy didn’t strike him as the kind of woman who would abandon her kids for any reason.

Then, she’d started to cry. Huge tears rolled down her cheeks. Not because she had done anything wrong; everything inside his gut told him that

Lindy had done nothing.

Her only fault was her inability to remember a sequence of numbers. That, and losing all the hidden papers with the pass code written on them.

“Hey, take it easy,” he’d said.

He’d dabbed at her face with a handkerchief. *Good thing he had one in his pocket.* He could have handed it to her, but her tears had given him the chance to touch her face.

As his fingertips brushed against her damp cheek, a lump had formed in his throat. She was terrified. And everything she thought showed on her face. *So easy to read her.* This woman couldn’t keep a secret; she had no ability to hide her thoughts. She must have thought he was about to arrest her.

*Who?*

“Who could have found those numbers?”

Lindy had offered a theory that Sasha had found them and used them on his own. Somehow, Fraser didn’t believe that was the answer. *Too pat. Too easy.* He’d have to look at the crime scene photos and get the medical examiner’s report, but it didn’t feel right.

“You’ll have to look at the photos from the crime scene. Maybe something will catch your eye that might help.”

That was a long shot, but worth a try. Besides, it would give him the chance to see her again, the thought bringing a smile to his face, despite her

wisecrack about cancelling plans to run off with a pack of lovers.

*Did Lindy Kellerman have a lover? Or a whole gang of them?* She was a nice-looking woman and that view of her cleavage had been more than tantalizing. She had looked great in that dress, and instead of being cool and smooth, he'd acted like Tyler.

"Infantile," he muttered to himself, fuming at his adolescent behavior. He had stood behind her, to get a good look down the front of her dress. The slightest hint of pink lace with a tiny bow in the center had been visible from the bra she wore underneath.

*What the hell was wrong with him?*

He had to get his life in order, he'd been away from women other than work, for too long. That was the problem. Lindy caused all kinds of involuntary reactions that he hadn't felt in a long time.

She knew it, too. Only a fool would be oblivious. Especially, after she touched his crotch. She must have known how he responded to her, and he'd tried to cover it up by saying she looked nice. Pretty lame. She looked a lot more than nice; she looked sexy to him.

*What a dope.* He'd blurted out that she looked even nicer than in yellow, the color of the nightie she'd worn the day before, at home. Did she need him reminding her of her embarrassment?

*What had that nitwit Pacula called her?*

"An older babe," he'd said. At least he'd gotten that right. Lindy was

definitely a babe. An older babe by an infant cop's standards; not by his own.

Good thing she hadn't asked point-blank if he thought she was a criminal. He didn't, but blurting out that she was a babe wouldn't have been helpful. At least he'd managed to keep that opinion to himself.

A suit? *When was the last time he'd worn one? Maybe that was too formal.* Lindy would smell a rat the minute she saw him in a suit.

On the other hand, he couldn't turn up in the jeans he usually wore.

Lindy Kellerman lived in a neighborhood with a lot of Jewish people. He'd seen them on Friday night, walking in groups from synagogue. The women were decked out in elegant clothes. Some of them wore hats that wouldn't have been out of place at the Melbourne Cup. All the men were dressed in expensive suits.

MacKinnon didn't know much about their habits, but it was perfectly clear that Friday night was a big deal for them; synagogue and then home for dinner. *Probably a lavish one.* Maybe he'd get lucky if Lindy was home and get invited.

It would be a welcome break from nuking tasteless stuff in the microwave. MacKinnon scowled. He'd been doing that too much lately.

He finally settled on decent-looking khaki pants and a navy sports jacket that topped the shirt and tie. A quick shave and he was ready to go.

Six-thirty. Perfect timing, and half-way out the door when the phone rang. He snatched it off the hook.



“MacKinnon.”

“Hey, Dad. How are you?”

MacKinnon’s lips curled up.

*Tyler.* The boys knew they could call him anytime, day or night. Talking to them was always welcome.

“Hi, Tyler. What’s up?”

“I was wondering if I could come over there tonight. Andrew, too. We could hang out with you.”

MacKinnon’s smile broadened. “What’s the matter? No date?”

He could hear Tyler inhale deeply. “No. But we felt like seeing you. Can we come right over?”

“Sorry, you caught me on my way out.”

“Going back to work?” He could hear his son’s disappointment in his glum tone.

“No, not exactly.”

“So you’re going out, like with a woman?”

MacKinnon held back the urge to laugh at his son’s surprise. “Is that so shocking?”

Tyler recovered, trying to explain. He stammered in response. “No, no, I, um, you just never mention anyone. So are you?”

*Good question.*

“I have to go see someone, and if I get lucky, I might be invited to stay for

dinner. I can't explain now, I've got to get going."

"Sure Dad. We understand." Disappointment was all too apparent in his voice.

"Is everything okay?" If something was wrong, he'd have to ditch his plan to bring the photos to Lindy as an excuse to turn up on Friday night. The boys had to be his priority.

"S'okay, nothing special. We miss you." Tyler's wistful tone tore at his gut. He missed them, too.

MacKinnon snapped his fingers. "Tell you what. As soon as I'm free, I'll call and come over and get you. Even if it's late. You can both stay over with me. We'll do something together tomorrow. Spend the whole day together. The whole weekend. How's that?"

He could hear Tyler's sigh of relief. "Great. I'll tell Andrew, and don't rush. Have a good time. Thanks, Dad."

"Don't thank me, I'm your Dad and you guys can come over whenever you want. Tell your mother I'll be around later to get you."

"Sure. Have fun."

MacKinnon glanced at his watch. Six-forty. If he timed it right, he'd get to her house just before she got back from synagogue. Assuming she attended.

What if she was invited somewhere else? That was a chance he'd have to take. And he had a perfect right to appear; hadn't he told her she had to be available to look at the photos? Could he help it if it was Friday night?

*Better soften the blow in case she was steamed about him turning up again without warning. Stop and get flowers on the way.*

Striding to the door, he pivoted, almost forgetting the excuse for seeing her again. *A legitimate excuse, sure, but not much of one if he left them at home.* He shook his head at his own carelessness.

He had been so busy trying to finagle a way into her house, he nearly forgot the excuse, let alone its significance. *Sasha's death.* He'd been right that first day when he'd told Matt that there was something fishy.

Snatching the manila envelope with the photos, he tucked it into his pocket and headed out the door. Thunder rumbled outside. Better hurry, there could be a storm brewing and he still had to find a florist on the way over to her place.



It was Friday afternoon before I had the chance to re-think Fraser's warning. I was in my kitchen preparing dinner. I stuffed potatoes and chicken into the oven and after twenty-four hours I had finally calmed down.

It occurred to me that I had gotten hysterical over nothing. My pass code being entered into keypad was circumstantial evidence, at best. He must know that. And he knew I had lost those notes, that I had them hidden everywhere.

If MacKinnon bothered to check out my personal life, and he must have, since he had already searched my office and checked out my house, the only

thing he would have discovered was that housekeeping was not one of my strengths.

He'd also learn that I wouldn't have abandoned my kids for any reason. A night of ecstasy with Brad Pitt wouldn't tempt me to leave them unsupervised, let alone the thought of whacking a failing student.

Of course, Brad Pitt would be a lot more of a temptation than Sasha. Brad probably uses deodorant, but even that wouldn't be enough.

I cheered up for several seconds and then came back to ground zero to face reality.

While my flimsy excuse could hardly be considered an alibi, it wouldn't point the guilty finger at someone else. *If* this was a murder, which it couldn't be.

Honestly, I knew the possibility existed, and MacKinnon implied all too clearly that Sasha wasn't a cut-and-dried suicide. With my access code now a part of the mess, a cloud was hanging over my head.

"I can kiss contract renewal good-bye, let alone tenure," I muttered aloud, as I peeled carrots over the sink.

Julie and Alvin were invited to dinner after synagogue services, and while I couldn't compete with Julie for gourmet dishes, I did serve a fairly lavish meal on Friday night, the only chance I get to cook anything more than a slapdash meal.

Even when Michael was around, my cooking had been largely based on

stir-fry. What else can you do when you work full-time, take care of kids and do all the other unpaid work that nobody appreciates?

That didn't include the time that Michael ate a bowl of dog food and informed me solemnly that the beef needed more salt. I nearly choked when I realized what had happened, but wisely kept it to myself. Somehow, I had sensed it would turn out to be my fault. I'd get the blame even if it wasn't my fault.

While I was slicing cucumbers and tomatoes for the salad, my mind wandered back to MacKinnon's warning.

*Don't leave town.* Like I was some arch criminal. Even if nothing was ever proven, and it couldn't be, since I had had nothing whatsoever to do with Sasha's demise, a shadow would linger over my name, the doubt always associated with me. *So long, job.*

What would Hamish MacBeth do? What about Stephanie Plum? Surely someone who was as addicted to mystery novels as I was should have some idea how to clear her own name.

*Interviews.*

"I'll interview the students. Maybe they know something about Sasha. Then MacKinnon will have someone else to harass. Brilliant."

Agatha Christie would be proud. I brightened at the prospect that I now had a plan.

I tidied the kitchen, setting the table with the Wedgewood china and

good silver I had managed to hang onto in the settlement. Two golden, twisted loaves of *challah*, the traditional Sabbath bread, and a bottle of wine for *Kiddush*, the wine blessing, were carefully placed on the table.

Silver candlesticks with white candles already gleamed, waiting for me to light them, welcoming the Sabbath into my home. I might not be a terribly observant Jew, but I did want my kids to have a sense of tradition.

“Tessa, Greg, get dressed, it’s getting late,” I called as I headed towards the shower to wash the smell of onion off myself.

Forty minutes later, I was dressed in a hyacinth suit, with my hair carefully coifed in soft curls around my face. A judicious application of shadow, blush and mascara, followed by some lipstick, and I was ready.

The kids were sparkly clean, hair combed, and dressed in their best clothes. The table was bathed in the soft light from the candles. Dill, rosemary and sage perfumed the entire house, and I felt at peace for the first time since Sasha’s death.

“Let’s go.”

As I sat beside Julie, who had saved me a place in the women’s section of the synagogue, she elbowed me, ready to dig for more info.

“Give.”

“It’s a nightmare,” I whispered back, to a variety of ‘*Shhhs*’ and icy glares from the other women.

“Fraser practically accused me of killing Sasha, and I dumped coffee on

his crotch.”

“So we’re on a first name basis now. Sounds promising. Hope you didn’t damage the goods. What are you going to do?” Julie clearly wasn’t about to give up on matchmaking.

Too bad her choice was a lunatic detective who couldn’t wait to lock me in the slammer.

The rabbi’s pointed glare as he rose to deliver the sermon put an end to our discussion.

On our way home, we had no chance to pick up the thread, either, with Alvin and Tessa beside us, hanging onto every word.

We reached my corner just as an enormous clap of thunder shook the ground. Torrents of rain began to bucket down and we sprinted the last few yards just as the cloudburst broke like a monsoon.

“Expecting company, besides us?”

Julie’s head, shaking the water like a spaniel who had stepped out of a river, inclined towards a Camry parked in front of my house.

Squinting in the dark, I was unable to make out a figure, until he stepped out of the vehicle. I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Ohmygod!”

“What, *what*?” Julie sounded like a parrot with a limited vocabulary.

“It’s *him*!”

“The sexy cop?” Julie narrowed her eyes to slits. “You’re wrong about

him.”

*Wrong? What did I get wrong?*

A small smile curled on her lips.

“He looks more like Indiana Jones than Dirty Harry.”

“Indiana Jones?”

Speechless, I nodded. Everyone now stared pointedly from the dubious safety of the front step, huddled together like refugees, trying to keep out of the rain. I handed the key to Tessa who gaped like the others.

“Open the door.”

The lock clicked and the kids scampered inside, followed by Alvin. Julie’s eyes flickered towards mine and with regret on her face, she left me alone on the front step as he walked forward hesitantly.

“Sorry to interrupt your Sabbath. Being Friday night, I thought you might be at synagogue. It’s just that I had the photos, and you know how important this is to the investigation.”

He was so contrite that I couldn’t be annoyed.

At least he didn’t think I was taking a Berlitz crash-course in Portuguese, in preparation for a mad flight out of the country.

Maybe he thought I had booked a one-way ticket to Rio and taken the kids on frequent flyer miles. *Some getaway.*

“I didn’t realize you had dinner guests. I can wait until later.”

“And sit out in your car in the rain while we eat?” I clicked my tongue



and made a hasty decision.

“Come on in and join us, there’s plenty. Really.”

I saw the hesitation and urged him in despite the aggravation he had caused me. I figured I owed him for the aspirin and hankies. No point in irritating him further than I already had.

“It’s no trouble, please join us.”

“If you’re sure it’s no trouble.”

He was so sincere and apologetic as he accepted the invitation. It was only after he walked in that I noticed he was wearing a sports jacket and pants, not his usual jeans. He even wore a shirt and tie and the realization hit me like the jolts of lightning that crackled across the sky.

*He had come dressed for dinner, counting on my invitation.*

Fuming at the way he found me so predictable, I stomped into the kitchen with Julie hard on my heels.

“He looks even better in person,” she whispered.

I nodded grimly, stirring the chicken soup, thick with noodles, and handed Julie a bowl of salad to take to the table.

“Don’t get taken in by the packaging.”

Julie merely grinned, saying nothing.

We entered the living room, finding Alvin and Fraser engaged in an animated discussion about the merits of Hunter Valley wine, and why French wines couldn’t compare with Australian produce.

“You should try this place the next time you’re up in the Hunter Valley. Their wine is very clean and dry with a lemony, green-apple flavor.”

In a flash, Alvin produced a silver pen and pad from his jacket pocket for Fraser to scrawl the name of the winery.

“You might consider trying this one too. It has a nice ripe fruit flavor with hazelnut undertone.”

Alvin salivated as if he had just seen a mouth full of bridgework. I couldn’t resist a peek at the paper that Fraser had handed Alvin. Neat writing, and a detailed map full of arrows and directions to the wineries.

Not that I understood them at all. Number amnesia wasn’t my only failing. I have a severe map reading disorder. Whatever my instincts about directions are, they’re inevitably wrong and I’m always getting lost on the roads. Since I can’t afford a GPS until they give them away with supermarket coupons, I rely on five-year-old Greg as navigator, who has a far better sense of direction than I have.

Julie elbowed me, clearly impressed.

“I haven’t seen Alvin so excited about anything since he bought a high-powered dental drill. Your great Scot is really hot.”

“He isn’t mine.”

Stepping forward, she extended her hand, an electric smile pasted on her face. The same face I had seen her use to woo countless clients to her firm.

“Julie Silver. I presume Alvin already introduced himself?”

Fraser smiled back, a non-committal polite smile. I could see Julie's bewilderment in her face. She had failed to dazzle him, not her usual experience. I know, because he saved the broad smile for me, eyes raking up and down my form.

"You look nice," he murmured. Snapping his fingers, he excused himself to dash out to the car again, returning less than a minute later with an enormous bouquet of long-stemmed red roses in one hand.

"I hope you like roses."

I loved roses and no one had bought me flowers in so long, I melted at the sight. The roses made it easier to forgive his premeditated behavior, as I arranged them in a vase. Maybe he was trying to soften me up. Tough threats hadn't worked so now he was trying the soft approach. *Good cop, bad cop.*

Tessa fluttered her eyelashes at him, practicing for adolescent flirting, as if he had presented her with the roses. Fraser introduced himself while Greg glowered.

"A cop. Do you have a search warranty?"

Ducking his head to hide the urge to burst into laughter, Fraser shook his head, but Greg's suspicious nature wasn't about to be easily deflected. His lower lip protruded, a murderous look on his face, despite Fraser's gentle smile.

I suppressed a grin at my son's protective tendencies. It was nice to know I had a champion, even a five-year-old one.

"Are you going to arrest my mom?"

“Shut up Greg, don’t be dumb. You don’t have dinner and then arrest someone.” Tessa’s voice shrilled in the silence.

Fraser knelt down until he was at eye level with Greg.

“No one is going to arrest your mom,” he said quietly. “She’s trying to help the police, that’s all.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. Obviously, Fraser had come to his senses. Either that, or he was a darn good liar.

Greg still wasn’t convinced. Black eyes narrowed on Fraser.

“You got a gun?”

Fraser spread his jacket for Greg’s inspection. Greg’s face changed from skepticism to disgust.

“Too bad. I could have told all the guys at school.” With a sigh of disappointment, he turned away.

Clearing my throat, I suggested we should all sit down at the table.

“Over here Alvin, dear, right next to me.” Julie hastily nudged Alvin out of place, so that Fraser would be forced to sit next to me. My face flushed at her obvious ploy to shove us together.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Fraser. I knew that he observed me too as we went through all the traditional rituals, blessing the wine, the challah, and finally the children, before settling down to the soup, roast chicken, potatoes, salads, sautéed mushrooms, roasted vegetables and fruit sherbet.

I hoped I wouldn't have to discreetly open my skirt button, I felt so stuffed by the time I served dessert.

"Wonderful meal, Mrs. Kellerman. I haven't had any home cooking for a long time." Fraser patted his lips with the white linen napkin, careful not to use my first name in front of the kids. It was only then that I realized that he had called me Lindy when he invaded my office.

Julie shot me a quick glance over the table.

"Doesn't your wife cook?"

I flinched at the pointed question, but Fraser barely reacted.

"I'm not married," he replied easily.

Julie grinned at me triumphantly. I could hear her voice silently ring in my ears. *Told you so.*

*Go for it,* she mouthed, clearing her throat before rising. She pressed her hand dramatically to her forehead.

"It's been wonderful, but I think I'm coming down with the same bug you had." She coughed several times to enhance the point.

"I'm certain that I have a temperature and my throat aches. This must be flu, I simply must get right home to bed. Time to go, Alvin."

Before Alvin could open his mouth to protest, Julie had hustled him halfway out the door. For a sick woman, she moved at a speed that would put Carl Lewis to shame, and I reddened at her obvious ploy, but she only winked as she waved.

“Goodnight Lindy, so long Indy. How cute, it rhymes.” She slammed the door with a resounding *thud*.

“That was quick, but it’s late. Shouldn’t you kids be in bed by now? Anyway, I really need to discuss something important with your mom. Okay?”

Without a word of protest, Tessa and Greg kissed me goodnight, taking themselves off to their rooms.

I gaped at the ease with which Fraser had managed my children. It always took me at least half-an-hour of battling, at the end of which time, I tumbled into my own bed, exhausted.

“They probably think I’ll handcuff and arrest them. Kids always think they have to obey cops,” he said easily, starting toward the kitchen.

“I’ll give you a hand clearing up.”

Too astounded to move, I watched as he removed his jacket and slung it on the back of a chair. He began to clear dishes and then stacked them in the sink. Sleeves rolled up, he turned on the water and squirted liquid soap into the sink.

The bubbles reminded me of the kids when they were little in a bubble bath, blowing the white suds with me, all three of us laughing. Michael had never been around for all the hard work, but he also missed out on the fun.

“Don’t tell me you’re not married,” I said scornfully, arms folded over my chest. “You’re too well-trained.”

His eyes flickered towards me.

“I said I’m not married and I meant *now*. I was. It ended twelve years ago. I have two teenage sons who live with their mother.”

“I’m sorry.” I genuinely meant what I had said, I hadn’t intended to pry. Well, maybe a little. He seemed to know so much about me, yet I knew nothing about him.

A ghost of a smile lit his face.

“It was my father who taught me about housework. My mother died young and it was just the two of us. The main reason we came to Australia was Dad’s sister, who married an Aussie and begged us to come out here. I guess she didn’t like the idea of the two of us on our own.”

Without another word, I walked forward and grabbed a dish towel, ready to start drying the plates he had scrubbed, as we worked in companionable silence.

## Chapter Six

Dishes dried and kitchen tidied, I tiptoed into the kids' room to check on them.

Greg was sound asleep, a picture book open beside him on the pillow. His little rump protruded under the covers, soft snores indicating he was in a deep sleep.

Unable to suppress a small smile, I tucked the covers around him, clicked off the bedside lamp and proceeded to Tessa's room.

Like her brother, she too was asleep, a worn teddy bear that had once belonged to me tucked into the crook of one arm.

Returning to the living room, I found Fraser seated on the loveseat, and eyed him warily.

The heavy scent of the long-stemmed roses perfuming the room, the rain beating down on the roof and the soft glow of the candles, created a romantic atmosphere.

Still wary, I perversely chose to sit on a wing chair, hoping it didn't collapse. The springs had given way and the furniture was falling apart, but there wasn't a chance in hell that I would be able to replace it in the near, or even distant, future.

Fraser cocked his head curiously, and I was filled with the sensation that



he could read my mind again. *Did he think I was going to provide the after dinner entertainment?*

“Where did you get your name? It’s unusual. Don’t tell me your parents had a thing for Charles Lindbergh.”

He was trying to put me at ease, and I knew without doubt that he was intuitively aware that all my senses were on edge.

He had it right, he made me nervous and I still wasn’t sure why, but I was beginning to think I knew the answer.

How the hell could I be attracted to a man whose prime goal was to put me in jail?

Despite his reassurance to the kids, I harbored some doubts about his motives. Why else would he be hanging around me? I was appalled at my bad taste and out-of-control hormones. Maybe I was having an early menopause. Either that, or a very late adolescence, the way my hormones lurched whenever he was around.

Even though I was startled, I tried to concentrate on the question.

“My name? I’m named for cheesecake.”

The second I blurted it out, I knew how utterly ridiculous it sounded. His head cocked to one side, the look of incredulity on his face changing to skepticism.

“This should be good.” Folding his arms over his chest, he waited for the explanation, but I could see the laughter wrinkles around his eyes.

“Honestly.”

Settling back on the sofa, he grinned.

“Lindy Kellerman, by now, nothing you say should surprise me.”

“There are a couple of variations of the story, but the bottom line is that my parents met over cheesecake. Lindy’s cheesecake.”

One brow arched quizzically, and I continued rapidly in self-defense. Being in the same room, all alone with him, without a chaperone, made me nervous as hell.

Would he try anything? Did I want him to? Was this the ultimate good cop ploy?

I didn’t remember David Caruso ever doing anything like this. Then again, Fraser seemed a lot sexier to me than any television cop.

“My mother always said she was out for an afternoon with a friend and they stopped in for cheesecake and coffee at Lindy’s. You know? The Broadway restaurant? Famous for desserts. According to Mom, my father was also there, and tripped over her foot with his coffee. Of course, Mom’s version was that Dad tripped her.”

A smile lit my face as I recalled my parents arguing over which of the pair had been to blame that fatal day. It was an argument that had lasted over their entire married lives.

“Runs in the family.”

His teasing reminder of my own caffeine dump on his crotch made me

burn with humiliation, and I returned to the story, desperately trying to put my own clumsiness aside.

“Anyway, the friend knew my father and invited him to join them. One month later they got engaged. My mother and Dad, not the friend. What about you?”

“Not nearly as dramatic a tale,” he said dryly, blue eyes glinting with humor.

“I’m named for my mother’s family, the Frasers. It’s called a sept in Scotland, and it’s a fairly common practice there.”

It sounded infinitely more dignified than being named for cheesecake, no matter how sinfully delicious, and I forced myself back to the alleged reason for his visit.

“You said you had some pictures for me to see?” My voice rose in question.

Sighing, he reached inside his jacket, removing a manila folder. Silently, he handed them to me.

I stood up to grasp the envelope, lifted the tape and peeked inside. Involuntarily, I winced.

In one movement, he snatched the folder from my hands and pulled me down beside him on the sofa.

“Relax. You’re awfully nervous.”

Nervous was an understatement. Alarm bells were ringing in my head at

his closeness and I noted that he was freshly-shaved, in anticipation of the dinner invitation.

“They’re fairly gruesome,” he said gently.

I gulped, nodding.

“It’s not like I’ve never seen dead bodies before. Nurses see a lot of that sort of thing, but there’s something so creepy about this.”

Fraser nodded his understanding. One hand snaked around my shoulder and patted it.

“I know. Not really a Kodak moment.”

I inhaled deeply, steeling myself to open the envelope again. A dozen color photos spilled out. I glanced at them rapidly and squeezed my eyes shut, feeling sick to my stomach.

“I know this is hard, but it is important.”

My eyes opened and I saw his sober expression.

Quickly, I rifled through them, putting aside the facial close-ups. I really didn’t need to see that ghastly tongue protruding from the chalk-white face, the eyes staring up at nothing. I stopped abruptly at the last one, a full length body shot filmed from the right side.

Fraser noticed the frown on my face as I peered closer, holding it up to the light.

It was the unexpected object in Sasha’s fist that had caught my attention, and it didn’t make any sense.

“He’s holding a syringe in one hand. I didn’t notice it that day.”

“You were probably too upset to take in that detail and it’s almost hidden under the right leg.”

“Something is wrong about this.”

I closed my eyes again, concentrating on the class, several weeks past, where I had taught basic injection technique to my students. Mentally, I could envisage the cluster of students at the table.

Pam, Kate, Lauren and Sasha all industriously poking at oranges with needles. They were desperately trying not to stab themselves in the process, and Sasha had, in the end.

His clumsy performance, more than anything else, convinced me that he had lied to the admissions officer for the university. Whatever he had claimed, Sasha had never been a practicing nurse or doctor in his home country, as he had insisted. His documents were worthless. Maybe even forged. It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened.

“He was awful at it. Most of the students are a little clumsy when they begin, but it’s a skill, like most other things. Like taking blood pressure, it only takes practice. The only trouble with teaching a skill like this is that students want a cookbook solution, a step-by-step procedure to copy, and they can’t because I’m left-handed. When they try to duplicate my movements, their hands get tangled.”

I sat up with a start, my eyes wide open. The four students at the table

were suddenly in front of my eyes with perfect clarity.

Fraser felt the change in my mood. Pulling me closer, he turned my chin to face him. He was so close, I could feel his breath on my face.

“What is it? You noticed something?” His urgent tone made me gulp.

“There’s something wrong with this because Sasha was left-handed. I always remember the students who are, because I am too. The syringe in this picture is in his right hand.”

“Are you sure? You couldn’t be mistaken?”

Mutely, I shook my head.

“Not a chance. I told you, I always remember the left-handed ones, and Sasha was one of them.”

“Could he have been injected with a drug used for practice in the lab?”

I shook my head vigorously, curls coming undone, whipping around my face.

“Absolutely not. There are only fake drugs in that room. The clinical coordinator does a great job creating vials filled with fake medication. She uses things like talcum powder to mimic drugs that need to be faked for student practice, but no way would real things be in there. For one, they’re too expensive. For another, too dangerous. We keep a locked cupboard only for the sake of students practicing the procedure of signing out medication. The needles and syringes are real of course, but no medicines. There’s nothing more dangerous in that room than water and gelatin.”

In one movement he was up and out of the seat.

“Can I use your kitchen to make a call? Excuse me for a minute, please.”

I nodded and he strode with determination into the other room. I could hear a garbled conversation that included a demand for the medical examiner and a complete toxicology report on any kind of substance in Sasha’s blood that could have killed him. He returned to the living room, a tight grimace on his lips.

“Shit. This started out as a cut-and-dried case. I was only there because I happened to be at the local station to fill out some paperwork on a homicide. That’s my usual work, homicide, and when the call came in, I went along for the ride out of curiosity, more than anything else.”

His fingers pinched the bridge of his nose as he recounted that day. It already seemed like years since Sasha had turned up on the floor of the classroom.

“It was so obvious that a student had committed suicide. All the elements were there. Students have a high suicide rate, there was no sign of physical violence, so what else could it have been? The pass code business put a hole in that theory, but I wasn’t too disturbed at that point. Hell, Sasha could have found one of your notes somewhere. You had enough of them.”

“I know. I didn’t kill him, you must know that.”

He nodded grimly, eyes clouded with thought.

“But someone did. Someone who knew your pass code and didn’t mind

setting you up as the fall guy.”

His long legs paced up and down the room as he concentrated on the information. Abruptly, he drew to a halt in front of me, gazing up at him. His face darkened with worry and I saw the lines in his forehead deepen.

*Did he now think I had killed Sasha? Were we back to me being a murderer? Did he think I was The Avenger, some self-righteous academic vigilante, whacking failing students in my spare time? The only good thing about that would be wearing Diana Rigg’s cool leather cat-suit.*

*On second thought, probably not, based on my most recent weigh-in at the gym.*

Fortunately for me, Fraser didn’t harp on the Academic Avenger theory. Instead, what he said chilled me further.

“I want you to be careful. If someone killed, they can, and most-likely will, do it again. Maybe vary your routine a bit. You’re a creature of habit, I know that for a fact. You arrive and leave at the same time every day and that makes you vulnerable. Too predictable. Anything, absolutely anything that gives you a bad feeling is worth checking out. Don’t discount your intuition.”

Before I could ask about how he knew my routine, I clamped my mouth shut.

If Fraser had been stupid enough to follow me around observing my usual routine, the only criminal thing he could have seen me do was pinch melons in the supermarket. That didn’t solve the puzzle, and if there were no other suspects but me, the killer would never be caught.



And the one thing I did know beyond any doubt about Fraser, was that he wasn't dumb or likely to give up easily. He seemed genuinely convinced that I hadn't done anything to Sasha, other than fail his essay.

Fishing in his pocket, he handed me a card with his name and mobile phone number.

"Call me anytime, day or night. And don't lose the number. Write it on your chest if you need to. I could help you do that."

Despite his provocative offer, that I knew was meant to defuse my rapidly escalating sense of dread, his warning sent a shudder up my spine.

Still, I couldn't force myself to take it too seriously. As far as anyone knew, I was Suspect Number One, so why should anyone bother to do anything to me? Hadn't he said that I'd been set up to take the blame? So why would anyone want to get rid of me?

I opened my mouth to speak, but hesitated. I had thought about telling Fraser my plans to interview students the following week, but thought the better of it and shut my mouth like a clam.

He must have noticed and grabbed my shoulders.

"Lindy, don't get any ideas about investigating this thing on your own. Leave it to me." There was no doubt of the command in his voice.

"We'll catch the killer, whoever it is. Investigation is mostly painstaking attention to details, putting a jigsaw together, until you get a picture, instead of random pieces."

I nodded my understanding and rose, asking, "Want some coffee?"

His affirmative nod gave me the chance to escape to the kitchen. I puttered around, giving myself a few minutes to think. I boiled the kettle, spooned coffee into cups, and re-filled the sugar bowl. Loading everything onto a tray, I returned to the living room.

Fraser was back on the sofa and patted the empty seat I had vacated, still warm from my bottom. Warily, I placed the tray on the table, feeling another zing as his arm brushed mine to reach for the coffee.

A thunder clap, followed by lightning, shook the house to its foundations and more crackling lit the sky in a wild electrical display. I gasped in surprise, but he showed no reaction, just went on.

"Tell me more about Sasha."

I lifted the cup to my mouth, the last traces of red lipstick applied earlier now smeared around the edge.

"There isn't that much to tell. He was admitted to the program, according to Bill Kingsley, as an overseas trained nurse. We get students like that, who claim to be registered nurses in their country of origin, but we can always tell who really is and who isn't. It's like the injection skills, you can tell who's done that before and who hasn't a clue what to do."

He leaned closer to listen and I edged away towards the end of the sofa. My thigh pressed up against the armrest. His eyes narrowed, a glimmer of amusement in his face, as I tried to pick up the thread.

“He was struggling with English. That was one of the reasons he failed his last assignment for me. In first year, we can allow some flexibility for insufficient English skills, but by second year, they have to be judged like any other student. Writing and communication are part of nursing, so Barbara maintains they have to be able to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in an effective way.”

“So he failed because of poor English?” The incredulity was apparent in his tone.

Clicking my tongue, I drew a breath and continued.

“I also suspected he cheated. That there was plagiarism involved, since he couldn’t, or wouldn’t show me the references for his work. He claimed that he threw them away after he submitted the assignment. Parts of it were too well-written, and they didn’t read like the rest of the essay. You can tell almost immediately when the difference is so obvious. To make sure that I wasn’t prejudiced, I had Gloria read it to double mark the paper, and she agreed it was lifted from a book. She failed it too.”

I had taken grim satisfaction that my judgment had been seconded, but now it didn’t seem to make any difference. *Death by plagiarism?* Sasha was still dead, and I couldn’t see what a plagiarized assignment had to do with it.

“So why wasn’t he thrown out?”

A loud sigh preceded my reply.

“It isn’t that easy to prove plagiarism. I would have had to locate the

source, and since Sasha refused to provide the information, all I could do was fail it and make sure the incident was entered in his file in case it happened again. In that case, the Student Disciplinary Committee would have come down hard on him.”

I folded my hands over my lap as I recalled the scene in my office where Sasha had ranted and threatened me.

“I get the feeling there’s more.”

“You’re not going to like this, but he threatened me.”

Fraser sat up sharply at that point, placing his cup down on the table.

“How?”

I shrugged.

“The usual. He threatened to go to the Dean and claim that I was prejudiced against him. Barbara would have thrown him out of her office. She wouldn’t be bothered with a failing undergraduate paper, especially if it had been double marked.”

One brow arched in question.

“He generally made noise and said he would get me, whatever that meant.”

My fingers twisted in my lap.

“He said I would be sorry. I guess that makes me an even better suspect. He threatened me, so I got rid of him.”

Teary-eyed, I felt two strong arms pull me closer. Another earth shaking

lightning bolt plunged the room into darkness.

“Thank God for that,” he breathed, kissing me firmly, his tongue plunging deep into my mouth.



*That kiss.*

Lindy had kissed him right back, her tongue tangled with his. She liked it too, he could tell from the little sounds she made deep in her throat. Her body had pressed against his, the muscles relaxed from the earlier tension. Her hips had moved and she had to know what she was doing to him, she couldn't have missed the tell-tale swelling in his groin.

He could have gone on a lot longer, locked on her mouth, and maybe even more, but her palms had flattened on his chest and she'd shoved him away.

Her breathing was ragged and her nipples hard, like that day he'd caught her in the nightie at the door. Dilated pupils stared at him in the darkened room. Thank God for the power failure. She'd been so nervous earlier in the evening, he might not have been able to get his arms around her. He might not have had the nerve to try.

“In case you forgot, I have kids in the house and this really isn't such a good idea,” she'd said.

*Sure. Kids in the house.* Sound asleep. Not that he was going to do more than kiss her. Not yet, and not with kids around. Couldn't rush her and risk scaring

her. It was too soon.

He'd been right; she was cute *and* sexy. That woman really knew how to kiss. If she was that good at kissing, didn't that mean she'd be great in bed too? Why not? She got all excited over the smallest thing, wouldn't she be just as exciting in bed? He couldn't wait to find out.

"We can just fool around."

That went down faster than the Hindenburg. Fraser mentally slapped himself in the head. *Fool around. What a stupid thing to say. No woman wants to hear that.* He hadn't meant it the way it sounded; he'd meant kissing. Nothing more than that, for now.

*Big mistake.* She got nervous all over again. He could feel her tensed shoulders and saw the frown on her face when the lights flickered on again.

*Did she think he was going to jump her? Right there on that worn out sofa, with her kids sleeping a few feet away? Had some other man done that?* The thought of some other man seducing Lindy in her own house riled him, although he wasn't sure why.

*Shit. Slow down. Now you scared her. Acting like a horny teenager.*

Matt Pacula wouldn't have done something so stupid with that Katie Something-or-Other student. Whatever else Matt lacked, he probably had smooth moves around women.

Tyler probably had better finesse with girls.

*Out of practice, that was the problem. Ease off, or she'll get scared.*

Lindy would be worth the wait, and from the way she'd kissed him, the wait wouldn't be all that long. She wanted it as much as he did, it was a question of timing. Yeah, timing.

And that friend of hers, Julie, was all for it. He laughed softly when he thought about Julie's quick exit after dinner. She'd run out of there so fast, he thought she'd trip on the steps as she yanked her husband Alvin behind her. An ally. Better be nice to Julie if he ran into her again, she was on his side.

## Chapter Seven

All weekend I mulled over the tangle my life had gotten into, all because I couldn't remember a series of numbers. One failing, and look where it had gotten me. And in between, my thoughts wandered back to that kiss. *What the hell did that mean?*

Playing Monopoly with the kids on Saturday afternoon, I fingered the brightly-colored paper money, wondering if somehow that was a part of the mystery behind Sasha's death.

*Money.* Knowing about those problems, I wondered if they had plagued Sasha too. He had never mentioned financial difficulties, and just because he dressed in scruffy clothes didn't mean a thing. All the students did, even the well-to-do ones.

I couldn't seem to figure out why or how, but there seemed to be more unanswered questions now than there had been before.

Every time the phone rang, my heart skipped a beat with a wild hope that it was Fraser, but it always turned out to be one of the kids' friends, or Julie, or Susan Berman.

"Just checking in to see how you feel," Susan said cheerfully. Caught off guard, I had let my defenses down, saying the wrong thing, before I realized



who was on the other end of the phone.

“Not bad. Just a sniffle.”

*Fatal words.* I should have told her I had caught double pneumonia and needed hospital treatment for the next six months. Complete bed rest and intravenous antibiotics in Tahiti.

“Wonderful. Then I can count on you for a barbecue tomorrow. We’re having toburgers and homemade pita.”

“Toburgers?”

“Tofu burgers.” I heard a distinct note of superiority in her voice. “You’ll just love them! They’re so much better for you than red meat. You ought to take a dose of ginkgo biloba. You’re so stressed lately. I’ll give you a bottle to take home tomorrow. All organic, no animal testing.”

I grimaced, picturing Greg and Tessa’s reaction to another of Susan’s gala meals, but they had a legitimate excuse to get out of the fiasco. They were going out with Michael for the day to gorge on pizza and ice cream. They would come home with carbohydrate overdose, while I would be stuck with another harangue about homeopathy for my stress.

*Lucky me, facing Susan’s food all alone. Didn’t the woman ever eat anything normal?* By the time I slammed the phone down I was salivating for something sinful and cut an enormous wedge of Mississippi mud cake. I ate slowly, savoring every single calorie as the chocolate melted in my mouth, discounting the possibility that I would ever get my jeans closed after such a binge.

Julie's phone call was even more direct than Susan's, but at least she didn't waffle on about anti-oxidants.

"Tell."

I knew a command when I heard one. I glanced around, making sure the kids were outside playing in the bright sunshine, now that the storm had moved on to wreak havoc elsewhere. No kids in the house. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Tell what?" I tried to sound innocent, but nothing fools Julie. Public relations people are the biggest con-artists going, according to her, and there was no skirting around the issue. She zoomed in like a shark on a school of guppies.

"You know *what*. What happened? We got out of there fast enough so you'd have time for some canoodling. Didn't MacKinnon treat you to a Highland fling?"

"There was hardly any of that."

I could hear the groan at the other end.

"Didn't you get in some decent snogging? He's gorgeous, and he was looking at you like he could eat you alive."

"That's the cop in him. He was getting ready to arrest me and you misinterpreted."

Julie didn't buy my feeble explanation.

"Honestly Lindy, here you are with a hot-blooded, honest-to-goodness

interested male, and he is interested, trust me, and you did nothing? What is wrong with you? Maybe you should reconsider some of those pathetic nursing home prospects, after all.”

“I didn’t say nothing. He kissed me-”

“Ahhhh. Paydirt. That’s better.” I could hear the note of approval in her voice.

“And?”

“And stuff.”

Julie snorted.

“For an educated woman, you could choose a better word than ‘stuff.’ You sound like you’re sixteen and the guy copped a feel. What kind of *stuff*?”

I hesitated. As close as I felt to her I didn’t want to reveal all the details. It seemed so clinical to dissect the previous evening in romantic terms.

The darkened room, with candles burning on the dining room table, had emboldened Fraser. He had kissed me and I kissed back, enjoying the sensation of our tongues dancing together and the feel of his freshly shaved cheek next to mine. His arms had crushed me against him and I felt that bulge again.

This time it pressed against my own crotch, begging for me to unzip the pants, and examine if it was really as large as it felt. And that kiss just went on and on as if he had all night to tease my tonsils.

My toes curled in my shoes at the thought of a marathon kissing session with MacKinnon. Unlike other men, he didn’t seem to treat kissing as a prelude

to more intimate pleasure; a way-station on the way to a destination. He seemed to genuinely enjoy kissing. I'd been right when I'd sized him up earlier. Fraser MacKinnon knew how to kiss a woman senseless.

How could I tell Julie I thought I would swoon when his tongue teased the whirls of my ear? My body had been in a daze of pleasure I hadn't felt in years when his thumbs rubbed my nipples, teasing them into hardened peaks that begged for more.

"Hard again," he had murmured. "I noticed that the day you were sick."

I felt the heat in my cheeks while secretly acknowledging that he was right. *Good Lord, was there anything that man didn't see? Did he have to be that observant?*

I had to fight the urge to yank off my suit and fling myself against him. Instead, I had forced myself to draw back, his arms still around me.

"In case you forgot, I have kids in the house, and this really isn't such a good idea." I could hear myself panting as I tried to get under control. My legs felt like water, and my pulse was racing.

"Besides, how do I know that you aren't going to arrest me?"

He had exhaled, gazing at me so intently that I was forced to look away. I can usually stare anyone down, but MacKinnon had me licked in that department.

"I am not going to arrest you," he said slowly and precisely. "The circumstantial evidence might point to you, but even I think a failed paper is insufficient motive. The question really comes down to why would someone

want to make it look like you did this, and who?”

He must have sensed my relief as he leaned closer to me, ready for another round of tonsil hockey. My palms flattened against his chest in warning.

“The kids.”

He drew back, smiling weakly.

“I know that. We’re not going to do anything with your kids around. We can just,” he hesitated, “fool around.”

“*Fool around?* What the hell does that mean?”

*Was that all I was, some woman he had met on the case, to fool around with, relieve the daily tension? Did he do that with all his female murder suspects and then move on to someone else? Did that happen on Magnum? Would that be so bad?* It was the best offer I’d had in years.

He hadn’t answered, but leaned closer until I felt his breath on my neck as he nuzzled gently. One hand stroked my hair.

“You’re awfully nervous. Don’t be. I’m not fooling around or toying with you. You’re a very passionate woman, Lindy. That’s one of the many things I’ve managed to discover about you. When the time is right, we’ll be great together.”

I blinked as the lights flickered back on, Fraser staring at my face intently, and again I had the uncomfortable feeling that those piercing ice-blue eyes could read every thought in my head. He rose, kissing me on the head, as he reached for the photos, still exposed on the table. Without any wasted motion,

he shoved them back in the envelope, tucking it inside his jacket pocket.

“You have nice kids and nice friends. It’s been a memorable evening. I’ll see you soon.”

Striding quickly to the door, he had disappeared into the night, like some alley cat on the prowl. The sound of the car racing up the street was followed by a garbage can clattering to the ground.

“Probably some cat.” I hoped it wasn’t Mrs. Gallagher. For all I knew, she had night-vision goggles, and was on a nocturnal scouting mission to check out the garbage bin. I stood in the doorway a long time, breathing in the fresh smell of just-mown grass after the rain, as I contemplated what I was getting myself into.

*No. No way was I ready to tell Julie about that.*

“You’re nuts, Lindy. Bloody crazy, you know that? The guy is seriously interested. Here you are with a guy who must be a great shag, and all you have to do is sit back and let him take over. He clearly knows exactly what to do. Are you seeing him this weekend?”

“Nope, I get to eat tofu-burgers at Susan Berman’s.”

Julie groaned again.

“Spare me the details and give me a buzz when you’ve done the deed.”

The phone banged down on the other end as I stood listening to the dial tone, leaving me to wonder if I even remembered how to do the deed. Too bad you can’t take a refresher course. Maybe there’d be something in *Cosmopolitan*

that would help.

I picked through a stack of magazines that Julie had delivered when she finished with them. I flipped through the glossy pages that advertised kiss-proof lipstick, searching for 'Introductory Sex'. Tough luck for me that there wasn't a course I could audit at the university, Sex 101.

With a shake of my head, I flung the magazines to the floor, pivoted and marched outside where Tessa and Greg were taking turns trying to kill each other on their roller blades.



*"Nothing? You have nothing to say?" The two physicians leaned in closer for her answer, their noses wrinkling in disgust. The patient had voided, and the room reeked of urine from the soaked mattress. Still, she said nothing.*

*The physicians conferred quietly, one beckoning to a nurse, who stood at attention several steps behind them.*

*"There are no orders to kill her. Only to ensure that she is unreliable to speak about the flyers."*

*The nurse gazed at the patient, trapped in the bed with restraints. She had ceased her struggle against the straps that held her in place, out of exhaustion.*

*Only a short time at Mental Institute Number 15, and she already had the appearance of an elderly woman. She was emaciated; her face had a bony look, framed by tufts of thinning*

hair that had turned grey. Purple bruises covered her arms and legs. Dried blood from lacerations criss-crossed her body.

Hard to believe she was only thirty, with a young son somewhere. Didn't she care what happened to him? She could have made this all easier if she had spoken.

What was wrong with this woman? Didn't she realize she was forcing them to increase their efforts?

Resentment flooded the nurse. This patient was an inconvenience for all of them. Their director had promised his superiors that she would talk. The sodium pentothal hadn't worked. Now the physicians would try another method.

"A lumbar puncture. No anesthetic. Prepare for the procedure," one of the doctors ordered.

The nurse blinked at them. She'd have to restrain the patient for the procedure. Hold her curled in a fetal position, exposing the spine for the huge needle that would withdraw spinal fluid. Not for a conventional medical condition; no suspected meningitis. Her diagnosis was politically defined madness.

"Immediately," she responded to the doctors, scurrying to fulfill her instructions.



Monday morning, I marched into the office after an exhausting weekend. The rain had started again on Saturday afternoon, and the kids hurtled themselves back inside with the speed of intercontinental missiles.



They had whined about boredom. So, in desperation, we baked a batch of gingerbread men, that only added to the tight-jeans problem.

By Sunday, it was almost a relief to pack them off for a day with Michael, who would take them to a video arcade, spending a fortune on the games for lack of any other ideas of how to entertain his own children. He never seemed to consider actually talking to them. Instead, I knew without doubt that he would stuff them with junk food, because he didn't know how to say no, and would deliver them back home later in the day, gorged and in a daze from sugar overload.

I, on the other hand, had risen early, grimly determined to rewrite the grant application that Borowski had flung in my face the previous week.

"Is no good. You write garbage. Rewrite literature review. This time make it comprehensive." She had piled into my arms an enormous list of publications and several thick books that she deemed essential for me to read and incorporate into the application. It would have been enough to fill my own rubbish bin and Mrs. Gallagher's, if I had the audacity to give up and trash them.

I didn't have that luxury, and had read well into the night, until bleary eyed, I had finally fallen asleep as the sun rose over the treetops.

I couldn't suppress a small groan at the daunting task the slave driver had set before me. For the first time, I had an inkling about Eliza and Simon LeGree. Borowski might not have had a whip to crack over my back, but her

acid tongue was just as lethal.

I had spent weeks working on that literature review she had demanded. Gloria had read it for me and thought it was excellent. She couldn't understand why Borowski knocked it back again, and she commiserated with me.

"But she's the big shot, what do I know? I guess that's why she's a full professor and we're lowly lecturers."

What a way to spend the day, but I worked on, taking a break only for Susan's gala barbecue. I had made my apologies as quickly as possible, since I had the legitimate excuse of more work. What a choice, trying to please Borowski or eat Susan's food.

The tofu-burgers were hideous. Enough to make me bulimic. I contemplated how much weight I could lose if I moved in with Susan for a few weeks. In record time, I could emerge svelte and glamorous looking. Better than a fat farm.

"Don't forget the calcium tablets," she had called when I begged off, with the excuse that I needed to do some work on my doctorate and get Professor Enderby off my back. Another person who did nothing but harangue and make me feel stupid.

With promises to swallow a daily garlic and horseradish supplement, I sprinted for my car like Marion Jones at the finish line.



Monday teaching was a relief, in comparison to the weekend from hell, excluding the Fraser part.

I still hadn't seen or heard from him, and began to wonder if he had been put off by my reluctance on Friday night. Maybe he didn't like my hard-to-get attitude. *Now that I wasn't a suspect, maybe he'd found another woman to smooch with on a ratty sofa. Or even do more than kiss. A woman who didn't have kids in the house.* The thought of that made me burn, and I discarded the idea.

He didn't seem to be the kind of man who gave up easily. At least, I hoped he didn't. I itched to feel his hands roam over my body; just the thought of his touch made me tingle with anticipation.

A knock on the door brought me out of my daydreams.

Pam Anderson was standing in the doorway. Filling it would be a more apt description. Her six foot frame, topped by platinum blonde hair made her look like a Viking sex symbol.

Unlike her better-known celebrity namesake, my student's attributes, and they were considerable, weren't silicon induced. At least, I didn't think they were.

"Am I in trouble?"

The tiny, squeaky voice seemed incongruous in such a big girl.

I suppressed a chuckle, motioning to the visitor chair, sweeping papers and books to the floor, creating an obstacle course.

Defensive action. An academic boobytrap. If nothing else, a killer on the

loose would probably trip and fracture something, if he or she was stupid enough to arrive uninvited in my office.

“Not at all. Please sit down.”

Obediently, she perched on the chair, leaning forward on the edge in expectation.

“Thanks for coming in, and don’t look so frightened.”

I had to suppress a smile as the frown turned into a neutral expression. Poor Pam must have thought she was in some sort of trouble. I hastily tried to put her at ease.

“I wanted to have a chat with some of you about Sasha. It was a terrible shock to all of us, and I know many of the students are still upset, especially those of you who sat at the same table. No one seems to know exactly what happened and I wondered if there was something you knew that you might care to tell me.”

I thought I sounded wonderfully sincere and caring.

Pam’s lashes flew up and to my horror, she burst into tears. Guilt flooded through me at the obvious distress my snooping had caused.

“I probably should have said something sooner, but he was peddling the exam for your subject. He said it was the real thing. Selling it for cash. No one knows how he got it, but it looked authentic. I didn’t buy it and I told him he would get in trouble if anyone from the faculty found out, but I didn’t report it either. I know I should have, but I didn’t want to dob him in.”

Big drops plopped down on Pam's sweater. Her eyes were puffy and red, like she was having an allergic reaction.

I ignored all of Barbara's advice that explicitly stated that staff should never touch students. Instead, I wheeled my chair over and patted her shoulder.

"You should have said something right away, but at least you did now."

I handed her a tissue from a box on my desk. After going through two of Fraser's handkerchiefs, a month's supply of tissues seemed to be a reasonable investment.

Pam clutched the tissue, blowing her nose with a snort that sounded like a Viking horn-blast in warning to enemies. Yellow mucus filled the crumpled tissue, and I handed her the entire box.

"Am I in trouble?" Green eyes, filled with tears blinked at me.

"No. He's dead, after all." I couldn't figure out what exam peddling had to do with Sasha's death, but it did confirm to me what I had suspected all along. He was a cheat, and I had been right about that essay. He had cheated on it, even if I couldn't prove it.

Pam sniffed loudly. Her red-rimmed eyes and the black mascara lines on her face gave her a sad clown appearance.

"There's more."

I sat up in my seat like a terrier whose ears prick at the sound of a nearby fox.

Her voice lowered to a whisper. "He was dealing too."

My eyes widened at the hushed confession.

“I never bought anything, honestly. I told him he’d get in trouble if he got caught. Never get registration as a nurse, but he said he was only small time, and nobody would bother with him. I think he needed the money, but that doesn’t make it right.”

She wailed again. She had a look on her face not unlike the physiology laboratory rats who ran through the maze, hopelessly confused.

Drugs. That was a dirty business.

*Maybe dirty enough to kill.*

“What kind of drugs?”

“Ecstasy. Coke. Maybe other stuff. I saw him peddling stuff at a rave party a few weeks ago and left right away. I tried to steer clear of it all.”

*Money again.* It still didn’t explain why he was killed. If he’d been dealing and cheated someone, and Sasha seemed to be the type to cheat at anything, maybe someone killed him.

*Cheating again.* It still didn’t explain how he got into the lab, nor did it point to any idea of who might have been the killer.

I sat quietly with Pam, silently contemplating the latest bombshell. All it did was widen the possibilities, rather than narrow them. It gave Fraser a 500 piece jigsaw instead of a 250. Some detective I turned out to be.

Half a box of tissues later, Pam finally rose from her seat. Stooping over, she hugged me, and I thought if only the coroner had found that Sasha had been

choked to death, Pam could have done a great job.

“Thanks, Lindy. It was very nice to make the time to talk to all of us. Everyone is very upset, and we appreciate all the support.”

She turned and walked rapidly out as I experienced another twinge of guilt, hastily putting that aside as another student knocked at the door.

## Chapter Eight

Three boxes of tissues and two days of listening to tearful students confess their horror and misery, forcing me to relive the sight of Sasha's body on the floor, drained the last ounce of energy from my own body. Everyone seemed to know something unsavory about Sasha.

Exam cheating, drug dealing, shoplifting at the student boutique. Sasha made Al Capone look like a rank amateur. He was a one-man mobile crime spree.

"About the only thing he didn't get involved in was kidnapping," I mumbled to myself sourly, as the last of the distressed girls left my office.

I considered rolling over on my own floor to give up and play dead. Fraser hadn't turned up, and I decided that he had had enough of what he termed 'fooling around,' and sought feminine company in other places that were less complicated.

Too bad. I had had a chance and blown it, but somehow I couldn't see myself having a quickie on my living room sofa and being satisfied with that. Maybe it was me, a character flaw, out of sync with contemporary values.

Maybe Julie was right and I should have been more forthright. Or at least, more encouraging.

For now, I had to contend with a ten AM appointment with Borowski as



my daily penance, like a Catholic who sought absolution. Ten Hail Marys and five Borowskis.

Armed for battle, I was dressed in combat uniform. My best navy suit with a strand of shimmery pearls around my throat, and my only really good dress pumps. They were beautiful navy suede, and gave me even more height, so I could stare down at her.

As if Borowski could be intimidated by my appearance. She wouldn't even notice. Still, I felt that I looked successful and confident even if I knew she considered me hopeless. No matter what I did, I couldn't please that woman.

"As if she notices what I wear," I mumbled as I fished in my shoulder bag for the pass code.

"I don't know why I bother with the stupid thing. Probably everyone in the university knows the number by now, but me. I could ask one of the students. For all I know, Sasha sold my number to everyone. He would have done anything for money."

I was still rifling through my handbag as I rounded the bend, when my nose wrinkled in disgust. A foul odor permeated the corridor and it was much stronger outside my office.

"Pffoo. Smells like manure." The landscape gardeners must have fertilized the lawn around the campus buildings.

Distracted by my search, I was in front of the door before I slammed into Fraser.

“You have a bad habit of running into me,” he mumbled as I stared up at him. I couldn’t hide the joy I felt at the sight of him, and the knowledge that he was still a part of my life.

“What the hell is this supposed to mean, and where is that stink coming from?”

So glad was I to hear his voice, my lips spread into a huge grin that flipped into a frown when I saw the enormous block-lettered note in black letters taped to my door.

NOSEY BITCH.

“What does that mean?” Fraser’s brows narrowed.

I tried to remain nonchalant as I shrugged my shoulders, slack-jawed, and didn’t answer the question.

I had a good idea exactly what it meant. Someone didn’t want me asking questions about Sasha. I still didn’t know who killed him, but I must be closer to understanding what happened. Move over Miss Marple.

His lips tightened in a grimace when I refused to answer his question.

“You’re not getting off that easily.”

As the lock clicked open he stepped back. My head was turned slightly to one side and I opened my mouth to retort. It was only then that I realized where the smell was coming from.

*My office.* And I had just stepped into the biggest pile of dog plop I had ever seen. It must have taken a pack of St. Bernards to come up with the

mountain right inside the door. It covered my shoes, my ankles, and splattered up my legs.

Speechless, I burst into tears. To his credit, Fraser tried to hide his amusement, but I noticed he skirted past the disgusting mound, careful not to step in the mess.

“I presume you didn’t baby-sit a dog in here?”

Not funny. My wails increased in volume. Fraser hugged me closer, careful to avoid Mt. Manure.

“Honey, don’t cry,” he soothed. “There’s no real harm done. It’s a mean trick, that’s all.”

“What the hell do you mean no harm? Look at me!”

My shrieks brought Gloria rushing from her office around the corner, with Brian right behind her. Both stopped short at the sight of me standing in a pile of dog plop, with Fraser’s arm around my shoulder.

“Holy shit.”

Gloria wrinkled her nose.

“There’s nothing holy about this. It’s absolutely disgusting. Poor Lindy.”

Neither of them moved, fascinated by the foul mess.

“If you want to impress a lady, you should send flowers, not dog poo,” Brian added with a snicker.

Fraser shot him a black look.

“My best shoes and they’re ruined. The smell will never come out. And

the carpet. It stinks to high heaven!”

Without another word, Fraser carefully forced one of my hands to his shoulder. Stooping gingerly, he removed the shoes from my feet, careful not to touch the mess.

“Now the hose. Take it off.”

For once, I didn’t argue with Fraser about taking off my clothes, and I was grateful for his take-charge attitude.

*Take it off.*

I had been certain that, somehow, when I finally heard Fraser order me to remove my clothes, it would be seductive, romantic, sexy.

Instead, I was attempting to wriggle my skirt, lean on Fraser’s shoulder for balance, and tug on my pantyhose. No romance. All I could think of was trying not to slip in the revolting mess and ruin my suit, too. My brain must have turned to mush. It had to be some kind of poison produced by the toxic canine fumes.

Gloria’s glance darted from my now bare feet to Fraser’s face. She arched her brows and cleared her throat.

“I’ll call Bill and tell him what happened.”

She tugged Brian by the hand who gaped behind her. The pair scurried back to the sanctuary of her office, still smelling of lavender oil. No scented oil would get the odor out of my room, it smelled like dog hell.

Unable to suppress the tears, I carefully peeled off the feces-covered hose.

Fraser snatched them from me, tossing them in a plastic bag, along with the shoes. He knotted the end securely as I stood, silent.

I watched him carefully scrub his hands at the sink of our shared kitchen. He tossed me a few wet paper towels for me to wash the remnants of dog doodle from my ankles. My eyes stared glumly at my bare legs; then I scrubbed my hands at the sink like I was preparing for cardiac surgery.

“I can’t walk around without shoes all day. I have a meeting with Borowski at ten.”

“I’m sure you have some explanation for this, but before I hear it, I have a few calls to make.”

Fraser acted as if he hadn’t heard a word I’d said. He punched numbers into his mobile phone and spoke quietly as he asked for the local police to come to my office. Clicking off, he phoned again, this time to Barbara, already upstairs in her office. While he was speaking, Gloria came up and handed me a worn pair of rubber thongs.

“I had these in my gym bag. They’re not much, but at least they’re shoes.”

I tried to smile gratefully, but couldn’t seem to manage even that much effort. Wrapped up in my own distress, I was barely aware of Fraser’s lowered words to Barbara.

“She’s in no condition to stay here and the place smells awful. Nothing can be touched until the lab technicians check for prints. Ditto the keypad. You’ll need a cleaning service to fix that carpet, the stuff seeped right through.”

I could hear Barbara squawk over the phone. Other faculty members were drifting in, their faces wrinkled at the disgusting odor that had seeped out, filling the entire wing. Everyone stopped dead in their tracks at the sight of me standing bare-legged, in ridiculous beach thongs, next to Fraser, with the poop-covered shoes in the see through bag.

Kindly, no one said anything, but I could hear doors slamming as everyone did their best to keep the sickening odor out of their offices. The entire wing now smelled like a kennel that hadn't been cleaned in months.

Barbara marched in with her stooge Bill shadowing her elegant figure and came to an abrupt halt at the sight in my office. Frowning, she turned away, the smell overpowering her, as it had the rest of us. She whipped out a delicately-scented handkerchief from her pocket and covered her nose. Bill's jaw dropped wide enough to drive a car through.

"The shit hit the fan all right."

Barbara glared at him.

"Not funny." Her eyes darted from the mess, to my wet face, down to my bare feet and the bag that contained my ruined shoes, hose and dog shit, and ended with a grimace directed at Fraser. Her lips tightened in distaste, but Fraser stood his ground, totally unimpressed with Barbara's attitude, which seemed to imply that this was his fault.

Instead, he yanked me closer to his side and I was too cowardly and upset to protest.

“She’s coming with me to make a statement at the station. This is serious vandalism and you can see Mrs. Kellerman is understandably upset. I’d appreciate it if you would notify Professor Borowski that Lindy won’t be able to make their meeting.”

It was an order not to be disobeyed, as if I were a child, no longer capable of making a decision on my own.

Barbara merely gave him a curt nod. Fraser glared at Bill, as if daring him to make another wisecrack.

Bill opened his mouth, but in the end, slammed it shut.

*Thank God.* I had no patience for any witticisms from Mr. Smart-ass.

The two quick-marched off down the corridor, as anxious as everyone else to get away from overpowering smell.

Fraser took one final look at the door and yanked me down the corridor.

“Where are we going? I can’t walk around like this!”

Students drifting in for early morning classes congregated outside classrooms, busy with their social chatter. The gossip stopped pointedly as Fraser swooped past them with me in tow. Everyone laughed and pointed at me as he dragged me down the hall to the staff garage.

Fraser acted totally oblivious to the attention we generated, ignoring the snickers.

I fumed at the embarrassing ordeal. My mind could already envision a front page photo of my bare feet in the student newspaper, and I mentally

prayed there were no photographers lurking around. We stopped short so suddenly that I nearly crashed into him for the second time that day.

“We’re getting out of here.”

He gripped my hand, fingers laced with mine, a grim expression on his face, and led me to an ancient Holden parked in the visitor space. Full of dings and with a cracked side window, it looked as if it should be in the car cemetery.

Police wages must not go any further than academics. It made my clanking Ford look good, and that was quite a stretch.

“We’re going shopping. And then, I want the whole story. I can’t seem to leave you alone for a few days without you getting in trouble.”

Ruffling my hair like I was a naughty kid, his expression was serious, the hard chiseled mask that I associated with his cop face was in place. I shivered because I had more than a good idea what his reaction would be when I told him what I had discovered about Sasha. I had other things to worry about first. For starters, how to get the smell of *Eau de Pooch* off my feet.



Not even the sight of early morning shoppers who openly gaped at my bare-legged, rubber-thonged appearance as I flip-flopped my way through David Jones department store, deterred Fraser. He had parked in an illegal space on Elizabeth Street so we could make a mad dash into Sydney’s most elegant department store to avoid any unnecessary embarrassment. As if that



was possible the way I looked.

“You can’t park here,” I had protested.

He shot me a lopsided grin in reply.

“Of course I can. I’m a cop and I’m on official business.” He shoved a sticker under the windshield, locked the door and hauled me past men and women in neat business attire, on their way to offices.

People’s scowls at my ridiculous state confirmed that they thought I was either a hooker or a bag lady, under arrest.

Despite the humiliation, I couldn’t help comparing him to Michael. When Greg was a baby and had gotten sick and thrown up on a plane trip to Hawaii, Michael had slumped down in his seat and tried to pretend he didn’t know us.

Fraser, on the other hand, firmly clutched my hand so that I couldn’t give in to the urge to bolt and run from the stares. Instead, he marched resolutely forward, dragging me in his wake, past genteel salesladies who sprayed perfume and offered new lipsticks. On he went, through haberdashery, with its bizarre collection of elegant hats that no one wears and straight to ladies shoes.

The black uniformed clerks all stared wide-eyed, but were well trained. Not one said a word, as if this was an everyday occurrence for them.

A short, bald man that had a distinct resemblance to Danny DeVito, minced up to us. He tapped his chin thoughtfully, the deep tone of his voice completely incongruous with his height.

“Madame requires a pair of shoes?”

Fraser’s temper finally snapped.

“No, she’s a supermodel, setting a new trend. Of course she needs shoes.”

The local cops had gaped at the old pair, which, thank goodness, had been dropped off at the police station, along with my signed statement. Disgusted with the evidence, their faces had contorted at the foul bag of droppings. None of them bothered to pretend that they weren’t gawking at me. All of their eyes had traveled upward from my feet, as I struggled not to trip on the cracked linoleum floor in the thongs, to my tear-stained face, to the disgusting bag.

“You should have used a pooper scooper, lady.”

That did it. I’d been ready to burst into tears again when Fraser practically dragged me out the door to the echo of humiliating laughter.

And now I found myself in the middle of David Jones’ shoe department, watching Fraser, as he scanned the display of shoes that ranged from stilettos to mules and wedgies in a riot of color.

“Those,” he said, pointing to a glamorous pair of strappy red sandals, a small heel adding a feminine touch to the shoes. Highly impractical shoes that implied a steamy, sexy date.

*Where on earth did he think I was going to wear those?* Men just have no sense sometimes.

“I don’t have any use for those. They don’t go with anything and they’re

completely impractical. Besides,” I lowered my voice so the clerk wouldn’t hear me.

“They look like hooker shoes.”

A devilish grin flickered over Fraser’s face. For the first time that day I had a chance to study his appearance.

He looked exhausted, dark circles shadowed his eyes, and he looked like he hadn’t shaved too closely this morning, either.

With more than a tinge of jealousy, I wondered how he had spent the past few nights, but resolutely put that thought out of my head.

“I know. I’m partial to them. I like taking them off women.”

My eyes widened but I said nothing. MacKinnon’s foot fetish was the least of my problems.

Sensing a sale, the little man hovered closer, addressing Fraser. He could tell who was in charge, and it obviously wasn’t me.

“They also come in jet black, teal, and oyster.”

“Bring her the black and red.”

The clerk stooped down to measure my foot and hustled off to the stock room, anxious to make the sale, but not before he called back over his shoulder.

“You will require disposable stockings, I presume?”

I whirled back to Fraser who wore a shit-eating grin on his face.

“What do you think you’re doing? Two pairs! Do I look like Imelda Marcos? I can’t use those shoes and I can’t afford them either! I looked at the

price, if you didn't." My shouts were attracting attention, but I was boiling, my temper on edge from the horrible start to the day.

"Take it easy. This is on the house. Barbara said she would have the faculty reimburse you for the damage. It was vandalism that ruined your shoes and I'm still waiting for the story behind this."

"Barbara isn't going to pay for red hooker shoes." I shouted again, my shouts drawing odd glances from passing shoppers, who clearly thought I was on a day pass from a mental asylum. They stared before scurrying away.

"I am." The tone was so low and husky, I barely heard it, but I did.

Before I could retort that I was not about to accept red hooker shoes from Fraser MacKinnon, the salesman was back, carrying several shoe boxes.

With some distaste at my footwear, he indicated for me to sit, lifting the black sandals from the box.

Perfect fit, although they weren't pumps, and all I wanted to do was put an end to this embarrassing spectacle. I didn't even wait to see if they were comfortable. They fit, and I wanted out of this embarrassing situation ASAP. I indicated with a bob of my head that I would take them, tossing the thongs into the empty box.

"I'll wear them."

"Excellent choice, Madame."

The salesman nodded his agreement, eyeing the rubber shoes in the shoebox, a distasteful expression crossing his face. He rapidly covered them

with the lid, putting the offensive shoes out of his sight.

“The red pair, too,” Fraser ordered the man as he handed him a credit card. “Where’s the lingerie department?”

Red-faced, the man pointed to the back corner of the store as he snatched the credit card from Fraser’s hands. A sly grin lit his face as he rang up the sale, handing the card and docket to Fraser to sign.

It was all too obvious what he thought. I was an early morning tootsie out with my lover to buy sexy shoes and bimbo lingerie to go with the outfit. Maybe he thought I’d want a whip and he could sell me some boots to go with the dominatrix look.

“I don’t need any lingerie,” I whined as Fraser shoved the card in his pocket, dragging me into the department filled with lacy feminine garments. Teddies, camisoles, skimpy thongs and garter belts were displayed as far as the eye could see, and in every color imaginable.

“Just a plain pair of pantyhose. Any color,” I mumbled.

“She’ll have three pairs of black stockings,” Fraser announced to the bored saleswoman, who tapped a pencil on the glass case. His eyes traveled along the display cabinet and he leaned forward, whispering into the woman’s ear.

The clerk nodded her understanding with a small smile as I snatched a pair of flesh-colored pantyhose and dashed to the fitting room in record time to slip into them.

“These will be fine,” I announced. Throwing a wad of bills at the woman, I sprinted for the door, followed by Fraser, still carrying parcels.

He caught up with me in the ‘After Five’ department, eyes riveted on a sheer red and black dress. Shiny material, covered by a thin, see-through, filmy overlayer, and a plunging neckline, guaranteed any woman would feel glamorous and sexy in the dress.

I blinked up at Fraser who stood for several seconds eyeing the dress. He seemed to be studying me as his eyes darted back to the dress one more time.

“I don’t need evening wear. Let’s get out of here.”

Tugging me by the elbow, he did an abrupt about-face to make one more stop at the perfume counter. This time I wasn’t about to argue. I was all out of steam and I felt like a dog’s breakfast, certain that the foul odor had permeated my clothes.

“*Paris*. I noticed it on your dressing table. The bottle is almost empty.”

I love *Paris* and used it sparingly, in a futile effort to make it last. I wasn’t about to turn down the offer of my favorite perfume, but sirens shrieked in my head. *What was the payoff for all this generosity?*

“Thanks. This is very kind of you,” I said gratefully, spritzing myself with the scent.

Fraser grinned down at me, blue eyes traveling slowly from my feet as I tottered in the spiky black sandals, to my legs now clad in new hose, all the way up to my face.

“I’m sure you’ll find some way of thanking me.” His brows arched at my open mouth. “If you can’t think of a way, I can.”

I thought I would choke, as he resolutely took my hand, leading me to a coffee shop.

“Sit down.”

I plopped into a chair, knowing what was coming. Seduction would have been a lot more fun than the grilling that I was sure was about to start.

He waited until the frazzled waitress took our order for coffee and croissants, and then faced me, lips tightening in a thin line. “Start talking. And don’t stop until I tell you to.”

## Chapter Nine

Fraser waited until the waitress plunked steaming cups of café latte in front of us with an enormous plate of flaky croissants. Arms folded over his chest, he continued staring at me as I tried to cook up a story to feed him. He picked up a croissant and started to spoon jam onto the golden crescent, all the while eyeing me docilely stirring the coffee.

Any attempt on my part to pretend nonchalance failed miserably. My hands shook so badly as I tried to smear jam on a croissant that he sighed, taking the whole mess out of my hands.

He carefully split the pastry, covering it with raspberry compote, and shoved the plate back to me.

“Okay, start talking.”

I fidgeted in my seat like Greg does when he’s been caught doing something naughty and knows he’s about to be scolded.

“There really isn’t a lot to tell,” I mumbled.

“Perhaps you’d care to tell me why someone would pin a note on your door calling you a ‘Nosey Bitch,’ unless this involves snatching someone’s research grant, in which case you can spare me the details.”

I felt my face burn at his needling and averted my gaze.

“It’s hardly anything of consequence,” I whined, but I knew him well



enough by now to know that he wouldn't drop the subject. Fraser was like a dog with a bone. He'd gnaw away to get at the marrow and he wouldn't quit until I blabbed the whole story.

"Stop stalling. And no lying. You're a rotten liar, everything you think shows on your face."

Glaring at him, I sipped from the cup. I figured I needed a caffeine hit before I told him about Pam's disclosure.

"It's a minor scrap of information. I called a few students into my office for interviews to ask them about Sasha, and it turned out he was dealing drugs and peddling an exam. My exam. I can't understand how he could have gotten his hands on that. That exam wasn't in my office. They're locked in a safe and you need a secret access code to get in. I don't even have one."

Coffee spluttered across the table. Fraser's face was so red I thought he would have a heart attack.

"You did *what*?"

His roars made the other shoppers, who had been enjoying a morning coffee break edge their chairs away, warily eyeing him.

"Calm down," I said, my voice shaking. "You might give yourself a heart attack and I'm in no condition to do CPR."

Thumping around on Fraser's chest didn't seem like such a bad idea, but after that scorching kiss at my house, I would have preferred MacKinnon's kisses to mouth to mouth resuscitation.

As he grabbed my hand, his cop face glared at me. His features hardened as I winced from the pressure exerted on my wrist.

“Would you like me to take your pulse?” I offered sweetly, “you’re very upset. You could give yourself a stroke.”

“The only stroke you’re going to see is one on your cute backside! Didn’t I tell you to leave this to me?”

Oh boy. He was good and ticked off. I yanked my hand back, eyeballing him.

He was livid, breathing fast and heavy. Almost like foreplay. *What was wrong with me? Why did my brain conjure up sexual fantasies whenever I was around this man?*

Disgusted with my inability to control my thoughts, I forced the image from my mind. Still, he had said ‘cute backside’ and I figured that gave him bonus points in my book.

“I wasn’t really interfering in police business. The police just took the students’ names and details. They didn’t follow up or ask them anything much about Sasha. I know, because one of my girls went out with one of the police guys.”

Conceding my point, he nodded in agreement.

“Matt Pacula. He talked about it down at the station. Stop stalling.”

“The point is that the girls all knew Sasha. We don’t get a lot of men in the program, so they tend to take notice of the ones that are around. I merely

asked a few questions about what they knew about him. That was how I found out about the stolen exam and the drugs. That's all. Really."

Fraser sat silently for several seconds, contemplating what I had revealed. He grimaced and I noticed that vein in his forehead throbbing again.

"This is a dirty business. Sasha was a creep. A real shit. A cheater. You said so yourself, and someone killed him for it. Don't you understand that it could happen again and this time it could be you?"

I fumed while inwardly shaking. I really hadn't considered that anyone would hurt me.

*All I did was talk to the girls. What harm could that possibly do? I was genuinely concerned with their stress and fear, and wanted to alleviate the worst of their anxiety. If I happened to pick up a piece of information along the way, it could only help. Besides, wasn't I still the number one suspect, the only one with any connection to him?*

Fraser glared at me, obviously still upset by my meddling. He laced his fingers with mine, our elbows resting on the table.

"I'll check out this exam business and the drug angle, too. Drugs are rotten business. Maybe Vice knows something about him, but I want you to promise to stay out of it. That love letter was a warning. You've obviously struck a raw nerve and someone wants to scare you off."

I understood his point, but it was still my reputation that was in tatters because of Sasha. With my pass code as the only one entered on the lock, a

shadow would hang over my name no matter how innocent I was. My contract was due to expire in several months and I had to have my name cleared, or the only thing I would be kissing was my job goodbye.

“I want a solemn promise from you that you’ll keep your nose out of this. Let me handle it all.”

“That’s a rather macho attitude, isn’t it? You still wouldn’t have known about the exam or the drugs, if I hadn’t found out. You should be grateful to me.”

“I’ll be grateful if you keep out! I don’t want anything to happen to you. Now promise.”

I pulled my hand back from his grasp and lifted it as if I were about to take an oath in court.

“On my Girl Scout honor, I promise no more meddling.”

Too bad for Fraser that I’m left-handed and everyone knows it doesn’t count if you take a right-handed oath.

Besides, I was never a Girl Scout, only a Brownie, and that doesn’t count either.

Fraser drained his cup, glancing down at his watch. He threw a couple of bills down on the table and grasped my hand.

“Let’s go.”

I trotted beside him back to the car, but I had the niggling sense that he wasn’t finished with me yet. He held the car door open and I slid in, still

teetering on the new shoes. He gunned the motor and we sped off through the city.

“I have to go to work.”

“Honey, with the condition of your office, you won’t be working there for a few days. That whole place should be fumigated.”

*Honey.* He’d said it again.

Even in the commotion earlier in the day, I hadn’t failed to notice his use of the casual endearment. Maybe he called every woman he met ‘honey.’ It was easier than remembering names. Still, I racked up a few more points in the ledger for him.

“Where are we going?”

He shot me a sly grin.

“You’ll see.”

We drove over the Harbour Bridge in the light, mid-day traffic and took the exit for North Sydney.

A shiver ran up my spine. I had a sneaking suspicion that I knew exactly where we were headed. We came to a stop in front of an apartment building. Fraser punched a code into the security gate for the garage.

“Unlike you, I don’t have a number disability,” he said dryly. The gate swung open and he drove through to park the car in a reserved space.

*Uh-oh.*

“Where are we?”

I quaked inwardly because I was sure that I knew the answer to the question before I asked. *His place.*

I gulped, wondering exactly what he had in mind, alternating between anticipation and hysteria. We rode silently in the elevator to the fifth floor, stepping out onto a thickly-carpeted hallway. Fraser led me down the hall and unlocked the door with a set of keys.

“No pass codes,” he said with a grin, holding the door open for me. If he was teasing to put me at ease, it didn’t work. My palms were wet with nervous anticipation. *This must be the pay-off for the shoes.*

My eyes darted around the room. Blue leather furniture and fairly ordinary coffee tables. An expensive-looking stereo system and heaps of CD’s in one corner, a large screen television and DVD player in the other. One wall was covered floor to ceiling with shelves, all crammed with books.

My fingers ran along the spines. History, anthropology, sociology, fiction. Either he was very well read, or he put on a good appearance. I stopped, pulling out one ancient-looking text. *The History of the Celts in Britain.*

“That’s quite a dry book,” he commented, sneaking up so quietly behind me, I jumped in place. One hand pressed lightly on my shoulder.

“I had to read it for a history seminar.”

“History? You studied history?” This was a surprising bit of information.

“University of Sydney, honors degree in Celtic studies and languages. I won a scholarship and went to university, mostly to please my father.”

I contemplated the information carefully. Other than the bare bones of his marital break up, Fraser hadn't revealed anything personal until now. He seemed to guard that information zealously, so why had he brought me here and let me in through the door to his personal life?

Of course, he knew just about everything about me. I seemed to be an open book to him. He knew my work habits, my obsessions, my friends and my children. I wouldn't be surprised if he knew which cereal I bought for Greg at the supermarket, or my bank balance, which wasn't impressive.

"So how come you're a cop if you studied history?"

I turned to study his face, the blue eyes far away.

"I didn't see myself teaching Celtic history to bored high school or university kids, and I was always interested in law enforcement."

Subject closed. The open curtain had closed. I could see he wasn't going to say any more.

I carefully put the book back in place and wandered around the rest of the room.

Photos in silver frames were scattered on the tables, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Financial Review* stacked neatly next to a chair.

Fraser had told the truth about being well-trained in housekeeping. His place was a lot neater than mine. *Maybe he had a terrific cleaning lady and he bought her shoes, too.*

I stooped to peer at the pictures.

Two dark-haired boys, at various ages, that bore more than a passing resemblance to Fraser.

In one, he appeared with the boys; all of them were dressed in rugby shirts and shorts, laughing and kicking a ball.

Another showed the boys a few years older, teenagers, in red, black and yellow tartan kilts, together with their father, arms around each other as they grinned at the camera. In this one, I could see the MacKinnon long, lanky frame, the boys' blue eyes shining with humor like their father's.

"You have very good-looking boys."

Fraser shrugged, but I could see he was proud of them.

"They're good kids. Amy tried to keep them away from me, but it backfired because they wanted to be with me. I see them on weekends, and we go out to dinner at least once a week together. I see a lot of them because I don't put on the pressure and I talk to them every day. I try not to make too many demands on their time. They need their freedom and because I respect that, it works out fine. They're at an age where they're tomcatting around girls."

"Tomcatting? Did they learn that from you?"

I knew I was playing with fire with that provocative question, and my pulse raced as I spoke. For one second, I regretted my impulse to blurt, but if anything, he seemed amused.

"Do I strike you as that sort of man?" In spite of his amusement, the question was serious.



“I don’t know.”

Chin thrust out defiantly, I waited for an answer. Better to know now where this whole thing was going.

Instead, he crouched, fiddling with the CD player. Frank Sinatra came on and I shivered. This was serious make-out music. Maybe that was supposed to be the answer.

Rising again, he cupped my face in his hands, a tender expression on his face.

“Those days are long gone,” he said in a husky voice. “I’m mostly busy with my job and the boys. You’re the best woman I’ve met in a long time. The smartest, the most—”

Cutting off his own words, he bent his mouth to mine and kissed me. *Really kissed me.*

Electric sparks crackled inside me as the kiss deepened. Heat curled through my center. Drawing back, he studied my face, his fingers brushing lightly over my breasts.

“Hard again,” he whispered. “Me too. Come on.” He tugged me gently towards the hall.

“Two bedrooms. You can choose which one.”

I gulped, following him in a daze, as if I no longer had the will to resist. We got as far as the door, where I caught a glimpse of a double bed with a pale blue quilt and pillows, before the phone rang.

“Damn, now what?”

Fraser yanked the phone from his pocket and stabbed at the buttons.

“What?”

He glowered at the phone as my palms skimmed his chest under his sweater. I could feel thick silky hair as the palms edged upwards, the flat, male nipples already hard in anticipation of what was to come.

“I’m on my way.”

Whirling around, he exhaled deeply, the frustration apparent.

“You’ll have to take a rain check. That was the station. They have a new piece of information for me to check out.”

## Chapter Ten

“Are you stupid?”

Borowski’s scathing tone shocked me so badly that I staggered backwards. In all my professional life, no one had ever confronted me with such a question.

Admittedly, I’ve done stupid things. Like falling into a canal in Venice. Once, I lost my panties in the middle of Neiman-Marcus, following a crash-diet during which, I’d lost so much weight that the undies were too big, and went south. Marrying Michael could also rate highly in the stupidity stakes, but never had anyone addressed me the way Borowski had just done.

My face burned with humiliation.

“The ethics application is incomplete. The committee will never accept your proposal. Rewrite it. Try to sound intelligent.” As she slung a sheaf of papers at me, I was almost too stunned to accept them.

I had worked like a slave over that application. *What was wrong now?*

“Study the successful applications. Learn something. Rewrite it.”

Clearly the interview was at an end. She waved her hand at me like I was some annoying fly she wanted to shoo out of her office.

Dumbly, I stumbled out the door, clutching the papers, along with the application. I battled to hold in the tears. *This was so unfair.* I had worked

damned hard on that application and it still was all wrong.

*Was Borowski right? Was I stupid?* Fraser didn't think so. Hadn't he said I was the smartest woman he had met in years?

"Maybe he hangs around with ninnies," I muttered to myself, trudging back to my office. Mercifully, it no longer smelled like a pound.

I dropped half the papers in my search for the pass code and, finally unlocking the door, I snatched the scattered papers off the floor and slammed the door shut. I had never been so humiliated, but I fought the urge to break down and cry.

"Borowski give you the axe again?" Gloria popped her head into my office. One look at my glum expression and, shoving books off the visitor chair, she plopped down. Her hand patted mine in an effort to provide some comfort.

"Come on, Lindy, it can't be that bad."

"Yes it can," I sniffed. "She said it was awful. That I'm stupid. You don't understand; I need this grant money to make the trip to London. I could never manage it otherwise, or why would I put myself through this torture?"

Gloria sighed softly. "Look, you might as well face it, she has it in for you. I don't know why, but you'll never please that woman, so give it up. Can't you get someone else to supervise this application?"

Sniffing, I shook my head vigorously.

"She's supposed to be the top. When she showed interest in reviewing the application, I thought I had a real shot at it."

Biting my lip, I poured out more of my distress to Gloria, who listened, saying nothing.

“I can’t get anyone else now. It’s too late in the semester, and I need that grant money. The money would pay my airfare and I can’t manage without it. I barely have enough to make it home and back to work every day with the bridge toll, let alone get all the way to Europe. If I could get there, I could stay with Julie’s mother, so I wouldn’t even need a hotel.”

I sniffed again, fighting back the urge to cry.

“My contract is almost finished and so far, it hasn’t been renewed. I need this job. What chance do I have without that grant? I have kids to support and getting another job isn’t so easy. There aren’t any in Sydney. I checked. The only thing available pays less than I make here. I can’t go back to hospital work and nursing shifts, with kids. What am I going to do?” My head slumped on my desk in abject misery.

“You’ll manage it. Why don’t you talk to Barbara?”

“Barbara won’t do a thing. She thinks Borowski is the greatest thing since sliced bread. She publishes heaps of articles and books, and has attracted lots of graduate students to the faculty. We all know that’s what counts today, having bodies in seats. Universities are businesses, not places where you worry about education any more.”

Gloria cocked her head at me, a wry expression on her face.

“I wouldn’t go quite that far, but I get the point. Yes, academia has

changed, but that still doesn't make you stupid." Her eyes wandered to a stiff, cardboard envelope on my desk.

"The cocktail party for Professor Lowell. Are you coming? It's a free meal and should be good."

I wiped my nose and opened the envelope. Heavy cream paper with elegant black printing cordially invited me to attend the function, honoring the retiring professor.

"I guess so. I don't know if I have anything suitable to wear."

"Borrow something. I'll RSVP for both of us."

I stared back at her through the tears clouding my vision.

"Come on, it'll be fun."

Fun. As if spending a couple of hours with academics, toasting an old fart would be fun. Still, like Gloria said, it was a free meal and with my financial state, *free* was the operative term.

Kindly, she shut the door, leaving me to my misery. I dabbed my eyes with tissues and stared at the invitation.

*Why not?* I thought. I could certainly use some cheering up. If I could borrow a dress from Julie. I'd ask her tonight. We were going to a concert at the Opera House, Julie's treat.

When was I going to get all this work done? I had to pick up the kids, get the babysitter, get them all fed, and then change for the concert.



“What gives with you two? You act like a pair of adolescents. I was sure your MacKinnon was a live wire, and all you have to show for this relationship so far are a couple of chaste kisses.”

Seated in the Opera House concert hall, we riffled through the program to kill time until the music began.

Musicians were tuning instruments as they prepared for the concert. Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, a real favorite of mine, and it had been so long since I had been to a concert. When I had been married, we had always had subscription tickets, but now it was too expensive for me.

“They weren’t exactly chaste. We went back to his apartment.”

Julie’s dark brows arched. An electric smile lit her face as she turned to me. “That’s better. Let’s hear it.”

“There’s nothing to tell. We were heading towards—” I lowered my voice. “The bedroom, when his phone went off and he had to go.”

Julie clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“How disgusting. I certainly hope you were prepared for an afternoon of love. You deserve it, after spending the morning dancing around in dog shit.”

“Shh.”

Several annoyed voices behind us forced us to settle in our seats, as the conductor bowed to the audience and lifted his baton.

“Don’t you love *Spring*?” she whispered. “It makes everyone’s thoughts turn to love.”

Julie wouldn’t give up, she would keep harping and needling me until, to shut her up, I fell into Fraser’s arms for a bout of wild, hot sex.

Her meaning was crystal clear, and I blushed, grateful that the lights dimmed and strains of music began to fill the hall. My eyes closed and I relaxed, thoroughly giving way to the sensuous pleasure the music evoked deep inside me.

Forty-five minutes later, I blinked as the chandeliers flickered overhead, aware that I must have dozed. Sleep deficit, courtesy of Borowski. Not only had she humiliated me, but thanks to the endless work she had dumped on me, I had slept through the first half of the concert. *Darn that woman!* I had looked forward to this concert for weeks.

“Enjoying the music between snores?”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, as Julie’s elbow prodded me awake. “I’m so tired I have shopping bags under my eyes. You should have heard how Borowski let me have it today.” Mimicking her deep voice, I poured out the latest chapter of the saga.

My cheeks flushed in recollection of the embarrassment I had suffered earlier.

“I was really looking forward to this, but I’ve been working so hard. Between the job, the kids, Enderby on my back and Borowski,” I held up my



hands helplessly.

“I know. Spare me the details. The grind with kids and work is hard. I’m glad that phase of my life is over and mine are out on their own.”

“Julie, can I borrow a dress from you?”

We were walking up the aisle for the break, joining the rest of the well-heeled mob. I gazed down at my worn, navy skirt and cream blouse. I had thought it would be dressy enough, but clearly not if the scathing looks I was getting were any indication.

“Goodie, I love champagne.”

Julie swooped through the crowd to the bar, flashing her smile at several of the men, who smiled back while I shook my head in amazement.

I watched as she opened her beaded purse and handed a business card to one of the more attractive men that lounged around the bar. She wandered back with a flute of the golden liquid, handing me a glass.

“Call me,” she mouthed to him, as he drooled at her.

Inclining her head to the men who were grouped around the bar, her fingers marked each one off a mental list. “Single. Divorced. Married. Too old. Too young. Forget it. Gay.”

We sipped champagne together, but I couldn’t help wondering how she managed to find out so much in no time at all. It would have taken me twenty minutes just to learn their names, never mind their availability. Her keen eyes darted around the room, at the various men who wandered about during the

interval, as if she kept a scorecard in her head.

“That one looks like a potential. I think I’ve seen him on the telly.”

“Umm, Julie?”

She jerked her head around, her sight-seeing distracted.

“About the dress?”

“Sure. Is it for a hot night with The Flying Scotsman?”

“Not exactly. A farewell cocktail party for an old fogey at the university.”

“When you are going to learn?” She sighed with exasperation. “Yes, you can have a dress. How about a nice glittery, red-siren one? Donna Karan. It would look great with your hair, but I hate to waste it on that crowd.”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

““You can pick it up tonight.”

The bell sounded, calling us all back to the concert.

“I want to make a quick dash to the loo.”

“Give me your bag, it’s quicker without lugging that along with you, too.”

I didn’t see how carrying an evening purse could slow me down, but since Julie had agreed to lend me a designer dress, I wanted to stay in her good books, and handed it to her.

The rest of the evening was uneventful, other than an old lady getting stuck in a toilet stall while I was inside the bathroom. Her screeches made me dash out of the toilet in the fear that I might be accused of something else.

My name was still mud, and there had been nothing new from Fraser.

Whatever new piece of information he had gotten that interrupted our afternoon, he was keeping to himself.

It was only when I got home with the Donna Karan creation, guaranteed to turn me into a femme-fatale, that I opened my purse for the key and discovered why Julie had wanted my handbag.

Inside was a crisp, fifty-dollar bill and a pack of condoms. Wrapped around the pack was a note scrawled in Julie's elegant hand.

*The money is for the babysitter, since this is my treat. You should know by now what the other things are for. Make sure you use all of them.*



"Parcel for you, Lindy," called Maureen, the student reception clerk, as I checked my pigeon-hole for internal mail.

I rifled through the assortment of colored papers heaped in my box. Messages about committee meetings, research reports, and faculty plans were stacked in the box, up to the brim. It was a temptation to toss them all into the rubbish bin, but I couldn't do that. Not in front of Maureen, at any rate. It would have to wait for the safety of my office.

"I wonder what this is?"

I wasn't expecting any package, and flipped the parcel over for a return address. Nothing. It felt too light for a book. Publishers send out free copies, in the hope that we might recommend them to students, but this definitely wasn't

a book. Even the lightest paperback weighed more than this package. Besides, it was wrapped in plain paper, not the usual publisher's fancy paper.

My brow furrowed in concentration, but I couldn't recall sending away for anything. Not with the state of my finances.

Only that morning I had received a notice from the school, demanding money for a three-day camp for Tessa.

The flyer promised three days of educationally-designed activities, in an enchanted, bushland setting, guaranteed to enhance the kids' learning. Attendance compulsory. Signed by the school principal. Three hundred dollars worth of learning.

It seemed like a lot of money to camp out in the bush. And that didn't include the two pages listing the equipment the kids had to take with them to go native.

"Please, Mommy. Please can I go? Everyone is going." Her round face pleaded with me.

How could I say no to that? I patted her arm, reassuringly. The kids really didn't ask for much, and this was part of school, so in theory I shouldn't have to pay the outrageous expense. At least, I hoped not.

"We'll find a way to pay for it. Don't worry, you can count on going." The flash of pleasure on her face, as she danced out of the room, filled my heart with joy.

I hoped Michael was going to fork out the money for this, or I might have

to panhandle on the street. Either that, or become a streetwalker. Maybe the red hooker shoes would help with that.

*Nope. I definitely did not send for anything that would have cost money.* Fraser's warning rang in my ears as I turned the corner to my office. He had said to be careful, and I was rattled enough to listen to his precautions for a change. Without any hesitation, I lifted the phone and called Bill Kingsley.

"Bill, I have an unmarked parcel here and under the circumstances, I don't think I should open it."

"Does it smell?"

I snorted at the question.

"No, it doesn't smell. I don't know what it is and the police said to be careful."

"No *problem*o. Leave it outside your door and I'll get security on the job."

Unable to settle down to work, I paced up and down the corridor, anxiously waiting for security to arrive.

"What's with you? Borowski on your back again?"

Gloria eyed me as she carted a sheaf of papers and books, on her way to class.

"No, thank goodness. I have stacks of marking to do and a class to teach in another hour. It's just that someone sent me a parcel and, since it has no return address, I'm a little concerned about opening it."

I pointed to the parcel tucked into a corner outside my office door. Her

green eyes widened at the sight of the package.

“Yes, after the last surprise package you received, I don’t blame you.”

We were interrupted by Bill and Carl, one of the security guards. Carl was due to retire, and I had serious doubts about what a sixty-five-year-old man was going to do with a bomb in a mysterious package.

“Don’t you think we should call the bomb squad?”

Bill smirked at my question.

“Getting a little too dramatic, Lindy. This isn’t television. The dog shit was a practical joke. This is probably something you sent away for and forgot about.”

His tone implied I was a total nitwit, unable to keep track of my own purchases.

I shook my head.

“Definitely not. And it’s wrapped in plain paper, too.”

“Sure you didn’t send for a vibrator? I heard they’re going on twofers. Buy one and get another, free.”

Boiling with rage at Bill’s crude suggestions, before I could open my mouth to retort, my attention was distracted, as Carl shook the package and I braced to hit the deck.

When nothing happened, he slit through the brown paper with a penknife. Involuntarily, I huddled against the brick wall, eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the explosion. I wondered who would pick up the kids from school

if I ended up blasted to smithereens.

I caught a glimpse of Gloria ducking behind a sofa, who had the same idea in mind. Take cover.

We waited, hands over our ears, in anticipation of the blast.

Nothing happened. No *kaboom*. Not even a whistle. *Absolutely nothing*. Dead silence. Then the room exploded with Bill's raucous laughter.

"You could legitimately call it a weapon, depending on what you have in mind. Maybe even use it as a slingshot."

Blinking my eyes open, I was overcome with curiosity and crept closer to the package.

Bill was doubled over laughing, and even laconic Carl had a smirk on his face.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head at the sight that had set them off, like a pair of hyenas.

Nestled in delicate-scented, pink tissue paper was a black garter belt, decorated with tiny flowers, and three pairs of filmy black silk stockings.

I knew where they had been purchased. They were the stockings that Fraser must have bought as I made the mad dash to the dressing room, with pantyhose flying after me. One hand flew to my face in abject mortification as Bill's howls increased in volume.

Carl lifted the belt closer to examine it, his raisin eyes narrowing on the garters. Beefy fingers pinched around the lace, making me squirm with

embarrassment. At last, he grunted in satisfaction at his bomb detection skills.

“No bombs here.”

“Give me that!” I snatched the flimsy bit of lace out of his paws. If I died now, it would be excellent timing. I would never live this down. Bill would see to that.

Gloria shot me a sympathetic glance, but I could see that she too barely contained her laughter.

I clutched the parcel to my chest, stomped into my office and slammed the door, to hoots of laughter.

Inside the box was a scribbled note.

*Sorry about getting interrupted the other day. This is for the rain check. Wear this with the red shoes. When you do, I'll help you take them off.*



*She was dead. Not really a surprise.*

*The patient hadn't responded to any of the drugs with a confession. Nor had the lumbar puncture resulted in any progress.*

*She'd screamed all through the procedure, but nothing of use to the doctors. Or the police, who had listened the entire time. She'd been a real nuisance. Kicked and bucked like a wild animal, despite all the nurse's efforts to control her.*

*The patient had even managed to slam the metal tray holding the instruments for the spinal procedure.*



*Glass had shattered all over the room. It crunched under the doctors' feet and they had screamed at the nurse, for failing to restrain the woman properly. She had been forced to mumble her apologies and pin the patient without mercy. Good thing that she was strong. And still, the woman refused to speak.*

*"Electric shock," ordered the doctor. Stripping off the surgical gloves, he threw them carelessly at a rubbish bin, leaving the nurse to prepare the patient.*

*She was weak and wouldn't be able to withstand much of the shock. She should have confessed. It was her own fault.*

## Chapter Eleven

The loud thud on my office door interrupted my work for Borowski, snapping my already overstretched nerves like a taut elastic.

“What the hell is it?”

Face red as his hair, Scott Wilkins, one of my former students, shuffled into the room. He was dressed in his usual costume of baggy cargo jeans, ripped INXS tee-shirt, and baseball cap, worn back-to-front.

Licking his chapped lips, his long, bony fingers twisting, he stood awkwardly in the doorway, waiting for me to invite him in.

I had to fight my urge to groan at the sight of the awkward young man.

Scott had embarrassed me enormously the last day of semester, the previous year. He had stumbled into my office after the end of year barbecue. Emboldened by too much beer, he had staggered to the visitor chair with a crooked toothed grin followed by a silly smile on his face. *Drunk*.

“I wanted to wish you a good summer Lindy. You were the best teacher I ever had, and I’ll miss you over the summer.”

I had made some innocuous remark, wishing him a good summer break, trying to politely get rid of him.

Unperturbed, he continued waffling on, with me barely listening.

“I was going to enroll for summer school, but I changed my mind when I

heard you wouldn't be teaching anything."

Wary of the direction this one-sided conversation seemed to be heading in, I gulped audibly, trying to avoid looking at Scott. I lowered my eyes, and hoped he would get the hint to leave.

*No such luck.* When I looked up, he was still there in the chair across from me, gazing at me with a soulful expression, like an adoring puppy.

He leaned slightly forward, and the stink of beer on his breath made my stomach roil.

I hoped he didn't expect me to pat him on the head. I had the impression that Scott would roll over or play dead on command from me, and I had a sick feeling about what was coming.

"I love you, Lindy."

I had been saved by any further declarations of love by Gloria's arrival, in search of a book she was looking for.

Since then, Scott had stayed away, clearly as embarrassed by his outburst when he sobered up, as I had been.

His unexpected visit this morning made me sit up. This could only be trouble. I had enough on my plate already, and had no intention of playing Mrs. Robinson to Scott Wilkins.

Fidgeting in the chair, he removed the cap from his head. His flame-red hair was flattened to the crown of his head.

"Is there something I can do for you, Scott?"

Nodding, he bit his lip before blurting out the reason for his unexpected visit.

“I wanted you to know that I went to the police station and made a statement to support you. Everyone knows your pass code was the last one entered in the room where Sasha was found, and everyone knows you wouldn’t do anything wrong. The whole student body knows about this mess. There’s all kinds of junk on the news, too. Something about a stolen exam. Sasha was bad news, and we all know that, too. That guy was nothing but trouble, and I’m really mad about what that shit did to you. I’m organizing a supporting petition from the third-year students to take down to the police station, too.”

Touched by his efforts on my behalf, I stammered my thanks.

“That’s very kind of you Scott, but totally unnecessary.”

He rose from the chair, and my antennae sensed that trouble was coming.

“I know you’re busy, but I wanted you to know that there are people who care about you. Really care. I meant what I said last year, even if I was loaded.”

Before I realized what was happening, he leaned forward and kissed me. Really kissed me, smack on the mouth.

So stunned was I by Scott’s declaration of love, I hadn’t noticed the familiar scent of *Cool Water* in my office. Swiveling in my chair, I confronted a tight-lipped Fraser.

Fraser and Scott exchanged glowering expressions as a greeting.

An uncomfortable minute of silence followed as Scott fidgeted a bit more,

toying with the cap in his hands.

“I guess I better go.” Scott ducked out the door, shooting Fraser a dark look, before disappearing around the corner.

“I’m surprised at you, Lindy. I didn’t think you went for younger men.”

His sarcastic comment notched my already boiling temper up another level. Furious with the embarrassment he had caused me over the suggestive gift, I obstinately refused to swivel my chair back to face his gaze.

Even when I felt the familiar palm on my shoulder, I pretended enormous interest in the incoming email, as if I couldn’t wait to attend a curriculum meeting.

“Is this the silent treatment, or are you shopping around for more shoes on the net? Or is it your new love interest?”

*That did it.*

Certain that the man was going to give me high blood pressure, I pivoted so quickly in the chair, I nearly fell off, his hand bracing me from a near fall.

“Don’t you dare speak to me! Scott is just a sweet country kid with a crush. He’s harmless. At least he didn’t humiliate me in front of all my colleagues! You can keep your hooker shoes and your underwear, too!”

I could feel my cheeks burning with outrage. His fingers on my jaw, forcing me to look at him, only added to my agitation. As steamed as I was, his blue eyes were as calm as the ocean on a clear day.

“Having a bad day? PMS?”

“Yes, Post MacKinnon Syndrome!” I hollered, not caring who could hear me.

I could imagine all my colleagues hanging out their doors, eavesdropping on the argument. Their idea of a passionate issue for a quarrel was a comma instead of a semi-colon out of place in an essay.

“Uh-oh. Am I in trouble?”

Childishly, I stuck out my tongue.

“Trouble? You’re so deep in shit with me that the pile left here was an anthill in comparison.” Jerking loose from his grasp, I turned my face back to the computer, shoulders shaking in anger.

“You look kind of cute when you’re angry.”

That did it. My fist slammed on the desk.

“Get out of here!”

“I take it you didn’t like my gift? You shouldn’t be angry, it was a clear message that I think you’re a very sexy woman. It wasn’t meant to be opened in front of anyone.” His voice had dropped to a low, seductive growl that sent shivers through me.

My mouth tightened. Gloria had been very impressed with the package. She had sighed with envy after Carl and Bill had departed, still hooting with laughter.

When things settled down, she had crept into my office and stared openly at the lingerie. There was more than a tinge of good-natured jealousy in

her eyes.

“You’re really lucky. Nobody ever sent me anything like that. He must really be hot, whoever it is.”

Green eyes gazed at me thoughtfully.

“You deserve it. It’s about time you found someone.”

Without another word, she had walked away, humming ‘Let’s Fall In Love,’ an arch smile on her face.

*First Julie, now Gloria.*

Fraser’s brows waggled at me playfully.

“I didn’t like taking your advice about caution. You told me to be careful and I thought it might be another surprise package. I was scared to death there might a bomb, or who knows what else, inside. So I did what you said, I called security. When they opened the gift box, in front of witnesses, I might add, how do you think I felt?”

His face reddened, but he couldn’t suppress a snicker.

“I guess I’ll have to bribe you to get back in your good books.”

“Nothing you have to say would be of the remotest interest to me.” Icicles dripped from my voice.

“Too bad. I was certain you’d be panting to hear about the latest break in the case.” Pivoting, he took a step towards the door, but he knew I would snap at the bait.

“Wait a minute.”

Even with his back to me, I could tell he was grinning.

“Speaking to me again?”

“No, listening.”

Shutting the door, he whirled around to face me, unable to hide a triumphant smirk, and settled in a chair, crossing his long legs at the ankle.

I noticed he was dressed in a University of Sydney sweatshirt. A tantalizing tuft of black chest hair was just barely visible. MacKinnon looked sexier than ever, and he wasn’t even trying.

He waited several seconds, knowing the suspense was killing me, as I fidgeted, impatiently drumming a pencil on my desk.

“You’re going to love this. You know we’ve been backtracking over the pass codes. Going back and checking on everyone who was in the building through the codes entered in the garage door.”

I nodded, arms folded across my chest. The skepticism must have shown on my face, turning into incredulity, as he continued the story. He leaned closer, watching my face for a reaction.

“There were a few people here that night, a few finishing off post graduate classes.”

“Big deal. Nothing unusual about that.”

MacKinnon grinned. “Sure, and most of them check out with students who can verify that they left together, but one of your mates had no reason to be here. He said he was working late on student affairs. Actually, that was the



truth. He was hosting a private party with a student on his office floor.”

Eyes widening, I hastily forgot my anger at Fraser.

“You must be joking! Who? Who?” I sounded like some owl in a cartoon I had watched with Greg.

He held up a palm, clearly amused.

“Patience. As I said, he said he was working late, but when we put on the pressure, one of your students caved in. All we had to do was confront him with the information. Melissa Etherington.”

“Melissa? She’s on probation. She already had a warning that if she fails anything this semester, she’s out.”

Fraser nodded.

“I know. Melissa decided to bypass the Student Disciplinary Committee, or whatever it’s called. She decided on a more creative, personal approach to her woes. I guess she figured if she did a few favors for Bill Kingsley, he would come through for her, and change her status. Once she broke down during questioning, it was easy to get him to admit the truth. She claims she was desperate and offered him a freebie, since he can access all the student files and change her from probation to normal progression, in the system. With so many students, she figured no one would know or notice the changed status.”

“Bill Kingsley? I don’t believe it! He’s married and his wife just had another baby.”

Despite my personal dislike of Bill, the news was appalling. *No wonder he*

*had winced when Barbara mentioned accounting for our movements the evening before Sasha was found.*

I vaguely recalled meeting his wife Fran at a faculty function. Unlike Bill, who dressed in beautifully cut suits, Fran looked like a bag-lady, dressed in loose, shapeless clothes. She had waffled on about animal rights and her newest chiropractor. What would she say when she found out about her husband's extra-curricular activities?

"Barbara is going to have a fit. She's already having apoplexy over the stolen exam."

Fraser nodded grimly.

"Especially since he tried to deny it, but there were a few others, too. We've had several very tearful young ladies down at the station, all anxious to spill the beans on your friend, Kingsley. The guys are having a ball over this one. He's down there now screaming for a lawyer."

A shadow darkened his face, his eyes clouding with worry.

"Bill didn't do it," I said. "I don't like him, he's crude and obnoxious, but I find the possibility that he killed Sasha hard to swallow. For what reason? Bill doesn't do anything without a good reason. Surely the police must know that."

Whatever I personally thought of Bill, and I didn't think a lot of him, I knew in my heart that he wasn't the killer.

Fraser shook his head, clearly not buying my defensive attitude of my nemesis.

“Maybe yes, and maybe no,” he said. “For the time being, we’ll put on a little more pressure. He could have seen something that night that didn’t strike him as important at the time, but might make sense to us. Remember, if he had one thing to hide, chances are, he has something else he doesn’t want found, either. He might have had some dealings with Sasha that we don’t know about yet. That might explain the stolen exam.”

Shrugging, he looked directly at me. “I told you before, investigation is mostly about sifting through heaps of information, trying to make sense of it until it falls into a pattern.”

Considering his explanation, I still couldn’t see any pattern that connected Bill and Sasha. Not unless Bill had taken a sudden interest in boys, too, and he definitely didn’t strike me as that type, either. Not with the snide, sexist remarks he made when Barbara wasn’t around. I wasn’t convinced about the exam, either, although Fraser did have a point.

No, the police were just fishing. I didn’t care what Fraser thought, my gut feeling was that Bill had nothing to do with it.

Bill would scream blue murder, and with a halfway decent lawyer, be off the hook.

What would happen to his job and his marriage was another story. I doubted that any lawyer could untangle that fiasco.

I straightened in my chair again to listen as Fraser continued speaking.

“I might have a chat with your boyfriend, too, since he’s so passionately

in love with you. Did he know Sasha threatened you?”

“No, he didn’t! And leave Scott alone. He wouldn’t do anything violent. He’s just a kid with a crush. He’ll get over it.”

“Unrequited love and passion makes men do strange things, although ‘men’ is a term I’d use lightly with him. You sure you don’t prefer his company to mine?”

With a sigh, I shook my head dumbly.

“Good. Am I forgiven?” His breath was on my neck, sending heat swirls around my stomach.

I knew when I was licked. My head bobbed up and down.

“Good.”

Lifting me out of the chair, he pressed my body against the door, his mouth claiming mine in a rough, demanding kiss. Hard lips molded to mine, shaping my mouth to his, his tongue pressing urgently, until I collapsed against his chest, reduced to a whimpering fool.

“That’s better. Just in case you needed a reminder of what it’s like to be with a man, instead of a boy.”

I slumped against his chest, legs shaking like jelly.

“I have to get back to the station, but don’t make plans for Sunday afternoon.”

Winking, he strode rapidly out the door, as I sank to the floor, my legs no longer able to support me.

“Wow.”



*Shit. Goofed up badly with that gift. What had gotten into him, sending her a thing like that?* Too many fantasies lately, all about Lindy, and seeing her decked out in sexy lingerie.

She seemed to him the type to wear that stuff, when it had caught his eye in the department store.

Not like his ex-wife. She would have spit chips over anything like that. Amy only wore plain, white cotton, if she bothered to wear a bra at all. Always carrying on about how they were designed by men, to imprison women. Granted, plain white could be appealing some of the time, but not all the time.

“Security opened the box in front of witnesses. How do you think I felt when people saw that?”

He winced, knowing all too well how she must have felt.

That was a very intimate, personal expression, intended to show that he found her sexy and desirable. It wasn’t meant for anyone else to see.

He could imagine her humiliation when she, expecting a bomb, had instead found sexy lingerie. She must think she’d never live it down.

He’d nearly blown it with her. Good thing he’d had that tidbit about Kingsley to mollify her anger.

*Kingsley, the smarmy, son of a bitch.*

“I demand legal counsel,” he’d shouted. “I’m not saying anything until my lawyer is here.”

Kingsley could scream all he wanted. Too many female students had come forward, blabbing about his extra-curricular activities.

Naturally, all the guys at the station had roared with laughter about the latest *peccadillo*.

Everyone, except Matt. He’d been a nervous wreck. Sweat had stained his uniform as he had collared MacKinnon.

“Was Katie one of the students that blew the whistle on Kingsley?”

Fraser had studied Matt’s features. The younger cop hadn’t bothered to hide his anxiety, breathing rapidly, a black expression on his young face. He must really like the girl.

MacKinnon had patted Matt on the shoulder. “Does she seem like that kind of girl to you?”

Matt shook his head.

MacKinnon smiled. “Nah. Take it easy. You must really like her.”

Matt had gulped, nodding. “Yeah, I really do. She’s fun and sweet. Pretty, too.”

Matt had it bad. He had all the classic signs, whether he knew it or not. MacKinnon had seen it all before. Once a man fell hard for a woman, that was it.

Now that Matt was over the scare, he had the urge to chat. *Terrific*. Just

what MacKinnon needed.

“Kind of funny how it all worked out, huh? I told you, one of the perks of the job was meeting chicks. I never figured to meet anyone like Katie, but she’s terrific.”

Fraser had shot him a glance from the corner of his eye, but Matt kept right on babbling.

*Love.* People that were in love and in the flush of the romance wanted to talk about it all the time. Matt was in bad shape. A goner, as far as MacKinnon could see.

He shrugged his shoulders in response.

“You too,” Matt continued. “A fringe benefit of the job. With that Kellerman lady.”

Fraser glowered.

Matt laughed. “Who did you think you were kidding? I saw. I saw that day at the station, when she was down here in those beach thongs after stepping in the dog mess. The way you looked at her.” He shook his head and grinned.

“You think I’m dumb? I know. And I was right about her, too. She is kind of cute, for an older woman. Nothing wrong with being older. Sorry about that crack, she’s about the right age for you.”

MacKinnon said nothing. Matt saw more than he gave him credit for, and he wasn’t finished yet.

“And smart, right? Katie’s teacher. Probably just your type. Like I said, a perk.” Matt walked away, hands shoved in his pockets, whistling under his breath.

It irked MacKinnon, but he had to give Matt credit. He had him pegged one hundred percent. *Why bother denying what was true?*

And despite his ploy to get Lindy to speak to him after the fiasco with that gift, he’d better make more of an effort to show he was really sorry. Sorry that she’d been embarrassed, not sorry that he could imagine her wearing that lingerie.

He could only hope that he’d get the chance to see her decked out in that lacy stuff. And soon. *God, the frustration was driving him crazy!*

Lindy wanted it too, he could tell by that kiss in the office. She had all but fainted in his arms by the time he got finished with her. Thank God for that. She could have said she’d never speak to him again.

Without any further hesitation, he picked up a phone and dialed a florist. She’d loved those roses that he’d brought to her house when he’d gate-crashed dinner. A huge smile had spread on her face, and she’d thanked him profusely.

*Flowers. Women love getting flowers. Much safer gift.*

“Hansen’s Florist,” said a voice on the phone.

“I want to order one dozen red roses, nice ones. For a delivery,” he said, as he cupped the phone with his hand, glancing around to see if anyone was listening.



*A dozen roses to her office, where everybody could see that gift, too. Yeah, a much better idea.*

“They’re a bit pricey this time of year,” said the florist.

“Doesn’t matter, as long as they’re nice.” He quickly gave all the details, including the delivery address, over the phone.

“It’s too late to deliver to the university today, we’ll send them out first thing in the morning.”

That would have to suffice. Hanging up the phone, he whirled around, nearly tripping over Pacula. A smart-ass grin on the kid’s face was all the evidence he needed to know that Matt had listened to the entire conversation. The younger cop nodded his head sagely.

“Uh-huh,” was all he said, quirking his brows as he walked away.

## Chapter Twelve

“A stakeout? Like *Charlie’s Angels*? Only if I get to be Jaclyn Smith.” Julie’s voice echoed on the speaker phone from her office. “You can be Kate Jackson, she was the intelligent one.”

Her offer barely impressed me. “You can be Farrah Fawcett, for all I care! Are you coming, or not?”

“Count me in, but who’s minding the kids? You can’t take kids on a stakeout.”

Julie had a point.

“Tessa is sleeping over with friends. I’ll get Susan to take Greg for the night.”

Julie groaned. She loathed Susan cordially, and intentionally ate rare meat in front of the crusading vegetarian every chance she garnered, happy to watch Susan wince.

“She’s got a new vegetable juicer she’s dying to try out. I won’t tell Greg.”

I grimaced, already envisioning my son’s face when I announced the change in the evening’s plans. *What kind of a mother was I?* Putting guilt aside, I turned back to the phone.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure we’re free the whole evening.”

“I’ll pick you up at nine, dressed for success. Over and out.”

The phone clicked off, making me wonder if I had been smart to include Julie in my surveillance plans.

What kind of qualifications did she have for investigative work? For that matter, what were mine?

Of course, locating Sasha's last known address had been easy enough. It didn't require any detective skills. He was still listed in the student files.

I wasn't sure what I thought I would learn by hanging around outside his apartment, but I did know that Bill Kingsley hadn't killed him.

Bill was a nasty, double-dealing snake, but not a killer. My gut reaction rejected the possibility.

Besides, hadn't Fraser said to trust my instincts? And if it wasn't Bill, then the real killer was still running loose. I shivered at the thought.

Sitting in Julie's brand-new, silver Saab convertible, I wondered what had given me the lame-brained idea to include Julie in this mad scheme. We were hardly inconspicuous in the expensive car.

"I told you we should have taken my car."

It had seemed like such a good idea to case Sasha's grotty apartment in the heart of King's Cross, at the time.

Drug dealers, street walkers and homeless kids all wandered the street, eyeing the expensive car. Loud rock music blasted from a doorway that led to a basement nightclub. Kids were throwing up in the street, drunk or on drugs.

One girl dressed in fluoro-pink, spandex shorts and a crop top was

propositioning a man. Her finger beckoned him to an alley.

I felt sick to my stomach at the sight. The girl didn't look much older than my Tessa, and my heart ached for her parents.

I shifted my gaze to the other side of the street, the view not much better. Clattering sounds of broken bottles and beer cans added to the musical interlude on the street.

A drunk was pawing through a filled refuse bin. God only knew what he was looking for. Another wino sprawled on the curb in front of the adult bookstore, the lurid covers drawing my eyes like a magnet.

Everyone on the street openly gaped at us. They probably thought two new hookers were trying to muscle into their territory. Either that, or we were two tourists who had really gone astray on the Sydney Explorer Trip.

Slumped in the driver's seat, Julie eyed me warily. "So what do we do?"

Dressed in black leggings and a matching cashmere sweater, she offered me a slice of gourmet pizza from the cardboard box in the backseat.

We chewed for several minutes, savoring the thick cheese topping and perfect crust in silence, as we waited for something to happen. It always did on *Starsky and Hutch*.

Five minutes of boredom and Julie was fed up.

"This isn't getting us anywhere. We need action. Let's go."

Before I could stop her, Julie bounded out of the car, lugging a Ferragamo shoulder bag slung over her back. She called back impatiently.

“Are you coming?”

“I hope your car is here when we get back.”

“We have great insurance. The Dental Association has a major plan. They think dentists are low risk for theft. They don’t make house-calls, after all.”

I sprinted after her, skirting past the drunk sprawled on the curb, and scooted past empty bottles in the street beside him.

Even dashing past, I caught a whiff of his foul odor. Disgusting. He cradled his head in his hands to hide his features. I could just imagine the hangover he’d have in the morning. That is, if he ever sobered up.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Panting, I tried to keep up with Julie’s marathon speed. I have to find an exercise program, I thought frantically, as Julie raced effortlessly past the crowd of kids.

Without reply, she darted through the inky doorway. A pencil beam of light guided her up the stairs as I caught up with her.

“Here. Hold this.”

Digging inside the bag, she pulled out a screwdriver and a collection of odd-looking metal implements. My eyes widened as the realization hit me. *Where the hell did she get burglar tools?*

“This is breaking and entering.”

My horrified voice cracked as she worked confidently on the door, not even bothering to look back at me. Unperturbed, she poked and prodded at the

lock, whistling under her breath.

“I didn’t break anything, and we can hardly be blamed for going in when the door was already open.”

Julie’s logic left me stunned, but in less time than it took me to open my own office, she had the lock open and shoved against the door. The creaking hinges added to my heightened sense of anxiety.

“What does Alvin think you’re doing tonight?” My whisper echoed in the dark hall.

She shrugged in response.

“I told him I was going out to dinner with you. That wasn’t a lie, I did supply the pizza.”

“Where did you learn to pick locks like this?”

“At school. It was one of the few useful things I learned.”

“I thought you went to an exclusive girls’ school in Berkshire.” I was genuinely stunned at Julie’s talent. I simply couldn’t get over her burglary skills.

If public relations ever slowed down, she could supplement her income and never declare the taxes.

“My mother sent me there for an all-around quality education. Chalk this up to ‘all-around.’ This is proof that a good education never goes to waste. Come on,” she said, turning the beam of light around the walls of the room.

“What are we looking for?”

“I don’t know. *Something*. Anything that might give us a clue about Sasha.”

I whispered back, although there wasn't anyone around to hear us.

As I prowled through the room, I was uncertain of what I was looking for. Soiled clothes tossed carelessly on the floor, an unmade mattress, also on the floor, and containers from take-away food tossed in the sink, didn't give me the slightest inkling as to who had been behind Sasha's death.

"My, how gracious," Julie said snidely, as a fat, black cockroach, the size of a mouse, scuttled past her.

No books open on the rickety wooden table. That figured. Sasha wasn't exactly a diligent student.

The light beam flickered on a curling, old, black-and-white photograph of a thin middle-aged woman on the table.

Stooping to examine the photograph, I had to squint in the dark. The features were slightly out of focus. She was dressed in a flimsy, worn garment, hair scraped back severely, with high cheek bones. The photo didn't ring a bell, although I felt that it should.

Despite the poor quality and obvious age of the snap, there was something familiar about her. *Where had I seen her before?* My brow furrowed in concentration as I tried to make the connection, but I couldn't seem to come up with anything.



*A little boy gazed up at her. Wasn't that just like the doctors? Left her to tell the child.*

*“Your mother died. She was very sick, and there was nothing they could do.”*

*Fat tears rolled down the boy’s dirty cheeks.*

*“I want my Mama,” he wailed.*

*An orderly wheeled the sheet-covered body out of the room. He halted in front of the nurse for her signature, releasing the body from the ward.*

*The boy’s fingers caressed the sheet. He stared at the patient chart, still clipped to the bed. His mother’s name and diagnosis still appeared on the papers.*

*Politically defined madness.*

*The nurse narrowed her eyes on the boy. Could he read? What did that matter? He wouldn’t understand what that meant and she’d never see him again.*

*She brushed aside the brief twinge of guilt that crossed her mind as she looked at the boy one final time.*

*What would happen to him? It was his mother’s fault; not hers.*

*He would be living in an orphanage; that was the usual result for children whose parents were political dissidents. She hoped he’d learned a lesson from his mother, and realize that nothing was worth challenging the government.*

*Turning away from him, she strode off, down the corridor. There were other patients to tend, living patients. This child’s mother was dead, and there was no reason to waste any further thought on her. Or him.*





My eyes blinked as the overhead naked bulbs flickered on, flooding the shabby apartment with light.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Mod Squad.”

We both jumped as a familiar voice bellowed in the ghostly quiet. Fraser MacKinnon glared at us, fists balled at his waist.

“Care to explain what you’re doing here?” Blue eyes flashed with electricity.

Julie clutched my elbow for support, but I was shaking head to toe.

Now that we realized it was Fraser, instead of some crazed crack addict about to kill us for money, or some mad rapist, she reverted to her cool, sophisticated demeanor.

“Why, Mr. MacKinnon, how delightful to see you again. I was just saying to Alvin the other day that we must have you two over for dinner. He so enjoyed discussing wines with you.” Julie shot a brilliant, even toothed smile at Fraser, but he wasn’t buying into any of it, even when she offered her hand, which he pointedly ignored.

“You can go home now Ethel, and leave Lucy to me.”

Julie fairly bristled at his snide comment, her eyes raking up and down his form.

Dressed in a stained, worn, trench coat that looked like a relic of the Second World War, torn shoes, and ripped trousers, Fraser looked and smelled like he’d been on a binge. His jaw, covered with dark whiskers, made him look

much older, and downright seedy.

In a flash, I realized that he was the drunk I had skirted past on the street. *No wonder he'd hidden his face.*

"My, and you're dressed in the latest fashion too. The grunge look is all the rage in London." Julie darted out the door, anxious to make her escape and left me to face Fraser's wrath alone.

"Chicken," I called after her.

"Okay Lucy, start 'splaining."

His slight burr as he attempted to imitate Desi's Cuban accent sounded bizarre, and in spite of the fact that I knew without doubt I was in big trouble, I couldn't suppress a small chuckle, which only seemed to infuriate him.

Stepping forward, he gripped my forearms until I yelped.

"You can stop the police brutality," I whined, but I knew Fraser well enough to know that I wouldn't get off easily with this caper.

The sound of Julie's car zooming away down the street left me feeling more abandoned than ever.

"It was perfectly clear to me that Bill couldn't have possibly done away with Sasha. He had nothing to gain, and that's the only way he operates. Melissa was just fun and games and he was unlucky enough to get caught. Sasha couldn't do anything for him, so it didn't make sense. Bill was just trying to cover up his student affairs portfolio." I coughed over the last phrase, well aware of the pun.

Fraser nodded grimly.

“We had to let him go. The garage security surveillance camera photographs the time that people leave in the evening, and his print clearly says a quarter after nine. The medical examiner says Sasha died later than that, and there’s no doubt.”

I couldn’t suppress a crow of triumph.

“I told you so.” I hoped I had distracted his attention from catching me burgling Sasha’s dump, but I should have known better. He pounced back on the folly of my amateur sleuthing.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you to be down here? How could such an intelligent woman do something so incredibly stupid and dangerous?”

As he glared at me, I couldn’t help but flinch.

*Intelligent.* Somehow, I thought it would be better if he had found me sexy, but intelligent was better than lame-brained.

“It wouldn’t be if it were legal to carry pepper spray. This country has crazy laws. Everyone I know in the States does.”

Relaxing his grip, he grinned.

“Honey, if you had pepper spray, or anything else on you for a weapon, someone would turn it on you before you knew what had happened.”

In one swift move, he pinned my arm behind my back, twisting me around, and pressed my back against his chest.

Still dazed by his unexpected maneuver, I was vaguely aware of something stiff thrust against my denim-clad buttocks.

Burning with anger, I silently conceded that he was right. *Hell, I couldn't even break into my own office because I couldn't remember or find the pass code, let alone a canister of pepper spray.*

"You made your point. Let me go."

"People get cut up down here all the time. I don't want you to be one of them." Slowly, he released my wrists, flicking me around to face him. He flung wide the worn coat, like some pervert about to expose himself.

I waited, determined not to avert my gaze, and frankly, more than a bit curious about the size of the hidden organ.

Instead, he unbuttoned a flannel shirt, treating me to the fantastic sight of his glorious chest dusted with dark silky hair.

My eyes traveled down the washboard stomach and stopped at the huge scar on the right side. Four vertical inches, it had healed well, but the raised tissue was a permanent reminder of whatever had happened.

"Must have been some appendix."

Saying nothing, he buttoned the shirt again, eyes still on my face.

"So, find anything useful?"

"Nope." I shook my head. "Nothing that makes sense. I don't know what I expected to find. Something that might spark an idea." My mind wandered back to the picture, but I knew I had never seen the woman in my life.

“And anyway, how did you know we were here? Do you have my phone tapped now?”

My brows narrowed in suspicion. Nothing MacKinnon did would surprise me at that point.

He stepped closer and I caught a whiff of cheap wine on the raincoat.

“Phew. Definitely not a scent to attract friends and influence people. You smell like a dead skunk.”

“That’s too bad for you. Your ride seems to have taken off, so you’re stuck with me. Let’s go.”

Flicking the light, he grabbed my hand. He walked down the stairs ahead of me, eyes swiveling around the entry, checking for possible assailants, before he dragged me across the street to a beat up brown van, full of dents.

“Where the hell do you get all these cars from?”

“The force. You’ve never been in my car.”

Shoving me into the van, he vaulted into the driver’s seat, gunning the motor so quickly, I had to brace myself on the dashboard. He sped through the Cross, carefully swerving around some of the kids, still congregated on the street.

We drove in silence through Paddington, with its trendy boutiques and night life. As we drove along the street, he spoke in a quiet, controlled voice, the emotion apparent despite the low timbre.

“The Cross was my first assignment as a rookie. That was where I got the

scar. Knifed on the street, chasing a drug dealer. I don't want you down here alone at night, ever again." He was shaking with rage, and I should have been equally but I couldn't be too angry.

The Cross gave me the creeps, and I didn't have plans for any more evening field trips.

"I wasn't alone, I was with Julie."

He smirked and turned the van into Oxford Street.

"First rule of the police. Don't abandon your partner. Lacey took off and left Cagney behind."

I opened my mouth to retort but thought the better of it.

At least he thought I was Cagney, the sexy one. I wasn't sure what Julie would have to say about that, as we sped through the heart of the city, on our way north.

We pulled into Fraser's spot in the garage and proceeded up the elevator, to his apartment. Unlocking the door, he disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of brandy and two glasses. He poured the dark liquid, handing a glass to me.

"You probably need this, after tonight."

Swallowing his own quickly, he turned on his heels, calling over his shoulder. "I'm going to scrub off this smell. Not quite as bad as the dog mess, but hardly seductive."

*Seductive. Hmmm.*

Mentally, I checked my appearance. The jeans and sweater weren't too alluring, but I doubted I'd be wearing them for long. Turquoise bra and panties, legs shaved just that morning.

I nodded, figuring this was as good as it gets. I'd finally have something to report to Julie. I was practically salivating at the thought.

Nervous at the prospect, I jumped up from the sofa where I'd been sitting and flicked through the CDs stacked near the stereo. Classical music, jazz, some contemporary.

I put on Luther Vandross, his voice making me feel sexier by the minute. No doubt about it, this time was definitely it.

Fraser had crept up behind me without warning, making me yelp.

"Don't do that!"

His fingers softly caressed my neck, sending my nerves into overload. "I thought you wanted to play cops. I could be the cop and you could be the robber. I put the handcuffs on—"

I whirled around to face him. His voice, lowered to a growl, drifted off, but I knew what that heavy lidded look in his eyes meant.

Dressed in a white, terry robe, carelessly belted, he gave me a tantalizing glimpse of muscular legs that would be tangled with mine, in about thirty seconds, from the way the temperature was heating up in the room.

Pulling me towards him, his mouth was on mine, as one hand unsnapped my jeans.

The belt of the robe fell open and my hands traveled down to the engorged organ that pressed against my crotch. My hands stroked it until he groaned, his breathing already ragged. The blue eyes had dilated until they were the color of the midnight sky.

“Let’s go,” he said.

That seemed like a great idea to me. My panties were already damp in anticipation.

Grasping my hand, he tugged me towards the bedroom with the blue quilt and pillows, stopping once on the way to kiss me. His hard, plunging tongue gave me a taste of what was to come in a few minutes as I broke the kiss, anxious to get past the appetizer and dig into the main course.

His fingers unzipped my jeans and lowered them, softly skimming the bare inner thigh, sending shivers up my spine.

I stroked his chest, my eyes glued to the erection that seemed be getting bigger by the second.

*Bzzzzz.*

I jumped at the sound of the doorbell.

“Forget it,” he said, lifting my sweater and expertly unhooking my bra. His mouth bent to my breasts, the tongue already working its magic.

*Bzzzzzzz.*

“Dad, are you home? I can hear music in there.”

Silence. Then a deep groan.



I put my fingers to his lips.

“I know. It’s your son. You have to answer the door.”

With a grimace, he tied the robe around his waist, hiding that glorious vision from my eyes, and stormed to the door. He left me in a dazed, sexually frustrated state.

I could hear the murmurs in the living room as I made an effort to pull myself together. My hair looked like a bush that needed clipping, lipstick smeared on my face like I was a circus clown.

Hastily, I ducked into the bathroom, still full of steam from Fraser’s shower, and tissueed off the red stain. A quick comb through my hair would have to do.

I peered at the mirror to study my appearance. My nipples were still hard and erect, even through the sweater. I hoped Fraser’s son hadn’t inherited his father’s predilection for observing breasts in a state of excitement, but I doubted it.

Shoulders squared, I opened the door, creeping towards the living room, where they were seated opposite each other, chatting away like a pair of old crones.

Fraser rose as I stood in the doorway, uncertain what to do.

“Tyler, this is Lindy,” he said easily, tugging me forward.

Blue eyes darted from my face to Fraser’s. He took in the terry robe and tell-tale flecks of red lipstick on Fraser’s jaw.

“Oh boy, I guess I interrupted something,” he said, his face flushing with embarrassment.

I folded my arms over my chest in case he started to look at how close we had been before he dropped by.

“Not at all,” I said, hoping he believed me. The poor kid was squirming with mortification. I wondered how he felt finding his father about to hop into bed with a strange woman. Maybe it happened all the time.

He eyed me, suspicion all too apparent on his face, as Fraser padded off to the kitchen.

“Want a drink?”

“Thanks, Dad.”

There was something very disconcerting about those familiar blue eyes in a younger face, studying me the same way his father did. A small smile lit his face, and I noticed that he had enough facial hair to be legitimately shaved every other day.

I ducked my head, embarrassed by his overt interest in me, and shifted my weight from one foot to another.

“Sorry about interrupting. I’m glad Dad found someone. He’s been alone for a long time.”

I barely had time to contemplate his announcement. For some odd reason, I had had the niggling suspicion that Fraser had women stashed all over the city. His son’s admission that my misgivings had been unfounded flooded

me with relief.

If Tyler could be believed, and there was no reason why he couldn't be, Fraser had been as celibate as I.

Filled with satisfaction that I wasn't just a quick pick up, I shot Fraser a soft smile as he padded back into the room, dressed in old sweat pants.

My quick look of endearment must have surprised him, but he returned my glance with a lopsided grin as he handed the soft drink to Tyler. I shook my head as he offered me a can, watching as he snapped the lid on his own.

Pouring chips into a bowl, he settled back on the sofa next to me, his arm comfortably around my shoulder, as we listened to Tyler's munches and teenage woes over his latest girlfriend.



"Silverstreak Public Relations. Can I help you?"

"Yes," Fraser said. "I'd like to speak with Mrs. Silver."

"Who's calling please?"

"Tell her Detective MacKinnon." Use the title so Julie understood this wasn't a casual, friendly call.

MacKinnon was still steamed about that crazy stunt last night. *What a pair of idiots.* And he wanted to know whose brainwave it had been to turn detective; the sophisticated, redhead sidekick, or Lindy. His gut feeling was that the whole thing was Lindy's idea.

Irritating, canned music echoed on the phone, as he waited for the call to be transferred. God, he hated that music. Everybody seemed to use some version of that canned stuff. Silence would be better than listening to a tinny rendition of Mozart. He hadn't thought it was possible to ruin such a great musical work, but that crappy sound did a fine hatchet job on Wolfgang Amadeus.

"Julie Silver, who's speaking?"

"Don't stall, Julie. You know who it is, I told your receptionist, or whatever she is."

He could picture Julie in her office, and her reaction to his curt tone. She was probably trying to cook up some story about last night. *Tough*. He'd have his say, and then warn her off anything that dangerous again.

MacKinnon also had no doubt that, the minute she hung up, she'd speed dial Lindy with a full report of the conversation. Women were like that. They stuck together and then had to re-hash everything.

"How nice to hear from you again," Julie said.

Fraser's temper snapped. "Cut the crap, Julie. Which one of you two lunatics thought up that caper last night?"

A pause. He could almost hear the wheels spinning in her brain.

"It was Lindy, wasn't it? Is she crazy?" *Was he crazy?* She was driving him insane. Certifiable.

The sigh in response was enough of an answer for him.

Fraser exploded. "How could you agree to something so risky? You saw what goes on down there, and you must have known. What kind of friend are you? Why didn't you try to talk her out of it? The two of you could have gotten knifed, assaulted. What in hell is wrong with you? You're supposed to be smart women!"

"Well, really," Julie said, clearly in a huff. "You don't have to get into a snit. We are smart. And if the police had been doing their job, and had cleared Lindy's name, we wouldn't have had to go down there. And I wasn't about to let her go alone. I have skills, you know."

Fraser snorted. "Skills. Sure. You could work the reporters and write the obituary if something happened to her."

Julie gulped. "Look, I'm sorry, but like I said, she's in a state. Her name is mud and maybe you didn't know, but she doesn't have tenure, she needs her job. She's getting worked to death by some battle-axe professor and her contract is almost up. She's got kids, and that ex of hers is a pain in the ass. Hardly pays for anything; always a battle over every cent. Lindy's doing it tough, and she can't afford to be out of work. So what was I supposed to do?"

Fraser opened his mouth and then clammed it shut.

From Julie's perspective, she was doing what friends do for each other: they help out. Probably got all excited about breaking into Sasha's place. Like the two of them were in some mystery novel. Playing detective. How did they get in there anyway? It was locked.

“I want a promise that you’ll leave it to me. I don’t want her to get hurt. You either. Neither one of you seems to understand how dangerous this is. Try to have some confidence in my ability.”

“Oh, I have plenty of confidence in your ability,” Julie said smoothly. “You just seem to take a long time to get off the starting blocks.”

*What the heck did that mean? Was she talking about the investigation or his attempts to seduce Lindy? Hadn’t he been trying? Was it his fault that they kept getting interrupted?*

*Yeah, she was more than interested, that had been pretty obvious last night. Maybe she did that kind of thing all the time.*

“I’ve got a question for you. I’m assuming Lindy isn’t seeing anyone. Has she been involved with anyone recently?”

Fraser had good reason to ask that question. First, because maybe, just maybe, somebody had it in for her, and was doing things deliberately to make Lindy look bad.

And secondly, he wanted to know for personal reasons, too. She was so cute and feisty, she must have been seeing a lot of men. She’d been divorced for a few years.

Was he just another one in a string of casual affairs? Better to know it now, even if it hurt, because that wasn’t the way he saw Lindy at all.

*Quiet.* Julie was thinking about what to tell him, or how much. Maybe Lindy had something going on with another man all the time?

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but she hasn’t seen anyone. Not in a

very long time. I'm not saying how long. That ex of hers did plenty of damage to her ego. I saw it for a lot of years. Even when they were married; he was always putting her down. Always correcting her and trying to make her look stupid. As if that made him look superior. It didn't; it only made him look like a jerk, but that's beside the point." Julie paused.

Fraser remained silent. *How could anyone think Lindy was dumb?* Her ex must have been a moron.

Julie spoke again. "That battle-axe at work is doing the same thing. Telling her that she's stupid and inferior, and it really gets to her. I think she takes it badly, maybe even believes it, because of all the years she put up with the same stuff from her ex. And despite what you think about last night, she isn't stupid. Not by a long shot."

No, she wasn't dumb. That stunt had been idiotic, but she wasn't. And maybe Julie's words explained a few other things. She wasn't playing around with him. *Excellent*. Because he wasn't either. He was crazy about her. How that could happen so quickly, he didn't know or understand, but there it was.

Maybe because she wasn't some awful set-up like he'd endured in the past. She didn't put on an act to impress him; she was herself. A little wacky, but that was part of her charm.

He smiled in recollection of the previous night. Almost had her in bed, and then Tyler had to turn up. *Lousy timing*.

At least she'd been understanding. After all, she had kids, too.

Julie spoke again. "There's something else, too. And I'm speaking as a friend. I love Lindy, and she's been through enough. I'm not interfering with whatever you two have going on, not that there seems to be all that much."

Fraser was about to open his mouth. It wasn't from lack of trying.

"Not yet, anyway," Julie said. "I don't want you to hurt her. All I'm saying is that I want you to be upfront and honest with her. She's a grown woman and she can handle it, but no deceptions. She had enough of that. You seem like a nice man, and you seem genuinely concerned about Lindy. I'm not talking about professional concern. You know what I mean."

"I wouldn't do anything to deliberately hurt Lindy, if that's what you mean," Fraser said.

That was the truth, although he wasn't prepared to tell Julie that he was already nuts about Lindy. When she wasn't driving him nuts.

If anything, he had thought he was the one who could have been hurt. He did have one final question for Julie.

"One other thing. How did you two get in there?"

"Sorry, I've got a call on another line. Lovely talking to you again."

*Slam.*

Fraser stared at the phone. Julie wasn't about to reveal who pulled the break and enter. It was a toss-up, either one of them could have done it. He hoped she'd taken the warning seriously.

*A call on another line. Sure.*



MacKinnon could safely bet Julie was already on the phone with Lindy, giving her a word for word description of their conversation. He could only hope that this time she took the warning seriously.

## Chapter Thirteen

A rip-roaring headache and blurry eyes made me slump over my desk with a small groan. The late night caper finally drew to a close sometime after midnight, when Fraser had sent Tyler to bed in the spare room.

He bade us goodnight as Fraser turned to me with a hopeful expression on his face.

“Sorry about this. He’s pretty confused about his girl and needed to talk. Women tend to do that to men,” but he said it with a grin.

“You’re a good father. I understand perfectly about Tyler, but I’m not sleeping with you with your son around. You might be able to handle it, but I can’t.”

Fraser nodded sadly, understanding my stance.

“I can’t stand much more of this sexual yo-yoing,” he said, his fists clenched in frustration.

I patted his hand comfortingly. “I know. We’ll get it right, eventually.”

He cursed under his breath. “Kids, phone calls from the station, I hope I live long enough to get my hands on you, and when I do—”

The gruff voice drifted off, the promise of sexual fulfillment hovering between us. Dressing quickly, he drove me home, where I tumbled into bed and slept like the living dead.

I awoke with a dull thud in my head that increased to a tom-tom beating in my brain.



Barbara nearly had a conniption about the stolen exam.

The vice-chancellor was furious, and had raked Barbara over the coals, ranting about idiotic security systems and student dishonesty. Security had been called in, with Barbara taking out her foul mood on everyone nearby.

I had arrived that morning to find her in the middle of a rant at poor old Carl, who insisted that no breach of security had taken place.

“Nobody gets into the safe without an access code,” he had insisted, arms folded over his chest, as he had glared back at Barbara, refusing to be cowed.

I had watched, unable to suppress a giggle as she eyed him, suspiciously dressed in an odd pair of shorts and tee-shirt, despite the winter chill. He ambled into the faculty administration area to curious glances from the secretaries.

Short tempered with everyone at this point, Barbara’s cool façade snapped.

“What are you dressed for?”

Unperturbed, Carl had calmly answered. “I’m working undercover.”

Furious by then from Bill’s indiscretions, Sasha’s dead body, the stolen exam, and the field day the media were having with all of the scandals, Barbara

snapped and threw the job at the first sucker she could find. *Me.*

“Rewrite a new exam. It’s your subject and your responsibility. It’s due next week at exams brunch.”

*Next week!* And Borowski expected the entire grant application, including the ethics proposal, completed next week, too. Not to be left out of the witch hunt, Professor Enderby had called three times, demanding a meeting with me.

Too cowardly to face another blistering harangue, I had let the answering machine pick up the message and neglected to return the call. *Fat lot of good that did me.* Enderby had x-ray eyes, like a superhero who could see through phone lines.

“I know you’re hiding from me, Mrs. Kellerman. Either you’re a serious doctoral candidate, or you can stop wasting my time. I’ll expect you in my office with some work to show me next Tuesday.”

*Tuesday.* The same day Borowski wanted the paperwork and Barbara wanted the exam. The semester was almost over. Teaching had ended and students were preparing for exams.

It was a long weekend coming up, the Queen’s Birthday. Idly, I wished for a long American Thanksgiving Day weekend that stretched an extra day, but no such thing existed in Australia.

Instead of Pilgrims and Indians sitting down to share turkey, the early white settlers of the Antipodes had set about chasing convicts and hunting Aborigines.

At least they didn't serve them up for a meal, but on the other hand, nobody marked the Queen's Birthday with a cake and candles. Unless Her Majesty did in private. Elizabeth didn't strike me as the type to make a wish and blow out the candles.

Just as well, what could you buy someone like that for a birthday present? Leather rubbish bins to leave outside the palace gates?

At least she would have a birthday party of some sort, trooping around the palace with the red-coated guards in black fur hats, while I would have to work at home, on a borrowed laptop, straight through until Tuesday.

"What a great way to spend the long weekend."

I mentally calculated that, if I didn't sleep or eat for the next few days, worked in the parking lot while waiting for the kids from school, and didn't take too many bathroom breaks, I might stand a chance of getting all the work done.

And papers to mark were stacking up in my file by the minute, as if the papers were cloning themselves. Maureen had phoned only that morning to beg me to empty out the student papers in my box.

"I have no space left to jam any more of them in," she begged. "Get them out of here."

Maybe I should just give up and go on welfare now. I had the sick feeling that I knew exactly how everyone on the Titanic had felt. *On a sinking ship, without a life preserver.*

I suppressed the urge to belt out a chorus of “Nearer My God to Thee,” and turned my attention back to the work piled up. I don’t care what anyone says, Leonardo di Caprio didn’t really know what it felt like to drown. I was being swallowed up by paper, sucking me under, as sure as a whirlpool.

I popped two aspirin into my mouth from the bottle Fraser had left, belted down a quick caffeine hit and turned back to the exam.

Several hours, and fifty multiple choice questions later, Gloria popped her head in my office. Dressed in baggy, navy shorts and a tee-shirt, her feet were clad in brand new designer white sneakers. Her thick hair was pulled back with an elastic.

“Want to come to the gym?”

Morosely, I shook my head, acutely aware of the uncomfortable bulge around my waist. I had to find an exercise program I could stick to, but I hated the gym and for once, was glad for the excuse.

“Can’t. I have to finish this exam for Barbara. Battleaxe Borowski is on my back, and Enderby is screaming for blood.”

“Poor you. I’ll do a couple of extra laps around the gym and think of you.”

“Thanks, but right now I can’t spare a minute. Besides, the last thing I need is someone yelling at me to make me feel even more inadequate.”

“I know, that Megan is like a Nazi.”

Megan, the gym instructor with her perfect figure, in her skintight spandex body suit, barked orders at her pathetic charges. She screamed at us

with a smarmy expression on her face, while we panted, in a variety of contorted positions, pumping hand weights.

We hopped up and down on plastic steps like crazed goose-stepping soldiers under her stern commands, to the beat of Gloria Estefan. She would always take one look at my gasping efforts, a pitying look on her dark face, and *tsk* before moving on to her next victim.

“Catch you later. Don’t forget the cocktail party for Professor Lowell on Sunday night. I can pick you up for it.”

I groaned as the door creaked shut, leaving me in blessed silence.

Instead of the exam, my mind wandered back to the previous evening. I had the uneasy feeling that there had been something in Sasha’s shabby apartment that I had missed, but I couldn’t figure out what it might have been. Maybe if Fraser hadn’t interrupted our breaking and entering caper I would have seen it, but on the surface nothing was there.

Like a multiple choice question on the exam, I considered Bill Kingsley and Scott Wilkins again. The police were way off if they thought either of those two had done anything. It was gut instinct more than anything else, but I trusted my intuition about people.

Whatever my other failings were, I was pretty good with character. I had no idea what Bill or Scott might have thought about Sasha, but I knew they weren’t killers. I would have circled, ‘D,’ none of the above.

Instead of working on the exam, I procrastinated and lifted the phone to

call Julie.

“Silverstreak Public Relations,” answered the cool voice on the phone.

“Tell Julie that it’s Lindy,” I announced to the secretary. *A secretary*. If only I had one, maybe I stood a chance of wading out of the mounting paperwork that piled up around me like the Himalayas.

Irritating music echoed over the phone on hold, as she transferred the call to Julie’s extension.

“What’s up? Recovered from last night?”

“Nice work, Sherlock, ditching me like that,” I retorted.

“Elementary, Watson,” she replied, not at all perturbed. “You were in perfectly good hands. I hope you did more than hold hands, by the way.”

“Not quite.” Briefly, I related Tyler’s interruption the previous evening. She clicked her tongue in disgust.

“Between your kids and his, you’re going to be retired before you two get it together. You’d better check into a hotel and put out the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign. Make sure it’s a dirty weekend.”

Ignoring her one-track mind, I inhaled deeply before deciding to ask the question on my mind.

“Julie, I know this sounds odd, but is there something we could have missed last night? I keep getting a feeling that there was something right there, staring us in the face, and I can’t think what it could be.”

“Darling, the only thing you missed was the bulge below your sweetie’s



belt. If you didn't see it, I did. A prize winner, if that zipper was an indication. He looked like Mt. Vesuvius before a major eruption. For Pete's sake, find some way to be alone with the guy and let him have his wicked way, before he dies of frustration. I have to go, I have a client waiting and don't call me until you've had a night of heaven with your Hamish MacBeth." *Slam.*

No help there. With a sigh, I turned back to work, only to be interrupted by Maureen at the door.

"Now what?"

My nose twitched from the heavily-perfumed scent, as Maureen, clutching an enormous bouquet of red roses and baby's breath, and a stack of assignments to mark, knocked at the door.

"Somebody must like you a lot," she said with a grin, handing the flowers to me, as she slung the papers, neatly bundled in twine on the floor.

I breathed in the sweet scent of the roses, enchanted by the unexpected gift. My fingers tore at the attached card.

*I remembered that you like roses. Hope you like this better than the last gift.*

Unable to suppress a grin, I climbed up on a chair to lift down a glass vase from the top of my bookcase.

Maureen stared curiously as I arranged the blooms, just ready to open. "You getting it on with someone?"

I replied with a dirty look.

"Those are serious flowers, that's all. If someone sent me roses, I'd know

how to say thank you.”

Still wearing a smirk, she slammed the door, leaving behind the mound of paperwork that seemed to be multiplying faster than rabbits.

I phoned Fraser’s number to say thank you, but there was no answer, and I didn’t feel like leaving a message on his voice mail, too impersonal.

Idly, I wondered where he had disappeared this time. Probably running around King’s Cross as a cross-dresser, after a drug dealer. Nothing would surprise me about Fraser MacKinnon.

Unable to suppress a giggle, I settled back to work until it was time to get the kids at school.

I could anticipate what an earful I’d get from Greg over the Berman sleepover, where Susan probably fed him a beetroot smoothie. I popped another few aspirin for good measure.



My blood-curdling shriek must have sounded like something out of a Vincent Price movie, but the sight that greeted me the next morning as I opened my office door would have shaken even the coolest of men.

My hand flew to my mouth, sick from the horrific greeting, but I seemed unable to avert my gaze.

Brian Lockhart ran over at the start of my screams and stopped short.

Emily Caulfield, the prissy, schoolmarmish, midwifery instructor in the office two doors down, poked her head through the door to see what all the

commotion was about. Unable to contain her curiosity, she tiptoed out of her cubbyhole, her annoyance at being disturbed so rudely radiating on her face. I felt as if she was about to send me to the naughty corner for misbehavior in class.

Both gaped through my doorway, speechless for several seconds.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to have pets in the office, Lindy,” Emily said in a teeny voice. “Didn’t you have a dog here recently?”

I shot her a murderous look.

“If Fran Kingsley knew about this, she’d have the animal rights people down here in a flash.” Brian couldn’t suppress a wisecrack, but I was beyond laughter.

I was terrified at the latest surprise package left for me, barely able to stand on my shaking legs, which felt as if they might give way any second.

“Call Fraser. MacKinnon. *Now!*”

So sickened was I, that I had been reduced to a monosyllabic idiot, croaking out the order to Brian.

Happy to have something to do, Brian did an about-face, returning to his office to make the call. He shouted back over his shoulder.

“What’s the number?”

Throwing my shoulder bag at him, I nearly knocked him flat with its weight.

“It’s in there somewhere. Forget it, call 000 and tell them it’s an

emergency!”

Brian phoned, then came back and tried to drag me away from the doorway, as Emily scuttled back to her cave, slamming her door.

Knowing Emily, she was probably afraid of finding a hamster or lab frog hopping around in her office.

I stood with my chest heaving but refused to move. Desperate. I was desperate for Fraser. I wanted him to be there, wrap his arms around me and promise everything would be all right.

He must have been somewhere nearby because it seemed like no time before he arrived. *Thank God.*

As he slammed through the glass door to our wing of the building with a tremendous crash that startled all the other early morning arrivals, his face was radiating concern. Deep lines were etched his forehead and around eyes, his jaw was covered in stubble. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days.

His face visibly relaxed from the hard cop face to a soft, molten look the second he saw me, and he sighed with relief. He marched forward with a take-charge attitude that was obvious in his confident stride.

Like Brian and Emily had, he stopped short in the doorway beside me, his jaw dropping in the same sick astonishment we had felt.

Dangling from the overhead fluorescent light was a dead cat. Eyes still open, it stared at me like a stuffed animal with glass substitutes, the tail stretching downward from the light so that the animal swayed, its head down

like a macabre pendulum. Tied to the end of the tail was a note in block letters:

NEXT TIME YOU.

Fraser enfolded me in his arms, his grip tightening as he cradled my damp face to his chest. One hand stroked my hair and he whispered in my ear. “It’s okay. You’re okay. I’m here now and you’re safe.”

Feeling secure and protected now that he had arrived, I gave way to the urge to sob.

I didn’t care what Brian, or anyone else, thought about my tears or that fact that I was wrapped around Fraser. If it was possible, I pressed tighter against him. My fingers laced around the nape of his neck, and I stood there for several minutes, before I felt able to compose myself.

His nose twitched from the strong odor inside the office, now filtering out through the corridor.

“What’s that smell?”

Happy to have someone else take over, Brian sniffed.

“Formaldehyde. I bet that thing came from the student labs.”

I could see Fraser’s confusion, and tried to clarify.

“The first-year students study anatomy. Human bodies are too expensive for their study, so in the dissection labs, they cut up cats.”

That seemed to drain me of any further ability to speak, and I buried my face on MacKinnon’s chest again.

While I played ostrich, Fraser snapped off the mobile, calling the police

for reinforcements, barking orders over the phone.

“Get a photographer over here this time. This isn’t like the dog mess and it isn’t a practical joke. It’s sick. And increase the detail. Twenty-four hours. I’ll take care of the office.”

I didn’t have the faintest idea what he was talking about, and to be honest, I didn’t care by then.

Fraser forced me away from the door, pulling me towards our common sitting area, and gently lowered me down on the black leather sofa.

Brian had scuttled back to his office shortly after Fraser turned up, happy to hand the responsibility to someone else. Now he poked his head out of his office. His eyes swept over me. My sobs were punctuated by hiccups. He crept out and asked in a small voice, “Everything okay?”

“No, everything is not okay! What in hell’s name is going on around here?”

Fraser’s temper erupted like a volcano, and I noticed again the grey shadows under his eyes. They matched the shadowed whiskers on his jaw, as if he hadn’t shaved for a day. I figured it was some sort of undercover disguise. Maybe he had to go down to King’s Cross and pose as a drunk in the street again.

Sitting down beside me, he pulled me close to him, my head resting on his shoulder. His arm was around my waist and I snuggled tighter.

Brian got the hint and locked himself back in his office, as more staff

members drifted in to find me curled on the sofa with MacKinnon. I had no idea what they thought when they found me entangled with Fraser and to be honest, I didn't care.

In the few minutes of quiet before the police and the rest of the faculty arrived, he nuzzled my neck softly, leaving a whisker burn.

For once, I was beyond any thought or concern as to what any of them thought. *As if that mattered at this point. A dead animal was in my office and the note had made it clear that the next victim of the dissection lab would be me.*

Fraser rose as several young police officers marched through the glass doors, carrying attaché cases, and he indicated with his index finger where to go.

"Through there, try to lift prints from the keypad."

"No worries."

They walked through the corridor, followed by a skinny, bleached-blonde policewoman with a camera and acne. She looked like Angie Dickinson's portrayal of a cop in *Police Woman*, only a Grade C version.

Brian's door creaked open, and he handed each of us a steaming mug of coffee. I swallowed gratefully as he ducked back into his office, emerging again to offer us a box of doughnuts. *Comfort food. When in doubt, eat.* He tossed a pile of paper napkins on the table beside the box before disappearing again.

Too distressed to think about my ballooning weight, I bit into a chocolate custard doughnut. Stress must eat up mega calories, I reasoned, as

Fraser chewed a jelly doughnut, the red jam squirting on a napkin with the first bite.

“Doughnuts! Thanks.”

The police officers returned to us, pouncing on the remaining pastries. Chewing noisily, they chatted to Fraser as if I wasn’t there.

The blonde policewoman joined them a minute later, fluttering her dark lashes at MacKinnon.

I noted with perverse pleasure that her roots were black, and she was in serious need of a touch-up. I perked up even more when I noticed that she had legs like Olive Oyl. Not the sort of legs a man would want to see in red hooker shoes. At least, I hoped not.

“All done, Mack. I might take off and see if I can find Katie if that’s okay. She said she was studying in the library.” It was Matt Pacula, one of the young cops who had been on the scene when we found Sasha. His chocolate brown eyes, like an innocent puppy’s, made me see why one of my girls had fallen for the guy. *A real cutie.*

“Any prints?”

Matt shook his head.

“Nah. Too smeared for anything to come out.”

MacKinnon’s tight lipped grimace showed his obvious disappointment.

“Did you take care of the plant?” MacKinnon’s brows arched in question.

Three heads bobbed up and down.



“I don’t have plants in there! I have a cat. A *dead* cat, and I want it out.”

“We got the cat into the bag instead of out of it,” joked Pacula, and despite his Paul McCartney looks, I glared at him.

“What you need in that office is that stuff from *The Cat in the Hat*. Thing One and Thing Two to straighten it out,” added the other, chomping on a whipped cream éclair. “You got a lot of papers stacked up, like a landfill.”

Blondie peered at me like I was Public Enemy Number One. She narrowed her eyes and smiled archly. “I know you. Aren’t you the dog shit lady?”

*What a bitchy thing to say.* Daggers from my eyes put MacKinnon on red alert, and he held up a palm in warning. “That’s enough. Mrs. Kellerman is very upset, and that’s perfectly understandable, under the circumstances.”

As he turned toward me, I noticed tiny jam stains around his mouth. Reflexively, I dabbed at them with one of the napkins. The two male cops exchanged knowing glances and grinned. Blondie grimaced.

“Was your pass code changed yet?” Fraser asked.

I shook my head and he cursed under his breath.

“That’s the first thing that should have been done. I don’t know what security was thinking. Send them down here. We’re going to reset this door. Now.”

With a nod of understanding, the boys in blue, followed by the disgusted blond and her camera, headed out the door.

I winced as they departed when I saw the dead cat, now in a bag. *Who would do such a horrible thing?* I shivered at the memory of the note's implication. Even worse, what could the person who did this have planned for me next?

Unable to control my emotions, I buried my face in Fraser's chest again and wept.



"God Almighty, what in hell's name is going on at that university? The dog mess was one thing, but the dead cat was a deliberate scare tactic."

Fraser MacKinnon's temper boiled over. Lindy had been frightened. *Finally*. It was about time. More than panicked, she was terrified. She wasn't the only one.

"You must have been plenty scared, too, I bet," Matt said. "I heard from the traffic cops that you broke the speed limit, and went through a couple of red lights on the way over there."

MacKinnon glared at the young cop. "What did you expect? That hysterical moron that phoned in from the university said there was something dead in Lindy's office. Who did you think I presumed was dead?"

Matt licked his lips. "Yeah, I get the picture."

"No, you don't." Shit, he'd been in a sweat by the time he'd run through all the corridors to Lindy's office. Terrified, that her dead body was lying there in the office.

He couldn't describe the relief he'd felt that she was alive, when he'd finally sprinted around the last corner to her section of the building.

"It's horrible," she had wailed, burying her face in his chest.

*Alive.* Nothing had happened to her. In the first few seconds after his arrival, all he could think about was the fact that she was alive. He'd wrapped his arms around and held her close; all he could concentrate on was soothing her distress.

"It's okay, I'm here, and nobody's going to hurt you." He must have repeated it a dozen times before it finally sunk into her brain.

"Did you think that making stupid cat jokes was going to help? What is wrong with all of you?" MacKinnon was livid over Pacula's thoughtlessness. The other clowns didn't help much. "Didn't you see her face?"

"I don't know about her face, but I know what I saw when we got there." A sly smile crossed Matt's lips "Very cozy. All curled up with you. She was crying, right? You didn't look exactly like you minded. All ready for some TLC, and you were right there to deliver."

MacKinnon opened his mouth to shout at Pacula, but stopped himself. *God, Matt was right.*

"Sure. You were interested in her from the start. I might not know so much about murders, but I know about women. Way to go."

MacKinnon changed the subject. "This wasn't a joke. I said that the first time. This time, it was a deliberate threat. You saw what that note said."

“I gotta hand it to you. You said this was dangerous. ‘Next time you.’ Whoever wrote that, made it pretty clear.”

“You’re a regular Einstein. I warned you, and nobody took this seriously.”

“Well, you gotta admit that dog business looked like a practical joke,” Matt said. “A stinky one, but a joke.”

MacKinnon pinched the bridge of his nose. “Even that cold fish of a Dean fluffed it off as a prank, and the rest of you guys weren’t better.”

“It smelled like a dog pound,” one of the other cops cracked. As MacKinnon shot him a foul look, the cop turned away, burying his head in a newspaper.

“Wait’ll I get my hands on what’s-her-name,” MacKinnon threatened.

“Who? Sally? She was pissed off ‘cause she caught you cozied up with that Kellerman lady. Maybe you’re smart about some stuff, but you got a lot to learn about women.”

MacKinnon glared at him.

“She’s been making eyes at you for a while. Didn’t notice, didya?”

*That did it.* MacKinnon’s temper snapped. “No, I didn’t notice, and I don’t care. That was a mean thing to say. If I see her, she’ll get a mouthful from me about it.”

Matt laughed. “I bet. Yeah, it was mean, I guess. Calling her the dog shit lady.”

MacKinnon paced several steps. “There’s something in that office.

Something we missed. Something that Lindy might not even realize is in there.”

“We went over the whole place.”

“Tough. We missed it, whatever it is. I’m going back over it again when she goes home. And I’m planting a bugging device, too. First the dog mess, now the cat. Someone is going to try something in that office. And the next time, it’s going to be Lindy. That note made it clear. We’ll have a van in the staff garage, and we’re going to make sure someone listens in twenty-four hours a day. That includes you on the roster.”

“Bugging? There could be some interesting conversations in there.” Matt grinned, all too pleased at the thought of what they might hear.

“No telling what students talk about with her. Lindy strikes me as the sympathetic type.”

Matt grinned. “Maybe Katie will talk about me.”

MacKinnon stared at him. *Didn’t this guy get it?* Probably not. Nobody was threatening his girlfriend. He leaned forward until they met almost nose to nose. “You keep your mouth shut. I don’t care if your girlfriend turns up in that office, or what she says. This isn’t about you, and it sure isn’t about her.”

Matt blinked at him. “Yeah, if Katie is there, she might talk about me.” For some reason, he seemed pleased at the prospect of eavesdropping. A sly smile spread on his face.

“Keep yourself focused. This is about Lindy, not your girlfriend,” Fraser said. “I’m warning you, and I mean it. And don’t let on about anything you hear.

Including anything about you. I don't care what you hear. Too bad. You got that straight?"

Pacula nodded and started to walk away, but halted and turned back to glance over his shoulder.

"What if that Kellerman lady talks about you? Maybe with her mates at the uni. Or phones a girlfriend, while she's at work. Women love talking about stuff like that. They do it for hours." Matt paused, his grin widening. "And they talk about every little detail."

*Shit.* MacKinnon burned at the prospect. Matt was right. Women discussed every little detail. How they could spend so much time dissecting a relationship was beyond him.

If she phoned Julie from the office, they'd analyze the smallest, most insignificant thing. Why women did that was anyone's guess, he only knew that they did it.

What would he do if she blabbed about the interrupted attempts to get her into bed, for all the other cops to overhear? And recorded on tape, so they could play it back. Again and again. *God.* He felt his face flush at the prospect. He'd never live it down.

Tough. He'd have to put up with it. Like he told Pacula; get your priorities in order. The most important thing right now was keeping Lindy safe.

"That Wilkins guy is here. They brought him in for questioning. You want to see him in the interview room?"

MacKinnon grimaced. Scott Wilkins. “Yeah, I definitely want a chat with him. A nice, long one. See what the hell is going on with that kid.”

“What’s eating you? He’s a kid, what’s the big deal.”

“That twerp says he’s in love with Lindy. Kissed her, right on the mouth. And right in front of me.”

Matt nodded. “You didn’t like that, huh?” He tsked. “Boy, you’re in bad shape.”

MacKinnon snapped. “Wilkins has some nerve. That guy stepped way over the line. He didn’t just kiss her on the cheek, he kissed her on the lips. And in case you don’t know, that’s absolutely taboo at a university. Students and staff aren’t supposed to touch each other, for any reason.”

Matt shrugged. “Like I said, you got it bad.”

MacKinnon ignored his assessment. “Lindy thinks he’s innocent; I’m not certain. This kid thinks he’s in love with her.”

Matt whistled softly. “All the students know Sasha was a rotten apple. Katie told me. It was no secret.”

Matt was right. Lindy’s interviews were proof that Sasha’s reputation was wide-spread.

“So you figure if this Wilkins guy knew that Sasha had threatened Lindy, maybe he decided to take matters into his own hands?”

“Maybe. It doesn’t explain how he got into that lab. No student access, you know that. A long shot. But worth pursuing, and you never know what the

kid might spill.”

“He’s waiting in the room. You want me to come with you?”

“Why not? I hope Romeo doesn’t have a class, because he’s going to be late. Very late,” MacKinnon mumbled.



## Chapter Fourteen

By that afternoon, the horrible cat-mobile was long gone from the office, taken for analysis. Despite Fraser's optimism, I was certain that all the police would find would be a cat missing a number of organs, based on whatever anatomical systems the students had studied that semester.

Fraser had departed shortly after the other police had taken off, once I assured him that I was fine. *I wasn't*. I didn't feel anywhere near fine, but I had seen the worry and fear on his face when he'd first arrived.

Despite my terror, I forced myself to make a considerable effort to swallow my revulsion, and attempted to start marking papers in the office. Security had been called by Fraser. He chewed them out for their slipshod work and they promised to reset the lock with a new pass code, right after the long weekend.

Nerves on edge, I didn't think I could stand any more, but I was in for another shock. Gloria popped her head into my doorway with the latest news alert.

"Lindy, you won't believe it! Did that cop you were cozied up to on the sofa tell you that they arrested Scott Wilkins? I just heard it upstairs from one of the other students."

"Scott?" I was so stunned that I couldn't speak.

Gloria nodded, a grim expression on her face. "I can't believe it. Nobody can. He's such a nice, gentle boy. So popular with the other students. I never would have imagined that he could kill anyone. What kind of students are we accepting in this place?" Glancing around, she dropped her voice before confiding, "I heard that Barbara is having a seizure over all of this. It just shows you." Her nose wrinkled with disgust although what it showed, I wasn't certain.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Scott Wilkins. I can't believe that either."

Stunned, I sank back in my chair after Gloria left. I was almost in a state of shock, reeling from the latest episode in the ongoing faculty soap opera. I also knew beyond any doubt that neither Bill nor Scott would ever leave a dead animal in my office. It simply wasn't in the character of either man, no matter what Fraser thought.

"Fran would murder Bill if he dared to harm an animal. Assuming she hasn't killed him already, over his flings with students, and Scott is just a nice boy with a crush. He wouldn't do it, I know that," I had insisted to Fraser earlier that day. "I don't know who did this, but it wasn't either of them."

He had eyed me skeptically at the time.

Only a short while ago, he had planted a quick kiss on my head before leaving. He hadn't said a word about Scott. All he told me was to try to avoid any more incidents, as if I went deliberately looking for them.

"Try to stay out of trouble, if that's possible," he murmured. "And don't

forget about Sunday.”

“I’m not going anywhere on Sunday. I’ll be drowning in paper.” Laughing softly, he was gone before I could argue with him.

Now, upset with Gloria’s news, I lifted the phone and without any hesitation, dialed MacKinnon’s cell number. He answered on the first ring, almost as if he had been expecting the call.

“You’re crazy,” I shouted. “What on earth has gotten into you, arresting Scott? He’s a sweet boy. You’re just being petty and jealous. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

My harangue was cut short by MacKinnon’s gruff voice.

“Jealousy has nothing to do with it. Your sweet boy,” he said, dripping with sarcasm, “has been brought in for questioning. Not arrested. That’s a misperception by the gossips, spreading rumors among your students. They don’t bother to get their facts straight. He was persuaded to come in and explain why he’s been stalking you, and hanging around your house. Unless, of course, you don’t want to know about that.”

*Stalking.* His angry pronouncement knocked all the fight out of me and I gulped. *Was everybody crazy except me? Maybe I was crazy too.*

I thought back to the night that Fraser had appeared at my house for dinner, and the noise outside after he left. *Had Scott been the one who made those noises outside my house?* I had chalked it off to Mrs. Gallagher’s covert garbage surveillance, or a stray cat.

Thinking about cats set my overwrought nerves a-jangle again. The prospect of Scott, hidden in shadows, lurking around my house at night was worse. It gave me the shivers imagining him hidden out there, waiting for who knew what? Self doubt began to plague me.

Maybe my instincts weren't as infallible as I had thought. I was so overwrought that my hands trembled as I tried to make myself a coffee. All I managed to do was spill the mess all over my desk.

It had been bad enough earlier in the day just to force myself back into my office. My nerves were on edge after the horrible start and, although I tried, I couldn't erase the disgusting image from my mind, nor the message that my turn was next.

Making a concerted effort to persevere, I was soon deep in concentration, my head bent over the essays. Tight, knotted shoulder and neck muscles ached from leaning over the unending supply of assignments.

It's mostly hard work to mark papers, but periodically I do get a laugh from students. Unintentional on their part. They don't always check their spelling, and sometimes come out with the most ridiculous statements.

I chuckled over the typos that had been submitted in hasty last minute work. 'The woman's diluted cervix' made my eyes widen, as I circled the error in red. Another one discussed 'romantic fever.' I was pretty sure the student meant rheumatic fever. One more red circle around the careless mistake. I'd never heard of the romantic version before, but I was certain that if it existed,

then I had a rip-roaring case. All due to Fraser MacKinnon.

I couldn't stifle a giggle as my sharp eye spotted another beaut. Red circle again, this time around the 'lover function test.' I wasn't all that interested in the correct phrase, liver function, but I was more than ready for the lover function test with MacKinnon. My thoughts wandered back to him when I least expected it, and I wondered if we would ever get it together.

With all the unnerving thoughts periodically crossing my mind, it was no surprise that the knock at the door made me jump out of my chair with a yelp. I half expected a dead horse's head to appear, like some gruesome scene from *The Godfather*.

Blinking, I looked up to see several of my students clustered at the door, their faces bright with excitement. I hoped they weren't there to fill me in on Scott. I had no strength left to correct or discuss the rumors, and I wasn't about to reveal his late-night activities to anyone else. Forcing myself to paste a pleasant smile on my face despite the unexpected interruption, I spoke as calmly as I could manage.

"I'm awfully busy marking right now. Is it something important?"

Kate stepped forward from the delegation, skirting her way around the obstacle course of stacked papers.

"Sorry to bother you, Lindy. We know you're busy, but Matt came to the library this morning and told me what happened. We all feel so badly for you. We were going to come to see you anyway. Now seemed like a good time."

She inclined her head to Pam, who clutched a package in her hands. Not another package! I didn't think I could take any more surprises.

"We thought, under the circumstances, you might appreciate this. We all wanted to say thank you for being so nice to all of us over the terrible semester we've had. Actually, the semester was great, except for the end, and after all, none of what happened was your fault. Sasha was bad news, and I guess it was inevitable he would end badly. He just picked the wrong place to do it. So we thought—"

She handed me a card signed by the entire class, their signatures scrawled with little greetings and words of affection. Touched by their gesture, I started to thank them, but was interrupted by Kate.

"This is for you." The pink, shiny square parcel was thrust into my hands.

My eyes squeezed shut, unable to forget all the other packages I had received. I shook the box playfully and sniffed with suspicion, but I didn't think this one contained a dead animal. Nor did I think the students would have the nerve to give me a sexy garter belt.

Only one person I knew had that much *chutzpah*. Despite all the stress and anxiety, I felt a smile creep across my face at the thought of that seductive gift, as my fingers carefully undid the paper wrapping.

"Girls, you shouldn't have."

Inside the box was an oil burner and an entire box of assorted fragrant oils and candles.

“Matt said the formaldehyde was pretty overpowering,” Kate explained.

“We thought this would help get rid of the smell, and be nice and relaxing. After all, you’re marking our papers, too. We figured we need all the help we can get, and we want to be sure you’re in a good mood.”

We all laughed at the feeble joke as I wished them well on the exam. They all beamed in response.

“Back to the library,” said Pam. “We heard the Dean is having a new exam written because of what happened. Lindy, you should know that none of us are going to transfer to another university. We talked it over as a group and we all want to stay together here, so the Dean doesn’t have to worry about that.”

Kate interrupted, her eyes shining as if she had another surprise for me.

“We also signed up for your group again, next semester. We want to stick with you. All of us.”

I felt tears welling in my eyes at the blatant support and affection from my students. Maybe my job didn’t pay a lot, but times like this made it all worthwhile.

With promises to stay in touch between semesters, I gently nudged them out the door, settling back to work. Before I returned to the grind though, I lit my new burner. Lavender and tea rose infused the room as I continued working. The sweet floral scent soothed me as I marked stacks of papers. Periodically, I would rise and stretch my shoulders, sore from hunching over the assignments. But each time I took a break, my mind brought back the image of that horrible

cat, hanging over my head again.

Nope. Whoever did this, was still running around loose. I shuddered at the thought of an unknown assailant on the prowl through the university corridors, stalking the next victim.

Me.

Hair rose at the back of my neck, and I admitted to myself that I was actually looking forward to working at home over the long weekend. The office had seemed a safe haven, but not anymore. Home seemed a lot safer. No one could get at me there.

Despite the shock over Scott, I still believed home was safer than the office. At least no one could get in and leave surprise animals waiting for me to trip over at home.

Michael was taking the kids for the weekend, something he'd never done, and I'd have the house to myself. I'd be all alone. Nothing but solitude and peace in my house.

"Probably be panting to get them back to me by Monday night," I muttered sourly. I didn't want to waste any thought or my limited time on Michael. Resolutely, I picked up my red pen to begin correcting again.



Bleary eyed, I rubbed my lids. My fingertips extended, pressing gently, to massage the temples. My head thudded with a dull ache and my shoulders felt



permanently kinked in pain from the marathon marking session.

I had barely had any sleep in the past few days. Too bad there isn't a sleep bank where you can make deposits and withdrawals. In the state I was in, I'd be in overdraft for the next five years. At least it would match my financial state.

I glanced at my watch. Ten AM. I had spent the entire weekend working on material for Professor Enderby in preparation for the threatened meeting on Tuesday.

I had alternated between my attempts to pacify Enderby, and marking student papers. Despite all the work I had achieved in the office on Friday, the pile was still so large that I'd been forced to borrow a supermarket trolley from the clinical coordinator to get them all out to the car.

Stacks of ten assignments each were neatly piled on the dining room table, waiting to be added and calculated in numerical scores and entered into marking sheets.

The house seemed so empty without the noise of Tessa and Greg fighting, the Disney station blasting cartoons, and Tessa's Robbie Williams CD screaming through the walls.

Three quick raps at the door made me groan.

"Now what? I hope this isn't some proselytizing sect, out door-knocking again." Was nothing holy? Even Sunday didn't provide a respite. I mumbled to myself, in all likelihood from a terminal case of sleep deprivation. I yanked the

door open to a grinning MacKinnon.

“Sunday. Did you forget?”

Speechless, I stared at him, dressed in his usual worn jeans, a thick, oatmeal pullover and yellow windbreaker.

Winter was truly in the air and despite my long years in Australia, in my heart, I knew that June should mean the start of summer, instead of the cold, dreary winter months. Shivering in the chill, I stepped back to let him in.

“You’re cold. Didn’t you put on the heat?”

His eyes wandered curiously to the electric radiators that I had purposely avoided using over the weekend. With bills mounting, I refused to cave into the luxury of keeping myself warm when the kids weren’t around. I tried to ignore the chill, bundling up in heavy sweaters.

“Just as well. You should dress in warm clothes for what I have in mind.”

This didn’t sound like MacKinnon. His usual goal was getting my clothes *off*, not on.

“I told you, I can’t go out. I have work to do. Besides, I’m still annoyed about Scott.”

Rocking on the balls of his feet, hands shoved in his pockets, he met my steady gaze.

“I told you we didn’t arrest him. We just gave him some friendly advice to stay away from you. No more hanging around at night and sending loving glances towards your window.”

That knocked the bluster out of me. I staggered as he caught me. The touch of his hand on my elbow sent a megavolt of electricity through my body.

I shivered for a second at the thought of a man, even a harmless enough one, like Scott, lurking around my house, watching every move. Maybe I was nutty after all and had no ability to judge character. For all I knew, Scott had escaped a mental asylum and was masquerading as a student.

I shook my head at the ridiculous thought. *No, I was a good judge of character.* I had Sasha pegged as a cheater from the start, and instinctively, I knew that Scott was infatuated with me, but was harmless, despite his ridiculous obsession.

Scott just irked Fraser, and that twinge of jealousy warmed my heart, even though I knew that Scott was hardly a rival for MacKinnon.

“Scott didn’t do it, I know it.”

“You always talk to yourself?”

Pink with embarrassment, I avoided his gaze, although I could tell he was amused.

No. Scott wasn’t a total sicko. Maybe he had taken a crush to extremes, and I was glad that Fraser had warned him to find others ways to spend his nights, but it still didn’t make the kid a killer.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “And I’m sorry I can’t go out with you.”

My voice must have revealed my regret and he glanced at the papers stacked on the table. He cocked his head at me, looking so boyish that he

reminded me of Tyler.

“What do you have left to do?”

With an audible sigh, I pointed to the scattered marking sheets and laptop set up on the table.

“I have to put them in alphabetical order, total all the marks and write a final report.”

I left out the work for Borowski. With no contract renewal in sight, it was no longer a priority for me. I had perused the employment section of the paper, but nothing with flexible hours, absolutely nothing, was available other than strip-o-grams, and I didn’t think my body was going to qualify for that job.

“Okay, so I can do the totals for you while you write the report. Hand me a calculator and I’ll get them in alphabetical order when I finish.”

Fraser must have seen my skeptical look, and he urged me again.

“Come on, Lindy. A few hours off won’t kill you. It will do you the world of good to get out in the fresh air and relax. You’re pale and tired, and everyone has to take a break, eventually.”

He had a point, and with resignation, I shuffled through the papers, explaining how to add the data and where to enter the numbers in the columns.

I trotted off into the kitchen to make us both coffee that we sipped, busy with the tedious chores. Periodically I glanced up at him, but he was engrossed in the boring job, fingers occasionally raking through his thick hair so that it stood on end in a few spots.

“All finished,” he announced, an hour later, handing me the marking sheets. Neat figures lined the columns, like an accountant’s report. He did a far better job than I would have. Mine were usually full of hastily erased errors, that only I could decipher most of the time.

“I’m just finishing the last sentence now.” My fingers pecked at the keyboard as I saved the material, shutting down the computer. Yawning, I stretched my arms high above my head, eyeing him curiously.

“So what’s so important that couldn’t wait for another day?”

“The weather is perfect and we should take advantage of it, is all.”

Glancing out the window, I conceded that he had a point. The sunshine was bright, the sky a deep azure, and just the slightest breeze riffled through the trees.

Fraser grasped my hand and tugged me. “Let’s go.”

“Wait a minute, don’t I have to get changed?”

Dressed in a ratty old Boston University sweatshirt and jeans, I thought I looked like a refugee from Bosnia.

“No. Perfect. Grab a pair of sneakers.”

Clearly, he wasn’t going to tell me what he had in mind, enjoying his little secret.

It occurred to me again that I knew very little about him, only bits and pieces snatched at odd minutes, as I locked the front door and headed out to the car. I wondered what vehicle would be waiting at the curb. An undercover

taxicab wouldn't have surprised me at that point.

We reached the end of the driveway and I stopped short, eyes wide at the sight.

"Don't tell me *that's* a police car, too."

I could feel his grin before I whirled around to stare at his face. He looked like the cat that swallowed the canary.

Parked at the curb was a fire-engine red MG convertible. All my life I had dreamed of riding around in one of those cars.

As a teenager, they had seemed the height of cool sophistication to me, and I was sure if only someone would give me a ride in one, I could pretend I was with one of the Beach Boys.

Too bad for me that I never seemed to date anyone with such a sporty car when I was single. They seemed to be reserved for sexy blonds in string bikinis, and clearly I wasn't in that category.

Michael had insisted on safe, family sedans, and the closest I would come to my dream might be a car with a sunroof.

For the present, I was driving a clanking Ford that belched and gasped fumes from the exhaust pipe. My car was clearly on its last legs.

"Yours?" My squeaking voice must have indicated my complete astonishment, and he grinned broadly at my reaction to the car.

"Like it?"

I gulped, too astonished to speak and nodded. He held the door open and

I slid in, pretending we were on our way to the beach to surf like an older version of Gidget and Moondoggie. About the only thing missing were the surfboards, and Brian Wilson's voice trilling about the attributes of 'California Girls.'

"Mind if we keep the roof down? It's a nice day."

Sliding in, he buckled the seat belt and gunned the motor. My hair flew out behind me, like the girls in one of those old beach movies.

Fraser MacKinnon couldn't know it, but he had managed to fulfill a long-cherished fantasy. I felt like I was sixteen all over again, and the world was full of possibilities.

"Any break in the case?" I asked, coming back to reality. He scowled as a reply.

"No. We still don't have any idea who let the cat out of the bag, so to speak. That's going to come to an end on Tuesday, when they reset your pass code. I'm going to make sure it's a number that you can remember, so think of something. A phone number, a birthday. Anything. For now, let's just relax and enjoy ourselves."

He was right. I was worn out, exhausted emotionally and physically, and relaxing seemed like the best thing to do. Taking a few hours off suddenly seemed like a brilliant idea, and I wondered if we were making a beeline to his place. I could worry about being unemployed, and my steady decline to a bag-lady on the street, later.

Much to my surprise, we headed in a different direction. Within a short time, we arrived in Manly, driving down the hairpin curves to the water's edge until we pulled up beside a yacht club. Fraser expertly parked the car in a reserved space.

"What are we doing here?"

He shot me one of those grins again that said he had a surprise in store.

"We're going sailing. Come on."

"But I've never been sailing. I don't know anything about this." My protests did little good, as he led me by the elbow into a shed full of ropes, canoes, kayaks, and rigging.

Selecting a green fluoro life vest from a rack, he buckled it securely around me with no wasted motion, quickly securing one around himself.

Ignoring my continual protests that I was an ignoramus around boats, he pulled me down the dock to the water.

Small waves lapped at the wooden jetty and gulls cawed overhead, as I bit my lip at the prospect of heading into Sydney Harbour on a boat. A small boat.

My idea of a boat trip on the city's glorious waterfront was a Captain Cook day cruise I had taken years ago. The kids had gone with me and had spent most of the time stuffing themselves with jelly beans, instead of listening to the guide's monotone travelogue about the historic sites we were passing. Even that trip made me seasick.



I was nauseated at the prospect of sailing with Fraser and prayed that I didn't heave in front of him, disgracing myself forever.

Seeing my hesitation, he tried to reassure me.

"It's perfectly safe," he insisted. "I've been around the water most of my life. The Harbour is like a duck pond compared to the North Sea."

Now that was a surprise. He had never made mention of that before. I watched as his expert hands rigged the sails, the wind billowing the white cloth. With the obvious ease of an expert, he quickly unknotted the ties that secured the boat at the dock.

Gingerly, I accepted his hand, as he helped me into the boat and cast off from the dock. The sails picked up wind as he tacked left and right, the boat skimming over the water.

"Enjoying the ride?" he shouted, over the wind. I clutched the sides of the boat and in a peculiar way, I did enjoy it. Wind whistled through my hair, but the brilliant sun kept the day warm.

We waved to others on the water in a variety of craft, ranging from sailboats to cabin cruisers, and the Manly ferry making its way to Circular Quay. Passengers waved or tooted horns back as Fraser made his way further north. Even though we were in a boat, I felt as if we were flying over the waves.

"Here, you can take the tiller now."

"No thanks, not me." I shrank against the edge of the boat and the sudden motion made it tip dangerously to one side.

Yanking me backward, he settled me near the tiller, keeping me cradled securely with his own body. His arms and legs stretched around mine as his hands guided the boat, showing me patiently how to steer.

I was filled with a strange exhilaration that was erotic at the same time, as I moved the long shaft of the tiller back and forth between my hands, under his whispered tutelage.

“Relax and feel the water.” The hushed tones calmed my nervous apprehension and I felt the tension melt from my hands as I tried to follow his instructions. I glanced up and saw him smile down at me, his hands gently guiding mine.

“A natural sailor,” he said with a satisfied chuckle, as I made tentative efforts at steering the craft. I suppressed my terror with the hope that I wouldn’t goof and that we wouldn’t end up dunked in the chilly water.

“Were you in the Navy?” I couldn’t believe the apparent ease that he had around the boat.

His movements had a natural grace that could only come from complete confidence around marine craft. Clearly, he had told me the truth about spending time on the water.

Fraser shook his head, flicking off salt spray, his face turned to the sun, and so happy and young looking, my heart soared at the sight. *What was going on here? Was I falling in love with this man?* I knew almost nothing about him.

“I told you I was born in Dundee. My grandfather and father had a fishing

boat, and I worked on it as long as I can remember. Weekends, school holidays, that sort of thing. I'd go out with them at night to set the nets and bring in the catch. I hauled in the fish and unloaded it at the markets and learned to take care of the boat."

Taking the tiller from me, he steered towards a sheltered cove north of Manly.

"Fishing is a dicey business, even in the best of times, and when my aunt begged us to come out here, we lived on her place in the Hunter Valley. She married an Aussie and they still grow grapes. They have a small winery up there. My aunt keeps chooks, has a vegetable garden, that sort of thing. You don't take the croft out of a Scot all that easily," he said with a small smile.

"Chooks? Oh, chickens." I had a giggle again over another word used casually by Aussies. "So that was how you knew about wines that night with Alvin."

He nodded, his eyes focused on the approaching shoreline.

"I took a gap year before university and spent it on a boat in Nova Scotia. Lots of Scots settled there, you know. It was great. The boat was a teaching vessel, a naval classroom for people that wanted to learn about sailing. All different ages and backgrounds. We taught them navigation, rigging, how to strike and set sails, and clean the heads. They didn't like that last part," he chuckled.

"When I joined the force, I had duty for a while with the Water Police. I

liked it well enough, liked being back on the water, but I prefer to feel the wind in the sails, not a motor doing all the work, so I put in for a land assignment. I still sail whenever I can. Taught both of my boys too, and they love it as much as I do.”

“That’s amazing,” I said, still stunned at how much he had revealed.

Fraser said nothing further but started singing in a rich baritone. A song about a whaler, setting out from Dundee, and bonnie lasses gathering around to bid their men farewell. The melody filled me with pleasure.

His voice evoked the ancient history and music of Scotland, far better than any CD I had ever played in my office. I thought that if he had only arrived at my house dressed in the MacKinnon kilt, I would have swooned and walked away into the sunset with him, like the cover on one my lurid romance novels.

Instead of walking hand in hand in a field of heather, we pulled into the shore. Fraser carefully dragged the boat up on the beach, toward a ramshackle eatery that looked like it would collapse if the Big Bad Wolf made the slightest effort.

“I know it doesn’t look like much, but the food is great,” he said, noticing my skeptical look.

“It’ll be fine,” I said without enthusiasm, at the sight of some fairly weather-beaten men spooning up chowder at a dingy bar.

“It’s just that I didn’t know if you’re kosher, and I figured most fish would be safe,” he said easily. “I respect people who keep their traditions alive.

Being a Scot, I understand about the importance of keeping in touch with the past, and with ancient traditions.”

I blinked, but said nothing.

Michael called keeping kosher a ‘medieval hocus pocus,’ and delighted in ordering pork in front of me. He had taken a malicious pleasure as I squirmed.

While not strict in religious observance, I drew the line at pork and shellfish, and couldn’t help comparing the two men. One who respected me, and one who never had.

Settling at a rickety table full of scratches, we ordered fish from the elderly-looking waitress, spending our time idly talking as we waited.

“I’ll tell you a story,” he proposed, snapping his fingers. “An old Scots legend has it that a *selkie*, a half human, half fish creature, fell in love with a human male. She was so lovely, that he couldn’t help falling under her spell and she agreed to marry him. On the day they married, she carried with her a small box and warned him never to open it.”

“What happened? Like Pandora’s box, all the evils in the world flew out? I’ve heard this before.”

My disappointment must have shown as my lips curled down.

Shaking his head, his eyes were alight with humor.

“Impatient. No, they were wed only a short time when he could no longer resist opening the box. He waited until she was out and snapped open the lid. The box was empty, so he thought.”

“Empty? So why did she tell him not to open it?”

A wistful expression spread on his face. The fine lines crinkled around his eyes, which had deepened to the color of the sea behind us.

“When she returned home and found the box open, she asked him why he had done it. He told her that he couldn’t understand why she cared so much about an empty box, and then she announced that she was leaving him.”

“Because she couldn’t trust him?”

He shook his head sadly.

“No, she said that she wasn’t surprised that he had tampered with her dearest possession. She expected him to open the box but the box wasn’t empty. Inside was the smell of the ocean and the memories she had kept of her home and her past. If all he could see was an empty box, then he would never understand her, and she couldn’t stay because all she would be to him was an empty box.”

I sat silently, contemplating the tragic end to the story, and bit my lip, holding back the urge to cry.

*Wasn’t that partly what had gone wrong with Michael?* He had never looked inside the box to see what was really there, instead, he had looked only at the window dressing. I flushed with the acknowledgement that perhaps, I had been equally at fault.

Long fingers laced with mine, our elbows resting on the table as I met his eyes. He had a serious expression on his face.

“I think I was partly to blame for my marriage breaking up,” he said quietly. “I was a good cop, but a rotten husband. I don’t want to make the same mistake twice, and I think I’ve learned a few things since then. That’s what I’m trying to say. I want to look inside the box and see everything that’s there.”

Too flabbergasted to reply at what I thought he had implied, the serious mood was interrupted by the arrival of our fish. By mutual consent, we dug in, starved after the morning on the water. There was enough fat on the plate to feed half the starving children in Africa.

Without the slightest regard for calories for a change, I polished off the entire portion of fish, with a mound of freshly-fried hot chips along with it.

“You were right. The fish was great,” I enthused.

Fraser smiled, clearly pleased with my words.

“Local, caught just this morning. Probably by those men who were at the bar earlier.”

“Huh, if they did that in parts of New Jersey where I grew up, it would probably be toxic.”

We headed back to the boat, walking hand in hand, before he helped me back in the craft. Within a short time we docked at the jetty in Manly, and Fraser drove me home again.

“I can’t ask you in, no matter how much I want to,” I stammered at the door. “I still have a pile of work to do and I have a cocktail party to attend at the university tonight, too.”

He nodded his understanding. “I have the *Financial Review* to wade through. I grew up without much money, so I tend to watch my investments carefully. Being a Scot, I worked hard and saved and now I watch what happens to it. I don’t want to be without money again.”

Kissing my sunburned nose, he strode off to the MG. I watched the flash of red streak off down the road as I turned back to work, but my mind was distracted by the latest piece of the MacKinnon puzzle.



Fraser reviewed the afternoon as, gunning the motor, he drove away. It had gone really well, start to finish, once he’d persuaded Lindy to ditch work and play a little bit. *What a workaholic.* Then again, she didn’t have a choice, she had kids to support. She had loved the car, he was glad because, so did he.

Maybe he looked kind of old to be driving around in a convertible, but he didn’t feel old, not with Lindy. It was like he was young all over again and been handed a second chance. *Who would have figured he’d fall for her, and so fast? And even more surprising, that it would be mutual?*

He’d spilled the beans to her, told her as best he could, that it was serious on his part, not a game with her. That was the point of the story.

She’d gotten it, he’d been able to see that in the stunned expression on her face. Maybe she thought he’d been toying with her all along; that he made a practice of picking up women. She’d gotten the message, though, loud and



clear. He didn't know any other way to tell her.

He'd fouled up with Amy, but good. Never should have married her, the worst mistake of his life. The only good thing to come out of that had been Tyler and Andrew, and that situation stunk. He should have fought harder to get the boys, but it hadn't looked good in court, being a single father with crazy work hours.

He'd appeared to be a workaholic like Lindy, but his excuse had been to hide at work, away from all the fighting at home. *Fatal error.*

"Mr. MacKinnon, how do you intend to care for these children with the hours you work? In the past few months, you've averaged fifty hours a week. Young children need a full-time parent, not a part-time one. From the look of your work patterns, even part-time is pushing it."

That had stung. As if he didn't care about the boys. The judge's stern expression had been all he'd needed to see to know that he'd lost, and Amy's triumphant one had confirmed it.

*God, that had hurt.* There'd been no answer to the question. No matter how nutty Amy was, and she was loony, on paper, she looked like the better parent to two little boys.

Who'd been to the parent-teacher interviews, who'd taken the kids for their immunizations? The answer to almost every question had been Amy.

She'd shot him a superior grin, knowing full well that she'd succeeded in snapping his heart into pieces. The only people that he loved in the world were

Tyler and Andrew, and Amy had ensured that she'd take them away from him as a punishment.

Amy had used it all as a weapon to get back at him. And at the police. He could still hear her shrieks when he'd announced to her that he was joining the force.

"Are you crazy? Rotten pigs! And you think you're going to be one of them? Over my dead body!"

It was a rant that had continued for years. She hated the force, and this had been her revenge on him and the police.

This time, he wasn't going to make mistakes. Lindy didn't care that he was a cop, she never made disparaging remarks about it, like Amy had done.

Fraser wanted to know everything about Lindy. All the quirks, eccentricities, likes, dislikes. The whole bag, because the more he saw, the more he liked. Except when she decided to investigate on her own.

He knew she'd be safe now. He was headed to the university, too, to be tucked into a van, along with another cop.

Driving into the university, he parked his car on a dead-end road, well away from the garage. Lindy would spot his distinctive car in the garage if she parked in there.

Walking quickly to the garage, he opened the decoy plumber's van and climbed in. Pacula was there, with another cop.

"This has been pretty boring. Want some chips?" Matt extended the half

eaten bag to MacKinnon, who shook his head.

"I don't get why we have to be here on a long weekend. No classes and everything's closed," Matt said in between mouthfuls.

MacKinnon shot him a look. The other cop yawned.

"I told you. There's a function tonight. Some professor she works with who's retiring."

"So?"

"So, it's not work, but we all know that everything happens in that office. How do we know someone isn't going to use tonight as a chance to sneak into that office again, looking for something? This time we'll catch whoever it is."

"Care to bet on it? Five bucks says nothing happens," said the other cop. "We're gonna be bored to death."

"That's tough," MacKinnon said, settling himself in the cramped quarters. "No more risks. If someone decides to prowl around, we catch whoever it is. Small chance, but something is in that office. Something we missed, and the killer wants it."

"Any bright ideas?"

MacKinnon shrugged. "Not Wilkins. She's right; it isn't him."

"That dork wouldn't do a damned thing to hurt Lindy. You should've heard him at the interview," Matt explained to the other cop. "He must have said it a million times. 'Lindy Kellerman is one of the finest women I've ever known.' That's what he said. The kid was so scared, I thought he might wet his

pants.”

The other cop laughed softly. “Harmless kid.”

MacKinnon frowned. “Harmless, but weird. He’s been hanging around outside her house at night. That won’t happen again.”

“I’ll say. You scared him half to death,” Matt said. “He went all pale after you warned him that he’d be prosecuted if he was caught anywhere near Lindy’s house ever again.”

MacKinnon felt grim satisfaction at Scott’s scare after the warning to stay away from Lindy. “It wasn’t him, and it wasn’t that smart ass Kingsley, either. He got himself caught in a scandal, is all.”

“Yeah, I heard. Everyone at the station heard. All the guys are talking. Big shot, but he cracked.”

“Mr. Kingsley is going to be a busy boy,” MacKinnon said, unable to suppress a malicious grin. “For starters, he’s unemployed. He’ll never get hired at another university again. I told you, staff and students aren’t supposed to touch at all, and he did a lot more than touch. That kind of thing follows staff around for years. Nobody’s going to take a risk and hire him.”

“Got a marriage on the rocks, too, I bet,” said Matt.

“His own fault. If all his wife does is spit in his face and throw him out, he’s getting off lucky. And getting exactly what he deserves.”

Matt agreed. Now that he had a girlfriend who was a student, he’d developed a real interest in staff who took advantage of them. Kingsley was a

creep, who exploited young girls who were desperate, and thought they'd found a quick fix to their problems.

"You think he changed their grades after they put out?"

MacKinnon opened his palms. "Don't know. It's not our job. The university launched an investigation and there's a big uproar about it. That icy, uptight Dean all but had a seizure over this."

"She'll shit a brick if it gets in the papers, on top of all the other stuff," said the third cop.

"Yeah. One thing's for sure, Mr. Manager, or former manager, won't be making any more sexist cracks to Lindy."

"Nobody's got anything to say. It's dead quiet in there," Matt complained.

"Too bad. Kingsley won't turn up. He can't show his face around here, and Lindy didn't know about his flings. And it isn't Wilkins, but someone broke in there. Someone on staff, or a student, and we better hope whoever it is, turns up tonight so we can clear this thing up."

"So you figured Sasha getting killed didn't have anything to do with his drug dealing or other stuff?" Matt looked at him with a curious expression.

"It all leads back here. Lindy is pretty popular with her students, except for Sasha."

Matt nodded. "Yeah, Katie really likes her. So do her friends. She was real popular with that Wilkins kid, too."

"Would you drop that please?" MacKinnon's temper snapped.

Matt exchanged glances with the other cop and elbowed him. "I bet you wish you could crash that party and see her all dressed up."

MacKinnon glared at him.

"Do anything over the weekend?" The other cop tried to defuse the rising tension.

MacKinnon relaxed again. "Yeah. Went sailing this afternoon."

"Nice day. You take your boys?"

"Nope." MacKinnon didn't intend to elaborate.

Matt poked the other cop. Both of them had big grins on their faces.

"You took her, didn't you? Bet you'd rather see her all dressed up, instead of wearing old clothes to go sailing."

MacKinnon was fuming, but they were right. Maybe she'd wear those red shoes tonight. And something else underneath that went with them? He shifted his weight.

"You gotta get this thing wrapped up," Matt said.

That was true. "Yep. I almost hope somebody tries something so it will be over and done."

"Sure. Then you can concentrate on that Kellerman woman. Keeping her safe, that's a good one. How safe is she gonna be around you?"

Matt and his mate laughed out loud.

## Chapter Fifteen

“That’s some outfit. Too bad you’re wasting it on the faculty,” Gloria commented, eyeing the scarlet number Julie had loaned me.

After I had dithered for ages over which shoes to wear, I pulled out the red hooker shoes Fraser had bought. I knew even before I put them on that they were exactly the right shade and feminine sort of shoe to go with the dress.

*Hooker shoes and an expensive dress. Might as well complete the siren ensemble with the garter belt, Wonder Bra and black stockings.*

Even I was stunned at the reflection in the mirror as I wound my hair into a fashionable French twist. Either I had lost weight, it had shifted around, or the dress was made from a new miracle fabric.

I looked sexy, desirable, a man-killer, or so it seemed to me.

*Gloria was right, too bad it would go to waste on an evening populated mostly by women and a couple of old farts.*

A generous spray of Paris completed my preparations for the cocktail party. The perfume turned my thoughts back to Fraser, and I wondered what he would think if he could see me dressed to kill like this, instead of in ratty jeans and a sweatshirt. Too bad he wouldn’t get the chance.

“As if he would be hanging around a dull faculty function,” I muttered,

unable to suppress my disappointment.

Grabbing my one decent evening bag, we set off, with Gloria driving her car. Old Faithful was on its last legs, and I dreaded the thought of the old Ford breaking down in the middle of the night, and me, trying to figure out what was wrong this time.

When we arrived at the university, a collection of cars were already in the staff garage, along with the plumber's van I had noticed taking up the desirable spot for the last few days. It reminded me of the rusty looking water coming out of the pipes at home. Another bill to look forward to, the way things were going.

The buildings were dark and deserted, except for the brightly-lit function room, where waiters circulated with an assortment of canapés. A string quartet was playing soft background music, while groups of people chattered together.

I nibbled at a miniature spring roll, pounced on another waiter offering mini pizzas, and with the fish lunch now long-departed from my stomach, sipped a glass of champagne. My head buzzing from the alcohol on an empty stomach, I staggered back a few steps on the spiky shoes, and caught a glimpse of Borowski in one of her black man-tailored pants suits.

Her beady eyes were studying my form, and I knew in my heart I had somehow failed yet again. Her smirk was enough for me to see that she thought I was drunk. She sniffed in derision as if I was some sort of street-walker,



despite the admiring remarks the others had made.

“Great dress, Lindy,” Brian had enthused, swooping upon us with more glasses of bubbly.

The evening wore on with dull, long-winded speeches, full of accolades for Professor Lowell’s contributions to the university.

When the old geezer stood up to address the crowd, I was unable to stifle a yawn and elbowed Gloria who stood beside me.

“I’m going up to my office. I might as well give the grant application one more shot. After that, I can start looking for another job.”

“You’re crazy. Barbara probably forgot to renew your contract with all the commotion that’s gone on this semester. You should talk to her about your job. If you don’t, I will.”

Ignoring Gloria’s kind offer, I threaded my way through groups of people who were laughing at some jokes.

The corridors were dark and eerie with no students around and minimal lighting, as I glanced quickly over my shoulder, half expecting Scott to pop up somewhere. Now that I knew about his nocturnal habits I had the creeps. I had the peculiar sense of eyes following me everywhere I went and goose-bumps dotted my bare arms.

“Nerves. This is stupid, get a grip on yourself,” I muttered in disgust.

Fed up with my inability to control my baseless anxiety, I flicked on the light in my office. I peered around the room, searching for any new deposits

that might have arrived over the weekend. After the dog and the cat, I figured the killer was working a steady pace up the animal chain and a slab of meat infected with mad cow disease might be next.

Satisfied that nothing was in the office other than work, I settled in my chair, turning on the computer. While I waited for it to power up, I sorted through books and journals, in an all-out final attempt at the work Battleaxe Borowski expected on her desk first thing Tuesday. I skimmed through a heavy tome that she insisted I should read, searching for the paragraph I wanted to add to the document.

So intent was I on the book, that I didn't hear footfalls creeping through the dim corridor until she was standing in the doorway. I sensed more than heard her, and turned my head quickly toward the door, where I made out the familiar silhouette of Catarina Borowski.

She stared at me with a sympathetic expression on her face. "Working hard?"

I gulped and nodded.

"Thanks to you. I've read everything you suggested and I'm still working on the material you expect the day after tomorrow."

She shook her head, as if she knew something that I didn't, like a student that just didn't get it, no matter how many times you tried to explain a key point. Clicking her tongue, she shot me a pitying expression. Her voice lowered to an undertone.

“So foolish, Mrs. Kellerman, and that nice policeman isn’t around to butt in this time.”

It was only then that I noticed the syringe she clutched in her hand. With the startling clarity of a drowning victim, I realized that I was the next sacrifice on Borowski’s hit list.

“You?” My voice squeaked.

I knew I sounded stunned, and she smiled, the evil sort of smile you see when the villain pops up in a horror film, with no hero in sight.

Nobody except Gloria knew I was up here, and she might not turn up for hours. Maybe not even then. She might presume I had caught a ride home with someone else.

My pulse raced and panic was setting in. The office was several floors above the ground, and there was only one door. No possibility of escape with her blocking the doorway.

Where’s MacKinnon when you need him? I thought hysterically.

Stepping into the room, she uncapped the needle, pointing it at me, her cold eyes narrowed on my form.

“This won’t hurt at all,” she whispered. “You’re going to have a nice, long sleep. Say goodnight.”

A big drop of clear liquid seeped from the needle. In a panic, I wondered who would make the kids’ lunchboxes once I was dead. I hoped it wouldn’t be Susan Berman, the Parsley Princess.

My leg kicked out as I tried to remember the kick boxing I'd learned from Megan the Gym Nazi, but Borowski kept advancing towards me. A loud rip confirmed that all I had done was manage to slit Julie's dress up to the hip.

I swallowed hard, still searching frantically for a weapon, any weapon, as she raised the syringe, ready to plunge it into my skin.

The flying tackle knocked her past me, sprawling on the floor, courtesy of MacKinnon.

"Watch out," I screamed. "She's got something in that syringe!"

Borowski was a strong woman, and she struggled with Fraser, raising the injection to jab him, as he fought to subdue her.

I could hear them both grunting during the struggle, as they rolled around the floor. Papers and journals flew through the room.

I grabbed the heavy book that she had given me to read, knowing it would be put to good use. *Much better use than on a grant application.*

"At least it won't go to waste."

Without the slightest hesitation, I conked her on the head. I must have hit the mark, because it gave Fraser the split second he needed. He twisted her wrist until the syringe dropped to the floor.

Borowski grunted, panting hard from the assault.

MacKinnon flipped her over on the floor, savagely jerking her hands behind her back, and straddled her.

The entire time she screamed a string of curses in several languages,

flopping like a fish caught in a net. One more thunk on the head from the book and she was silent.

Two more police officers ran in, took one look around and cuffed her as she groaned, stirring on the floor.

“Are you all right?” White with fear, Fraser cupped my face in his hands. Large hot tears dribbled down my face, staining the few parts of the dress that weren’t in tatters.

My fingers stroked his jaw, a small laceration oozed dark blood, a souvenir from the struggle with Borowski.

“Are you?”

My voice quavered as I studied him, searching for other injuries.

He nodded, his attention momentarily averted, as the other cops secured Borowski and carefully bagged the open syringe in an evidence bag.

“How did you know?”

A shadow of guilt crossed his face. Reaching behind a filing cabinet, he handed me a small black box.

“Bug. We planted it the day of the cat incident. We figured you were the bait. You were the only one being harassed and threatened. With enough time, whoever it was, would probably go after you, too. We parked one of our vans in the garage to monitor any sound coming out of your office. Nothing ever happened at your house, so we figured it was going to happen here. Didn’t count on it this time of night, but we keep it staffed twenty-four hours a day,

just in case. I know what a workaholic you are.”

I was still shaking when it dawned on me. *The plumber’s van*. I sniffed, wiping my wet eyes.

“You bugged my office and didn’t tell me?” I staggered at the thought. “Is that thing off now?”

Nodding, he shoved the box into his pocket, still watching me intently.

Fraser must have thought I was about to explode, but instead I flung my arms around him, kissing him with all the gratitude I could find in my heart.

“Had I known you would react like this, I would have planted that sooner,” he said, one brow raised at my reaction as he jiggled the bugging device. His arms reached around me as I slumped, in exhaustion, against his chest.

“I thought I was going to die. I would have, if you didn’t turn up. I’m going to be sick,” I whispered.

With my legs still shaking, he led me carefully to the ladies room, where I heaved and cried until there was nothing left in me.

I peered at the mirror over the sink as I washed my face and hands. My hair was wild and knotted, like a topiary that needs a landscape gardener, black mascara lines were smudged under my eyes, and the torn red dress would be another reject from a charity organization, one strap dangling over my shoulder. The scarlet dress matched the color of my eyes. I looked worse than the cheap street-walkers I had seen idling around the Cross.

Hastily, I wiped the streaks and patted my hair, unable to tug the ragged dress down around my exposed legs.

Fraser hovered outside, like a mother hen fretting over a chick, pacing up and down in front of the door, fists swinging back and forth. The relief on his face was so obvious that I felt myself melt inside at the fear and worry I had caused him.

“One more second and I would have been in there after you.”

As he pulled me close to him, the sound of the last of the seam being ripped to shreds broke the silence. I looked up and saw he was fighting off the urge to cry, too. His hard features crumpled in misery.

“I could have lost you.”

We huddled against each other, like a pair of refugees hiding from the enemy for long minutes, grateful to be alive and together.

“We have to go to the station,” he murmured, raining kisses on my eyes, my nose, and anywhere he could find exposed skin, and there was more of it by the second at the rate the dress was going.

“I know.” I felt strangely calm for no reason I could think of, safe and secure with MacKinnon’s arms around my waist.

“I can’t go out in public like this. Julie is going to kill me for ruining her dress.”

Without a word, he whipped off his sweater, tying it strategically around my waist, covering the worst of the rip. As he did, his eyes caught sight of the

dainty garters holding up the black stockings, and the white flesh of my exposed thighs. They traveled down to the red shoes and I could see the smile in his eyes.

“You wore them.”

Tugging me gently to his side, he led me to a waiting squad car, driven by yet another cop. He helped me into the back seat, where I could finally collapse in his arms for the short ride to the local station.

“One of the guys will get Barbara,” he said quietly. His fingers stroked my hair, the way a parent would to a distressed child. He murmured softly in my ear, all sorts of endearments, holding me close to him, until the car pulled into the lot.

We entered the station to loud shouting in the booking area. Borowski had come to and was screaming about police brutality and prejudice, when she caught sight of me, her eyes flashing with fury.

“Bitch.”

Shuddering, I turned away, happy to bury my face in MacKinnon’s chest and feel the safety of his arms around me.

Voices stopped in mid-sentence and I could feel everyone’s eyes turned towards me, taking in the shredded glitzy dress and the sweater draped like a peculiar sarong, hanging over one side. Not to mention MacKinnon crushing me against his body. Any tighter and he would cut off my circulation.

I didn’t care what they thought and obviously, neither did Fraser. I only



hoped he would hold me like this forever and never let go.

“This won’t take long, Lindy, I swear.”

Still hanging on to me, Fraser pulled me along a corridor, away from Borowski’s screams, past rows of metal filing cabinets and desks with computer screens.

Her screeches echoed down the corridor until he slammed the door, transforming the room into a blessedly-silent oasis from the storm, raging outside like the eye of a hurricane.

“Lindy sweetheart, can I leave you alone for just a few minutes? I have to square a few things before I get you home.”

Having lost any power of speech, I nodded.

“Okay. Back in few minutes, I promise.”

Kissing me quickly on the head, he headed out the door. It slammed shut behind him. It seemed like mere seconds before he came back with a grim expression on his face.

“She’s put away for the night and that syringe and whatever is in it, is locked up for examination. Wouldn’t surprise me if the same stuff turns up in Sasha, under examination. They’ll run toxicology tests as fast as they can, but it’s a holiday and almost everyone is off. With so many drugs to screen for, we might never have found what killed him. Now the medical examiner can run a check to see if they match. I’d bet anything it’s a major sedative.”

“Fraser?” I gazed up at him, too weary to listen or make sense out of what

he was telling me.

“I don’t want to hear any more right now. I just want to go home.”

“I know.” Pulling me from the seat, he crushed me against his chest.

“We’re going home. Right now. My home.”



In a daze, I wandered into Fraser’s apartment, drifting behind him.

He was uncharacteristically silent, and I idly watched as he secured the bolts on the lock and disappeared into the kitchen. He returned carrying two brandy snifters, the liquid sloshing over the rim of the glasses.

“Here, you need this.”

I gulped the brandy, grateful for the burning sensation as it made its way to my stomach.

Fraser eyed me as he swallowed his own, as if making up his mind about something. Without warning, he stooped and pulled out the phone plug. He shut off the mobile, and shoving it into a drawer, turned and took me in his arms.

“This time, no interruptions.”

He tugged at the dress and, if it was possible, more material ripped from his efforts, as red sequins popped to the floor.

“Fraser?”

“Hmm?” he murmured, his mouth nuzzling my neck, sending a flash of

hot lightning straight to my center.

“I don’t think I can do this.”

“What?”

Unable to face him, I looked down at the floor as I whispered again.

“It’s been a long time since...” My voice trailed off, but I couldn’t hide the anxiety now that the time had finally come.

This time it was serious. He had made sure there would be no *interruptus coitus*.

*When was the last time I had had any sex?* Certainly not with any of the dreadful nursing home candidates. And Michael had been too busy sticking it to his floozies, even before the final split. What if I didn’t remember what to do? I felt my legs buckle, and was certain that Fraser would be furious at my hesitation.

He stopped kissing me just long enough to whisper in my ear. “Me, too.”

Both of us out of practice, I had never considered that. If his kissing technique was any indication of what was to come, he seemed a lot less rusty than I felt.

And there was another reason I was terrified. Old insecurities rose to the surface and I blurted it out. “I have stretch marks from having kids.”

With a sigh of resignation, he lifted his shirt and pressed my hands against the scar on his abdomen.

“That makes us even. I won’t mind if you don’t. Let’s go, or we won’t

make it to the bedroom.”

With determination, he pulled me towards the room. He didn’t flick the light switch, leaving the room bathed in darkness, for which I was grateful.

I could feel him stoop to the floor to unbuckle the flimsy straps of the shoes. His hands skimmed up my legs, sending shivers through me, as he unsnapped the garters. Stockings pooled at my feet as his hands stroked my inner thighs, slowly dancing higher.

Warm breath on my legs teased my senses as his tongue licked its way upward, heading for ground zero. I staggered, but he only laughed softly, catching me. His fingers stroked the moisture already seeping between my legs.

“Wet already?”

Still on his knees, he lowered his head between my legs. I went into a spasm as he licked a path closer and closer, until I thought I would orgasm on the spot. I was panting in anticipation when he stopped, his fingers stroking the dark hair between my legs.

“Don’t stop now!”

“Impatient. I want this to last.”

Too frantic to care, I yanked off the remains of the dress, as Fraser unhooked the bra.

His thumbs rubbed against my erect nipples. “Hard again.”

I could hear the humor in his voice.

“That’s because I’m around you. I finally figured it out.”

He nipped with his mouth gently, until my hips bucked against him and I cried out. He continued sucking as I pulled at his clothes, undoing the snap and zipper in record time.

Pulling me into the bed, he tumbled in with me. One hand pressed both of my wrists over my head.

“Cops and robbers,” I whispered with a soft purr in my voice. “You’ve got me handcuffed.”

His low growl sent shivers up my spine. I could hardly wait to feel him deep inside me.

*Enough fun and games. I wanted him inside. Now.*

“This is safe, right?” he said, poised to enter me.

“Safe?”

Groaning, he pulled away, sitting on the edge of the bed, head in his hands.

“I don’t have anything here. I meant to, but-”

And then I understood. A smile curled on my face as I mentally thanked Julie. My finger traced up his spine and I felt him shudder from my touch.

“Go get my purse.”

Rising, he walked out, returning with the beaded bag. He handed it to me. I flicked the catch and tossed him the pack.

“You came prepared?” He sounded incredulous.

“No, you can thank Julie. She said not to call until you use them all up.”

Fraser snapped on a condom and plunged into me.

I've heard all kinds of stories about middle-aged men. Can't get it up, can't sustain erections. Fraser proved to me that whatever I had heard must have been mythology. He held back until I collapsed in a quivering mass.

Several hours and two condoms later, I woke nestled under a warm quilt, one leg entwined with his, my head cradled on his chest.

His arm tightened around my waist as I lifted the phone beside the bed. I dialed as quietly as I could.

"Julie," I whispered, to the groggy voice on the other end of the line. "I think I found an exercise program I can stick to."

I hung up the phone and we used the last of the treasure stash to start off the day with a bang.

## Chapter Sixteen

The sun filtered through the slits of vertical blinds at the window as I cuddled against Fraser, still sound asleep next to me.

Instead of irritating me, his soft snores were a comforting sound, rumbling through his chest. I was filled with tenderness and couldn't resist stroking his brow.

"Exhausted. Poor darling, he's probably going to sleep the entire day, after last night."

Without a word of warning, he rolled over and sat up, a satisfied smile lighting his face.

"I'll make some coffee."

Slipping into a pair of boxer shorts he'd tossed on the floor in our frenzy to make it to the bed without another interruption from kids (his or mine), or the phone, he headed towards the kitchen.

I sat up in the bed, naked except for the grin I was wearing, not unlike Scarlett's the morning after Rhett Butler carried her up the stairs.

Padding back with two mugs of coffee in his hands, he handed one to me and slipped in beside me, sipping thoughtfully.

I eyed him carefully from under mascara-less lashes, as one arm draped around my shoulder. All of my insecurities rose to the surface again.

Now that the chase was over, maybe he wouldn't be interested any more. *Why should he be?* The case was solved, at least it seemed to be, although the missing pieces hadn't been slotted into the jigsaw.

The terror of the night before had dissipated, and I was dying to know what could have precipitated someone of Borowski's standing to commit murder.

Fraser still hadn't said a word. Maybe he wasn't big on conversation the morning after.

That might have been just as well. He might have a few choice remarks to make about the noise I had made the night before. I wasn't sure, but I thought I could recall screaming his name as I came. Maybe he was too busy trying to come up with a way to brush me off. I shuddered at the thought that I would be on the reject shelf, but I must have learned something. For once in my life, I shut up.

"I guess I should get up."

I started to pull back the covers, then froze. I had no clothes. Not a stitch, unless the garter belt and Wonder Bra counted.

Seeing my hesitation, he walked off, returning with the terry robe.

"You probably want to wash up," he said quietly, staring at my face.

Uh-oh. I winced. Brush off on the way, I knew it. I never look great in the morning. No makeup, pale face, and hair tangled. I felt like Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. I needed preparation for the camera rolling in on the facial



shots, too. Too bad I couldn't shout "Make-up!"

Now that he'd gotten a close-up shot, maybe Fraser's thoughts were drifting away from love in the afternoon, or morning, or whatever he had had in mind.

"Take your time. I'll make you breakfast. You must be starved, after last night." He winked, heading out of the room.

I was left full of doubt, as I staggered into the bathroom on shaky legs. I must have used muscles I didn't even know I possessed last night.

Being a femme-fatale isn't all it's cracked up to be, and I saw why Fraser had stared at his first good sight of me. My face was red and bruised from whisker burn, and there were two distinct love bites on my neck. My hair was beyond repair.

With a sigh, I turned on the water and let the soothing warm spray fix up as much damage as possible.

I slicked my hair back in a pony tail in an elastic band I found lying around, and pounced on the now-emptier evening bag, for any make-up I could find to improve the pale face in the mirror. Not much. A lipstick and blush.

I tip-toed into the kitchen, dreading the thought that Fraser might regard me as just another one-night stand. I had a gut feeling that Neil Sedaka would make a comeback, and I'd be treated to a version of "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do."



Fraser cracked eggs into a bowl for omelettes and popped slices of bread into a toaster. He could hear the spray of water from the bathroom. Lindy was showering. Better have more coffee ready for her when she came into the kitchen. He wondered what she'd think when she got a good look at her face in the bathroom mirror. Red and sore from his beard. His fingers ran along his jaw. *Better shave, right after breakfast.*

He had to smile as he recalled his first sight of her this morning.

She'd looked so adorable and sexy, with her hair all mussed and the sheet drawn up over her chest. Her bare shoulders peeked out over the top of the sheet and she'd eyed him sideways.

She hadn't said much this morning; just sipped the coffee he'd brought her. That didn't seem like a good sign, didn't women want to talk all the time? Especially after sex.

His thoughts drifted back to the previous night as he poured the eggs into a frying pan. She seemed to like it. A smile curled on his mouth. Hell, she'd screamed his name, and she'd come hard. More than once. A lot more than once.

It had been dynamite.

Fraser hadn't meant to be so rough, that was the last thing she needed after nearly getting killed. He'd wanted to take it slow, gentle, after everything she'd been through, but she'd been as frantic as he'd been. Maybe just a

reaction, the pure joy of knowing she was alive when she could have been dead.

He'd been right about her all along. *Hot. Passionate.* Just thinking about it made him want her all over again.

Did she want him again? She was probably sore after last night, better keep his mind on something else. The last thing she must want would be for him to jump her in the kitchen.

Hell, after last night, it was nothing short of miraculous that she could walk. Besides, they were out of condoms.

Thank God for Julie. She'd been a lot more practical than he'd been. What a dumb thing, forgetting to have condoms around. It had been so long since he'd needed anything like that. He'd have to thank her.

He had to laugh when Lindy told him about Julie's CARE package. She'd been pushing for this all along, and it was a sure fire bet that Lindy would be on the phone right after breakfast to report in to Command Center, or the Ladies Central, whatever it was.

"You've been kind of slow getting off the starting blocks," Julie had said that day on the phone when he'd chewed her out over their break-in.

They'd made up for lost time last night. More than getting off the starting blocks. It had been more like a marathon.

His face burned when he thought about what the discussion between the two women might entail. He hoped they didn't get too clinical, analyzing every detail about last night.

God, all he needed was Lindy grading last night like she did her students' papers. He could only hope she'd give him a high mark.

As tempting as it would be to eavesdrop on that conversation, he'd give Lindy the privacy she needed with her girlfriend. He'd love to know what they had to say. Especially Lindy.

She didn't even have any clothes to wear. That wasn't true; she did. She didn't know it, but he had a surprise for her stashed in the closet.

*Something else he'd bought at David Jones. Something she could wear in public, unlike the other gift, which had embarrassed her.*

He couldn't wait to see her reaction. And she'd have to wear it; not much of a choice. It was that, or his robe. The borrowed dress from Julie was ripped to shreds.

He slid the eggs onto plates, laying the toast beside them. He was starved and she probably was, too.

The tangy scent of shower gel made him glance up. Lindy was in the doorway, her hair slicked back in a pony tail. Her skin was a becoming pink from the hot shower, making her look as if she was blushing all over.

His robe was belted loosely around her waist, way too big for her. It didn't hide the swell of her breasts hidden under the oversize garment. *God, she looked great.*



“Wow.”

Two places were set with toast and fresh omelet's, the aroma better than my favorite perfume. My stomach growled in anticipation.

Fraser was standing at the kitchen sink, rinsing out the frying pan. Those blue eyes traveled from my head to my bare toes, making my heart flip-flop.

“I guess I'd better invest in a hairdryer to keep for you here.”

In two steps, he was on top of me, eyes zeroed on the cleft of my breasts, peeking out from the damp robe. His mouth slaked over mine as his hands untied the belted robe. So much for not looking great in the morning. He barely noticed my face.

“You smell great,” he mumbled, his thumbs toying with my erect nipples.

“Shower gel. Yours.”

Kissing a hot trail down my neck, he continued towards my breasts as I pulled away.

“Did you forget, we're out of condoms.”

A low growl in my ear sent my libido into overload, as I wondered how fertile I might be at that second. *Did I dare play that sort of roulette with my body?* I wanted him so badly that I must have lost any ability to think rationally.

“I can be creative in other ways.”

Half-an-hour later, after some very talented tongue work, and another shower, this time together, he re-heated breakfast.

I stumbled to the table like a drunk after a really serious bender. By now,

I was ravenous. Like a pair of teenagers, we giggled and ate, holding hands in between bites.

“Do you have any idea how terrific you are? You’re the best thing to happen to me in years.”

My insides turned to mush and I figured I could stop stressing about my pale appearance. My face had acquired a becoming pink glow after love in the kitchen, anyway.

I ate like there was no tomorrow, stuffing food into my mouth without a thought about calories.

At the rate we were making love, I figured I could afford to eat anything I wanted.

*Yep, no doubt about it, I’d finally found an exercise program that was easy, fun, and never boring.*



“I know it’s a holiday and things are quiet, but we really should go down to the station for you to make a statement, and I still want to find out what possessed your nemesis to turn into a serial killer. Cats included.”

He was dressed in his usual jeans and pullover, but my eyes darted glumly towards the torn dress.

“I don’t think I can turn up looking like *The Red Peril*,” I said, fingering the fragments of material.

“You could turn up in your underwear and cause a sensation, but I guess you don’t want to do that.”

Snickering at my scowl, he walked towards the hall closet, pulled out a David Jones black and white shopping bag, and handed it to me.

Carefully folded inside white tissue paper, was the black and red dress we had seen in the ‘After Five’ department, the morning we had gone on the shoe expedition.

My fingers caressed the soft material, still astounded at the sight of the dress.

“I bought it later that day, but after your reaction to my first present, I thought I should hold off for a while with this one,” he said with a sheepish expression.

“But this is so dressy, it’s for an evening function. That’s why it’s called the ‘After Five’ department.”

Fraser shrugged his shoulders.

“What time are you due home for your kids?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Then you’ll be here after five, no worries.”

Peculiar logic, but I wasn’t about to turn down another bout of fun with Fraser. I hadn’t begun to have my fill of him, yet.

I strolled into the bedroom and slipped into the dress. His implications had filled me with happiness. I stood, admiring the cut and feel of the garment

on my body, swishing around to catch different angles in the mirror.

The reflection made me grin with pleasure. This dress looked even better than the one Julie had loaned me. I don't know how, but it fit as if it had been made for me. I lifted the phone to report that I had managed to destroy her designer dress, but Julie didn't care.

She was appalled when I gave her the sketchy details of the night before but the dress meant nothing.

"Who cares? A dress can always be replaced, but a friend?"

I could visualize her grin as I told her about having used up all of the gift package from my evening purse.

"You were a slow starter, but it sounds like the two of you are making up for lost time. You'd better let you get back to it. Fraser doesn't sound like the patient type. We'll talk more when you get home and recover. Next week, from the sounds of it."

I was pretty lucky. For one thing, I could have been dead by now and on the way to my own funeral, not the Tom Sawyer version. My best friend didn't care that I'd killed her dress, and I had a man who was the hotter than salsa waiting for me in the next room.

So I still didn't have money; all in all, I still figured I had come out ahead. And I had a sexy new dress, courtesy of MacKinnon.

The dress was everything I thought it would be when I first saw it. I felt seductive, alluring and desirable, as it shimmered back at me from the glass.



The loud wolf whistle made me blush with delight, and I knew I definitely wasn't pale anymore.

"And it's perfect for the shoes," I said as I paraded around in the dress. "It's a shame I can't afford it."

My fingers worked the zipper, preparing to remove the dress and fold it back into the bag. If all else failed, I'd have to turn up at the station in the bathrobe. That would hardly set male hearts hammering. If I was lucky, they wouldn't lock me in the loony bin.

In two steps he was on top of me.

"It's yours. I bought it for you, and it will give me pleasure to see you wearing it. It would give me even greater pleasure to see you take it off. Later. Not now."

The seductive growl in my ear made me whirl around to confront him.

"I can't keep accepting gifts from you. Besides, this one is expensive."

His finger on my lips put a halt to my protests.

"I told you that I worked hard and invested well. I've been careful with my money and I can afford to give gifts to you whenever I want. I'm not a wealthy man, but I'm reasonably well off. Give me the pleasure of giving to you."

I hesitated, still unsure.

He sighed deeply. "Okay. Consider it an official reward, courtesy of the police department, if you want."

Leaning closer, he whispered again. “Don’t worry. I’ll be taking it off sooner than you think.”

I could feel my eyes widen and I put aside permanently any doubts about morning-after brush-offs, as I finished dressing and we drove to the station.

Despite the Queen’s Birthday holiday, the station was bedlam, with cops, reporters and cameras flashing everywhere.

Fraser hustled me in through the side door, into a private office where I could hide from the media.

“I’ll get one of the guys to take a statement about last night. After all, she threatened you and made an attempt on your life, even if they couldn’t pin her to Sasha, but I’d bet my life that they did.”

Ducking out, he shut the door behind him as I paced up and down the small room, anxious to get this over and done. At least I wouldn’t have to worry about the grant proposal for Borowski. An enormous workload off my plate and for a change, the rest of my work was caught up, thanks to the marathon marking session.

The door scraped opened and Barbara slipped into the room. Dark shadows under her eyes and deep lines in her forehead, making her look much older, jolted me and I realized for the first time what a great façade she usually put on at work. She walked towards me hesitantly and then embraced me. I was gob-smacked. Barbara was always so cool and distant.

“Lindy, I’m so terribly sorry about everything that happened. To think I

actually enticed that woman to come to us. She could have killed you. I would never have forgiven myself.” She continued brow-beating herself, taking the blame for everything until I held up a palm.

“It really wasn’t your fault,” I insisted. “She had a great reputation, a leader in mental health, so how could you have known?”

I meant what I had said. Barbara was taking the blame for something that she could never have anticipated, and it did no good for her to berate herself.

Barbara forced a small smile on her face, but I could see the deep regret in her eyes as she patted my hand.

“You’re a good person to be so forgiving and as long as you’re here now, I might as well tell you that your contract is not going to be renewed.”

I must have gasped audibly. My legs gave way and I plopped down in a chair.

A small smile lit her face. *Sure. She could afford to smile, now that I was on the way to a destitute life on the streets.*

“I shouldn’t have expressed myself that way. And again, I apologize for scaring you. What I meant was that we seem to be a bit short of staff, especially with one professor retiring and another...” The voice drifted off as her eyes wandered in the direction of the door.

“So, if you’d be interested, I’d like to offer you a tenured position. Of course, that includes any perks that tenure includes. A university car might be a start.”

My grin of pleasure must have been all the answer she needed.

“I’ll have the paperwork started immediately. We have a new manager coming in to begin tomorrow. Bill has been advised to seek other employment, so this will be the first item on the agenda.”

The mask went back up and Barbara was back to being the Dean, her back erect, voice firm and full of confidence. She walked towards the door, the hand lingering on the doorknob for a moment as she gazed back over her shoulder.

“Great dress.”

Barbara walked out, leaving me to contemplate the latest gift parcel that I had received. I couldn’t have been happier if it had been in shiny paper with a bow on top.

I was still in a state of euphoria when Matt Pacula ambled in, clutching a sheaf of papers. Molten chocolate eyes narrowed on me, standing at the window in the corner, and he whistled.

“Great dress. You want to read through the statement and sign it? I wrote up more or less what we heard happen over the bug. The whole thing is still on tape, so it makes our job a lot easier.”

I read through the statement quickly and signed it. As awful as last night had been, there was still a bright side. For a change, someone other than banks and credit card companies wanted my autograph.

Scrawling a signature next to mine, he pivoted on his heels to leave. “I’ll

send Mack back in. He's a lucky man."

Matt left whistling, the sound disappearing down the hall, as I was left on my own until Fraser poked his head in the door.

"You're never going to believe this," he began, parking his fantastic butt on a small, worn sofa. He patted the seat beside him and I eased myself down, careful not to damage the dress. One ruined dress this week was enough. His arm settled around my shoulder as he spoke.

"Sasha knew Borowski from the old country, so to speak. Back in the days of the Cold War, plenty of people disappeared into mental hospitals for a variety of reasons. Political dissidents, religious practices, the wrong color socks. Who knows? Sasha's mother was one of them."

"So that was the woman in the photograph. I knew she looked familiar, but I couldn't figure out why or how."

He nodded. "Yeah. Brilliant deduction. You might have figured it out eventually. Anyway, Sasha was taken away as a kid and raised in an orphanage. When he got a bit older he was allowed to visit his mother once. By then, they had reduced the woman to a vegetable."

I shook my head in disgust. "I can never understand that sort of thing. Doctors and nurses trained to heal people, using their precious skills to cause harm. What a waste."

He nodded grimly.

"Borowski was one of them. Even though he had only seen her once at the

asylum, he recognized her. She is pretty distinctive. After the end of the Cold War, Dr. or Nurse Borowski, whoever she turns out to really be, had the sense to get out to the West, where her chances of making money and getting ahead were far better in the chaos that was going on as the Russian system, and all the republics that fell apart. She might have also been worried about prosecution for the things she had done.”

“It must be at least eighteen years, maybe more,” I speculated.

“A long time, in any event,” he said, picking up the thread of the story. “Sasha left too, eventually. I would assume that his thoughts were purely on money. After years of socialism and shortages, capitalism must have looked good. Amassing money seems to be all he was interested in, and chances looked a lot better here. My guess is that he enrolled at university as a cover for his drug dealing. He figured that students would have the money and the inclination to experiment with soft drugs. Could be, he thought that as a nursing student, he might have access to a motherlode in a hospital.”

“What a dope. No way would he get his hands on narcotics or anything else. There’s procedure everywhere to sign them out. With witnesses. Besides, nursing students generally avoid drugs. They see the results in hospitals,” I commented.

Fraser nodded, continuing.

“The guy had no scruples at all, and when he saw Borowski, he threatened to reveal everything about her. By then, she had built up a

reputation that had to be protected at all costs, and she wasn't going to risk anyone finding out that she had been involved in a number of incidents that ruined lives. For all we know, she personally killed a few of those patients. She'll deny that, of course."

"So what happened?"

"If Borowski can be believed, he came to her office to blackmail her. She's just using that to bargain her way out of this, but it won't work. For starters, he demanded the exam, which she was able to access in the safe. He thought it would be a good moneymaker. But Sasha was greedy, he didn't quit, always threatening and demanding money. And who's to say what those threats were? I don't know about international law or extradition, but Borowski must have been scared witless. He was too big a risk as long as he was alive, so she had to get rid of him, once and for all."

"So she told him to meet her in the classroom?"

"She gave him some sort of story that she was teaching late and he fell for it. He wasn't too bright from what everyone says, including your other students, and you, too, for that matter. Borowski must have gotten her hands on some kind of tranquilizers that she managed to steal on clinical practice with students until she had enough to be sure that Sasha would never knock on her door again."

*More trouble.* Diversion of patient drugs for personal use is a big legal no-no. Criminal prosecution. Fraser must know that. Good. The more reason to

lock that woman away for the rest of her life, the better, as far as I was concerned. I never wanted to see her face again.

“So far I follow, but why persecute me?”

Fraser grinned.

“You and your number disability. You lost one of your cheat notes with the numbers in her office and she knew exactly what it was. She kept it aside, like those Arctic explorers who leave packs of food scattered around for an emergency. She used it to enter the code into the lock and figured you’d get the blame, or at least, be on the hot seat. When she heard the gossip that you were interviewing students, she got nervous. Despite her attempts to convince you that you were stupid, she knew you weren’t, and that you might figure out what happened. That was the reason she kept you tied up with that ridiculous grant application, until she had a chance to get you permanently out of the way.”

Shaking his head, he continued. “Anyone else would have been scared off. Not you. You didn’t ease off, despite her warnings. Just couldn’t keep your nose out of her business. Such a cute little nose, too.”

His mouth brushed against my nose, sending tingles through me again. If he didn’t let up, we’d be bonking on the sofa, and Fraser had already proven he could be creative. And he had stamina.

With considerable effort and a heap of regret, I gently nudged him, anxious to find out the rest of the story.



“So she left the dog mess in the office, and the cat?” I asked.

I was astounded that someone whom I had been taught to respect, even if I personally loathed the woman, could behave in such a hideous way. I was even more sickened at the thought of the countless men and women she had harmed, possibly killed, because they thought differently than a system that had deserved to die.

“She even used your code again to get into the student labs for the cat. I didn’t get around to telling you that part. She made sure your exam went missing with the hope you might get fired.”

“So what’s going to happen?”

He shrugged.

“It’s up to the lawyers now, but I’d say that they can build enough of a case to put her away for life. No parole. We have the tape from your office and your statement to support that she would have killed again.”

I shivered, realizing how close I had come.

“Cold?” His arm tightened around me. “We can leave whenever you’re ready. The reporters are gone now.”

We drove back to his place, both silent. I was still trying to come to terms with the revelation.

There was little traffic on the roads and the drive took almost no time, due to the public holiday.

Fraser locked the door behind us as I stood uncertainly. He carried a

small paper bag that he had tossed into the back of the car before we took off from the police station.

“What’s that?”

He grinned.

“Always so impatient.”

Stepping forward, he took me in his arms, the feel of his strength around me making me melt like liquid butter.

“I love you, Lindy.”

I blinked up at him, moisture building in my eyes as I gazed at his face. The laceration on his jaw had scabbed over and it looked as if he had cut himself shaving. My knuckles brushed softly over the wound.

“When did that happen?”

His mouth tightened but I could see the humor in his eyes. “I think when I saw you standing in the dog poo.”

I punched his chest lightly, making him laugh and crush me against him.

“I think I love you too.”

We stood for several seconds, content to hold each other close, knowing that if Borowski had succeeded, I would have been lying in the morgue instead.

“Now you can take it off.”

“Huh?”

“The dress. Now you can take it off. It’s still early, and we’ve got the whole day free.”

His head inclined to the small package.

“Condoms. There’s an emergency chemist right down the street from the station. Open twenty-four hours, and public holidays. I figured this was an emergency.”

He tossed the box of condoms at me. I caught them neatly and opened the bag.

“Super deluxe pack.”

We rushed for the bedroom, leaving a trail of clothes behind, to see how many condoms we could use in one afternoon. And I don’t mean to blow up as water balloons.

*The End*

## Lindy's Classic Chicken Soup with Matzah Balls

Matzah ball mix should be made ahead and placed in refrigerator for a few hours. I prefer to do it the day before and cover well.

2 tablespoons of margarine or fat

2 eggs slightly beaten

½ cup of Matzah meal

Tiny pinch of salt

2 tablespoons of seltzer (club soda—the bubbles are the important factor)

Mix the margarine (or fat) with eggs. Mix the Matzah meal and salt and add to egg mixture. Blend well and add the seltzer (or club soda). Cover the bowl and put in fridge. When ready to add to soup, bring soup to boil, reduce flame to slight bubble, form the mixture into balls. Hands should be cool and damp so the mix doesn't stick to hands. Cover and cook for about 30 minutes. This recipe should make about 8 Matzah balls.

A variation is that they can be made ahead of time and chilled, then added to the soup as it comes to boil.

The seltzer is what makes them fluffy and light, rather than giving them the heavy texture of bombs. A variation that I have only seen in my family, was browning the Matzah balls after cooking, in the oven, to give them a slight crust.

You can also opt to add some grated onion to the mix, if you like that taste.

### Classic Chicken Soup

4—5 pounds of chicken cut up

3 quarts of cold water

3 carrots cut up into pieces or chunks

2 stalks of celery

2 sliced onions

A few sprigs of fresh dill

2 teaspoons of salt or to taste

Optional additions: Black pepper, a bay leaf, or parsley

Put the chicken in the pot, bring to boil, reduce heat and simmer for about 30 minutes. Add the other ingredients and partially cover. Simmer until the chicken is tender. You can store this soup in the refrigerator for a few days, and it can also be frozen.

The story of this recipe: My mother never owned a measuring spoon, cup or anything that would enable anyone to precisely work out ratios and figure out what she did. She cooked by instinct, and still does. This is as close as I can get to the way she measures, and it is the way I make it, too. My children were convinced for years that the world was coming to an end if there was no chicken soup on Friday night, the start of Sabbath for Jews. It's a time when even families that are not religious still come together for dinner, and it's very special to have that tradition. There is nothing like the smell and the taste of it, it has a perfume that is all its own, and is rather typical Eastern European Jewish.

## Author Bio

A nurse by profession, Elle Druskin is American born, lived in Australia and Israel and has traveled the rest of the world with many adventures and experiences that have provided great scope for her writing. A well recognized academic with a doctorate in Holocaust history, she teaches nursing and writes mystery and mainstream romantic fiction. Lindy Kellerman, the heroine of "To Catch A Cop" and the other "To Catch" books is her alter ego.

"I keep trying to stay on an even keel, be normal and it never works. Things seem to go haywire around me all the time, pretty much like Lindy who gets to say the things I would love to say when these things happen. She's a great friend, as crazy as that sounds; I hear her talking to me, telling me, "Write that book! I'm tired of living in your head." I know, they medicate you when you tell people these things, but it's still true. So what could I do but obey Lindy."