

Vital Signs
Volume 2: Sex in a Southern City

A Ravenous Romance™ Modern Love™ Original Publication

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Vital Signs Volume 2: Sex in a Southern City

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

Some things just aren't meant to be.

So thought Shirley Daniels as she packed the last of her belongings into her rented U-Haul, rolled the cargo door shut, and prepared to leave behind her beloved hometown of Statesville, North Carolina, forever.

Shirley never thought she'd see the day when she'd leave the small rural town of her birth in favor of the big city. After all, she'd lived here all her life. She grew up here, and worked her entire career as a nurse-anesthetist at Statesville's Covington Community Hospital. The only time she'd spent away from home was in nursing school, and she'd always come home for summer and winter vacations, even many weekends. But her life in Statesville was over now. And she had Bob Watson to thank for that.

The bastard.

Just a few short months ago, Shirley had made a deal with Bob Watson.

Or to put things more accurately, she'd made a deal with the devil himself. And it had gone badly. *Very* badly.

The less she thought about Bob Watson right now, the better.

Shirley climbed into the cab of the U-Haul and keyed the ignition. She wasn't going to think about all the bad things that had happened in Statesville any more. From now on, she would be looking forward, not back. She pulled the lumbering U-Haul out onto the main drag through town and headed for the interstate. She headed for her new life, her new beginning.

From this day forward, Shirley Daniels was a new woman. And once she made it to Raleigh, things were going to change for her in a very big way. She was sure of it..

If she only knew how.

Chapter Two

It was Shirley Daniels's first day on the job at UNC-Raleigh University Hospital, and things were not going well.

Back in Statesville, Shirley had not only been the best nurse-anesthetist on staff at Covington Community Hospital, she'd been the *only* nurse-anesthetist on staff at Covington Community Hospital. One by one, all her fellow nurse-anesthetists had quit in favor of better-paying jobs at urban hospitals, until her only competition for anesthesia jobs was a seventy-two-year old anesthesiologist who'd had his medical license suspended twice for falling asleep in the OR. Compared to him, the spry young Shirley was an anesthesia genius, even without "MD" after her name.

Back in Statesville, Shirley was a big fish in a little pond.

Here, at this vast, well-funded major research hospital, it was just the opposite. Shirley was an ill-trained, naïve, countrified nurse without a clue about how things worked at a big-city teaching hospital.

She'd made her first mistake within five minutes of arriving at her new job. Accustomed as she was to Covington Community Hospital's collegial atmosphere between doctors and nurse practitioners, she'd first shown up to work at the hospital's Anesthesiology Department, as she always had back home in Statesville. But no sooner had she crossed the office threshold did four hulking male anesthesiology MDs practically grab her by the collar and toss her out into the hallway. "This office is for *doctors* only, toots," one of them had snarled at her. "The nurses' lounge is in Building A, lower level."

“B-but—I’m a nurse *practitioner*,” Shirley protested. “I have a master’s degree and more than eight hundred hours of advanced anesthesia training on top of that—”

“Get out!” the three doctors screamed at her in unison. And the door slammed in her face.

Shirley was shocked and bewildered. She’d heard rumors back in nursing school about how some hotshot MD-level anesthesiologists weren’t fond of mere nurses homing in on their territory, but she’d never actually encountered outright *prejudice*. The lone MD anesthesiologist back in Statesville had frequently asked her for advice on how to configure the hospital’s new computerized dosing machine, since he’d never been trained on one when he’d been at medical school almost fifty years earlier. She was used to being treated as a colleague—even an equal—by most doctors she’d worked with over the years. But those three big-city MDs had cast her out of their sight as if she were a leper. And it only got worse from there.

So much for big-city people supposedly being more open-minded and accepting than small-town folk. She might as well be in Siberia.

This was the last time Shirley would ever accept a nursing job over the phone. She knew there was a nationwide nursing shortage, but this was ridiculous.

After wandering the halls for almost a half hour and begging a senior citizen volunteer for help, Shirley finally made her way to the main nurses’ lounge in hopes of inquiring where the nurse-anesthetists’ department was housed, only to find that the rank-and-file shift nurses weren’t too fond of nurse-anesthetists, either.

Shirley walked into the nurses’ lounge, carrying her duffel bag, anesthesia kit, and a slip of paper with her new boss’s name on it. All two dozen or so nurses relaxing in the lounge on their coffee breaks or between shifts looked up at once. To her surprise, Shirley noticed that

several of the nurses were men. And not a single one of her fellow nurses, male or female, said or did anything in greeting, not even a simple nod of the head. In all her days as a gracious Southerner, Shirley had never seen such a blatant lack of manners.

“Ahem.” She cleared her throat loudly, hoping for some kind of response. She got nothing.

Well, when in Rome, Shirley thought. She might as well just be rude like everyone else.

“Excuse me, but what the hell does a gal need to do to get some help around here?”

“Don’t look at us,” one of the female nurses sneered at her. “We don’t help nurse *practitioners*.”

Shirley was dumbfounded. “B-but how do you know I’m a nurse practitioner? I didn’t even get a chance to introduce myself.”

“We know your kind on sight,” a portly male nurse snipped. “This lounge is for *real* nurses only. So I suggest you take a hike, little lady.”

By this point, Shirley was near despair. Her shift was supposed to have started almost an hour ago, and she still had no idea what she was supposed to do or where she was supposed to go. At this rate, she’d get fired before she’d even had a chance to do any real work.

So much for making a fresh start in Raleigh. Not even here a full day yet, and she was already a miserable failure.

Just as she was about to burst into tears, an elderly nurse she hadn’t noticed before shuffled up from her spot in the corner. The older woman was white-haired and walked with a limp and a stooped back, but it was clear from her flinty gaze that when it came to nursing, she still meant business. “Don’t ya listen hide nor hair t’ what none o’ them youngsters say,” she said, a deep backwoods accent jarring Shirley’s genteel ears. “Back in my day, *all* nurses were

practitioners. We just didn't call ourselves that. I worked a MASH unit back in Vietnam, ya know. An' us MASH nurses did everythin' from givin' patients ether during surgery to sew up incisions to doin' bedside psychiatry while the doctors were all out gettin' drunk. An' we didn't git paid extra for it, neither." She extended her gnarled, blue-veined hand. "Name's Marla. Marla Crabtree. I been in the nursin' business nigh on fifty years, an' I don't 'spect to retire 'til I drop dead."

"A pleasure, ma'am," Shirley stammered, still reeling. "If you don't mind, I was wondering—"

"Ask me any question ya want, little lady. Just don't ask me how old I am."

Shirley chuckled. She liked Marla already. "Well, I'm supposed to be working as a nurse-anesthetist. I took the job over the phone via an outside recruiter, and nobody told me where I supposed to go on my first day. I've tried asking around, but—"

Marla grinned. "Let me guess. The anesthesiologists knocked ya down on yer ass."

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Don't take it personal, hon. Them gas dogs, they hate everybody."

Shirley frowned. "*Gas dogs?*"

Marla laughed heartily. "That's what us old-timers call you folks who work the gas in the OR. Back when I was in 'Nam, some of the docs used to snort ether in the off hours whenever the booze ran low. That's how they got their name, an' it just stuck, I guess. No offense meant, ma'am."

Shirley smiled. "None taken." She followed the gnomelike little woman as she waddled out of the nurses' lounge and down the hall. Despite her age and apparent lack of mobility, Marla Crabtree moved quickly. Shirley practically had to run to keep up with her.

“What’d ya say yer name was, little lady?” Marla asked as she darted down the hall, ducking this way and that to avoid rushing gurneys and running orderlies.

“I didn’t,” Shirley replied, breathless. “It’s Shirley. Shirley Daniels.”

“Right good name,” Marla said as she dashed into a waiting elevator. “Sturdy. I had me a cousin named Shirley back in Pennington Gap, the little nowhere mountain town that I’m from. Ya don’t meet too many Shirleys nowadays.”

“My parents were old-fashioned,” Shirley said, leaning against the elevator wall as she tried to catch her breath. “My goodness, Marla, you are in very good shape for a lady your age.”

“I do Tae Bo,” Marla said, mock-punching the air. “You gotta love that Billy Blanks fella on them Tae Bo videos. A right good-lookin’ boy, he is. An’ ya’d never know it to look at him, but he’s almost sixty. Hell, he an’ I could date, if he wasn’t already married.” Her wrinkled face spread out in a wide grin. “Though I wouldn’t be opposed to havin’ a nice little bedroom affair with him, no siree.”

Shirley had to work hard to contain her laughter. *Things really are different here in the big city*, she thought to herself. Nobody over sixty even *had* sex back in Statesville, let alone talked about it in public with a total stranger.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open onto the fourth floor. “Nurse-anesthetists’ unit is fourth door down on the left,” Marla said, pointing it out. “I’d walk ya there myself, but your department chair don’t like me too much. I got this nasty habit of tellin’ her how to do her job, ya see. I used to be head ether girl back in ‘Nam. Put more people under the gas than your new boss’s got hairs on her head. But they won’t let me anywhere near the gas round here ’cause I don’t got a fancy-schmantzy state certificate.” She clucked and shook her head. “So I’m stuck doin’ bedpans an’ IVs. Oh well. It’s a livin,’ I reckon.” She took an index card out of her

scrub pocket, wrote a number down on it, and handed it to Shirley. “That’s my pager number if ya ever need anything. I been workin’ at this here hospital nigh on forty years now, an’ there ain’t nothin’ I either don’t already know or can’t find out about for ya right quick. Ya enjoy yer first day now.”

Marla started to waddle off, then stopped short. She glanced over both shoulders, then leaned towards Shirley, taking care to keep her voice low. “An’ when it comes to yer new boss Beth Peking, don’t say I didn’t warn ya. They call her The Dragon Lady round here, an’ with good reason.”

Shirley wasn’t sure what to say about that, so she just smiled and nodded as she watched Marla Crabtree waddle off down the hall. She took a deep breath and put her best foot forward as she stepped into her new boss’s office.

Beth Peking was a petite Asian-American woman who looked to be in her mid-forties. Instead of nurse’s scrubs, she wore a pert little silk suit with a Mandarin collar embroidered with red dragons. On her feet were four-inch black spike heels—totally impractical footwear for nursing—and her fingers ended in long, blood-red lacquered talons that would surely break if she ever tried to pick up a needle or turn a dial on a dosing machine. An administrative type, for sure: no one could do any real nursing work dressed like that. She was sitting in an easy chair by her office window, totally engrossed in a thick hospital report. Shirley knocked on the doorjamb several times, but Ms. Peking never so much as looked up.

Rude city people, Shirley thought to herself. It was hard for her to get used to such a total lack of manners from everyone she encountered. “Excuse me,” she said in a loud voice.

No response.

Well, she might as well just start yelling. “*Excuse me*. Are you Beth Peking?”

Her new boss sighed and finally looked up from her report. “I heard you the first time you banged on the door,” the petite woman hissed in a thick Chinese accent. “I’m not ready to talk to you yet! You wait!”

Shirley’s jaw dropped. “Well, I never—”

Beth Peking read two more pages in her report, then made a big show of folding it closed and slipping it into a file cabinet. She looked Shirley up and down, peering at her over her tiny red-rimmed reading glasses. When she stood, Shirley immediately understood why her new boss wore such impractical shoes: even with the four-inch spike heels, Beth Peking was barely five feet tall. The tiny, birdlike woman’s contempt for everything and everyone around her was almost palpable. “*Now* I’m ready to talk to you,” she squawked. “Sit down.”

Without a word, Shirley obeyed. Between the nasty demeanor and the dragons stitched on her coat, it was pretty clear why everyone called her new boss The Dragon Lady behind her back.

“I know who you are,” The Dragon Lady squawked at her. “You’re Shirley Daniels. Today is your first day. And you’re late.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I had some trouble finding—”

“Don’t say sorry to me, Shirley Daniels. I don’t like sorry. You just say you’re wrong and you move on. Easy?”

Shirley flushed and her eyebrows pursed in bewilderment. She had no idea what to make of this woman. “Umm, I guess I was wrong, then. Okay?”

“That’s better. If you’re ever be late again, you’re fired.”

Shirley felt her stomach twinge as she stared into The Dragon Lady’s fiery black eyes. “I understand,” she said in a small voice. Suddenly she understood why the hospital had used an

outside recruiter to hire her for this job. No nurse in her right mind would choose to work for The Dragon Lady if they knew about her ahead of time.

The Dragon Lady pulled a fat file off her desk and dropped it in Shirley's lap. "Employee packet," she said. "You fill it out. You fill it out and bring it back to me in one hour. *One hour* only. If it takes you more than one hour, you're fired. Go two doors down to the nurse-anesthetist lounge to fill it out. When you're finished, I'll take you on a hospital tour. Okay?"

With a heavy heart, Shirley took the packet and headed down the hall to the lounge, dragging her feet all the way. She'd gotten more than she'd bargained for in moving here, that was for sure. Working in Raleigh wasn't exactly shaping up the way she'd hoped it would. Even after all the bad things that had happened back in Statesville, it seemed that was paradise compared to how her life was already turning out in the big city.

On the bright side, she supposed it could only get better from here.

She flipped through the scores of pages of the employee packet. The first part was asking mostly for basic information—name, address, age, Social Security number—but then she despaired at the reams and reams of pages asking for her nursing school grade transcripts, a complete employment history dating all the way back to her first job in high school, even an essay section where she was supposed to write five hundred words on what being a nurse-anesthetist meant to her. She glanced at the clock and saw fifteen minutes had already gone by.

"I might as well just quit now," she said aloud to the empty air, blinking back tears. "There's no way I can get this all done in forty-five minutes."

"Yeah, The Dragon Lady can be a real bitch," a gruff male voice said just behind her. "I don't know why the hospital didn't fire her years ago. Must be the nursing shortage."

Shirley's head whipped around fast enough for her to get a mouthful of her own hair. A tall, lean, dark-haired stranger stood at the coffee stand just behind her. He flashed a kind smile at her as he stirred the hospital's weak coffee in a Styrofoam cup with a pink plastic stirrer. Hardly a masculine gesture, but coming from a man like him, that hardly mattered. This man—tall, athletic, broad-shouldered, movie-star handsome despite the dull gray scrubs and two days' of razor stubble he was wearing—would look masculine wearing an apron and kneading bread dough. He was a walking pile of testosterone.

George Clooney, eat your heart out. This guy made George Clooney look like a dweeb.

Shirley's breath caught as she felt her crotch heating up at this awesome sight. She was speechless.

"I'm Dr. Randall Hamm, by the way. I head up the Anesthesiology department here. And you are—?"

The sound of his voice was like dark chocolate. Pure sex, sweet and rich.

Yow. Maybe life in Raleigh wouldn't be so hard after all.

Shirley tried to introduce herself, but when she opened her mouth, no sound came out.

Dr. Randall Hamm just smiled wider. The fact that Shirley's mouth was moving and yet formed no words didn't seem to faze him at all.

Apparently the man was already aware of his effect on women. Either that, or he was completely clueless.

"Do me a favor, willya?" Dr. Drop Dead Gorgeous said. "Don't tell The Dragon Lady I'm stealing coffee from the nurse-anesthetists' lounge. She'll have my head on a platter if she finds out."

Shirley finally managed to locate her vocal cords. "Wh-Why?"

“She hates us docs. Doesn’t like us coming anywhere near here. She seems to think all anesthesia procedures should be done by nurses.”

“I’ve noticed that most of your colleagues feel the same way about us nurse anesthetists,” Shirley countered.

“Yeah, that’s true,” Dr. Hamm said, then shrugged. “Me, I think everybody should just do their jobs and shut the hell up. But that’s just me.”

Shirley liked this man already. Hell, she could see herself *loving* this man very, very quickly, even though a real relationship was at the absolute bottom of her to-do list right now.

Dr. Randall Hamm nodded towards the intimidating pile of papers The Dragon Lady had given her. “If you’re worried about filling all that stuff out before your time runs out, don’t worry about it. Just fill in the first few pages and give it back to your boss. Take the rest of the stuff home with you tonight, fill it out on your own time, and hand it in to Human Resources yourself when The Dragon Lady isn’t looking. Problem solved.”

“But—”

He smiled again, and this time, it wasn’t just your run-of-the-mill-handsome-man smile. It was a spectacular, twinkling, worthy-of-the-lights-of-Broadway kind of smile. The kind of smile that sold toothpaste on billboards in Times Square. The kind of smile that made nurses quake in their padded shoes, and made sex-starved women like Shirley Daniels cream their pants. “Look, don’t worry about The Dragon Lady,” he said. “She just likes to scare people. If you show her you aren’t scared of her, she’ll back off. The woman’s bark is a lot worse than her bite, believe me.”

Now it was Shirley’s time to smile. “Thanks for the advice, Dr. Hamm.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, and was out the door without even asking her name.

Shirley whipped through the more important sections of paperwork, finished it with fifteen minutes to spare. She headed back to The Dragon Lady's office, the white rubber soles of her nursing shoes barely touching the ground as she walked.

She'd come to Raleigh to get away from the past. Now, she'd just met the reason to stay.

Chapter Three

Shirley floated into Beth Peking's office, a broad smile painted across her face. She dropped her pile of completed employment papers on her new boss' desk with a flourish. "Well, I'm finished," she sang. "When do I get started?"

The Dragon Lady looked up from her own pile of paperwork, her brightly painted mouth pulled into a thin, angry line. "You're done already? You're not supposed to be done yet!"

"Well, I am," Shirley replied. "And I must tell you, Ms. Peking, that I'm very excited to be on staff here at University Hospital."

The Dragon Lady blinked twice. She clearly wasn't prepared for Shirley to be so confident. "No, you're not. You're a country bumpkin who was hard up for a job." Her voice was a pitchfork aimed right at Shirley's head.

Shirley forced a laugh. No way was she going to let this crazy woman get to her. "Oh, Ms. Peking! You are so funny! What a great joke! You should go on David Letterman."

The Dragon Lady's thick black eyebrows mashed together. Her face turned as red as her silk mandarin jacket for a moment. Then she seemed to relax. "Nice to have you aboard," she said, a twinge of defeat quavering in her voice. Shirley obviously wouldn't be an easy target for her ire. But that didn't mean the woman wouldn't keep trying. "You're new, so you're at the bottom of the totem pole. You'll get only the most boring anesthesia assignments."

Taking Dr. Randall Hamm's advice well in stride, Shirley just grinned even wider. "That's okay," she chirped. "Things were never very exciting back home in Statesville, after all." A lie, but she wasn't about to let The Dragon Lady know that.

The Dragon Lady blinked again and made a low growling sound in her throat. “You be quiet now,” the tiny woman spurted. She sounded like a Chinese restaurant waitress with a death wish. “Now I’ll take you to the operating suite. Show you around.” She stood up and dashed into the hallway, her spike heels clattering on the linoleum. She stopped short, turned around, wagged her tiny scarlet-tipped index finger in Shirley’s face. “You be quiet on the tour. No talking! You don’t say *anything*, understand?”

“Oh, I understand,” Shirley practically sang. “I’m sure I have a lot to learn.”

The Dragon Lady made that low growl sound in her throat again, just like a real dragon. Shirley figured it would only be a matter of time before the woman actually started breathing fire.

She followed her boss up and down the busy hospital hallways, in and out of two elevators, and through a set of swinging double doors emblazoned with CAUTION: STERILE AREA. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. The Dragon Lady wasn’t exactly wearing sterile attire, but that didn’t seem to bother her at all. She plowed right through the swinging doors so hard that one of them nearly ended up knocking Shirley flat onto the linoleum.

But she wasn’t worried. She knew that The Dragon Lady was leading her into the Surgery and Anesthesiology Department. And that meant Dr. Randall Hamm couldn’t be too far away. Her crotch buzzed at the thought of seeing him again.

And then suddenly, almost as if he’d read her thoughts right out of the air, Dr. Randall Hamm appeared out of nowhere, still stirring his Styrofoam cup of weak coffee. Beth Peking ran right into him, her elaborately coiffed head knocking him somewhere around the belly button. The man was easily almost three feet taller than The Dragon Lady, even with her heels.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Beth Peking and her latest victim—er, ah, employee. Hello there, Ms. Peking. How’s tricks?”

The Dragon Lady teetered backwards on her heels away from Dr. Hamm’s middle and fumed. “I don’t do tricks, Dr. Hamm. I’m not a hooker.”

Dr. Hamm laughed. “Ah, Beth Peking. Always with her head in the gutter.” He shook his head, mock-sad. “A tragedy that such a filthy mind is wasted in these sterile halls. By the way, Ms. Peking, where are your scrubs? You’re in a sterile area. As lovely as your silk blazer and heels are, they weren’t made for the OR.”

The Dragon Lady flushed red and muttered something unintelligible. So much for breathing fire.

Dr. Hamm turned to Shirley. “Nice to see you again—ah, miss. Welcome aboard. Try to stay out of trouble.” And with a flash of his million-dollar smile and a fatherly wink, he was gone.

He still hadn’t asked her name.

Shirley watched him go with her mouth hanging open. *I guess you only get one chance with that guy*, she mused. And she’d blown it. Big time.

The Dragon Lady picked up on Shirley’s malaise right away. “Oh, I see you met Dr. Hamm! He’s a big boss around here. He’s not interested in nurses, so you just forget about it.”

Shirley felt her cheeks burn. “Wh-what do you mean?” she stammered, feigning ignorance.

The Dragon Lady laughed like a wind-up doll. “Oh, you can’t fool me, Miss Shirley. You got the hots for Dr. Hamm. It written all over your face.” She erupted in her annoying high-pitched laugh again. “*All* the ladies here at University Hospital got the hots for Dr. Hamm.

Even me. I won't lie to you. He's very, very cute. More handsome than George Clooney." She snickered. "But you don't stand a chance. He doesn't like anybody. He's never dates anybody at all."

"Really? You're sure?"

The Dragon Lady nodded. "Oh, I'm sure. Dr. Hamm's got no social life. All he does is work, work, work. We all flirt with him. He never notices." She snorted. "Hmph. He's probably gay."

Shirley's heart sank. Just her luck that the one man who managed to set her heart aflutter in her otherwise dismal new life wasn't even remotely interested in her—or worse, batted for the other team.

"Come with me now," The Dragon Lady chirped. "I'll give you a tour of OR. And be quiet. Don't disturb the patients."

Shirley followed her boss around the operating department as she teetered on her ridiculous spike heels, squawking at the top of her lungs in her thick Chinese accent as she showed Shirley all the tools and equipment she'd need to do her job. But Shirley barely heard a word of what the annoying woman said. All she could think of was the fact that she was horny as hell, and the only man from miles around she wanted to get naked with wasn't the least bit interested in her.

Maybe leaving Statesville was the worst thing she'd ever done. It certainly felt that way right about now.

* * * *

Dr. Randall Hamm knew better than to get too friendly with the nurses. Especially the nurse-anesthetists. For one thing, he was no good at dealing with women socially. They were

like exotic foreign objects to him, fragile and easily broken if not handled with the utmost of care. And it wasn't like the nurse-anesthetists ever stayed around for long, anyway. With a boss like Beth Peking, who would? Between the national nursing shortage and the personnel problems, the turnover rate for nurses in his department was off the charts. What was the point of investing more than the faintest of pleasantries with the new nurse, anyway? As cute as she was, she probably wouldn't last a week. He didn't even know her name, and that was fine by him, thank you very much. The less he knew about her, the better.

Or so he tried to convince himself. There was something about the new girl that bothered him. Well, not so much bothered him as *unnerved* him. Dr. Randall Hamm was a notorious loner, after all. Always absorbed in his work or his quest for research grants, he wasn't accustomed to noticing a hot new nurse. Hell, he wasn't accustomed to noticing *anyone*.

But he'd noticed the new girl, all right. Big time.

And his cock was *still* noticing her. Thick, hard, and throbbing, it threatened to tear a hole in his scrubs. Lucky for him he'd managed to duck off down the hallway to his private office before anyone noticed.

Dr. Hamm was out of his element. Dealing with people, and their unpredictable behavior, had never really been his forte. He was a researcher at heart. He'd always been happiest in the lab, tinkering with anesthesia concoctions or coming up with new and improved OR management strategies. To him, sex was just a primal urge, an itch to scratch and be done with. It wasn't something that was supposed to complicate your work, or distract you from it. He'd always been an anonymous one-night-stand kind of man. Relationships came ridden with traps that were best avoided. But whether he liked it or not, there was a new game in town: a woman he didn't think he stood an icicle's chance in hell of avoiding for long.

Not as long as his cock had something to say about it, anyway.

Chapter Four

Shirley sat neck-deep in her old-style clawfoot bathtub at her new Raleigh apartment, exhausted from her first day on the job at University Hospital. She knew she had no right to be tired, since she hadn't done any actual anesthesia work. Her entire first day had been preoccupied with dull administrative tasks and following her annoying boss around the hospital like a lost puppy on a walk in the park compared to some of the marathon OR sessions she'd worked through back in Statesville. But the dull drudgery of her job wasn't what had her so exhausted. Not by a long shot.

Shirley Daniels, countrified nurse anesthetist and fish-out-of-water in the big city, was in serious need of a serious lay. And if she didn't get one soon, she just might need serious medical attention.

It had been far too long since she'd had anything resembling a sex life, and she had Bob Watson to thank for that. It was Bob Watson's fault she was stuck in Raleigh in the first place. The man had ruined her life.

Making matters worse, Bob hadn't exactly been stellar in the bedroom. After all the hell that man had put her through, she didn't even manage to get a decent fuck out of it. Joanna Watson married to a multimillionaire doctor back in Statesville while Shirley was a lonely stranger in Raleigh. Talk about poetic justice.

And now, Shirley was all hot and bothered about a man who didn't even know her name.

When it came to men, she sure knew how to pick 'em. Either they didn't know she existed, or they were federal criminals. Nice.

And thanks to Dr. Randall Hamm and his million-dollar smile, she was lovesick.

Literally. If she didn't get laid soon, she might die.

Shirley had read about being "lovesick" in books: mostly historical romance novels where ladies swooned at candlelit balls and men brawled and dueled with pistols to blow off pent-up sexual frustration. But she'd never actually believed that being *lovesick* was possible in the real world.

Until now.

Shirley's entire body was an itchy ball of fire. Her head ached and throbbed, her mind was filled with nothing but racing, raging thoughts about hot sex. The pit of her stomach churned and rocked—she couldn't keep anything down, not even saltine crackers. Her legs felt heavy and sluggish, and her crotch was molten lava. She could barely walk. She could barely think. Hell, she could barely *breathe*.

And it was all Dr. Randall Hamm's fault.

Damn him. Damn him, his movie-star looks, hot bod, and indifferent attitude straight to hell.

Shirley was beginning to understand why Beth Peking, The Dragon Lady, was so annoying and reviled by everyone. Beth Peking lusted after Dr. Randall Hamm, too, after all. Shirley supposed if one day of unrequited lust for Dr. Randall made *her* feel this awful, she figured that months or years of it would make her just as loony as her new boss.

Shirley's hand strayed below the hot, raspberry-scented suds and found the space between her legs.

She found her pussy deep in the dark recesses of the steaming bathwater, and parted the curtains of her sex with her index finger. Her cunt was slick with a combo of bathwater and her

own salty juices. She ran her fingers lightly up and down her slit, feeling herself get slicker and hotter with every stroke.

Shirley hoped that by getting herself off here in her relaxing evening bath, she'd stop feeling like such a lovesick hothead. But the exact opposite was happening. Instead of relieving her pent-up frustration, each stroke of her fingers against her cunt just made her that much more hot and bothered.

She wouldn't last a week in Raleigh at this rate.

She rubbed herself harder and faster, concentrating on making herself come. Yet there was no relief in sight. She brought her washcloth and even an oblong bar of rose-scented soap into the act. No dice. All that happened was her cunt got hotter and more swollen, her head throbbed even more, and her whole body became a live wire of pent-up sexual frustration. If she were a fair maiden in a Regency novel, she would have swooned—hell, maybe even *died*—from a nasty case of the vapors a long time ago.

If Shirley didn't come soon, her head would explode.

Time to bring out the big guns.

Shirley looked up and eyed the detachable shower massager that hung from a hook on the wall over her head. She reached up to grab it, fiddled with the controls until she found the heavy-jet setting—the punishing spray designed only for pressure-cleaning dirty bathtubs. A slow smile spread across her face as a thoroughly naughty idea formed in her mind.

She tested the stinging water jets against the palm of her hand. Satisfied with the pressure, she slid the pulsating shower massager between her legs, aiming the spray directly at her clit. The sensations were intense. Shirley's eyelids screwed shut and she gritted her teeth as she felt the blood rushing to swell her already white-hot clit. Her deepest muscles clenched as

the pulsing waterfall hit her cunt, sending her closer and closer to the edge. Her whole body was an electric current, jumping back and forth between two charged poles, ready to explode into a million scorching sparks.

And finally, just when she thought she could stand it no longer, Shirley finally came. Her hips bucked as she fell over the precipice, becoming one with the powerful waterfall between her legs until her whole being ran rampant like Niagara Falls in springtime.

Her orgasm hit like a runaway train, exploding up and down her entire body. Her hips bucked and her limbs thrashed wildly, sending steaming bathwater splashing over the sides of the tub. Obscene sounds fell out of her mouth and ricocheted off the bathroom tile. It was truly an orgasm for the history books.

But even after all that, Shirley wasn't even close to being satisfied.

Time to take things up a notch or two.

She ran her hands up and down the slick stainless-steel handle of the shower massager. Firm, hard, smooth, easy to lubricate. Its heft felt good in her hands, the perfect weight and thickness for fucking. She unscrewed the massager top from the handle and let the water run through the plain round hole at the handle's end. The resulting stream was light, but not without a little pressure. The scored edges of the opening were a little rough, so she wrapped her damp washcloth around it for protection.

Safe sex with a cold metal dildo, she thought with a chuckle. *Classic.*

She was still sitting in the hot sudsy bath, and she'd already finished one orgasm, so she knew she was plenty lubed enough to fuck herself with a stainless-steel plumbing appliance that had itself seen better days. The only question was, was she that desperate?

Yes, I am, Shirley thought to herself, plenty embarrassed. *Yes, I am.*

But just as she was about to cram the thing up her cunt for a nice, long solo fuck, she heard a knock on her apartment door. A *loud* knock.

Shirley sat bold upright. Who could it be? She didn't know anybody in Raleigh, except for Marla, Dr. Randall Hamm, and The Dragon Lady. She seriously doubted any of them would be showing up at her apartment door at eleven o'clock at night. Besides, they didn't even know where she lived.

Shirley got out of the tub and pulled on her bathrobe without bothering to dry off. The pounding at her heavy wooden apartment door got louder and louder. Whoever it was, Shirley guessed they were angry. She pulled her keychain out of her purse, which had a small spray can of Mace attached to it. She was home alone in a strange town where she knew no one, and she was taking no chances.

She unlocked the door and opened it slowly, leaving the lock-chain attached. She peeked through the crack, and nearly fainted dead away at what she saw.

Framed in the tiny space between the heavy wooden door and the cracked, peeling doorjamb was a tall, buff, and handsome man who looked to be in his late twenties.

And he was wearing nothing but a towel. A *damp* towel.

"H-hi there," she stammered through the crack. "Umm, can I help you, sir?"

You could sure as hell help me, she thought silently to herself.

"I'm real sorry to disturb you, ma'am," the gorgeous specimen of the male species drawled back, a thick mountain accent pulling at the edges of his words. "But I think you must have some kinda plumbing problem, 'cause I got me some water a-leakin' down from my bathroom ceilin'. Would ya mind if I showed it to ya?"

You can show me anything you want, baby, Shirley thought to herself. She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying it out loud.

“We should prob’ly call the landlord,” the man went on, shifting back and forth on his feet. Shirley could see the outline of his formidable equipment sculpted against the threadbare blue towel he held around his middle, and the sight was enough to drive her wild.

“You know, sir, that water dripping down is probably just because I had a little—accident when I was taking my bath,” she said, twirling a lock of her damp hair nervously around and around on her finger. “I, ahem, *slipped* and ended up splashing a bunch of water out onto the floor.” Not entirely the truth, but not entirely a lie, either. “So I don’t think it’s necessary to call the landlord. But you’re welcome to come inside and take a look for yourself, just to make sure I don’t have any broken pipes or anything.” She batted her eyelashes at him shamelessly, doing her best to play the role of the classic Southern damsel-in-distress. “What’d you say your name was, sir?”

He smiled, flashing brilliant white teeth. “Didn’t, ma’am. But it’s Ed. Ed Main. I live right downstairs from ya. Been meanin’ to come an’ properly introduce myself, but ain’t had occasion to before now.” He glanced down at the damp towel around his middle. “Hope you don’t mind my bad manners, ma’am, but I didn’t wanna waste no time gettin’ dressed when water was a-rainin’ down on my head. Had to come see what the whole mess was about.”

“No problem at all,” she sang. “Just one minute, if you please.” She shut the door momentarily, disengaged the chain from the slide, reopened the door. “I’m Shirley. Shirley Daniels. Pleased to meet you, Ed. Won’t you come in?”

Chapter Five

Ed seemed surprised, maybe even a little shocked, at her invitation, but that didn't stop him. He strode right into her worn attic apartment, his bare feet leaving little damp tracks on the pockmarked hardwood floor. He grasped tightly at the towel wrapped around his middle, almost as if he expected it to drop to the floor as soon as he crossed the threshold.

And how, Shirley thought to herself. Honey, you have no idea.

Ed scanned Shirley's cluttered living room, which was still strewn with her half-unpacked moving boxes. "Looks like you just moved in," he said, obviously still a little uncomfortable at being there.

"Yes, I moved in over the weekend," Shirley replied. "And I started my new job today. Haven't had a lot of time to get settled yet. I hope you don't mind the mess."

Ed nodded and tipped an imaginary hat at her with his free hand. "Not at all, ma'am. If you'll just show me yer bathroom, I'll take a look at the leak situation an' then be on my way."

Saying that he'd soon be on his way was the polite thing for him to do as a Southern gentleman, of course. But Shirley guessed by the growing bulge underneath that threadbare towel of his that the not-so-genteel part of him had other plans in mind. "If you'll just follow me, Mr. Main," she said, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder and guiding him down the hall. "But I do hope after you've seen to the leak you'll stay and sit for a spell. I have some lovely lemon herb tea I picked up at the store just yesterday that I've been meaning to share with someone."

And that's not all I'd like to share with you, she thought as he followed her into the bathroom. If only that stuffed-shirt Dr. Randall Hamm could see her now. At work, he was a

cold fish who didn't know Shirley existed. And yet, here she was, about to seduce a half-naked hottie who'd just shown up at her door uninvited.

Dr. Randall Hamm didn't know what he was missing. She'd show him, all right.

Ed poked around her splattered bathroom, eyeing the big puddles on her floor. "Looks like you had quite a party in here, ma'am," he said, a twinkle forming in his blue eyes. "If ya don't mind me sayin' so."

"The party was just getting started when you arrived, Ed," was Shirley's scintillating reply. "Now it's time for the real fun to begin."

With that, Shirley shed her terrycloth robe in one swift motion. It pooled at her ankles on the damp floor.

Ed's jaw dropped to his knees. "Damn, ma'am. That's one helluva pretty sight."

"Please call me Shirley. All my closest friends do."

"I guess that means I'm about to become one of your closest friends then, ma'am." Ed sauntered up to her and dropped his own towel. It joined her robe on the damp floor, where they both helped soak up the same pool of water.

Well, that was easy, Shirley thought. She really should seduce random total strangers more often.

Her violet eyes passed over Ed's gorgeous young body. With that soft, velvety skin and smooth face, he couldn't be more than twenty-six. That lean, hard body was the picture of glorious youth. His arms were firm and sculpted, rippling with the kind of muscles that come from hard day-to-day work in the real world, not occasional workouts in a gym. His legs were just as firm, with defined calves and rippled thighs. A light coating of sandy blond hair coated his angular pecs like goose down, then gathered into a darker line that led from his belly button

downward to his thickly furred crotch. His cock was thick and dripping with pre-come. Its uncircumcised head poked through his shining foreskin, bursting like an overripe peach.

Ed Main was ready to fuck.

But Shirley was biding her time. As aroused as she was at the sight of Ed's raring-to-go body, she wanted to draw things out as long as possible. She'd just made herself come five minutes ago, after all. She had plenty of sexual energy to build upon. And besides, this was *her* apartment, *her* turf—and Ed was *her* conquest, dammit. Her house, her rules.

Instead of going to meet him, as she was sure he wanted her to, she hung back and waited for him to come to her.

She didn't have to wait long. Before she could say boo, Ed swept across the room and enveloped her naked body in his thick, strong arms. His mouth plunged onto hers with abandon, sucking her lips, her tongue, her entire being hard into his mouth. The feel of his unshaven cheeks against her face and neck was the hottest sensation she'd ever known, even if it did rub her skin raw. Hell, she was *ready* to be rubbed raw. She was single, new in town, and horny as hell, and she deserved to have a little fun.

Without even asking permission, Ed pushed her down to the damp, slippery bathroom floor tile. The feel of the cold, chipped porcelain against her bare back was jarring and sensual at the same time: an eclectic mix of shock and pleasure. After her first solo orgasm in the steaming hot bath, all of Shirley's senses were on high alert, and the mixed signals rising from the cold, still bathroom tile underneath her and the hot, aggressive male body writhing on top of her made for some of the most incredible sensations she'd ever experienced.

She felt Ed's hot, thick cock thrust itself between her legs. He pressed one finger, then two, then three into her already wet and swollen cunt. He was ready to get busy, that was for

sure, but ever the Southern gentleman, he was just waiting for Shirley to give the word so he could plunge himself deep inside her.

But she still wasn't ready. Everything was happening so fast. She needed to slow things down, big-time. And not just to maximize her own pleasure, either. Her mind was full of too many thoughts. Doubts and worries ran through her brain a mile a minute, and they refused to stop. Was she doing the right thing? Was she being too rash? Was it really a good idea to drop her drawers on the spur of the moment with her new downstairs neighbor? What if things ended badly? How would she handle it?

And what about Dr. Randall Hamm? After all, *he* was the one she really wanted to sleep with. As hot as Ed was, he was just window dressing, something to occupy her time until the man she really wanted decided to want her back.

Ha. As if that would ever happen.

Shirley squeezed her eyes shut tight, tried hard to clear it of all the random thoughts and distractions. What did she care about Dr. Randall Hamm, anyway? Especially when she had another hotter and younger man already naked on top of her anyway? What the hell was she thinking?

It was high time she stopped thinking and started fucking.

She guided Ed's hand to where she needed it most. Her clit was already swollen to twice its normal size, so he had no trouble finding it. He went to work right away, rubbing her nub with a fingertip in rapid circles, just the exact way the Shirley did when she brought herself to orgasm. It was as if this perfect stranger could read her mind.

Damn him.

Finding a perfect stranger who could satisfy her perfectly was all she needed right now. And yet, her heart seemed to long for something—for *someone*—more.

And that someone wasn't in the room. He was somewhere else—probably burning the midnight oil back at the hospital, not paying attention to anyone. Just like he didn't pay attention to her.

Damn him, too.

Shirley's legs involuntarily widened, pulled in, raised themselves up as her orgasm approached. Oh, this hot Southern good ol' boy was serviceable, all right. Hell, he was *more* than serviceable. But he wasn't the man she really wanted. No siree.

Well, she couldn't think about that right now. She *shouldn't*. She should concentrate on the matter at hand: namely, getting fucked by the man who currently had his hand between her legs.

Shirley's breath quickened, her hips bucked, her belly clenched, and she came. Hard. "Mmmmmmm, yes, yes, yes," she groaned, pressing herself into Ed's hand. She pretended for a moment that Ed's hand was really Dr. Randall Hamm's hand, and that was more than enough for her to come again.

"Yeeeeesssss," she groaned. "Oh, baby, *yeah*."

If Dr. Randall Hamm could make her come like that in her imagination she could only imagine what he could do to her in real life.

Damn.

A gentle touch on her cheek brought her back to earth. She opened her eyes, saw Ed's lovely blue ones staring into her own. "You all right, ma'am?" he asked tenderly. "I thought I lost you for a second."

You have no idea, Shirley thought to herself with embarrassment. Really, she wasn't being fair to this man, who was working so hard to satisfy her, and *only* her. It was a good thing he couldn't read her mind. If he could, he'd dump her on the hard cold tile and make a mad run for the door. "I'm all right," she finally sighed. "Just—you know. Kinda spent from coming."

Ed's eyebrows raised in concern. "You wanna stop, hon?"

She reached out and stroked his stubbled cheek. "Oh no, sweetheart. Just let me take a break for a minute."

He smiled, and she breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't suspect a thing, and she wanted to keep it that way. "You sure know how to push a gal's buttons," she said. "I wanna see what else you can do."

"Quite a lot, ma'am," he drawled. "If you'll just let me show you."

Shirley held up an index finger and touched it to Ed's lips. "Just one second, hon." She stole over to the bottom drawer of her vanity cabinet, where she kept a travel-sized box of lubricated Trojans. Anticipating a busy night, she grabbed three condoms from the box, slipped them between her teeth, and crawled slowly back to where Ed lay sprawled on the tile floor. She shook her head back and forth, growling like a tomcat around the foil condom wrappers. His eyes widened at the spectacle. And if Shirley the well-educated nurse didn't know such things were medically impossible, she could have sworn she saw his cock grow three inches at the sight.

Even if tonight was the only night she would ever spend with Ed Main, she would make it a night he would never forget.

She tore open the foil condom packet, made a move as if she were about to take the condom out and roll it onto his waiting cock. But at the very last second, she did something else

entirely. She closed her mouth over the tip of his dripping cock, tasting his salty, musky taste, drinking in the feel of his slick glans and rough shaft against the rim of her lips and against her tongue. She deep-throated him, moving her head up and down in a rapid rhythm, nearly bringing him to orgasm right then and there. But she pulled off at the last possible second, gripped his balls hard and pinched the base of his cock between two fingers, stopping that load from blowing right in its tracks.

Ed sucked in his breath and groaned. “Damn, woman!” he cried. “You are one helluva wild thing.”

“Oh, I’m just getting started,” Shirley replied with a grin. With that, she slipped that condom on his cock for real this time, pushed him down onto the floor, and straddled him hard. She took the whole length of him into herself in a single stroke, grunting and sighing as she felt herself stretch and strain to accompany something so thick and massive. He was the biggest, hardest, thickest man she’d ever fucked, that was for damn sure.

Her body wouldn’t forget this night for a long, long time. And now that she’d had something this big, it would be pretty damn hard for her to be satisfied by anything but.

Take that, Dr. Randall Hamm. Shirley chuckled to herself as she started riding Ed. And she rode him like a bucking bronco, like a raging surf, like the world’s most out-of-control electric bull. She was a wild cowgirl in heat, and nothing would stop her wild fuck until she was done, done, done.

She rode him long. She rode him hard. She rode him until her walls were rubbed raw. She rode him until it hurt.

Hurt so *good*.

Ed Main just didn't lie back and take it, either, God love him. After he got over the initial shock of Shirley's unbridled aggression, he stepped right up and returned the sexual favor in kind, matching every wild buck of her hips with a hot little thrust of his own. He grabbed her hips with both of his big hands while spreading his long fingers wide enough to find her clit without ever once letting go. He rubbed her clit in all the right places and at all the right times, timing the strokes of his fingers perfectly in between the strokes Shirley made up and down his cock. The resulting sensations shook her to the core.

Shirley felt parts of herself she never knew existed before. She became intimately acquainted with the structure of her pelvis, the inner lips of her vulva, the tiny curved spot where the end of her vagina met the bottom tip of her womb. She felt the buzzing, the heat, the rising intensity in her body at the molecular level. She saw her orgasm beckoning to her from across a deep precipice, watched it approach, become closer and closer, until she could see that it was the biggest, baddest, most earth-shattering orgasm of her life.

Ed Main might not be the man of her dreams, but boy howdy, he got the job done.

All at once, her climax hit her like a rushing waterfall. It grabbed hold of her body and shook her hard, fast, full-throttle. The vibrations started deep in the lowest recesses of her cunt, then radiated upward and outward through her belly and chest and out through her limbs until everything, from the tips of her toes to her fingers to her tongue and even her eyelashes, burst. She was an exploding supernova, an atomic blast, a volcanic eruption.

This was an orgasm for the record books.

Shirley knocked her head back and cried out in a long, high-pitched animal scream.

Goddamn.

Who knew a small-town countrified Southern belle like her was even capable of fucking like a wild animal? Well, if the sound of that scream was any example, the whole world knew it now.

She felt Ed's climax begin to explode into her just as the last spasms of her own climax subsided. He let out a low, long guttural grunt, followed by a shouted "Hot *damn!*" Then he came. Big time. The force of his explosion was so hard, it nearly broke the condom in half.

Nearly, but not quite. The engineers back at Trojan designed those extra-large Magnums with red-blooded Carolina men like Ed Main in mind. And thank God for that.

Because Shirley wasn't done with Ed yet. Not by a long shot.

They still had a whole packet of condoms left to go, after all. And the night was young.

Very young.

Chapter Six

It took all the strength of will Shirley had to drag herself into work the next morning. She and Ed had been busy doing every possible variation of the Horizontal Bop until the wee hours, then finally collapsed to sleep on the hard, cold bathroom tile around four a.m. Since Shirley had to be at work that day by six-forty-five to prep for her first operation on her new job, that amounted to about an hour and a half of sleep. She still had a crick in her neck from falling asleep with her back and shoulders pressed up against her clawfoot tub with Ed sprawled on top of her. And all the hours of wild fucking had made muscles Shirley didn't even know she had plenty sore.

Ed had mumbled his goodbyes and shambled downstairs to his own apartment when Shirley's alarm woke them both at six. She wasn't sure if she'd ever see him again.

Well, she supposed she'd probably run into him in the lobby by the mailboxes, or maybe in the stairwell. But somehow she supposed she'd seen as much of Ed Main last night as she'd ever see of him in the naked department. Because while their red-hot, tile-banging night of stranger sex had been fabulous, there wasn't much to it beyond scratching an itch. No real passion or depth of feeling. Just a wild couple of fucks on a wet bathroom floor. Nothing poets would compose verses about, nothing a gifted sculptor would commit to marble. Just a basic, serviceable, reasonably satisfying night of fucking that got the job done without any frills.

When it came to fucking, Ed Main was like a sturdy old Chevrolet. Sure, he was reliable and got you from Point A to Point B. But he wasn't, well, a *Lexus*.

And Shirley Daniels wanted to fuck a Lexus, damn it. Maybe even a Rolls-Royce.

Dr. Randall Hamm could sure as hell pass for a Rolls-Royce. And as luck would have it, she was set to assist Dr. Randall Hamm in the OR today.

Shirley smiled to herself as she strode up to University Hospital's main lobby doors. She would make that man notice her today if it killed them both.

She paused to gaze at her reflection in the tinted glass window. She looked like warmed-over hell. But what could she expect after fucking her downstairs neighbor's brains out on the bathroom floor all night long? At least she didn't fall asleep facedown on the tile like Ed had and wind up with a hexagonal terrazzo pattern embedded into her cheek. She just had bags under eyes the size of Louis Vuitton deluxe travel totes, that's all.

Well, it was nothing a little caffeine and Maybelline couldn't fix. She glanced at her watch, saw she had ten minutes to spare before she needed to scrub in. Plenty of time to inhale a couple of mugs of strong black coffee and put on her face. She would make an impression on Dr. Randall Hamm, that was for damn sure. A *good* impression. The kind of impression that could help her get laid—this time, with the man she really wanted to sleep with.

Shirley slipped into the ladies' room, makeup kit in tow. She parked herself in front of the mirror and set herself to work erasing those Louis Vuittons from under her eyes. A dab of concealer here, some purple eye shadow there, a dash of sultry Lip Plumper gloss in Dusty Pink Nude, thick black liquid eyeliner, and some Maybelline Instant Lash Extensions, and *voila!* Instant sexpot.

Or as much as a sexpot as she could appear underneath shapeless scrubs and a blue paper bonnet, anyway. Fortunately for her, scrubbing in alone took ten minutes. That was ten minutes she could stand directly across from Dr. Randall Hamm at the scrub trough, pouting her lips and flitting her eyelashes at him like a *Maxim* cover model.

If only he'd pay attention.

Damn it, she'd *make* him pay attention. Somehow. She didn't have a good plan for exactly how to do that yet. But if Shirley Marie Daniels knew how to do anything, it was improvise.

She dusted the makeup residue off her hands and headed for the scrub room.

Her face fell and her heart sank when she got there, though. Because the instant she crossed the threshold into the green-tiled sterile scrub room, Dr. Randall Hamm was already at the drying table, holding his freshly scrubbed hands and forearms out in front of the blower.

Shit. Her plan was wrecked before she even got started.

"Good morning, Dr. Hamm," she sang at the top of her lungs, hoping to distract him enough to keep him in the scrub room for just a moment or two longer.

Dr. Hamm glanced over his shoulder at her. His eyebrows pursed together and he frowned. "Awful dolled up for a morning in the OR, aren't you, umm—what's your name again? Sharon?" he said, disapproval thick in his voice.

"I like to look professional at all times," Shirley chirped, slipping out of her cardigan and stepping up to the scrub trough. "And my name's *Shirley*, not Sharon."

"Oh, Shelley, right. Sorry."

"*Shirley*." So much for getting Dr. Drop Dead Gorgeous to notice her. He couldn't even get her damn name right. This was hopeless.

"Shelley, Shirley, what's the damn difference?" He shrugged.

"A big one," she said. Boy, Dr. Hamm wasn't exactly living up to his dreamy first impression from yesterday, no siree. Yesterday he was George Clooney. Today, he was more

like Hugh Laurie, the smarmy, cynical doctor on *House*. Talk about getting up on the wrong side of the bed.

Dr. Hamm finished drying off and slipped into his surgical gown. “Anyway, Shirley-whatever-your-name-is, there was recently a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showing that wearing cosmetics in the OR can increase the rate of patient infection. Lipstick, mascara, and nail polish are all notorious bacteria traps. So as long as you’re assisting me on anesthesia, *Shirley*, I suggest you take one of those sterile wet-wipes from the box over there and use it to wipe that mess off your face before you scrub in. No makeup in the OR. Period. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go get the machines calibrated.”

With that, Dr. Randall Hamm turned on his heel and stomped into the OR.

Sheesh. What a bastard. *No makeup in the OR?* Whoever heard of such a draconian rule? Not Shirley, and she was hardly a babe in the woods when it came to medical rules and regulations.

Things really were different here in the big city, that was for sure.

Dejected, Shirley used a sterile alcohol wipe to remove all her makeup. She stared at herself in the polished chrome surgical mirror above the scrub trough, cringing at her bare face, ruddy and raw from the rubbing alcohol. The bags under her eyes were bigger than ever.

Well, she’d gotten Dr. Hamm to notice her, all right. For all the wrong reasons.

She got into her mask and gown and dragged herself into the OR, blinking back tears.

* * * *

Dr. Randall Hamm stood in the OR, staring at the wall and grinding his teeth. He gazed down at his bulging crotch. *Down, boy*, he ordered his cock, which had taken on a life of its own the moment the hot new anesthesia nurse walked into the scrub room.

He knew her name now. Shirley Daniels. He'd made a point to make sure he knew it, in fact. He'd memorized it off the duty roster. He'd repeated it to himself a dozen times, relishing the feel of the words as they slipped off his tongue. *Shirley Daniels*. It was a sensible, old-fashioned name, and yet sensual at the same time, like the stage name of an old-time movie starlet in old Hollywood. He knew her name too well, in fact, and wished to God he didn't.

Seeing her face made up like a runway model's had thrown him for a loop. She had no right to walk into the scrub room looking like that. No right at all. It was an occupational hazard. He had no choice but to force her to wipe it off. There was no way he could make it through an entire operation staring at those luscious long lashes of hers. No way in hell. He needed her to stay as plain-Jane as possible. For the sake of his own sanity.

Damn it, he had it bad.

The situation was untenable. Things were bound to get complicated. And he didn't like complicated. He didn't *do* complicated. He liked everything in his life to be neat, clean, trim, and sterile. Especially where women were concerned.

And Shirley Daniels was anything but.

* * * *

Dr. Hamm didn't say a word to Shirley through the whole operation. She followed his cues on blind instinct. Lucky for her, she had fifteen years' experience in the OR and didn't need any help when it came to monitoring the anesthesia machine or the unconscious patient's vital signs. In fact, when the surgeon started closing up the incision, Dr. Hamm got up from his post behind the sleeping patient's head and left without explanation, leaving Shirley in charge of getting the patient into recovery. She wasn't sure if it was a snub on Dr. Hamm's part or a compliment of her skills.

Whatever it was, it really pissed her off.

The surgeon closed up the incision—a quick job, since it was a simple gallbladder operation and the surgeon was using staple sutures—and scrubbed out. The surgical nurses did a sponge count and all the other routine safety procedures for the end of an operation, and left the surgical suite one by one. Shirley dialed down the anesthesia and watched the sleeping patient's blood pressure and heart rate stabilize, then began disconnecting the elderly, moderately overweight woman from the anesthesia machine.

Everything went as it should, as routine as routine could get. Then, just as Shirley was about to call for an orderly to help her wheel the patient into the recovery room, a screeching alarm went off on the blood-pressure monitor.

“Oh my God!” Shirley cried as she watched the poor sleeping woman's blood pressure plummet to a near-lethal level. Her nurse's training told her that kind of postoperative blood-pressure drop could have only two possible causes: internal bleeding or anesthesia toxicity.

She pressed her blue-booted foot on the bright red button on the floor that read “EMERGENCY.” A recorded female voice called out “Emergency Team to Operating Suite, STAT. Emergency Team to Operating Suite, STAT. Code Red. Code Red.”

The surgeon, team of nurses, and another doctor Shirley didn't recognize bounded into the room. Most of them were already out of their surgical gowns and wearing nothing but dirty scrubs. All of them swarmed the operating table, taking pulses, checking breathing, trying to figure out what was wrong. But the one person that Shirley needed there most was nowhere to be seen.

“Where the hell is Dr. Hamm?” she yelled. “He's the one who calibrated the anesthesia machine, damn it! If he OD'd this patient, it's on his head, not mine!”

The emergency team paid her no attention. They were too busy trying to help the dying patient.

“Dr. Hamm!” she shouted to the empty air. “Get the *fuck* back in here!” She needed Dr. Hamm’s help desperately, but she didn’t dare leave her post. If she did, she’d be subject to disciplinary action. The patient was already disconnected from the machine, so if the dose she’d received had been toxic, at least she wasn’t getting any more of it. But Shirley wasn’t trained in emergency patient resuscitation beyond routine CPR and ventilator procedures. There was nothing more she could do.

All the vital signs monitors flatlined. The patient was dead. But would she stay dead?

The emergency team scrambled to save the elderly woman’s life. Epinephrine, shock paddles, heart pumps. Nothing worked.

After fifteen minutes of trying, the surgeon and emergency-services doctor both set their instruments down and shook their heads. “Time of death, eight forty-five,” the surgeon said. “We did everything we could. Now we just need to find out what the hell happened.” He stomped out of the OR, still shaking his head.

The other doctor came up to Shirley, his face grim. “Hi there, Shirley,” he said, reading her ID badge. “I’m Dr. Simpson from Emergency Services. Dr. Hamm is going to catch hell for this. Obviously he thought you were very capable, otherwise he wouldn’t have left you in charge of recovery. But he should have come back as soon as you sounded the alarm. It wasn’t fair of him to leave you high and dry like that, even if it turns out this wasn’t his fault.”

“It *has* to be his fault,” Shirley snarled, still stunned at what had just happened. “Why else would he have bolted out of here and not come back?”

“I don’t know,” Dr. Simpson replied. “But I don’t think we should be assigning blame prematurely. Sometimes patients just die for no good reason. I’m sure the woman’s family will order an autopsy. Hopefully we’ll have some more answers soon.” He paused, gave Shirley a sympathetic smile. “You were very fast on your feet, by the way. Good job.”

“It still didn’t do any good,” Shirley said, staring at the floor.

He gently squeezed her forearm. “People die in this business. That’ll never change. Just try to focus on the positive.” He covered the dead woman with a sheet, and finished filling out the toe tag so an orderly could pick up the body for the morgue. “It could be worse, you know. You could be the one stuck with breaking the news to this poor woman’s family.”

“I don’t envy you that job,” Shirley said.

Dr. Simpson sighed, shook his head and left, glancing back at her over his shoulder as he did so. There was a glint in his eye, Shirley noticed, but she couldn’t be sure if it was because he was interested in her or, if like her, he was blinking back tears.

Chapter Seven

Shirley stood under the scalding shower in the post-op locker room in a daze. She still couldn't get her mind around what had just happened. Dr. Randall Hamm, superstar hotshot head of University Hospital's Anesthesiology Department, had bailed in the middle of an operation, then disappeared when his patient went into cardiac arrest. It violated every rule Shirley knew existed about operating room and hospital procedure. If Dr. Hamm weren't head of the Anesthesiology Department, he'd be thrown out on his ass.

Then again, he might be thrown out on his ass anyway. Bailing on a dying patient wasn't exactly good form for a hotshot young department head, whether in a small country hospital or a big-city one.

Shirley turned the water up even hotter and buried her head in the spray. Her mind raced with unpleasant thoughts. Who was the woman who died? Shirley had glanced through her file before the operation according to hospital procedures, but she couldn't even remember the poor woman's name. Did she have children, a husband, grandchildren? What would happen to her family now that she was gone?

And more important than that, *what* had killed her? Was Dr. Hamm somehow responsible for her death? Or even worse, was Shirley herself responsible? Her stomach churned at the thought.

Shirley was embarrassed by her own behavior. She'd walked into work this morning focused on nothing but getting laid. She'd spent time dolling up her face and batting her eyelashes at Dr. Hamm when she should have been reviewing the patient's file and preparing for

the procedure. She'd let her love life interfere with patient care, and now the patient who'd been under her care was dead.

A sobering thought, indeed.

But even despite all that, Shirley just couldn't get Dr. Randall Hamm and his smoking-hot bod off her mind. Which made no sense whatsoever, considering the fact the guy not only didn't know she was alive—he just might have killed somebody this morning.

Talk about falling for the wrong guy.

What the hell was the matter with her? Shirley might be relatively new to the casual dating scene, but she usually had a much easier time seducing men. Take last night, for example. Ed Main—who was hot, younger than her by several years, and had shown up at her door half-naked to boot—had eaten right out of her hand within minutes of meeting her. Yet she couldn't get Dr. Hamm to notice her no matter how hard she tried. What was her problem?

The problem was, Shirley could get laid any time she wanted.

Just not with the *man* she really wanted.

She supposed there were more serious problems to have. But that didn't exactly comfort her. If anything, it just made her feel worse.

The heat that had burned in her belly and crotch this morning had just gone cold.

The wild sex romp she'd had with Ed last night might as well have never happened. All that was left in its place was a lump of frigid remorse.

Shirley switched off the shower and reached for a towel. She wasn't sure how fast gossip traveled through the miles and miles of hallways of her new employer, but she had a feeling she was about to find out.

* * * *

Shirley was standing in line at the OR suite elevator when she ran into Marla Crabtree. Or rather, Marla Crabtree ran into her.

Marla was walking backwards while talking to someone down the hall when she slammed right into Shirley. “Oh! Pardon me, ma’am!” Marla exclaimed without even looking up, then stooped over to pick up the stack of bedpans she’d just dropped. Fortunately, they were empty.

Marla stood back up and seemed surprised to see Shirley. “Well, if it ain’t the woman of the hour,” she clucked. “Mm, mm, mm. So yer first patient died on the operating table, huh? I’m tellin’ ya, hon, that’s gotta be a hospital record.”

Shirley’s heart sank. “So you’ve already heard.”

Marla’s wrinkled head bobbed up and down. “Good news travels fast ’round here, hon. Bad news, too.”

“So is what happened to me good news or bad news?” Shirley asked, not even trying to hide her sarcasm.

Marla looked thoughtful. “Well, guess it depends on how ya look at it, hon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it *is* sad that she passed away just from havin’ gallbladder surgery. But it ain’t like she had any friends. She was one of the meanest folks I ever run across.”

Shirley was incredulous. “You *knew* her?”

“Why, sure, hon. Didn’t you?”

“Well, I read her patient file, but I didn’t *know* her. Honestly, I can’t even remember her name.”

Marla laughed and slapped her knee with a bedpan. “Aw, hon, I keep fergittin’ ye ain’t from around here. That lady who died was Enola Higginbottom, the nastiest old hen ever to walk this here Earth. She ran the local chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy. Well, I wouldn’t call it much of a *chapter* nohow, since she was the only member left. Wouldn’t let nobody else in unless they swore an oath to destroy all things Yankee until their very last breath and all sorts of other evil nonsense I won’t even repeat. She was a mean, snotty old racist. Her husband did time in prison fer his Klan activities. Died in Leavenworth, as I recall. Meanness ran in her family. Oh, I don’t think anybody ’round here is sorry to see the last o’ her.”

Shirley was stunned. She’d had no idea she’d monitored the vital signs of a sleeping racist and modern-day Confederate sympathizer. A suddenly very plausible idea crossed her mind. “I wonder if that’s why Dr. Hamm left the OR in the middle of the operation?”

Marla shrugged. “I guess anything’s possible. Though if I was a bettin’ woman—which I ain’t, mind you—I’d say the gallbladder surgeon was to blame. Who was it, Dr. Hampton?”

Shirley paused to think back. “I’m not sure. My job was to keep an eye on what Dr. Hamm was doing with the anesthesia, not the surgeon.”

“Was he a short fat guy, balding, with a gray goatee? Deep voice, Northern accent?”

Shirley nodded.

“Yep, that’s Dr. Hampton, all right. Had his license suspended a couple years back fer leavin’ a scalpel in somebody. Made all kinds o’ other mistakes over the years. I’m surprised the hospital even lets him anywhere near here.” She scoffed. “Then again, he’s probably the only doctor fer miles around willin’ to lay a hand on that nasty old Enola Higginbottom anyhow. Lucky fer him, she don’t have no relatives or friends left to sue him fer wrongful death.”

Shirley gasped. “Wow. I don’t even know what to say about that.”

“Probably best to keep mum then,” Marla said matter of factly. “When you’ve been here long as I have, sometimes ya learn when to keep yer trap shut. I’d say now’s one o’ those times fer *you*.” She glanced over both her stooped, crooked shoulders, and lowered her voice. “An’ keep on yer toes around The Dragon Lady. She loves to fire people, nursin’ shortage or no nursin’ shortage. She could use Enola Higginbottom as an excuse to fire ya on yer second day. That’d be a record, even fer her.”

“I’ll watch my back,” Shirley said, her stomach knotting. “Thanks for the tip.”

“Anytime, hon,” Marla replied, tipping one of her empty bedpans up to her temple in a mock salute as she waddled down the hall.

Shirley sighed and shook her head as she stepped onto the waiting elevator. She wasn’t sure what to make of Marla Crabtree. She liked the woman, sure. Marla Crabtree was a hard woman not to like. But could she be trusted? Or was she just a harmless, eccentric old busybody? Given all that had happened her first two days on the job, Shirley wasn’t about to let her guard down with anyone.

* * * *

Shirley tiptoed into the nurse-anesthetists’ lounge, trying not to arouse any attention. She gingerly dropped her procedure report in Beth Peking’s inbox, hoping that the soft *swish* of manila folder against plastic mail tray wouldn’t be enough to distract The Dragon Lady away from her pile of paperwork.

Unfortunately, The Dragon Lady had the eyes and ears of a hawk in flight. The instant Shirley dropped the file in the inbox mounted on her half-open door, her head jerked up so fast that the red cats’-eye reading glasses flew off her head and landed on her desk with a *thunk*. “Ah, Shirley!” she shrieked. “You’re back! Come sit down! We need to talk! Right now!”

Shirley pasted on a fake smile and forced a spring into her step. She would not let this woman intimidate her. The Dragon Lady was in for a healthy dose of good-old-fashioned Southern sweetness and charm. “Good morning, Ms. Peking,” she sang. “And how are you today?”

“Not good! I hear from downstairs that your patient *died*! You killed your first patient? Who do you think you are? Jeffrey Dahmer?”

“It is my understanding that the patient died as a result of surgical complications, not from anesthesia,” Shirley replied, cool as fresh cream.

The Dragon Lady looked down her pert little nose at Shirley, suspicious. “How do you know that? They haven’t even done an autopsy yet.”

“Oh, a little bird told me,” Shirley replied. She had a feeling she knew exactly how to draw the attention away from herself, too. “And I think if anything bad comes up on how the anesthesia was handled on that operation, it’ll be on Dr. Hamm’s head, not mine. He bailed in the middle of the operation and didn’t even bother to come back with the emergency team when the patient flatlined.”

That got The Dragon Lady’s attention, all right. “You don’t say,” she said. “Oh, I’d like to see that Dr. Hamm get in trouble. Somebody really needs to bring him down to size. He’s got a big bug up his ass. Hmph.”

Shirley laughed despite herself. The Dragon Lady really wasn’t half bad, once you knew how to press her buttons. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who thinks so,” she said. Which was the truth.

The slightest indication of a smile tugged at Beth Peking’s pointy features. “You know, Shirley, I like you. You’re pretty smart for a dumb country girl.”

“Thanks,” Shirley replied. It was a backhanded compliment, but a compliment all the same.

* * * *

There were no more routine surgeries scheduled for the day, so Shirley spent the rest of her shift in the nurse-anesthetists’ lounge finishing up her human resources paperwork and catching up on the latest issue of *Anesthesia Nursing Today*. Just before her shift ended at three, she heard faint footsteps behind her. She glanced up and was stunned to see Dr. Randall Hamm standing just behind her chair.

“Interesting article,” he commented, reading over her shoulder. “Though I disagree with the author’s assertion that ketamine is a better inducer for anesthesia than sodium pentothal. Ketamine is slow-acting and can cause hallucinations.” He took a sip of his coffee and chuckled. “Just goes to show why nurses have no business going it alone at the anesthesia machine, let alone trying to write research papers.”

Shirley stood up abruptly and crossed to the other side of the room. “I already know how the doctors at this hospital feel about nurse-anesthetists, Dr. Hamm. You don’t need to rub it in.”

He blinked. “I think I already explained yesterday that I don’t share the draconian opinions of most of my colleagues. At least, not all of them.”

“Maybe so, but you never explained why you bailed on Ms. Higginbottom’s surgery today,” she said. “She’s dead now, you know. What the hell are you doing up here, anyway? Shouldn’t you be getting interrogated by hospital management right now, or filing a serious incident report or something? That’s what happened at my old hospital back in Statesville whenever somebody died on the operating table.”

Dr. Randall Hamm sucked in his breath and frowned. “That’s already happened, I’m afraid. And I’m not done yet. I came up here to take a breather from all that,” he said, and sighed. “Plus, I wanted some coffee. And maybe some company, too.”

Company? As in, hers?

Well, that was exactly the last thing she’d expected him to say.

Even as angry as she was at him, Shirley still couldn’t help also being attracted to the man. *Very* attracted. To the point that her crotch was on fire and her belly was doing backflips. Though the wild party that had just erupted in her lower half did little to assuage the shock and misgivings that had accumulated in her brain throughout this increasingly bizarre day. After all, it wasn’t every day that one of your patients died, let alone on your second day on the job. It was all so much to take in.

“I’m afraid I don’t make very good company when I’m upset,” she admitted. “Though my shift’s over now, so if you wanted to maybe go get a bite to eat or something—”

“I’m afraid I can’t leave hospital grounds right now,” he said, his voice gruff and strained. “I’m on duty until midnight. Plus I’ve still got a ton of meetings with management over what happened this morning. Maybe some other time.”

Well, so much for that, Shirley mused. Her disappointment was palpable. What the hell was this guy’s idea of “company,” anyway? “Some other time, then,” she muttered.

“Right,” he replied. And dashed out of the room before she could say another word.

What the hell was with this guy? Dr. Randall Hamm, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, was a mystery wrapped inside of an enigma. Shirley’s jaw clenched as she realized she couldn’t read this man at all. Nobody could. He was about as transparent as your average smokestack.

Shirley ground her teeth in frustration as she gathered her things to leave. She just needed to face facts. Dr. Randall Hamm would never be hers. Hell, he'd never be *anyone's*. He apparently just wasn't that kind of guy. He was a hot, sexy, mysterious, desirable—loner. Unattainable. Untouchable. In a word, forbidden.

And that just made Shirley want him all the more.

Damn it.

Shirley shifted back and forth on her feet, trying in vain to stifle the hot itch at her crotch.

Well, I suppose there's always Ed, she thought as she headed for the parking lot.

Chapter Eight

Shirley sat slumped in front of her television, watching the latest episode of *Celebrity Rehab* while munching on Triscuits straight from the box. Even though he was approaching fifty and not at all her type, she found herself fantasizing about Dr. Drew Pinsky while he consoled a relapsed B-movie-queen-turned-junkie as she puked her guts up into a wastebasket.

Fantasizing about sex about someone on late-night cable TV, helping a junkie puke. Nice. She must be really, really horny.

She sighed and reached into the box for another Triscuit, only to find that she'd scarfed down the whole box.

Well, I guess that's dinner, then, she thought. Pathetic. She really needed to get a life.

She really needed to get laid, too.

Shirley would have much preferred to have Dr. Randall Hamm in her bed tonight. But she was afraid Ed Main would have to do. She had itches to scratch, and she couldn't afford to be choosy.

Then again, there was no guaranteeing Ed would even be up for the job. She'd gotten the distinct feeling when he left her apartment this morning that last night was strictly a one-time-only "wham-bam, thank you ma'am" kind of thing. And as hot and young as he was, Shirley figured he was probably off banging someone else right now, probably someone younger and prettier than she was. Definitely someone who wasn't stretched out in front of the TV in raggy sweats eating Triscuits.

Still, she figured there was always a chance, however slight, that her hot young neighbor wasn't busy, and might be up for another romp with the sultry older woman from upstairs.

Don't ask, don't get, Shirley reminded herself. *At least give it a shot.*

But she couldn't exactly give it a shot wearing the same raggy sweatpants she'd been sleeping in since college and a faded-out novelty T-shirt that read "I'm Going Nucking Futs." Not exactly sexy, even if it was a pretty good description of how she felt right now.

She went to her room and rummaged through her closet, searching for something suitable for seduction. There weren't a whole lot of choices, since her wardrobe consisted mostly of nursing scrubs, a few pairs of faded jeans and knit tops, and two dressy outfits for special occasions. The dressy outfits would be overkill for a trip downstairs, so she chose her tightest pair of jeans and a bright red knit top that clung to her curves like a leotard. She topped it off with a matching red silk headband that tamed her disheveled locks, and a smidgen of peachy lip gloss. Now all that was left was the right pair of shoes.

She tossed aside the sensible loafers and slip-on flats that had dominated her wardrobe for years. As a nurse who spent hours on her feet, Shirley had always concentrated on comfortable, practical footwear. But even she had a shoe fetish. Way in the back of her closet were a pair of patent-leather stilettos that she hadn't worn since she went on her first nooky run as a fresh-n'-free single gal. On that hot, carefree spring evening, she had seduced a University of North Carolina frat boy almost half her age, and still managed to get to work in the morning. She'd fucked him wearing nothing but these stilettos, and their shiny patent-leather finish had gotten foggy from all the heat that encounter had created.

If that wasn't a sign she should wear them again tonight, she didn't know what was.

She slipped the stilettos on without bothering with stockings. It took all the balance and control she had to make it down the two narrow flights of stairs in those fuck-me shoes. She made it to Ed's door, and was about to knock when it opened by itself.

A pert little blonde with huge breasts stood in the doorway. She wore polka-dotted bikini underwear, a skimpy crop-top, and nothing else.

“Um, Ed?” the pert little blonde called over her shoulder. “There’s somebody out here.”

Damn, Shirley thought to herself. *Somebody already beat me to him.*

Ed appeared in the doorway, wearing nothing but a pair of skintight black Jockeys.

“Howdy, Shirley. C’mon in.”

Shirley froze in her tracks instead. “I, um, I don’t want to interrupt anything,” she stammered. “Why don’t I just go back upstairs? I didn’t really want anything important.” She bit her lip, searching for a plausible lie. “I just needed to, uh, borrow a cup of sugar.”

As if it were perfectly normal for women dressed in skintight jeans and stiletto heels to borrow cups of sugar at ten o’clock at night.

Ed’s eyebrows raised; the lie didn’t fool him for a minute. “It’s all right, Shirley, ya ain’t interruptin’ nothin’ nohow. If anything, yer just in time to join in on some fun. Ain’t that right, Billie?” He winked at the blonde, who giggled.

Ed pushed the door open wider and beckoned. Against her better judgment, Shirley teetered inside, her feet throbbing inside her stilettos. And her feet weren’t the only part of her that were throbbing now, either.

Ed swept the door closed behind her and fastened all three locks. Shirley’s violet eyes swept the room and took in its unusual furnishings. There was a low-slung platform sofa straight out of the ’70s, strewn with fat red velvet cushions. There was a thick tufted angora rug on the floor, with soft pile almost four inches thick. A framed “Love” poster hung over the sofa in a gilded frame. The room was dotted with dozens of lighted candles, and the scent of sandalwood incense wafted towards her nostrils. Barry White’s deep, sexy voice purred from two huge stereo

speakers mounted on the wall. A heart-shaped straw basket sat next to the thick, tufted rug, filled with bottles of sensual oils, massage implements, lubricant, a box of condoms.

Shirley had to stifle a gasp as she realized she'd just stepped into a sex chamber. Ed and his gal-pal Billie were obviously about to get it on together—so why had they been so quick to invite her inside?

Why, indeed.

Shirley was about to take part in her first threesome.

“Billie, why don't ya go an' pour us all some wine?” Ed asked, keeping his eyes fixed on Shirley the whole time. Billie nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. “Ya know, Shirl---do you mind if I call ya Shirl?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Well, Shirl, I'd just finished tellin' Billie what a great fuck ya were last night, and how much I'd like to have ya join us tonight, but ya beat me to it. Billie was just 'bout to head upstairs to yer apartment when ya just happened to show right up. Whatcha think about that?”

Shirley shrugged and sipped her wine. She was at a complete loss for words. His was uncharted territory.

“Well, I'll tell ya what *I* think,” Ed went on. “I think it's fate. We're destined to be together, you and me. Not in some big real romantic way, with weddings and flowers or nuthin' like that. Just in a hot sexy way. 'Cause I think you are one hot sexy lady. Billie thinks so, too. Ain't that right, Billie?”

Billie appeared, balancing three glasses of red wine on a tray. “Damn straight,” she quipped. Her voice was tinny and high-pitched, almost like a bird's voice. “Any gal that Ed thinks is hot is hot in my book, too. Ed's got real high standards.” She handed Shirley a glass of

wine, then reached out and squeezed Shirley's left breast, testing it like a melon. "Oooohh," she cooed. "I ain't never seen boobs that big that were *real* before!"

Guess that means yours aren't, toots, Shirley mused. But try as she might to dislike the girl, she just couldn't bring herself to. She was sweet and bubbly and seemed genuinely thrilled that Shirley had joined their sexy little soiree. "We're so lucky to have you, Shirley," the younger woman gushed. "Ed and I have wanted to do something like this for months now."

Months? So apparently Billie wasn't one of Ed's one-night stands, as Shirley had obviously been the night before. Shirley didn't know if that should make her feel cheap or lucky.

In any case, Ed must have had a good enough time with her last night to come back for more. *Much* more.

Ed gazed at her lasciviously, undressing her with his eyes. She suddenly felt very exposed.

What exactly was she getting herself into? Should she cut and run now while she still had a chance? Or should she stay and see what it really meant to have a threesome? What was all the fuss about threesomes, anyway? Why were they considered so taboo?

And why did the very thought of having one turn Shirley's crotch to cream?

There was only one way to find out.

"Let's get this party started, gals," Ed said. He gulped the last of his wine and tossed his wineglass in the fireplace, where it shattered. Then he stepped out of his Jockeys and tossed them across the room. They landed on the corner of the "Love" poster.

Shirley turned to stare at Ed's huge, dripping cock, which seemed even bigger and thicker than she remembered from last night. She wanted to take it into her mouth, taste the familiar,

musky-salty flavor of his pre-come, relish the feel of his cock and balls' rough, wrinkled skin against her tongue, her cheeks, her hands, her neck.

But Billie had already beat her to it. While Shirley had been reminiscing about Ed's flavors and textures, Billie had parked herself on her knees right in front Ed and had taken his whole thick, throbbing length into her mouth. Her pert blond head bobbed up and down, up and down while she sucked him. Ed had his head thrown back while he enjoyed the blow job, thrusting his hips forward and back, forward and back, while Billie matched his movements in perfect counterpoint. Ed grunted and groaned his pleasure, while Billie gave little squeals of her own as she realized just how much he liked what she was doing to him. Meanwhile, Billie slipped out of her panties and started touching herself, rubbing her clit and fingering her wet hole with one hand while she steadied herself against Ed's body with the other. The two of them were so into each other, Shirley might as well have not even been there. And still...

Shirley stood frozen in her tracks, staring at the obscene display. She wasn't even doing anything, but she was more turned on that she'd ever been in her entire life. Watching another woman give a man a blow job was the hottest thing she'd ever seen. Watching another woman give a man a blow job was practically enough to make her come all by itself.

Okay, so now she understood what all the fuss was about.

Threesomes weren't so much about three people fucking as they were about one person *watching* two other people fuck.

Instinctively, Shirley's hand strayed to the button of her jeans. She unfastened the button and slid down the zipper. She stepped out of her stilettos and slid the jeans off, one leg at a time. The panties were next. As Shirley started sliding them off, their soaking-wet crotch leaving trails of moisture on her thighs on the way down, she glanced up to see that Ed was staring at

her, watching her impromptu striptease. He licked his lips and smiled as she got the panties off. Her skintight top was next, followed by her bra. Her violet eyes locked with his blue ones, and a bolt of electricity jumped across their room in the space between their bodies, sizzling them both.

Never once breaking his thrusting rhythm into Billie's mouth, Ed, beckoned Shirley to come and join them. And very, very timidly, she did.

As she closed the distance between them, Ed suddenly let out a low moan. He reached down and gently pushed Billie off his cock. "Any more o' that sweetness, hon, and it'll be all over. Let's take a breather, huh?" Billie smiled and nodded, then reached out to caress Shirley's thigh.

"You're so beautiful, Shirley," the younger woman said. "I love your skin. It's so soft and white. Like a magnolia. And you smell so good. I bet you taste good, too."

Before Shirley knew what was happening, Billie pushed her backwards until she was lying flat on the soft angora rug. Billie pushed her legs apart, parked her blond head between them, and started eating Shirley's pussy.

Shirley let out a little cry of surprise. Just last night she'd had her pussy eaten, but Billie was doing such things to her down south that she might as well be a virgin. No sooner than Billie's tongue hit her clit, Shirley came hard. Hard enough to shake her whole body into submission. Hard enough to make all four of her limbs thrash, hard enough to make her head and heart explode. Billie had all the same juicy wet parts that Shirley did, and boy howdy, did she know how to make them sing.

Ohhhhhhh. Now Shirley understood why men liked to watch women fuck each other. Because it was hot, hot, hot.

Shirley involuntarily pulled her legs up and back and held onto her knees, making her cunt a wide-open flower in full bloom. Following her cue, Billie sunk her mouth and tongue in deeper, plunging into Shirley's darkest, sweetest depths. The younger woman darted the tip of her tongue against Shirley's clit in rapid-fire thrusts, alternating that sensuous treatment with some good-old-fashioned rubbing with her thumbs. When Billie wasn't rubbing her hot button hard, she was finger-fucking her. Shirley moaned, groaned, screamed and cried. The sensations the younger woman evoked in her body were like nothing she had ever experienced.

And if that weren't enough, Ed was going to town on her now, too. He started by tenderly nuzzling the delicate soft skin of her neck and torso, then worked in harder and deeper until he was sucking whole sections of her skin into his mouth. By the time he was finished giving her the royal suck treatment, every millimeter of her skin was alive and buzzing with sensation. She felt electric, truly alive, possibly for the first time in her life. And just when she thought the sensations between her legs and over the sweaty heaving surface of her body couldn't possibly get more intense, Ed and Billie took things up another notch.

Ed squeezed Shirley's breasts together tight and hard, then lifted them up and out until a small tunnel formed underneath them. Then Ed rose up on his haunches and shoved his cock in the space between her breasts, thrusting himself back and forth until he was fucking her there.

A man was fucking her breasts. Shirley never knew such a thing was possible.

If that weren't outrageous enough, somehow Ed managed not only to keep his cock strutting in that tunnel he'd created between her breasts, in a feat of wild gymnastics he captured both of Shirley's nipples into his mouth at the same time, kneading them between his lips and tongue in perfect time with his animal thrusts.

Wow.

Another seemingly impossible thing was happening between Shirley's legs. Billie had been finger-fucking Shirley with gusto for a while, but she was taking things up a notch, too. Instead of the just one or two fingers she'd been using to stimulate Shirley's soaking-wet vagina and g-spot, Billie was slowly but surely working more and more of her hand inside. First it was three fingers stretching and pulling and thrusting, making Shirley wider and looser than she ever thought possible. She was already on the verge of coming, but something was holding her back—maybe just curiosity? As wild as things were getting, who knew what could happen next?

Just when Shirley was about to go over the edge, Billie abruptly pulled her hand out of her, got up and crossed the room. Shirley whimpered as she saw her orgasm backing away from her; her now-empty cunt ached to be filled again. Ed was still fucking her breasts to beat the band, but it wasn't enough to keep her satisfied—not by a long shot.

She needed something to fill her cunt. Now.

"Fuck me, Ed," she cried. "Please."

Ed paused from his boob-fucking and looked up. "Just sit tight, hon," he whispered with a smile. "Billie's just gettin' ready for somethin' I guarantee you'll like better than anything *I* can do to you."

That just made Shirley mad. "No! I need you *now!* Please!" Her cunt was a black hole now, desperate for something to fill it before her whole body collapsed in on itself.

Just then, Billie reappeared between her legs. "Aw, Shirl, I guarantee this'll make you feel all better right away."

Shirley felt something slick and cold between her legs. The scent of raspberry-flavored Astroglide filled the air. Billie slipped a finger back inside her, tickled Shirley's g-spot, then slipped in another finger. The process repeated again, each time the pressure in her vagina and

the tickling of her g-spot getting more and more intense. Billie pulled and tugged and stretched her pussy lips and her insides, then pushed something hard and thick and deep inside her, something harder and thicker and deeper than anything that had crossed her most intimate threshold in her life. The tension in Shirley's body was the most explosive it had ever been—she was on the verge of going supernova. Only the slightest thread of reserve and determination kept her from going off a cliff and deep into the abyss.

That, and Shirley wanted to know just what the hell was inside of her. For all she knew, it was a battering ram. Or maybe a late-model Cadillac. Whatever it was, it was huge. And it was throbbing in a way that nothing stuffed inside of a cunt should throb.

"I'm in," Billie whispered.

Ed took this as his cue to pull himself off Shirley's upper body. He sat on his haunches just beside her and reached out to stroke her forehead. "Look down," he said. "Look down and see what's inside you."

Shirley obeyed. And to her astonishment, saw that Billie's entire right hand, wrist, even a good chunk of her forearm was inside her cunt. She screamed. In pleasure, of course.

The throbbing inside her intensified even more. "You're feeling me open and close my hand right now, hon," Billie cooed, smiling. "It's called fisting. I hope you like it. I know I love it when Ed does it to me."

Fisting? An entire human fist was crammed up her cunt, opening and closing? That was what was making her body feel like one giant interstellar explosion?

Goddamn.

With a scream that could shatter glass, Shirley came so long and hard that she lost consciousness.

The old saying was true. Once you go threesome, you never go back.

* * * *

Shirley awakened in darkness. She didn't know how long she'd been out—minutes or hours, she had no idea. Her whole body ached from the wild sexual exertions she'd experienced, and yet she still felt relaxed and completely at peace. The level of satisfaction Billie and Ed had evoked from her body was beyond description.

Most of the candles had gone out, except for two or three that were still burning on the far side of the room. Shirley heard some soft grunts and moans coming from that direction, heard something that sounded like rhythmic friction on soft carpet, too. She turned her head in that direction and saw Ed and Billie, both naked. And fucking.

They were in a variation of the missionary position, except Billie's body was pulled up into an arc, her weight resting on her shoulders. Ed was kneeling before her, resting her legs on her shoulders while he pushed his cock in and out of her cunt—easy, since she was exactly perpendicular to him. Shirley recalled that she and Ed had enjoyed this very same position together the night before, and her own cunt vibrated at the memory of the deep, hard penetration it afforded.

Shirley watched in fascination as the attractive young couple fucked each other hard. Ed varied his rhythm back and forth from short bursts of rapid-fire thrusts with intervals of slow, deep, hard rams. Billie counterthrust her tiny hips up and out, matching him stroke for stroke. Shirley admired the younger woman's strength and agility. Shirley had only been able to hold her own body in that position for a minute or so last night, while Billie stayed that way for the duration of the fuck, which seemed to go on forever. Shirley already knew from last night that Ed had plenty of stamina, so who knew how much longer things could last? She hoped against

hope that once Ed was finished with Billie, he'd have the energy left to stick that wonderful dick of his deep inside her, too.

Even though their eyes were screwed tightly shut, Ed and Billie still seemed to sense that Shirley was now awake, watching them closely. Their pace quickened, intensified. Instead of the soft, gentle whimpers that accented their sex play before, the couple's vocalizations became harsher, deeper, more animal-like.

"Uhhnnnuhh!" Ed grunted, pumping harder and faster. "Unuh, unuh, *unnuggh!*"

"Oooohhhhhh!" Billie cried. "Yes! Oh baby, baby, yeah! Fuck me, Ed! Fuck me so hard!"

Okay, so maybe it wasn't the most eloquent dialogue in the world. Shirley had seen cheesy porno movies with better sex lines than that. But that didn't change the fact that watching this beautiful, strong (not to mention *limber*) young couple fuck each other's brains out wasn't one of the hottest things she'd ever seen in her entire life.

So hot, in fact, that Shirley needed to get off. In a big way. Now.

Both her hands dropped to the space between her legs. She pried her wet vulva apart with one hand, started in on her red-hot, swollen clit with the other. She settled back against the side of the sofa for leverage, and went to town.

She was on the verge of coming again when she heard Billie and Ed's simultaneous cries of release. Instead of collapsing into one another and enjoying the afterglow, however, the couple immediately got up and came over to where Shirley was propped up against the sofa, satisfying herself. While Ed went to dispose of his condom, Billie started sucking on one of Shirley's breasts. She let Shirley work on her cunt by herself, perhaps out of respect for the wild treatment the younger woman had given that piece of anatomy only a short time before. Shirley

threw her head back, relishing the heat building between her legs and the wet sensuousness of the younger woman's mouth on her nipple, riding the tide of pleasure as it ebbed and flowed, ebbed and flowed. She was so lost in her reverie of ecstasy that she barely heard Ed pad over to her on his bare feet, barely heard the foil of the condom packet tear open, barely felt his hard, sheathed cock pass the threshold of her cunt until he was fully on top of her, pumping and thrusting like a stallion.

He pumped her hard, slamming into her womb every time, making her g-spot explode upon each impact. She came again and again and again, until she thought every cell in her body would disintegrate into nothingness. Worlds, stars, galaxies formed between their two sweating, straining bodies.

Now she knew what the term "Big Bang" really meant.

Ed finally exploded into her. Then, to her shock and dismay, he immediately pulled out, bringing their bliss to a sharp, sudden end. He stood up and crossed the room, holding the wilted condom out in front of him, then dropped it into a wastebasket before he ducked down the hall and pulled a door shut behind him. Billie had already disappeared somewhere into the depths of the apartment. Wherever the two had disappeared to, the unspoken message was clear: *we're done with you now, so get out.*

Shirley was all alone. Alone, naked, and rubbed raw in all the wrong places.

I knew there had to be a catch, she mused.

So much for threesomes. It was plenty of fun in the heat of the moment, but at the end of the day, someone always got stuck being the third wheel.

Chapter Nine

Work was absolutely the last place Shirley wanted to be that morning. Her back ached, she had a painful crick in her neck, and the entire lower half of her body felt like it had been torched.

Not to mention the fact she hadn't slept a wink all night long. Once she knew she'd been tossed out of Billie and Ed's love nest, she'd headed back upstairs to her own bed. And she ended up spending the rest of the night staring at her cracked bedroom ceiling, wracked with all sorts of conflicting emotions. Was she a sophisticated, sensual goddess—or a cheap whore? Would she ever be able to look Ed in the eye if they ran into each other in her building's lobby or in the parking lot? Would he ever want to fuck her again?

Hell, knowing that she'd spent the better part of a weeknight getting fisted hard by a hot blonde and fucked even harder by a man in his twenties, would *any* man ever want to fuck her again?

And far most troubling of all, what would Dr. Randall Hamm think of a woman with her checkered sexual past? The guy didn't exactly seem like a man who was into anything kinky.

He didn't seem like a man who was into anything sexual at all, in fact. He was just about as unreadable and cold as any man Shirley had ever laid eyes on. It was a cruel twist of irony that he was also the hottest-looking man she'd ever laid eyes on.

For the first time in her life, Shirley truly understood what it meant to be lovesick. In the Victorian sense. To the point of swooning. She had a nasty case of the vapors.

In fact, she'd seriously considered calling in sick today. And she would have, if it weren't only her third day on the job.

How would she make it through three operations today when her cunt felt like it had been stretched a mile wide thanks to Billie's fisting and Ed's fucking? How would she be able to concentrate when her head ached and her heart clenched with desire for the one man she couldn't have—the very same man who'd be standing right behind her in the OR?

Shirley had absolutely no idea.

She could really use a stiff drink. Or *several* stiff drinks. Too bad it was illegal for nurses to drink on the job.

Shirley headed down the hall towards Beth Peking's office, dragging her feet the whole way. Even at this ungodly hour, The Dragon Lady was already at her desk, dressed in yet another red silk Mandarin suit—this one decorated with lotus flowers—and yet another pair of four-inch spike heels. She stared Shirley down as she came into the room, frowning and drumming her long lacquered nails on her desktop. Something in the tiny woman's fierce expression told Shirley that today was going to be even worse than she thought.

"Shirley Daniels!" the Dragon Lady squawked. "You're not even here three days, already you're making trouble."

"I, I—" Shirley stammered.

"Be quiet. Sit down."

Shirley obeyed. She plunked herself down on a hard wooden chair, then winced when the impact stung her already-aching sensitive parts.

This didn't slip The Dragon Lady's notice. "What's the matter with you, Shirley? You constipated?"

“No, umm, ahhh,” Shirley searched for a plausible lie. “I just pulled some muscles working out, is all.” Which was true, in a manner of speaking. The vagina was a sort of muscle, wasn’t it?

“Well, today is your lucky day, then. You’re banned from the OR today.”

“What? Why?”

The Dragon Lady rolled her eyes. “Come on. You know why. Because of what happened yesterday. You killed your first patient. Now you have to file an incident report.”

“I didn’t kill the patient! From what I understand, the *surgeon* probably did.”

“Don’t argue with me. You’re *my* nurse. *I* say whether you killed your patient or not.”

Shirley blinked twice. So much for Beth Peking’s soft side, which Shirley had had just a glimpse of yesterday. The Dragon Lady was back in force. Which must mean that The Dragon Lady was taking some heat from yesterday’s OR debacle herself. “Ms. Peking, I assure you that I was not responsible for what happened to the patient yesterday. And I am sure that will be proven beyond a doubt once the hospital’s investigation is complete. In fact, I will do everything in my power to show that you run the best nurse-anesthetists’ team in the entire Southeast.”

If there was one thing about nursing that Shirley had learned back in Statesville, it was *when in doubt, butter up your boss*.

And it seemed to work. The Dragon Lady’s expression softened; Shirley thought she might have even noticed the tiny beginnings of a smile tugging at one corner of the tiny woman’s birdlike mouth. “Just get those administration bozos off my back,” she snapped. “I’m up to here in paperwork now. All kinds of big shots are asking me all kinds of questions. I don’t need any more trouble. I’m already too busy. You understand?”

Shirley nodded. “It’ll all turn out fine, Beth. I promise.”

“Don’t call me Beth! You call me Ms. Peking!”

Shirley sighed. What kind of Chinese woman was named *Beth* in the first place? “It’ll all turn out fine, *Ms. Peking*.”

The Dragon Lady smiled for real. “That’s better. Now get out. Go to the president’s office. On the third floor. They’re waiting for you.”

At this hour? Shirley thought as she left. It was just barely past six thirty in the morning. But then again, hospital administrators weren’t known for keeping bankers’ hours.

She swallowed hard, bit her lip, and headed for the elevators.

* * * *

As she expected, the hospital administration’s offices were mostly dark and empty at this early hour. But there was a single overhead florescent light burning in the small secretary’s nook that sat in front of the president’s office. A petite, elderly secretary with perfectly coiffed hair and an expensive-looking suit sat behind the brightly polished desk, typing a memo. She looked up from her computer screen as Shirley approached and smiled.

“Ah, you must be Shirley Daniels,” the secretary drawled in a voice that dripped of the old South. Her hair was a lacquered lavender helmet, and her wattly blue-veined neck dripped with fine cultured pearls. Back in her youth, this woman was probably the prototypical upper-class Southern belle, complete with ruffles, parasol, and her very own white verandah draped in Spanish moss. She probably went to finishing school instead of college, where she learned how to dance the quadrille and the delicate art of holding one’s pinkie out while drinking tea. And now she was a hoity-toity executive secretary in a designer suit, probably earning double the salary Shirley did with a graduate degree in nursing.

Shirley disliked her immediately.

“The president’s waitin’ for you, darlin,” the woman drawled, turning back to her memo. “Make sure you’re honest, now. President Chalmers can tell when people lie. Honest, he can.”

The pit of Shirley’s stomach quivered. There was a sinister edge to the aging Southern belle’s voice. What was that hoity-toity woman implying, anyway? She had no intention of lying. In fact, the whole situation seemed fairly straightforward to her. A routine inquiry into an unexpected OR death, that’s all. This sort of thing was commonplace in hospitals, big and small, all over the country. Wasn’t it?

Shirley glanced back at the snobby secretary, who was absorbed in typing her memo and no longer acknowledged her presence. She obviously wasn’t going to get any more help there. She took a deep breath for courage and padded into the hospital president’s office, her thick-soled Nurse Mates sinking into the deep plush pile of the office carpeting.

President Chalmers hulked behind a huge mahogany desk, reading a thick medical text. He was a pudgy man with a white beard and an expensive suit, and looked to be in his late sixties. Several framed diplomas and certificates decorated the wood-paneled wall behind him, and a brass nameplate reading “REGINALD CHALMERS, MD, MBA” sat on the edge of the desk. So President Chalmers was also *Dr.* Chalmers. That was unusual. In Shirley’s experience, doctors and hospital administrators hated each others’ guts. For Chalmers to be walking both sides of that line made him a hard man to read indeed.

President Chalmers didn’t acknowledge Shirley’s presence, so she cleared her throat loudly. Twice. After what seemed like an eternity, the gruff old man looked up. His flinty gray eyes scanned Shirley up and down, up and down again. “Well. You must be the new hire under Beth Peking,” he said. His Southern drawl was even thicker and more patrician than his polished Steel Magnolia secretary. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“All good, I hope,” Shirley said, trying hard to sound upbeat when in reality, she was shaking in her Nurse Mates.

President Chalmers didn’t seem too impressed by that. “I hear from persons who have reason to know you were the attending nurse anesthetist when Enola Higginbottom died in the OR. Is that true?”

Shirley swallowed hard. “Yes, sir, it is.”

President Chalmers’s thick gray brows knitted together, forming a single tuft that looked like the wrong end of a rabbit. “Anything else you’d like to say ’bout that?”

“Sir, with due respect, I would like to state that I conducted myself to the best of my nursing abilities at all times during the procedure. It was I who alerted the emergency response team when Ms. Higginbottom became, ahem, distressed. And I stayed with the patient and continued monitoring her until the attending physician determined there was nothing more to be done for her.”

President Chalmers listened in silence, a baleful expression pulling at his ruddy wrinkled features. He seemed to be expecting something more from her. Something Shirley wasn’t entirely sure she was willing to give him.

But whether she wanted to spill the beans on Dr. Randall Hamm was beside the point. Her job was on the line, after all—not to mention her own personal ethics. She swallowed hard and did what she had to. “Sir, it gives me great pain to tell you that the anesthesiologist supervising both me and the operation left in the middle of the procedure, abruptly and without explanation. He never came back to the OR, even after Ms. Higginbottom flatlined.”

President Chalmers's tightened jaw relaxed the slightest bit, the muscles rippling underneath the snowy white hairs of his beard. He nodded once. "Um-hm. And who was the anesthesiologist in question, Miss Daniels?"

"I think you already know that, sir."

"I want you to tell me."

"It was Dr. Randall Hamm, sir. I—I even tried calling out for him, to get him to come back to the OR, but he never did. And he never explained why, either." Shirley felt her cheeks burn, felt her pulse quicken. She knew she was betraying Dr. Hamm, but she had no choice. In fact, a part of her was almost *glad* to be betraying him. That just made her cheeks burn and her pulse quicken even more.

President Chalmers didn't say anything for almost a full minute. He coughed, shuffled papers on his desk, fiddled with a pen, shuffled more papers. "Good gal," he finally said, his tone softer and much more friendly. "Now you're sure that Dr. Hamm never explained where he went when he left the OR?"

"Not to me, sir."

"Miss Daniels, may I ask what your impressions are of working at University Hospital thus far? As I recall you haven't even been here a week, and yet you've already managed to see a fair bit of excitement."

Shirley bit her lip. This was a trick question if there ever was one. "Well—"

"It's all right, gal. This ain't a test. Whatever you say in here stays right here in this office."

"Well, sir, it's certainly been—interesting. Definitely a big change from my days working in a small town."

“You came here from Statesville, didn’t you?”

Shirley nodded.

“Nice town, Statesville. The wife and I got ourselves a hunting cabin out that way. Nice place to go for deer season. Pretty in the springtime, too.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I expect that life here in the big city is a mite different than what you were used to back in Statesville?”

Shirley bit her lip again. This could get hairy in a hurry. “It’s been a bit of an adjustment, sir,” she muttered. Ha. If he only knew.

“Well, you seem like a resourceful gal,” President Chalmers chuckled, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on the desk. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine here in Raleigh. Which brings me to the whole reason I called you in here in the first place. I hafta admit, I called your boss Beth Peking on a bit of a false pretense. We never suspected you were responsible for what happened to Enola Higginbottom in any way whatsoever. But I couldn’t exactly come up with another reason to have you come into my office at six thirty in the morning. Not without havin’ The Dragon Lady get suspicious, anyhow.”

Shirley stifled a giggle. So even President Chalmers called Beth Peking The Dragon Lady behind her back. That went a long way to show just how unpopular she really was. “Ms. Peking is a very interesting person to work for, sir.”

The jowly old man guffawed. “Well, you sure are polite, ain’t ya? Which makes me think you’re perfect for the little job I’ve set up for you to do.”

“What kind of job, sir? Something besides anesthesia work?”

“In a manner of speaking. What I want you to do, Miss Daniels, is try to find out more about Dr. Randall Hamm. Spend some time with him. Find out what makes him tick. My administrators and I have been up and down this whole Enola Higginbottom thing, and we can’t for the life of us figure out why Dr. Hamm would have bolted outta the OR like that. And *he* ain’t telling us why, neither. And even though he’s department head and worked here at University for nigh on ten years, nobody, not even the snoops up in Human Resources, have one iota of personal information on the guy. Not even his home address. He uses a PO box on his HR form, and his emergency contact number is a pager service. I need you to find out everything you can about Dr. Randall Hamm, then report that info back to me.”

Shirley could hardly believe her ears. The president of University Hospital was actually *ordering* her to spend time with Dr. Randall Hamm! It was a dream come true.

Or then again, it could also be her worst nightmare.

“This is a top-secret operation, by the way,” President Chalmers went on. “Nobody is to know about this, except you an’ me. An’ whatever you do, don’t do anything that’ll make Dr. Hamm suspicious. The guy’s already too tightly wound as it is.”

“Well, if this is supposed to be so secret, how will I get Dr. Hamm to spend any time with me in the first place?” Shirley asked. “He’s not exactly social. Every time I’ve tried to have any kind of conversation with him, he finds some excuse to disappear.”

Shirley knew she had to tread lightly here. If President Chalmers got any inkling of her true feelings for Dr. Hamm, the whole plan was doomed.

The gruff old administrator paused to think. “Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll cook up some story about how I want Dr. Hamm to spend some time socializing with all the new nurse-anesthetists as part of a nurse retention effort. Chalk it up to high turnover and the nursing

shortage. Tell him to take you to lunch, show you the ropes around the hospital a bit. He'll probably bite. He knows he's about three steps away from bein' fired himself as it is. Sound fine?"

Shirley nodded.

"Good. You keep me up to date on what you find out, now. And remember, this is our little secret."

"Yes sir," Shirley replied. She turned on her heel and trudged out of President Chalmers' office.

Then, her entire lower half went up in flames.

Chapter Ten

Shirley strode back into The Dragon Lady's office, a huge grin plastered on her face. Her tiny boss jerked bolt upright in her chair. Clearly this was not the expression she'd expected Shirley to have after being grilled by the hospital president.

"Well, I'm back," Shirley sang. She was walking on air. She even made a point to do a little dance in front of The Dragon Lady's desk, soft-shoeing it with her Nurse Mates on the linoleum.

Her boss was aghast. "What happened? Why are you so happy? President Chalmers never makes people happy. He's grumpy and mean. He makes my life hell."

"On the contrary, I found President Chalmers to be quite the Southern gentleman," Shirley said. "Really, what a nice man."

"I thought you were in big trouble!" The Dragon Lady squawked. "Why are you so happy? I thought they were going to fire you. I thought they were going to fire *me!*"

Shirley reached out and patted Beth Peking's tiny, red-taloned hand. "Don't worry. Both our jobs are safe, I promise. Everything is just fine. Fine and dandy."

The Dragon Lady eyed her suspiciously. "Either you're lying, or you're crazy. Nobody goes into President Chalmers's office the day after somebody dies in the OR and comes back singing and doing a stupid dance. Something really fishy is going on here."

Shirley decided it was high time she changed the subject. She glanced at the nurse-anesthetist schedule on the wall and noticed her name wasn't on it. "Well, since it looks like the trouble from yesterday has blown over, I think you can put me back on the OR schedule," she said. "When do I scrub in? I'm anxious to get back on track."

The Dragon Lady sighed and shuffled some papers. “I have no OR openings until this afternoon. Meantime, you review procedures. Unless you want to go to Labor and Delivery to help on epidurals?”

Shirley winced. She’d never liked Labor and Delivery. The sight and sound of screaming pregnant women in labor had never appealed to her. “I’ll take a pass on that. Just give me a procedures manual and I’ll get started.”

“Suit yourself, country girl,” The Dragon Lady sighed, and thrust a heavy procedures binder into her face. “Now get out of my office. I’m busy today.”

With pleasure, Shirley thought, and headed for the door.

And ran smack-dab into Dr. Randall Hamm.

“Pardon me,” he said, his expression unreadable, as usual. “I’ve come to speak with your boss.” Shirley made a motion to leave, but Dr. Hamm held up a hand to stop her. “It’s concerning you, Shirley, so you should probably stick around.”

The Dragon Lady turned eight different shades of green.

Dr. Hamm plopped down in one of Beth Peking’s hard, uncomfortable chairs. “I hope you don’t mind me dropping by like this unannounced, Ms. Peking, but I got a directive from the president’s office today to spend some orientation time with your new hire here.”

The Dragon Lady’s face went from green to purple. “O-orientation time? Why? Shirley’s *my* employee, so it’s *my* job to do orientation, not yours.”

Dr. Hamm cleared his throat. “Well, yes, under normal circumstances that would be true. But apparently President Chalmers is concerned about the high employee turnover in the nurse-anesthetists’ department—I say that with all due respect to you, Ms. Peking—and since he

doesn't want the nursing shortage at this hospital to get any worse, he is assigning new nurse hires to work directly with senior physician staff as part of a new employee retention program."

The Dragon Lady coughed, then appeared to swallow her tongue.

"Since the directive comes from President Chalmers himself, I take it there will be no objections if I borrow Ms. Daniels for a few hours today?" Dr. Hamm went on. "I know she's not on the OR schedule today, but then again, I'm not either. I'll be showing her around some of the more technical areas of the Anesthesiology Department, and I'm thinking I'll take her to lunch afterwards. Strictly business, of course."

The Dragon Lady sank deep into her chair, almost disappearing behind her desk.

"Well, Shirley, we best be off then, before Ms. Peking changes her mind." Dr. Hamm took her lightly by the arm and led her out into the hallway. He was by far the most upbeat she'd ever seen him, but she still couldn't read his true feelings or intentions. Dr. Hamm wore his poker face all the time, and today was no exception.

Shirley's mind raced with all sorts of ideas of how she might take advantage of this golden opportunity. She'd become quite adept at seduction, after all. With all the sexual adventures she'd gotten into lately, getting Dr. Randall Hamm into her bed ought to be easy. But it just wasn't that simple. Something about this gorgeous, mysterious man made Shirley clam up on the outside, even as she heated up on the inside. She felt like a shy, giddy schoolgirl in his presence, and all her hard-won seductress skills just seemed to fly out the window. As she timidly followed him down the hallway towards the bank of elevators, she felt transported back to her teen years—her limbs and belly tingling with hormones, her mind addled by desires she was too young and inexperienced to understand.

She might not be young and inexperienced any more, but when it came to a man like Dr. Randall Hamm, Shirley might as well be a virgin wallflower. She was way out of her league, and she knew it.

“Well, Shirley, I must say I was a little surprised when President Chalmers asked me to be your orientation buddy,” Dr. Hamm said as he pressed the “DOWN” button on the elevator. “But I can see where he’s coming from setting up a program like this. We’ve really had a problem with employee turnover among the nurses, especially the nurse-anesthetists. But if you ask me, the best thing this hospital can do to retain nurse-anesthetists is fire Beth Peking. As I’m sure you’ve already figured out by now, that woman’s a real piece of work.”

Shirley’s mouth had gone cotton-dry from nervousness and excitement, so all she managed in response was a guttural “Mm-hm.”

The elevator arrived. Dr. Hamm stepped right on, seemed to pay no notice to the fact that Shirley was actually trembling now, that her forehead was dappled with a light coating of sweat. It was a damned good thing that the man didn’t have X-ray vision, because if he did, he also would have noticed the fact that Shirley’s panties were soaked through with pussy juice. And it was only a matter of time before the crotch of her blue scrubs started showing a wet spot, too.

Shirley followed him onto the elevator. Dr. Hamm started droning on about some mundane new technique of intravenous anesthesia administration, but Shirley didn’t hear a word he said. She was too busy trying to keep from crying out as the sexual tension built and built between her legs, threatening to spill over the floodgates and bring her to climax without him even laying a finger on her. Even with his wooden demeanor and impenetrable, businesslike façade, the man was a walking, talking sex machine. Just breathing the same air that he did was enough to bring a woman to orgasm.

And then, just as soon as Shirley thought she'd managed to get a hold of herself, the elevator lurched, the lights flickered, and Shirley toppled forward into Dr. Randall Hamm's chiseled arms.

That did it. Shirley bit her tongue to keep from crying out as a series of intense pleasure-spasms wracked her body from head to toe.

Shirley had read about women having spontaneous orgasms in romance novels, but she never thought it could actually happen in real life. But she supposed where Dr. Randall Hamm was concerned, anything was possible.

Dr. Hamm gently grasped her forearms and set her upright just as the elevator started moving again. "Are you all right, Shirley?"

She managed a small nod. Her cunt was still on fire, and threatening to go over the edge once again. The feel of his hands against her body, even through the rough fabric of her scrubs, was pure electricity.

Dr. Hamm abruptly let her go, as if he'd touched something hot. Probably because he had. Shirley's whole body was up in flames.

"Looks like we got stuck for a minute there," he said. "They really need to replace these old elevators. We're lucky we didn't get stuck."

Shirley grumbled something unintelligible. She didn't think they were lucky the elevator wasn't stuck. Quite the opposite. She had a feeling that if it had gotten stuck for a good long while, she just might have had an opportunity to seduce Dr. Hamm for real, instead of having his mere presence send her body into uncontrollable orgasmic fits. Not that she was complaining, but---

"Shirley, are you sure you're all right? You look a little, ahem, flushed."

Flushed? How kind of him to notice. Of course she was flushed, damn it. She'd just had two orgasms from standing next to the guy. "I'm, ahhhh, I'm just a little claustrophobic, is all," she lied just as the elevator made it to the lower level and the doors slid open.

"Well, all that's good to know. I was getting worried about you. Thought you might be having a fainting episode or something."

Oh, I'm having an episode, all right, she mused. She ground her teeth in frustration as she followed Dr. Randall Hamm into a large vaultlike room filled with medical equipment.

"If you'll just follow me, Shirley, I'd love to give you a sneak peak at the new chemical vaporizer that'll be getting installed in the main OR next month. It'll really improve our procedures for delivering inhaled anesthetics." Dr. Hamm rubbed his hands together, as if he were anticipating a gourmet meal. For the first time ever, Shirley noticed he seemed genuinely excited about something.

A light bulb flickered on inside her brain. *So that's what makes this guy tick,* she thought. *Technology.*

Well, that could be interesting. *Very interesting.*

If only she knew more about it.

Dr. Hamm wandered through the rows of dusty equipment and scattered metal boxes until he came upon a large tank-like device covered in buttons and sophisticated electronic panels. "Here it is," he said. "The Avery Aspirator 6-5000. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Well, it's a machine," Shirley said. She didn't realize sterile plastic-and-metal medical machines could be beautiful. But Dr. Hamm was right—it *was* beautiful. It was sleek, almost like a piece of Art Deco architecture: beautifully designed with polished chrome trim and glossy polished enamel instead of the drab beige plastic and dull, blocky builds of more traditional

medical machines. Instead of the familiar flashing red numbers and circa-1980s digital displays Shirley was used to seeing, the machine had crystal LCD displays in full color, and the ability to calibrate and distribute anesthesia doses at the touch of a single button. Best of all, the machine was self-explanatory—no more wasting time in weeklong training sessions every time the hospital upgraded its equipment. No wonder Dr. Hamm had fallen in love with it.

Now, if only she could make him fall in love with *her*.

Dr. Hamm ran his hand up and down the sleek, polished side of the machine. The man was actually *caressing* it. Shirley never thought she'd see the day that the sight of a man touching an inanimate piece of medical equipment would turn her on, but lo and behold, it was happening.

"There'll be a training seminar on the new machine next week," Dr. Hamm said, delicately running his fingers along a piece of polished chrome. "But I wanted you to get a chance to see it sooner. It's really going to make your job easier. And mine, too."

"I—I can see that," Shirley stammered, still staring at Dr. Hamm's fingertips as they did their delicate little dance on the edge of the machine. She closed her eyes, imagined the feel of those fingers on her cunt as they made the same motions on the most intimate parts of her body as they were on that damned inanimate object—*ooooohhh*.

A light tap on her shoulder jerked her out of her reverie. "Shirley, are you all right? You seem a little distracted."

A *little* distracted? Well, that was the understatement of the century. "Like I said before, I'm just a little claustrophobic," she lied. "It's just very cramped down here, is all." In truth, the huge room wasn't cramped at all, but she was running out of excuses.

Dr. Hamm just shrugged. “Well, I guess we can go back upstairs, then. How about we take a break for lunch? Maybe stroll the grounds? The hospital has lovely grounds. I encourage all my residents to take walks in the fresh air whenever they can. Helps clear the lungs. And God knows we inhale a lot of unhealthy fumes in our line of work.”

Shirley nodded. She’d left the OR dizzy from anesthesia fumes more times than she could count. And she was feeling plenty dizzy this morning, too, for reasons that had nothing to do with her job. “That sounds like fun,” she managed, then took several long, slow deep breaths in a futile attempt to get a hold of herself. But all it did was make her feel lightheaded. That, combined with the fact her entire lower half was on fire, made for a very dangerous combination.

Why, oh, why did she let President Chalmers talk her into this whole charade? As much as she wanted to get closer to Dr. Randall Hamm, she was beginning to wonder if maybe the man was hazardous to her health.

In a daze, she followed Dr. Hamm back to the bank of elevators. The walk through the hospital lobby and out to the grounds was a blur. Shirley was only able to keep herself steady by fixing her gaze at the level of Dr. Hamm’s ankles. If her eyes strayed any higher, she’d see the curve of his powerful calves, the rippling of his powerful back and shoulders underneath his scrubs—and she’d be done for.

Before she could realize what was happening, she found herself strolling underneath a grape arbor laden with blooming mountain azaleas. A clump of flowering honeysuckle grew just to her left, filling the air around her with its heady sweet scent. Dr. Hamm paused underneath the arbor and took a long, deep breath.

Shirley paused for a moment and did the same. The perfume of the honeysuckle and azaleas helped to jolt her back to reality a bit. The pungent odor was both delightful and

shocking at the same time. In Dr. Randall Hamm's presence, all her senses were heightened, all her emotions on edge. Every second she spent walking next to him reminded her of just how much her body ached for his touch. Every cell of her body buzzed with desire.

Yet the man remained oblivious to her. The only things that seemed to interest him were machinery and medical procedures. Even the beautiful garden surroundings only served to remind him of his medical duties. "Nothing like the smell of North Carolina in the springtime," he said. "Always helps me refocus after a long day in the OR. Say, have you had a chance to read up on the latest developments in quick-release intravenous deep anesthetics?"

"Uh, no."

"You should. They've got the half-lives on some of the new drugs down to a matter of seconds. It's actually possible now to bring somebody back to consciousness in five seconds or less. Who needs a recovery room with that kind of turnaround?"

The man was maddening. Didn't Dr. Randall Hamm ever just stop to smell the roses? Didn't he ever notice anything that didn't have to do directly with his job? Like *her*, for instance?

Things just couldn't go on like this. If they did, Shirley might lose her mind.

She had to change the subject, and fast. "Um, Dr. Hamm, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself? Do you have any hobbies?"

He gave her a blank look. "Hobbies? What do you mean?"

Really, the man was too much. "You know. Things you enjoy doing when you aren't working."

Another blank look. "But I'm *always* working."

"I'm sure you take a day off every now and then. What do you do on your days off?"

He paused to think. “Well, whenever I have a day off, I usually use it to catch up on reading medical journals.”

Shirley rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ever do anything *fun*?”

His eyes widened. “Fun? What do you mean?”

Shirley laughed out loud. The guy was wound up tighter than a cheap watch. “You know. What do you do to just enjoy yourself? What do you do to unwind?”

He sighed. “Well, I do happen to enjoy my work. That’s fun enough for me.”

“Don’t you ever just take time *away* from work? Don’t you ever go to the movies? Concerts? Plays? Don’t you ever go hiking? Horseback riding? Sailing? Watercoloring? Racquetball? Jogging? Anything?”

“Well, I do work out at the gym five days a week. But I consider that a necessity, not a hobby.”

You’d have to, with that hot bod, Shirley mused. “Well, I guess that’s better than nothing,” she said. “Anything else?”

His eyes narrowed, suspicious. “What’s with the third degree all of a sudden? Did somebody put you up to this? Chalmers, maybe?”

Damn it. He was on to her already. “Um, no,” she lied, backpedaling. “You just seem—forgive me for saying this—kind of antisocial, is all. I was just wondering if maybe you had any kind of life outside the hospital, since you don’t seem too keen on making friends while you’re at work.”

Now he looked hurt. “But I thought *we* were friends, Shirley.”

Well, that was unexpected. “W-we are,” she stammered. “But we can hardly be friends when I don’t know anything about you.”

That seemed to throw him for a loop. “I don’t know anything about you, either,” he retorted. He backed away from her slowly, as if she were carrying a deadly weapon.

“There’s no need to get so defensive,” she said. What on Earth was the man hiding? “I just want to get to know you better, that’s all. Maybe this is news to you, Dr. Hamm, but getting to know each other is what friends *do*.”

He relaxed, but still eyed her suspiciously. “Fair enough. I just don’t like it when people come at me with a bunch of questions, is all.”

“Well, generally that’s what people do when they want to get to know one another better. Ask questions.” She studied the lines and angles on his handsome face, trying to decipher what might lie beneath. “You know, Dr. Hamm, this is probably rude of me, but how in the hell did you get to be chief of anesthesiology when you have almost no social skills?”

His left eyebrow raised. “What do you mean, *almost* no social skills?”

She crossed her arms just below her bosom and smirked. “I say *almost* because you’re actually pretty cool, when you want to be. You can even be funny sometimes. Like when we first met.”

One corner of his mouth tipped upward, ever so slightly. “Thanks for noticing.”

“Well, it’s pretty hard not to notice you, Dr. Hamm.” As if anybody could fail to notice a man who looked like a genetically engineered blend of George Clooney and Brad Pitt.

“Call me Randall, please.” Then he coughed, seemed to catch himself. “In private only, of course.”

“Of course.” Feeling more at ease than she had in quite a while, Shirley found a small white garden bench beside the grape arbor and sat down. She patted the space beside her, inviting Randall to join her there. After a moment’s hesitation, he did. “Look, Randall. I know

for a fact that there's a very nice guy lurking somewhere underneath that aloof exterior of yours. I've seen a glimpse of him here and there, so you might as well stop trying to hide him from me."

Randall's expression softened, and his slate-blue eyes even twinkled a bit. "Well, Shirley, I must say you are a most unusual woman."

She locked her eyes with his, and felt her stomach quaver a bit. "Oh? And what makes you say that?"

"Because you're the first woman I've run across in a very, very long time who has ever been at all interested in me as a person. Most ladies I know have a tendency to take one look at me and start to drool. I've never been able to strike up a real friendship with a woman, and I've never been able to figure out why."

Shirley giggled. For a physician, Randall was quite dense about matters of the heart. "You do have a certain effect on women, you know."

He shrugged. "No, I'm afraid I don't know."

Now she guffawed. "You've at least taken a look at yourself in the mirror once or twice, haven't you?"

His shoulders hunched, and tension flickered across his jaw. "More times than I care to remember."

"Well, then, surely you must realize just how handsome you are."

He fidgeted, looked at the ground. "This conversation is making me very uncomfortable."

"Why?"

He fidgeted some more, stared at his hands. Shirley noticed his palms were sweating. “Shirley, this may be hard for you to believe, but I was a really, really ugly kid. An even uglier teenager. I’m what you’d call a ‘late bloomer.’ Very late, in fact. I was a loner growing up, and I’ve never been very comfortable in my own skin. So you might imagine that it’s hard for me to deal with all the attention I get from women. My reaction is usually just to shut down. Or failing that, to crack a bad joke.”

“I don’t think your jokes are bad,” Shirley said. “I think they’re pretty funny. I wish you’d crack them more often.”

“Well, I would, but I have to spend an awful lot of time coming up with them. You know the old saying: you can’t rush great art.”

Shirley laughed heartily again. “See, what did I tell you? You’re hilarious, when you want to be.”

Randall cast his eyes down to the brick-paved walk. Was that a blush on those rugged cheeks of his? Why, yes, it was. She felt her crotch quiver as she realized that even stone-faced Dr. Randall Hamm had a sensitive side.

“I learned as a kid that if I told jokes, it greatly reduced my chances of getting beaten up,” he said. “It helped a little. But I still got beaten up an average of three times a week until I turned eighteen. And it probably would have continued well into college, except for the fact that I went to Earlham College, a Quaker school run by pacifists. Throwing a punch there got you expelled.” He paused, grinned. “And by the way, I’m not a Quaker. I just went to a Quaker college to, well—”

“To keep from getting beaten up?” Shirley finished his sentence for him, and noticed she’d placed a hand lightly on his elbow. She had no idea how it got there. But it was there

now, feeling the hard, rippled muscles of his forearm underneath the thin, rough cloth of his scrubs. And Randall didn't seem to mind at all.

Maybe there was hope for the two of them.

After a long moment, Randall backed away from her. He got up from the bench and continued walking down the brick paver sidewalk, pausing to admire a clump of purple foxglove. His expression was blank again, his body language rigid and closed. He was back to his old, mysterious, impenetrable self again. He gazed at the flowering plant for a moment, kicked at the pile of mulch it was planted in. "Did you know that foxglove is the base plant for the heart drug digitalis?" he said, and coughed. He shifted back and forth on his feet, suddenly an awkward teenage boy in a grown man's body.

"No, I didn't know that," Shirley replied. Her heart sank. Just when she thought Randall was starting to warm up to her, he'd run for cover again. She feared she'd never get close to him again. Not even a little bit.

As if to confirm her fears, Randall glanced at his watch. "Well, I guess we've spent enough time messing around. We ought to get back to work. I'm sure The Dragon Lady is beginning to wonder what happened to you."

"I'm sure," she said with a sigh.

"Well, I guess we should get back to work, then. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around the OR." He gave her a half-hearted wave, then turned on his heel and walked back towards the hospital, strutting so fast it was practically a run.

Shirley watched him go, stunned. Who the hell did he think he was, anyway? The nerve of him, asking her to go on a romantic walk through the hospital gardens, opening up to her,

revealing his sensitive side—and then clamping himself shut like a frightened clam and taking off. Talk about rude city people. Where did *he* learn manners? A barn?

Dr. Randall Hamm might be ravishingly handsome, impossibly sexy, mysterious, and alluring all rolled into one, but he was damn near impossible to figure out. Just when she thought they might be getting somewhere, the whole thing just blew up in her face.

So much for her high hopes. When it came to Dr. Randall Hamm, Shirley was back to square one. And square one was pretty much nowhere.

* * * *

Randall hightailed it back to his office. Damn it, this was just not going to work. He couldn't be in Shirley Daniels's presence for more than ten minutes before his crotch started acting up in a big way.

Down, boy, he ordered his cock for the umpteenth time. What was it with that infernal woman? Did she not understand that her mere presence was enough to send any red-blooded American man into a conniption fit? And she thought *he* was the one who was clueless. She ought to look in a mirror herself.

He never should have followed President Chalmers's instructions. He should have just packed up his office and driven five hundred miles away. He should really just find a new place to work. Because anyplace where Shirley Daniels was, he could *not* be. Not with the effect she had on him. As long as Shirley was around, his chances of maintaining his carefree, uncomplicated, workaholic bachelor's life were close to zero.

And there was the matter of Enola Higginbottom's death. Randall knew far more about what had really happened in that OR than he was comfortable with. Now Shirley was starting to

nose around. Chalmers had put her up to that; he was sure of it. And Randall didn't like the idea of Shirley getting mixed up in that nasty business one bit.

The situation was getting dangerous, and in more ways than one.

Chapter Eleven

Shirley stared down at her gray plastic cafeteria tray. She'd bought the lunch special: Southern-fried chicken with a side of cornbread, butter beans, and cole slaw. But she wasn't the least bit hungry. She usually liked Southern comfort food, but after her disastrous morning with Dr. Randall Hamm, her stomach was in knots. She pushed her lunch tray away and stared at the Formica tabletop instead.

Shirley hadn't made any real friends at the hospital yet—after what had just happened, she could hardly call Dr. Randall Hamm a friend, after all—so she sat alone. The other hospital employees bustling around the cafeteria didn't seem to notice her. She sighed as she watched the other employees chat, laugh and gossip over their trays, and missed the small-town camaraderie she'd always known back in Statesville.

She was having trouble fitting in here in the big city, that was for sure. Everyone here had some sort of agenda. Nothing was as it seemed. And everyone was rude. *Very* rude.

The only person in town who had been truly nice to her had been crotchety old Marla Crabtree, and Marla wasn't exactly Shirley's idea of a nice person. She was loud, nosy, a gossip, and she talked about sex at work with total strangers. Shirley had no idea what to think about an old woman who publicly proclaimed to her co-workers that she wanted to have sex with Billy Blanks from the Tae Bo videos within five minutes of meeting them. It made Shirley wonder how much of herself she should really reveal to Marla. If she didn't watch her back, she figured Marla could somehow find out about her secret liaisons with Ed, then go and blab to the whole hospital that the new girl in town was into wild threesomes with her neighbors.

Who knew what would happen if *that* news got out?

Then there was the little matter of Dr. Randall Hamm. Not only was she failing miserably with him in the romance department, her secret spy mission on behalf of hospital administration was a total bust. She couldn't exactly march into President Chalmers's office and announce that she'd learned Dr. Randall Hamm was a late bloomer who occasionally liked to tell jokes. It was pretty clear that the hospital head honcho was after some more serious dirt than that. And Dr. Hamm was still keeping himself very much under lock and key.

Which seemed to prove that the man had something serious to hide.

Shirley sighed and rubbed her temples. She was in way over her head here. If she knew what was good for her, she would pack her bags and leave Raleigh before things got any worse.

As if on cue, Marla appeared in front of her, carrying a tray laden with fried chicken, biscuits, gravy, and two glass dishes of red cubed Jell-O. "Mind if I join you?" she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she parked herself in the chair across from Shirley. "Are ya gonna eat that chicken? If not I'll wrap it up and take it home for Clovis. Clovis is my German shepherd. He *loves* fried chicken."

Shirley looked up and saw with horror that Marla was already helping herself to her abandoned lunch tray. Didn't *anyone* in Raleigh have any manners? Apparently not.

"Don't look so upset," Marla chided her. "It ain't like you were eatin' it yerself."

"But—but—"

"But nuthin'. I swear, some of you country gals're just way too uptight fer yer own good." Marla finished wrapping Shirley's unwanted lunch in paper towels and slipped it into her handbag. "It'll keep in there just fine 'til I get home. Don't you worry yer head about my pocketbook," she said in response to Shirley's gape-mouthed expression. "It's just a cheap vinyl purse from Wal-Mart. It ain't like I go around carryin' designer duds."

Shirley shook her head and sighed. Marla Crabtree was really too much. The woman was odd, crotchety, and just plain rude. And yet, Shirley still couldn't help liking her. "At least the food won't go to waste," she said. "I just don't have the stomach to eat anything right now."

"Yeah, ya looked a little green from across the room, so I brought ya this." Marla took one of the glass dishes of red Jell-O from her tray and pushed it across the table at her. "Eat up. Ya need to have somethin' in yer stomach, or ya won't make it through the rest of yer shift."

Shirley took the bland dessert and picked at it with distaste. "I dunno. It's not like I have anything important to do right now. I don't think I'm even scheduled to be in the OR again until at least tomorrow afternoon."

"That's where yer wrong," Marla said with a wink. "I got it on good authority they're sendin' ya in on some emergency heart surgery in about a half hour."

How on Earth would Marla, a shift nurse in charge of bedpans and IVs, know anything about the emergency surgery schedule, let alone before Shirley knew about it herself? That went way beyond being a busybody. What was she, a psychic or something?

"That ain't all ya need to be in shape fer today, neither," the older woman went on. "I understand that President Chalmers has got ya runnin' a little errand fer him on a certain hot young doc who works with ya, and I'm sure he's gonna want some kinda report before the end of the day."

Shirley's stomach did a back flip. So much for keeping things with Dr. Randall Hamm under wraps. Shirley blinked. "How would you know anything about that?"

Marla winked again, and smiled. "Oh, a little bird told me."

Shirley scoffed. "You must know a lot of very nosy birds."

“Now there ain’t no call to get huffy with me, missy,” Marla said, wagging her finger at her. “I’m the only friend ya’ve got round here, and I’m just a-lookin’ out fer ya.”

Shirley eyed her suspiciously. “Oh, I’m not sure about that. You seem awful nosy for someone who’s trying to help. No offense intended, of course.”

“None taken, hon,” Marla replied, digging into her deep-fried lunch. “I expect a little country gal like you’d be a little suspicious of everybody ’round here. Such a new and different place, so many new people, and yer stuck with that awful harpy of a boss besides. It’s liable to get to ya. Back when I was in the Army, we called it culture shock.”

“That’s what they call it now, too.”

Marla laughed, slapping her knee. “Yer a pretty funny gal, Shirley, d’ya know that?”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny,” Shirley retorted, but she couldn’t help but crack a smile. All her suspicions melted away as Marla cackled even harder, then reached across the table to take her hand.

“Look, hon,” the older woman said. “Like I told ya before, I been a-workin’ here at this hospital fer longer than a lotta you young whippersnapper nurses’ve been alive. There ain’t anythin’ that happens round here that I don’t somehow find out about. I got eyes on the back of my head, see. And I gotta pair of ears nailed to my hind end. I just got a knack fer findin’ stuff out. A gift, even. First picked up on it back when I was in ‘Nam, to the point that the colonel who oversaw my MASH unit used to have me work recon on some of the Viet Cong POWs we had in our camp. Whenever I’m around, information just seems to stick to me.”

“Wow,” Shirley said, impressed. “But why do you keep sharing it with me?”

“Like I said, hon, I’m jest lookin’ out fer ya. God knows somebody has to. Now finish yer Jell-O before The Dragon Lady comes a-lookin’ fer ya.”

Shirley obeyed. When she swallowed the last bite, she looked up and met Marla Crabtree's dingy gray eyes. They were lined with deep crow's feet and bloodshot with age, but they were sincere. "Well, since you already seem to know all about me, why don't you give me some advice?"

"What kind of advice, hon?"

"What should I do about Dr. Hamm?" She paused, checked herself. "About what President Chalmers wants me to find out about him, I mean."

"Well, I guess that depends on what ya wanna find out about him."

"President Chalmers wants me to find out more about his background. Whether he has any odd associations outside of work, that sort of thing."

Marla's deep-set eyes twinkled. "Well, I know that," she said. "But what do *you* wanna find out about him?"

Shirley felt herself blush. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't ya play dumb with me, missy. I know when a gal's got the hots fer somebody. I may be old, but I ain't blind. 'Sides, you'd hafta be dead and buried not to have the hots fer that Dr. Hamm. He's a tasty one, fer sure. I'd sleep with him myself if I weren't wrinkled and ugly as an old prune. Lucky fer me, I got me a membership down to the Seniors Social Dancin' Club in downtown Raleigh. I go down there and pick me up a man every chance I get. Not that I get a lotta chances, since most of the men my age are already dead. Guess that's why God invented vibrators."

Shirley giggled. She'd never met a senior citizen with Marla Crabtree's sex drive in her life. Let alone one who talked openly about vibrators at work. She made a mental note to herself to consider emulating these open sexual attitudes when she got to be Marla's age. "I

think President Chalmers is suspicious of him,” she said. “He thinks Dr. Hamm bolted in the middle of Mrs. Higginbottom’s operation because he had something to hide.”

Marla snorted. “President Chalmers thinks *everybody*’s got somethin’ to hide. Hell, it’s his job to do that. ‘Sides, if I was a bettin’ woman, which I ain’t, I’d put my money on President Chalmers havin’ somethin’ to do with bumpin’ off Enola Higginbottom a lot faster than I would Dr. Hamm.”

“But—”

“Don’t change the subject, hon. I said it before, an’ I’ll say it again. What do *you* want to know about Dr. Hamm?”

Shirley closed her eyes, took a deep breath, conjured up the image of Randall’s ruggedly handsome face in her mind’s eye. There were so many things she wanted to know about the man, this man who was a mystery to her, and yet at the same time seemed so familiar. How did he really feel about her? How did he really feel about anybody? What secrets did he hide behind those dark eyes? What was he hiding from, and why? And would he ever choose to reveal his true self to her? To anyone? God only knew. “I just wish I knew what he was really thinking,” she said.

Marla chuckled. “You an’ me both, hon. Though I can tell you this much. Tongues are already a-waggin’ all over the hospital about that nice little walk in the garden the two of you took this mornin’. Word round the hallways is you two are goin’ steady. I expect the rumor mill’ll have you two engaged to be married by the end of the day.”

Shirley was aghast. “But that’s not true! Not even *remotely* true! The only reason Dr. Hamm took me on that walk in the first place was because Dr. Chalmers ordered him to spend some time with me as part of an employee orientation.”

“I dunno, hon. Somethin’ tells me that romantic walks in the hospital gardens ain’t exactly what President Chalmers had in mind.” Marla guzzled down her pint bottle of chocolate milk, wiped her milk mustache off with her shirtsleeve. “Tongues are a-waggin’ about somethin’ else, too.”

“What’s that?”

Marla glanced furtively over both shoulders and lowered her voice. “You didn’t hear this from me, of course, but this mornin’, a team of homicide detectives showed up here at the hospital and started nosin’ around, askin’ a lotta questions. Seems to be they think Enola Higginbottom didn’t die the other day by accident. They’re sayin’ she was murdered. And they’re sayin’ Dr. Randall Hamm knows somethin’ about it.”

Shirley gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Sure as shootin’, hon. I saw four cops sidle up to Dr. Hamm in the hallway myself just a few minutes ago. He went into an empty office with ’em and shut the door. He didn’t look too surprised to see ’em, neither.”

“Oh, my.”

Marla polished off the last few bites of fried chicken, then wiped her greasy fingers on her napkin. “So I’d be on my toes if I were you, missy. There’s no tellin’ what’s gonna happen next round here.”

That goes without saying, Shirley thought to herself. She hadn’t even been on the job at University Hospital for a week yet, and already she felt as if she was working on the set of a soap opera. She’d wiled away so many hours in front of the soaps back in Statesville after she got fired from her job, but she never thought her own *life* would turn into one. The next thing she

knew, University Hospital would be taken over by terrorists and all the employees killed off one by one, just like what had happened on *General Hospital* last season in a ploy to boost ratings.

Marla stood up and collected her tray. “Well, hon, I best be gettin’ back upstairs. I’m sure all the old fogeys dyin’ up on the geriatrics ward are needin’ their bedpans changed right about now. Take care, and watch yer back. Lotta sharks swimmin’ the waters today.”

“I will,” Shirley replied, following the older woman to the metal tray-collection racks. “And you do the same.”

“Sure thing, hon. And I’ll put my ear to the ground on what that Dr. Hamm is up to for ye. I’ll find somethin’ out, too. Like I said, good gossip has a tendency to stick to me wherever I go.” And with a wink and a wrinkled smile, Marla disappeared down the hallway.

Shirley headed in the opposite direction towards the main bank of elevators, the pit of her stomach buzzing with nervous excitement. Life in Raleigh was a far cry from her sleepy, small-town life back in Statesville. Just when she thought she was getting used to the place, someone pulled the rug out from under her once again.

Homicide detectives nosing around a hospital? Murder in the OR? Maybe even a cover-up that went from President Chalmers’s office on down?

Now I really have seen everything, Shirley mused as she waited for the elevator.

Ha. Not by a long shot.

Chapter Twelve

Shirley headed upstairs to her own department, dragging her feet all the way. She wasn't in any hurry to face The Dragon Lady's wrath again, no siree. Not only would Beth Peking be seething with jealousy over Dr. Hamm's attentions—such as they were, anyway—but Shirley figured it was highly likely that her busybody boss would already be well aware of the arrival of a murder investigation centering on an operation Shirley had worked on.

If The Dragon Lady hadn't found adequate reason to fire her thus far, chances were good that she would now.

But when Shirley approached her boss's office, she found it empty. The whole department was deserted, in fact. She went into the employee lounge to check the white board that displayed the day's OR schedule, and found it had recently been wiped clean.

She was about to check her locker when she heard heavy footsteps behind her.

"You won't be having anything to do around here for a long time," a familiar male voice said behind her.

She spun around, and stared straight into Dr. Randall Hamm's deep-set eyes. They'd gone from their usual blue to almost black—from desire, maybe?

Ha. With her luck, probably not.

"The North Carolina State Police have shut down all surgical operations at this hospital until further notice," he went on. "So it goes without saying that people like you and I aren't going to have a lot of work to do."

"Why?" Although given what Marla had just told her, she could pretty well guess the reason.

“Kind of a long story.” He ran a hand through his already tousled locks, and shifted from foot to foot. Shirley noticed a light coating of perspiration on his brow, saw his chest heaving up and down rapidly. The man was agitated, that was for sure.

My, but the man was hot when he was agitated. (Well, in truth, he was hot all the time.)

Shirley folded her arms across her chest and gazed at him expectantly. “Well? Are you going to tell me what’s going on around here or not?”

He sighed, ran a hand through his hair again. The musky scent of overheated, agitated maleness began to fill her nostrils.

Mmmm. Yummy.

Shirley felt her crotch heat up. The man better hurry up and give her the scoop, or she was going to cream her pants again. And that would just be downright embarrassing.

“A murder investigation has been opened into the death of Enola Higginbottom,” Randall said. “The police say they have several suspects, but they aren’t saying who they are right now. At this point, I think we can assume that any one of us who were in the OR with her is on the suspect list. That would include you and me.” There was a hard edge to Randall’s voice Shirley hadn’t heard before.

Was it fear?

Shirley felt the bottom fall out of her stomach. “But that’s absurd. I never met Enola Higginbottom before she got wheeled into that OR. I didn’t even know her name until I read the patient file.”

“That won’t hold much sway with the police,” he replied. “They aren’t ruling anyone out at this point. Enola Higginbottom had a lot of enemies. Anyone she encountered at any point in

her life is a potential suspect.” His lips pressed into a tight line, and he gazed at Shirley with a hard expression. “Most of all, the people who were with her in her last moments of life.”

A sinister possibility crossed Shirley’s mind. “What about you?” she asked.

He shifted uneasily on his feet again. “I’ve been cooperative with the police thus far, but they don’t seem very satisfied with my answers. I’m afraid I may be a prime suspect at this point.”

Shirley gasped. “Why?” But she could already well imagine. Randall mysteriously bolting out of the OR in the middle of the procedure couldn’t possibly look good to the police. Assuming they knew about it, of course—which Shirley figured at this point, they probably did.

Randall pulled a chair out from the table and straddled it. “I’ve been a thorn in Enola Higginbottom’s side for a long time. In my own small way, I’ve spent most of my free time demonstrating against her racist activities in town, via my membership in several nonprofit human rights organizations. I’ve done it mostly anonymously, since I don’t like drawing attention to myself.”

“Hmm. Imagine that.”

“Don’t kid around, Shirley. This is serious.”

“Sorry.”

Randall took a deep breath, blew it out, drummed his long blunt fingers on the tabletop. “As much as I tried to keep a low profile regarding my extracurricular activities, Enola Higginbottom found out I was behind the organized effort to start boycotts against all the businesses she owned. Once upon a time, she owned a grocery store, a funeral home, and a car dealership. No more. They all went out of business, thanks in part to the economy, but mostly due to the boycotts. Needless to say, I was not her favorite person.”

Shirley joined him at the table. “Did she ever threaten you?” she asked.

“Yes, many times. Or rather, her hired goons did. Enola Higginbottom associated with some very undesirable people. White supremacist survivalist types, mainly. With lots of guns.”

Shirley was stunned. “Did—did they threaten to *kill* you?”

He nodded. “Many times. I filed several police reports about the threats I received over the years. So of course the police are looking closely at those reports now, and thinking they add up to a pretty good motive for murder.”

Shirley was finally beginning to understand why Dr. Randall Hamm kept so much of his private self under wraps. He did it for his own protection. Even with as far as society had come since the Civil War, North Carolina was still the old South. Shirley was a born and raised rural Southerner, and she knew better than anyone that there were still plenty of people, like Enola Higginbottom, who would like things to go back the way they were before the Civil War. And who weren’t afraid to use violence to make it happen.

She decided to try lightening the mood. “So I was right all along,” she said. “You *do* have a hobby.”

Randall laughed. “Of sorts. And a potentially dangerous one at that.”

Shirley stared down at her hands. “So what do we do now?”

“We wait. I don’t know if you’re religious at all, Shirley, but you might want to start praying, too.”

She flinched. “I’m a committed atheist. But now seems like a good time for me to reconsider that line of thinking.” She glanced around the lounge, then peeked up and down the hallway, searching for any sign of life. “So where is everybody? It’s like a ghost town around here.”

“At home contemplating their doom, no doubt,” Randall said. “With a moratorium on all surgeries, it’s not like there’s anything for those of us in the anesthesia business to do. They’re sending all the emergency cases across town to St. Matthews for now. And your beloved boss Beth Peking has been placed on administrative leave, by the way.”

“Ah. I’m sure she’s thrilled,” Shirley said with a nervous giggle. “But why her? She didn’t have anything to do with what happened in the OR.”

Randall stood up and crossed over to the window. “She had it coming, as I understand it. Beth Peking has a lot of enemies here too, as you might imagine. People don’t get nicknames like The Dragon Lady by accident, you know. The administration probably just used today’s events as an excuse.”

Shirley waved her hand. “Oh, she’s harmless. Once you know how to push her buttons, anyway. You said so yourself.”

“Don’t be so sure. I might have thought that once, but now I don’t know what to think. About anything.”

Shirley joined him at the window, and they both stared out onto the flower-covered hospital grounds that lay just beyond the parking garage. She mentally retraced their footsteps along the brick-paved path, wondering if perhaps it wasn’t too late to nurture the tiny romantic seeds they’d sown there just this morning. “There’s still one thing I don’t understand.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you leave the OR in the middle of the operation? You never said.”

He sighed. “The answer to that is very complicated.”

“Try me.”

He backed away from her. She noticed his breathing picked up, too----and not from desire, either. “I—I really can’t go into it right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t trust you.”

“Seems to me you don’t trust anybody.”

Randall flinched. Her words stung, and she knew it. But it was true. “You’re a very good judge of character,” he said.

She scoffed. “Actually, no, I’m not. If I were, I wouldn’t be living and working here in Raleigh in the first place.”

His left eyebrow raised, and his shoulders relaxed a little. “Oh? Something tells me there’s a story behind that statement.”

“That’s because there is.” Shirley looked into Randall’s suddenly twinkling blue-gray eyes and saw a window of opportunity. And if she didn’t grab for it while she still could, she might lose her chance to be with him forever.

“What do you say we go and grab lunch?” she said. “For real this time. And I’ll tell you all about why I’m actually a crummy judge of character.”

He cracked a smile, and the twinkle in his eyes brightened even further. “Well, if you’re such a crummy judge of character, why do you want to go to lunch with a likely murder suspect?”

Shirley pondered this for a moment. The man had a point. Still, it was a risk Shirley was willing to take. “You let me worry about that,” she said, and grabbed her purse. “I’m new in town, so I’ll let you pick the restaurant.”

Chapter Thirteen

A half-hour later, Randall and Shirley were sitting on red velvet floor cushions at Golden Bombay Palace, the only authentic Indian restaurant in the Raleigh-Durham metro area. The pungent aroma of curry and cardamom attacked Shirley's nostrils as she picked at a flaky wafer called a *papadum*. "What exactly is this supposed to be?" she asked. "It's too thin to be a cracker, and too hard to be bread. And why does it have all these little seeds mixed in?"

"Those are anise seeds. They help give the *papadum* its flavor. Here, try dipping it in the mango chutney." He handed her a steel tripod containing various spicy sauces. "The mango is the orange sauce on the left. It's sweet. The other two are a little on the spicy side, so you might want to steer clear of them since this is your first time."

Her first time? He made it sound like they were discussing sex, not food.

Well, at least they were on the right track.

She spooned some of the mango onto her crumbly *papadum* wafer, then just for fun, she added a smidgen of the red-hot coriander sauce.

"Are you sure you wanna do that?" Randall asked, eyeing her warily. "That coriander sauce has a kick. Might not agree with you if you're not used to anything spicy."

"Oh, I'm *never* afraid of a little spice," she purred, fluttering her eyelashes at him. The double entendre floated between them, but it didn't have the effect she was hoping for. Still, Shirley thought she might have seen the tiniest flicker of amusement in Randall's poker face. Or was it attraction? Impossible to tell at this early juncture, but there were still plenty of hours left in the day.

Shirley bit into the *papadum*, chewed, swallowed—and shrieked as a blazing inferno took over her mouth.

“Aggh! It’s s-so hot! I didn’t even take that much!” She drained her water glass and frantically waved at the Nehru-jacketed waiter for a refill.

The waiter refilled her glass, took one look at her watery eyes, and left the water pitcher on the table with a muffled snicker. Shirley downed three more glasses of ice water, but it did nothing to cool the inferno.

Randall grinned. “I warned you.”

“Mrrrrrrgh. Mrrrph!”

The waiter returned with a basket of steaming flat bread and their *samosa* appetizers. “Try some *naan*,” he said. “The bread will absorb some of the heat.”

Shirley grabbed a piece of *naan* and shoved it into her mouth whole. It did help a little---with the heat burning in her mouth, at least. The heat burning in her crotch, not so much.

Shirley gobbled another piece of *naan*, chased it with more water. She was still on fire, though, and in more ways than one. She silently wondered if this lunch date had been such a good idea. At the rate she was going, there would be nothing left of her body at the end of the meal but a sooty pile of ashes.

“So, Shirley, once you’ve recovered, I hope you’ll enlighten me on this whole character-judgment problem you claim to have.”

“Kind of a long story,” she replied around a mouthful of *naan*.

“We’ve got plenty of time. We don’t need to go back to the hospital today, remember?”

She sighed. “All right, fine. Though once you hear my story, you might not like me very much.”

Randall chuckled. “Give me a little more credit. I’m a prime murder suspect. I don’t have much room to be judgmental at this point.”

“Okay, here goes, then. I moved to Raleigh from a small mountain town about two hours from here. Statesville. I worked at the community hospital there.”

“Covington Community Hospital? I’ve heard of it.”

Shirley felt her cheeks burn. “Yeah, I’m sure you read about it in the newspapers. There was a little bit of a scandal up there recently.”

Randall tore off a bit of *naan*, dunked it in the red-hot coriander sauce, and popped the spicy thing into his mouth without flinching. “Uh-huh. I vaguely recall reading something about the former hospital president over there cooking up some cockamamie scheme to rip off his new chief surgeon’s patent royalties. Is that what you’re referring to?”

Shirley blushed even deeper, and stared down into her empty water glass. This was going to be a lot harder than she thought. “Yes,” she said in a small voice. “And, well, um, the thing is, well, umm—”

“Let me guess. You were mixed up in that whole mess somehow.”

“Exactamundo.” She poured more water from the pitcher, drank two sips, fiddled with her napkin. “Very bad judgment on my part, I know.”

Randall just shrugged and made no comment. He drenched his *samosa* in the coriander sauce instead, then followed it with scorching hot pepper sauce. Then he started eating the spicy concoction with gusto without so much as breaking a sweat, or even picking up his water glass.

Damn.

Dr. Randall Hamm might be a little hard to read sometimes, but there was no mistaking it—he liked to keep things hot and spicy. *Very* hot and spicy.

Shirley's lower belly melted. If he was that way at the dinner table, what would he be like in the bedroom?

Randall paused between bites and looked up. "So, you were involved in the federal racketeering case, then? That's how it ended up, right? It's all starting to come back to me now. I followed the articles in the Raleigh *News-Observer*. Quite the soap opera, as I recall."

Now Shirley was thoroughly mortified. He knew all about it. Which meant he knew all about what a scummy, bottom-feeding shrew she'd been, too. She half-expected him to flag the waiter down for a takeout box so he could hightail it out of the restaurant and leave her with the bill.

Randall poured more hot sauce on the remains of his *samosa* and forked the last few bites into his mouth. A light coating of perspiration had formed at each of his temples—from the spicy food, no doubt.

Or maybe, just maybe, from something else entirely.

"So tell me something, Shirley," he said. "How exactly were you mixed up in a federal racketeering case, and why? I don't recall your name mentioned anywhere in the papers or on the local news when that whole mess was getting investigated."

"That's an even longer story," she muttered.

"As I said before, we've got plenty of time."

"I kind of got roped into it by the man I was sort of dating at the time. And the man I was sort of dating was sort of the ex-husband of the woman who was sort of about to marry the chief surgeon whose patent royalties we were, ahem, *sort of* going to, um, shall we say, *appropriate*. And of course, the man in question assured all of us that his plan to cook the whole thing up as

part of his divorce petition would be perfectly legal, as well as foolproof. But of course, that isn't how it turned out at all."

Randall smirked. "How *did* it turn out, then? Though I can well imagine. The newspapers didn't exactly paint a pretty picture."

"Well, Bob Watson—the sleazebag I was dating—dragged us all into court, where he was challenging his original divorce decree from his wife, who was a co-worker of mine. He was somehow going to finagle that both he and the hospital had the right to the new chief surgeon's patent royalties because the new chief surgeon was dating his ex-wife while they were still married, or something."

Randall blinked. "Sounds pretty convoluted to me."

Shirley sighed and shook her head. "Well, you're right, it was. But Bob Watson, he made it all sound so simple. The guy was a real smooth talker. You know the type: he could probably sell ice to Eskimos if he tried. And I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I wasn't the only one, either. As I'm sure you already know, since you followed it in the papers."

"Didn't the hospital administrator who was involved—Joe Middleton, was it?—didn't he drop dead of a heart attack right after the feds got involved?"

"Yep. And good riddance, if you ask me. He was even worse than Bob Watson, in my opinion. Sure, he didn't come up with the scheme himself, but he was after the money. As soon as he found out there was a loophole in Dr. Wilkinson's contract that might help him get his paws on those patent royalties, he jumped at the chance to exploit it. You could almost see the dollar signs flashing in his eyes."

The waiter came to collect their appetizer plates. Randall dusted *samosa* crumbs from his hands and gazed at her intently. "And you? What were *you* supposed to get out of it?"

“Well, this is kind of the embarrassing part. I wanted money, of course. Who doesn’t? But in truth, the real reason I signed on to the whole thing was because I was jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“That’s right, jealous. Sounds petty, I know. But it’s true.”

Randall looked puzzled. “What exactly were you so jealous of that it induced you to commit a federal crime?”

Suddenly Shirley felt very small. “I was jealous of my co-worker. Who also just so happened to be Bob Watson’s ex-wife.”

“Why?”

“Because the new chief surgeon was madly in love with her. And I would have much preferred that he was madly in love with me instead.”

“And matters of the heart have a funny way of not working out the way we want them to,” Randall said.

“Exactly. So I did what any good American girl would do. I committed a federal crime.”

Randall guffawed and clapped his hands. “You know, Shirley, that’s exactly why I like you. You don’t take anything too seriously.”

“I’m afraid I learned that the hard way.”

“So if you were in on the whole conspiracy from the beginning, how is it your name never came up at the trial? How did you stay out of the papers?”

“I had a very expensive lawyer. So expensive, in fact, that I went bankrupt from legal bills. I sold almost everything I owned to pay that lawyer, and it still wasn’t enough. So I had to file bankruptcy. I had to sell my living room set in order to afford the bankruptcy filing fee.

Now I'm totally broke with no retirement savings, no credit card, and I live in a studio apartment filled with secondhand furniture. I don't even have a car."

"So you've still managed to pay for your crimes, then."

"Yep. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better if I'd just gone to jail." The waiters arrived with their entrees; Shirley stared down at the strange-looking aluminum tray that contained eight different tiny round metal bowls filled with several different brownish-orange vegetable stews arranged in a circle. In the center of the circle was a pile of strange hot-pink meat that vaguely resembled chicken. Randall had the same, though he'd ordered his *extra hot*, while hers was, supposedly, *mild*.

"What the hell is this?" she blurted.

"That's your lunch. It's a tandoori *thal*, the specialty of the house."

"You told me you ordered the best thing on the menu."

"That *is* the best thing on the menu. Try it. You'll like it. I promise."

She picked at the hot-pink chicken with distaste. "They took the skin off," she said.

"And why is it so—pink?"

"It's a lot healthier with the skin off, you know. Less fat that way. And the pink color is from the spices they marinade it in." Randall cocked his head and smirked with amusement.

"You know, for someone with an advanced degree, you don't seem to know much about food."

"I don't know much about anything," she retorted. "Which would go a long way to explaining why I got sucked into Bob Watson's little scheme. Only a really stupid, naïve person would do what I did."

"I don't think you're naïve. Passionate, maybe. But not naïve."

Her fork stopped in midair. "Passionate, huh? Whatever would make you think that?"

“It takes a passionate woman indeed to risk prison to get back at a romantic rival,” he said, dipping a corner of *naan* into a spinach curry. “I used to think that kind of passion only existed in the movies. But maybe not.”

A thread of sexual tension grew in the space between them. Shirley was stunned to find it wasn't all just on her side of the table. She'd taken a huge risk spilling her guts to Randall like this, and to her surprise and delight, it seemed to have paid off. Instead of being repulsed by her criminal past, in Randall's eyes, it just made her more attractive.

And as much as Shirley wanted him to be attracted to her, she wasn't entirely sure that was a good thing.

“Well, Randall, I *am* a passionate person,” she said. “But in the case of what happened back in Statesville, I was passionate about the wrong things. Nobody should ever be passionate about trying to destroy the life of a friend and co-worker. That's something I wish I'd understood at the time.”

“What was her name? Joanna Watson? The press really took a shine to her, as I recall.”

“Joanna Watson-Wilkinson, now. Yeah, the press loved her. She's gorgeous, for one thing. And she really played the damsel-in-distress role to the hilt.”

“That she did.”

“She married Dr. Wilkinson too, you know. He of course got to keep all those patent royalties, plus collect a shitload of punitive damages on top of it. He was rich all along, but now he's a gazillionaire. Joanna gets to share her life with that man—and all his wealth.” Shirley paused and picked at her meal, having suddenly lost her appetite. “I know I should be happy for her, but I'm not. I'm still just jealous.”

“So would a lot of people.”

“But you don’t understand! My parents didn’t raise me that way. I know that it’s wrong to be envious of other people, to covet what they have, let alone take revenge on them for the way I did. But that doesn’t change the way I feel sometimes.” She sighed and hung her head. “You must think I’m a terrible person.”

“Not at all. On the contrary. I think you are a remarkably honest and forthright human being. Not many people are willing to admit their most personal faults out in the open to a total stranger like you just did.” Randall took a couple bites of tandoori chicken, chewed and swallowed thoughtfully. “Don’t beat yourself up so much. You know what you did was wrong, and it seems to me that you’ve more than atoned for it. If it still bothers you so much, maybe it’s best to confront the person you wronged directly and tell her you’re sorry.”

Shirley dropped her fork. “Oh, no! That would never work!”

“It’s never too late to apologize. You might be surprised just how gracious some people can be about it.”

She sighed, blinking back tears. “I’ve tried to apologize to her several times, actually. She’s not interested. She hates me, and I suppose she has good reason to.”

“Give her time. Maybe after she’s had a couple of years to cool off, have a couple of kids, she’ll be a little more open-minded.”

“I don’t think so.”

Randall reached across the table and put his large, strong hand over Shirley’s tiny, quivering one. “Shirley, I think the first thing you need to do is to forgive yourself. You’re only human. You made a mistake. So has every other human being ever to walk the surface of this planet. It doesn’t mean you have to punish yourself for the rest of your life.”

Shirley pondered this for a moment. He kept his warm, large hand cradled over hers, passed the tip of his forefinger back and forth over the soft, tender skin of her upper wrist. Even this slightest caress was erotic to the core. Bolts of electricity wound their way up her arm and down her torso until they merged and exploded between her legs. She felt her panties dampen as her juices began to flow. This man, this wonderful, sexy, enigmatic man, cared about her. *Really* cared.

And now, he was touching her as only a lover would. “I guess I’ll try to forgive myself, then,” she whispered.

“Don’t try. Just *do* it. Right now. It’s easy.”

She screwed her eyes shut, visualized Joanna Watson-Wilkinson’s beautiful face. It appeared in her mind’s eye, and Shirley silently offered an apology. The phantom Joanna offered no sign of acknowledgment, but Shirley felt as if a huge burden was lifted from her shoulders almost immediately.

She opened her eyes, found that Randall was staring right into them. “Well?” he said. “Feel better?”

He still hadn’t let go of her hand. In fact, he’d set down his fork and was now stroking her forearm with the other hand. The soft buzzing that had erupted between Shirley’s legs had grown into a full-blown explosion. She was on the verge of coming right here in the restaurant after just a minute or two of innocent handholding. If that’s what Randall could do to her at a dinner table, she could only imagine what he would do to her once they got into bed together.

Assuming, of course, he *wanted* to go to bed with her.

Shirley couldn’t stand the suspense any longer. She needed to know where she stood with this man, damn it. Sure, a certain amount of mystery was attractive in a man, but there got

to be a point where it could drive a girl insane. “Um, Randall, I was kind of wondering,” she stammered, suddenly feeling like a teenager with a boarding-school crush. “How do you, um, *feel* about me?”

Randall’s eyes twinkled and he grinned, stepping up his caresses of her forearm. The feeling was like having a pack of fairies do a dance on her arm—pure magic. “Can you be more specific?” he teased. “Do you mean *feel* in the tactile sense or in the emotional sense?”

“Please don’t turn this into another one of your jokes,” she snapped. “I’m out on a limb here, and if I don’t get an answer to that question very soon, I just might drop dead of a heart attack.”

“I see. Well, we can’t have you having a heart attack here at the only Indian restaurant in town. What would it do to their business? I’d probably be out of my only chance of getting decent tandoori chicken this side of Atlanta.”

“Randall, please—”

He put his index finger to her lips, shushing her. He squeezed her hand hard, sending bolts of heat up her arm and down her body, until both her legs trembled. The tension in her body built and built and built, climber higher and higher, until Shirley’s breath caught and a tiny whimper of ecstasy escaped her mouth. She was about to come, right here, right now, in a public restaurant with at least two dozen other people watching, and this damned incorrigible man was still withholding his true feelings from her. The situation was beyond ridiculous. It was insane.

He smiled broader, seemed suddenly very interested in his cuticles. “You do remember I’m a murder suspect, don’t you? One would think that would put a bit of a damper on any designs you might have on this body of mine.”

“I don’t for a minute believe you killed Enola Higginbottom,” she snapped. And it was true. She really didn’t think he had it in him.

“I appreciate that, Shirley. Because I promise you I am totally innocent of that crime. But unfortunately, at this point I can’t prove my innocence, which might end up being a bit of a problem with the police. Are you still interested in my answer?”

“Yes,” she growled. She was *damn* interested, in fact. She was so interested that if he didn’t give her the goods that instant, she was going to kick him right in the crotch.

“I could be arrested at any time, you know. Police could walk right into this restaurant in the next three minutes and put me in handcuffs.”

“I don’t care,” Shirley whispered harshly. Now she was desperate. So she might as well come right out and commit a desperate act. She leaned forward until her nose was mere inches away from Randall’s. The hem of her scrub shirt dipped into a bowl of lentil *dhal* soup, but she didn’t notice. “Randall,” she whispered. “If you don’t take me somewhere and fuck me in the next five minutes, I swear to God I will have to crawl away somewhere dark and hidden to kill myself.”

Randall leaned into her and kissed her passionately on the mouth. With tongue. Lots and lots of tongue.

They finally came up for air, almost a full minute later. “Shirley, as a physician, it is part of my sworn Hippocratic oath to prevent suicide whenever possible. So I’m afraid I have no choice but to oblige your request.” He flagged a red-faced waiter. “Check, please. The lady and I will take these lunches to go.”

Chapter Fourteen

Twenty minutes later, Shirley and Randall were at Randall's sprawling Georgian Revival house, a white, pillared relic from before the Civil War. "The previous owner went bankrupt restoring it, so I got it cheap---relatively speaking," he explained when Shirley gaped in awe at the two-story entry hall, complete with a winding staircase and stained-glass rotunda. "His loss was my gain."

"Wow. It's so beautiful—"

He put a finger to her lips. "*You're* beautiful." With that, Randall swept her up in his arms and carried her up the winding staircase. "We can discuss the history of my home later, madam. Right now I intend to take you upstairs and ravish you senseless."

Very Gone With The Wind.

They made it to the top of the winding mahogany staircase. Randall carried her down a marble hall lined with gold-plated wall sconces, the kind that would originally have been for gaslights but were since retrofitted for electricity. The walls were paneled in buttery, polished walnut with gold inlay, and the ceiling was painted with ornate Renaissance-style murals depicting golden cherubs flying through a starry sky. The opulence surrounding her was breathtaking; Shirley felt as if she'd been transported to a Hollywood movie set.

A movie with explicit sex, anyway. Because things were about to get down and dirty.

They entered a room with a massive four-poster bed, the kind that required a step to climb into it. Randall set her down carefully on its high surface, and the bed's billowy down comforters and pillow-top mattress threatened to swallow her whole. She sank down into the luxurious satin and velvet bedclothes, and before she could take a breath, Randall managed to

sweep off her Nurse Mates and her scrubs, so she was clad only in her bra and panties. Waves of heat rose up her body, bringing a deep red flush to her skin, which was soon coated all over with a light, musky dew. The feel of the expensive satin sheets against her flushed, sweaty skin was pure sensuality, like velvet left out in the rain. The crotch of her panties was already soaked through, her nipples hard and sharp as cut glass. Her body ached to be separated from those little slips of nylon, cotton and lace.

Randall read her mind. He slipped one finger underneath the elastic waistband of her sopping-wet panties and tugged hard, ripping the thin nylon fabric in two and wrenching it from her body. He reached around behind her back and expertly unfastened her bra with one flick of his wrist. All at once she lay naked before his still fully clothed body—naked and breathless and exposed.

He plunged one finger into her depths, then two, then three. “My God, Shirley. You’re so wet. And you smell so good, so sweet. I want to taste you.”

She gave her consent by spreading her legs wide.

Randall’s sandy head dropped to Shirley’s dripping satin petals and began to feast. His tongue probed deep inside her first, licking her salty, musky juices, tasting the slick, ribbed walls of her sheath. Then it transferred to her hard, hot little nub, sending bursts of scorching sensation up and out to all corners of her body. She bucked underneath him, mewling and moaning as the first of what would be many orgasms took hold of her body. He fed upon her sweet juices for what seemed like hours, making her come again and again and again, until her whole body was on fire, sweaty and spent and pulsating.

The old stories were true: doctors really did know how to fuck better than anyone. All those years studying anatomy were bound to pay off, after all. And boy howdy, now Shirley was reaping the benefits.

Just when she thought she couldn't possibly take any more, Randall took things up a notch. He started unbuttoning his shirt with one hand, and slipped four fingers from the other deep inside her cunt. He found her g-spot in less than an instant, and began pressing, pressing, pressing hard up against it in a slow, steady rhythm. He broke their connection just long enough to get out of his clothes, but to Shirley, even that brief respite was pure agony.

That agony didn't last long, however. Shirley heard the familiar crinkly sound of a foil condom wrapper being torn, then felt Randall's firm, hard chest pressing down on top of her a moment later. "Can I come inside?" he whispered, teasing her cunt with the tip of his bulging cock.

She managed a small nod, and he plunged in. He was huge—the biggest, longest, thickest cock she'd ever taken into herself, and given all her randy activities of late, that was saying something. He plowed into her so hard and stretched her so wide that she thought she might split in two. He slipped his hands underneath her buttocks and pushed her up to meet him at each and every thrust, turning her body to such an angle that he hit her g-spot square in the middle on the way in, rubbed her clit with his shaft on the way out. It was simple bread-and-butter fucking, but it was oh, soooooo good.

The best Shirley ever had, in fact.

She opened her eyes and stared up at Randall, watching him as he fucked her. The mound of hair that rested over his cock was sandy brown, just like on his head, and it was damp and glistening with her juices. She watched his thick, hard, purplish-red cock slide in and out of

her, in and out, in and out. It was shiny and moist from their fucking. It reflected the bright afternoon sunlight on its surface, making it appear a shiny, well-formed weapon. Her cunt was like a wet, dewy rose; his cock its thick, knobby stem. Together they formed a beautiful garden, filled with heady scents and natural sounds.

Randall's eyelids drooped half-closed and his mouth hung half-open in an expression of pure sex as he rammed into her again and again and again. The musky, salty-sweet smell of their sex permeated the room, mixed with the clean-linen odor of the lavender-scented bedclothes and the wafting perfume of the freesias, lilies, and magnolias growing in the garden outside the bedroom window. Their fucking filled the room, made it bigger somehow. The ever-narrower space between them was hotter, thicker, steamier than any Southern midsummer afternoon. There was no need for any fancy sex toys or scented lubes of exotic fisting. The simple motions of their bodies and the animal noises they made with each thrust were already more erotic than anything Shirley had ever experienced.

And even so, Randall was about to intensify things even further. He leaned forward, changing the angle of penetration so that the tip of his cock hit her cervix, shaking her whole body to the core. As he did so, he moved in to kiss her, teasing her mouth with his tongue, sucking her entire lower lip into his mouth. He darted his tongue in and out of her mouth in perfect synchrony with his thrusts, then he moved lower to suck her neck, leaving a trail of deep purple love-bites in his wake. He worked his way further down, leaving more love-bites on her shoulders and in the valley between her breasts, until he found his way to her left nipple and began to suck it hard, taking the whole areola into his mouth, along with some of the surrounding flesh. The resulting suction was hard, intense. Shirley knew she'd be black and blue all over by

the time he was done with her, but she didn't care. She'd wear all those love bites like a badge of honor.

He transferred his attentions to her right breast—sucking it just as hard and deep as the other one, so she'd have a matching set of hickeys—all the while not letting up one iota on the fuckfest happening down south. The sound of their slapping bodies and mingling juices was deliciously obscene. Shirley listened to the noises of sex as they filled the room, and longed to say something, something dirty. She didn't know much about dirty talk in the bedroom, but she figured there was always a first time.

“Fuck me, Randall, you dirty boy,” she grunted. “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me hard.”

He obliged, stepping up the pace of his thrusts. The force of each impact was so strong, so earth-shattering, that Shirley thought her whole body would just dissolve. “Do you want me to fuck you, Shirley?” he yelled at her. “Do you? Do you?”

“I want you to fuck me,” she cried. “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.”

“Do you want it harder? Do you want it faster?”

“Yes! Harder! Faster!”

He gave it to her so hard and so fast she thought her cunt would explode. And an instant later, it did. It exploded into a thousand spasms that throttled her body from the tip of her crown to the surface of her curling toes. Her pussy lips expanded and contracted, expanded and contracted, her juices gushed out of her in a raging salty river. “Look down,” he commanded her. “Look down and see what we're doing to each other.”

She obeyed and was stunned at just how otherworldly her cunt and his cock had become. Her pussy was more swollen and slick than it had ever been, her labia swelled to almost three times their normal size and spread out wide, exposing her deepest recesses to the air. His now

dark-purple cock slid in and out of her distended lips, the condom so slick with her juices, it was almost transparent. The blue veins on his shaft stood out at attention, rippling up and down his equipment and increasing her internal sensations better than any studded plastic sex toy ever could. The display of raw, pure sex between their bodies was the most erotic sight in the history of their shared world. And it was enough to send them both over the edge.

Randall grunted as he exploded into her, and Shirley immediately joined him in by far the most spectacular of her many orgasms. They rode the tidal wave of ecstasy together until it crashed hard against the beach of their bodies, ebbing and flowing until the last sensual vibrations disappeared. They collapsed into each other, enveloped in satisfaction, and the afterglow overtook them like a velvet glove.

They dozed there in the huge bed, their bodies wrapped and folded into one another, for several hours. They slept the deep, dark, dreamless sleep of spent lovers.

* * * *

The shrill sound of police sirens jerked Shirley awake. She glanced at the open bedroom window, saw from the steep angle of the sunlight and the long shadows on the floor that it was now early evening. The sirens were still far away, but Shirley had a strange, sinking feeling that the cops were headed straight for them.

She grabbed Randall's shoulder and shook it, hard. "Randall, wake up. Wake up!"

He opened one eye, keeping most of his face buried in the pillow. "Mrrgh?"

"Wake *up*! I think the police are on the way here."

"Mrrrgh." He pulled the pillow over his head. "No, they're not."

The sirens grew louder and louder until they were almost deafening. Red and blue lights spun on the bedroom walls. “Yes, they are! They’re here now! They’re here for *us*! Randall, get dressed!”

Shirley leapt out of bed, reaching frantically for her clothes. She jumped around like a gazelle, slipping into her own clothes while she gathered Randall’s up in her free arm and tossed them onto his head. “Get *up*, Randall. Otherwise you might be dragged off to jail naked.”

Randall finally took her at her word and pulled himself out of bed. He tugged on his boxers and peeked through the curtains just as the whole house shook. “Oh, shit,” he said. “They’ve got a police ram. I’d better go down and meet them, otherwise they’re going to break down the door. I can’t afford to replace my front entrance right now. Double-mahogany doors don’t come cheap.”

Shirley eyed his half-naked body. “At least put a shirt on. As much as I like seeing you this way, I’m sure the jailhouse isn’t the place to show off your chest.”

“Agreed.” He tossed on his shirt and headed out the door, buttoning it as he went. “You’d better meet me downstairs as soon as you’re decent,” he called after her.

Shirley got her clothes and shoes on, then checked her reflection in the mirror. She might be back in the attire of a hospital nurse, but her face and hair were that of a steamy sexpot. Her hair was a disheveled, sexy tumble; her lips were swollen from kissing and her neck was dotted with at least three hickeys. Not exactly the wholesome girl-next-door look.

Oh well. There wasn’t anything she could do about it now. And from the sound of things downstairs, the cops were about to break down Randall’s front entrance.

By the time Shirley made it to the bottom of the massive winding staircase, Randall had managed to avert disaster by unlocking the door and ushering the police inside with all the charm

of an English nobleman. “Breaking down the door won’t be necessary, gentlemen. I would have been outside to greet you, but I’m afraid you disturbed my afternoon *siesta*. I believe you are all here to arrest me? If so, please get on with it. I hate long waits.”

The police, in full riot gear, seemed very confused. Clearly, they’d been expecting more of a fight. “Actually, uh, Dr. Hamm, uh, you’re not under arrest. At least, not yet. We’re just here to execute a search warrant.”

Randall frowned. “Is that all? Then why all the pomp and circumstance?”

The top-ranking police officer removed his bulletproof helmet and scratched his head. “Uh, we received a tip that you’d put up a real fight,” he said.

Randall laughed. “You might want to take a better look at your informants, then. Officers, I have nothing to hide. Take a look around, search whatever you want. Just please don’t break anything.”

The police still just stood around looking confused. They didn’t seem to notice Shirley at first, but she decided to take the initiative and introduce herself. “Hi, I’m Shirley Daniels. Excuse me, um, officers, but is there anything you needed from me?”

The head officer jerked his head in Shirley’s direction. “She with you?” he asked Randall.

“Yes.”

The cop whispered something to his other officers, who began nosing around the house without actually doing any real searching. After a few minutes of that, they came back and shrugged. “Don’t look like anything’s here,” one of them said.

“Don’t look like *what’s* here?” Randall snapped, impatient. His charm was already starting to evaporate. “Forgive me, gentlemen, but if you don’t start giving me some answers about what’s really going on here, I’m afraid I’ll have to call my lawyer.”

More whispering among the cops. “Look, folks, I think there’s been some sorta mistake,” the head officer said. “Neither of you are under arrest, and what we came here to find ain’t here. But if the two of you wouldn’t mind, we’d appreciate it if you came down to the station so we could ask you both some questions.”

Shirley and Randall exchanged looks. “I don’t see the harm in that,” he said with a shrug. “Shirley, what about you?”

“I guess that’s fine,” she stammered. “Though I really don’t have any idea what this is about.” Which wasn’t exactly true. Of course she had *some* idea. What she didn’t know was what *she* had to do with it.

“Let’s go, then,” the officer said. “You can both ride in the back of the squad car.” He put his meaty hands on their shoulders and not-too-politely urged them outside.

As they climbed into the back of the squad car, Shirley felt the bottom fall out of her stomach. Maybe they weren’t *technically* getting arrested—at least, not yet. But something sinister was definitely going on. And whether she liked it or not, Shirley was mixed up in it.

Chapter Fifteen

Shirley sat alone in a cold, sterile interrogation room at police headquarters. She wasn't handcuffed, but the duty officer had locked her into the room. "As a precaution," he said. She'd asked for something to drink, and was provided with cold, acid-tasting coffee in a soggy paper cup. Her requests to go to the bathroom had been ignored.

If this is what it was like to be interviewed at the police station voluntarily, Shirley shuddered at the thought of what actual jail was like.

She heard muffled shouts coming from the next room, followed by something that sounded like furniture being thrown. She knew Randall was being held in one of the other interrogation rooms, and hoped against hope it wasn't *him* who just threw a chair or table. Or that he hadn't had something hurled *at* him.

Shirley had often heard that big-city police departments were corrupt, and wondered if maybe she was witnessing that kind of corruption now. As if in answer to that silent question, a heavysset plainclothes detective lumbered into the interrogation room, lugging a cup of coffee and a huge strawberry Danish in each meaty hand. "Evenin'," he said in a thick Carolina drawl. "Ya must be that gal from up Statesville way. Ya know you're in the federal database?"

Shirley blushed to her temples. "Yes, sir," she said meekly. "I pleaded guilty in a federal case not too long ago. A misdemeanor, not a felony."

"Hmph. Database says ya were mixed up in all that Covington Community Hospital nonsense that was all over the news," the detective snarled. "So why weren't *you* on the news?"

“That was part of the terms of the plea bargain,” she explained, blushing even deeper. God, this was humiliating. Next thing she knew, she’d probably be strip-searched. “So, um, officer, what exactly is all of this about?”

“What’s all of what about?”

“Why did you want my, ahem, friend and I to come down to the station today?”

The detective’s thick gray eyebrows raised, and he snickered around a mouthful of Danish. “I was thinkin’ you could tell me that yerself, missy.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

The fat detective polished off his Danish, then licked the icing and grease from his fingers. He plopped down on one of the hard plastic interrogation chairs, cupped his hands around his steaming coffee. “Look, lady. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. An’ the hard way ain’t pretty. So I suggest you start talkin.’”

“But I don’t know anything! I don’t even know what this is about.”

That didn’t seem to impress the cop. “Oh, I think you do, missy. Especially considerin’ you’re already purty well acquainted with our criminal justice system.”

Shirley stomped her foot. “This is ridiculous! This is an outrage! I *demand* a lawyer.”

The cop smiled, admired his ragged fingernails for a moment, then finally spoke. “You ain’t entitled to a lawyer yet, missy. Ya ain’t even been charged with anything. But if ya want a lawyer, I’ll be more’n happy to charge ya with somethin’ and order up a two-bit flunky from the public defender’s office for ya.”

Shirley’s heart skipped a beat as the full realization of what was going on began to sink in. She was here because she was a murder suspect. That was the only explanation for what was happening. And she had no idea what to do next. She was innocent as innocent could be, and

yet, she didn't believe for a minute that the fat, drooling cop sitting across from her would believe a word she said.

Still, the truth was the truth. And deep down, she knew it could set her free. "I know what this is about," she admitted. "I'm here because of what happened to Enola Higginbottom, right?"

The cop laughed and rubbed his pudgy hands together. "Now we're gettin' somewhere, missy."

"Well sir, not really, because I don't know anything other than the fact the woman died. I have no idea why, or who may be responsible. Or *if* anyone's responsible, for that matter. Sometimes people just die in the OR for no reason."

The cop leaned closer. Shirley could smell salami on his breath, along with raging body odor. "Is that an admission of guilt?" he oozed.

"Of course not! What reason would I have to kill a woman I'd never even met?"

This seemed to subdue the cop a bit. "So you didn't know her?"

"No. I barely know anybody in Raleigh. I just moved to town a little over a week ago."

The cop pursed his thick lips and twiddled his thumbs. Clearly, that wasn't the answer he'd been expecting. "So you don't know anybody in Raleigh, huh? What about the guy you came here with? Seems you know him *real* well."

"So what if I do?"

He laughed. "Well, if he's the only man in town you know, missy, ya sure know how to pick 'em."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He templed his fingers under his chin and eyed her balefully. “Ya know, missy, ya can make this a lot easier for yourself if ya just tell us what ya know about Dr. Randall Hamm.”

At this, Shirley had to laugh. “You know, here’s the thing. I know next to *nothing* about Dr. Randall Hamm.”

Except how he was in bed, of course. And that he was very easy on the eyes, and had a good sense of humor. Other than that, *nada*.

“Lyin’ to me ain’t gonna help ya, missy.”

“I’m not lying,” she said. “I admit to having an, ahem, *intimate* physical relationship with Dr. Hamm, but that’s pretty much the extent of it. I know almost nothing about him as a person. And that’s God’s honest truth. Hook me up to a polygraph if you don’t believe me.”

The cop seemed puzzled, and didn’t say anything for several minutes. Shirley scanned him up and down, searching for a badge, a name tag—anything that would indicate the guy was legit. “You know, you’ve never told me your name, Officer. Or your badge number. And I’m beginning to think I’m being held here without probable cause. I’m also thinking it might be a good idea if I knew who you were, so I can make a complaint about how you’re treating me here.”

The cop hemmed and hawed, and dark circles of sweat appeared at his armpits. “Scuse me,” he muttered, and left the room.

Shirley shifted back and forth in her seat. She really needed to find a bathroom, then get the hell out of there. Neither of which was likely to happen any time soon. She twiddled her thumbs and counted the cracks in the ceiling, then the stains on the cheap industrial carpet. Anything to keep her mind off things.

About fifteen minutes later, a stout gray-haired woman entered the room, followed by a youngish man with a crew cut and goatee. Both of them wore crisp white shirts and sported leather-mounted police badges that hung from lanyards around their necks. "I'm Officer Reynolds," the stout woman said, "and this is Officer Doyle. First accept my apologies for the ah, treatment you got from our colleague, Officer McIntosh. He always likes to play the bad-cop routine, even when he shouldn't."

Shirley shrugged. "Whatever. Right now I really need to visit the ladies' room, if you don't mind."

"Sure, no problem," Officer Reynolds said. "I'll walk you there myself. Doyle, do me a favor and get the lady something cold to drink. See if you can drum up some sandwiches, too. I think once we get things going, we'll be here for a while."

Shirley breathed a sigh of relief as she followed the stout woman down the hall. That relief was short lived, however. Because just as she was about to duck inside the ladies' room, she saw Dr. Randall Hamm being led down the hall in handcuffs.

She started to cry out, but he shook his head at her as he passed. "Don't worry," he mouthed silently at her.

Then he was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Officers Reynolds and Doyle were friendly and polite, had even brought her a turkey sandwich on rye and a bottle of ice-cold Diet Coke. But after seeing Randall carted off in handcuffs, Shirley had lost all desire to cooperate with the police. “I want a lawyer,” she growled.

The two cops exchanged looks. “You aren’t going to be charged with anything, ma’am. We just want to ask you a few questions.”

“I still want a lawyer.”

Officer Reynolds sighed and shook her head. She handed Shirley her cell phone. “Well, go ahead and call your lawyer, then, if you have one. We can’t get you a public defender, though, because you’re not being charged with anything.”

Shirley’s heart sank. That meant she could only have a private attorney. And she couldn’t afford to hire a private attorney. The last one she’d hired had eaten up every cent she had to her name. “Never mind,” she said with a sigh. “I guess we need to get this over with. Start asking your questions.”

Reynolds and Doyle conferred for a moment in the far corner of the room, then returned to Shirley’s side. Reynolds smiled, even patted the back of Shirley’s hand. She seemed to be taking on the mother hen role, while Doyle just hung back silently and took notes. “Now, Shirley,” she said, her voice soft and gravelly like a grandmother’s, “I know you’re new here in Raleigh. And I also know that you came here to Raleigh to get away from your past. I know you’ve made some mistakes in your personal life, mistakes you’re not proud of. But that’s all in the past, and we’re not here to punish you for what happened back in Statesville. What we do

need to do is ask you some questions about what you've been doing in your job at University Hospital here in town."

"There's not much to tell," Shirley said. "I've barely been on the job for a week. I don't even know most of my co-workers' names. And I've only assisted on one operation so far."

"Yes, ma'am," Reynolds said, patting Shirley's hand again. "And I understand that patient died on the operating table."

"That's correct. Though I couldn't for the life of me tell you why. Except maybe just for the fact that she was old."

Reynolds and Doyle exchanged looks again, and Doyle took prodigious notes, scratching hard with his pencil on his notepad. "Are you absolutely certain about that, Ms. Daniels?" Reynolds said, leaning in close enough for Shirley to smell her cheap perfume.

"I'm afraid so. The woman was elderly, and her blood pressure dropped immediately after the surgery, as she was about to come out from the anesthesia. There were no other warning signs to indicate why that might have happened. At least, none that I was aware of. The surgeon had already closed the wound, which makes it unlikely that he nicked an artery or something that would cause her to bleed internally."

Doyle perked right up at that comment. He leaned over and whispered something to Reynolds, then took more notes. "Are you absolutely sure about that?" Reynolds asked.

"No, not *absolutely* sure," Shirley admitted. "I suppose when you have an elderly patient on the table like that, anything's possible."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Sometimes people die on the operating table for no reason whatsoever. At least not a reason that can be easily determined. Especially if they are older." Suddenly Shirley felt as if

she were back in nursing school, quoting from one of her textbooks. “A lot of people don’t realize that going under anesthesia can sometimes kill otherwise healthy people without explanation. It’s just the risk you take whenever you go under the knife. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything suspicious is going on.”

“But something suspicious *did* happen, didn’t it, Shirley?” Reynolds said. Her tone had gone from gentle mother hen to shrill and accusatory. “Something happened in that OR that wasn’t at all routine, right?”

“Well—”

Officer Reynolds pounded on the tabletop. So much for the mother-hen routine. “Look, Shirley, we already know what happened in there. So don’t try to hide things from us. And *don’t* try to protect anyone. We just want to hear your side of the story.”

“My side of the story? I don’t know what you mean—”

“Stop stalling and get on with it, goddamn it.” Doyle’s deep, gruff baritone reverberated off the soundproofed walls of the interrogation room, sending Shirley’s head and stomach reeling. Even with the scrawny body and the geeky crew cut, with a voice that intimidating it was easy to see why the man had become a cop.

“All right, fine,” Shirley said, holding up her hands. “But honestly, I don’t know if what I’m about to say means anything at all.”

Officer Doyle’s eyes narrowed. “Tell us anyway.”

Shirley sighed. “Well, here goes. Instead of supervising the end-of-operation anesthesia shutdown procedures as he should have, Dr. Hamm left the OR and left me in charge. Which, even though it’s a little unorthodox, it actually isn’t *technically* a problem, since I am

more than capable of supervising anesthesia myself, without a physician's help. I did most of my operations solo back in Statesville, since we were always short of anesthesiologists, and—"

Shirley's voice trailed off as she realized that her excuses and explanations for Dr. Hamm's odd behavior just weren't going to cut it. The two officers were obviously unimpressed. They stared her down, brows furrowed, jaws tensing. They looked seconds away from popping her with the Tasers they both kept in their belts.

Shirley gave up. "You've charged Dr. Hamm with murder, haven't you?"

Officer Reynolds blinked. "Actually, no. We've charged him with obstruction."

"Obstruction?"

"Obstruction of justice," Officer Doyle explained. "We know he knows something about Enola Higginbottom's death that he's not telling us. We were hoping you could help explain it to us."

"What? I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about." Which was true. She was in way over her head here. What she wouldn't give to be able to afford her old bloodsucking lawyer again.

The two officers got up and conferred on the other side of the room again. After a few minutes of harried whispering, they came back and sat down. "We have it on good authority that you had a clandestine meeting with Dr. Reginald Chalmers, the president of University Hospital, the other day. We also have it on good authority that Dr. Chalmers charged you with gathering information on Dr. Randall Hamm, and that you were to keep this fact a secret."

Wheels began to turn inside Shirley's head. "On *whose* authority do you know this?" Although she already had a pretty good idea.

"I'm afraid we can't divulge that information."

“Marla Crabtree told you, didn’t she?” Shirley hissed. “Damn it, I knew that woman was too good to be true.”

Officer Reynolds flushed red, hemmed and hawed just like her bad-cop colleague Officer McIntosh had an hour or so earlier. “Uhhhhh—”

“It’s all right, you can admit it. I’ve already figured it out anyway.” Her cheeks burned and her eyes smarted. She’d poured her guts out to Marla Crabtree, had even looked past her own nagging suspicions and considered the older woman a friend. And in return, the woman had gone and ratted her out to the police.

Goddamn the big city. You just couldn’t trust anybody here. Least of all, crotchety old ladies who talked about banging Tae Bo instructors in public like they were discussing the weather. “So what else did she tell you?” Shirley sputtered.

“Not much. She said you’d know what Dr. Hamm was really up to, though.”

“Well, she lied to you. Because I have absolutely no idea.”

The two cops conferred some more. Shirley struggled to eavesdrop, but the soundproofing tiles on the ceiling and walls absorbed every shred of their whispered conversation. After several minutes, they returned to her side, looking nervous. “We’ve decided to rethink our investigative strategy,” Officer Doyle said in his booming baritone. “We’d like for you to use your assignment from President Chalmers as a means to investigate *him*. We have a strong suspicion that he may be involved in Enola Higginbottom’s death. It seems he’s taken a liking to you, maybe even trusts you enough to share information with you that he won’t share with anyone else.”

Shirley sighed. This was just getting more and more complicated by the second. And the cops’ theory that she could solve a murder mystery based on her one and only meeting with

President Chalmers seemed more than a little far-fetched. Still, she was willing to give it a shot—under certain conditions. “If I do that for you, what do I get in return?”

Officer Reynolds flinched. “Um, nothing? Other than the fact that you’d be doing a service to the citizens of Raleigh and the state of North Carolina.”

“No deal. If I lose my job because of this, I’m screwed. I’m still broke and in debt from all the legal bills I racked up back in Statesville. If you want me to take a risk like this, I need some kind of financial protection.”

More conferring. “I’m sure we could arrange something with the State Witness Assistance program if need be,” Doyle muttered. “They can offer financial assistance and job placement when needed. But only if you lose your job as a result of helping us.”

“That’s more like it,” Shirley said, suddenly feeling very confident. “Now what exactly am I supposed to be finding out for you?”

The two cops looked sheepish. “We don’t exactly know,” Reynolds admitted. “But we do know that at one point in time, Dr. Chalmers was heavily invested in one of Enola Higginbottom’s companies, a company that eventually tanked and he lost his entire investment. We think that might be a potential motive for him to have been involved in her death----or perhaps, just to be covering up what really caused her death.”

Knowing what had happened with Joe Middleton’s role in the patent-royalties scam back in Statesville, Shirley could already see plenty of potential angles for Dr. Chalmers to work in this case. As odd as it may seem, she knew there were plenty of ways a hospital could profit from a suspicious death, from insurance claims to lucrative lawsuits against the presiding doctors. Maybe what the two cops were suggesting wasn’t so far-fetched after all.

Maybe it was her chance to atone for what she'd done back in Statesville. She still carried around a tremendous amount of guilt from her deeds. Helping solve a potential crime just might set her karma and life back on the right track.

And maybe, just maybe, doing some digging of her own just might help her discover the key to what kind of man Dr. Randall Hamm really was.

Chapter Seventeen

Shirley gave the cab driver the transport voucher she'd received from the police department, along with a fifty-cent tip. She wasn't feeling especially generous today, and even if she were, she couldn't afford to be. The driver swore in Spanish at her as he drove off, but she didn't care.

What a day! This morning she'd started out as a junior-level nurse in a big-city hospital with a dull, humdrum life and no romantic entanglements aside from the occasional one-night stand. Less than twelve hours later, she'd had the best sex of her life with a complex, mysterious man she cared deeply for, but whom she didn't understand at all. She'd had the rug pulled out from under her at her new job, and she was helping to investigate a murder mystery for the state of North Carolina.

Talk about rapid turnarounds.

Raleigh might not be Chicago or New York City, but when it came to keeping its inhabitants on their toes, this Southern metropolis was light years ahead of the sleepy small town where she'd grown up.

Shirley was exhausted. Even if it was only nine thirty, she was already about to call it a night. She just hoped she wouldn't run into Ed or his bubbly blond girlfriend in the hallway. She was in no mood for no-strings-attached sex tonight. She was in no mood for no-strings-attached sex. Maybe not ever again, in fact. As fun as that part of her life had been in recent months, Shirley had learned the hard way that getting busy with everything in pants eventually came with a price. An *emotional* price.

She'd jumped into bed with Dr. Randall Hamm today expecting to come away with the sense of empowerment and elation all her past impromptu trysts had gotten her, but the exact opposite had happened. Instead of helping to satisfy her cravings—for sex and for the man himself—this afternoon's encounter just made her want him all the more. The satisfaction her body had enjoyed just a few hours ago was short lived; now she was as horny and on-edge as a frustrated teenage virgin. She wanted him, needed him, had to have him. Now.

Only problem was, Dr. Randall Hamm was in jail.

Damn it. Today just wasn't her day.

Shirley walked up her apartment building's gravel driveway, rummaging in her handbag for her keys. They'd fallen all the way to the bottom of her purse, and she was so busy trying to dig them out that she didn't notice that someone was waiting for her on her front stoop.

"Hello, Shirley," a familiar male voice said. A voice that stopped her dead in her tracks.

Shirley looked up, and stared into Bob Watson's haggard, unshaven face.

"*Bob?* What the—?" she sputtered. Suddenly she felt faint; she had to brace herself against one of the porch pillars to keep from falling over. "What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be in prison!"

Bob shrugged. "They let me out early. Counted the time I did awaiting trial as time served. Budget cuts, you know. With the recession, the government can't afford to keep people in jail."

"Get out of here," Shirley said, seething. "Get out of here before I call the police."

"I'm not breaking the law," he retorted. "I'm just standing here in front of my own apartment building, minding my own business."

Shirley felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. "What?" she shrieked. "You *live* here?"

“Yup,” he said. “And why not? It’s a good location, and the rent’s cheap. Besides, from what I hear from the neighbors, it’s a regular *Melrose Place* around here. Plenty of hot tail available whenever you want it.” He eyed her lasciviously. “So whattaya say, babe? Since you’re already givin’ it away for free to the neighbors, how about you and me head up to my place for old time’s sake? I’ve got a nice new waterbed.”

Shirley shivered with disgust, and choked down the bile in her throat as her stomach turned at the very thought of getting back into bed with the sleazy, slimy—not to mention *totally impotent*—Bob Watson. “If you think for one minute that I would even *consider* getting back together with you, you are beyond crazy.”

“I didn’t say anything about us getting back together, babe,” Bob oozed, all slimy snake-oil salesman. “I’m just lookin’ for a quick roll in the sack. Then maybe you an’ me can talk about my latest business plan.”

Business plan? *Oh, that’s just great*, Shirley mused. What Bob Watson called business plans, the rest of the world called federal crimes. “I don’t think so, Bob. Now get out of my way. I need to get up to my apartment.”

Bob rooted his feet into the concrete. “I’m not goin’ anywhere, babe. If you want to get upstairs, you’ve gotta take me up there with you.”

Shirley ground her teeth. The audacity of this man was beyond the pale. What did she ever see in him, anyway? “Do you really want me to call the cops, Bob? Because I happen to be very good friends with a couple of members of Raleigh’s finest.”

Bob laughed. “I highly doubt that,” he sneered. “You’re just as much as an ex-con as me, even if you used your fancy-dancy lawyer to buy your way outta jail. And now I hear you’re

broke. Guess maybe that's why you're sleepin' with everybody under the sun. You makin' any money from that? Maybe you should."

That did it. Shirley blew her stack. "You have no right to judge me, Bob! No right at all." She put both hands to his chest and shoved so hard, he toppled over. She dashed past him into the building and ran upstairs, cheeks burning and eyes smarting from humiliation. Damn it. Damn it all to hell. Not only had Ed blabbed the sordid details of their trysts to the whole universe, Bob Watson was now her neighbor, too.

There was absolutely no way she could keep living here. She would have to move. How, exactly, she had no idea. Bob was right; she *was* broke. She couldn't afford to break her lease, couldn't even afford to rent a moving van. But that was another matter for another time. Right now, she just had to get the hell out of there.

Shirley hastily packed an overnight bag and headed back outside. Thankfully, Bob had disappeared. Shirley walked to the corner, flagged a taxi, and asked the driver to take her to the nearest budget hotel.

Chapter Eighteen

Shirley sat wedged into the narrow, undersized bathtub in her \$39.95 motel room at the Raleigh Budget Superlodge. The tiny tub was filled with lavender-scented suds from the bubble bath she'd brought with her from home, but the hot bath wasn't comforting at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. She had cricks in her neck and back from wedging her body into far too small a space, and a splitting headache from the sound of throbbing bass and screeching rap music booming from the souped-up cars that drove through the hotel's less-than-desirable neighborhood. The bathroom mirror was cracked; the tile was chipped and moldy. If Shirley had somewhere else to go, she would. But as the old saying went, beggars couldn't be choosers.

If the tiny bathroom was miserable, the motel room was worse. The whole reason Shirley had locked herself in the bathroom in the first place was to escape the sounds of the cheap one-night stands happening on the other side of her motel room's thin paneled walls. From the sound of it, the room to her left contained a middle-aged couple doing the nasty up against a wall, and the room to her right housed a pair of young lovers just getting acquainted with each other. Under normal circumstances, the sound of overheard lovemaking would have turned Shirley on. But after all that had happened today, all it did was make her feel lonely and miserable.

Shirley's cell phone sat perched on the side of the tub. Officer Reynolds had asked that she keep it turned on and close by at all times, in case they needed to notify her of any changes or developments in their ongoing investigation. She stared at the phone and mentally willed it to ring—not because she wanted to jump into her undercover work, but because she was desperate for any excuse to get the hell out of that hotel room.

To her shock, the phone rang almost immediately. She had it on the combo ring-vibrate setting, and the phone jumped around on the side of the tub enough that she barely had a chance to rescue it from falling into the water. She glanced at the caller ID screen; it said “PRIVATE.”

Probably the cops, she thought. “Hello?”

“Shirley, it’s Randall.”

Now she *did* drop the phone. “Shit!” She frantically fished it out and wiped off the bubbles with a washcloth, hoping it still worked. “Randall, are you still there?”

“Yes. What just happened? It sounded like you were underwater just now.”

“Um, I was, sort of. Never mind. Why are you calling me? And how did you get this number?”

“I, uh, I got it from the police. They told me to call you.”

“What? Why?”

“I agreed to cooperate with the investigation in exchange for them dropping the obstruction charges. I didn’t want to, but my attorney told me it was the only way for this whole mess to blow over.”

Shirley jerked upright, sending hot water and suds spilling over the sides of the tiny bathtub. “What the hell? Last I heard, the cops were dragging you off in handcuffs! Now you’re *cooperating* with them? Jeez, Randall, I never know which way was is up with you, buddy.”

“Shirley—”

“And by the way, you’ve got a helluva lot of explaining to do. I really got put on the spot by the cops because they *assumed* that just because I was sleeping with you, I’d know everything about everything you’ve been up to lately. Which isn’t even close to the truth, as I’m sure you

already know. Let me tell you something, mister. If you and I are going to have any kind of future together, personally or work-related, you need to start being straight with me. I'll admit that the whole mystery-wrapped-in-enigma thing was kind of sexy at first, but now it's just getting old. And furthermore—"

Randall sighed into the phone, making static. "Look, Shirley, I know you're probably very confused. But if you'll just let me explain a few things, I think we'll be able to work everything out."

Shirley paused to think. She was still pretty damn skeptical wherever Dr. Randall Hamm was concerned. Sure, the man was hot, and sure, he was by far the best lover she'd ever had. But that was no excuse for him putting her through the wringer like he had. What other man could single-handedly cause her to almost lose her job, get picked up by the police, and dragged into a covert operation all in the same day?

"Shirley, are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. So start explaining."

Randall coughed. "Uh, it would probably be a lot easier if I explained in person. Where are you right now?"

As if on cue, the middle-aged couple next door started pounding themselves against the bathroom wall. Apparently they'd decided on a change of scenery. "Uh, I'm not sure if you'd want to be where I am right now," she said, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand in a futile attempt to muffle the sound of "Yes! Yes! Oh, baby, fuck me, yes!" on the other side of the cheap plastic tile wall.

"Don't be so sure. It's probably best we meet in as low-profile a place as possible. We don't want anyone important to know we're in cahoots on this investigation thing."

“Welllll—” Shirley glanced around the seedy bathroom, grabbed a threadbare towel from the rack and wrapped it around herself as she stepped out of the tub. “If it’s low profile you’re looking for, then where I am right now is perfect. Though I wouldn’t bet on it being very safe. And we should probably be on the lookout for bedbugs.”

“Is that some kind of joke?” Randall asked. “You don’t live in a flophouse, do you?”

“No, I don’t *live* in one. But tonight I’m definitely *staying* in one, unfortunately.”

“Why?”

“It’s kind of a long story. Why don’t you just come over and find out? I’m at the Raleigh Budget Superlodge, on the corner of Franklin Street and State Route 123.”

Randall whistled. “Wow, that *is* a bad part of town. I’ll be right over. And I’ll be packing heat, too, if you know what I mean.” He hung up.

Shirley giggled. In fact, she wasn’t entirely sure what the last comment meant. Because given their recent history, when it came to Dr. Randall Hamm, “packing heat” could mean any number of things.

Chapter Nineteen

Randall showed up at Shirley's cheap hotel room less than a half hour later. He arrived looking less like a hotshot doctor and a lot more like a golf pro in his tight-fitting red polo shirt that accentuated the outline of his pecs, pressed khakis that hugged his trim frame, and expensive white leather loafers. Shirley had changed out of her ratty sweats and into the one nice outfit she'd remembered to toss into her overnight bag: a light cotton sundress flicked with yellow sunflowers, and matching yellow espadrilles.

When she opened the door to let him in, she couldn't help but notice his lip curl up in distaste while he eyed the surroundings. "This place seems a little down market for you," he commented, then looked her up and down. "Though you do help give it a little class. Nice dress."

"I'm sorry, but I can't exactly afford the Ritz. I'm bankrupt, remember?"

Randall plopped down into one of the cracked vinyl chairs, taking care to wipe the seat clean first. "The affordability issue is perfectly understandable. But what I don't understand is what you're doing here in the first place. Don't you have an apartment?"

Shirley sighed. "Yeah, but I can't stay there right now."

"Why not?"

"As I said on the phone, kind of a long story. We'll get to that later. First things first. How about telling me what the hell is going on with *you*?"

Randall snickered as he tucked into the black leather shoulder bag he'd brought with him. He pulled out a frosty bottle of vodka, two bottles of Coke, and two plastic cups. "Before I do, I think you and I could both use a drink. The vodka's fresh from my freezer at home, and the

Cokes are already cold. Which is good, because this doesn't strike me as the type of hotel that has a decent ice machine."

"They do have one, actually," Shirley offered. "Down at the end of the, ah, hallway." If one could call it that. The "hallway" was a concrete landing walled only by a very rickety metal railing. "But it doesn't work. And it's also pretty moldy."

Randall poured the drinks, giving them both a double shot of vodka. He handed her one glass, started sipping liberally from the other. "I originally wanted to do Cuba Librés, but I was fresh out of limes. And rum. Plus you can get drunk a lot faster on vodka, anyway."

Shirley took a sip of her own drink, and winced at how strong it was. Even mixed with the Coke, the one-eighty-proof vodka made her throat burn and her eyes water. "So what you're about to say is bad enough to merit getting hammered, then?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Randall gulped down the rest of his drink, then poured himself another. "I brought enough libations to last us the whole night, so drink up."

She gingerly took another sip of her drink and scorched the inside of her throat again. Lightweight that she was, there was no way she could match Randall drink for drink. And she had a nagging feeling she'd need to stay sober in order to fully grasp what he was about to tell her. "I'm all ears, so start talking."

Randall took a deep breath and blew it out in an unbelievably sexy sigh that set Shirley's crotch afire. Here they were, in a cheap motel room, drinking copious amounts of alcohol and about to share a pile of juicy secrets about a potential homicide in a big-city hospital.

It was only a matter of time before things got down and dirty.

But, first things first. "I always wanted to be a doctor, ever since I was a kid," Randall said. "Which was a good thing, since my parents were both physicians, and so was my paternal

grandfather. So it was almost an expectation that I'd go into the family business, too. The only difference was, I came from a family of small-town doctors who specialized in general practice, just treating families. Giving kids their shots, treating the flu, setting the occasional broken bone. Ordinary, everyday stuff. My grandfather used to call it 'ringworm and rheumatism' medicine. But a small-town family practice was never what I was interested in. I wanted something bigger."

Randall paused, took another sip of his drink. "When I graduated from medical school and told my parents I was going to skip the family medicine residency in favor of anesthesiology, they were heartbroken."

Shirley gasped. "Why? I'd think they'd have been proud of you."

He scoffed. "Well, they weren't. My dad went so far as to say that anesthesiologists weren't real doctors, just because they don't form relationships with their patients. Which I'm sure as you know yourself, is kind of hard to do when your only contact with your patient is making them unconscious in the operating room. But I didn't see that as a bad thing at all. As I'm sure you have probably figured out by now, dealing directly with people is not exactly my forte."

Shirley laughed. "I hadn't noticed."

"When I did the anesthesiology rotation in med school, it seemed like a dream come true. I'd struggled in all my other rotations, especially pediatrics and general practice, because I had a really hard time communicating with and relating to my patients. But in anesthesiology, all my patients were asleep. Here was a way for me to be a doctor without having to emotionally connect with anyone. Sounds like a cop-out, I know. But it was a life-changing moment for me.

I was beginning to think I didn't have what it took to be a doctor, since I've always been sort of a loner."

"That's great you found your calling and everything," Shirley quipped as she felt her body warm from the alcohol. "But what does all this have to do with what happened to Enola Higginbottom?"

"More than you might think," Randall said. "I didn't just want to make a break from my parents' way of practicing medicine. I've always wanted to work in a big research hospital. I wanted the chance to work on the most up-to-date equipment, wanted to try out all the latest medications, wanted to see firsthand all the latest developments in surgery. Plus, I wanted to be anonymous. It's easy to get lost in the shuffle at a big research hospital. Nobody will remember your name, except maybe the few anesthesiology nerds who read your articles in medical journals. At a big hospital like this, I could immerse myself in my work, do what I needed to do, and just fade into the background. Nobody would ever bother me. Or so I thought."

"What do you mean?"

Randall took a long sip from his second drink, set it down on the Formica tabletop, stood up and started to pace. "Things actually went exactly that way for the first couple of years I was here. But then things started to change. In little ways, at first."

"How?"

"Well, when I got close to thirty, I finally started growing into my looks in a big way. And I'd started working out, too, so it wasn't long before all the women around the hospital started noticing me. *A lot.*"

Shirley chuckled. "Hmm. Imagine that."

“I couldn’t just fade into the background any more. And when women started noticing me in a big way, ironically, so did the men. But not in the way you might think.”

“How so?”

“Guys from all over the place started coming to me for advice. On all sorts of things. Women, mostly. Not that I had a lot to offer there. But then I started getting asked all sorts of questions on medical topics. I became the hospital’s go-to guy on all things anesthesia. Then I started getting offers for research grants, studies, speaking engagements at conferences. And all because I was good-looking. It seemed fake to me, and totally undeserved. So I just withdrew into my shell even further.”

“Why?”

“I just wasn’t accustomed to that kind of attention. I’ve always felt most comfortable doing things alone, my own way. Even my charity work was done anonymously. I guess it’s just the way my brain is put together.” He paused, ran his finger around the damp edge of his highball glass in a way that Shirley couldn’t help but find arousing. “But there was one offer that stood out among the rest. That one, I took.”

Shirley already had some idea where this might be heading. “Go on.”

“President Chalmers came to me one day and asked if I’d like to get involved in some special project research that would be quite lucrative for both me and the hospital. I was hesitant at first, but then he added that it was the type of research that could be conducted secretly. That raised some red flags with me, but I was still curious about what he meant, so I agreed to meet with him about it.

“This was about two years ago, shortly after Dr. Chalmers took over running the hospital,” he said. “Like any hospital administrator, he’s ruthless about looking for new revenue

streams. So when he offered me a chance to get in on the ground floor of a new anesthesia study funded by a drug company, I was skeptical at first. The drug companies are notorious for funding so-called studies that are little more than expensive marketing tools for their drugs. But when I looked into it further, it seemed legit. I was allowed to set my own study parameters, and there was—supposedly—no pressure to publish study results favorable to the drug company. So I went ahead and signed on. In return, I got a generous research budget, plus a pretty fat signing bonus. That’s how I made the down payment on my house, in fact. It seemed like any academic physician’s dream come true. At first.”

“Let me guess,” Shirley said, polishing off her drink. “There was a catch.”

“You betcha. It took me a while to figure that out, but after a couple of months doing the study, it was obvious. I got my first inkling of the problem when I turned over my first dataset to Dr. Chalmers, and he called me into his office, saying it was problematic.”

“How so?”

Randall ran his fingers through his hair. He was getting agitated. “Well, he didn’t exactly say that at first. He called me into his office, sat me down, offered me a drink of twelve-year-old scotch from his liquor cabinet. I honestly thought he’d called me in to congratulate me on a job well done. But that wasn’t the case at all. Once he knew I was comfortable, he threw the proverbial book at me. Apparently, he’d forwarded the dataset to the drug company, and they were furious about it.”

“Why?”

“Well, I discovered, quite by accident over the course of my research, that this expensive new anesthesia drug that we were being paid to study was no more effective than a cheap and widely available generic that had been around for years. So of course I reported that in my

dataset. But the drug company wasn't exactly happy about that. And neither was Dr. Chalmers. Turns out that the Higginbottom family owned a chunk of the company that manufactured the drug, and Chalmers was heavily invested as well."

Shirley's eyes widened. This must have been the sour investments that the cops had referred to back at the station. "Oh my. What a mess."

"Yeah, no kidding. So it goes without saying that Dr. Chalmers ordered me to change the data."

"What do you mean, *change* the data?"

"Chalmers basically told me to come up with a different set of data that was favorable to the drug company. To just make something up, in other words. I refused, of course. But he wasn't too happy about that. He basically said that if I didn't change the data, he was revoking the research grant. I said, fine by me. Then he said I'd have to give the signing bonus back. I told him he'd have to sue me for it. That's when he about blew a gasket."

Now Shirley started having Joe Middleton flashbacks. Corrupt, manipulative hospital administrators? This was familiar territory, for sure. "Because in order to sue you, he'd have to go public with the fact he wanted you to rig the study."

"That's right, Shirley." He grinned at her, and his eyes twinkled. "You know, you've really got a good head on your shoulders when it comes to this sort of thing."

"Comes from my past life of crime," she quipped. "So if you wouldn't cooperate on rigging the drug study, what did Middleton do next? Find another scam?"

"Yep. One that would be a lot harder to track. It just so happened that one of my contacts at the ACLU clued me in to a new scam that was making the rounds among the sleazier hospital administrators: wrongful death insurance scams."

Shirley frowned; she'd never heard of anything like that. "I didn't even know that was possible. Aren't hospitals usually the ones that get *sued* for wrongful death?"

Randall nodded. "Yeah, most of the time. But in North Carolina, and a couple of other states, hospitals can also *collect* on wrongful death insurance if they can prove it was a result of a defective drug or piece of medical equipment. Sometimes it's even possible to collect in the case of medical malpractice, if the doctor that does it isn't employed by the hospital. The resulting monies are split between the patient's family and the hospital. If you play your cards right, it's a gold mine."

Shivers ran up and down Shirley's spine. Suddenly, Enola Higginbottom's sudden death in the OR made a lot of sense. "You don't mean—"

Randall sat down, took both of Shirley's hands in his, squeezed them. "I do mean it, Shirley. Enola Higginbottom was murdered as part of Dr. Chalmers's insurance scam. I'm almost sure of it. And he's trying to pin the blame on me, when I think it's almost certain that the surgeon who did the operation was responsible. I think he paid the surgeon off to make a mistake, then offered to help cover it up."

"But why her?"

"I think Chalmers targeted her because he knew she had a lot of enemies, along with a lot of wealth, so he figured it would be easy for him to get the police to suspect someone else besides him."

Shirley squeezed his hands back, felt her whole body go up in flames as bolts of electricity ran through her entire body. Even as the thought of cold-blooded murder at her own hospital chilled her spine, Dr. Randall Hamm's touch made her hot, hot, hot. "If you know Dr.

Chalmers is the one behind this whole thing, why didn't you want to cooperate with the police at first? Why didn't you just tell them what you knew from the get-go?"

"Because I have no proof. Right now, it's my word against his. The only reason the cops agreed to drop the obstruction charges was because I promised to work behind the scenes with you in order to *get* some proof of my accusations. And we've got our work cut out for us. Because if we don't come up with something within the next forty-eight hours, my ass is grass. Yours too. The cops took a big risk letting me go, and if it doesn't pay off in a hurry, they're gonna be looking for somebody to blame. So like it or not, you and I are gonna be spending a *lot* of time together over the next couple days."

Shirley smiled, and her violet eyes flashed fire. "Oh, I like it. I like it a lot."

Randall took one of her hands and lifted it up to his lips. He kissed her fingers one by one, then took them into his mouth and sucked them. Warmth enveloped Shirley's whole body as he gave each and every digit the royal treatment with his oh-so-supple tongue. Then he moved on to the palm of her hand—a part of her body she never knew could be an erogenous zone.

Until now.

"Mmmmmm," she moaned. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Oh, here and there," he said. "What do you say we move over to the bed? Unless you'd prefer to blow this joint for someplace a little classier. Like my place?"

His place? Shirley wasn't certain she could wait that long. Then again, she wasn't sure she wanted to sleep in that cheap flophouse bed, either. "Under normal circumstances, your place would be great," she said. "But I'm afraid we're gonna have to get busy right here in the flophouse. You've already got me way too turned on to make the drive back to town."

“I think that can be arranged.” Randall pulled her to her feet, then planted a huge kiss square on her mouth. With tongue. Lots and lots of tongue.

Shirley buried her face in his neck, breathing deep of his manly smell: a mixture of Irish Spring, wood smoke, and musk. “Tell me something, Randall. For a guy who’s basically an antisocial loner, how did you learn how to be so good in bed?”

He flashed her a wink and a smile. “Oh, let’s just say I’m a quick study.”

Mysterious to the end.

Damn it.

As Randall slid his hands down her back, Shirley wondered if she’d ever get past that Teflon exterior of his. Then when he squeezed her ass hard and started sucking on her neck, she decided that at this point, she really didn’t care if she ever did. There were far more important things to think about, after all.

Like how fast he could make her come.

Randall tore off her sundress, exposing her braless breasts to the air. He blew his hot breath onto her nipples, hardening them into firm little peaks. Her crotch heated as he ran his fingers across one hard little nub, then the other, turning them to glass. He pressed himself against her, showing her just how much he wanted her, needed her. His cock was solid iron, a battering ram aimed straight at her heart.

She stood pressed up against him, naked except for her wispy lace panties and her chunky espadrilles. His hands strayed from her now-heaving breasts to their slim elastic waistband, his fingers slipping between it and her soft, delicate skin. The panties slid off, slowly, slowly, leaving a trail of moisture along the inside of her thighs. The salty, earthy scent of her sex filled the cheap motel room, perfuming it. She took two tiny steps, and the panties landed in a little

lacy heap on the worn shag carpet. He found her lips in an instant, probed their folds, found her heat center, and began to stroke it.

Dr. Randall Hamm might not be the most social guy on the block, but he sure as hell knew his business when it came to satisfying women. His fingers danced across her clit, turning that little bundle of nerves into a ball of fire.

Her cunt clenched, released, clenched, released. The spasms grew and grew, until they took hold of her entire body, throttling her against him as she bucked and jumped. She threw her head back and cried out as he rubbed her harder, harder, harder. She came again, her hips bucking into his hand.

“Oh, yeah, baby,” she moaned into his neck. “That’s *so* good.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he whispered back.

Shirley just came twice while standing up. And she couldn’t wait to get him lying down.

She tore at the buttons of his polo shirt, sending more than one of them popping off and flying across the room. She pulled at the knit cotton fabric, barely managing to keep from ripping it into tatters as she fought furiously to bare that fine, rock-hard torso of his. That accomplished, she pried open his belt buckle, tugged at his zipper, and freed his beautiful throbbing cock from its little prison. His pants pooled around his ankles as she took him deeply into her mouth, tasting him, sucking him, licking him hard and fast.

He bucked his hips in response to her movements, fucking her mouth. The tip of his cock rammed against the back of her throat, tickling her gag reflex ever so slightly. Instead of scaring her, it just turned her on even more. Deep-throating him made her feel dangerous. Seductive. Hot.

Sooooo hot. She sucked him harder.

But instead of responding in kind, Randall gently put a hand between them, pushing them apart. He was panting hard, barely able to get his breath. “Shirley,” he whispered, “as hot as what you’re doing right now is, we need to chill out for a little while. Otherwise this is going to be all over, and I’m sure you don’t want that.”

“Okay,” she breathed, a little off balance. She’d never realized before that moment just how much she loved having a huge, thick cock in her mouth, and was a little disappointed he’d cut her off so soon. But he’d make up for it soon enough.

“Lie down,” he told her. “Spread your legs wide. I’m going to give you something you’ll never forget.”

She obeyed. Once she was flat on her back, he gently lifted her by the hips and pulled her towards him until her hips were right at the edge of the bed, her legs dangling over, her feet just shy of the floor. He ducked down between her legs, pressed them open even wider with the flats of his hands. He ducked his head down and began to feast on her pussy, probing her damp folds with his tongue. He tasted of her juices, lapped them with his tongue, spread them over his lips with relish and gusto. He worked the tip of his tongue over her already engorged clit until he worked her into a frenzy, just shy of going over the edge for the third time. Then at the last second he pulled back, transferring his attentions to her sheath, which he probed with fingers and tongue. He worked one, then two, then four fingers deep inside her, searching for and finding that precious g-spot, and pushing hard against it again and again and again.

Each and every impact of his fingers against her most secret place was a tiny interstellar explosion that threatened to create new galaxies deep inside her womb. She came again and again and again, until her body just became one long, continuous, pulsating orgasm. Her mind,

body, and spirit all seemed to separate into their respective parts, with her body exploding, her mind retreating, and her spirit rising and growing to fill the entire room.

She didn't need to tell Randall it was time for him to fuck her, or even to guide his cock to her. He already seemed to know the exact moment in time to enter her. She heard a condom wrapper tear from someplace miles away, felt his huge cock plunge into her tight sheath through a blissful fog.

Randall plowed her deep and hard, each and every thrust rocking her to the core. Her body had long ago surpassed its pinnacle of sensation, so this fuck wasn't really about a physical connection any more. No, this fuck was something way beyond just his cock being inside her cunt. This fuck was about something much bigger. They were forging a connection. They were sealing a major deal in a major way. When they both finally came together in one massive explosion, their fates were inextricably linked.

The only question was, how long would it last?

* * * *

As they rested in the afterglow, Shirley decided to pose one last question before drifting off to sleep. "You never did tell me why you bolted from the OR in the middle of the operation."

Randall caressed the side of her face. "Well, I'll tell you, but the answer's pretty embarrassing."

"Go ahead."

"I took off because being in the same room with you had me so turned on, I was about to jizz my pants," he said. "And I couldn't exactly let that happen. Would have contaminated the whole OR."

Shirley cracked up. “Glad to know I wasn’t the only one,” she murmured. “You had quite an effect on me, too.”

“So I guess now you understand why I haven’t been too forthcoming on that issue with the police,” Randall said, nuzzling her hair.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she whispered.

They laughed very softly to one another, and fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty

“Well, we’ve got our work cut out for us today,” Randall remarked early the next morning, as he drove the both of them back into town in his blue Lexus. “It’s not going to be easy to find the proof we need with most of the surgery-related departments still shut down.”

“Actually, it might be a little easier,” Shirley offered. “There won’t be as many people around to notice what we’re up to.”

“True.” He reached over and patted her knee. “You know, Shirley, I like the way you think. You’re a creative gal.” He paused, gave her knee a hard little squeeze. “Both in *and* out of the bedroom.”

Shirley’s whole body warmed at his not-so-subtle reference to some of the more interesting sexual positions they’d explored last night. “We’re gonna need all the creativity we can get,” she said. “Somehow I don’t think I can just go right up to President Chalmers and ask him point-blank how he managed to have Enola Higginbottom killed for the insurance money.”

“I’m sure you’ll come up with something,” Randall said, pulling into the gravel driveway of Shirley’s apartment building. “Besides, he likes you. Rumor has it that he has a weakness for beautiful young brunettes. Maybe you can use your feminine wiles on him somehow. In a strictly g-rated way, of course.”

“Of course,” she chuckled.

Randall pulled the car into an empty parking slot and killed the engine. “You just need to grab a fresh set of clothes, right? I’ll wait here.”

“No, I’d really rather you come upstairs with me,” Shirley said, the pit of her stomach clenching. “There’s a reason why I ran away from here last night, you know.”

He frowned. "Right. Which you never explained."

"As I said last night, it's complicated. Just follow me upstairs, okay? Please?"

He held up his hands in defeat. "You're the boss."

They made it as far as the first-floor landing before running into trouble.

Ed and Bob were sitting in matching wingback chairs in the building's wood-paneled lobby, in what would have been the rambling old Victorian's front parlor before it was subdivided into apartments. They were both reading sections of the morning paper. Bob set his paper down first, looked from Randall to Shirley and back again with a sinister grin. "Well, looky what we have here," he oozed. "Told ya it was just a matter of time before she showed up this morning."

Ed set down his own paper and gave her a gentlemanly nod. "Mornin', Shirl," he said in a syrupy sweet voice that made her stomach churn. "I've been wonderin' when you were gonna show up." He raised his eyebrows up and down and leered at her. "Been wonderin' when you and me can meet up again. Sure had a good time with you the other night. Would love to do it again sometime." He nodded at Randall. "Unless your gentleman friend objects?"

Randall turned to her, bewildered. "What the hell is he talking about?"

Shirley sighed and shook her head. "I told you things were complicated here. Let's just go upstairs."

She shot Ed an evil look as they passed him and headed up the staircase. To think, that man had blabbed their most intimate secrets to a bottom-feeder like Bob Watson. She regretted ever getting naked with Ed, no matter how good it might have felt at the time.

They made it to the third floor, and Shirley keyed open the door. “Do yourself a favor, Randall, and never sleep with your neighbors. Especially when one of the neighbors is also your ex-boyfriend.”

“Ah, I see. I trust you may be looking for a new place to live, then?”

“As soon as possible,” she said. “Not that I can afford to move. I don’t exactly have much of a budget when it comes to rent right now, and this building is the cheapest thing in town.”

Randall shut the front door behind them and followed her across the apartment to her small bedroom. “Who says *you* have to be the one who moves? Why not them?”

Shirley laughed. “Yeah, right. Ed was here first, for one thing. And now it looks like he and Bob are a team. They’ve ganged up against me. It’s two against one.” She pulled open a bureau drawer, selected a fresh set of nursing scrubs and a change of underwear. “I’m just a single gal living alone in the big city, you know. I have to protect myself.”

Including protecting herself from herself. She *had* jumped into bed with Ed as a willing participant, after all. And look where that had gotten her.

Randall folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head at her. “You know, Shirley, you don’t strike me as the type of woman who would give up that easily.”

“Once bitten, twice shy,” she said, and shucked off her sundress and panties. She bent over to unlace her espadrilles, giving him a delectable view of her rump.

“You don’t seem too shy right now,” he remarked. “Do you always argue in the nude? If so, we should really do it more often.”

Shirley ignored that. As much as she’d like to get down and dirty with him again, they had far more important things to do right now. She stepped into her panties—plain white cotton

ones, thank you very much—snapped her bra in place, and pulled on her plainest, baggiest set of scrubs. If she was going to keep her eye on the ball today, she needed to do it feeling as unsexy as possible. She gritted her teeth, tried to clear all the sexy thoughts and from her brain. Not an easy task when a man as gorgeous as Dr. Randall Hamm stood two feet away from her, watching her dress. Her crotch melted as she felt his eyes on her—

Damn it, they could *not* have sex right now. No time for that. If only she could come up with some sort of distraction...

Shirley squeezed her eyes shut and thought of the least sexy thing she could. Namely, Bob Watson, naked and limp-dicked.

It worked. Her crotch cooled off in a hurry. And her brain cooked up what might just be a brilliant idea.

“You know Randall, my ex-boyfriend Bob Watson—he’s the sleazy guy downstairs with the salt-and-pepper hair and the twelve o’clock shadow—might actually be some help to us.”

“How so?”

“He never met a scam he didn’t like, for one. And he can be a real smooth talker when he wants to. I bet if we play our cards right, we might be able to get him to do most of our dirty work for us.” Which if all went as planned, would bust Bob out of parole and send him away from Raleigh and right back to prison where he belonged.

Randall planted a kiss on her forehead. “Babe, I like the way you think.”

“Thanks. You’ll need to let me do most of the talking, though. Bob works best around women whom he thinks are in love with him.”

“And you are, aren’t you?” He poked her in the ribs.

“Of course I am. *Madly*.” She rolled her eyes. “Let’s go. And by the way, my plan will work a lot better if you act jealous.”

He rubbed his hands together with glee. “At last, here’s my chance for some good, old-fashioned Southern vengeance. Pistols at dawn, perhaps?”

“Don’t do anything illegal. We’re in enough trouble as it is.”

They headed back downstairs. Ed had disappeared, but Bob was still sitting in the threadbare wingback chair, pretending to read the paper. “Oh, Bob,” Shirley sang, “forgive me for being so rude earlier. I was so shocked that you’d gotten out of prison, I just plumb *forgot* myself, you see.”

Bob set down his paper and grinned. “I knew you’d be glad to see me, Shirley. Once you got used to the idea.”

“You know it. And Bob, I’m *so* glad we ran into each other, because it just so happens that my, ah, *associate* Randall here and I have just stumbled across a business opportunity we think you’ll be interested in.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Wow, Shirley,” Randall said in amazement as he drove them the three blocks to the hospital. “That was almost too easy.”

“Bob is a sucker for any get-rich-quick scheme,” Shirley replied. “Funny, I never thought dating him would ever come in handy. I guess that just goes to show that every relationship, no matter how bad, has a purpose.”

“I’m curious. What exactly *was* it like to date that man? He doesn’t seem like your type.”

Shirley groaned. “Don’t ask. And to be perfectly honest, I don’t really have a type.” Except maybe for Randall. *He* sure as hell was her type. But he was sort of in a class by himself.

“He doesn’t strike me as all that smart,” Randall commented. “I just hope he doesn’t screw it up.”

Shirley laughed. “Oh, he’ll screw it up all right. But in a way, that’ll be good for us. So don’t worry.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, then.” Randall pulled the Lexus into a parking spot marked RESERVED. “Well, here we are,” he said. “We’ll need to go our separate ways for the rest of the day, otherwise we might draw suspicion.” He swiped his access card through a reader mounted next to a steel entry door. “This is the private entrance for staff physicians, so nobody will see us come in. I can take you as far as the freight elevator, but from that point you’re on your own.”

Nervous butterflies gathered in Shirley's stomach as they walked down the dark, low-ceilinged basement hallway. She never imagined that less than two weeks after moving to Raleigh, she'd be embroiled in such a wild adventure. But here she was, about to help expose a murder in a big-city research hospital. And her plan to do it might not be sophisticated, or even foolproof—but it was her chance to atone for a major wrong. Only now was she truly making a clean break from her small-town life back in Statesville.

The only question was, what would happen if her plan failed?

She didn't want to think about that.

The hall dead-ended into another, wider one. The steel freight elevator loomed before them. "Well, this is where we part ways," Randall said. "Take the elevator to the third floor. It'll drop you off about twenty yards from The Dragon Lady's office. I don't know if she's back in today, but if she is, snoop around and see what you can find out. I'll head to President Chalmers's office and see if I can scope out when Bob arrives." He pulled a small black plastic device out of his pocket. "I'll try to plant my voice-activated digital recorder somewhere near Chalmers's office, if I can. Maybe now it'll be good for something other than making grocery lists."

"How will you manage that without being seen?"

He squeezed her hand. "Oh, I have my ways. It also helps that Chalmers' secretary has a crush on me."

"*Everybody* has a crush on you," Shirley said. The elevator arrived, and she stepped onto it. "Well, I guess this is goodbye, then."

He nodded. "Goodbye, Shirley."

As the doors slid closed, Shirley said a silent prayer. With any luck, she wouldn't be saying goodbye to Dr. Randall Hamm for long.

* * * *

Shirley walked the halls surrounding of the Nurse-Anesthetists' Department and found it almost entirely deserted. The state's shutdown on all surgeries at the hospital was still very much in force. The duty roster said that the only nurse-anesthetist currently on duty was assigned to Labor & Delivery.

She peeked around the corner and was surprised to see the light on in The Dragon Lady's office. *She must be back from suspension*, Shirley thought. She made a beeline for Beth Peking's open door.

When she made it to the threshold, Shirley had to stifle a laugh. The Dragon Lady was there, all right. But she did not look happy. More like miserable. Beth stood perched on her trademark spike heels, wearing yet another one of her red silk Mandarin-collar pantsuits as she packed a banker's box full of her belongings.

She looked up when she heard Shirley approach. "Well, today is your lucky day, Shirley Daniels," the tiny woman said in her thick accent. "I got fired."

Shirley cleared her throat and tried to feign sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that, Dra—Ms. Peking. But I promise you, I didn't have anything to do with it." At least, not directly. But Shirley knew better than to elaborate.

"Oh, don't you give me that," The Dragon Lady retorted, wagging her scarlet-lacquered finger at her. "When you showed up, all kind of problems started to happen. You are bad luck! Stupid country girl, up to no good."

"But—"

The Dragon Lady set down her now-overloaded bankers' box on the empty desk. "I did research on you, Shirley Daniels. I Googled you. You know what I found out? You are a criminal. You are a bad woman. This hospital never should have hired you. And then they fired me instead. Makes no sense."

Shirley's mouth went cotton-dry. "I'm sorry," was all she could think to say.

Beth started packing another box. "You know there are a lot of cops here today? A cop just came by this morning, asking all kind of questions. I don't know what he's talking about. Probably they're looking for you, since you are a criminal." The tiny woman picked up her boxes, carried them out in front of her in a stack that was almost as tall as she was. "This place is going to hell in a hand basket," she said, and sneered. Then she disappeared down the hall.

Well, so much for that, Shirley thought. The Dragon Lady obviously wasn't going to be much help. And being the new girl in town, she didn't exactly know many other people around the hospital. With Beth Peking gone, that left only two other possible sources of inside information: Dr. Joseph Chalmers, who was out of the question, of course. And Marla Crabtree.

Marla. The crotchety old nurse who had ratted her out to the cops.

Shirley wasn't sure how she felt about that. Sure, Marla knew everything there was to know about everybody at the hospital. But Marla had already betrayed her once. She could hardly be counted on to keep her mouth shut about something as important as exposing a murder, let alone a murder orchestrated by the most powerful man at the hospital.

Then again, Shirley supposed the older woman's busybody personality could be an asset. Maybe she could use Marla to create some kind of distraction while she helped Randall get the evidence they needed.

As if on cue, Marla appeared out of nowhere. She seemed so adept at knowing the exact moment to show up, Shirley wondered if the woman had ESP.

“Hi, hon,” Marla said in her trademark gravelly drawl. “Whatcha been up to the past couple days? Ain’t seen ya around. Then again, ain’t seen hardly anybody around these parts.”

“Talking to the police, mostly,” Shirley said, seething. “So have you, apparently.”

Marla’s wrinkly, blue-veined face blanched. “Guilty as charged, hon. I suppose that means ya know I talked to the cops about ya.”

Shirley folded her arms across her chest and frowned. “Yeah, I sort of figured that out.”

Marla held up her hands in defeat. “Before ya get too mad, hon, let me explain. I only did what I did to help ya out.”

Shirley scoffed. “Yeah, likely story.” She didn’t want to believe a word Marla said, but something in the old woman’s pale gray eyes told her that she should.

“Hon, the only reason I went to the cops was ’cause I heard through the grapevine that Prez Chalmers was gonna try to pin the whole Enola Higginbottom thing on you.”

Shirley felt the bottom fall out of her stomach. “*What?* How?”

“I dunno all the details, hon. But you gotta figure, it prob’ly makes a lot of sense from Prez Chalmers’ side. I mean, you’re the fresh-faced girl from outta town, you don’t know nobody, and you’ve got that, well, *checkered* past o’ yours. That’s right, I know all about what happened back in Statesville. Chalmers prob’ly figured it’d be easy fer him to pin the whole insurance scam on you, since ya had a past history of gettin’ in on that sorta thing. Not murder, of course, but the scam side of things, ya know. Once I got wind of that, I went to the cops and told them what I knew. I knew fer a fact that ya didn’t have nuthin’ to do with it, and I wanted to take the heat off ya. That’s all.”

Shirley sighed and stared at the floor. Was there no escaping her past? Even now as she tried to atone for her past crimes, they kept getting her into trouble.

Marla put a gnarled hand on her shoulder. "Don't be embarrassed, hon. We all make mistakes. Even me. Ya know, I never did tell ya the reason I joined the Army way back when."

"Why did you?"

Marla closed her eyes and fiddled with her hands, remembering. "This was back in, oh let's see, '64 or '65. I was fresh outta high school, workin' days at the phone company and goin' to nursing school nights. Money was real tight, and my good-fer-nuthin' husband had just run out on me. We was only married a coupla months before he ran off. Anyhow, one thing led to another, and I sorta got into some trouble passin' bad checks. Got arrested, got dragged before the judge. The judge thought he'd get creative and offer me a sentence he usually only gave to the wayward young men back in them days. Jail, or the Army. I chose the Army. Uncle Sam helped me learn right from wrong, picked up the tab on the rest of my nursin' school bill, and the rest is history."

Shirley couldn't help but smile. It seemed that she and Marla weren't all that different. For the first time, she began to understand the older woman's motherly attitude towards her. "That's a wonderful story, Marla," she said. "It gives me hope. I've been wanting to turn my life around here in Raleigh, but something tells me I won't be able to do that completely until I right some past wrongs of my own. And I was hoping maybe you could help me."

Marla took Shirley's hand and squeezed it. "Be happy to, hon. What can I do?"

Shirley squeezed back. "What you're best at doing. Come on."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Marla led Shirley down a series of damp, dusty passages. A small flashlight Marla had produced from her scrubs pocket provided the only light. "I'm prob'ly the only person left alive who knows about these old supply transport halls," she said. "Time was, we used to send our soiled instruments up and down these little halls in little carts that ran on pneumatic pressure. We used to have to steam-sterilize all our equipment in the main hospital autoclave way back, years ago. When they went to almost all disposable stuff and packaged sterile instruments, they didn't need to autoclave nuthin' no more, so they stopped runnin' the carts. But they never did shut up the passageways."

"Is this how you stay on top of all your gossip, then?" Shirley asked, turning sideways to fit through a very narrow section of passage, which by now was more like an oversized heating duct than an actual hallway.

"It's one way, hon. Though I don't come through here unless there ain't no other way around it."

"Well, today is probably one of those times," Shirley said. "Where does this tunnel end?"

"Oh, they go all over," Marla replied. "Every department in the older part of the hospital has an outlet for these tunnels, though most of 'em got sealed up years ago. But it just so happens that one of the last remaining exits leads right into the hospital executive offices. Might surprise ya to know this, hon, but before they did the big remodel back in '86, the president's office was the hospital laundry. Dr. Chalmers don't know it, but he sits right in the same spot where we used to drop off the soiled sheets and diapers."

Shirley giggled. “That seems appropriate.”

“Well, he’ll be knee-deep in shit for real when we’re done with him,” Marla cackled.

They came to a fork in the passage. Marla shined her light down both paths. “If I remember right, the left one’ll take us right into the back of Chalmers’s office. We can listen in on whatever’s goin’ on there through the air vent. And if by chance things don’t go the way you and Randall planned ’em, I can mosey right into Chalmers’s office myself and get him talkin’ up a storm. Gimme five minutes, I’ll have a full-blown confession outta him before he even knows what hit him. And you’ll be my witness.”

“How on Earth will you manage that?”

Marla turned to her and grinned. “Oh, I got the gift of gab, hon.”

Shirley just shrugged. It was probably better just to stand back and let Marla do what she did best.

They came to the end of the narrow passageway. A large air-conditioning vent filled part of one wall. “Peep right through them cracks there,” Marla instructed her. “Tell me what ya see.”

Shirley obeyed. She pressed her eyes up against one of the tiny metal slits in the grating and peered through. She could see Dr. Chalmers sitting behind his huge desk, but not much else. He appeared to be talking to someone, but she couldn’t tell who. “I can’t see much of anything,” she said.

“Ya gotta angle yer head more, hon. Look *under* the slits, not *through* ’em.” Marla spoke as if she’d done that very thing many times.

Shirley did as she was told, and the view improved instantly. Now she had a full view of the room, and she could even hear what was going on a lot better. Dr. Chalmers *was* talking to someone—and that someone was Bob Watson.

So far, so good.

Shirley strained to hear what they were saying. She couldn't make out much of what Dr. Chalmers said, but Bob's voice came through loud and clear. "Well, sir, I've seen a lotta insurance deals in my time, but this one takes the cake," he said in his deep, thick Carolina twang, unmistakable anywhere.

Good, Shirley thought. *He's taking the bait*. Now all he had to do was to get Dr. Chalmers to say the right thing at the right time, and hopefully somehow either get it on tape or get at least three eyewitnesses to overhear it—not including Bob, who couldn't exactly be trusted. Shirley prayed Randall had managed to drop that digital recorder somewhere nearby.

Bob leaned into Dr. Chalmers's richly paneled desk, ran his fingers back and forth over its surface, admiring the grain and finish of the expensive wood. "I'd sure like to get in on the ground floor with you on your next deal if I can. And I know the perfect target. The hospital insures its employees, right?"

Dr. Chalmers nodded and muttered something unintelligible.

"Good," Bob said, his voice growing ever louder and bolder along with his bravado. "'Cause I'll let ya in on a little secret. My ex-girlfriend works here at your hospital, and it just so happens I've just bought a nice little life insurance policy on her. Five hundred grand. Nobody knows about it but you and me. If ya can manage to get her bumped off while she's here at work, how about you and me split the difference?"

Shirley yelped.

He was going to have her killed. Bob wanted her dead.

And probably not for the money, either. Shirley didn't believe Bob's life insurance story for a minute. Bob just wanted her dead.

But why?

Ha. What a question. She could think of at least a dozen reasons why.

Marla tapped her on the shoulder. "You all right, hon? Yer awful pale all of a sudden."

Shirley suddenly felt very cold. She wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. "I can't do this anymore," she whispered. "I'm done playing games. We need to get the cops over here. Now."

"But I thought the cops wanted y'all to get them the proof they needed."

Shirley scoffed. "That was before I knew I was about to become a murder victim myself."

Marla's eyes flew wide. "Good gracious, hon. You sure?"

"I know what I heard," she seethed. "Only question is, will Chalmers go for it?"

"We prob'ly don't wanna wait around to find out, hon. Let's get ya outta here."

"Just me? What about *you*?"

Marla patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry about me, hon. I'll just keep everybody busy 'til the cops get here."

Marla shooed her down the tiny hallway and opened a small metal door that led into an empty broom closet. "This'll let ya out right by the main elevator. Get the cops, bring 'em right into Chalmers's office. I'll use my gift of gab to make sure he and your little friend Bob don't go nowhere."

Marla disappeared back towards Chalmers's office, and Shirley headed back out into the main hospital with a purpose.

* * * *

Shirley dashed into a secluded part of the hospital garage, hoping her cell phone would be able to pick up a signal. She pulled Officer Reynolds's business card from her purse and dialed her number.

"Hello, Officer Reynolds? I think I have all the proof you need now. Get the hell over here before I end up dead, too."

It took a little convincing, but Officers Reynolds and Doyle finally agreed to send a team out to the hospital. Shirley promised to meet them in the hospital lobby, along with Randall.

Now, she just had to find Randall.

Shirley was about to head back into the hospital building when she ran into him. Literally. She would have toppled flat onto her back if he hadn't caught her just in time. The feel of his hands on her body was pure electricity, white-hot heat that warmed her belly and melted her crotch.

Damn it, there was just no escaping this man.

"You always seem to know exactly where to find me," she remarked. "How is that?"

"I make it my business to know where you are at all times," he said, pulling her close. "Especially now that there seems to be a pretty hefty price on your head."

"So you heard. What are we going to do? I can't stay here anymore."

He planted a kiss on her forehead. "You can and you will. The cops are on their way, and I'll make sure they protect you. Hell, *I'll* protect you. I'll even get my twelve-gauge rifle out of the trunk of my Lexus if need be."

She chuckled. “So I guess that’s what you meant last night when you said you were packing heat.”

“As the Boy Scouts say, be prepared,” he said.

“But what about the cops? Do we have enough proof to get them off *our* backs?”

“Yep. I got the whole conversation on tape. Planted my digital recorder in one of Chalmers’s potted ferns while Chalmers was in the bathroom. I told his secretary I left something in his office, and she let me right in. Gullible woman.”

“It’s easy to be gullible around you. You do have quite an effect on people.”

“So I’m told. Well, we’d better get to the lobby before all hell breaks loose.”

They sped off to the hospital lobby, arriving just as the police did. Randall led most of them off to Chalmers’s office, while a smaller detail stood by as a precaution to protect Shirley, even though it was unlikely anything would happen to her in a busy hospital lobby in front of dozens of bewildered, staring witnesses. They were taking no chances.

Officers Reynolds and Doyle, who’d switched from their usual plainclothes attire to dress blues, both shook her hand. “Looks like you did some nice police work for us, Shirley,” Reynolds said with a wry grin. “Thanks. I hope what you’ve gone through here these past few days doesn’t put you off living in Raleigh, though. Things aren’t usually this exciting around here.”

Shirley smiled back as her body warmed all over. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Seems to me there’s plenty in Raleigh to keep me excited for a very long time.”

Epilogue

Shirley carried the last box into her new apartment. Thanks to a generous raise at the hospital, along with a cash reward from the state Crime Fighters Fund for helping the police solve Enola Higginbottom's murder, she could now afford a bigger apartment in a nicer part of town. And a car. And real furniture. Things were definitely looking up for her, and in more ways than one.

She set the heavy box down in her front entryway and picked her way across the living room, which was strewn with boxes and bags. Randall knelt in the middle of the room, muttering to himself while he tried to assemble her new entertainment center. "The damn instructions to this thing are in Chinese," he growled. "So don't expect me to be done anytime soon."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," she said, gently squeezing his shoulder. "You're a pretty smart guy, after all. And I know you love messing with hardware."

"Whatever," Randall grumbled and went back to tinkering with the pile of wood and screws that would eventually hold her new television. It certainly wasn't the most romantic thing for a man to say, but that was just fine with Shirley. Dr. Randall Hamm might be a man of few words, but he had it where it counted. And any man who would spend his entire Saturday putting together furniture for her was a man worth keeping around.

Shirley took a can of grape soda, a favorite since her childhood, from her otherwise empty fridge and went out onto her balcony to enjoy it. She glanced back over her shoulder at Randall, who was now hammering two boards together, still muttering to himself around a

mouthful of wood screws. She smiled as her body warmed all over. Even that, the most mundane of tasks, was sexy and masculine when he did it.

She turned away from him to stare out over the grassy mountain meadow that bordered the back of her apartment complex. For the first time she could remember, Shirley Daniels was perfectly content with her life. Everything was just as it should be.

Her relationship with Dr. Randall Hamm might last forever, or it might end tomorrow. And she was perfectly happy with that. Neither of them had discussed what would happen in the future. Neither of them knew what tomorrow or the next day would bring. But that didn't matter.

What did matter was that it was a beautiful day in Raleigh, North Carolina, and they were spending it together.

THE END

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