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DELIGHTFUL DECEPTION

UNDER COVER ANTHOLOGY

By

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Chapter One



Thea Foster, MD, PhD, MBBS, and—this one had been for fun—PharmD, was a woman with a mission. Specifically, her mission was twofold: a) avoid termination, and b) avoid boredom. She was very much afraid that if she accomplished the first, the second was inevitable.

She pressed her thumb to the ID plate, waited a moment to be scanned, then stood by as the door to BioSecurity slid open. "Good morning, Dr. Foster," the computer husked, and she nearly grinned. Those fools in IT had been fooling around with Central's voice programming again. How else to explain why she had just been greeted by Marilyn Monroe's breathy contralto?

"Good morning, Central. Any schedule changes I should be aware of?" Probably not; as head of BioSecurity, there were precious few changes that were not immediately brought to her attention.

"No, Dr. Foster. I downloaded the new CEO's presentation into your Palm last night; nothing has changed."

Thea felt her mouth turn down in a grimace. The new CEO. Right. Not that she had forgotten—she had a photographic memory and it was, unfortunately, impossible for her to forget anything—but she'd shoved it to the back of her brain for awhile.

After last quarter's debacle with the theft—OK, the donation—of PaceIC, the company's bottom line had gone well over into red, with no hope in sight.

There were other eggs in Anodyne's basket, of course, but nothing near completion. PaceIC had been their shot, and now it was gone. Well, not entirely gone, but now there was market competition, and their profit margin had been considerably narrowed.

Thanks to me.

Well, yes. Thea hadn't liked the idea of making the suffering pay through the nose for *her* invention, thanks very much. She had expressed this thought to Nicholas Jekell, aka the Jackal. The Jackal had told her that as an employee of Anodyne, anything she invented was the company's property, what they did with it was none of her damned business, and if she didn't like it, she could shove it up her frozen ass.

Forty-eight hours later, the head of security had left for the day, completely unaware that she was

carrying a vial worth billions. Dr. Jekell never pieced it together—not all of it. For once her IQ, rep had been the saving of her. No one had considered for even a nanosecond that Dr. Foster had jettisoned PaceIC... to *benice* .

Motivated partly by altruism, but mostly by vengeance, Thea had been shocked at how much she had enjoyed the great good fun that had resulted. The ensuing chaos had been the most interesting thing to happen in years, and if Renee had had a rough time of it at first, things had turned out all right for her in the end. Thea soothed her mildly guilty conscience—pricked by the memory of gunshots and police intervention—by recalling the proof in her briefcase: The wedding invitation had come yesterday. She had no idea why Renee and what's-his-name had invited her, but she meant to go. She was so rarely invited anywhere.

Now the fun was done, unfortunately, and it was time to, as her metaphor-mixing grandmother would say, face the piper. Anodyne had been bought ought by wunderkind Jimmy Scrye, who was coming this morning, doubtless to lay waste to personnel.

Well, it would be interesting, if nothing else.

Thea strode down the hallway, paused to deposit her briefcase in her office, and then headed for the lab. The door's electric eye scanned her and, reading the correct biosignature, obligingly opened.

Her staff was clustered around the play computer like a knot of lemmings trying to decide when to jump. They looked up at her, and she saw a blur of anxious expressions.

"Good morning," Thea said.

"Hi, boss."

"Morning, chief."

"Have you heard anything?" That last from her wide-eyed protégé, Jessica Lorentz. Jessica had been working for Anodyne for eighteen months and had been out of graduate school for eighteen and a half. Right now her blue eyes were quite round with distress, and her reddish brown curls were in wild disarray. She looked like a harassed Orphan Annie. "About the new owner?"

"Just that he's meeting with all the teams today. He's due here in another five minutes, so you might consider looking as though you are working instead of researching him on the Internet."

As one, the group straightened and backed away from the computer, which was used strictly for games, Internet searches, eBay bids, and online gambling. Thea pushed her team hard, and if they wanted to take a break and play a little blackjack, who was she to argue?

"There's not much to work on, "Jack, one of her techs, pointed out. "I mean, with PaceIC gone, we don't have anything near ready—"

"I know."

Jessica elbowed Jack in the ribs. "Duh, she knows."

"Perhaps Dr. Scrye will give us some direction," Thea suggested.

"You ever had the big boss be younger than you?" Jack asked.

"In this field?" Thea smiled. "Frequently." And it was true. Her team leader at BioSine had been twenty-four, with a managing budget of two-point-two million. At thirty-three, Thea was an old lady. "I'm not worried about that. I'm worried about—"

She cut herself off. No need to give the team more to fret about.

"You *must* be worried," Jessica teased. "I don't think you've ever used the word, much less felt the emotion. Our IQ."

Only Jessica could get away with the Ice Queen thing, though others had tried. Thea was well aware that she came across as aloof. OK, cold. OK, frozen like Antarctica during a rough winter. She gave not a rat's ass. Results were what counted. If people called her IQ behind her back, that was fine. The important thing was that the work got done and into the field, to maximize aid.

*Not*Anodyne's bottom line, though the former CEO had disagreed with her on that one. And where was he now? Facing charges of conspiracy to kidnap, among other things.

It was almost enough to make her grin. Twice in one day!

"*Well*, what did you find out about our new fearless leader?" Thea asked, pretending she hadn't been up until 3:30 A.M. researching the hell out of Scrye.

Her team chimed in with answers, but nothing new: Born in Southern Pines, North Carolina. Orphaned at sixteen via a house fire, got his MD at nineteen after only three years, started his first biofirm at twenty-two, sold it for billions at twenty-five, made a practice of rescuing ailing biotech firms and turning them around. Today was his twenty-ninth birthday.

"Maybe he'll fire us all as a b-day present to himself," Marshall said gloomily.

Thea scowled at him over the tops of her glasses. "None of that, Miss Marshall."

As always, her cross-dressing research tech brightened when she referred to him in the feminine tense. "Sorry, Dr. Foster." Marshall fiddled with his pearls. "It's just—OK, I get that our shares are pretty much in the toilet now, but I really like this job. I wasn't here to get rich and move on... *I like* it here, OK? I wanted to stay and do stuff. I don't want to be looking for work. I mean, jeez..." Now he was actually nibbling on the necklace in his agitation. "You're the only boss I've ever had who lets me dress up for work."

"I'm sure it won't come to anything like that," she said automatically, but of course she was in no way certain. Scrye could fire them all and start over. Or he could fire half of them and rebuild the other half. Or he could leave things as they were. It was anyone's guess. And her research hadn't helped her formulate a plan, which was frustrating. What would a twenty-nine-year-old former prodigy do with them? "I think the best thing to do is—"

"Happ... eee birth... day... to... youuuuuuuuu... happ... eee birth... day... to... youuuuuuuuuuu..."

Thea covered her eyes. "Oh, dear God."

"Happ... eeebirth dayyyyyyyy... Missster Pres... ih... dent..."

"Jeez, I forgot about Central being Marilyn today," Jack said innocently, which was an utter lie, as his cousin was the head of the IT department.

The door slid open, and a tall, balding man entered. He was dressed, surprisingly, in a sober black suit, with a light blue shirt and a blue bow tie with white polka dots. He looked more like a librarian than a hip young doctor.

He stared at them through his gold wire rims and waited patiently for the computer to stop serenading him.

"... tooooooo... youuuuuuuuuuuuu. M-wah!"

"Did the computer just blow me an air kiss?" the man asked pleasantly.

"Uh—" was as far as Thea got. As God was her witness, she had no idea what to say.

Marshall sidled up to her. "I don't think that's the new boss," he whispered to her. "Unless he's aged ten years in two days."

"After the nonsense here, I may well have," whoever-it-was said dryly. "As it happens, my name is Don DePalma. James is—" He was interrupted by a blare of music, and sighed. "On his way."

It took Thea a moment to place the music. It was the theme from *Superman*.

James Edward Scrye II burst into the room. He was bizarrely arrayed in khaki shorts—in January!—a red button-down shirt, no socks, and red tennis shoes with yellow laces. She had a blurred impression of dark red hair and freckles, and then he was clambering atop one of the lab tables.

Oh, and the cape. She hadn't noticed the cape right away. It, too, was red, and Mr. DePalma stepped behind Scrye, grasped the hem of the cape, and flapped it gently as if Scrye were flying.

Meanwhile, the music blared on: "Daaaah dah dih duh dah, *daaaaaah, daaaaaah, daaaaaah* . Daaaah dah dih duh dah... *dah duhdaah* !"

"People of Anodyne, hear me!" Scrye boomed. He had a surprisingly deep voice for a bio-nerd. "The forces of evil have been utterly defeated. I, Jimmy Scrye, have taken over this nest of evil-doers and from here on out, y'all are firmly on the side of good. Hear that? Repeat after me, please—"

"—dah dih duh dah, *daaaaaah, daaaaaah, daaaaaah* . Daaaah dah dih duh dah—"

"—I will use my powers for good."

Stunned silence from Thea and her team.

"Say it," he threatened, "or I'll turn the music up."

"I will use my powers for good," they parroted.

"All righty then," he said, and leaped nimbly from the table. "Uh, Don, you can shut that off."

Mr. DePalma leaned over and pressed a button on the small boom box no one had seen him bring in.

"Okey-dokey then," Scrye said. He was bouncing back and forth on the balls of his feet. His eyes were very green, the color of spring grass. He looked like he'd be carded to buy cigarettes. Heck, drain cleaner. But his quickness only exaggerated his feline grace, and she noticed his legs were ropy with muscle. "Which one of y'all is Dr. Foster?"

"I am," Thea said. She was trying very hard not to stare, and failing. "This is my primary team: Jessica, Marshall, and Jack."

"Right. You guys are the ones who thought up PacerIC."

"That was Dr. Foster," Jess, Marshall, and Jack said at once.

"It was a team effort," Thea said quietly.

"Bullshit. Sorry, Dr. Foster, but you know that's not true," Marshall said. He stomped his high-heeled foot for emphasis. Dr. Scrye raised his eyebrows. "You did something like ninety-eight-point-nine-nine percent of the work. We just sort of cleaned up after you."

"A gross exaggeration," she told Scrye.

"Don't you *dare* belittle your efforts toward the greatest medical breakthrough of the decade to save our jobs," Jessica snapped.

"Yikes, y'all need to take a chill pill," Scrye said, holding his hands up, palm out, in a gesture that soothed no one. "First of all, I'm ninety-eight-point-nine-nine percent sure that nobody in this room is out of a job. I mean, I gotta meet with Dr. Foster on some stuff, but I'm sure we'll figure everything out."

The team looked at Scrye, then at Thea, who could hardly contain her irritation. Not only did she loathe tedious meetings, their new boss had as much as told her that she'd need to agree to whatever he wished if she wanted to keep her team.

And the hell of it was, she would.

Chapter Two



James followed Thea Foster to her office. He was nervous as hell, and hoped to cover it up with the usual Hyper Boy Genius Bullshit.

He'd known what Thea looked like, of course; he'd memorized her personnel file and seen her employee ID photo. But the scowling bespectacled face in the picture gave no clue that Dr. Thea Foster was a stone knockout, nor did it hint at the woman's sheer presence.

Foster was tall, almost as tall as he was—at six-foot-two, Jimmy didn't run into a lot of ladies who could

look him in the eye. She had the darkest, glossiest hair he'd ever seen... it tumbled past her shoulders, and curls escaped the headband she wore and fell across her forehead.

Her eyes were a bottomless brown, so dark they were nearly as black as her irises. So dark, when she looked at him he thought he could feel himself falling into her gaze.

Her skin was pale, like most people who spent their days in labs, but instead of the washed-out fishbelly white he expected, her skin was porcelain perfection, except for the beauty mark riding the bow of her upper lip. What they used to call the mark of a sorceress.

Like most beautiful women in a brainy trade, she dressed to hide her assets—dark brown skirt past the knee, coffee-colored blouse, dark brown blazer. Sensible flats and sensible nylons. But the gold pin on her lapel was a small Tasmanian Devil, and the frames of her glasses were purple and tipped at the ends like the old-fashioned cat's-eye glasses of the fifties.

He knew she was brilliant. He'd followed her work for years. But he'd had not the faintest clue that she was utterly, amazingly gorgeous.

It was too bad.

It made everything harder.

"Right, then," he said with forced brightness, sliding her files aside and sitting cross-legged on the edge of her desk like an overgrown pixie. She arched dark brows and slowly sat down. "Let's get to it I know you gave PaceIC to Renee Jardin in order to fuck over your old boss."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. He felt the temperature of the room plummet—or maybe *that* was just the impression he got when her eyes frosted over and her mouth hardened. "That's not true," she said quietly.

"No, really, it's fine. I mean, I admire the *shit* out of you. It was a ballsy move, no question, but now you and I have to clean up your mess, *capice*?"

"If my new employer has doubts about my past performance," she said distantly, "he is welcome to peruse the security tapes."

He threw back his head and laughed. Her eyebrows arched higher until he expected them to climb off her forehead. "Riiiiight, Dr. Foster. You were smart enough to think up the most important find in the last hundred years, but you were too stupid to doctor the security tapes."

She reddened, and he nearly fell off the desk. Jeez, she was even prettier when she blushed—the porcelain skin took on a faint pinkish undertone, like roses in the desert. "I'll clean out my desk," she said, and rose.

He leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. For such a tall woman, her wrists were surprisingly fragile—delicately boned and not even two inches across. "Hold up there, partner. I'm not firing you. Repeat: Not. Firing. You. So don't Get your panties. In a wad."

"My panties are none of your business." She jerked her wrist away, and he let go with a yelp before she could put him through the wall. "But if you think I'm going to stand to be insulted in my own—"

"Who's insulting you? I told you: I think what you did was hot shit. Jekell was an asshole. Who hides a cure that can help millions of people just to make a buck? Shit, the guy was already rich. How much more money did he need? You can't take it with you, right?"

"I disliked Dr. Jekell," she replied, "but I resent your insinuation."

"Oh, please." He rolled his eyes. "What, you think this is a setup? You think I'm wired? That this is an elaborate sting to get you to confess so I can fire you?" He pulled up his shirt and saw her eyes widen in alarm. "See? No wires. Want me to take my pants off, too?"

"Not unless you want to be beaten."

He was momentarily distracted by a visual of the formidable Dr. Foster in black lingerie and a riding crop. "Yow... look, I don't need to trick you to fire you. This is my company now. Plus, in Minnesota all employees are at-will employees: I can pink slip you if I don't like your breath. All I'm saying is I admire what you did, but the fact is, your actions cost Anodyne big bucks."

"As I said, if you doubt my word, you should terminate me."

He sighed. He'd known she would be difficult and stubborn, but he hadn't thought she'd be thick. "You know, for a genius, you're a little slow on the uptake."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We need to get to work, pronto, on something*else* you've been playing with. We need to get it perfected and into the market, and I'd like to get it to the FDA immediately. So we can't waltz around holding each other's dicks. *We have to get to work.*"

Instead of crossing her arms over her chest, like most women did when cornered, she tucked her hands into her armpits, as if the thought of holding his dick was repugnant. "I must say, you're different from most boy geniuses."

"Call me that again, and I really *will* fire you." He snorted. "It was annoying enough when I *was* a boy."

She studied him with an assessing gaze. "In many ways, you still are."

"Sticks and stones, Dr. Foster. So. Are you on board? Or what?"

"I'll be glad to get back to work," she replied quietly. "And so will my team. But what exactly do you want us to perfect?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I want you to invent skin. And I want you to do it in four months."

Chapter Three



He pulled up his shirt and she gasped. Supergeek he might be, but Jimmy had the upper body of a weightlifter. His abdominal muscles were sleekly defined, and his chest was lightly furred with reddish brown hair, which tapered into his shorts.

"Thea, I've wanted you from the very beginning," he whispered, crawling across her desk. "I took over this silly little biotech firm just to get closer to you."

"Really?" she gasped.

"Absolutely." His warm hands clamped over her shoulders and dragged her forward. Dimly, she heard a stack of production memos hit the floor. His kiss was bruising, astonishing in its possessiveness and—

"Dr. Foster?"

—arousing in its pure animal—

"Uh... Dr. Foster?"

—pure animal—

"Dr. Foster," he whispered seductively, "what the hell is the matter?"

"What?"

She blinked. She wasn't in her office, she was in her lab. Daydreaming in front of her team, who was watching her with not-quite-concealed alarm. *Blast and double blast*.

"We can take it," Jessica said bravely, fumbling with a broken Bunsen burner. She dropped it and winced. "Just tell us."

"Yeah, out with it, boss. Just stop staring at us like that. You look a little—"

"Glazed," Marshall finished.

"I beg your pardon," she said politely. "My thoughts were—" Being thoroughly overtaken by her annoying new boss. No, it would never do to say *that*. "—elsewhere. We all have jobs, in fact, we're expediting one of my back projects—Faskin."

"Artificial skin?" Jessica asked. "Hmm."

"Our new boss has given this priority resources, including funding. So let's pull all the back work and get started."

"Won't be easy," Marshall said truthfully. He tapped a high heel thoughtfully. "We shelved it because it was just about impossible to avoid host rejection."

"Yes, but I have some new ideas on that."

"That's it?" Jack interrupted. He fiddled with his rawhide choker. Thea often thought he had the look of a man who shed his lab coat for swim trunks and a surfboard the minute the workday was over. "New Guy wants us to get back to work on Faskin? You were in there kind of a long time."

"Personnel issues."

"Oh." He fiddled faster.

"No one is getting fired." *Not even me* . "He was quite—ah—adamant about that."

"Well, great!"

"Yes, great," she repeated sourly.

Chapter Four



She rapped twice and, upon hearing his exuberant, "*Entrez*, O lackey of mine!" opened the door and stepped into his office.

The Boy Wonder had certainly made some improvements in seventy-two hours. Her former boss had favored mahogany furniture, duck prints, a hidden stash of *Penthouse* , vials of cocaine, and dark carpet.

Now the office looked not unlike the toy store of the future... the carpet had been pulled up and replaced with dark blue tile, and there were Legos, toy robots, trucks, racetracks, giant easels, markers, chalkboards, a rainbow of chalk, and a popcorn machine.

"For heaven's sake," she said, startled.

"I know! Isn't it great?" He sighed, a great gust of relief, and tossed the red marker down beside the legal pad. It promptly rolled off the table and across the floor, where a three-inch toy robot pounced on it. "Finally, I can get some work done."

"What a thrill for us all. If you have a minute, I'd like to go over some preliminary—"

"I bet you don't think I can walk on my hands all the way across the room."

Humor hint. "I'm sure you can."

"No, really. How much you want to bet?"

"Two pounds British Sterling. Now—"

He rose smoothly from behind his table—no desks in here, interestingly enough—and then bent over.

"No, really, Dr. Scrye, that's not—"

"Jimmy, or Jim. Or Scrye," he said, his voice hollow. His entire head was now beneath the table. "Heck, I answer to almost anything."

"A great relief, Dr. Scrye. Now, about these—"

"Jimmy." He walked around the edge of the table—on his hands, she observed—and his shirt pulled up, displaying that amazing chest and stomach, damn it. He hand-walked all the way over to her and stared at her legs. "Nuts. I was hoping for a skirt."

Was he really? "Ah, beneath the genius façade lurks a pig. How nice."

"Hey, after the Jackal, I'm a dream boss. Admit it."

"You're a dream boss," she parroted.

He chuckled and flipped to his feet so quickly, if she had blinked she would have missed it. His freckled face was slightly flushed from the blood rush. "So, what's up, Thea?"

"Dr. Foster."

"Aw, c'mon."

"Dr. Foster," she repeated firmly.

"Are you afraid if you're too familiar, you might fall in love with me?"

"No!"

"Ouch!" He rubbed his ear. "Jeez, you don't have to yell."

"Sorry," she said. She could feel her face getting warm. "Can we please go over this data?"

"Sure, Doc Thea." He bounded across the office and sat on the couch, which was bizarrely patterned with red ducklings against a background that matched the tile. "Have a seat." He patted the cushion beside him expectantly.

She glanced around the office, but there was nowhere else to sit except on one of the giant beanbags, and she wasn't sure her dignity would survive it.

She sat gingerly beside him. "Thank you. My team has pulled all the back data on Faskin, and of course there's really only one problem, but so far it's been rather insurmountable."

"You can't get the artificial skin to take."

"Correct."

He was staring at her. His intense, green-eyed gaze was almost hypnotic. His eyes were the color of antique glass, the color of a perfect emerald, the—

"Can you do it? That's all I need to know."

"What?"

He snapped his fingers in front of her face, and she flinched. "Helloooooo? Can you perfect Faskin?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "Eventually."

"Eventually two months? Eventually sixty years? Help me out, here."

She chewed on her lower lip. "Possibly by the end of the year. I have a few ideas..."

"Good. Whenever you think stuff up, the world changes." He touched her hand so quickly, she wondered if she'd imagined the sensation of his skin on hers. "It's one of the coolest things about you. Sooner would be better, of course."

Her hand tingled—annoyingly—where he'd touched her. "What?"

"Thea, d'you think you can pay attention for two seconds? I said, sooner-say would be etter-bay. I want Faskin to be trial-ready by the end of the quarter."

"I'm well aware of your insanely tight timeline. What I'd like to know is why?"

"Because." He bounded up from the couch, scooped up a stack of Legos, and tossed them to her without looking. She caught it neatly in one hand and examined it. Eight inches of red, white, and blue Legos in concentric stripes. Cute. "Because because because because beeeee-*cause!* Because of the wonderful things I does!"

"Stop that."

"I've been told I have a lovely singing voice," he said, sounding hurt.

She refused to be distracted. "Why really?"

"Money, of course," he muttered, prowling around his table like a flame-haired panther. "Moneymoney money."

She fiddled with the Legos. "But you're already rich."

"Hey, Thea, get lost, willya? Go invent something amazing or, better yet, fix Faskin."

She slowly stood, and frowned at him. "If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, but you needn't act like such a brat."

"*You're* a brat," he snapped.

She tossed the Legos at him. He snatched the small sculpture out of the air and stared at it. "You have made a DNA helix," he observed, "out of my American Patriot Lego set."

"Simpleton," she muttered, and turned to leave.

"I know you are!" he yelled after her. "But what ami?"

Chapter Five

"Heads up," Marshall muttered. He hurried across the room, his Jelly flats clacking against the tile. "Here come the Christians. Or the lions—I forget."

Thea stifled a sigh. In an attempt to garner good publicity after the havoc the Jackal wreaked on Anodyne, PR had been arranging tours throughout the facility all week. As head of BioSecurity, she was obliged to narrate.

The head of PR, Giselle McKenzie, stuck her head through the doorway and herded Marshall away with a frantic waving motion.

"What?" Marshall said innocently. "Is my slip showing?"

"You certainly do not have to leave," Thea said coolly, withering McKenzie with a glare.

"No worries, Chief. I need to touch up my makeup, anyway." He disappeared in the area of the restrooms. Thea had no idea which one he used, even after years of working with him. She certainly wasn't going to ask.

The tour—a baker's dozen of suburbanites—followed McKenzie into the lab. As always, laymen looked disappointed at just how ordinary a working lab appeared—sort of like an industrial kitchen, except with more expensive appliances.

"This is Dr. Foster," McKenzie was babbling, "our head of BioSecurity. Dr. Foster, maybe you could tell us what your team is working on right now?"

"Maybe," she agreed.

Silence.

"Um... now?" McKenzie asked, and Thea was amused to see her Adam's apple bob as she gulped.

"Certainly. Right now we're working on perfecting artificial skin."

"Like for cyborgs?" the mop-haired son of one of the suburbanites asked eagerly.

His bangs were so long she couldn't see his eyes, but she admired his stark T-shirt, black with white lettering: FUCK OFF, PUNKI *need one of those*, she mused.

"Like in the *Terminator* and stuff?"

"Like for burn victims," she corrected patiently.

"Don't they have skin grafts for that?" another member of the group asked.

"Yes, but it's a poor technique. It takes several surgeries, and it's excruciating for the patient. Also, the

risk of lethal infection is very high. With artificial skin, we could eliminate that. However, the human body is a formidable matador when it comes to fighting off invaders—in this case, artificial skin."

"A formidable what?"

She ignored the interruption. "Burns are catastrophic. And if you have burns over more than fifty percent of your body, there isn't enough healthy skin left to prevent infection or to cover the wounds. Without skin, death is inevitable.

"As recently as five years ago," she continued, "doctors would calculate a burn victim's survival rate by adding his age to the percentage of his burn. It was a heartless equation, but one that nearly always worked. Burn victims essentially die of starvation, because their strength runs out—fighting infections and such—and they waste away."

"This is fun," mop-head commented. "I'm so glad you brought me, Mom."

The woman beside him slapped his arm, but Thea smiled. "Hope endures," she said. "If we put the puzzle together—if we unlock the key to Faskin—it will make a gigantic difference. No more cadaver skin grafts—"

"You cut skin of dead bodies and put them on burn victims?" another member of the crowd—this one a young woman in her early twenties—gasped. "That is just so ewwww!"

"We don't anymore," Thea sniffed. "It's not practical. Again, that's where Faskin comes in. After all, if a starfish can grow a new arm, and a lizard a new tail, the human body should be able to be encouraged to grow new skin."

"So Faskin isn't actually skin?"

"It's a chemical that encourages growth of the epidermis and dermis. What grows is virtually identical to your natural skin, and your body can't tell the difference. No rejection. No infection."

"So... it's like cloning your own skin?"

"It's like cloning the way a Big Mac is like a sirloin steak," Thea said kindly. "Very little resemblance, actually. It's technical."

"How long have you been working on Foreskin?"

"Faskin. Seven years."

"Why so long?"

"The previous management had little interest in the project," she replied. "There's very little market demand for this sort of thing. The profit potential is small. Most biotech firms are looking for the next Viagra."

A few giggles. Thea remained a stone. She thought it was utterly ridiculous that most insurance companies covered Viagra while denying coverage of birth control pills. And what a waste of time! Erections for octogenarians? With leukemia in the world? If that had been *her lab* ...

She caught sight of Jimmy Scrye standing at the back of the room. His arms were crossed over his chest and he was dressed in knee-length denim shorts—in winter!—loafers without socks, and a dark green polo shirt. In place of a preppie alligator over his left breast, drop dead was carefully stitched in red thread. No one in the tour group glanced in his direction.

They probably think he's the janitor, she thought, amused.

"To wrap things up, Faskin will change everything," she said, trying not to glance at her watch.

She enjoyed educating people, but she'd declined a professorship because it would take her out of the lab too long. "And not just by lowering the death rate, although that's a very important consideration. It will also dramatically reduce scarring, reconstructive surgeries, and painful grafting. Thanks to Faskin, not only can victims of severe burns be saved, but their skin will look virtually normal."

She stopped talking and turned back to her table. The small tour group—at first startled at the abrupt end of the speech—clapped softly. She turned back around, blushing, and said nothing.

A head taller than everyone in the crowd, Jimmy smiled at her. She smiled back before she could stop herself.

Chapter Six



"Thea, darling, I've wanted you from the moment I memorized your personnel file."

"Really?"

He was crawling across the table, moving like a big, red-headed panther, knocking over burners and clipboards and charts as he came. The clatter was enormous. "Of course! Why do you think I bought this goofy little biotech firm? To get closer to you!"

"I'm relieved to hear you say that," she said, as he pounced on her and bore her to the cold tile. Interestingly, although she smacked the back of her head when they landed, it didn't hurt. "I'm afraid I'm getting a crush on you, and I'm too old for that sort of thing."

"This isn't a crush, baby," he murmured, his breath tickling her ear. "It's true lurrrrrrrrrv."

"I don't think so," she said, shivering as he chewed on her earlobe. "We barely know each other."

"Never doubt it, Thea. We were made for each other. We complement each other perfectly. Also, your numbers on this are completely fucked up."

"What?"

Jimmy snapped his fingers in front of her face again. How she hated that! "My God, you must be the first Nobel-qualifying scientist I've ever known who has ADD. I said, your numbers are completely fucked."

Not again! Damn it, damn it, damn it!

"*Know* that," she snapped, yanking the clipboard away from his hands. She noticed her own were shaking. She hardly ever daydreamed, and now she couldn't seem to stop. And about Jimmy Scrye, of all people! He was loud, he was annoying, he was brash, he was... really well built. "It's just preliminary data." She took a deep breath and forced calm. "I think the results themselves are actually quite promising."

"I agree—I guess. I mean, chemical biology *isnot* my strong point. Also, you've got the handwriting of a serial killer."

"I do not!" She checked it to be sure. Was that "random fluctuation" or "ransom fatuation"?

He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand up in all directions. She ignored the urge to smooth it back down. "Anyway, this stuff looks good, but what good is skin that disappears after a day or two?"

"It's a step in the right direction," she said stiffly.

"Sure it is. 'Hi, I'm John, it's nice to meet you... whoops! There goes my skin.' "

Her team, which had been carefully pretending not to listen to their conversation, muffled giggles. She glared at their backs.

"We'll do better," she said grimly, fighting the urge to hit him over the head with her clipboard.

"Hey, don't get me wrong, you guys are doing great." He braced his palms on the table and then jumped up. He crossed one ankle over his knee and she noticed again he wasn't wearing socks. "I'm just anxious to get this done."

"Why?"

"Mind your own beeswax. I wish I could help, but this isn't my field."

"You can help by staying out of the lab," she said.

He winked at her. "Ah-ah-ah! I have to keep an eye on my property."

"What *isthat* supposed to mean?" she nearly yelled.

He leaned back. "Jeez, stop with the yelling! What d'you think it's supposed to mean?"

"Can we get back to work, Dr.—"

"Ah-ah-ah!"

"Jimmy," she said, her shoulders slumping in surrender.

"That'd be swell. Hey, have supper with me tonight. We'll talk about what else you need for Faskin."

"I can't," she replied, ignoring the way her heart rate jumped. "Tonight is the team potluck. Marshall is

hosting."

"No, I'm not!" Marshall shouted from the other side of the room. "I have to cancel. I have—uh—"

"Mono," Jessica supplied helpfully.

"Right! I'm uber-contagious."

"We can't go, either," Jack added. "We've all got mono."

"Too much kissing during coffee breaks," Marshall said seriously.

"Super!" Jimmy said. He turned to her. "Pick you up at six?"

"All right," she sighed. Jimmy smacked her on the shoulder in a comradely way and then jumped off the table and bounded toward the elevators. She turned slowly to look at her team, who was once more deeply engrossed in their work. "Traitors."

"Thea's got a date with the boss!" Jessica squealed.

"Hush up."

Chapter Seven



Jimmy parked outside Thea's trim condo and took a deep, steadying breath. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, then forced his fingers to loosen.

"OK," he muttered. "Be calm. It's just dinner. Just... mellow out, for the love of God."

Easy to say. Quite a bit harder to do. It was bad enough that his top scientist was walking around in a world-class body. Bad enough that he needed her desperately on a ridiculous number of levels: physically, emotionally, and practically. Worse, much worse, that she clearly didn't care for him.

There was something about her... As soon as she walked in the room, his mouth just ran away from him. He babbled in a constant, inane attempt to get a reaction. Any reaction. It had always been that way. Nobody had believed his IQ test results at first. He was such a goofball, the de rigueur class clown, with such poor grades the school had made him take the test three times.

Putting his strong—insane!—attraction to Thea aside, he had trouble concentrating when he allowed himself to imagine she'd perfect Faskin. God, what if she actually pulled it off? Everything could change. Everything.

The irony: He had been able to do just about anything he put his mind to, but his brain wasn't wired for biochemistry. That is, he could do it, but not nearly so quickly or so well as Thea Foster. She was in the top ten of her field. He wouldn't have made the top three hundred. Thus, the acquisition of Doc Thea

and, incidentally, Anodyne.

"Stop sitting in here thinking," he said aloud, "and get your ass up to her door."

Good advice! He opened his car door and tried to jump out, remembering too late that he hadn't unbuckled his seat belt. He'd moved so quickly, the damned thing had a stranglehold around his neck.

He wrestled with it for a few seconds and finally freed himself. Within seconds, he was ringing Thea's doorbell.

She opened the door at once. "Good evening."

She was wearing a black sheath, knee length and sleeveless, that showed off her lush figure to perfection. No stockings, and her toenails were painted dark red. Her hair was loose and flowing past her shoulders in a gorgeous dark river. She was wearing lipstick that matched her toenails, which made her complexion look even more luminous.

"Buh," he managed.

She seized him by the lapels and yanked him inside, then slammed the door.

"Wha?" he asked.

"Never mind going out," she told him. She was blinking so rapidly, he wondered if she had a nervous tic. Two dots of high color had appeared on each cheekbone. "I have ordered a pizza. I'm going to get you out of my system so I can focus at work."

"Huh?"

She kissed him so hard, his toes curled. He brought his hands up to press her closer, touching her smooth skin and marveling at the delicacy of her arms. She was so tall, such dainty limbs were a surprise.

She broke the kiss, leaving him gasping like a trout out of water, and pulled him by the tie. He followed her, shrugging out of his jacket. "So," he said cheerfully. "What kind of pizza?"

"I don't think I can do this if you talk through it," she said.

"Well, hell, don't I get a vote? What, you're just going to sexually molest me so you can get something out of your system?"

"Exactly." They were in her bedroom now. He was amused to see a giant poster of Albert Einstein, the famous picture where the elderly genius was sticking out his tongue at the camera. The double bed was a sleigh bed, the wood of the frame dark cherry; the pillows and quilt were light blue and looked exceedingly comfy. The plush gray carpet looked like it had been swept, then vacuumed twice. Interestingly, there was no dresser; instead there were neatly stacked clear plastic boxes against the far wall. She could see the clothes at a glance and get dressed fairly quickly. Efficient, and neat as a pin... big surprise.

He cleared his throat. "Look, Thea, I'm sorry—"

"It's all right. I have several condoms."

Several?!? "—but I need to be wooed." While he babbled, she rapidly unbuttoned his shirt. He wondered if this was some glorious dream, then dismissed the thought. If it was a dream, she'd have come to the door wearing only the lipstick. "You can't just use me and then throw me out. Oh, who am I kidding, of course you can. But you have to admit, this is very weird."

His belt was unbuckled, whipped free of the loops, and went flying across the room. Then her hands were on his zipper. "I didn't think you even liked me!" he exclaimed. He grabbed her wrists. "Do I get to undress you now?"

"Only if you don't talk," she said firmly.

He mimed locking his lips and throwing the key over his shoulder. Then he put his hands on her shoulders, gently turned her around, and unzipped her dress. He noticed with pure joy that she wasn't wearing a bra.

The dress puddled around her ankles and she stepped out of it, then kicked it in the direction of the hamper in the far corner.

She slowly turned around.

He knew he was staring at her like a lack-witted virgin, but he couldn't help it. She was just so... luminous and perfect. Her breasts were small and cream-colored, her nipples the color of not-quite-ripe strawberries. Her waist was also small, but her legs were amazingly long. Nude, she was all creamy skin and long legs and flowing dark hair and great dark eyes. It was like gazing upon a wood goddess, a woman whose beauty was so terrible, it might kill you.

"Should I get dressed?" she asked quietly, standing before him with her hands at her sides.

"Don't you dare."

She smiled for the first time that night. "Your pants are falling down."

"Small wonder. You tore off my belt. Well, shoot, I don't think you should be the only naked one in the room."

"A good rule of thumb," she said gravely, and then laughed.

He nearly fell; he'd been standing on one leg and pulling his socks off. "God, what a great laugh. You should do that all the time."

"I'll keep it in mind. You have one black sock and one navy sock."

"Well, I didn't think you'd notice," he whined. "Who could have predicted a dinner date where we'd be naked in sixty seconds?" He shucked off his pants and turned to put them on one of her dresser-cube things, when he heard her draw a short, surprised breath, almost a gasp.

Shit.

He didn't turn back around; he didn't want her to see he was blushing with embarrassment. Just for a minute, he'd forgotten...

Jimmy took a ridiculously long time arranging his pants and socks, and didn't bother slipping off his shorts. He was pretty sure she'd be telling him to get dressed any second now.

He hadn't heard her move—those bare feet in that deep carpet were wicked quiet—but started in surprise as he felt her soft touch.

"What happened?" she asked in a voice that was only curious, not pitying. "These are burns. Quite a lot of them, in fact."

"House fire," he replied shortly. "I jumped on my little sister to put *her* fire out, and a couple of burning roof tiles fell on me."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have—perhaps you wouldn't have seemed quite such a—"

"Gaping pain in your ass?" She was still touching his burns, going from one to the other, exploring, wondering, so he kept his back to her. "It wasn't any of your business."

She turned him around and kissed him on the chin. "It isn't now, either. Come to bed."

"Right I'll be out of here in just a second."

She took his hands and stepped backward. "You're not listening. Come to bed."

"Uh..."

"Jimmy Scrye, Boy Genius, not quite tracking tonight" She made an impatient sound. "Do you think I care if you have a few scars? Everyone does. You just carry yours on the outside."

"Stop it," he said. "I'm getting misty."

Chapter Eight



Thea was on her knees, gripping the headboard with her hands, and she had time to think, *Good Lord, I'm robbing the cradle. He's four years younger than I am*, and then she felt his mouth on her, trailing kisses down her spine.

His hands were big and strong and warm, and they cupped and caressed and fondled with a young man's pure enthusiasm. He hummed as he touched, a jaunty tune, and she grinned; she couldn't help it. He was just so happy to be here, with her, nude in the dark, exploring her. He made no effort to hide it.

She said, "I suppose you think that because you're the boss, you get to do all the work?"

"Actually, I was thinking the HR department might want to have a word with me after tonight."

She laughed, then gasped as he kneaded the soft white globes of her buttocks.

"God, you have the *greatest* ass. Why do you hide it beneath those awful suits?"

"Because when I go to work bottomless, the team gets distracted."

"I'll bet! Remind me to put out a new memo."

"Heh-heh. You said put out." She chortled this in a nasally deep voice, her flawless Butthead impersonation. Only one person on her team knew she could do it. Two, if she considered Jimmy on her team. After tonight, she had better.

"Thea Foster! You're just brimming with talent." He was laughing against the backs of her thighs. It tickled, but it also made her ache in an odd way. "The things we find out when we get naked... by the way, you smell fantastic. What is that, rose oil?"

"Guilty."

"Mmmmm." She could feel him nuzzling her, and the ache intensified, forcing her to shift her weight and spread her legs a bit. Then he was licking her, long soft licks that parted her flesh, that brought a gush of wetness he must have tasted.

She felt his thumbs on her, parting her further, and then his tongue was darting and sliding and tickling, and she groaned and pushed back against his face. She looked over her shoulder and saw his lean, muscular form crouched behind her, his fingers and tongue busy, busy, and the sight of him pleasuring her was almost enough to push her over into orgasm.

He tongued her clit—*Jesus, is he part anteater?*

—while he slipped a finger inside her, and she shoved against him, harder. "Do not—" She gulped a breath. "Do not stop doing that, please."

"Like I want to?" Now there were two fingers working busily inside her, getting slick, getting slippery with her arousal, and she moaned softly and rocked against him. "Oh, *God*, you're sweet, so sweet..."

She gasped something in reply, and gasped again when she felt his lips settle over her clit, felt his tongue jabbing right in her very center, while at the same time his fingers were busy, busy between her legs. She rocked harder, but he kept her in place, and now a third finger was slipping into her.

A final slick stroke of his tongue did it; she nearly staggered as her orgasm tore through her, as her uterus contracted in delightful sobbing spasms. Her knees gave way and he rode her gently to the bed, then surged inside her so quickly, the tops of his thighs slapped against the backs of hers.

She moaned into the pillow; this wasn't love-making, this was being taken. And she didn't want him to ever stop. He was pinning her to the bed with his weight, and one of his hands was on the small of her back, keeping her in place while he stroked and took and thrust. She couldn't even thrust back; she had no leverage. So she sprawled on her stomach and took him, all of him, and felt the vibrations of another orgasm take root in her belly.

He groaned into the back of her neck when her uterus contracted, when the delicious spasms radiated outward. *He can feel me coming*, she thought, and the idea held back excitement of such magnitude it

was nearly unbearable.

"Thea," he husked, "You're so slick... so sweet... and I'm about done."

"Try reciting the periodic table," she suggested.

He groaned laughter. "Greedy."

She reached down, down, and cupped his scrotum in her hand, testing the heavy, warm weight She squeezed, very very gently, savoring the texture, and he shivered, his hips jerking helplessly, and then he was done.

He rolled off her, and they dozed.

Chapter Nine



"Stop that."

"Stop what?" she replied.

"You're thinking too much. My spider sense is tingling."

"I'm paid to think too much," she pointed out.

"You're analyzing this and what it means and what we'll do about work tomorrow." He stretched, momentarily taking up the entire bed—she had to cling to the edge or she would have fallen off—and then relaxed. "But here it is: This was your idea. So you call the shots."

"Yes, I know."

About twenty minutes had passed, long enough for her to begin to recover from their amazing encounter. She'd had her share of physical love, but Jimmy was so exuberant and skilled and hungry, it had literally left her breathless.

But he was wrong. She wasn't overanalyzing what had happened. She was wondering when they could do it again. And that was very bad. She should be pondering the next cell cycle for Faskin, not thinking about getting the mouthwash out of the bathroom and showing Dr. Scrye a very interesting chemical reaction.

Aren't you entitled to a personal life?

Well, no.

No, not at all. Too many people were depending on her. Every burn victim in the world was depending on her, not to mention countless future victims. Just like every person with heart trouble had depended on

her for PaceIC.

Don't be a martyr, you silly cow.

She would if she pleased, thank you very much. She could succeed only under immense pressure. And who knew more about her pressure points than she herself?

"Uh, Thea? D'you think I could horn in on whatever conversation you're having with yourself?"

"No, it's private," she replied solemnly, and then laughed.

"Do Butthead again."

"Heh-heh. I said private."

He put his hands on his stomach and chortled, actually kicking his feet in glee. "God, that is the *best* ! I wouldn't have guessed you could do that—I wouldn't have guessed you even knew who Butthead *was* ."

"I get MTV."

"I wouldn't have guessed you watched it!"

"Well," she said comfortably, rolling over and resting her chin on his stomach. "I guess we aren't so terribly smart, are we?"

"Hey, it works out," he replied, running his fingers through her thick dark strands. "You're the smartest person in this bed—by sixteen whole IQ points, I looked it up—and I'm the richest."

"Synergy has been achieved," she said dryly. "About work... I would prefer if we kept this between us."

"And I agree, on the condition that we have another date tomorrow night."

"Now who's greedy?" She arched her neck; his strong fingers moving through her hair felt marvelous.

"Guilty," he said, and pulled her up for a deep, sweet kiss.

Thea was pleasantly sore the next morning. It had been an extraordinary night. The man could do things with soap on a rope that were unbelievable. And they never had gotten around to ordering pizza.

She sailed past all the security measures and practically jumped off the elevator into the lab. She had several ideas about the new cell cycle and meant to get to work on them immediately.

Thea forced herself to slow. Was this her normal eagerness to start a new day in the lab, or something more? Did she have renewed urgency about Faskin so she could fix Jimmy's scars?

She thought about it all that morning, and finally decided her sin was pride, not squeamishness. His scars hadn't bothered her—she had seen much, much worse since tackling Faskin. But the fact that they bothered him *did* bother her. He had been prepared to leave last night. Had actually assumed she would throw him out after seeing the scars. Ludicrous!

No, Thea didn't want to fix them for her. But she surely did like the idea of fixing them and pleasing Jimmy. Intellectual pride... and the satisfaction of a job well done.

She got to work.

Chapter Ten



"How'd last night go?" Jessica asked. They were dictating notes for the team secretary to transcribe the next morning, and it was getting late. "Did you have fun?"

Indeed, and I came screaming, too.

"It was all right."

"Is he as big a goofball in a social setting?"

Yes, and he has a tremendous cock. Simply huge, and when he shoves it hurts just right.

"I suppose."

"You should see him again," she announced. Thea had always found the young scientist absurdly protective. "You guys complement each other. You're ice, he's fire. You're designer shoes, he's flip-flops. You're—"

"—vegetables and he's fruit, yes, I see the pattern you're subtly drawing, thank you. As a matter of fact, we are getting together again tonight. We came to several satisfactory conclusions last night, and are interested in achieving more."

Just then, Jimmy poked his head into the room. "Hi, Jess. Hi, Dr. Foster. You ready to go?"

"Another twenty minutes, please."

"Sure. I'll see you then. Bye. Bye, Jess."

Thea hid her relief. She'd been half afraid he'd come to work wearing an I BAGGED DOC THEA T-shirt. Instead, he'd been the soul of discretion.

"Let's finish here," she said to Jessica, who was staring at her with eyes gone huge.

"You fucked him, didn't you?"

"Jessica!"

"Oh my God, you *did* ! I can't believe it! What was it like? Did he crack jokes the whole time? He did,

didn't he?"

Thea hid her eyes with her hands. "What are you, a witch?"

"Oh, come on," she scoffed. "He drives you nuts from day one, comes by the lab just to bug you, but today he's all polite and nice and just as respectful as you please. You might as well have written it on the back of your lab coat."

"Don't tell anyone," she begged.

"I won't if you won't." Jessica smiled so widely her eyes went to half-mast. "Good for you, boss. I mean it. You deserve some personal success, too, you know."

"We'll see," she said, but she certainly had a lot to think about. More so than usual, even.

"Dr. Foster, I had to restrain myself from jumping your delectable bones all damn day."

"I'm relieved you managed."

"So should we strip, or have something to eat first?"

She tossed her car keys on the hall table, put a hand on his shoulder, leaned in, and murmured in his ear, "Can't we do both?"

Jimmy fell to his knees, right there in the hallway. He clasped his hands and looked up at the ceiling. "Lord, thank you for this woman. This incredibly sexy woman. This goddess in spectacles. I owe you *huge*."

"Get up, you look silly," she scolded, but inwardly, she was pleased. She'd never heard a man thank the Almighty for her before. "Come along, then. What do you want to eat?"

"Ummm..."

"Besides me," she added.

"Well, if I have to wait, then I guess I'll settle for pasta. Where's your kitchen? I never got around to seeing it last night..."

"You saw plenty last night; don't imply I was a poor hostess." He followed her down the hall. "I haven't been grocery shopping in a while—"

"Leave it to me. I'm used to whipping up a seven course meal out of Spagettios and Ritz crackers."

"Yech!"

He'd brought wine, which she deftly opened and poured. Then she sat on a stool by the counter and watched him work. He rooted through her cupboards and fridge, and pulled out a box of fusilli pasta, a stick of butter, a can of tuna, and salt and pepper. Within ten minutes she was eating hot, buttery pasta flavored with the ocean tang of Chicken of the Sea.

"Good," she said with her mouth full, not quite hiding her surprise.

"I'm a man of many talents," he bragged, sitting across from her with his brimming bowl. "When I'm not seducing employees, I'm whipping up gourmet pasta with substandard ingredients."

She nearly choked. "I seduced *you*, big boy. Let's keep it in mind."

"Yes, ma'am," he said humbly, and wolfed down more noodles.

"For heaven's sake. Slow down, you'll make yourself ill."

"A. fat chance. I have an indefatigable appetite. *B*. I forgot to eat today. And—"

She snorted. "Some genius."

"—*C*. the sooner we finish eating, the sooner I can find out if you taste as good as you smell."

She cocked an eyebrow at him and took a sip of wine. He grinned at her so good-naturedly she had to smile back. He was just so refreshingly... refreshing. "Did you know when you smile your eyes look even greener?"

"You should see what happens when my dick swells."

"Damn it! Now I've spit wine all over my shirt."

"So lose the shirt."

"Har-har."

"Do Butthead again," he begged.

"No." She tossed her head. "Then you'll get used to it and take me for granted."

"Never!" he exclaimed. "Do I have to get on my knees again?"

"Oh, yes. But later." She smiled at him, delighted to see he could both blush and look randy at the same time.

"Hey, I—" His voice had roughened and he cleared his throat. "Anyway, thanks for letting me come over. I'm living out of a hotel room, and it's sure nice to come to a house, y'know?"

"A hotel? Didn't you move here when you bought Anodyne?"

"Oh, hell, no. I'm just here to oversee Faskin. After that—" He mimed a bird flying away.

"Oh." *Don't be an idiot. Did you think he was in love? Did you think you were?* "I didn't realize that."

"Hey, I thought you'd be thrilled. You don't have to worry about being stuck with me once the job's done," he joked.

"Thank God for that," she said coldly, and dumped the rest of her wine down the sink. She turned on the garbage disposal and scraped the rest of the pasta—there wasn't much; they'd both been famished—down the sink. "Are you being discreet because you'll leave when you have what you need?"

"What?" he shouted over the grinding blades.

She shut the disposal off. "I said, has my kitchen met your needs?"

He blinked at the strange question. "Uh... sure."

"Thank you for cooking," she said formally.

"My pleasure."

"I must repay the favor."

He bowed in the direction of her bedroom. "After you."

"I mean," she said coolly, "take you out to dinner or something along those lines."

"Oh." He seemed taken aback by the abrupt temperature drop. Part of her thought that was just fine. "Sure. Anytime."

"Anytime before you leave."

"Well... yeah."

Genius, my large white butt. I've never known someone so smart and so dumb at the same time.

She forced a smile. "There's a special on tonight that I'd like to watch."

"Reality TV fan, eh?"

"Hardly. It's about..." She paused, the better to savor the man's name on her lips, in her mouth. "... Dr. Langer."

She sat down on the far end of the couch, and was annoyed when he plopped down right beside her. Then she was annoyed because she was annoyed. *What on earth did you expect? Marriage? For God's sake. You only jumped Jimmy to get him out of your system.*

"—went to MIT, too. My profs were in total awe of him. The couple times I met him, he seemed like a pretty good guy."

"What?"

"Jeez, did you zone off again?"

"*Do not* snap your fingers in my face, not unless you want to pull back a stump."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Whoa, easy! Guess I have to speak up in order to be heard over the

voices in your head."

"Something like that," she admitted. *At least when I'm dealing with you .*

"I was just saying, when I went to MIT people were still talking about him. And he's almost twice our age."

"Almost twice *your age* ," she pointed out.

He shrugged. "Like we give a shit about that."

Mollified, she picked up the remote and turned on the television. "Oooh, there he is!"

Robert Langer was explaining to the PBS interviewer that his usual methodology was to look at a problem upside down and inside out.

Thea felt her mood instantly unsnarl. "Ohhhhh," she sighed. "He's so handsome!"

"*What? He's balding and he looks embalmed in that lighting.*"

"He's just so—so smart. So unbelievably smart. God, those piercing, deep brown eyes—"

"I thought you liked green eyes," Jimmy whined.

"—that big, beautiful skull . . ."

"Holding a big fat brain, no doubt."

"Oh, exactly. Exactly! Curse him for being married! You know, he's the reason I went into bio-medical engineering."

Jimmy was now slumped so far down on the couch, his butt was hanging over the edge. "How fabulous."

"I could watch him forever."

"Well, this special's an hour long. For what it's worth, it'll seem like forever."

She tuned him out and listened raptly to every word uttered by the great god Langer. The hour sped by and she clicked off the TV, disappointed, when the credits rolled.

Jimmy was still slouched beside her, staring at the ceiling. "Thank Christ," he said. "That was fucking endless. I think my ass fell asleep."

"I thought you liked Dr. Langer."

"I don't like watching my best girl drool all over him," he snapped.

"Best girl?"

"Oh, be quiet." He crossed his arms over his chest and sulked.

She leaned into him and worked the first three buttons free of his shirt, then slipped her hand inside and caressed his nipple. She felt his chest heave as he took a quick breath, then his arms relaxed. "Come back to the bedroom with me?"

"Oh, this is fucking bogus! You're totally using me because that PBS special got you hot Admit it!"

"Come back to the bedroom with me?"

"Yes," he growled. "I'll take you however I can get you." He stood in an abrupt movement and hauled her up beside him. "If you call me Robert, I'm going home."

"Agreed." *Robert* .

When he asked her what she was laughing about, she refused to tell him.

He chased her to the bedroom.

Chapter Eleven



They helped each other off with their clothes, fumbling in their haste, and Thea noticed her bra was hanging from the curtain rod. Well, it's not like she needed that particular item of clothing anytime soon.

Jimmy, she noticed, was careful to never turn his back on her. She was torn between sympathy and amazement. She couldn't imagine the immense physical pain he'd endured, to say nothing of the trauma of the fire itself. On the other hand, he was so carefree, such an amiable clown, she was astonished he could be so self-conscious over a few scars.

She put her hands on his stomach—it was like pushing against a two-by-four—and shoved. He toppled back on the bed, clad only in one kelly green sock.

"Be right back. And for God's sake, lose the sock."

"It brings out my eyes!" he yelled after her.

She grabbed the bottle of Scope, pausing for a moment to stare at her reflection. Was this woman with mussed hair and glittering eyes really her? She was flushed with excitement and her hands were trembling. She absolutely could not wait to get her hands on Jimmy's scrumptious body. She was as giddy as a kid with her first chemistry set!

Are you going to stare at yourself, or are you going to pleasure him out of his mind?

The latter, of course.

There isn't a single man in the world luckier than me right now. Not one.

He had a forearm thrown over his eyes; if he were to actually watch Thea going down on him, he'd probably drown her.

She had sipped some mouthwash, and the next thing he knew, she was sucking his dick into her mouth. The warmth of her lips, tongue, and cheeks, coupled with the cool sting of the mouthwash, nearly made him leap off the bed.

She'd been at it for at least ten hours. Or at least that's how it felt. She wasn't shy about using her hands and fingers, either, and as a result, it felt like about three different women were in bed with him.

Thank you, Dr. Longer. I love you, Dr. Longer.

He brought his hands down and buried them in the black fire of her hair. Quite unconsciously, he dug his heels into the mattress and started to thrust against her mouth. "If you're not the swallowing type," he rasped, "it's time to let me go."

She hummed in response, which set the mouth-wash to vibrating against the tender flesh of his cock. The top of his head blew off—at least, that's how it felt—and he was gripped with spasms so fierce, he was still shuddering a minute later.

"Good heavens," Thea remarked, propping herself up on an elbow to study him. "Are you all right?"

"Holy shit," he groaned. "You're not even out of breath!"

"I lettered in swimming in college," she said primly.

"Holy God."

"It's just a chemical reaction," she teased. "We see them every day in the lab."

"Not in my lab!"

She leaned over him, pulled open the bedside drawer, and rummaged around.

"What the hell is *that*?"

"This? What does it look like?"

"That vibrator," he said, shocked, "is as long as my forearm."

She gave him an irritated glance, shoved Mr. Shaky further back into the drawer, and fished out a new box of condoms. "I don't have a steady boyfriend," she explained. "And I spend most of my time in the lab. What do you suggest? Porn mags and bubble gum?"

"First of all, you just raised the worst mental image ever. Second—" He was distracted by the box she fished out of the drawer. "Magnum extra large? My ego is getting so big, there won't be room for the two of us in this bed."

"I broke two condoms on you last night," she complained. "Thank God the third one held. I'd just as

soon not have another latex wrestling match."

He laughed and Thea grinned back. She opened the box, and he said, "Uh, Thea, you're gonna have to give me a minute, here. Unlike your toy, you can't just plug me in and expect instant service."

She shrugged. "All right."

She put the box on the bedside table and sat cross-legged beside him. A moment of silence passed, broken by the tap-tap-tap of the foil packet on her thumbnails.

"Jeez, why don't you whip out a stopwatch?" he complained.

"I can see the clock from here," she pointed out, then giggled. "Sorry. You must think I'm an awful slut. Can I help it if I want my turn?"

"You'll get your turn," he growled, and pounced, burying his head between her sweet-smelling thighs.

She was wet and hot and salty-sweet, and she made the most delightful noises in the back of her throat as he worked her with his tongue and lips and fingers. He felt her fingers trailing through his hair, cupping his neck, drifting down—

Oh my God!

He jerked back. "That's enough," he said roughly.

"Wh-what?" Her breasts were heaving and she put a hand up to brush her bangs out of her eyes. "What's the matter?"

He snatched the condom out of her hand, fumbled it out of the packet, and rolled it onto his thick erection.

"Talk about leaving a girl out in the cold," she said, trying to tease, but her eyes were large with worry.

"Just didn't want to wait anymore, is all." He grabbed her, flipped her over, pulled her legs apart, and drove into her. Her gasp was almost buried under his groan. He could see the white globes of her gorgeous butt working, rising to meet him, and he kept his hands on her outer thighs, keeping her spread for him. Oh, it was glorious, it was like fucking wet silk, she was—

She was gone! She had put her hands on the floor and crawled away from him with a sharp jerk. His dick waved indignantly.

"What the *hell*?"

She rolled over, glaring at him from the floor. "You only take me from behind. We're never made love face to face. It's because of your back, isn't it? You're worried about the scars."

"Get back up here," he said calmly. "Right now."

"I decline. You're a user, Jimmy. Spectacular between the sheets, but a user." She was standing up, looming over him in naked glory. In the gloom her skin looked like marble; he was facing an enraged goddess: Athena. "You're using me to get your Faskin, you aren't staying around once you have what you

want, and Doc Thea's good enough to fuck as long as you're not face to face. *God forbid* we actually look in each other's eyes."

She's right.

She's wrong!

His intellect warred with emotion; emotion won. "You're so full of shit. You had absolutely no life before I came along. I jazz things up and you know it."

"If I wanted jazz, I'd buy a Louie Armstrong record," she snapped, and despite himself, he had to bite his lip to hide the grin. "Don't flatter yourself, Dr. Doofus. My life doesn't need fixing. Yours does. Do you think if I touch one of your scars, I'll turn to stone? Throw you out? Never let you touch me again?"

"Jesus, *shut up* ! Are we going to finish this or are you going to play amateur shrink?"

"Amateur shrink, seeing as how you've finally given me a choice about something. Your scars are no big deal. They wouldn't matter to me if they were all over your face."

He stepped off the bed and seized her by the shoulders. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he snarled. "Pray you never find out."

He thrust her away from him. He didn't dare touch her again. His hands wanted to fly up and slap the shit out of her. Wanted to yank her hair and make her scream and stop that talk about scarred faces being no big deal. He cast about frantically for his pants, terrified he would hurt her before he could escape.

Suddenly, the world was whirling denim as his Levi's smacked him in the face. "Don't let the door hit you in the gluteus maximus on the way out," she said. She spun him around, braced her hands—

His inner child, the voice of the ten-year-old he'd once been, screamed. *She's touching my back! Don't, it'll hurt, stop hurting me* !

—and shoved. Good thing the bedroom door was open, or he would have broken his nose.

"Tomorrow's going to be a fun day at the office," he said angrily.

"I quit!"

The bedroom door slammed in his face. He stepped into his jeans—thank God his keys were still in the pockets—and debated whether to go after his shirt and socks.

He heard *awhump* ! and guessed she'd thrown herself on the bed. Muffled sobs drifted out into the hallway. He leaned his head on the door for a good minute, listening, but didn't dare go in. His hands might get away from him. Bad enough his mouth already had.

He turned around and left. It had started to rain, which was just as well, because he wouldn't have to wonder if raindrops were running down his face, or something else.

Chapter Twelve

He pulled her to him and cuddled her against his side. His hand slipped down and cupped one of her breasts, gently testing the weight. "Thea, darling, I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you. As the guy in the Gillette commercials said, 'I liked you so much, I bought the company!'"

She sighed as his thumb rubbed across her nipple, coaxing it to stiffness. "Really?"

"Of course, really." He leaned down and brushed her lips with his. "Did you ever doubt it?"

"Frankly, yes."

"Dr. Foster!"

"What?"

"I didn't say anything," Jimmy said with a contented sigh. "Let's play hooky and have sex all day."

"Dr. Foster!"

"I'd—I'd love to. I think we already did. Look how low the sun is."

He dropped a kiss to her temple, then shrieked in her face, "*Open the door right now!*"

She gasped and sat bolt upright. The sun really *was* low. She was alone, and someone—it sounded like Jessica—was pounding and kicking the door.

"IQ, if you've been killed or murdered in there, I am calling the police! So you better answer the door!"

She bolted from the bed, snatched the robe from the back of the bedroom door, shrugged into it, and raced down the hallway. She unlocked her front door and jerked it open, then had to dodge Jessica's pounding fist.

"Oh, thank God. Finally!"

"What?" she snapped.

"*What*, what? You haven't missed a day of work. Ever. Ever-ever. The team was worried about you, so I offered to check on you. Are you sick?"

"Sick of work," she said pointedly, and started to swing the door shut Jessica jammed her foot into the gap, then shouldered her way past. Bemused, Thea let her. "Did you know your house smells like tuna?"

"He fixed supper for me." Then she slapped her hands over her eyes and cried like a child, for the first time since—well, last night.

"Jeez," Jessica said, impressed. She pushed the cup of tea closer to Thea.

"I'm sorry to burden you with my troubles."

"I don't mind that. You're the best boss I ever had; I want you to be happy."

"I'm the only boss you ever had."

"Never mind. It's just... I gotta say, I didn't know you *could* cry. And over that weirdo, Dr. Scrye? Bizarre!"

"I can't believe I was so stupid. I actually thought he liked me for me. Not because of what I could do for him. Or to him," she added bitterly, thinking of the bottle of Scope.

"Look, he probably freaked out because you were getting too close. I'm sure he adores you. God knows he was an absolute beast at the office today."

She perked up. "Really?"

Jessica raised her pinkies and linked them together in a cross. "Swear. He was a total asshole. He made Marshall cry! Told him he couldn't pull off the purple pantsuit because it was a fall color."

Thea slammed her fist on the table. "Bastard," she hissed.

"Right. Anyway. I'm glad you're OK. Relatively speaking. Um... there's a rumor... I'm sure it's not true, but the team made me promise to—"

"Yes, I resigned. I'm very sorry, but I cannot work for that man another day. Another minute."

"Well, will you let us know where you get work? And if you'll be budgeted for a team?"

"You don't need to leave on my account," she protested. "Anodyne will be in the black again soon. There's plenty of work left."

"We'd rather work with you. It's like..." Jessica's eyes went faraway. "Like you make us more than we are. Like you're so smart, you've got brains to spare for the rest of us. And as a result we work better. We are better."

"I wasn't especially smart last night," she commiserated, but she was pleased. Jessica was quite wrong, of course—her team had six PhDs and three MDs between them—but it was nice of her to say. "In fact, I'd better get this over with."

"I'll go—"

"You will not go with me. I don't need an escort. Although," she added dryly, "security will likely be escorting me out."

"Well. If you're sure."

"I am. Thank you for checking on me. I'm sorry I tried to close the door on your foot."

Jessica laughed. "I have two. So it's all right."

She had boxed up her files—those she could legally take with her—and cleaned out her desk. Now she printed out her formal resignation and fantasized briefly about stapling it to Jimmy's forehead.

It was after ten... she'd slip it under his door and be on her way. And never, never think of Anodyne or Faskin or Jimmy Scrye again.

His office door was open a crack and light was spilling out into the hallway. She hoped that meant he'd simply left it unlocked. She couldn't hear anyone speaking, so she simply pushed the door open with her tented fingers.

Jimmy was standing beside a Lego Eiffel Tower as tall as his hip, hugging a woman. From the back, she had the same flaming red hair, and it bounced around her shoulders like a mobile sunset. Thea was shocked at how the sight was like a knife between her shoulder blades.

Jimmy's eyes, which were closed as he blissfully hugged the whore, flew open. "Thea! Jeez, are you all right? I mean—uh—"

She flapped the piece of paper at him. "I came in to pack. Here is my formal resignation. I regret I am unable to give you proper notice."

The hussy started to turn. Jimmy started to talk faster. "Thea, please don't. I—the company needs you. We can't finish without you."

"You'll have to."

The slut pulled away and faced Thea, who nearly dropped her resignation. The left side of her face was mostly flawless... cream-colored skin, a gorgeous sprinkling of freckles, cheekbones you could cut yourself on. Sparkling green eyes. The right side... a ruin. Thea was looking at long-healed skin grafts.

"Hi," the very nice woman said. "I'm Patrice, Jimmy's twin sister."

Your scars are no big deal.

"I'm Dr. Foster," Thea said. "It's nice to meet you."

They wouldn't matter to me if they were all over your face.

"It's nice to meet you. You're all Jimmy talks about."

Oh, dear God. How blind she'd been. How unforgivably stupid.

"Thank you."

She thought back to what the team had told her on his first day. Orphaned at sixteen via a house fire, that's what they said. An MD who started his first biofirm at twenty-two.

I jumped on my little sister to put her fire out, and a couple of burning roof tiles fell on me.

A scarred man who made a practice of rescuing ailing biotech firms and turning them around.

Why? For Patrice. All for her. It had nothing to do with *his* scars. Oh, she was an idiot.

"—came to check out Jimmy's new digs," Patrice was saying. "He told me you were going to help him put me out of business." She said it in a tone of perfect good cheer.

"Um... Miss Scrye..."

"Dr. Scrye-Drie."

"Scrye-Dry?"

"I hyphenated my name when I got married."

"Thereby giving herself the dumbest name ever," Jimmy said, rolling his eyes.

"Shut up," Patrice said, giving him a pinch. "What were you saying, Thea?"

"Ah... well, Faskin offers great promise. But it can't—that is to say, we can't use it to—um—"

"Fix my horror of a face?" Patrice Scrye-Drie laughed. Laughed! "Of course not. Faskin will only work on fresh burns, correct?"

"Yes. Maybe someday..."

"Right. Well, that's good enough for me. That's all I ever wanted. I've got a husband who thinks I'm the sexiest thing he's ever seen, but I've got a sucky job."

"She's the director of the burn ward at Chicago General," Jimmy explained. "Does six grafts a day."

"Not for long," Patrice said. "Not if you finish what you started." She smiled. The right side of her face didn't move, but she had a dimple buried in her left cheek. The effect was surprisingly charming. "You will, won't you? Don't let my jerk-off of a brother chase you away."

"I'm so, so sorry about last night," Jimmy said earnestly. "I didn't mean to treat you like—"

"I don't want to discuss it." She saw him flinch, and wanted to tell him she'd been a bit of a jerkoff herself... *that's* why she didn't want to get into it. Especially in front of Patrice.

How blithely confident she had been! What a supreme ass!

"I'll—I'll stay. Until Faskin is done. That could be six weeks or six years... I don't know."

Jimmy looked distinctly relieved. Patrice clapped her hands. "That's great! Thanks so much, Thea!"

"I didn't—I didn't feel right, leaving my work unfinished anyway," she said awkwardly.

"Put me out of business, Thea. You promise me, now."

"I promise."

They smiled at each other, like sisters.

Chapter Thirteen



"C'mon, IQ. Pack it up for the day."

"Quit it," Thea said, her gaze riveted on the chemical reaction before her.

"Come on ! You've got to get out of here. You haven't left the lab in four days."

"Hmm..."

"You're going to kill yourself for that redheaded weirdo."

Which one? "Most likely."

"Dr. Foster, please!"

"Good-bye."

Jessica huffed out. She'd been the last team member to stay. It was midnight... at least, it had been the last time she checked her watch. Her stomach, which had been growling constantly, had finally quit.

Good. She didn't have time to eat.

She was inches away. She felt it. She *smelled* it! It had been like this with PaceIC, too... years of frustration, followed by unconscious insight, followed by success. While she'd been sulking and sobbing and sleeping in bed, pieces fell together in her brain and the answer, which had eluded her for so long, was inches away.

She would get this done. She would keep her promise. She would make it up to Jimmy. She would...

... would...

Why was it getting so dark?

"Oh, Christ Thea!" Hands on her shoulders, shaking. Light taps on her cheeks. Somebody yanked her glasses off. Firm fingers at her throat, checking her pulse. A thumb peeled her eyelid up. "Thea! Shit, where's that fucking cell phone—"

"You keep it in an ankle holster like a complete yutz," she said, batting his hand away from her eyes. "Remember?"

Jimmy was staring down at her. He was pale, and his green eyes burned like lamps. He was holding her glasses protectively curled in his hand like a baby bird. His fingers moved to her throat again, to check her heart rate. "It's three o'clock in the morning, you dumbass! Killing yourself won't help my sister."

She snorted irritably. "I've worked longer than this without sleeping or eating."

"Eating?"

"Stop yelling. Help me up."

"The hell. I'm calling an ambulance."

"Just help me up," she repeated tiredly. "You're an MD, you know perfectly well I don't need to go to the hospital. Besides, thanks to the HMOs, I could have end-stage cancer and they wouldn't admit me."

He sat on his heels and thought about it. "Promise to rest."

"...for a while."

"OK. Ooooooof!" He strained and lifted her.

"Don't be overdramatic. I can walk."

"You weigh a ton."

"Thank goodness I haven't eaten, then."

He laughed and nearly dropped her. He staggered through BioSecurity and brought her to the executive conference room. The sight of it made her giggle.

"What's funny, honey?"

"Oh, I caught an employee having sex in here once. I mean, they had just finished, but you could tell what they'd been up to. I thought it was monumentally stupid of them at the time. I didn't know..."

"What?" he said, placing her on the couch behind the table.

"Never mind."

"Do not move from that couch. Not unless you want your ass kicked."

She yawned. "Oh, I wouldn't want that."

He backed out of the room, and then she heard him running down the hall to his office. He was back a minute later. "Drink up," he said, popping the top and handing her the Coke. The can felt ice cold and she pressed it to her cheek. "That'll get your blood sugar up."

She emptied the can in seven noisy gulps, then laid back and belched lightly. "Oh, that's better."

"You areso sexy when you're gassy."

"Shut up. I'm not speaking to you." She flushed, embarrassed. "Also, you shouldn't be speaking to me."

"Forget it." He sat down cross-legged beside the couch. It was so low, he still loomed over her. "You couldn't have known. I should have told you. I just—it's a private thing."

"I understand," she said fervently. "Believe me."

"No, you were the one person in the world I*should* have told," he said, serious for once. "But old habits, you know."

"I shouldn't have been so smugly judgmental."

"And I shouldn't have been a raving sociopath. Well, we've both beaten our breasts pretty well, haven't we?"

"You leave my breasts out of this."

He laughed, leaned over, and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. "Sleep," he said.

She did.

A minute later, she opened her eyes to blazing sunlight. The shades hadn't been drawn, and she could see it was almost noon.

"Wow!" she said.

"What? What?" Jimmy sat up beside the couch, blinking dazedly. His hair was standing wildly in all directions. He had carpet marks on his left cheek. "Are you all right? What's wrong? I'll call the—"

"Sorry." She smiled and touched his cheek, smoothing out the checkerboard pattern. "It just surprised me... It felt like I was sleeping only a few minutes, but a good nine hours have gone by. Also, I could play tic-tac-toe on your face."

"I always knew you were a kinky bim."

"Did you really sleep on the floor all night?"

"Yeah." He ran his fingers through his hair, which made it stand up just as wildly... but in the opposite direction. "You were my patient."

"Oh, you spend the night with all your patients?"

"Just the ones who drive me batshit. Stay here."

"Good doggy," she muttered as he stumbled out.

She did not obey. She got up, carefully tested her legs, and was pleased when they held her weight. She used the executive washroom, shook her head in despair at her reflection, and was lying placidly on the couch when Jimmy returned.

"OK, you want Pringles, Fritos, or Nachos for breakfast? Lunch, I mean?"

"Do you have anything that doesn't end in 'os'?"

"*Isaid* Pringles. Also, M&M's."

She made a face. "Pringles, please."

"Just a few," he warned, popping the top and dumping a few chips into her hands. "I ordered some soup and sandwiches from the cafeteria. They'll be up in a few minutes."

"I'd rather eat my own vomit."

"Obviously you haven't eaten at the caf since I took over. The food's much better."

He was right. Her sandwich had been brushed with basil mayonnaise; the tomato soup was velvety perfection and tasted like summer. She forced herself to eat slowly. No use having it all come back up.

Jimmy gathered up the garbage as she lay back down with a sigh. "Oh, that was good. Where is everybody? I haven't heard a soul in the hallway."

"It's Sunday," he replied, stomping the garbage until it fit in the overflowing can. "We're it, sugar. Come on, I'll take you home."

"Absolutely not." She stood. Yes, that was *much* better. "I've got to get back to work."

"Absolutely not. Thea, you'll get it. I know you will. Shit, the whole company knows."

"No pressure or anything," she muttered.

"If you don't promise to rest and not come back to work until Tuesday, I'll fire your ass."

"Don't be an idiot," she snapped.

"Sticks and stones, sugarplum."

"You can't fire me. Your sister is depending on you."

"Watch me, gorgeous." He crossed swiftly to her and held her hands in his. "It's not worth your health."

"Jimmy, you don't understand. Let me work," she pleaded. "I'm so close! I know I'll—"

He kissed her. She knew she should finish the argument, but the pressure of his lips on hers was, in its way, a compelling argument on its own. She looped her arms around his neck and licked his lower lip.

"Ummmm. I've missed you."

"Gorgeous?" she teased. "Are you farsighted? I'm a wreck."

"Gorgeous," he repeated firmly. "And—uh—I'll take you home."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I mean, I have this gigantic hard-on right now—"

"Gigantic, hmm?"

"But you're in no shape to—"

"If you won't let me work," she said, slipping her fingers into his jeans and feeling the throbbing warmth he had for her, "you'd best let me play doctor, Doctor."

He closed his eyes and squeezed her so hard she squeaked. "Um. You. Uh. Shouldn't do that. Um. Don't stop."

She unzipped his fly, reached around, and squeezed his ass. Oh, lovely. The flesh barely gave way. "You are in *great* shape," she commented. "But you devour a constant stream of junk food and I've never seen you exercise."

He leered. "Sure you have."

"Oh. Pervert."

"OK," he said suddenly, pushing her toward the couch. "But you have to let me do all the work."

"Phooey, that's no fun."

"I mean it, Thea."

"You'd appear more stern if you weren't yanking off your jeans as fast as you could."

"When we're done, I plan on strangling you," he said, exasperated.

"When we're done, you won't have any strength left."

She got off the couch and crawled beneath the conference table. "Here," she said, patting the carpet beside her. "I want to do it here. Also, I owe Renee Jardin an apology."

"Who?" He crawled next to her.

"Never mind."

They undressed each other, growing more and more urgent, and once Jimmy sat up too quickly and banged his head on the underside of the table. This sent Thea into gales of laughter and she scarcely noticed when her skirt went flying over his shoulder.

He buried his face in her cleavage, licking and nibbling and sucking, and she could hear her breath shortening. "How do you feel about kids?" he asked, his mouth muffled against his flesh.

"What?"

"Kids. Ankle-biters. Nose-miners. Rugrats."

"Thanks for translating." He lightly nipped the sensitive swell of her breast and she shivered. "I always figured I'd artificially inseminate myself. Twice."

"Uh-huh. Well, how about the old-fashioned way?"

"That would be all right in a pinch," she said, picturing herself swelling with Jimmy's child, a red-haired beauty with her eyes and his sense of irreverence.

"OK, good, we're agreed on that. How do you feel about getting married?" He reached down, gently parted her, and slipped a finger inside. He found her ready... more than ready.

She raised her knees and spread herself before him. He made a soft sound in his throat, a purr of pleasure.

"It would depend," she said breathlessly, moving against his hand, "on whom I asked."

He raised himself up on his elbows and smoothed her hair away from his face. "If you asked me?"

She reached down and clasped his throbbing, velvety length. "Then I would love marriage."

"So. Ask me."

"Right now?"

"Well, it's possible I'm about to knock you up. So I should make an honest woman out of you." He pulled up her legs and entered her with excruciating slowness. She locked her ankles behind his back.

"Ask me," he breathed in her ear.

"It's crazy," she gasped.

He pumped harder, lengthening his strokes, and she groaned and met him, thrust for thrust.

"Ask me."

"Will—you—marry—me??"

"Yes."

He slowed his strokes, looking down to watch himself entering her again and again. "It's still crazy," she groaned, as he moved against her, within her. Slowly. Sweetly. "We've only known each other three weeks."

"Three weeks and two days," he corrected her, panting slightly. He stopped moving, resting within her.

"Oh, now you're just being mean," she joked.

"I want to say this while I can sort of think. I mean, most of the blood in my brain headed south a while ago."

"Men," she sighed, shaking her head.

"And I don't care about how long it's been," he added gently. "I care about you. I love you. I loved you the minute I saw you on the news about PaceIC."

"You saw me?"

"Couldn't take my eyes off you. Something about your face—you looked proud, but you looked a little scared with all those microphones in your face. Of course, the cameras didn't do you justice, because in person you were—wow."

He was still throbbing within her, which was delightfully distracting. She squirmed, but he didn't budge. "That's... ummm... a lovely thing to say. I couldn't *stand* you the moment I saw you."

He laughed, a low rumble against her chest. "Why do you think I bought this company?"

"Wh-what?"

"Anodyne. I bought it because—well, because I wanted you to finish Faskin, but also because I wanted to get to know you. I wanted you my first day here."

"Oh, no!"

"What?"

"Oh, shit!"

"Jeez, am I hurting you? What's wrong?"

"I'm dreaming!" she wailed. "This is all a dream, the best one I ever had. Any minute now you're going to turn into Jessica."

He pinched her nipple. She yelped. "Satisfied?"

"Well... that did hurt a little. Maybe it's not a dream. God, I hope not," she added fervently.

"Also, babe, we gotta talk... You dream about me and then I turn into Jessica?"

"Just shut up and fuck me before I wake up."

He'd been bending down to kiss her, and laughed in her mouth. "Yes, ma'am. It's just as well. If I have to stay still any longer, my balls will blow up."

"You say the nicest things—ah!"

He thrust, and she pressed her heels against his back, forcing him deeper. She clutched his shoulders and shoved back at him. She could hear how wet she was. How wet he'd made her.

"Put your arms around me," he murmured. "I want to feel as much of you as I can."

She did, clutching his back, feeling his muscles work as he fucked her, pleased them both. She was staring into his emerald eyes when her orgasm raced through her.

"Ahhhh, Christ!" he groaned. "Anybody tell you—when you come—all your muscles lock?"

"Well," she said breathlessly, "it's physiologically..."

"No,*all* your muscles."

"Oh." She giggled. "No. Nobody's ever noticed, I guess. Plus, my vibrator's not the chatty type."

"Do not talk about Mr. Shaky," he growled.

"Oh, I think Mr. Shaky might be due for early retirement." She tightened her grip and thrust her tongue in his ear. He jerked in response, then stiffened and shuddered all over.

"I love you," he said.

She tried to smooth his hair, but it was a lost cause; it kept springing up between her fingers. "I love you, too. But it's still crazy."

"Ask me if I give a fuck."

She jabbed him. "Nice!"

He jabbed her back. Things degenerated into the first tickle fight of her adult life.

Epilogue



From *People* magazine.

The World's Most Beautiful People

Issue, March 25, 2005

Exotic, stunning, and with the carriage of a queen, Dr. Thea Scrye is much more than just a pretty face. A contender for the Nobel Prize for Medicine, Foster gave hope to countless burn victims when she perfected Faskin, a phenomenal advance in artificial skin.

"She's a genius," Dr. Patrice Scrye-Drie, former director of the Chicago General Burn Unit, says

enthusiastically. "She put me out of a job. Our whole family just loves her to death. She's just what my brother needed. Have you talked to them? Did you see my niece? Seven months old and already talking! I have pictures. I have alotof pictures ."

Scrye-Drie, Thea Scrye's sister-in-law, credits her brother's efforts with moving Faskin toward completion. "Jekell had no interest in it. But Jimmy revived the project and gave Thea everything she needed."

Dr. James Scrye, hotshot rescuer of ailing biotech firms, gives all the credit to his wife, who in turn takes it. Interestingly, the Scrye family boasts several brilliant physicians. In an extended family totaling over thirty members, only two are not in the medical field.

Although it has wrought great good, Faskin came into being from tragedy. The Scrye twins lost their parents in a house fire when they were still children, and have been seeking an alternative to the trauma of skin grafts ever since. Both were injured in the fire that killed their parents.

When asked about his bride, Dr. Jimmy, as he insists on being called, replied, "She's a goddess. Write that down. Two d's. Goddess."

Dr. Thea Scrye, who has suffered much media attention due to her extraordinary breakthrough, was not inclined to share much with People. "You have a Most Beautiful issue? For real? I thought my husband was playing a joke. How exquisitely stupid. Go to a hospital. Donate blood."

Smitten by the wedding photo her husband gleefully faxed, this reporter complied.

MaryJanice Davidson's Greatest Hits!

If you missed *The Royal Treatment*, a Brava trade paperback, run, don't walk to the nearest bookstore.

In a world nearly identical to ours, the North won the Civil War, Ben Affleck is the sexiest man alive, Martha Stewart is a better pastry chef than insider trader, and Russia never sold Alaska to the U.S. Instead, Alaska is a rough, beautiful country ruled by a famously eccentric royal family, ostracized by the other royals, and urgently in need of a bride for the Crown Prince. In fact, *anyone* would do. But they have no idea what they're in for when they offer the job to a feisty commoner—a girl who's going to need...

THE ROYAL TREATMENT

The Princess-to-Be Primer.

Or, Things I've Learned Really Quick, as Compiled by Her Future Royal Highness—Yeah, whatever-Christina. That's me.

1. Asking for cocktail sauce for your oysters will make the chef cry, then faint.
2. Telling jokes you picked up from the guys on the fishing boat doesn't go over really well at a fancy ball.
3. Telling the obnoxious younger royals you're going to kick them where the sun don't shine if they don't stop annoying you is guaranteed to make them follow you everywhere.

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