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IN HIS
WILDEST
DREAMS



Debbi Rawlins

In His Wildest Dreams

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Nick Ryder isn't happy about anyone analyzing his dreams, even if it's only as a favor to his sister's friend Emma. But after getting an eyeful of Emma au naturel, his dreams become more like an X-rated movie - with Emma in the starring role! Which would be fine - if Emma didn't expect him to share every little detail with her... With her graduate degree in jeopardy, Emma Snow knows she should be grateful to Nick for volunteering at the last minute. But when the playboy's provocative dreams start to become her fantasies, she has a hard time separating work from play. Somehow she has to get Nick to take her study seriously. And it would be a lot easier if Emma wasn't so tempted to make all of Nick's erotic dreams come true....

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“Tell me more about your dream,” Emma probed

“Well, I stood there while the blonde tore off my clothes. The brunette just lay back and watched. I was getting pretty hot by then with all the tempting and teasing—”

Emma’s pencil snapped. She jumped and stared down at the stub left in her hand.

“Take it easy, Doc.” Nick laughed. “I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.”

She took a deep breath. “Are you sure this was a dream?”

He seemed momentarily disconcerted. “What? You think I made this up?” He moved closer and slipped his hand around her waist. “Doc, you wound me. I thought we were getting to be...close.” He lifted her chin and leisurely trailed his lips down her neck.

She moaned softly. “Nick, this isn’t right. If the study were over—”

He captured her mouth with his, her eager response fueling such a raging desire it made him so hard he throbbed.

“Doc, I think the study is going just fine....”

In his Wildest Dreams
Debbi Rawlins



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1

“BULL. HE’S NOT on a conference call. He’s watching the Lakers game. Tell him it’s Nick Ryder and to get his butt on the line.” Nick adjusted the phone between his jaw and shoulder, leaned back in his sister’s office chair and got comfortable.

On the other end of the line, the temp hemmed and hawed for a moment. Nick sighed, taking pity on her. If she’d been his financial planner’s regular secretary, she would’ve laughed, told him the latest dirty joke she’d heard, and then patched him through to Marshall.

“Just tell him I’m on the line, okay?”

“All right, Mr. Ryder, one moment please.”

He squinted out the apartment window, hoping he’d see Brenda coming down the street. When he saw no sign of her, he cleared a spot between the two stacks of student papers she was grading and swung his feet onto her desk.

“What the devil are you doing calling me in the middle of the game?”

Nick chuckled at his friend’s gruffness. They went way back to prep school days, followed by Yale. After graduation, Marshall had stayed for another two years of graduate studies, but Nick couldn’t wait to get the hell out, and he had. Not because school was hard, but because it was too easy. The curriculum bored him silly.

“By your pleasant tone I take it I’m winning our bet?”

“One of these days, Ryder, you’re going to fall on your ass.”

Nick snorted. “Tell you what, without even asking the score, I’ll give you another four points.”

“Smug bastard.”

“Man, that’s what I get for practically giving you your money back?”

Marshall’s laugh was interrupted by a cough, and Nick winced. He wished the guy would quit smoking like the doctors had advised. “What do you want, Nick?”

“I got a tip on a new restaurant chain. Their stock is about to go up and I want five hundred shares before it does.”

“You know restaurants are risky.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got this hunch.”

Marshall sighed. “Far be it from me to underestimate one of your hunches. No matter what, you always manage to land on your feet.”

“What’s life without a few risks?”

Marshall muttered something Nick didn’t hear. Just as well. He was sick of the “Golden Boy” cracks, even though he knew Marshall didn’t begrudge him his good fortune. Not like some of the other guys they’d gone to school with.

Was it Nick’s fault that he’d never had to study for exams, that he was lucky at the track, that at twenty-nine he’d invested well enough to have made close to a million, or that he didn’t have two kids and a nine-to-five job?

He wasn’t foolish. When it really counted he believed only in calculated risks that bred success, and once he’d thrown in, he stayed committed to the end. Not understanding the odds ended in failure. Nick made it a point not to fail. Not professionally, or personally.

He passed on the restaurant stock info and was hanging up when he heard a key in the door.

As soon as his sister stepped inside, her gaze flew to his booted feet. “Off the desk. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Look.” He raised his boots a couple of inches. “I’m using a coaster.”

Brenda shook her head, a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. “What are you doing here anyway?”

He got up and took the pair of bulky brown grocery sacks from her arms. “I need to talk to you.”

“I gave you a key for emergencies.”

“This definitely qualifies as an emergency.” He carried the sacks into the kitchen, and then pulled out a package of chicken. “The freezer, or the fridge?”

“The fridge.” She started unloading the second sack. “You could have called.”

“It’s easier to invite myself for dinner this way.”

“What?” Brenda slid him one of her amused glances that annoyed the hell out of him. “No date?”

“Tiffany has to work late.”

“You’re actually dating someone who has a job, and takes it seriously?”

“Pathetic, isn’t it? I keep telling her there’s more to life than sticking her knees under a desk eight hours a day.” He yanked out a bag of salad greens and made a face. It was a funky mix of wild greens—weeds if you asked him—that Brenda favored but made him gag. “Disposal?”

“Try it, Buster.”

He tossed it in the vegetable tray, and then took out a beer. “So what’s for dinner?”

“How do you know I don’t have a date?”

“Yeah, right.” He uncapped the bottle. “Want one of these?”

She sighed. “That hurt.”

Nick stared at his sister, puzzled by her sullen expression. “Come on, Bren, you know what I meant. You’re always working or studying for your doctorate. It’s not that you can’t find a date.”

She gave him the silent treatment for almost a minute, long enough for him to start feeling like a heel, and then she grinned. “Gotcha!”

“Brat.” She was two years younger but definitely more mature, or at least more serious about life, mostly because he refused to grow up. No fun in that.

“We’re having chicken and pasta.” She ducked around him to get to the spice rack. “If you’ll get out of the way and put some water on to boil.”

“Yes, ma’am. Oh, before I forget, you had a call...someone named Emma. She had to cancel lunch tomorrow. Her last subject bailed out on her. She said you’d know what that meant.”

“Oh, no.” Brenda set aside a jar of garlic salt, her expression crestfallen. “I can’t believe this. Did she sound really upset?”

“Kind of matter-of-fact, I guess.” He rooted around a lower cabinet until he found a large pot. When he stood, Brenda hadn’t moved, her expression still troubled. “Who is this woman?”

“A friend.”

“That much I figured out.”

“I mean a really good friend. She’s saved my butt a couple of times during midterms. She’s incredibly together, kind of like I want to be when I grow up.”

“Like that’s ever going to happen.”

That got him a tiny smile. “Look who’s talking.” Then she looked bummed again.

“Hey, cheer up. Your friend will figure it out.”

“Yeah, I know. It just doesn’t seem fair. Her thesis is on dream interpretation, and she’s been working hard at it for over a year now.”

“Ah, another one of your perpetual student friends.”

“Knock it off, Nick. Emma’s different. Things haven’t been easy for her. She doesn’t have parents who paid her tuition. She was on partial scholarship and had to take out a student loan, plus she works part-time as a waitress and as a teaching assistant for Professor Lyster.”

Nick yawned.

“Sometimes you’re a jerk.”

“What? It’s my fault Grandmother’s trust fund paid our tuition? I didn’t hear you complaining.”

Brenda glared at him. “You could show some compassion.”

“For God’s sake, lots of people put themselves through school. What’s the big deal?”

“Yeah, but Emma’s different. She’s had to work twice as hard because of a learning disability she had as a child.”

He stuck the pot under the tap and started to fill it with water. “How much am I supposed to put in here?”

When she didn’t answer, he turned to find her staring out of the window, totally lost in thought. Her chin-length dark hair hid most of her face but he could tell by the slump in her posture she was really upset.

He turned off the water. “Hey, Bren, why don’t we go out for Chinese, or maybe Italian this time? My treat.”

She shook her head and gave him a wan smile. “Nah, I don’t feel like it.” She went back to preparing the chicken. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

Ah, hell. Rotten timing. Of course Nick didn’t think Brenda would have a problem with doing him this small favor, especially since she’d been too busy studying the past few years to use the family ski house, but still. “I need the Aspen place for Thanksgiving.”

A small frown drew her brows together. “It’s my turn to have it this year, right?”

He didn’t like the way her interest suddenly piqued. “You’re not planning on using it.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” She had that lost-in-thought look again. It made him nervous.

“You haven’t been there in five years. You don’t even like to ski.”

“But it’s nice and quiet out there. An excellent place to unwind, study, whatever.”

“It’s quiet here.”

She glanced at him with that faintly amused look again. “What’s the deal? You promised some sweet young thing you’d take her skiing in Aspen?”

“So?”

“So, too bad. It’s my turn to have the house. You should have checked with me first.”

He muttered a curse. “Bren, come on.”

“Sorry, Nick, I really am.” She did look apologetic, as though she wasn’t going to give in. Dammit. “But I do need it this year.”

“Bull. You hadn’t even remembered it was your turn.”

“I know, but this thing with Emma...”

Oh, man, there was that apologetic expression again. “What does this Emma have to do with it?” He paused, struck by inspiration. “If you think she might be upset, shouldn’t you stick around and comfort her? You are her friend.” He tried to look sincere and concerned. Too bad Bren knew him too well.

Her look of disdain made him sigh. “Why don’t you rent another place?” she asked, turning back to cutting up the chicken.

“Are you kidding? Everything’s booked by now.” He took a long pull of his beer, annoyed that everything had gotten complicated. “Hey, how about I rent you a place? Anywhere you want. Jamaica? St. Thomas? You and your friend can soak up the sun and study to your heart’s content.”

She pursed her lips, drummed her fingers on the counter. Good. Obviously she was thinking about it. “I have another solution.”

“Okay.” He started to relax.

“You can be Emma’s subject.”

“What?”

“You let her study you for the next two weeks and the house is yours.”

“That’s no solution, that’s blackmail.”

“Suit yourself.” She shrugged and turned back to the cutting board, but not before he saw the beginning of a grin.

“Study me? Like figure out what’s going on in my subconscious?”

“Not exactly. You simply relay your dreams to her and she analyzes them, and then compiles the data for her thesis.”

“Using a bunch of psychobabble.” He snorted. “That is so not going to happen.”

She shrugged again, the stubborn glint in her eye all too familiar. She meant business.

“What if I find someone else?”

“Nope. You’re perfect for the study. You can fall asleep in a heartbeat and you’re good at recalling your dreams. Besides, she needs someone yesterday.”

“Oh, man.” He abandoned the pot and sat at the kitchen table. “I can’t just drop everything for the next two weeks.”

She laughed. “Like what? Playing tennis, or maybe having dinner with your girlfriend du jour?”

He sighed with disgust.

“Like I said, suit yourself.”

“How many hours a day does this thing take?”

“You’ll have to talk to Emma about that.”

He narrowed his gaze in suspicion. “You aren’t trying to fix me up with her, are you?”

“Oh, God no. Emma’s much too good for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Just let me know if I should call and tell her to expect you.”

“You realize this is blackmail.”

Brenda smiled. “I call it a trade.”

He got up, muttering a few choice words as he headed out of the kitchen.

“What about dinner?”

“I don’t have time. Call your friend. Tell her she’s got a new sucker.”

Brenda waited until he was out of sight and then pumped her hand in the air. “Yes!”

She did a little victory dance around the kitchen table, and then headed for the Mickey Mouse phone Nick had given her last Christmas.

This was just perfect.

EMMA SNOW STRAIGHTENED HER BACK, squared her shoulders and looked Jake straight in the eyes. “Would you like to go to Dean Sutter’s reception next month? Um, that is, with me?”

Jake looked back blankly.

“Wait, let me try that again.” She flipped back her ponytail, and cleared her throat. “Next week Dean Sutter is having his annual reception for the students who are completing the graduate program. If you aren’t doing anything... what I mean is... would you like to go with me? As my date. Well, not really a date of course... just someone to sit with at dinner.”

Jake stared at her a moment longer, yawned and then walked away, clearly unimpressed.

She glared at his retreating back. “Thanks, you ingrate. See if I bring home any more kibble.”

He didn’t even turn around. Instead he gave her “the tail.” She was fairly certain it was the feline version of flipping her off. The persnickety tabby often turned and stiffened his tail when he was displeased about something.

“I heard they’re serving salmon for dinner,” she called after him, but he ignored her and disappeared down the hall.

Emma sighed. She didn’t know why she was going through this futile exercise anyway. If she didn’t complete her thesis, she wouldn’t be going to the reception. Which meant she’d be stuck in school for another several months, assuming Professor Peters’s patience didn’t run out. Or her funds did. Both were serious contenders to screwing up her degree.

God, she had to be the oldest graduate student in history. She sank onto the edge of her bed and dropped back onto the mattress and stared at the chipped ceiling. Of course that wasn’t true—many people returned to school after raising families or whatever, but it felt as though she’d been in

the graduate program forever, lagging behind because money had run out, or her job as a teaching assistant required too much time, or her mother was calling her back home to Utah for some ridiculous reason.

Emma fell for it every time, no matter how flimsy her mom's new excuse. Guilt would start gnawing at her for not having been the perfect child her parents had dreamed of having, and she'd drop everything to go be her mother's crutch. Usually even without her mom's subtle reminders of how much she'd sacrificed to work with Emma, the years she'd spent helping her learn to read so she could be a "normal" child.

She blocked the destructive thoughts from her mind. Her energy was much better spent finding a new subject for the final phase of her thesis, not that she honestly had much hope. It had taken her best Bob Seger CD, a nerve-wracking dinner with the lascivious Martin Stanley, and a promise to clean Norman Cove's apartment for two months to secure the last three male subjects.

She sighed. Now that Norman had backed out, at least she didn't have to scrape together a few hours a week to do his cleaning. Time was becoming more of an issue. As it was she didn't know how she could continue to volunteer at the animal shelter.

She loved working with the strays. It was a way of giving back for the kindness her elderly neighbor had shown her when she herself had been a kind of stray, roaming the neighborhood after school when she'd felt unwelcome in her own home.

There was a bright side. Not having to clean Norm's apartment would allow her time to work an extra shift at the pub. Or more time for her thesis.

If she still had a shot.

She was so screwed.

The phone rang, and Emma leaped off the bed, foolishly hoping someone was answering her new ad from the library bulletin board.

"It's Brenda," her friend said before Emma finished getting out her hello. "How you doing, kiddo?"

"Better than roadkill."

"That good, huh?"

"I can't believe this is happening." She carried the phone back to the bed and flopped down. "I am so pissed at Norm I could strangle him."

"Why did he bail?"

"He claims he's flunking chemistry and he has to use the time to study more." Emma snorted. "Flunking my butt. I got a glimpse of his new lab partner."

"What a jerk! He's a whiz at chemistry. Did he actually think you'd buy that excuse?"

"Hard to believe he beat a million other sperm to the finish, isn't it?"

Brenda laughed.

Emma joined her, and then sighed. "Men. If they put one on the moon, they ought to be able to put them all there."

"No argument from me." Brenda hesitated. "This isn't like you to be joking at a time like this. You're not going over the edge on me, are you?"

"I think I'm in shock. I'm so close to finishing—this is like a bad dream, no, a nightmare. If I don't find some humor, I'll do something—I don't know what, but it won't be pretty."

"Well, you can thank me with a hot fudge sundae because I'm about to save your butt."

"What? You're going to dress in drag and be my final male subject?"

"Are you ready for some good news or not?"

"I am so ready."

Brenda paused dramatically. "I've got a guy for you."

Emma frowned. This had better not be one of Brenda's setups. Although it seemed she'd given up trying months ago. "Define that further."

“My brother.”

“The womanizer?”

Brenda cleared her throat. “That’s not exactly how I’d categorize him. Women are drawn to him.”

“You said once he had a different ‘flavor’ for each week.” Emma stared at her pathetically short fingernails. At least she wasn’t biting them anymore. Maybe they’d look halfway decent in time for the reception.

“I know, but not because he necessarily encourages it.” Brenda sighed. “Nick’s one of those guys women do silly things for...even the ones you’d never expect to behave like that act like brainless morons around him.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “And you want me to go out with him?”

Her friend laughed. “Oh, God, no. He’s volunteering to be your test subject.”

Heat singed Emma’s face. She knew she was bright red right now, a curse of her fair Irish skin. “I knew that.”

Brenda chuckled. “I wouldn’t do that to you, Em. He’s my brother and I love him...I even like him most of the time. But I would never try to fix you two up. Trust me.”

“I’d been thinking about the Dean’s reception and my mind was on a different track so I—” Emma’s muttering came to an abrupt halt as realization sunk in. “He’ll do it? For the whole two weeks?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“He owes me a favor.”

Emma got a funny feeling in her tummy. “Does he want to do it?”

“No.”

“Great.”

“Have any of your subjects wanted to do it? If I remember correctly, you did an awful lot of bribing and bartering.”

“True, but this is the end of the line. He can’t bail out on me because he has something else to do, or decides he doesn’t like being asked a gazillion questions.”

“He won’t bail. We have an understanding.”

Emma hesitated, not that she had much choice. As she’d said herself, it was the end of the line. Heaven help her if she didn’t finish her thesis. Not only was she flat broke, but the job they’d promised her at the clinic would be given to someone else who already has their master’s. “Does he have any time restraints?”

“I doubt it. He does some day trading on the Internet, some charity work, and he just got over his hobby of tinkering with old cars. He doesn’t have a regular job.”

Emma thought hard, trying to remember what Brenda had said about her brother. All she recalled was that he’d been a gifted student, who hated school but parlayed his genius into a small fortune. And that he was a real charmer with the ladies.

Good thing Emma was immune to that kind of stuff. Sex was overrated, in her opinion, media hype, advertiser’s bait. One encounter had been enough to satisfy her curiosity.

She switched the phone to her other hand, and then flipped through her calendar. “Does he know we’ll have to get started right away?”

“He knows.”

Her pulse started speeding with renewed hope. Brenda knew how important this was to her. She wouldn’t volunteer her brother unless she felt confident he’d see the study through. “I’d like to get started tomorrow.”

“He’ll be there.”

“I owe you a hot fudge sundae. Hell, I owe you twenty of them.”

“Forget it. My thighs can’t take it.” She sighed, and then paused. “Em, don’t let Nick get to you, okay?”

Emma laughed. “Afraid he might charm the pants off me?”

Brenda laughed, too. “You’re right. I don’t have to worry about you. Besides, you aren’t even his type.”

Emma winced. She knew her friend didn’t mean anything by that remark but it still smarted. Guys had never been attracted to her, not like they were to other girls. She’d been too busy studying to date, and the only boys who had asked were bookworms and nerds, too.

“Okay, this is for sure and I can go ahead and reserve the lab for tomorrow afternoon?”

“It’s for sure,” Brenda said. “What time?”

“I’m working the lunch shift tomorrow, and if you don’t mind skipping our coffee date, we can start at three.”

“No problem. I’ll tell him.”

“Let me know if that time is okay with him.”

“It will be.”

Emma frowned. Brenda sounded awfully smug. “You didn’t do anything illegal to get him to volunteer, did you?”

Brenda just laughed.

2

TARDINESS WAS ONE of Emma's two major pet peeves. She muttered a couple of choice words as she fumbled with the key and finally unlocked the lab door. She bypassed her desk and hurried to the back room, more an oversized walk-in closet than anything else, and dropped her backpack on the small refrigerator they kept full of soda to ease the long hours of lab work.

Only she and two other graduate students used the place but there was so much personal junk stowed between the two metal filing cabinets anyone would think an army of students lived here. While she prized neatness, she overlooked the mess the others left. She understood how so many long hours working in the lab stole time and energy.

What she didn't understand was how everything could have gone to hell at the pub in a matter of minutes, and at the end of her shift, too. Of all days for Manny to knock a tray of drinks out of her hands, and then take off for the beach before he helped her clean up. Of course everyone else disappeared, too, even the bartender.

She started to undo her coat and gritted her teeth when she split a nail on the second button. Was she ever going to be elated when she could finally quit that awful job. In more ways than one. She looked down and made a face at the ridiculous red, satin teddy-like thing she had to wear, and then shrugged off the coat and tossed it onto a file cabinet.

If the tips weren't so damn good she'd tell the owner what he could do with this skimpy excuse for a uniform. But no way could she find another job for the same amount of hours that paid her tuition and rent. It was a sorry reality that some women were forced to make their living that way, but she was glad she wouldn't be one of them for long.

If everything went well with this final study, she figured she could hand in her resignation in about a month. Bless Brenda's heart for however she bribed her brother to fill in.

Nick was perfect for the study in two ways. According to Brenda, he had amazing dream recall, and second, he had time. Brenda had told her once how he'd been a quiz kid who made his fortune early, and then diverted his energy to women. Good for him. All Emma cared about was that for two weeks he was all hers.

Other than that, she knew little about him, which was terrific for the study because she'd approach his dreams with few preconceived notions. It would have been better that she knew nothing about his reputation as a charmer. But that wouldn't be a problem...not professionally, and certainly not on a personal level. Those kinds of overconfident guys were a turnoff.

"Ouch!"

Another nail bit the dust as she shimmied out of the skin-tight uniform. She threw it aside, adjusted her thong panties, which she'd never in a million years have bought except she needed them to accommodate her uniform. Much to her surprise, she'd ended up liking the fit and bought several more.

She glanced at her watch as she reached for her khaki pants, and groaned. He'd be here at any minute. Her bra...where was her bra? God, she hoped she'd remembered to bring one.

NICK LET HIS PORSCHE IDLE a minute before he turned the ignition off. The temptation to peel out of the parking lot was so great he knew if he didn't cut the engine now he just might head for McGillicuddy's pub and forget all about this crazy dream analysis stuff, and Aspen.

But man, he didn't want to disappoint Tiffany. Because when Tiffany was happy, she was amazing.

He got all hot thinking about her and quickly stepped out into the cool North Carolina afternoon air. The single-story white stucco building he faced was old and not much to look at, but of course, this wasn't the main campus...more like an annex for the science department where the labs were located.

Pocketing his keys, he slid a glance around the small parking lot. A handful of white sedans, nondescript, unimaginative, were parked perfectly within the lines. He'd bet his bank account each and every one belonged to a professor.

Nick exhaled sharply. Just being on campus, any campus, gave him the creeps. Academia had to be life's greatest penance. He couldn't believe his own sister actually wanted to be a teacher.

He adjusted the collar of his black leather jacket, patted the pocket where he'd dropped his keys. Okay, he could do this. It was only for two weeks. Aspen was worth it. Tiffany would be very happy.

It was a long walk to the door. Only about twenty yards, but with lead feet it was a tough trip. When the front door wouldn't open, he almost turned back around. Maybe he should knock.

He tried the knob again, and hell, this time it opened.

He cleared his throat, and then stepped across the threshold. The room was clean but shabby. A metal desk was crowded into the corner, the top covered with stacks of files, yet managing to look uncluttered. Beside a black leather lounge chair was an intimidating and sophisticated piece of equipment. The wire tentacles were obviously some kind of probes and he quickly looked away. Better not to think about it.

Other than three mismatched metal file cabinets, not much else was in the room. Including anything breathing. Maybe he'd luck out yet.

There was another door that had to lead somewhere, and in good conscience he figured he ought to at least check for signs of life. He moved in that direction and saw her.

At least the back of her.

And she was naked.

Nick froze.

He tried to back up, get out of view, but his gaze stayed glued to the brown silky hair that hung nearly to her waist—a slim waist, that dipped in nicely above a curvy, firm-looking behind. And legs...man, she had some wheels.

Nick swallowed, but his mouth was too dry. If he didn't get the hell out of here, he'd probably start coughing.

She angled to the side to pick up a piece of clothing and the last thing he realized before he bolted out the front door was that she'd been wearing a thong. A red, silk one. Thongs did scary things to his heart.

He managed to close the door softly behind him, and then stood in the cool air and broke into a sweat. She couldn't be Emma Snow. Not from what Brenda had told him about the woman. Emma was a serious student, determined to complete her thesis, had no social life, no interest in dating or men in general, and was totally off-limits to him—as if he'd be interested in someone like her.

So who was this woman? Another student, or test subject? A friend of Emma's maybe?

After checking his watch, he decided to give her another five minutes before knocking. The extra time wouldn't hurt him either. His physical reaction needed to settle down.

Another couple of minutes and he heard someone moving around inside. He adjusted his jeans, and then knocked this time.

The door opened immediately. A brunette wearing oversized black-rimmed glasses smiled at him. "Nick?"

"Yeah." He tried to look past her. The other woman was obviously still in the back.

"Come on in. I'm Emma." She waited until he got inside and then offered her hand. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate you filling in like this."

Her hand was small, fragile, but her handshake was firm. He gave her another look. Hazel eyes, clear skin, no makeup. The only outstanding feature was her lips. Naturally pink and full enough they looked cosmetically altered. But indulging in vanity didn't fit the profile Brenda had given him.

Her general appearance did. The outdated glasses and tight bun at her nape made her look older than she was. In grade school they would have called her a bookworm, and a few other less flattering names.

“If you’ll take a seat at the desk I have some paperwork for you to fill out,” she said, gesturing to a battered gray fabric chair. The back was high and the numerous pills looked as though a cat had used it as a scratching post.

“What kind of paperwork?” He moved closer to the back room door and tried to get a glimpse of the other woman. No luck. “This is all confidential, right?”

“Of course. Any information you give me is strictly for the purpose of the study.” She smiled, and his gaze riveted to her mouth. Her lips and her friend’s legs. Now there was a combination to be reckoned with. “But I don’t think you’ll find I’ll be asking anything too personal. This basically asks statistical information.”

“And then what?”

“I’ll explain what we’ll be doing for the next two weeks.”

He took the seat at the desk and stared down at the questionnaire. Innocuous enough questions, but this part he’d expected. It was her poking around his psyche, trying to figure out what his dreams meant that he dreaded.

It wasn’t anyone’s business. Not even his, as far as he was concerned. Dreams were dreams. They didn’t mean a damn thing. Merely something to do while you slept so you wouldn’t get bored.

“I’ll be in the back getting set up. Let me know when you finish filling that out.”

“Hey.” He waited until she turned around. “You said this is all confidential, right?” She nodded. “Nobody else will be here.”

“Not a soul.”

“What about now? Anyone back there?” He gestured with his chin toward the back room.

“Nope. It’s just us.”

He frowned. So where was the mystery woman? Maybe there was a back door. Or maybe...

He gave Emma another once-over. Baggy khaki pants, a white lab coat over a navy-blue cotton shirt. Hard to tell what she really looked like under all that stuff. He doubted she’d be wearing a red silk thong, though. Not this woman. And the hair...it couldn’t be that long and fit in that small tight bun.

“Any other questions?”

“Let me get this straight.” He took another furtive glance toward the back. From what he could see, the room looked really small. “This is just going to be you and me. No one else is involved.”

Her gaze narrowed with concern. “Look, I really appreciate you doing this, but if you have any reservations that might prompt you to drop out mid-study, I need to know now. I can’t afford the time to look for someone else.”

Man, he’d give just about anything to take the opportunity to bolt. But anything didn’t include the Aspen house. Hell. “Nah, I’m okay, Doc, just a little nervous about you finding out all my deepest, darkest secrets.” He gave her his most winning smile.

She frowned. “We’ll talk more after you’ve filled that out.”

Emma hurried to the back room. She hoped he took a while to complete the questionnaire because she needed time to regroup. Her sudden imbalance had little to do with him, of course, or that he was supposed to be some kind of lady-killer. Frankly, she didn’t see it. Running late always made her a little nuts. That was her problem.

Granted, there was something appealing about him. Nothing blatant, nothing even easily identifiable. Sure, his thick dark hair was attractive in a messy, touchable sort of way, and he had a disarming smile that could probably melt many a resolve. But so did a lot of other guys she knew.

Except his face had character, from the crinkly lines fanning out from the corners of his dark eyes, to the small moon-shaped scar over the left side of his upper lip. A small chip marred otherwise

perfect teeth. Clearly he wasn't vain or driven by perfection, or he would've had these minor flaws fixed.

Her uniform lay in a heap where she'd left it in her haste to get into her street clothes. She gathered them up, stuck them in a bag to add to her laundry and then checked her hair. It was a mess. She'd misplaced a couple of bobby pins and her usual bun was a little wobbly, but it would do.

After waiting a couple more minutes, she went out to check on Nick's progress. To her surprise, he'd already finished and was talking on her phone.

"Let's have Chinese tonight," he said just as she walked in. Although he hadn't seen her yet, his voice lowered. "I'll leave dessert up to you." His laugh was husky, sexy, and then he looked up and saw her. "I have to go. I'll see you at eight."

Emma sighed, pitying the poor sap on the other end who fell for his sad lack of originality. "Did you have any questions about the paperwork?" she asked as soon as he'd hung up.

"Nope."

She paused a moment, waiting for him to get out of her chair. He didn't. If anything, he leaned back and got more comfortable, so she took the visitor's chair facing the desk and turned the questionnaire around to face her.

After a quick perusal she looked up to find him staring at her. She cleared her throat. "I'll give you an overview of what we'll be doing in the next two weeks."

He grimaced slightly.

Her stomach tightened. "If you have a problem committing to two weeks—"

"No." He shook his head, his expression agitated. "I just—go on."

God, she had a bad feeling about this. But Brenda had told her not to worry. Nick had his faults, but backing out of an agreement wasn't one of them. She sure hoped Brenda was right.

"I don't know how much you care to know about the theories upon which I'll be basing my interpretations—" There was that wince again. "What?"

"Nothing." His expression was sheer innocence. "I'm listening."

She hesitated a moment, tempted to call him on his obvious negative reaction to their conversation. But on the other hand, did she really want to hear what he thought? Did she want to give him an opening to withdraw from the study?

She took a deep breath and began again. "There are many misconceptions about dream interpretation and I thought it might be helpful if I cleared some of them up before we got started."

He didn't look happy, but at least he hadn't bolted. He glanced toward the back room, and then gestured with his hand for her to continue.

She leaned back in her chair and wondered what he found so fascinating in the back room. Had he seen the mess her associates left? "There's significant research indicating that dreams reflect our real-life concerns and are helpful in coping with conflict or solving problems. I operate on this theory."

He stood suddenly. "You're not psychoanalyzing me, Doc. No way. No how."

"First of all, I'm not a doctor. Yet. Secondly, I have no intention of trying to psychoanalyze you or anyone else." She exhaled sharply. "Could you sit down? You're making me nervous."

He muttered a mild oath, shrugged out of his leather jacket, and then tugged at the neckband of his T-shirt as if it were too tight. "Yeah, right."

"Would you let me finish?"

Eyeing her with distrust, he lowered himself back to the chair as he tossed his jacket to the side. "Brenda told me there wouldn't be any psychobabble involved."

Emma bristled, but she kept her cool. "This is a science. Not psychobabble. And like I've already assured you, anything discussed here is confidential."

"That's the thing, Doc." He ruffled his hair in a gesture of frustration. "Every time you remind me this is confidential, I get a rash."

Her gaze flew to his arms, his neck, any exposed skin.

“Figuratively speaking, of course,” he added. “Exactly what kind of questions are you gonna ask me?”

It took her several seconds to realize he’d spoken to her. His plain white T-shirt stretched snugly across his chest. Every muscle group was nicely represented. His arms weren’t too shabby either. Firm, rounded biceps strained against the hem of his sleeves.

“Doc?”

“Stop calling me that.” She quickly met his gaze. He seemed bewildered. Thank God he didn’t know she’d been ogling him like a silly teenage girl.

“Why not? You’re going after your doctorate, right?”

“Ultimately.”

“So, start acting the part.”

“That’s called fraud.”

He drew his head back, clearly surprised. “No, it’s not. You have a vision of who you want to be. Fake it till you make it. You’ll get there faster.”

She frowned, not quite grasping his point, but both fascinated and irritated with his new authoritative demeanor. “May we get back to the study?”

“I’m serious.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on her desk. “What I’m talking about is a perfectly legitimate way to attain a goal. It’s the same principle as when job counselors tell you to dress for the job you want, and not the one you have.”

It was easy to understand why he’d achieved success early. His solemn tone of voice, and the intensity in his eyes gave her a glimpse of the man who’d been driven to succeed. What an intriguing side to him.

She tapped her pencil on the edge of the desk. “The study?”

“Sure.” He grinned suddenly, and leaned back, looking totally relaxed. “Doc.”

There it was.

That subtle indefinable quality that drew women to him like ants to a picnic. Was it his slightly mischievous grin?

Or was it the way his gaze held her captive, as if telling her he wasn’t going anywhere, and neither was she. Amazing really, how the attraction crept up before you knew what hit you.

Luckily she was able to respond in a strictly professional, scientific manner. She cleared her throat, checked her bun. “Okay, where was I?” she mumbled, her voice still sounding a bit creaky, so she cleared her throat again. “Oh, yes, my method and theories.” She was back in control, unmoved, untouched by the darn devil in his eyes.

“I won’t lie to you, I believe that dreams reveal important facets about ourselves in metaphorical forms. They show us how we feel about others, about our relationships, and about ourselves, for that matter. They help illustrate our hopes and fears and weaknesses, and as an interviewer and interpreter, I will be pointing out—” She stopped, frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Huh?” He raised his gaze to hers. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“No, you weren’t. You were—” She brought a hand to her mouth and futilely felt around for anything foreign. God, there was probably something stuck in her teeth.

“Okay, so you caught me.” That devilish grin again. “Did you know you have perfect lips?”

She squinted at him, certain she’d heard incorrectly.

“Perfectly shaped. Perfect fullness. Perfect shade of pink. You should be doing lipstick commercials.”

“Mr. Ryder, I don’t think—this isn’t the time or—just knock it off.”

“What?” His eyes widened in genuine surprise, and then he nodded with annoying understanding. “I embarrassed you. I apologize. However, I only meant it as a compliment.” His lips curved in that smile. “Besides, you caught me staring.”

“You didn’t embarrass me.” Right. Heat singed her cheeks and she knew they were redder than an August tomato. “But I would like to stick to the business of the study.”

He threw her a questioning look, and then shrugged. “Of course. I didn’t mean to distract you.”

The hell he hadn’t. She stared down at her notebook so she wouldn’t glare at her subject, piss him off, and then have to go beg and barter for a new one again.

“As I was saying,” she said, slowly, each word deliberate, “I believe dreams do tell us a lot about ourselves, and I will of course, interpret the information you give me, but ultimately only you will know what each dream means to you.”

He snorted.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

“You always make rude noises for nothing?”

Amusement lit his dark eyes, and his mouth started to curve in a slow smile. “Sorry, Doc, I didn’t mean to rile you.”

“Right,” she muttered, and stared down at her notes. They weren’t really notes. Just something to look at while she collected herself.

How could this guy be so charming and annoying at the same time? The laughter that seemed to spring to his eyes was the irritating part. As for the rest of him...

Well, he did have a great chest and shoulders, broad, muscled without being in-your-face. And though Emma couldn’t honestly remember being impressed by a man’s hands before, she found herself periodically studying the way his long lean fingers restlessly, silently tapped the desk. That in itself wasn’t remarkable, but they inspired a sudden erotic image of him caressing her breasts that about knocked her over.

She took a deep breath. What was wrong with her? Having lustful thoughts about a virtual stranger was not her style. Especially not one who could make or break her thesis.

“Are we done here, or what?”

Nick’s impatient voice broke into her preoccupation, and try as she might, she couldn’t do a darn thing about the flush that crept up her neck and ripened her cheeks.

“Tomorrow we’ll get started,” she said calmly. “So it’s important that you record anything and everything you remember about tonight’s dreams.”

“Sometimes they’re a little X-rated.” He smiled. “Is that a problem?”

Great. “Record everything.”

“Everything,” he repeated with a devilish look in his eyes.

“Every last detail you recall.”

“Okay, Doc.” He managed to make the two simple words sound like a threat. “You got it.”

God, she hoped he wasn’t talking about some heavy-duty sexual fantasies. For the sake of the study it would make the data both interesting and thorough, but good golly, what a torturous two weeks for her.

She shuddered mentally, and then caught him staring toward the back. She followed his gaze. “What is it you find so fascinating?”

Something that looked like guilt flickered in his eyes as they met hers. Just as quickly it vanished. “Keep any prisoners back there?”

“Only ones who give me attitude.”

“Oh man, Doc, you’re getting me excited.”

She sighed. Obviously keeping this one on track would be a challenge. “Brenda said you have excellent recall. Do you use any particular method or trick?”

“I read an article that suggested giving a title to a dream as soon as you remember any part of it.”

“Does that help you recall more of the dream as the day goes on?”

“Yeah, I think so. If it was a good dream, and my mind wanders back to it during the day, it seems to unfold more.”

“Excellent. Keep a notebook with you.”

“Right. Record everything.” His voice and expression turned grim. He started to shrug into his jacket, and Emma forced her gaze away from the way the muscles played across his chest. “So, we’re done?”

She closed her notebook. “Yes.” She hadn’t even skimmed the surface, but maybe it was better he wasn’t so curious about her methods and theories. He was skittish enough. “Unless you have any questions.”

He shrugged, pulling a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket. “Same time tomorrow, or do you want to get this over with earlier?”

Gee, such overwhelming enthusiasm. “It’ll have to be the same time as today. I don’t get off work until then.”

He nodded absently, looking distracted, before he walked out the door without another word.

Emma waited a minute before she used the shiny base of the engraved brass stapler she’d received as an award to look at her reflection. Of course her image was slightly distorted, but still, her lips looked pretty normal to her. She pursed them. Maybe a little fatter than most, but...

“Hey, Doc.”

At the sound of Nick’s voice her heart nearly exploded and she straightened, almost flinging the stapler against the wall. “Yes?” Remarkably, her voice was intelligible.

His brows drawn together in a puzzled frown, he seemed too absorbed in his own curiosity to have noticed her vanity. “I do have another question.” She nodded, and with his gaze narrowed he asked, “Are you sure there isn’t anyone else here?”

Geez, talk about paranoid. “Positive.”

He sent her a skeptical look, and then a lazy mysterious grin curved his mouth. “Okay, Doc, have it your way. For now.”

3

HOW THE HELL had he let Brenda talk him into this? Nick checked the rearview mirror to see if anyone had entered the deserted parking lot. Okay, so he was early and the doc had probably just gotten off her shift. He'd have to remember to ask Brenda what kind of work Emma did. Not that he really cared but if she was going to be poking around his head, he figured he had a right to know something about her.

He stared down at the notes he'd taken from last night's midnight romp. Here he'd purposely instructed himself not to dream and he'd ended up having a couple of doozies...about naked women with long dark hair, long legs and silk thongs.

Shit!

He glanced at the rearview mirror again and this time an older, beat-up white sedan chugged into the parking lot. Doc was behind the wheel. He couldn't see her face, but he saw the mass of shiny dark hair. Since he was the only one there, he had to suspect she'd seen him, but without any acknowledgment she veered off toward the side of the building and parked out of sight.

A few minutes later, she hurried around the corner, her hair pulled back in a messy bun, the collar of her long tan coat pulled up around her neck. Odd. It had warmed up and wasn't cold enough for her to be wearing a coat.

He continued to watch as she made tracks in the opposite direction, nearly running into the pink azaleas flanking the stark white lab. If she'd seen him, she was pretending she hadn't.

He got out of his Porsche. "Hey, Doc."

She slowed, reluctance in every small jerk of her body as she turned around. "Sorry, I'm running late again," she called out, slightly breathless.

"You're not. I'm early." He closed the car door.

"Give me five minutes, okay?"

"All right if I wait inside?"

She touched the back of her hair, and quickly tucked up a stray. "Um, why don't I make sure things aren't a mess. Someone else used the lab after we did yesterday."

He snorted. "You should see my place."

She looked hesitant, and then he got it. Maybe she had to get her friend out the back door, although why the cloak-and-dagger was a mystery to him.

"Damn, I forgot something." He opened his car door. "Can we make it ten minutes?"

"No problem."

He got into the Porsche and watched her unlock the lab door and then hurry inside without a backward glance. He didn't bother to start the engine, but waited until the door closed before he got out and strolled around to the back.

No one was there. He started to wait but then noticed there was no back door. He kept walking until he'd made a circle around the small building. Only one door. Obviously the woman had still been inside while he met with Emma. But why would she lie about someone else being there? It didn't make sense. Unless Doc thought he'd get testy about the confidentiality issue. That was possible.

He gave her a couple of extra minutes before he went inside with the leather binder of notes he'd taken. She was ready for him, sitting at her desk, her glasses perched on her nose, a notebook in front of her, and a tape recorder set on the opposite edge of the desk, closer to the guest chair. Presumably where he would sit.

Man, everything he said was going to be on tape. Immortalized. They would have to discuss that.

"Have a seat." Those great lips lifted into a tempting smile, and he almost forgot about the tape recorder. "I see you have some notes."

"Man, do I. It's amazing I got any sleep at all last night."

She laughed. “Everyone dreams quite a lot. We just aren’t all lucky enough to remember the details.”

“Well, Doc, I’m not sure you’re going to want all these details.” He opened the binder and flipped through pages and pages of writing.

“Excellent.” She lifted her gaze to his. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. You probably won’t want all this stuff.”

“Are you kidding? This much recall is a gold mine.”

He wasn’t so sure. “Do I just give this to you, or what?”

She seemed surprised. “No, you have to describe the dreams in as much detail as possible.”

“What do you think all this is?”

She gave him a small tolerant smile that annoyed him. “A reminder for you. I promise that as you relate the events of the dream, you’ll begin to recall other details. There is nothing unimportant. Once you begin, keep talking. Let it all flow.”

Hell, this wasn’t going to work. He didn’t do “flow.”

“What’s wrong?” She laid down her pen. “You look distressed.”

“Hell, yeah, I’m distressed. You asked me to record all this stuff, and now you want me to go over it again.”

She had that tolerant, patient look down to a damn science.

“I know this isn’t easy. Dreams seem so personal—”

“Of course they’re personal.” He slouched in his chair, annoyed and frustrated.

“But you don’t have control over them. There’s no reason to be embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed.” He grunted. “That has nothing to do with it.”

She tapped her pencil on the desk with hard rapid intensity. Impatience pulled her lips into a straight line. “Let me be blunt. Brenda explained what we needed to do here before you set foot in the lab. What’s the problem?”

He glared back at her. Dammit. She was right. “Okay, you want the details. Here are the details...” He set his notes aside. He didn’t need them. One particular dream he remembered with so much clarity he still had a hard-on.

“Wait a second.” She flipped on the recorder.

“Is that necessary? You have my notes.”

She didn’t answer him. Just gave him one of those tolerant looks again, and then leaned back in her chair with a pencil in her hand. “Begin whenever you’re ready.”

Next year too soon? He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. “I’ll start with my first memory,” he said, and she nodded. “I was in this—look, it’s going to sound weird.”

“Don’t worry about it. Most dreams do. Go on.”

He shifted to a more comfortable position. “There was this room with a bunch of chairs and sofas, almost like a waiting room, except there weren’t any people there, only me. Seconds later, women started to parade in, most of them topless. Some of them were big-busted, like really big, like augmented big. The blonde with the tassels started to unbutton my shirt.” He paused. “Can I have some water or coffee or something?”

Emma stared at him, wordlessly, and then she blinked. “Of course. I should have asked you before we started.”

They both stood at the same time.

Nick motioned for her to sit back down. “Tell me where it is. I’ll get it.”

She shook her head. “We have colas, orange juice and water. If you want coffee I’ll start a pot.”

“We?” Now he had her.

“I share this place with two other graduate students and we all chip in to keep the fridge stocked.”

Another graduate student. Of course.

“Water’s fine.” He sank into his seat, and watched her out of the corner of his eye as she hurried into the back room.

Well, now that he sort of knew who the other woman was, he couldn’t just come out and ask for her name and phone number.

Could he?

He sighed. He had his plate full for right now. Normally talking about sex in any form didn’t bother him, but he could tell he’d startled her, which made him uncomfortable.

To him sex was a game, harmless recreation, but only if both players agreed and got equally as much out of it. Nick very carefully stuck to partners who shared his philosophy. That way no one got hurt. However, he also understood that not every woman agreed with his attitude, and he respected their opinions, too.

Unfortunately, his dreams weren’t nearly as discreet.

He glanced at the binder he’d set on her desk. It seemed to take her a long time just to get a glass of water, and he was tempted to grab his notes and do some creative editing, maybe clean up the details a little, omit some of the more colorful parts.

Before he could think the possibility through, she was back with a bottle of Evian. It sure hadn’t taken nearly five minutes to grab that.

“Anything else before we resume?” she asked, her finger poised over the recorder button.

“I don’t think so.”

She made a face at the recorder. “I thought I’d stopped it. Let me rewind to where we left off.”

He took a long cold sip of the water while she fiddled with the machine. But he nearly spit it out when she stopped and hit play, and he heard his own mutterings. Not of his dream as he’d relayed it to her, but the mild oath he’d uttered after she’d left the room, and then the more damning murmurs expressing his doubts.

Hell, he hadn’t realized he’d said anything out loud. Fortunately most of it was unintelligible.

To her credit, she didn’t even try to listen. She quickly continued to rewind the tape further. She played the last few seconds to remind him where they’d stopped, and then settled back in her chair, her gaze lowered.

He took another sip of water. “Okay, the blonde undid the top three buttons of my shirt, but she stopped when a redhead came in and told her I wasn’t the one. By the way, the redhead had on clothes.”

Doc looked relieved.

“The blonde got angry and said she didn’t believe her, and then tried to unfasten my next button. The other woman said something but it was in another language, and the others started laughing.”

“The other women?”

“Yeah.”

“Where were they?”

“Sitting on the chairs or lying on the sofas. Do you need to know whether they had their clothes off or not?”

“Yes.” Her tone was crisp, professional, but a faint pink crept into her cheeks.

“All but three of them had taken everything off.” At the vivid memory he shifted to accommodate the strong reaction his body was having.

“Were they strangers, or did you know any of them?”

“Never saw them before.”

“Sometimes in our dreams people take on different shapes and forms. Did you believe any of these women to be someone you knew...even though she didn’t look like she was supposed to?”

He thought for a moment. “No.”

She made a brief notation. “How about the room? Did you know where you were?”

“Nope.”

“Any other details about it you remember?”

“Not really.” He shrugged. “I guess my mind was on the women.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and she pressed her lips together. “Okay, let’s get back to the women. What else do you remember about them?”

“The redhead had a bag with her and she started taking out scarves and handcuffs and massage oils. When the blonde unzipped my fly, the redhead didn’t say anything. She just kept staring at me while she laid out the stuff she’d brought. But then the blonde reached into my pants to stroke me, and the redhead yanked her hair until she moved back.”

He paused for another sip of water. No surprise, he’d gotten harder than a rock replaying the scene.

“What were the other women doing?” Doc’s voice didn’t sound too steady and her face was getting redder.

He gladly avoided her gaze. “Kissing and fondling each other.” When the silence grew, he chanced a look at her. “Shall I leave out that part?”

“There’s more?”

He nearly laughed at her scandalized tone. “I’m not your first male subject, am I, Doc?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then you know men can have, um, wilder imaginations sometimes.”

“Of course.” She straightened, pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. Her cheeks were still pink, her voice a little high, but her gaze narrowed suddenly, and when her glasses slipped, she looked over them at him. “There is a major difference between dreams and fantasy.”

“I know that.”

She stared at him in silence for a long torturous moment. “These are dreams you’re describing, and not wishful thinking, right?”

He chuckled. “Trust me. I would not be describing my fantasies to you.”

She blinked, lifted her chin. “As long as we understand each other.”

“Look, I’d be happy to edit some of this. It can’t all be that important—”

She vigorously shook her head. “That would compromise the results of the study. Tell me everything you remember.”

“Okay, Doc, where were we?”

She pressed rewind and kept her gaze on the tape. It took a couple of tries before she found where they’d left off, and each time she had to listen to him describe the dream, her cheeks got a shade pinker.

“There, I think you’ve got it,” he said, taking pity on her, and she immediately stopped the tape and pressed record.

“Okay, so while the other women were kissing, and the redhead and blonde were arguing about something—”

“About what?”

“I couldn’t tell. I don’t think I really heard what they were saying but just had a sense they were angry. Anyway, I was too concerned about this other woman who came in.”

“Another one?” Her eyebrows lifted in shock, and then she quickly wiped all expression from her face. “Tell me about her.”

“Let’s see, she had long dark hair, great legs, a great— I couldn’t see her face. I got really agitated about that, but the only view I got was the back of her.”

“Did you feel as though you knew her?”

“Nah, I think maybe I was trying to place her but I really had no idea.”

“What was she wearing?” She paused, frowning. “Nick?”

He slumped back. How could he have been so stupid! Through the haze of dawning, he vaguely heard Doc call his name. “A black thong,” he said absently. “That’s all.”

The woman in his dream was the same one he'd glimpsed yesterday. That's why he couldn't see her face in the dream. Wow, this was really something. Kind of weird. He'd never obsessed like this before.

"You're remembering something, I take it?"

He stared blankly at her. Should he admit he saw someone else in the back room? She'd have to fess up then. But she'd also have a million questions about the woman being the centerpiece of his dream. No thanks.

"Not really." He shrugged at the curiosity in her face. "Sorry, Doc, I guess I was too excited about, um, the upcoming events to think about anything else."

"Right." Emma fidgeted with the pencil, and then stared down at her pathetic notes. Good thing she was taping this interview or she'd be in sorry shape later. Either the other male subjects she'd studied had held back on her, or this guy had only sex on the brain. Of course the others had relayed some sexual encounters, but Nick was too much.

Part of her was glad for the opportunity to make her study so thorough. The other part wanted to sink into a hole and not surface for a month. It wasn't that she was a prude, but it wasn't easy to sit here and listen to this stuff and pretend it didn't faze her. The last thing she wanted to do was spook him so that he started censoring himself.

On the other hand...

"Did you want me to continue?" he asked casually, as if they were discussing the weather.

"Yes, of course. You were telling me about the dark-haired woman."

"Oh, I didn't forget, Doc." He smiled again, shifted in his seat, getting comfortable, his eyes half closing, probably trying to get back into the dream. Oh, boy. "She didn't say anything, just watched the other two women argue. And then it was almost like she communicated to them silently because they stopped suddenly, and the redhead picked up the handcuffs and slapped them around my wrists."

"Wait a minute, let's back up." She was really botching this. She hadn't had him set the scene up properly. "You said you were sitting. Were you restrained in any way?"

"No."

"So you could have gotten up and left if you wanted?"

He drew his head back in exaggerated surprise and flashed a quick grin. "Would you have?"

She tried not to glare. "Go on."

"Let's see, oh, yeah... the redhead cuffed me to these two pole lamps on either side of my chair and then she finished unzipping my pants." He paused, frowning, as though he were trying to recall something.

"Was there anything familiar about her?"

"Which one?"

"Any of them."

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Yeah, maybe."

"I'm not trying to put words in your mouth. Think about it for a minute and see if anything comes to mind."

"Uh, sorry, Doc, but it wasn't my mind they was appealing to."

Emma sighed. "Would you be serious?"

"You kidding? I'm being so serious and honest, it's scary."

She groaned inwardly. She had to give him that one. "What else?"

"The dark-haired woman was just about to turn around but the blonde blindfolded me with one of the silk scarves before I could see the brunette's face. And then I felt all these different hands on me, yanking off my shirt, pulling down my pants."

He paused to take another sip of water, and Emma braced herself for what came next. "Maybe you should just use my notes for the rest."

She forced her gaze to meet his as she stopped the recorder. “You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

He leaned back, totally at ease. “I’m not. Actually, I’m enjoying the replay. I figured you might be a little uncomfortable.”

She gave her best breezy laugh and shoved her glasses into place. “I’ve heard hundreds of dreams. I’d hardly be embarrassed at this point.”

And then she caught her reflection in the brass stapler. Oh, God. If her cheeks got any redder, Nick would probably think she was having a stroke and call the paramedics.

“Okay, Doc. Have it your way.”

She stared down at her notebook, and thought about how many loads of laundry she had to do, how she’d waited too long to defrost her freezer, again. When heat still stung her cheeks, she thought about how she’d already eaten her backup pint of chocolate ice cream and hadn’t replaced it. That helped sober her a little.

“Ready?” She started the recorder again without waiting for his reply.

“After they had my clothes off, one started kissing me while another one licked and bit my nipples. I was irritated that I didn’t know who they were, and then they both backed off and I remember being cold where the air hit the damp spots on my skin where they had their mouths.”

Emma swallowed...mostly to make sure her mouth wasn’t hanging open. “So it was important to you to know the aggressors’ identities?”

“Do I seem like the kind of guy who’d go for anonymous sex?” Nick grinned with that devilish twinkle in his eyes, and for the first time she could recall, Emma wanted to smack a test subject. “No, Doc, I didn’t care particularly who they were. I wanted to know if it was the blonde or the redhead who was sucking me so hard I thought I’d come for a week.”

She tried her damndest not to show any reaction. “I guess you left that part out,” she said crisply, attempting to cool her rising temper. He was trying to goad her, she was sure of it.

“Actually, I was just getting to that— Hey, why are you looking at me with malice in those pretty hazel eyes? It’s a dream, Doc, I can’t help what went on in my sleep. You said so yourself.”

“You’re right.”

“You also told me not to hold back or censor myself.”

“Yes, I did.” It was difficult to maintain her composure when she truly had the urge to smack that innocent look off his face.

“So why are you looking so pissed off?”

“I’m not pissed off. That would be unprofessional.” She pushed up her glasses, enormously thankful they hadn’t fogged up. “I’m disappointed that you seem to think this is a joke.”

“Not true.” He gave his head an emphatic shake. “You may be used to all this blunt talk but I’m not. I have to look for a little humor to ease the tension.”

Oh, yeah, she was really used to all this. She cleared her throat as she readied the recorder again. “I apologize for misjudging the situation. Please continue.”

He tried to hide a smile, but she saw it, lurking at the corners of his mouth before he passed a hand over his face and blew into his palm.

She didn’t believe for a minute that this talk made him uncomfortable. He’d already admitted that he was getting off on it, and that she believed. Because, dammit, she wasn’t making it through this session totally unaffected herself. She’d had to shift twice to make sure he couldn’t see how much her nipples had tightened, and how they pushed against her flimsy bra and thin cotton shirt.

“Well, Doc,” he said, stretching, his arms wide, his chest broad and muscled under his snug blue T-shirt. “I hate to disappoint you but that’s about it. After they got me out of my pants and started—” A ghost of a smile played about his lips again. “Doing ‘the nasty,’ I woke up. I had urgent business that was best taken care of in the bathroom. But I don’t think you need to know about that.”

She gave him a disapproving glare in answer, and clicked off the recorder.

He immediately straightened. “We’re done?”

“Yes, unless you have another dream you remember.” She almost hated to ask.

“You’re in luck.” He indicated his notes with a jut of his chin. “The next one I call In Broad Daylight.”

4

“HOW DID YOUR MEETING with Nick go yesterday?” Brenda had gotten to Big Joe’s diner first and was already working on a strawberry milkshake.

“Fine. We had our first session this afternoon.”

Brenda switched her interest from the milkshake to Emma. “And?”

“You know I can’t tell you what we talked about. If he wants to discuss his dreams with you, that’s up to him.” Emma stared down at the menu, even though she knew it by heart.

Even though she always got a cup of chicken vegetable soup and a side of fries.

“Oh, no, don’t tell me he got to you, too.”

That ridiculous crack made her look up. “What are you talking about?”

“I no sooner mentioned his name and your cheeks got pink. What’s up with that?”

“That wasn’t about Nick.” She sighed with indecision and studied the small jukebox on the table. “He has some rather racy dreams. And that’s all I’m saying.”

Brenda burst out laughing. “Poor baby. I should have warned you. Nick is totally uninhibited.”

“Really?”

At Emma’s sarcasm, Brenda laughed again. “That’s just Nick. He skipped so many grades in school that from the time he was ten he hung out with older kids. At sixteen he started college. Mom and Dad kind of left him alone because he was such an excellent student, and sometimes he hung around with too racy a crowd. Made him immune. Nothing bothers him. He doesn’t mean anything.”

“Right.” Maybe today she’d splurge and add a chocolate malted to her order.

“Oh, come on, Em. I know him. I give him a hard time, and yeah, I’ve made cracks about him, but he has a lot of good points. He’s loyal to a fault, a real pushover for the underdog and the best listener. If I ever need an ear or sound advice, I go straight to Nick. Honest, he’s okay. I wouldn’t have offered him up as a sacrifice to your study, otherwise.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Brenda slurped up the last drop of her strawberry shake.

“Think about it. Would you want to tell a virtual stranger about stuff your subconscious dreams up?”

Emma shifted with unease. No, as a matter of fact, she probably wouldn’t. “Yeah, but we all know that most of it is metaphorical for other things that are happening in our lives.”

“You may know that, but the rest of us just squirm at the vague recollections the next day.”

“That’s why this study is important. We should be able to use our dreams as messengers from our inner voices. Let the dreams help solve our waking problems. Look how many cultures considered dreams messages from the gods. In the ancient world, countries like Greece and Egypt, dreams were considered the ultimate form of guidance.”

“Don’t get huffy. You’ve got to admit, not all your colleagues agree with that theory.”

“The informed ones do.” Emma pushed up her glasses. In spite of the fact that she was bone-tired, she’d been in a fairly good mood until a moment ago. “Most scientific theories have opponents. That’s why studies are important to prove them.”

“I’m not disputing that, but merely pointing out that a layperson would naturally be a little squeamish about spilling out their midnight mental escapades.” Brenda’s gaze narrowed. “Why are you so touchy today? It isn’t like you.”

Emma sighed. Where the heck was their waitress? She needed a malted now. “Sorry if I bit your head off. I didn’t sleep well. Talk about midnight escapades.”

Brenda leaned forward with interest. “Do tell.”

She didn't get it at first, and then Emma realized her friend wanted to hear about her dreams. To Emma's utter amazement, she almost physically recoiled. The thought of sharing last night's walk on the wild side made her want to run and hide.

Brenda laughed. "Not so easy, is it?"

"It's not that..."

"Yes?"

Bless Callie's heart. The waitress appeared at the perfect time to take their order. As usual, Brenda was indecisive and had to ask for a description of every special. Emma welcomed the brief respite.

She was genuinely startled by her own reluctance to share her dream. Reluctance heck, abhorrence was more accurate. Of course the dream did involve Nick and Brenda might misunderstand. Emma herself still hadn't figured out what her inner voice was trying to tell her. But nor had she tried too hard to figure it out.

The dream was still so real in her head that she could almost feel Nick's hands on her skin, palming her breasts, rubbing her nipples, sucking them. Their session today was going to be a nightmare. She'd have to force herself to concentrate and not drift back to last night's subconscious frolicking.

She came out of her preoccupation just in time to give her order to Callie.

And meet Brenda's expectant gaze. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"You were going to tell me about your dream."

"Actually, I was going to tell you why I couldn't. I don't remember most of it."

"Emma Snow, I can scarcely believe it, but you're lying through your teeth."

"I am not." It was a little scary how indignant she could get when Brenda was right. Emma was lying through her teeth all right, and she'd hang on to the lie till her dying breath.

Brenda toyed with her straw, a worried frown drawing her brows together. "I hope this isn't about Nick."

"Don't be silly." Emma gasped when her friend tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You finally bought them."

"What? Oh..." Brenda touched the diamond stud on her right ear. It had to be at least a carat. "I was still saving up for the suckers. Nick bought them for me. I found the jeweler's box in my desk drawer after he left the other evening."

"Wow!"

"I shouldn't have mentioned I wanted them. He's always doing things like that."

"Interesting."

"You look doubtful." A sisterly defensiveness rose in Brenda's eyes. "I told you he's a nice guy."

"I'm sure he is," Emma said lightly.

"Do me a favor and don't mention the earrings. He's funny about that. He never gives a gift outright. He tucks it away somewhere for you to find, and then acts like he doesn't know anything about it. It's weird, almost like he's embarrassed."

Emma smiled. She wouldn't have guessed that about him. "That's actually kind of sweet."

"Don't be foolish and fall for him. I mean it, Em." Brenda shook her head, her eyes concerned. "I love my brother but his idea of a serious commitment is staying the night."

"Fall for Nick?" Emma laughed. "I'd sooner eat chocolate-covered grasshoppers."

"THANKS FOR THE EARRINGS."

Nick finished drying the hood of his '55 Chevy before he turned around. "What earrings?"

Brenda gave him an indulgent smile as she entered the garage and sidestepped the assortment of chrome polishes and car washes he'd left on the ground. "They're exactly what I wanted."

He shrugged and shook out the rag. "They aren't from me."

“Then I won’t bother to insure them. They’re probably fake.”

He slid her a sidelong glance. “I begged Mom and Dad to get a puppy instead of a sister. But no, they had to hatch something they could put in frilly pink dresses.”

“The luckiest day of your life was the day I was born, admit it.”

“In your dreams.” Oh, hell. He glanced at his watch. He had to shower and shave soon, so he could meet the Doc by four-thirty. “What did you want, Pipsqueak?”

“Nothing. I figured I’d stop by to see how things were going with you and Emma.”

He discarded the rag and frowned, disappointed more than annoyed. “Doc told you.”

“Huh?”

“What do I care?” Shrugging it off, he picked up one of the polishes and studied the label.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She snatched the can out of his hand. “Quit ignoring me.”

“I’m not. I have to finish this up before my appointment with Doc this afternoon.”

Brenda frowned. “Why are you seeing a—” The confusion lifted from her face. “You mean Emma.”

He poured some of the grayish-blue liquid onto the torn piece of burgundy towel. “She’s not going to be happy with last night’s installment.”

“Your dream?”

He nodded and started on the hood. Man, this baby could still shine.

“She didn’t tell me anything, you know.”

Sliding her a glance, he kept polishing. “Wouldn’t matter if she did. I didn’t tell her anything I wouldn’t tell you.” He smiled at the thought. “Theoretically speaking, of course.”

“Yeah, but the point is, she didn’t and wouldn’t discuss any session she had with you or anyone else. She’s not like that.”

He gave her a challenging grin. “How is she?”

“Ethical...professional...moral. What did you think of her?”

He shrugged, and then put a little more elbow grease into the job. If he got the Chevy looking good enough, he’d pick Tiffany up in it tonight.

“You have to have some sort of opinion.”

“She’s okay.”

“That’s it?”

He snorted, and stopped polishing. “What do you want from me? You know damn well I’m being blackmailed into doing this. Do I have to like the woman, too?”

“Don’t you?”

“I said she was okay.”

“Fine.” Brenda folded her arms across her chest in that sulky way he knew all too well. “Have you gone to see Mom lately?”

Oh, brother. Now she was on the offensive. “Nope, and the subject is not open for discussion.”

“Have you at least talked to her on the phone?”

“Yeah, but I bet you already know that.”

“Mom might have mentioned you phoned her last month.”

He gave her an amused look and kept working.

“Nick, you can’t blame her for wanting to see you married and settled down with children before she dies.”

He stared at his sister in disbelief. “For God’s sake, she’s only fifty-two. I doubt she has one foot in the grave already.”

“Yeah, but you know Mom.”

“Yeah, I do. That’s why I’m staying clear until she either gets over this phase or starts picking on you instead.” He stopped, and used the back of his hand to wipe his forehead. “Why isn’t she bugging you to get married and have kids?”

“Because I’m not the one turning thirty next year.”

“Ah, that explains everything.” Shaking his head, he glanced skyward. The afternoon sun was fading. He had to get a move on. “Look, if you want to keep yapping, grab a rag and help.”

“And ruin my manicure? I don’t think so.”

“Too bad. If I don’t finish, I just may have to cancel my appointment with Doc.”

“That is too bad.” Brenda turned to go, and over her shoulder added, “I hear Aspen is really nice in November.”

“You’re a brat,” he called after her.

“And proud of it. Don’t keep Emma waiting.”

He watched her walk to her car, open the door and pause to waggle her fingers at him before getting in. After she’d driven away, he checked his watch again. No way was he going to finish in time for his date with Tiffany.

What the hell... Tiffany was a Porsche kind of gal anyway.

He finished the hood, threw the rag aside, and then stored all the cleaning supplies on the garage shelves he’d had the architect design when he had the house built last year.

The English Tudor was too big for one person, but on the advice of his accountant, he’d gone ahead and had it designed and built, but customized to suit his needs. Which meant he basically lived in the family room and the third garage where he kept the Chevy.

Unfortunately, his mother couldn’t see the financial reason for such a big house, that he needed a sizeable mortgage to reduce his taxable income. All she wanted to see was that he was finally ready to give her grandchildren.

Like that would happen.

At least not anytime soon. There were too many Tiffanys in the world... lovely, willing and able, and wanting nothing more from him than a good time and an occasional trinket. He was of the opinion that you didn’t fix what wasn’t broken. He was extremely successful at dating. Marriage he might not be so good at. It was a risk he wasn’t willing to take. Too many unknowns set you up for failure.

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