



Reluctant Press

Sweet Candi Cane

Maggie Finson



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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SWEET CANDI CANE

By Maggie Finson

An Intriguing Assignment

It looked as if I would be enduring a slow week in the office, maybe longer if nothing interesting came along. Diamond Security, the company I worked for as an investigator, was retained by a large number of clients ranging from private individuals all the way up to multinational corporations, requiring anything from uniformed guards to undercover operatives.

Diamond Security had a reputation for being the best, with incorruptible employees who were very good. And, I was one of their best. Me. Daniel Caine, field agent specializing in delicate investigations for clients who needed to find out things regarding their own businesses or simply have a discreet check done on some questionable employees. I had yet to run into a computer system I couldn't get into, either. And I had broken into some real tough ones during my tenure with Diamond Security.

My last assignment had been a routine probe of a small, but very high tech research facility belonging to a well known computer company. I'd found a few holes in their supposedly impenetrable perimeter, which is what I'd been paid to do, gotten in and out with an unimportant printout to prove I'd been there, then turned in my report and left the clean up for Diamond's very appreciative client.

I liked my work, and was proud of my abilities. Ross Hansford, my boss and the working owner of Diamond Security often joked that I would either be working for the CIA or in prison if he hadn't hired me. Given the things I did on the job, he was probably right.

Just then, though, I was staring at a pile of paperwork and fighting off a case of Monday morning blues with no immediate prospect for getting out of going through either one.

Sighing, I muttered to myself and began sifting the reports from a number of ongoing projects that I was marginally involved with.

My time in the cramped cubicle of an office I used when not on assignment was interrupted by the buzz of my phone. "Caine," I answered juggling the receiver between my shoulder and chin still keying things into the computer.

"Dan," Ross Hansford's voice came over the line, with the too serious tones that told me he had a client in his office. "Could you come see me? We've got something interesting here and I'd like to have your input on it before we take it on."

"Be there in a few minutes," I responded, happy enough to get away from administrative details even if only for a short time. "It'll take me that long to finish up what I have running. Okay?"

"See you in about ten, then," Ross replied, with a trace of humor in his answer. He knew how much I hated being stuck in the claustrophobic confines of the cubicle assigned to me as office space and would happily have dropped anything immediately to trot down the hall to his much larger one. He'd use the time lag between calling and my entrance to size up the client some more with small talk, probably explaining our fee structure and performance records.

I spent the time checking my appearance, you know, straightening my tie, combing my hair, making sure breakfast wasn't still on my jacket lapels, things like that. What I saw was actually pretty average. Five feet eight, slender, with longish sandy blonde hair that had a tendency to curl if left alone, light blue eyes, and an immaculate, expensive three piece suit.

From the way I looked and was dressed I could have been a mid level executive in any company or bank. My even featured face was pleasant, but otherwise unremarkable, and most people would look once, then pretty well forget all about seeing me. Which was an advantage in my chosen profession.

All those stories and shows with super handsome, flamboyant, highly visible investigators are just that. Show and stories. The really successful field agents in my profession are generally quiet, nondescript types you'd pass over easily in a crowd. Attracting a lot of attention by either our appearance or actions tends to be counter productive and sometimes just pure and simply dangerous.

Satisfied with what I saw, I entered Ross' office, greeting his receptionist, Carrie with a grin and questioningly raised eyebrow. "Hi, sexy. What's up?"

Carrie Evans, a petite redhead with green eyes I'd swear could glow in the dark, was sexy in a refined way, and gorgeous. Returning my grin impishly, she shrugged. That was a gesture she knew I appreciated, mostly because every heterosexual male I knew of just about polished his shoes with his tongue whenever she did it.

"Don't really know, Dan," she replied. "Guy's name is Brian Crawford, and he's CEO of Kingston Industries."

"Hmm," I knew some things about Kingston Industries. "Chemical research, pharmaceuticals, things like that?"

"Plus," Carrie informed me with an arch look. "That new chain of Venus Beauty Salons that just got started up last month."

"Oh, yeah," I nodded.

Venus Beauty Salons were very expensive, and their proprietors guaranteed results. Period. I recalled some of their ads, claiming that every woman was a potential goddess and they could bring that potential out to the fullest.

“Ross ready for me yet?”

“I’ll let him know you’re here,” Carrie nodded, then keyed in the intercom. “Mr. Caine is here, Ross.”

“Thanks Carrie,” Ross’ voice issued from the intercom. “Send him in.”

“Show time,” I grinned, pausing at her desk for a moment. “We still on for that concert tonight? I’ve got the tickets.”

“You bet we are, sexy,” Carrie grinned up at me. “Just so long as you promise not to keep me up all night this time.”

“We were in bed,” I defended myself. “Is it my fault that you didn’t want to sleep?”

“Better get in there,” she waved at the door. “Ross is sure he has a live one here, and wants you in on it from the start.”

“See you later, babe.” I responded.

“Bet you will, beautiful,” was her reply, followed by a wide smile when I winced. We had come to terms with little endearments through the simple expedient of trading them with each other indiscriminately. Sometimes being called sweet cheeks or beautiful still caused me to flinch, but all in all, it was worth it.

She was a great lady to be with, and very good in bed on top of that. But I had business to take care of, so I put the prospect for the evening to the back of my mind as I entered Ross’ office.

Ross’ office was as lustily elegant as his secretary, and huge. Arising from a slender lounge chair as if it had been weeks instead of just that morning since he’d seen me, Ross Hansford was an impressive man. His six foot three, two hundred pound frame still moved with the grace that had earned him honorable mention All American honors as a college halfback fifteen years before. With a shock of still bright auburn hair and deep blue eyes that seemed able to plumb the depths of anyone’s soul, combined with an easy, friendly manner, it was quite easy to see how he had been so successful.

“Good to see you, Dan,” his manicured hand engulfed my smaller one as he pumped my arm up and down. “I’d like for you to meet Brian Crawford, CEO of Kingston Industries.”

Crawford was a young man for a CEO, I judged him to be in his early thirties, and was trim in the way only the very wealthy seemed to show, with sleek good looks and manners that should have oozed confidence. But he looked worried, and his initial handshake was more than a little tentative.

“Mr. Caine,” he greeted me while sizing up what he saw, which in comparison to either himself or Ross Hansford, wasn’t all that impressive on first sight. “Ross has been telling me a little about you and your expertise with, uh... Delicate situations involving security.”

Mr. Crawford, Ross assured, or reassured the man. "You came to us because of our reputation, and this fellow is a very large reason for that being so good."

"Mr. Crawford," I nodded, accepting the silent offer of coffee from Carrie, who had quietly entered the office during the introductions. "I've heard some good things about you and your company."

"As I have regarding you," Crawford acknowledged, getting past his first impressions and beginning to read what was underneath my boyishly innocuous exterior. A sharp individual, I noted approvingly to myself as his expression changed rapidly from skeptical to interested. "Ross, here, and several of your clients I'm acquainted with, give you very high recommendations."

"I'm good at what I do, sir," was my simple response. I'd learned that belittling my abilities, or attributing my successes to luck more often put off potential clients than not. I was good at my job, and felt I had nothing to prove by bragging either. "How can we help you?"

"Truthfully," giving me another close look, he accepted what I had told him at face value then shook his head in perplexity over something else. "I don't know that you can, or would be willing to take on something like this at all."

"Ross has already decided your problem is worth at least a look," I responded. "Why don't you lay things out then let us make up our minds as to whether we can help you, or not?"

"Fair enough," Crawford nodded. "But this is really pretty tenuous stuff, more suspicions than anything else."

"Unless a person is certified paranoid," I shrugged, taking a seat beside the man. "Suspicious are something generally founded on reason. So tell us a story, Mr. Crawford, and we'll see what we can come up with after hearing you out."

"All right," Crawford agreed. "You've probably heard of our new chain, Venus Salons?"

At our nods he went on.

"Well, the claims made are really true, and verifiable. A series of sessions at any of those can make any woman appear younger, and bring out the absolute best physical qualities she has.

"Venus Research," he went on, "is the chemical branch of the company that found the processes, and developed them. It's run by a real Ph.D. chemist, a Doctor Jonathan Rutherford, and there have been some problems over there recently."

"What kind of problems?" I prompted when his pause had stretched out to fill several seconds. "Secrets getting out? Employees suddenly taking high paying positions with the competition?"

"Nothing like that," Crawford shook his head. "Our security is quite good, and frankly I'd just as soon trust all this to them. Keep things in house, so to speak."

"But you can't," Ross added thoughtfully. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be here talking to us."

“True,” Crawford ruefully admitted. “There has been an alarming amount of turn-over in staff there lately. Employees resigning, then not showing up in other jobs even several months after they've left. I've had private investigators trying to find some of these people for some time now, with no success. It's like they simply dropped off the Earth, or something.”

“People disappear all the time,” I pointed out. “Maybe these people made a discovery on their own, quit to avoid handing it over to your company, and are somewhere working on it right now. Sounds more like something the police ought to look into.”

“If they were all chemists, or computer people, I'd likely agree,” Crawford shrugged. “But quite a few of them were in security itself, and had access to most of the systems and codes admitting them into every lab and office in the complex.”

“But there haven't been any break ins, no competitor suddenly coming up with things so similar to your processes that they seem to be straight out of your labs?” I questioned, then added as he shook his head. “How many people are we talking about here, and what kind of time frame is involved?”

“Fifteen, in the past six months, Chemists, Lab workers, security people, even a janitor and several secretaries.”

“Are Dr. Rutherford, or your security chief there especially hard to work for?” Ross asked. “Or maybe people are just getting tired of long hours and poor pay? Leaving because they're burnt out? I admit that fifteen of them does seem a little high, but things like that have happened before, you know.”

“Rutherford and Stallings, the security chief,” Crawford shrugged, aren't even close to being martinets. Other than being demanding about the quality of work they get from their people, and neither is afraid to adhere to their own standards. I hired both of them, and have to say that any impressions I've gotten are that they are actually quite easy people to work with and for.”

“Okay, so you've got staffing problems out there,” I mused. “Say a bunch of people got disgruntled and left through the same period. Are you still losing employees now?”

“No,” Crawford sighed. “No one has quit for several weeks now.”

“So maybe your troubles are over with that,” I suggested, “though it is unusual that your former employees haven't resurfaced, I'll admit. Did these people just walk away from your facility and vanish?”

“No, they didn't,” Crawford gave me a look that plainly said he thought his time, and ours was being wasted after all. “Each of them went home, and acted normally for weeks before dropping out of sight.”

“So what has you so worried?” I questioned, genuinely intrigued. “I know you pay well, especially in a research facility, maybe all of these ”missing people" are just taking long vacations somewhere and don't want anyone interrupting them.”

“Don't you think that's stretching coincidence a bit?” Ross tossed in to break up my rather negative approach. “I mean, five or six people would be odd, but fifteen? Sounds like something is going on to me.”

"I thought so too," Crawford nodded, "but I wasn't all that concerned about it until this reached me."

He carefully removed a micro cassette from an envelope he was carrying and handed it to Ross.

"That arrived in my personal mail at home several days ago. It's from one of the investigators I had looking into things for me."

Ross placed the tape in a player, made sure it had been rewound, then started it. A male voice, I recognized began speaking.

"Mr. Crawford, this is Harry Sweeny. I've found a few irregularities in personnel files out here, and there's some innocent looking warehouses that your security people out here don't let anyone close to. Also, some of the newer women on staff seem to have just appeared fully grown out of nowhere. I can't seem to find much in the way of background on any of them.

"Rutherford and Stallings are up to their necks in whatever is going on in those warehouses, but I haven't been able to figure out what it is they're doing other than juggling a few personnel transfers.

"I've got the access codes to let me into that closed off area now, so ought to have something concrete for you within the next few days. I really don't think anything very sinister is being done here, but I'll get back to you with a fuller report once I have something more concrete, probably in a few days."

"I know Harry Sweeny," I told him. "You do hire the best, don't you? How long ago was that sent?"

"Postmarked last week," Crawford supplied. "And I don't think I've heard from Sweeny since."

"What does that mean?" I questioned. "Either you have or you haven't. Sweeny is good, and if he was worried that something was even a little wrong in your place even though he hadn't found anything, you can probably bet the farm there is."

"This phone call was placed to my private line at home several days ago," Crawford handed over another tape. "Listen to it and see what you think. I don't know what to make of it."

"Crawford, this is Sweeny." The voice was different, higher pitched and cadenced differently, it also sounded very frightened and tired. "I got into that closed off section and just about didn't get out. You were right, there are real troubles brewing in there and your top people are right in the thick of it. Mind control, reshaping people to their orders...."

"I've been dodging your security people for hours now," the voice became breathy, sounding exhausted. "Can't keep away from them much longer, just don't have the stamina to keep this up...." Traffic noises, and the sounds of car doors slamming nearby came through the tape, along with a gasped, "Oh, god, they've found me already. I won't let them take me back to that place. Help me, please help meee..."

The message trailed off into a high pitched moan of mixed terror and pain, then stopped altogether.

“That wasn't Harry Sweeny.” I tapped the player thoughtfully, then sighed. “Sweeny's tough, smart, and one of the most careful people I've ever known. That sounded like a very frightened woman to me. Recognize her voice?”

“No,” Crawford shook his head, “And very few people have my private number. Sweeny must have given it to whoever made this call.”

“But why would she claim to be Sweeny?” Ross asked. “She had to know how hysterical all that sounded, and far fetched to boot. Maybe someone was pranking you. Heard from the real Sweeny lately?”

“One short call,” Crawford shrugged. “A day or so before I got this one. He said things were fine, he'd over reacted to rumors and the place was running clean.”

“You got a tape of that conversation?” I asked.

“Right here,” Crawford produced another, which Ross put into the player and started. The message was as Crawford had related, but somehow dead, stilted and sounding forced to me, though it wouldn't to someone who hadn't roomed with the guy for years through college then for a while after.

“That isn't Harry Sweeny,” I emphatically told the others. “At least not the one I went to school with and still have drinks with off and on.”

“Sounded fine to me,” Ross countered, but nodded his agreement with my assessment. “But if you think it isn't, I believe you.”

“Harry Sweeny never sounded that lifeless even when going through the worst hangovers in history,” I supplied, then looked to Crawford. “Have you been able to contact him since this call?”

“His office tells me he came in, putzed around the office for a few hours last week, then left again. They haven't seen him since, though he has called in once.”

“Since you got that other call?” I questioned. “The strange one?”

“Yes,” Crawford nodded. “But it was just a routine check in for messages.”

“Could have been a recording,” Ross thoughtfully nodded, keying the intercom then requesting a call be put through to Harry's employers when Carrie answered. “I'll talk to Arnie Mendez, Sweeny's boss and see if the guy's checked in again.”

He had, again just a routine message check and all is well type of progress report. But he hadn't responded to any of his messages that had been passed along when he called. Then resigned without notice and told Mendez himself that he was going to work for Venus Research. Odd, and frightening in a way I couldn't quite get a handle on. Harry had loved his work, and been well compensated for his skills by an appreciative employer. I wondered what kind of job a cosmetics research lab could have offered him that would have prompted the job change.

“Mr. Crawford,” Ross placed the receiver in its cradle while favoring our client with a serious look. “I think you've just hired the experts you need for this.”

“That's why Mendez and Associates sent me over here,” Crawford sighed.

“We don't specialize in wandering spouses or petty theft,” Ross put in with a grin. “Not that Mendez would appreciate my saying he does.”

“We are a security firm, that also handles delicate, high level investigations off and on,” my boss went on. “And we don't usually take on something like this, but Dan here is the man for the job if you want us on it.”

“I want it,” my interruption was voiced quietly, and I knew the thoughtful expression on my face would convince Ross that I meant it. “Something in this smells bad. Harry Sweeny wouldn't have just quit that way. Not even if he were badly burnt out and offered a fortune by the company he went to. I know that much, Mr. Crawford.”

I didn't tell him that I would be on this whether he gave us the job or not. Something about that unidentified female voice on the second tape we'd heard raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Not her obvious terror, or her pleas for help. Though that would have had me concerned normally simply for the woman's sake. It had been the total hopelessness in that voice, and an eerie familiarity that I hadn't brought up in the meeting. I didn't know the voice, or remember it at all. But something at the back of my mind insisted that I did. And that Harry Sweeny was in deeper trouble than any of us currently believed.

As they finalized the financial end of things, I was already poring over the files Crawford had brought with him. A friend of mine was in trouble, I was sure of that much, and this assignment had all the indications of being something very much out of the ordinary.

I couldn't wait to get started on it.

If only I'd known how out of the ordinary it really was back then, no matter how much trouble Harry was in, I would probably have turned Crawford down flat. Maybe even quit my job if Ross insisted I do otherwise, and taken that vacation I'd been promising myself for so long right after I'd asked Carrie to marry me like she'd been quietly agitating for me to do recently.

But then, I wouldn't be telling this story.

Getting In

At first I had taken the time to give locating Harry a try. It was a fruitless search. His apartment and bank accounts had been emptied out, and no one he normally hung out with had seen or heard from him in weeks. Several phone calls and inquiries through other parties failed to turn him up at either the Venus Research facilities, or the small town in Washington State near Seattle where the lab was located.

Needless to say, I was very disturbed by that information, and even more determined to get into the place and find out what had happened to my friend and what was actually going on there.

With admonitions from Ross, Carrie, and a few other associates who knew what I was heading into at least as well as I did, which wasn't all that much beyond getting an uneasy feeling about the assignment, to be careful, I began preparing to go in undercover.

First, I established with our Communications Center a series of innocent sounding code phrases for direct communication with the Diamond offices. Then I set up other less direct methods for getting information out of Venus Research provided I found anything at all. Which I had a gut feeling I would.

After a bit of fiddling with personnel records, I was “transferred” from another division of Kingston Industries to take up an open position with Venus Research using an alias, of course. I wasn't a high profile person, but competent people in the security field, and a few higher ups in client companies, would have heard of me in relation to my real job.

So, one Daniel Everett dutifully and eagerly reported for work at the Venus Research complex one Monday morning several weeks after Crawford's visit to the Diamond offices.

“Welcome to our little family, Mr. Everett,” Claire Devon, director of personnel, a trim, good looking woman in her early forties greeted me in her office with a stack of folders. “These are the standard listings of benefits, rules and guidelines, standards of performance, and so forth for this division. Please look through them then feel free to ask any questions you might have.”

The woman didn't really seem pleased at all to see me, but was guardedly cordial in a businesslike way. She was alert to every motion I made, and watching for any twitches I might show.

Obligingly, I gave her a few. Tilting my head and thumbing through the first folder she had given me with pursed lips then favoring her with a tentative smile.

“Thanks, Ms. Devon. This is a pretty big move for me just now, so your help is appreciated.”

“Anything I can do,” was her cool response, “to make your employment with us happier, I will.”

“That's good to know,” I responded warmly, with just a little too much eagerness and very real honesty. “I'm really looking forward to getting started here.”

“I'm sure you are,” Devon smiled back at me. “You just go through all that, and I'll be back in a few minutes with a guard to escort you on a tour of the facility, Dan. You don't mind if I call you, Dan, do you?”

“Not at all,” I smiled up from the information packet.

She made a call from her secretary's desk as I idly thumbed through a package that should have been familiar had I really been an employee of Kingston Industries. The benefits were very generous, the restrictions few, and I could see no reason for a sudden employee turnover like Crawford had told us about in Ross' office the previous week. It really looked like any employee of Venus Research would fight to keep his or her job, the pay and package were that good.

But that remained to be seen firsthand. I did find it odd that the local director of personnel had chosen to leave me in her private office while making several calls that could have been easily made from her own desk without disturbing me. I refrained from being too nosy about anything in there because of that, only giving her computer

terminal a professional looking over that would be expected from a hot shot computer jock, and disregarding much else.

That terminal looked like nothing exceptional. It was good, new and definitely state of the art, maybe a little too powerful when networked, for simple personnel files, but overkill in computers had always been a weakness in well funded research facilities. It was networked, I could see, through a secured modem, and direct cable to what I figured was a mainframe somewhere else in the complex.

“Nice system,” I commented when she returned.

“It does the job,” Devon replied, then gave me a sheepish smile. “Actually, it's far more than I need here, or would be comfortable with using anywhere else. It was part of a package that was installed here last year. Every work station has one at least as good.”

“Glad to hear that,” I showed a little enthusiasm. “The better the equipment, the better job I can do with it.”

“I'm sure you'll do well,” Devon replied, “Your credentials are quite impressive.

“Well, I see your guide had arrived,” she waved through the window between her office and the reception area as a big man dressed in a suit that still managed to look like a uniform entered the office. “You're lucky, Mr. Stallings himself is going to show you around. He's head of security here. Must be a slow day or something.”

“Arthur Stallings,” the man held out his hand with a smile that never quite reached his gray eyes. He was good, and sizing me up, just as Devon had. It seemed that everyone wanted a look at the “new kid”.

“Dan Everett,” I shook his hand, conscious of his scrutiny but not showing anything beyond a normal seeming nervousness. “I guess I should be honored, being shown around by the place's security chief.”

“We don't get that many new employees,” Stallings easily told me. “And I like to keep my hand in, get to know them as we do. Sometimes I give the tour, sometimes I just introduce myself later on and have a friendly chat. No job is too unimportant, far as I'm concerned, so I do this off and on.”

I was given a security badge, temporary, it was explained, until I could be photographed and entered into the system, then taken on a quick walk through the complex. I saw chemical labs, the mainframe I had surmised Devon's terminal had been slaved through, testing areas, offices, and the area I would be working in, not anywhere near the mainframe, I noted.

We did pass a series of low buildings where security was very evident, surrounded by sensors I wasn't supposed to have noticed, and with heavy steel doors.

“What goes on in there?” I innocently asked without any real apparent interest. They only looked like warehouses.

“Storage, mostly,” Stallings answered, carefully watching to see if I showed any undue interest in the buildings.

I didn't.

“We keep extra equipment, supplies, things like that in those. Some of the equipment is very expensive, so we keep things pretty well locked up, and the chemicals used in development could be quite dangerous if someone got into them without knowing what they were doing.”

“Oh,” shrugging, I followed him on to processing for my photo session and entering my data into the computer system. “Good idea, keeping that kind of thing locked up. Some crazy might do a lot of damage with some of the things used here.”

“Never happen,” Stallings assured me. “My staff is good, Dan, and I trained them myself.”

“Good to know,” I nodded. “But I'm just a computer jock who happens to know something about chemistry. I'll behave.”

I went through the ID routine, and was given a clip on badge.

“This will admit you into any part of the complex that doesn't have orange markings on the doors,” Stallings informed me.

I idly noted that the supposedly innocent storage facilities had sported orange markings on their doorways.

My first week was spent settling into the job itself, getting to know my fellow workers and the team of programmers I was in charge of, getting settled into an apartment, and of course, looking around for any signs that things were other than they seemed.

“Hi, sweetheart,” I had phoned the prearranged number for contact with the office and Carrie had answered. “Just thought I'd see how Dad was doing.”

“He's fine,” Carrie replied, “Anxious to know how the new job is going, and how you're getting along.”

“Just fine,” I responded. “Getting settled in and comfortable. Still haven't run into that friend of yours, though.”

“Oh, I'm really sure he's working there somewhere,” Carrie returned, confirming that Sweeny was still missing. “I'll tell Dad you called. He'll be sorry he missed this one.”

“Tell him I'll call back in three days,” I responded. “There are still things to get settled here, but so far I haven't found anything I can't handle beyond being away from you.”

“I'll be along once things get situated back here,” she promised, playing the part of my fiancée, which she was close to being anyway.

Only she wouldn't be joining me in Washington State any time soon. There was definitely something wrong around this place, but so far I hadn't been able to discover what.

Or find a trace of Harry Sweeny, who was supposed to be working there.

Suspicious

“Hi there, honey,” Suzi, the girl who handled the front desk in my section gushed as I walked into the building.

Suzi was one of the things I felt wrong about in that place. She was gorgeous, sweet, and helpful to extremes. And extremely competent as a secretary even though seeming like an air headed sexpot otherwise. It was almost as if she had been programmed as a secretary, but without other interests besides men. I didn't even know her last name.

But there was something familiar about her, something in her eyes that hinted that she was more than a dutiful secretary, and sexpot. Something like you see in a trained animal obediently performing for its masters, knowing it was a captive while it did. That was the feeling I got from behind her wide, friendly smile and saucy moves. She seemed more like a trained animal than a human being, and didn't seem to expect any other treatment.

Unsettling. But no more than her haunting familiarity. I was quite sure that I'd never seen the woman before. Someone with her build and face would have surely left a lasting impression on me. Yet something about her was very familiar.

“Hi, Suzi,” I returned, hiding my discomfort in her presence because I knew she was sensitive to my emotions and responded to them. Hurting the poor girl's feelings was something I really couldn't bring myself to do, she was so eager to please. “Anything new?”

“Just the usual,” she replied in that breathy voice. “Richard is going to be late again today, and there's a meeting of section heads this afternoon at three.”

Nodding, I headed into the work stations where my team was presently working at something suspiciously like a genetic blueprint, though we didn't have all of it, or any input regarding what it was for.

Just as I sat down at my desk to adjust my monitor my memory heard Suzi's voice, filled with different emotions. Frightened, desperate, and in a taped conversation with the man who had hired me to do this job. It had been her voice on that odd, demented sounding tape, I was sure of it.

Then why was she back working in the very place she had been running from, and evidently happy to be there?

Or was she?

Confronting her with the idea would do no good, I was sure. But I had to find out somehow, and why would she claim to be Sweeny? That was patently impossible as far as I knew. Athletic, six foot males did not become lush, sexy females in a matter of weeks. Especially when that particular female was a good seven inches shorter and hundred pounds lighter than the person she had claimed to be.

It was time to get into the personnel files and do some real digging. Then find out what was in those sealed off buildings and why simple storage facilities were off limits to all but a few employees. Suzi, and a number of other secretaries routinely went in and out of those, something that I found curious indeed.

Then I intended to have a long talk with Suzi, find out why she had placed that call, and was back here contentedly working for the people she had seemed so terrified of.

If some of my suspicions were real, this was turning very nasty. There were others like Suzi around the complex, Sexy little beauties who were very competent in their job slots, but otherwise seemed like the types who would have trouble counting past ten with their shoes on.

Mind control and reshaping people to suit their needs?

That had been part of the message I was growing more certain had been phoned to Crawford from Suzi. Or someone sounding enough like her to be an identical twin, which I thought unlikely. She had to know what had happened to Harry Sweeny, if I could just push past that vapid exterior and reach the person underneath.

The frightened, trapped person who occasionally surfaced in her wide blue eyes.

A Few Discoveries

Hacking into the personnel files had been tougher than I'd expected. Mainly because they were directly connected to the rest of the system in the complex. Tapping into one gave me access to the rest of the supposedly sensitive files regarding the place and its business.

Suzi had no last name, no social security number, no past history in the files at all. Just a series of coded entries behind her name and job title. The entries were all dated, beginning several months earlier and progressed on a daily basis. With one gap of several days. Those missing days coincided with the time Crawford had received a hysterical phone call from a woman claiming to be Harry Sweeny.

There were exactly eighteen entries in the special file where Suzi was listed as Sexy Suzi. I would bet fifteen of those had been the missing employees, back and working in various capacities around the place, without pay, or official existence's beyond being in that complex. They didn't even have home addresses.

The seventeenth file was labeled Buxom Brandi, and had only started several days before my arrival. Who, I wondered was the unfortunate person with that designation. An eighteenth file had been started several days later but was still largely blank, except for a name.

Sweet Candi Cane.

Chillingly, that entry was dated only a few days after I had arrived.

Other files in the hidden, encrypted section revealed very unsettling, unbelievable in fact, details of what was going on at Venus Research. The place, supposed to be a cosmetics producer, was staffed with psychologists with degrees in behavioral theory, geneticists, and research chemists working on very advanced molecular and genetic alterations on living tissues through viral infection. The type of academics who would never be content with working for an outfit that made women's cosmetics and beauty treatments.

But every one of them was listed in the outer files as straight chemists, computer programmers, administrative aides, whatever. Anything except what they really were.

Molecular changes in living tissue? Genetics? Viruses? Behavior modifications? All tied together under the title "Venus Process".

No matter how little I wanted to believe it, maybe Suzi's telephoned claims of being someone else, someone radically different, had some truth to them after all.

I had to get into those sealed off buildings, then get Suzi out of this place. To somewhere, where I had time to get through what now appeared to be a very sophisticated type of brainwashing and find out who she really was.

Or had been.

At this stage, I wasn't really sure I wanted to know. This situation was getting really nasty, real fast, and showed no sign of being any better the more I delved into things.

It was time to bolt.

Let someone with clout finish up around here, like the Feds. I wanted no more of it, just to get myself, and Suzi, out before anything else happened to either one of us.

Stallings, Rutherford, Devon, all three were involved. with references to others on the outside, and addresses in each city that had recently become a site for one of the new Venus Salons.

I backed out of the files after making copies onto a specialized micro disk recorder I had been carrying disguised as a simple pen. Reasonably sure I had left no traces I returned my computer to my original work, sighing with relief once my original work, something involving a fragmentary piece of research involving attachment of an outside agent to DNA, had returned to the screen. I continued on my original research, progressing as if I had never left it to pursue my own unauthorized research. Still there was that strange feeling of being followed through the systems as the flickering monitor switched through the main frame. A certain delayed flickering on the screen...

It was definitely time to leave.

Getting Out

"Hey, beautiful."

I stopped at Suzi's desk at the end of my shift, leaning against it and being my most friendly.

"How about doing a lonely man a big favor and having dinner with me tonight?"

"Sure, hon," she beamed up at me, but that flash of another personality beneath the placid, happy exterior came back briefly. "When and where?"

"How bout an hour from now?" I asked, keeping my own nerves calmed down with an effort. I could meet you at your place and then we'll go and really have ourselves a time. Okay?"

“Uh,” she hesitated, clearly at a loss and not sure whether to be honest with me or not. “I live on the complex. How about if you meet me at the front gate in two hours?”

“Didn't know anyone lived right on the grounds,” I shrugged. “Two hours then, at the front gate.”

“See you then,” she breathed, sounding and looking happy, but there was a worried hesitancy to her answer, and visible relief that I hadn't pressed her about where it was she lived. I was more than a little sure it would be in those buildings that were off limits to employees who weren't in on whatever the plot here was.

I only hoped she wasn't reporting everything to the powers that be in the place. And that they would consider my asking her out as a normal reaction from a young man far from home and missing the female companionship he was accustomed to having.

If she wasn't waiting at the front gate without escort when our meeting was due, I would be forced to leave her. But the more I thought about that, the less I liked it.

Suzi with no last name, or history, was my only link to an old friend. Maybe, if the evidence was true, no matter how outrageous it seemed, even what was left of that friend resided within her pretty head. I had to get her out. Then find out the truth and make the people responsible pay for what they had done.

I mailed the micro disk that I'd copied from the buried files, along with a short message for Ross. It wouldn't do to have that on my person, or among my possessions if things went bad. The pen went into the package, too, replaced by a real one identical in appearance.

If I didn't get out with Suzi, at least the information I had dug up would reach people who could do something about it.

Really Getting In

She was waiting at the gate, as promised, dressed to incite a man's libido and smiling nervously as I got out of the car to meet her. Giving her a reassuring smile of my own, then the up and down appraisal she seemed to crave as much as expect, I vented a small whistle of approval. “Looking good, honey.”

“Thanks.”

In a very brief, figure hugging red satin number, with heels high enough to qualify as stilts, she did present a very enticing appearance. As I offered my arm and she took it, I noted a slight sound behind us, but before I could even turn to see what it was an arm went around my throat and I felt a brief prickling pain at the back of my neck.

As the pain went numb, and the numbness spread from that center, Suzi gave me an entreating, unhappy look. “I'm sorry, Danny. They made me do this.”

“That's a good girl,” the familiar voice of Stallings commended her as a number of male figures appeared around us. “Now trot your tail on back to the dorm and wait for one of us to come get you.”

“Yes, sir,” came her subdued response as she turned away.