



Part One

S T A C Y

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Chapter 1

ANYTHING'S FAIR IN A QUAL

Wendell Kinney reached out and squeezed Stacy Richardson's hand for luck. "Just remember, take your time," he said. "It doesn't hurt to platform your answers. There's no time limit, but Courtney always likes to be done by lunchtime, so if we can be out of there by noon that'll help. Ninety-eight percent on your Written is impressive, so this should be easy. And don't worry about Art, I'll keep him on his chain."

It was eight A.M., Tuesday, and they were in the third-floor hall of the old Science Building at the University of Southern California, just outside of Dr. Courtney Smith's office. Stacy Richardson was about to take her qualifying oral exam for her doctorate in microbiology. She'd been existing on less than two hours' sleep a night all through her last review week; probably a mistake, because she needed to be fresh for the "Quals," but the backbreaking job of reviewing four years of complicated microbiology was mind-boggling.

She'd been on the phone late last night for an hour with her husband, Max, who was in Fort Detrick, Maryland. He'd talked

her down off her narrow, anxious ledge, getting her back on the ground with sure-handed reason. He reminded her of her academic track record. Throughout her three and a half years of doctoral study, she had carried a 3.9 cumulative G.P.A. He promised her she'd be fine. There had been a moment during the conversation when she'd sensed from his voice that something was very wrong and had asked him about it.

After a long reflective pause he'd said, "This isn't anything like I'd expected. I don't think I belong here, and they sure as hell don't want me." He'd refused to say anything more, because he didn't want to distract her with his problems on the eve of the Quals. Her orals were the last hurdle and would determine whether Stacy would end up with a Ph.D. after her name.

Dr. Max Richardson was head of the Microbiology Department at USC. She had met him in her first post-grad semester. He ran an open lab on viruses and she had listened to his lectures, marveling at the intricacies of his scientific mind and the strong masculine shape of his personality, and okay, his body too. Their romance caused a furor in the department. Dating students was definitely not allowed. Before it became a full-fledged disaster they'd gotten married, legitimizing it, and everything had died down.

Six months after the wedding, Max's federal research grant came through. He'd been working in a new field of microbiology, evaluating killer proteins called "Prions." Max's research had won him a six-month sabbatical to study at the Army Medical Facility at Fort Detrick, Maryland, with Dr. Dexter DeMille, the leading U.S. microbiologist on Prion research.

They'd discussed the bad timing. With Stacy just months from her orals, Max had not wanted to be away, especially since Art Hickman, his mortal enemy in the department, was also on the Advisory Panel, which would be evaluating her. Max and Art had both been up for Department Chair. Max had gotten the job, and Art had been backbiting him ever since. In the end, Stacy and Max

had both decided that the chance to work with Dr. DeMille at Fort Detrick was such an incredible opportunity for Max that he should take it. Stacy said she would just study her brains out so that Art Hickman would not be able to fault her performance.

Wendell Kinney was also on her panel. He was a ruffled old Microbiology Department lion and a great friend to both Max and her.

“Remember,” Wendell said, bringing her thoughts back, “anything’s fair in a Qual. These guys can and will ask you about everything. Courtney Smith loves her Sterilization and Disinfection discipline, so she’s bound to ask you something on that. And Art Hickman will drill you on his damned arachnids.”

“I wish he’d stayed in the bush with those fucking spiders,” Stacy said, letting out a sigh that blew a wisp of her long, honey-blond hair up in the air in front of her. She grabbed the strand and tucked it behind her ear.

It didn’t help that just about everybody felt that Stacy Richardson was drop-dead beautiful. Immediately after she enrolled in the doctorate program, Art Hickman had tried to become her mentor. He said he wanted to take her under his wing, but it was soon apparent it wasn’t his wing he wanted her under. She had efficiently dodged him. Art had taken it okay until she’d fallen in love with and married his departmental rival. He’d been lobbing grenades ever since.

The door opened and Dr. Courtney Smith was standing in the threshold of her office. There was always at least one woman on the Advisory Panel when another woman was up for her doctorate. Choosing Courtney’s office for the orals was another extension of that political agenda.

Courtney Smith was a mannish, Janet Reno-sized biologist who wore pant suits that were always several sizes too small, as if she was desperately trying to convince herself she was still a twelve when she had long ago moved into the “generous” sizes. The shoulders in her boxy suit were padded to try to give the impres-

sion of a waist, also a lost horizon. She was holding a sheaf of folders against her ample chest.

“Today’s the day,” Dr. Smith smiled, showing a grayish row of tombstone-shaped teeth.

“Yep. Hope I’m up to it,” Stacy nervously replied, as she followed Dr. Smith into the small office.

Stacy had given up wearing skirts and dresses in favor of blue jeans and sweatshirts in an effort to disguise her figure. It was hard to be taken seriously while tenured department morons like Art Hickman referred to her as Max’s “Hood Angel.”

For her qualifying orals, she had chosen to wear loose flannel slacks, which did nothing for her, and a T-shirt under a blue blazer. She had her hair pinned up with a brown plastic clip and wore no makeup.

She looked fantastic.

The office was small and stuffy. It was April, but the Santa Anas had been blowing a hot wind across the L.A. basin, driving the temperature up into the mid-eighties.

Courtney motioned to the window. “They never have the air-conditioning on this time of year and that window got painted shut around the turn of the century, so I called maintenance to bring us a fan. They should be here any minute.”

“It’s okay. It’s fine, Dr. Smith,” Stacy said, her heart jackhammering, her hands flapping around her like small bony sparrows. She told herself to calm down. After all, she’d been having breakfasts with the entire panel at least once a week, all through the year. She knew them all well.

It was the practice for doctorate students to get as close to their advisors as possible. The faculty viewed this exercise as an attempt to make friends, so students could come to them with study problems, but any post-grad would tell you the real reason from the students’ perspective was to psych out the advisor’s pet projects or pet peeves. Hopefully one could discern what might be asked on the oral.

Now Art Hickman appeared in the doorway, pushing his new swivel chair. He was heavy-set, and his blow-dried, combed-over blond hair tented a patch of open scalp. A sharp, clipped mustache seemed a misplayed note in a symphony of fleshy curves. "Am I the last?" he said, then turned to Stacy, grinning wolfishly. "Well, Mrs. Richardson, are we ready?" Using her married name was a slap not lost on any of them. Art glanced in Courtney's office. "Where's H.R.?" he asked, referring to Dr. Horace Rosenthal.

"Here," a voice caroled from down the hall, and then Dr. Rosenthal appeared, a large, worn briefcase in hand. He was tall and slender and always wore bow ties. He was "Mr. Plant Virus." Rosenthal could talk for hours on vegetable diseases, soil antigens, and whatnot. Stacy had read all his published papers, searching for his pet theories.

"Stacy. Big day," Horace said, smiling. He had ivory-white skin. Blue veins roadmapped under a papery complexion that suggested he rarely got outside. His bow tie this morning was a cherry-red number with, of all things, a pattern of tiny clocks on it. *Who was it that said, 'Nobody ever takes a man in a bow tie seriously,'* Stacy thought nervously.

"Let's get going," Courtney said. "Horace, you can drag that extra chair over from the window."

Rosenthal grabbed the oversized upholstered chair and tugged it around like a rusted gun battery to face the room. Stacy was offered a metal student's chair, but she elected to remain standing. Wendell Kinney winked at her and kicked the door shut.

"Okay," Art Hickman said. "To begin with, 'snaps' on a great Written. You really aced that puppy." He liked to try to sound hip, using the vernacular of his students. "But, as you know, the qualifying orals are intended to be a much wider-ranging set of questions. What we're trying to determine is, not your technical or book expertise, but more how you will deal with the broader, less defined concepts of microbiology."

"I understand," she said.

“Any of us might interrupt you at a given point in your answer and ask for definitions or elaborations of your thoughts, or perhaps even redirect you. Don’t view that as criticism. We are only searching the corners of your knowledge,” he continued.

“Yes, Doctor, I understand.”

“It’d be nice if we could be finished by lunch. I hate sending out,” Dr. Courtney Smith said.

Wendell Kinney shot Stacy a slight smile. *He sure called that one*, she thought. If she passed her Qualls she would only have her doctorate thesis left, and most of them had already read sections of that emerging document entitled “Neurotransmission in Rhabdovirus Infection of Raccoon Species.” It promised to be an exceptional piece of student science.

“So, let’s get started,” Wendell Kinney said, cheerfully.

Here we go, Stacy thought, crossing her fingers behind her back.

“I’d like you to explain the possible relationship of herpes viruses to multiple sclerosis,” Dr. Hickman began, brushing his fingers across his neat little mustache.

“Yes,” Stacy said, clearing her throat to buy a few seconds.

“Take your time, Stacy. You don’t have to rush your answers,” Wendell reminded her.

“Yes, thank you, Doctor. . . . According to a recent study, seventy percent of the patients with the most common form of MS showed signs of active infection with human herpes virus six.”

“A study, Mrs. Richardson?” Art Hickman interrupted. “What study? The study of California muffler mechanics? Let’s be specific.”

“Uh, the . . . the finding was reported in the December issue of *Nature and Medicine*, and was conducted at the University of Minnesota. . . . And uh . . . Research Associates funded it, a government bio-research funding bank. The study was annotated by—”

“That’s okay,” he cut her off. “Just don’t use generalities. Go on.” He was still stroking his bullshit mustache.

“Yes, Doctor.” She continued, “Representational differences

were used to search for pathogens in multiple sclerosis brain tissue . . .”

Joanne Richardson almost hit the University policeman as she pulled her car into the Science Campus lot, parking her red Toyota sloppily across two spaces.

The cop moved to the passenger window of her car and glared in angrily. Joanne was gathering up her purse and had her head down as he rapped on the window.

“Hey! You almost ran me down!” he growled through the glass. When she looked up, he could see that she was crying. Tears were streaming, running her mascara, leaving black clown smudges.

“Where’s the Science Building?” Joanne sobbed, rolling down the window.

“You almost hit me,” the University cop said, his anger coasting to an awkward stop as he looked at the pretty twenty-year-old.

“Where is it? I have to get there, now.”

He finally relented. “The new Science Building or the old Science Building?”

“I don’t know, she didn’t say.”

“You looking for classrooms or faculty?”

“Faculty,” she said, choking back a sob.

“First, center this vehicle inside the lines, then go along this walk, past Sprague Hall, turn left at the statue of Tommy Trojan. It’s three buildings down, on the left, a big brick job.”

She reparked the car, quickly got out, and ran up the street. It only took her a few minutes to find the building. She ran up the steps into an entry that was filled with glass cases. Some contained faculty awards, some had student projects. Years of Lysol had turned the light gray linoleum floor yellow. There was a reception desk in front of the elevators, where an Assistant Professor sat grading papers, guarding the entrance like a soccer goalie.

“I need Dr. Courtney Smith’s office,” Joanne said, out of breath.

The Assistant Professor looked up at the tear-streaked face across from him. “Third floor, but I’m sorry, you can’t go up there. She’s giving orals.”

“I’ve got to talk to my sister-in-law, Stacy Richardson. It’s important.”

“You can’t break into her Qualls. You’ll just have to wait down here.”

“For how long?” Joanne asked, her voice cracking pitifully.

“Could be three or four hours, maybe longer.”

“I can’t wait.” She turned, and forgoing the elevators, ran around him and up the stairs.

The Assistant Professor dropped the paper he was grading and bolted after her.

Joanne got to the third floor and ran down the corridor. None of the offices had names on them, just numbers. She started to look for a directory board, but the man finally caught up with her and grabbed her arm.

“I need to talk to Stacy. She’s in Dr. Smith’s office,” Joanne repeated.

“I told you, you can’t talk to her. She’s taking orals.”

“It’s an emergency!” Joanne paused to catch her breath. “Her husband just committed suicide!”

Dr. Horace Rosenthal had abandoned his beloved plant viruses to ask a question on HIV infection. “Give us an identification of the chemokine receptor expressed in brain-derived cells and T-cells as a new co-receptor for HIV infection.”

“We have isolated HIV-1 variants that infect brain-derived CK4 positive cells . . .” Stacy began, as there was a knock at the door.

“We’re in Qualls!” Dr. Smith bellowed at the door. “Go on, Stacy.”

“Those cells are resistant to both macrophage M-tropic and T-cell line . . .”

Again, there was a pounding at the door.

“Goddammit,” Courtney Smith said, coming up out of her chair, charging the door like an NFL lineman, and yanking it open. “I said we’re in Qualls!”

“This is an emergency,” the Assistant Professor said, pointing to the tear-stained girl beside him. “She needs to talk to Ms. Richardson.”

Joanne moved into the office. She had stopped crying, but when she looked at Stacy, she choked slightly. “Max is dead,” she blurted.

“What?” Stacy said, her voice too loud.

“He’s dead. I just got the call. They couldn’t reach you, so they called me.”

“How?” Stacy’s mind was jumbled. Already a wave of nausea had hit the pit of her stomach.

“They . . . the doctor said he shot himself.”

“He what . . . ?” Stacy’s mind was reeling. She looked over at Wendell Kinney, who had his bushy leonine head in his hands. Then she happened to glance at Art Hickman, who had a total lack of expression on his face, as if his conflicting emotions over this news allowed him no reaction. His hands, she noticed, were spread in front of him, pushing against the desk, almost as if he were trying to get away.

“Suicide?” Stacy said, and now she started to feel a mixture of emotions too complex to even describe. There was fear and disbelief, terror, anger . . . loss. Then came the tears.

Joanne moved to her and put her arms around her sister-in-law. They stood there in the room full of microbiology professors and held on to each other.

“Are you sure? You’re sure it was . . . real . . . not some horrible practical . . .” Stacy couldn’t finish.

“I called back. I talked to a Colonel Laurence Chittick at Fort

Detrick. He said . . . Max went into the backyard late last night. He sat on a kitchen chair and stuck a shotgun in his mouth and . . .” Now it was Joanne who couldn’t finish.

Wendell Kinney got to his feet. He put an arm around Stacy. “Obviously,” he said to the other doctors in the room, “we’re postponing this exam.”

They all nodded. Their faces were anguished. Except for Art, everybody had loved Max Richardson.

“Let’s go to my office,” Wendell said, and he led the two women out of Dr. Smith’s office and down the hall.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon, and they were back in Max and Stacy’s apartment on Alameda Boulevard, just off the University campus. It was a small, cluttered flat in a bad section of Los Angeles. USC was located in a high-crime area and living off campus was a calculated risk. The walls of the apartment were decorated with the modern art that Max liked to collect: Chagall and Picasso prints that only cost forty dollars apiece, but which Max had put in expensive frames to give the illusion of the real thing. He once told her if he ever won the Nobel he would blow a hundred grand and buy a small original. Their two offices were a testament to their different personalities. Max’s was in the spare bedroom and was pin neat. Stacy had taken over the pantry and it looked like ground zero at a paper-shredding factory.

Everywhere she glanced she could see her dead husband . . . hear his voice or remember some funny, endearing moment. Augie, the Raccoon, sat in ceramic goofiness on a living-room shelf. Augie was a truly monstrous piece of pottery that Max had bought for her when she was pissed off about a paper she’d been assigned to write on new rabies strains in raccoons. “It’s stupid science,” she’d told him. Augie was up on his hindquarters, his little ceramic paws outstretched, as if he were soliciting a hug. Max bought him

at a student's garage sale and named him Augie, after the Rabies Augmentation Study in Ohio and Pennsylvania, which was the jumping-off point for her paper. He had placed Augie on her desk one evening and said, "You're saving this adorable little guy with your 'stupid science.' Don't give up on the masked rodent."

She had gotten an A on the paper, which had speculated on the viability of using targeted bait to deliver different antiviral liquids into different species of raccoons in the wild. Her paper was published in *Animal Science Magazine*. "Whoopee," she'd said sarcastically, when she got the magazine's acceptance letter and a check for five hundred dollars. But she'd been ashamed of herself and embarrassed that Max had been so right. No science was stupid science if it pushed back a new boundary or asked a new question. All of it had value if it added to the information pool.

"He didn't commit suicide," Stacy said three or four times in the last hour, hanging on to it, as if that one possible inaccuracy would make the whole thing a lie.

"But they said he shot—"

"I don't give a shit what they said, Joanne," she interrupted, "he didn't commit suicide. I talked to him last night till almost one A.M. He was not fucking depressed!" Anger was now taking center stage inside her. Her lover and mentor had been snatched from her at some godforsaken military lab in Maryland, and that fact was now untenable and totally unacceptable.

Wendell sat in the living room, looking at the two distraught women. Joanne was still tearing up, but Stacy, after crying for an hour, had given in to her natural instinct, which was to come out swinging. She had replaced the tears with anger and a stubborn, iron-willed determination. Wendell wasn't an expert on grieving, but he knew that the first stage was denial. This insistence on Stacy's part that Max had not committed suicide sounded like a form of denial to him, but he wasn't quite sure how to deal with it.

“Look, Stace,” he said softly, “I think we need to consider—”

“You were his friend, Wendell,” she interrupted, her eyes glinting anger. “Do you honestly believe he blew his head off with a shotgun? Do you? It’s bullshit!” She shook her head. “Maybe it wasn’t even him.” She looked at Joanne. “I mean, if his head was blown off, maybe they just think it was him, but it was somebody else.”

“Stacy, I think the doctors at Fort Detrick wouldn’t make that kind of mistake,” Wendell said.

“Max told me last night that he didn’t belong there. He said, ‘I don’t think they want me either.’” She looked up at Wendell.

“That could mean anything. Maybe they didn’t accept some of his science. Or maybe he was just having a bad day.”

“Bad day? Yeah, sure, that’s gotta be it,” she said, biting the words off one at a time.

She stood and moved into her bedroom, past the wall-mounted punching bag. Max had painted a frown face on the bag, and on each stitched section he had written a word: INFERENCE—CONCLUSION—ILLATION—JUDGMENT, the four pillars of deductive reason. When Max was stumped on some science problem, he’d stand in front of the bag and fire away. He had been on the boxing team at Stanford and could really get the bag going in a steady rhythm, his athletic body shining with sweat, while working on some brain-stumping hypothesis.

Stacy started throwing things in an overnight case, not even choosing outfits. It was just the act of packing, the feeling of doing something, that she needed.

Joanne and Wendell stood at the door, watching her flurry of activity.

“You’re going to Fort Detrick?” Wendell asked.

“Yes,” she said through clenched teeth, her emotions still coming in waves. Her anger could, in a matter of seconds, recede and be overtaken by grief so overpowering that it almost buckled her. She was trying desperately not to give in to it. Max was gone. A

fact that was impossible for her to fully grasp. He had been her soul mate, her perfect fit. She would never replace him.

“You’re going to go back there and accuse those people of misidentifying the body?” Wendell asked. His voice was gentle, sympathetic. “You think that’s a good idea?”

“Wendell, someone has to claim Max’s body. Someone has to bring him back for burial. That’s my job. I’m his wife,” she challenged. “And while I’m at it, I’m gonna ask a few bloody god-damn questions about why a guy who had no history of depression, no overriding negative perceptions on either his life or career, after just two months at fucking Fort Detrick, suddenly goes out into his backyard, sits on a kitchen chair, and . . . Oh God. . . .” She shuddered like a spaniel coming out of the water. She shook herself, throwing her hair back, then bit her lip and held on until the moment passed. Then she straightened her shoulders. “Well, I don’t buy it!” She slammed her suitcase shut without remembering to put in her toiletries.

“I’m going with you,” Joanne said.

“I can do it, honey . . . really.”

“He was my big brother. I wanna go with you. I *need* to go with you.”

“I’ll book us a flight.”

“This is not smart,” Wendell said. “The doctors at the Fort can make arrangements to ship Max back here.”

“I’m sure they can,” Stacy said, spitting the words out like fruit seeds, “but I’m not going to give ’em the chance.”

She moved into the pantry, booted up her computer, used her search engine to get to “Airlines,” then to “Travel Schedules.” She found a nine-P.M. Delta flight that arrived at five A.M. at Dulles Airport in Virginia, which was forty miles from Fort Detrick. She accessed reservations, booked two seats for that evening, typed in her credit card number, and downloaded her confirmation. Then she went into the bathroom, closed the door, sat on the toilet, and stared at herself in the mirror.

She looked drawn and frightened. She studied her eyes and mouth. The reflection didn't look like her. It was a new mask, as if her face had melted, then stretched and dried differently in the heat from this disaster. When the anger left her, she felt the hopeless grief. "Max . . . Max," she said, wailing at her reflection, "why did you leave me?"

Wendell knocked on the door and called to her.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," she choked out bravely.

Why do people do that? she wondered. *A stupid question followed by a lie.*

Ten minutes later, she steeled herself again, then got up off the toilet and moved back into the bedroom, looking at her watch, then at Joanne.

"We'd better hurry if we're going to get all the way to your house, get you packed and back to the airport by eight."

Joanne got up off the bed and they all left the bedroom. Stacy was the last to exit, and she paused for a minute in front of the punching bag. She could picture Max in his pajama bottoms in front of the bag, smiling. "*If I hit this thing hard enough everything seems to make sense,*" he had once told her. So Stacy put down her suitcase and faced the bag. "I'm gonna go kick us some ass, baby," she whispered to his memory. Then she hit the bag as hard as she could.