

November 30

Lucy Cunningham's control tops were so tight that her L inner thighs hissed like a swarm of cicadas with each step. The rhythm of nylon-on-nylon provided the soundtrack to what was becoming a long and humiliating stroll through the Palm Club's cardio studio, where she was scheduled to meet the man that fate – and her psycho boss – had selected to change her life.

Yes, people were staring. But that was because Lucy was wearing a business suit in a sea of spandex. That, and she was the only chubby chick in a room full of skinny people, which was always *funtastic*.

Lucy adjusted her laptop strap and pasted on a smile. So where was this guy? It was horrifying enough that she'd agreed to a public makeover as part of one of her own marketing campaigns, but now she had to go peeking behind treadmills in a game of find the über-trainer? According to the receptionist, he was a hard-to-miss man with short light brown hair, blue eyes, and a little gold hoop

in his left ear. Yet so far, she'd managed to miss him and his hoop just fine.

Lucy felt ridiculous. Then she felt around inside her jacket pocket for the comfort of her edible worry beads and popped two Milk Duds into her mouth. It hadn't escaped her that the beloved Duds would have to go if she was going to lose a hundred pounds in a year. But for that blissful instant, perhaps the last she'd ever know, Lucy closed her eyes and felt the chocolate melt on her tongue until it was yielding and warm, just the right consistency to swirl around under her soft palate to position for the gratifying payoff – the lethal slam of her bite.

Ah, Milk Duds. The official candy of pissed-off fat women everywhere.

Lucy chewed, now much happier, and allowed her eyes to scan the rows of gleaming steel fitness machines displayed on acres of plush charcoal carpeting. She glanced down at the Post-it note in her damp palm. It said: *Theo Redmond*. Her boss had referred to him as 'personal trainer to the beautiful people of Miami Beach,' which made Lucy smile, seeing that he was about to become personal trainer to Lucy Cunningham, originally of Pittsburgh.

As she rounded the corner and entered a wide sunlit area full of high-tech machines, it occurred to Lucy that she might not have thought this through sufficiently. After all, who in her right mind decides to turn over a new leaf during the holidays? Talk about masochistic.

And she hadn't even considered how she'd introduce herself to this trainer, once she located him. She always preferred the blunt approach but wondered how he'd handle a quip like, *Howdy! I'm the out-of-shape babe you ordered!*

‘Lucy Cunningham?’

Her head swiveled toward the deep voice. She stopped in her tracks as the bronzed God of Fitness arose from his knees. He’d been helping a vaguely familiar-looking woman with a machine that flapped her arms up and down like chicken wings, and the woman now seemed forlorn that he was leaving her side. The man began to walk toward Lucy, smiling.

Her stomach clenched with that near-sick anxiety she felt in the company of jocks, even though it had now been a whole decade since the Taco Bowl incident and there wasn’t an ESPN reporter in sight.

She reminded herself to breathe. She reviewed to herself the truths one by one – the guy moving her way had nice eyes; he had a genuine smile; the guy looked like a life-size Ken doll, only hotter.

His big hand swallowed hers. His skin felt warm and a bit calloused. He squeezed her chubby little fingers. And Lucy knew she was staring, but the sheer physical beauty of this man had apparently left her mute and brain-dead.

He smiled at her and inclined his head to look her in the eye. ‘I’m Theo. I’m running a little late, so would you mind having a seat in the conference room?’ He gestured toward an area walled off in smoky glass. ‘I’ll only be a few minutes.’

Lucy nodded. She looked from the trainer’s big white smile to the exotic woman on the exercise machine and it hit her. She’d just seen that perfect female face and that perfect female form on the front of that month’s *Cosmo*! The woman on that bench was supermodel Gia Altamonte!

Lucy sucked in a breath of surprise, and the partially desiccated Milk Duds went along for the ride.

Theo Redmond peered at her, his brow now furrowed in concern. Then he patted Lucy's back in an area that would have been between her shoulder blades if she'd had shoulder blades, but there'd been nothing remotely blade-like on Lucy's body for years, as she well knew, and she was about to make some amusing comment along those lines when she realized she wasn't getting any air into her lungs.

'You OK, Miss Cunningham?'

Lucy smiled nonchalantly, confident she could will herself to breathe. Any second now it was bound to happen.

The trainer and the cover girl continued to stare at Lucy as the seconds ticked by.

The hell with this, she thought, clutching her throat in what she prayed was the universal sign for: *There seems to be a Milk Dud lodged in my airway.*

Trainer Ken leaped into action. He ripped Lucy's laptop strap from her shoulder, twirled her around so that her back was toward him, and brought his arms up under hers. In a hot flare of humiliation, Lucy realized several things at once: Gia Altamonte was on her cell phone, summoning the paramedics in a particularly annoying high-pitched Latin accent; the trainer had his hands dangerously close to Lucy's underwire-buoyed twins; and, in her last oxygen-fed thought, she realized she was too large for Theo Redmond to encircle in his arms in order to save her life.

Lucy was swimming, up, up into the bright world, surfacing from a heavy and sensual dream, where she was being kissed like nobody's business, kissed so hard her lungs burned. She tried to embrace her dream lover, but

her arms felt too cumbersome to move, so she just angled her mouth to better accommodate his kiss.

‘The ambulance is here, so you can stop making out with her, Theo.’

That voice sounded like fingernails on glass.

‘Lucy? Miss Cunningham? Can you hear me?’

That voice was *sooo* much nicer.

Then it came back to her, and Lucy opened one eye to see the face of Theo Redmond hovering above. He had exquisite soft blue eyes framed in dark brown lashes and brows. He had smooth but strong lips. He was stroking her cheek.

‘Welcome back.’

Lucy closed her eyes tight and tried to melt into the plush carpeting of the cardio room floor. The paramedics rushed in. Their voices were hurried as they took her blood pressure, asked her what medicines she was taking, and – could this possibly get any worse? – heaved her onto a stretcher, wheeled her out through the busy Palm Club, to the elevator, the model and the trainer hurrying along at her side.

‘We’re taking you to the hospital, where –’

‘No.’ Lucy’s eyes snapped open. She glared at the paramedic.

‘Just to be on the safe side,’ he said.

‘I’m fine.’

As Gia Altamonte signed autographs for the ambulance crew crammed in the elevator, Theo leaned down close to Lucy’s face.

‘Do it for me, OK, Lucy?’ One side of his mouth hitched up, and he winked at her. ‘When a woman loses consciousness on our first date, I have to wonder – is it my antiperspirant? My mouthwash?’

‘It was my Milk Duds.’

‘Those things will kill you, you know.’ He let his little grin explode into a blazing smile.

Lucy couldn’t help it – she smiled back, still feeling the astounding pleasure of that dream kiss. And in the heat of Theo Redmond’s smile, something inside her ignited. It occurred to Lucy that dropping a hundred pounds had just become her second-biggest challenge.



December

‘Nice to see you again, Lucy.’

She heaved herself up from the low white leather couch in the Palm Club’s lobby and stood before Trainer Ken in all his glory, wondering how the man had managed to become better-looking in the last four days.

‘I’m baaack,’ Lucy said.

Theo laughed, and she scanned his crisp uniform of navy blue athletic shorts and white Palm Club polo shirt, then looked at those perfect bright teeth framed in those perfect man lips and thought if it weren’t for the mouth-to-mouth-induced nirvana she’d experienced in his presence, she’d need to poke Theo to make sure he was real flesh and blood. The guy was way too perky for first thing in the morning.

‘So how are you, Lucy?’

‘I’m breathing on my own today. At least I got that going for me.’

‘And I can assume you’re not armed and dangerous?’

Lucy wasn't sure she'd heard right, and frowned.

'I'm asking if you're packin' any Milk Duds this morning, Miss Cunningham.'

Lucy's jaw fell open. It seemed that Buff Body Theo's sense of humor was a little edgier than she'd assumed. Maybe she'd been too preoccupied with her own mortification and near-death experience four days ago to appreciate it.

'No ammo today,' she said, letting go with a nervous laugh. Then, as if on cue, she patted her sweat-pants pocket in search of the comfort of a Milk Dud. She looked up in horror to see Theo smiling softly.

'It takes about six weeks to establish a habit or to break one,' he said, his voice kind.

'So I hear.'

'The good news is we've got fifty-one weeks left.' He reached for her hand, squeezing her fingers in a gentle grip. 'How about we start over? I'm Theo Redmond, your trainer for the next year.'

Lucy steadied herself with a deep breath, aware that passing out was passé. 'And I'm Lucy Cunningham, your worst nightmare.'

'Let's think positive, shall we, Miss Cunningham?'

She pulled her hand away and huffed. 'Call me Lucy. I'm not that much older than you, and when you call me "Miss Cunningham" I feel like your spinster piano teacher or something.'

'I'm thirty-two.'

'I'm only twenty-nine.'

'I know.' He tapped his thigh with his clipboard and scowled a little, like he was thinking hard. 'This is where I usually ask my new clients to fill out a bunch of forms, but I don't feel like filling out forms this morning. How about you?'

‘So we’re going out for doughnuts instead?’

Theo tossed his clipboard on the reception counter and cupped Lucy’s elbow, turning her toward the elevators as he chuckled. ‘How about coffee and a sunrise? We can get to know each other a little, see what approach we’re going to take, while we watch the sun come up.’

As they walked down the three flights of stairs to the lobby on Washington Avenue, Lucy checked out her trainer from the corner of her eye and, as she always did, wondered how much more she weighed than the person next to her. She knew it only made things worse, but she couldn’t seem to stop her brain from doing the calculations. Maybe it was another one of those habits she could break with Theo’s help.

‘Are you originally from Miami, Lucy?’ The elevator doors opened and they headed for the street and into the pleasant, saltwater-scented city air.

‘Pittsburgh. I moved here about a year ago to be closer to my parents. They retired to Fort Lauderdale.’

‘Are you enjoying it?’

Lucy smiled to herself as they turned east along Fourth Street, heading toward the strip. The truth was that moving to Miami had made her feel like a foreign exchange student plopped down in an alien land. But her appreciation for the sun and heat and colorful array of humankind was slowly beginning to chip away at the culture shock. ‘It’s growing on me,’ she said.

Theo gestured toward the front patio of the News Café on Ocean and motioned for her to go up the steps in front of him. He pulled out a wrought-iron chair for her, then sat down across the table under the market umbrella.

‘I already know what approach I’d like to take to this whole business,’ Lucy said.

Theo grinned. ‘Oh? What approach is that?’

‘I’d like to stroll through one of those magic chambers and come out a hundred pounds lighter, a hundred grand richer, and drop-dead gorgeous.’

Theo leaned back in his chair to leisurely study his newest client. Her brown hair was yanked into a tight and shiny ponytail. She had a sweet face, with smooth and clear skin, nicely shaped full lips, and adorable cheeks. Theo briefly scanned the rest of her. At about five-seven, she was a big woman but evenly proportioned. She carried herself well. It dawned on him that Lucy Cunningham might be the real deal if she lost the weight. *No*. When *she lost it*, he reminded himself.

It was true that Lucy had ended up in the ER before she’d even laced up her sneakers, but he still saw this yearlong project as doable. He’d help the marketing executive lose up to one hundred pounds, documented in monthly TV appearances, magazine columns, and nonstop advertising, and they’d make a thousand dollars each for every pound she shed.

At the end of the year, Lucy would be thin and rich and he could afford to get his butt back to med school. Everybody wins.

Theo took note of the hefty-chick camouflage Lucy wore that morning – navy blue leggings that ended just below her knees and a large T-shirt that hit mid thigh, an attempt to hide what couldn’t be hidden. He returned his gaze to her face and encountered a set of big gray-blue eyes that were lit up with anger and defiance. Her pretty smile had transformed into a smirk.

The waitress appeared and Theo ordered decaf. Lucy followed suit. ‘I’m assuming you know where we can find one of those magic chambers?’ he asked.

‘I was hoping *you* did.’

‘There isn’t one. So that leaves Plan B.’ Theo waited for her to respond, but her gray eyes bored into his, unblinking. ‘Aren’t you curious what Plan B is, Lucy?’

The coffees came and Lucy swore she could smell cologne over the scent of java. She hoped it was only shampoo or soap, because she didn’t trust jocks who wore cologne. Like most of her issues surrounding men, that little quirk could be traced right back to Brad Zirkle and the Taco Bowl incident. But for this thing to work with Theo, she was going to have to at least *try* to trust him, cologne or no.

‘Plan B? Bring it on,’ she said.

Lucy watched Theo hide a smile by sipping his coffee. Then his eyes wandered over her head toward the street. She followed his gaze to a beautiful redhead strolling confidently up the sidewalk, who waved and called out, ‘Catch you Thursday, Theo-dorable!’

‘Thursday it is!’ Theo returned his gaze to Lucy, not missing a beat, and as he chatted about unrefined grains and positive thinking, Lucy wondered just how much of a ladies’ man her trainer was. With those looks and lip-locking skills, he had to be an A-lister among the single females of South Beach.

But *Theo-dorable*? Puh-leeze.

‘Plan B is whatever works for you. We find it and we do it every day until it becomes a part of who you are.’ Theo leaned across the small café table, lowered his chin, and looked directly into Lucy’s eyes. She realized the most disarming thing about the guy was that he was masculine and exquisite at the same time. His face was perfectly balanced – a strong and straight nose, widely spaced and intelligent blue eyes, smooth lips, defined

cheeks, ending in a slightly squared and cleanly shaven chin.

And his body was . . . well, Theo's body was solid and graceful and sun-kissed. He wasn't some bulging, muscle-bound hulk. The man simply *flowed*.

Lucy wiped perspiration from her forehead as her heart thudded, wondering if the redhead on the sidewalk or Theo's other girlfriends ever grew immune to his looks. Did they break out into a sweat just listening to him talk? She wondered if Gia Altamonte was one of those girlfriends and how many more of Miami's supermodels belonged to that club.

'And you'll follow Plan B until you can't imagine life without it. Until you feel balanced and healthy, look fabulous, and have more energy than you ever thought possible. How does that sound?'

Lucy scrunched up her nose. 'I still want the magic chamber.'

Just then, a pretty blonde sat down a few tables away, chatting on her cell phone while she smiled at Theo. *Hey, you*, she mouthed silently. Theo nodded his head in the woman's direction and Lucy began to wonder if he was a trainer *and* a gigolo.

Theo described how he wanted her to keep a daily journal of her food, her feelings, and her goals. 'We'll tackle all the hard stuff tomorrow, after the TV studio, OK?'

'Yep.' Lucy eyed the blonde who eyed Theo.

'I'll have a detailed questionnaire for you about your fitness and health history, your current food choices and lifestyle. The more thorough your answers, the faster we can hit on exactly what will work. Sound good?'

Lucy froze, slowly understanding the implications of his last comment. She had to put in *writing* what she'd

been eating lately? Was nothing sacred? ‘Make sure to have extra sheets of paper handy,’ Lucy said.

Theo lowered his voice. ‘You’ll need to bring your swimsuit tomorrow, too, OK?’

No, that wasn’t OK! She’d rather die than let him see her in a bathing suit. ‘Are we going snorkeling?’

Theo shook his head gently, knowing this part was going to be rough on Lucy. ‘It’s for the hydrostatic tank –’

‘The whaaa –?’

‘We’ll immerse you in water and get an accurate measure of your percentage of body fat.’

Lucy’s eyes went huge.

‘We have to know where we’re starting. That’s all it is – a place to start.’

‘But do we have to start *there*?’

‘I thought you agreed to a fitness evaluation.’

Lucy gulped. She blinked. She looked away for something to focus on while she got hold of herself. Her eyes landed on the blonde again, now crossing her zero-body-fat legs and batting her eyelashes at Theo.

‘Couldn’t we just make a guesstimate on my body fat? Like, say, ninety-eight percent, and go from there?’

Theo tried not to laugh. He watched Lucy Cunningham swallow hard and keep her eyes on anything but him. The embarrassment pulsed off her body in waves. He felt for her, he really did, but they couldn’t start until he was sure she was a willing participant.

‘Did you agree to this, Lucy? Are you aware that what we find out tomorrow and everything else we glean from lab tests, strength and cardiovascular evaluations – *everything* – is going to be made public?’

‘I’m doing this for the cash; let’s get that straight right from the start.’ Lucy took a deep breath. ‘I know I could

stand to lose weight, but I plan to use the money to start my own company. And I do not plan to fail. It's just that getting started sounds so . . .'

 Lucy looked down at her hands. *'Hard.'*

Theo pondered the slope of her neck and shoulders, how she overfilled the small café chair. Clearly, they'd be doing lots of cardio, adding machine and freestyle exercises over time. He was thinking Pilates for core strength. Yoga for flexibility.

He watched Lucy's jaw clench with frustration and figured she'd benefit from a few sessions where she could beat the living shit out of a kickboxing dummy. He made a mental note of it.

But as he continued to watch her, Theo was struck with the urge to hug this woman, tell her everything would be all right. That had never happened with a client before. Yes, it was about money for him, too, but he liked Lucy Cunningham. He wanted her to be happy. And there was something about her – maybe the mix of brave girl and smart-assed woman – that tugged at him.

'I know it takes a lot of courage to do what you're doing.' She didn't respond, and he watched as she hid her face in her hands. Theo worried she'd choked again. 'Lucy?'

'I need a minute, please.' She jumped from the chair, laced her way through the tables, and ran out onto the sidewalk. Theo watched her go – she had decent running form and seemed pretty agile – then he saw that she was crying.

He sighed, threw a ten down on the table, and went after her. Lucy had stopped at the corner. She was red-faced and out of breath as she waited for a chance to cross at the curb.

‘How long’s it been since you took a nice run?’ Theo stood at her side, following Lucy’s blank stare toward the entrance to Eighth Street Beach and the rising sun beyond.

‘What year is this again?’ The light turned and Lucy walked across Ocean Boulevard, still breathing hard.

‘That long, huh?’

‘I used to run. I gained fifty pounds during college, but before then I used to play softball and racquetball. I rode horses, skied, and hiked, too.’ She turned to him in direct challenge.

Theo couldn’t prevent the surprise from showing on his face. He was sorry Lucy saw it, because she looked away, embarrassed. ‘So why did you stop?’

Lucy whipped her head around so fast her ponytail brushed his shoulder. She looked up at him with what he could only describe as dread. ‘No reason.’

Theo didn’t push it. He knew that tomorrow she’d cover all the details in her client questionnaire. Today was for getting her to relax. Getting her psyched up for the long haul ahead. And so far, he’d failed miserably.

The timing couldn’t be worse, but Theo saw a curvy little woman heading toward them who had once dated his best friend, Tyson. Theo couldn’t remember the woman’s name and was relieved when she strolled by with only a smile. Then he saw Lucy’s openmouthed stare.

‘Do you run an escort service on the side, Theo?’

He laughed. ‘Naw. I just know a lot of people on South Beach.’

‘A lot of female people.’

‘And now I know you.’ He smiled at her.

Lucy was not often tongue-tied, but she was a little

rusty at engaging in small talk with gorgeous hunks. The truth was, she felt just plain defenseless against Theo Redmond and his enchanting smile.

‘Where are we going, Lucy?’

She’d apparently been staring at him in a trance, walking aimlessly. It was a wonder she hadn’t flattened a few pedestrians.

‘Wherever you take me,’ she said, flinching at the lovesick eighth grader she’d become, worrying she’d just officially blown her second chance at a first impression.

But Theo only laughed. He put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. ‘You’re in good hands, Lucy Cunningham.’

Office of Doris Lehman, MSW, PhD

‘Help. I have the hots for my trainer.’

Lucy had barely flopped down into the familiar peach damask love seat when she made that pronouncement. She let her eyes settle on the peaceful Japanese paper folding screen in front of the window, the focal point for her meditative stares the whole year she’d been in Miami. Her eyes scanned the familiar graceful sweep of bamboo leaves and transparent cherry blossoms, the little tiny female mouths of the little tiny women in tiny kimonos and tiny wooden platform sandals.

Tiny, tiny, tiny.

Lucy’s therapist sat as she usually did, serene, neat, notebook perched on a crossed thigh, eyeglasses tucked on top of her heavily sprayed salt-and-pepper pageboy like a headband.

‘Have you told him you find him attractive?’

‘I can’t stop drooling long enough to form the words.’

‘I see.’

‘Besides, it’s the Brad Zirkle thing all over again, you know?’ Lucy leaned forward and balanced her elbows on her knees. ‘Why do I always go for the ones who are out of my reach? Why do I set myself up like that?’

Doris smiled politely. ‘From how you’ve described him, it would seem Theo is much nicer than Brad Zirkle.’

‘Yeah, Mr Wonderful is still wonderful.’ Lucy sighed, then snarled at the geisha girls, trying to picture how her size 22 hips would look in a kimono pulled that tight at the waist. If she had a waist. She used to have one, if she recalled correctly, but she couldn’t remember how it felt to walk around with an indentation somewhere near the center of her body.

‘I sense some anger in how you describe him.’

Lucy had to laugh. ‘Not anger. I’m just kind of ashamed of myself for fantasizing about him the way I do – you know, him naked, feeding me Lorna Doone cookies while I watch Andy Griffith reruns.’

Doris began to scribble on her clipboard.

‘Am I having a breakthrough?’

Doris grinned. ‘I’m not sure yet. Please go on.’

‘Theo seems pretty shallow, but God is he *hot*, Doris. I’m talking perfect. Theo Redmond is perfect. He’s so perfect that it doesn’t even matter that he’s shallow. Did you know that most of his clients are models?’

‘Shallow.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you know this how?’

Doris’s tone of voice surprised Lucy. ‘Look, he’s very nice. All I’m saying is based on all that perfection, I’m thinking he must focus more on his appearance than his character. It must take all his time to have that perfect body. The perfect hair. That perfect smile.’

'I see,' Doris said. She put down her pen. 'Just as one might assume that an overweight person is a lazy slob?'

'*Doris!*' Lucy sat back in the love seat and blinked a few times.

'Just a little food for thought, Lucy.'



January

Journal Entry Jan 1

Breakfast: $\frac{3}{4}$ c oatmeal; 1 c skim milk; 1 c strawberries;
half decaf/half regular coffee

Lunch: 3 oz chicken breast; 1 slice whole wheat bread;
1 tbsp light mayo; celery; lettuce; tomato; 1 med apple

Dinner: 3 oz corned beef; 1 c cooked cabbage; large
salad w/ orange and red peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers,
and 2 tbsp light ranch dressing

Snack: 1 c plain yogurt; $\frac{1}{4}$ c light granola; 1 orange

Affirmation for Today:

*I am strong enough to refrain from killing any or all
members of my family.*

‘Lucinda, honey, would you pass the soda bread?’

Lucy handed the still-warm Irish bread to her mother and tried not to let the heavenly scent enter her nostrils and pierce her primordial brain, which would force her to stick her face directly into the basket and growl like a starving alley dog as she ripped off giant hunks with her incisors.

‘You’re eating like a bird.’ It was the fifth time her father had made that observation since they sat down to dinner. ‘No potatoes. No bread. Are you sick?’

‘Oh, for crying out loud, Bill. Leave her alone. You know she’s on that diet.’ Lucy watched with envy as her mother slathered butter all over a thick chunk of soda bread and savored a healthy bite.

Lucy reached for her glass of ice water and sipped demurely, looking around the New Year’s Day table, wondering why she’d thought she could survive another visit to the Land o’ Food when Christmas had been such an unmitigated disaster. She still hadn’t come clean to Theo about the pecan pie from December 26 and the deception was gnawing a hole in her soul. She’d promised that everything that went into her mouth would go into her food journal, and she’d already blown it, not even a month into her new life. And tomorrow was her first weigh-in! On live television!

She had no choice but to come clean. It’s not like she could say she *forgot* she ate half a pie.

‘What kind of diet is it again, honey?’

The kind where you sneak a half a pecan pie.

‘It’s not a diet, Mother. Lucy calls it a fitness and nutrition plan.’ This clarification came from Lucy’s older sister, Mary Fran, who was shoveling some kind of green bean paste from a jar into the open maw of her youngest.

Lucy watched her nephew spew most of it out and bang his fists on the high chair tray. She could relate. If she didn't get a piece of that soda bread in the next five seconds, she'd be banging her fists on the table as well. Somehow, she'd survived an entire month eating nothing but whole grains, fresh produce, and lean cuts of meat. What the hell kind of torture was *that*? Nothing fried. Nothing gooey. Nothing with icing on it. Nothing even vaguely cupcake-shaped. Lucy didn't think she'd make it through this dinner without shaming herself.

'She doesn't need to diet. She's beautiful.' Her father patted Lucy's hand. 'Have some potatoes, sweetheart. You won't have good luck this year unless you do.'

'Where do you get this stuff, Daddy? I swear!' Mary Fran wiped a green smear off little Holden's face while attempting to feed herself. Lucy decided it was no wonder Frannie was thin. She never had a second to eat. Maybe having three babies in five years was the secret to staying thin.

Lucy's eyes strayed to her mother. *Cancel that.*

'So how much poundage you dropped so far, Luce?' Dan could always be counted on to cut to the chase. That's what brothers were for, she supposed.

Her mother gasped. 'Danny! What a rude thing to ask! I hope to God that's not the way you speak to your patients!' Then, from across the table, she produced a sympathetic smile for Lucy. 'So how much *have* you lost, honey?'

Lucy was in the throes of a bad case of déjà vu and looked at her watch. It wasn't like she could feign a work emergency today and get in the car and drive the forty-five minutes to Miami. Even Stephan Sherrod, the world's worst boss, managed to avoid marketing and advertising emergencies on New Year's Day.

‘I don’t know how much weight I’ve lost, Dan, Mother, Daddy, Frannie. As I think I may have mentioned at Christmas, my trainer will weigh me just once a month, and tomorrow marks the end of my first full month. Right now, the numbers aren’t as important as improving my fitness level.’

‘So you haven’t lost anything yet?’

Lucy gave Dan the look of disgust she reserved only for her baby brother. ‘You’ll be the first to know. The minute I’m weighed, I’ll have them put out an all-points bulletin. It’s unfortunate you’re still in Pittsburgh, or you could just watch the *WakeUp Miami* show like everyone else.’

‘I think you look great,’ Mary Fran said, hauling Holden’s wiggling body from the high chair. Lucy watched her hustle into the kitchen, where she held the baby over the kitchen sink and used a damp paper towel to scrape bean paste from his hair and clothing. Then she called out, ‘Just don’t try to lose too much too fast, Lucy! That’s dangerous!’

‘I’m doing my best to avoid that.’

Dan laughed.

‘Well, I saw the ad in the *Herald* the other day,’ her mother said. ‘You should’ve worn your hair down, sweetheart. You look much better with it down. But your trainer looked like a movie star. Here. Have some more brisket.’

Lucy decided maybe she could lie about the work emergency. ‘Thanks, Mom. I think. I’ll pass on the beef.’

‘So let me see if I understand this, pumpkin.’ Lucy’s father offered her a slice of bread, which she managed to turn down. ‘You and Jack La Lanne get to split a hundred grand if you pull this off?’

Lucy sighed, positive that she’d gone over the details

with her father at least once. ‘No. We each get a thousand dollars for each pound I lose, up to one hundred.’

‘And that crazy boss of yours is paying for this? Was this his idea?’

‘It was my idea to capitalize on the reality-show make-over craze and build a campaign around one person’s success story. I just didn’t know it would be me. That *was* my crazy boss’s idea, and our client – the Palm Club – agreed to put up the cash.’

Dan cleared his throat. ‘Uh, Luce? Aren’t you afraid somebody will figure out that you’re . . . well, you know . . . the girl who brought down the Pitt State football program? The famous slump buster?’

‘*Daniel Murphy Cunningham!*’ Her mother’s fork crashed to her plate. ‘How *could* you? You know we’ve agreed never to speak of the Taco Bowl incident in front of Lucy!’

‘What in God’s name did he just say?’ Mary Fran yelled over the running faucet.

‘Hey, it’s not a big deal, really.’ Lucy had worried the same thing, so she couldn’t blame Dan for asking. ‘I’d never do this kind of thing back home, but it happened ten years ago in Pittsburgh. It probably didn’t even make the news down here.’

Dan shot her a grateful look. ‘I just wanted to make sure you’d thought this through.’

‘I told Stephan I wouldn’t do it at first, but then he dangled the money in front of me, and I saw it as my way to escape Sherrod & Thoms and start my own company. It was just too good to pass up.’

Her brother frowned. ‘But what happens if you blow it?’

‘*Dan!*’ Mary Fran hustled back to the table and shoved

Holden into her brother's lap. 'She's not going to blow it! Lucy can do anything she sets her mind to.'

Holden chose that moment to rake his little raggedy baby fingernails across Dan's cheek. 'Ow!'

'I think what we're asking is, are you sure you want to put yourself out there like this?' Lucy's mother reached across the table to stroke her fingers. 'It's a huge challenge, Lucy. I just don't want to see my sweet girl hurt or humiliated – not ever again.'

'Thanks, Mom. I think. But it's too late now. The Palm Club is paying our agency a lot of money to run this campaign, and *I'm* the campaign – monthly appearances on *WakeUp Miami*, a weekly column in *Miami Woman*, the biggest advertising blitz I've ever put together. I have no choice but to be successful.'

'That's an awful lot of pressure to put on yourself, Luce.' Mary Fran looked worried.

'By God, those reality TV shows are something, aren't they?' Her father served himself more potatoes. 'They make over your car, your house, your marriage, your filing cabinet, your face.' He went for the cabbage next. 'I think the only frontier left for TV is ritual human sacrifice and live copulation.'

Lucy's mother rolled her eyes. Mary Fran pursed her mouth in disgust. Then Dan said, 'You must not have direct satellite yet.'

The men took a cleaned-up Holden into the family room to watch football while the women cleared the table. Since her sister had traveled from Atlanta with just one kid, Lucy hoped they might have time to chat. But Frannie looked like she needed a nap more than a heart-to-heart.

'How's Keith doing?'

Mary Fran sighed at Lucy's question. 'The usual. He

claimed the promotion would mean less time on the road, but I don't see it.'

Lucy put a stack of leftovers in the refrigerator, concerned by the fatigue in her sister's voice.

'He said that's just temporary, right?'

Mary Fran looked up from the sink. 'I'm not falling for that again.'

'If you ask me, you look like you're just plain ready to fall over.' Lucy's mother hugged Mary Fran and suggested Lucy take her to the guest room for a rest.

'We'll have dessert a little later.' Her mother gave Lucy a wink. 'Pecan pie. Your favorite.'

Lucy sat on the edge of the guest bed and watched Mary Fran peel off her size 4 jeans and crawl under the hand-made quilt. She tried to remember what it felt like to be a size 4 and take up this little space on a double bed, but her memory of second grade was fuzzy.

'So tell me about this trainer, Luce.' Mary Fran took a deep breath and pulled the quilt up under her chin. She looked pale. 'Is she a weight-lifter chick? Or one of those aerobics instructor-cheerleader types?'

Lucy smiled a little, realizing that Fran hadn't been inundated by the image of Lucy and Theo at metro stops. She also realized she'd never been asked to describe Theo to anyone.

Four weeks had now passed, which meant she'd made it through twenty one-hour training sessions. He met her at the door every weekday before dawn, wearing his trainer getup, never a minute late, always in good spirits. He was accredited out the yin-yang in everything from sports nutrition to exercise physiology. He was patient but pushed her to go a little higher, do a little more, every day.

As a bonus, he remained the most searingly hot man-babe she'd ever laid eyes on.

'My trainer is a he, and he's quite good at his job,' Lucy said.

Frannie looked at her suspiciously. 'That cute, huh?'

'Lord help me – I think I'm gonna die if I don't get me some of that.'

Frannie laughed. 'This sounds promising.'

It was Lucy's turn to laugh. 'Yeah, well, a girl can dream, but he's way out of my league, and besides, it seems he already dates half the premenopausal female population of South Beach.'

'Hmm. When was *your* last date, Luce?'

Lucy sighed, hating to admit the truth. 'Remember the Oktoberfest two years ago? Very good schnitzel, very bad date?'

'You mean that programmer dweeb Keith set you up with?'

'Yep.'

'The one who said you had childbearing hips?'

'That would be him.'

'My God, Lucy. You haven't gone out since?'

'I think that night cured me of my urge to date.'

Mary Fran patted Lucy's arm and laughed. 'We'll go out on the town together. Meet some people. I'll be running away from Atlanta soon anyway, so how about I move in with you? We can party every weekend. Won't that be fun?'

Lucy reared back and stared. 'What *are* you talking about?'

'Oh hell, Lucy.' Her sister's words came out soft and sad. 'He's never home – and I mean *never*. We're lucky to have two family dinners together a month.'

‘Jeesh!’

‘I think I’ve had it. I’m so tired some days I can’t stay awake.’

‘Oh, Frannie. Does Keith know how much you need him at home?’

Mary Fran laughed. ‘The man knows. Trust me.’ She got quiet. ‘I think he’s having an affair.’

‘What?’ Lucy sat up straight. ‘I’m going to *kill* him!’

Fran yawned. ‘Maybe I’m just imagining it, but when he’s not on the road he can’t wait to get out of the house, and it’s such chaos all the time that I can’t blame him. I just wonder if he’s running to someone else – someone who doesn’t have kid snot on the front of her blouse.’

‘Oh, Fran.’ Lucy stroked her sister’s sassy little haircut. ‘Talk to Keith. Confront him.’

Mary Fran leaned against her sister and shook her head. ‘I’d rather just hang out with you and enjoy the single Miami girl lifestyle.’

Lucy chuckled. ‘Yes, just day after day of nothing but sex, clubbing, sex, sex, sex.’

Mary Fran turned her sleepy gaze to Lucy. ‘It might be for the best. Sex is what got me in this mess to begin with.’

‘But it’s such a good mess.’ Lucy kissed her sister’s cheek, seeing once again why people used to say Mary Fran was a miniature version of herself. Her sister was two years older, five inches shorter, and God knew how many pounds lighter, but with the same color hair and eyes and light pink complexion. Her petite cuteness didn’t bother Lucy as much as it used to, and seeing her wrung out like this broke Lucy’s heart.

‘Anyway,’ she said with a sigh, ‘I only have a one-bedroom and we’d end up killing each other over bathroom countertop space.’

Mary Fran had no comeback for that, because she'd fallen asleep.

Theo took a seat at the conference table and smiled at Tyson on his right, then Lola on his left. Palm Club staff meetings were always painful, but today's promised to be agonizing, because they were going to discuss the Lucy Cunningham project and Lola DiPaolo was already sneering at him.

Their boss, Ramona Cortez, regaled them with end-of-year sales figures and assigned trainers for several new clients, then gestured toward Theo. 'Get us up to speed on how your fifteen minutes of fame is going.'

He felt the heat of Lola's mascara-laden evil eye just before she said, 'Fifteen minutes that's gonna drag on for a whole frickin' year.'

Theo laughed along with every other trainer in the room, including his best friend, Tyson Williams, a bald and baby-faced former University of Florida running back who showed a bit of wear and tear that morning. Theo wondered which of Tyson's favorite clubs had kept him from his beauty sleep.

'We're doing great so far. We're in here every weekday morning at five, so give her a little encouragement if you see her. She's going to need all the support she can get.'

'And what are you gonna need at the end of this year? An updated résumé?'

Theo grinned at the remark from one of the trainers across the table and waited till the laughter subsided. 'Miss Cunningham and I will get the job done,' he said.

'Too bad the cameras weren't here the day she upchucked her M&M's,' Lola said with a laugh.

'No such thing as too many documentaries on how to

perform the modified Heimlich maneuver,' Tyson added.

'It was Milk Duds,' Theo said.

Ramona jumped in. 'We're already getting an amazing amount of press with this project. It's possible some of you will be approached by the media for comment in the coming months, so please clear it with me first before you're interviewed.' She smiled at Theo. 'This campaign is costing a bundle up front, but we're going to reap the benefits for years to come.'

Lola frowned and shook her head. 'Have you ever had a client drop a hundred pounds in a year? I mean, get real, Theo!'

'No, I haven't.' It was the truth. He'd never tried something this ambitious, with this kind of timetable or public exposure. Of course, he'd cared for obese patients as a med student and helped some clients make dramatic changes in their lives, but lately it had been one nearly-perfect-on-the-outside Palm Club client after the next.

Frankly, it was getting old.

'Remember my client who lost sixty pounds?' Lola charged on with her story, oblivious to the fact that no one remembered any such client. 'Well, I heard she left her husband for the China Wok delivery boy.'

Theo wasn't sure what point Lola was attempting to make, as usual.

Tyson turned to Theo. 'Looks like she's sticking with it. You doing six days?'

Lucy was sticking with it, and though her first weigh-in was still a few days away, he could see the change in her. Her aerobic capacity was up. Her upper-body strength had already improved. She'd obviously lost weight. She was handling the nutrition plan well and had been sticking with daily journaling, short-term goal setting, and counseling.

He'd done a boatload of research on cardio training and muscle toning for women, along with the newest motivation strategies. He'd picked the brains of a couple of his friends now in sports medicine. He'd even taped a few episodes of *Dr Phil*.

'We're doing five days on, one light day, and one rest day. She has access to me round the clock.'

'Oooh. Every girl's dream,' Lola cooed.

Tyson stared at Theo, his head cocked to the side, his dark eyes quite wide. '*One hundred* pounds, though, man. I still say better you than me.'

Ramona closed the meeting, sending the trainers out into the gym, but stopped Theo at the door.

'Got a minute?'

He leaned on the table edge and crossed his arms over his chest. 'Absolutely.'

Ramona smiled at him. 'You know, you're the best trainer I have and the only one I could have trusted with this. I wanted to tell you I appreciate how hard you're working.'

He nodded. 'Sure.'

'Look, Theo. I realize you've got your sights set higher than the Palm Club. I knew that when I hired you three years ago.' Ramona's warm brown eyes crinkled with her smile. 'You're going to handle Lucy and all the media attention beautifully. And I know that when it's over and you've got your money, you'll leave here and finish med school. How close am I to being right?'

Theo let go with a laugh. Ramona was so easy to work for that he sometimes found himself thinking of her as more a friend than a boss. But at her core, she was a shrewd businesswoman. When she held out that one-hundred-thousand-dollar bonus as bait, she knew he'd bite, and she even knew why.

‘If they let me back in, yes.’

‘They’ll let you in.’

Theo shifted his weight from foot to foot. ‘I love what I do here, Ramona.’

‘And your clients love that you do it.’ She let loose with a wide grin and patted his shoulder. ‘When the agency suggested the idea, I knew it had to be you. All I ask is that you let Lucy Cunningham down easy when she falls in love with you.’

Theo was used to this kind of teasing. He had an undeserved rep for being a player, and nobody but Tyson knew that he rarely dated. Between raising Buddy, working two jobs, Special Olympics coaching, and studying his ass off for the reentry exam, there wasn’t time for women, especially another one who’d break his heart. He hoped someday that might change, but that day seemed a ways off.

‘And a year is a very long time for a lonely woman to be in close proximity to Theo-dorable.’

He shrugged and decided to play along. ‘I can’t help it that I’m devastatingly handsome and perfect in every way.’

Ramona chuckled, headed for the door, then turned back toward him. ‘To your clients, that’s exactly what you are.’ Theo tried to cut her off, but she held up her hand. ‘Do you know you’ve got a waiting list of females a mile long? Have you noticed that out of your forty active clients there is only one man, and he’s in love with you, too?’

‘I’ve noticed.’

‘Lucy is our meal ticket. The world will watch her go from frumpy to fabulous in your care and we’ll be the hottest fitness franchise in the state – hotter even than Goldstein’s Gym, and you know how long I’ve wanted to bury that sleazy bastard.’

‘I know.’

‘Your job is to keep Lucy Cunningham motivated and on track. Get as close to her as you need, but keep it professional. I know you can walk that line.’

Theo frowned at his boss, incredulous. ‘She is not exactly my type, Ramona.’

She shook her head and laughed. ‘But you’re *hers*, Theo. You’re every woman’s type.’

Theo closed his eyes and sighed. ‘I can handle Lucy Cunningham.’

Ramona had already shut the door behind her.

‘You can open your eyes now.’

Lucy did. And the number on the scale seemed too good to be true. She looked up into the TV studio camera and gasped, ‘I lost *twenty-two pounds*?’

She blinked into the lights while the *WakeUp Miami* audience applauded. Theo offered her his hand, helped her down from the scale, and escorted her back to the row of upholstered chairs on the set. Lucy felt the cameras trail behind her and heard an occasional whistle or hoot from the crowd.

‘Congratulations, Lucy,’ cooed cohost John Weaver, who clapped right along with the audience.

She felt a little self-conscious sitting there in her snug pink sweatpants and a T-shirt, all eyes and smiles focused on her. At least it was a new T-shirt. A pretty lime green color the makeup people said looked nice against her complexion.

‘Do you feel any different, Lucy? Tell us – how in the world does that *feel*?’ Carolina Buendia’s question caused the applause to taper off, and Lucy swallowed uncomfortably. She glanced at Theo, who gave her a wink.

Lucy tapped the small microphone clipped to her shirt, hunched her shoulder to bring her mouth close, and said, 'I feel smaller.'

Theo finished measuring Lucy for the second time that morning, then led her from the Palm Club's trainer room out into the gym.

'Well?'

'The measurements I got at the TV studio were accurate.' Theo shook his head in disbelief.

'But this is good, right?'

'Too good. I don't want you losing this fast.'

She stopped walking. 'What are you, *nuts*?'

They arrived at the treadmill. Theo punched in a ten-minute warm-up program and Lucy hopped on.

'I expected you to lose a lot up front. That's normal. But you lost eight inches and twenty-two pounds, and that's too much in one month. I need to keep you in the two-pound-a-week range.'

Lucy perked up at that. 'So I get to eat more?'

'You wish.' Theo playfully tugged on the towel around her neck, then made some notes on his clipboard. 'I'll weigh and measure you once a week for a while to keep a better eye on things, see if I need to make adjustments. But that will be for my eyes only. I don't want you to get too attached to numbers.'

He looked up, caught her eye, and smiled. 'The bottom line is you're doing great, Lucy. I'm proud of you. So how was your New Year's?'

Lucy tried to let everything he'd just said sink in. *She was a success*. She was *too* successful! Maybe she didn't have to tell him about the pecan pie after all. Obviously, it hadn't hurt her. Maybe this whole weight loss thing would

be a snap. Suddenly, for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why she hadn't tried this sooner!

'My New Year's was marvy. Partied all night with the beautiful people.'

Theo gave her a crooked smile that made her stomach do a strange flip-flop. 'Yeah, I spent it with my family, too. Less aggravation.'

'We obviously don't have the same family.'

Theo let his smile linger for a moment while he reached for her wrist and took her pulse. Lucy had become accustomed to Theo touching her, but it still sent a charge through her nervous system every time, and she knew he'd never get an accurate pulse rate that way. She was tempted to tell him to subtract at least 10 from the figure.

When he was done, he patted her forearm affectionately and went back to his clipboard. 'How did you do with your nutrition plan the last few days?'

'Good. My journal's in my gym bag.'

She watched Theo bend down, push aside her water bottle, and root through her clean underwear before he pulled out the journal. She could have died. But really, was there anything left to hide from the man? He knew her weight to the digital ounce, her percentage of body fat – which was less than 98 percent, thank God – along with her body mass index, resting heart rate, base metabolic rate, and cholesterol level. He knew what foods she craved and exactly when she craved them. Besides, it wasn't like her white granny panties would trip his wire.

Lucy sighed, watching him flip through her journal. He would soon know about the pecan pie, too, because she'd finally admitted to it in writing. *Oh hell.*

Theo made a noncommittal 'hmmm' sound and glanced up at her, his little gold earring glittering in the overhead

lights of the cardio studio. He held her gaze for a second, his smile soft and thoughtful. 'That's one whopper of a slip, Cunningham.'

'Look. I'm fully aware that pecan pie isn't on my nutrition plan.'

He said nothing but returned the journal to her bag, then leaned against the treadmill, long and relaxed, and looked at her.

'I know I'm supposed to stay away from refined sugar and white flour.'

He nodded.

Theo's nonchalance pissed her off. Why didn't he just come out and yell at her? 'And the last time I looked, a thousand calories worth of corn syrup and pie crust fit both those categories rather nicely.'

'Probably does.'

'Aren't you going to say something?'

'Any whipped cream?'

'No.'

'I don't like whipped cream on mine, either.'

A sudden change in treadmill speed nearly made Lucy trip. She had to push herself to keep up the pace. Her lungs began to pump.

'That's it?' she cried, breathing hard. 'That's all you have to say about the pie?'

Theo shrugged. 'The world didn't end, right?'

'Of course not.' She tried to scowl at him, but her facial muscles wouldn't comply. She felt too warm and relaxed this morning, her body loosening and swaying to the steady beat of her feet on the wide rubber belt. She could feel the blood moving through her veins. She was starting to sweat in earnest. She felt proud and happy and, she realized with a jolt of awareness, a whopping twenty-two pounds lighter.

‘We’re in this for the long haul. You made a mistake, but you didn’t let it derail you. That’s the important thing.’

She gave him a grateful smile.

‘But if you do it again, I’ll have to kick your ass. And that’s the end of our little pie discussion.’ Theo continued scribbling on his clipboard, one ankle casually crossed over the other.

Lucy sighed. She supposed he couldn’t help it, but Theo Redmond throbbled with the good-looking guy vibe, that chromosomal-level confidence that made every female within a mile perk up, suck in her gut, and smile in an effort to catch his eye.

Except for herself, of course. It was understood that women like Lucy were automatically disqualified from playing those games with men like Theo. She’d once been stupid enough to believe she could be the exception to the rule, and look where it landed her. Never again.

She studied Theo, all that lean muscle and golden skin, and realized it was a blessing, really. There could never be any kind of sexual connection between them, and that left her free to be herself with him, the red-faced, sweaty mess she was.

Lucy was huffing now, starting to drip. She looked down at the digital readout on the treadmill console and frowned. ‘Hey!’ she gasped. ‘I thought . . . we were . . . sticking to three-point-two miles an hour . . . maximum incline . . . of three!’

‘Think again.’ Theo didn’t raise his eyes from the clipboard.

‘But –’

He looked up, his grin spreading ear to ear. ‘Don’t want you to get bored, Cunningham.’

She shot him a glare.

‘Keep talking to me. This is just a warm-up, and if you can’t talk, then it’s too much.’

‘I can talk.’ The sun was just starting to peek over the water. It made her smile. This entire experience made her smile – she was awake to see the sun come up. She was moving, sweating, breathing, meeting a challenge. She felt alive.

She turned and saw Theo scrutinizing her. ‘Thank you, Theo,’ she said, knowing she was beaming at him.

‘For what? The pie thing? Don’t thank me – just don’t do it again.’

She laughed. ‘Not that, exactly.’

Theo shook his head almost imperceptibly. ‘Then what?’

‘For being so cool about everything. For being good at what you do. I’m lucky to have you as my trainer.’

Slowly, Theo’s grin began to fade, and Lucy watched him struggle to keep it in place. He shrugged off the compliment. ‘It’s just my job.’

Right. Lucy turned back to the windows and laughed out loud at herself for being flattered by his attention. Theo was looking at a huge payoff if he could get her to lose all the weight, and at this point it looked like she’d make it way before the year was through. That charm was professional courtesy. That smile was capitalism at work. She bet those cornflower blue eyes shone like that for all his paying clients. Of course it was his job. *She* was just a job. Nothing more.

Lucy told herself to remember that.