

SEX & THE SINGLE THERAPIST

By Marcia James

Chapter One

“Mr. Baumgardner, can you explain to your wife your reluctance to fulfill her jungle fantasy?” Dr. Ally Skye prodded.

With a mulish scowl, the man faced his spouse of fifty years and gave it a shot. “I’m eighty-two. Tarzan, I’m not.”

“That’s what this is about?” the diminutive Mrs. Baumgardner snapped, her voice shrill against the pan flute CD playing on the sound system. “You’d feel silly in a loin cloth?”

Yes! Ally mentally cheered the silver-haired woman for grabbing the proverbial bull by the horns. The couple’s third sex-counseling session was nearing an end, and *finally* her geriatric clients had reached the root of their current bedroom problems.

“I’ve got a pot belly.” Mr. Baumgardner gripped the arms of the mauve leather chair. “I’d look like a fool dressed up like the King of the Jungle.”

Ally leaned back in her own armchair and made a note on her pad, using a form of shorthand she’d developed for unobtrusively documenting her sessions. Only she’d be able to translate her notes as *"Husband has realistic body image but is selectively self-conscious. Dressed in plaid pants with purple "I crapped out in Vegas" T-shirt but won't wear costume for wife.*

His wife radiated indignation. “You don’t care about that pot belly when you want your willy whistled.”

Ally intervened. “Let’s approach this from a different angle. Mr. Baumgardner, do you enjoy sexual relations with your wife?”

The balding man squirmed. “Yeah.”

She glanced at Mrs. Baumgardner, who sat ramrod straight with her arms crossed chest-high over her floral dress. “How does your wife ensure your lovemaking is satisfying?”

“Well...” The man blushed, the tips of his hair-sprouting ears turning red. “We have a standing date on Saturday nights to, you know, make whoopee.”

“What does she do for you in bed?” Ally doodled on her pad so the embarrassed man could talk without meeting her eyes.

Other efforts to aid client relaxation included the homey feel of her office—with its serene pastel colors, leafy plants and tranquil, feng shui layout—as well as her choice of a soothing blue, linen pants suit. She’d canned her table-top fountain, however, when its running water had triggered a diuretic response in some clients.

“If her arthritis isn’t acting up,” Mr. Baumgardner explained, “she uses her hands for, uh, foreplay.”

“Uh-huh,” Ally encouraged, as she sketched a leopard-skin-clad he-man in the margin of her notepad.

“And sometimes she’ll take out her dentures and...” He covered his discomfort with a cough.

Ally raised her eyes to his. “So, your wife removes her dentures to what? Enhance your fellatio pleasure? Don’t many people feel unattractive, even silly without their false teeth?”

Mr. Baumgardner, a retired CPA, could still put two and two together. “Yeah. Okay, I get it.”

“Good,” Ally praised. “You know, sex is richer when both partners make an effort. And an openness to new experiences is positive, especially in the bedroom.”

He turned to his wife. “You really want the jungle thing?”

She nodded, a pleased smile transforming her wrinkled face.

“And you won’t laugh at me?” he asked.

“I won’t. I promise.” Mrs. Baumgardner crossed her heart.

Ally checked the wall clock. Two minutes left. She selected a business card from a holder on the nearby table and held it out. “This costume shop on Flamingo has the best selection in Vegas. They carry clothes and props for almost any fantasy.”

Mrs. Baumgardner slipped the card into her bingo-motif purse and looked at her watch. “Thank you, dear. Since our time’s up, we’ll just head over there right now.”

Sighing, her husband stood and followed her out of the office. The Baumgardners took the back exit, which allowed people to leave without running into the next clients.

It was a good system. When the back door closed, a light flashed on her office manager Gladys’s desk signaling the end of a session. Then Gladys would give her ten minutes before sending in her next appointment.

Ally smiled, jotting notes in the Baumgardners’ file. The old couple was making strides. There was no reason they couldn’t enjoy as varied a love life as her younger clients.

Given Las Vegas’ mega-growth as a retirement city, she was seeing more elderly people. Of course, Viagra had stimulated—in more ways than one—her influx of aged therapy-seekers. Often, a re-activated sex life brought a new set of problems.

The front entrance of her office cracked open, and Gladys poked her head in. Her perfect French twist sprouted wisps of hair as though the middle-aged woman had run her manicured hands over it. Gladys’ silk scarf was askew, and she’d nibbled off her lipstick. In the five years since Ally had established the practice, her unflappable office manager had never been shaken.

Ally stood, dropping the file on her side table.

“There’s a cop out here.” Gladys hissed the words in a stage whisper before Ally could speak. “There’s been a—”

The woman squeaked as a wide, tanned hand grasped the edge of the door above her head and shoved it fully open. A long-limbed, broad-shouldered man stepped around Gladys and

closed the door in her face.

The grim man strode forward, impatience shimmering off him in waves. *Holy guacamole*, as her mother used to say. Beneath her clamoring fight-or-flight instinct, Ally recognized a thoroughly female reaction to his overt maleness...a sexual awareness that buzzed like a low-voltage current.

Lean but muscular, he wore a short-sleeved shirt revealing powerful, sun-darkened arms. His untucked, orange-and-turquoise Hawaiian shirt hung over dusty jeans that molded to his thighs. And there was a bump under his shirt tail. A belt holster?

A desert tan gave the cop the look of an Old West lawman despite his vibrant shirt. His hair, unruly and the color of espresso, brushed his collar. The room's diffused lighting glinted off gold highlights probably threaded through his dark mane by Nevada's relentless sunshine.

Fine lines emphasized the man's vibrant cobalt eyes and full, sensual mouth. Laugh lines? Only if he occasionally offered the world something besides this scowl. The cop's serious demeanor, though, fit the sharp planes of his handsome face. He halted in front of her, and Ally fought the knee-jerk urge to retreat.

"Detective Zack Crawford, Las Vegas Metro Police Department." His gruff introduction wasn't accompanied by an offer to shake hands. The man's gaze drifted over her, insolently assessing, before his eyes returned to her face. "I need to ask you some questions."

Ally met his cool stare, tilting her head to adjust to the good half-foot differential in their heights. *Hmmmmmm*. One tall drink of water. Too bad his manners sucked. He was deliberately crowding her personal space, probably attempting to make her nervous. Well, she didn't intimidate easily. "Could I see some identification?" This was her office, and *she* was in control here.

He rolled his eyes before producing his shield from a back pocket. Ally didn't need her grad school body language courses to spot the exasperation in his posture and expression.

Unable to resist needling him, she plucked the shield from his fingers and studied it for several long seconds. Then, returning it to him, she extended her hand and completed their introductions. “I’m Dr. Ally Skye.”

Crawford took her hand, gave it a single shake and dropped it. During the brief contact, she felt the warm, rough texture of his calloused fingers and awarded him points for giving her a firm but not vise-like squeeze. He might be impatient and aggressive, but he’d taken care not to crunch her knuckles.

Ally motioned to her client chairs. Crawford slid a hip onto the arm of the nearest one, ensuring he would hover over her if she settled onto the seat of her chair.

So that’s your game. She almost grinned, enjoying their non-verbal jockeying for dominance. It was easy to spot a control freak when you had a few of those tendencies yourself. Unwilling to sit submissively below his level, she perched on the arm of her therapist chair, glad she’d chosen to wear the linen pants suit and not a dress that morning.

His lips tightened. Oh, he’d noticed the power play but didn’t comment. Instead, he took a notebook out of his shirt pocket and flipped it open. “I’m here about a *patient*.”

The disdain he’d layered on the last word was crystal clear, and Ally sighed. As a sex therapist, she was accustomed to unenlightened people denigrating her work. “I can’t discuss my clients.”

His eyes narrowed in a look that probably made criminals cower. “Don’t pull that confidentiality bullshit, *Doctor Skye*. I know what services a surrogate performs.”

Ally ground her teeth. He assumed she was a sex surrogate, which many considered synonymous with “call girl.” No wonder he thought he could push her into discussing her clients. The “Doctor” before her name wasn’t an honorary title *or* a correspondence school degree, but he hadn’t noticed her diplomas on the far wall above her desk.

“*Detective Crawford*,” she mimicked his derisive tone while chiding herself for letting

him push her buttons. “I’m a licensed therapist, not a sex surrogate. And my clients are entitled to the same confidentiality as those of any doctor.”

He leaned toward her, his musky scent sending an olfactory jolt to her brain’s lust center. Ally swallowed her breathing in self-defense.

“This is a homicide investigation,” he announced. “Tug Shaffer’s been murdered, and we’re questioning his wife.”

His words staggered her, and the room tilted for a crazy second. She’d seen Pam and Tug for their weekly session two days before. Now, Tug was *dead*? It had to be a mistake.

She fought to wrap her mind around the news, not caring that Crawford was observing her stunned state. Tug had been a wife-cheating, selfish SOB with plenty of enemies, but dead? Pam, who’d loved her husband despite it all, must be devastated.

Pam was a close friend, and Ally—never one to strictly follow the rules—had risked her license to help her through her marital crisis. A therapist shouldn’t treat someone she knows, but Pam’s distress had wrenched at Ally’s heart. And now this...

Ally gathered her wits and confronted the detective. “What do you mean, you’re ‘questioning his wife?’ You think *Pam* murdered Tug?”

Crawford made a show of checking his watch. “We haven’t charged anyone—”

“Pam’s the nicest person I know,” she interrupted, his verbal dodge confirming her guess. “She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“If I had a poker chip for every time I’ve heard that,” he muttered.

Ally shook her head. Pam was a gentle soul, who’d *never* do anything violent. She helped out at a no-kill animal shelter, volunteered in the Big Sisters program and taught sewing skills gratis through an inner city vocational school. She was also the person who’d cheerfully handed out Ally’s business card to everyone she knew to help build her therapy practice.

Damn, there had to be a way to break through this cop’s skepticism. “Listen, I’ve known

her close to five years, and she loved Tug. Pam's in the yoga class I teach Saturday mornings."

Crawford sighed, sounding world-weary and unconvinced. Ally searched her memories for something to persuade him he'd picked the wrong suspect.

Pam, a costumer who dressed Vegas performers, had married her carpenter husband only months after they'd met on the same cabaret show. Despite Tug's roving eye, the marriage had lasted ten years. That was practically Golden-Anniversary status in Sin City. But their relationship had deteriorated lately, and Ally had agreed after much soul-searching to counsel the couple.

"Before her lawyer clammed her up, Pam Shaffer admitted they were seeing you," Crawford said. "I need to know what problems they discussed here."

Ally pushed for details. "How did Tug die?"

The detective blew out a frustrated breath, shoving his fingers through his shaggy hair. "A pair of shears to the heart. They were part of the wife's costume-making kit."

"*What?*" Ally shot to her feet, indignation leaving a metallic taste in her mouth. "You suspect Pam because the murderer used her shears?"

"Her fingerprints were all over—" He clamped his jaw shut, looking more like a Mafia enforcer than one of Vegas' finest. "I'm not discussing an open investigation. You've got people waiting out there." He hooked a thumb toward the office's front entrance. "And I'm due in court on another case, so just tell me why the Shaffers were seeing you."

Her mind raced as she considered the evidence. "Of course, her fingerprints were on the weapon. She owns it."

"Everybody's a friggin' detective," Crawford grumbled as he put away his notebook. "Let me guess. You're a fan of *CSI*?"

Ally suggested the obvious. "Couldn't someone wearing gloves have used the shears?"

"Sure, and it's possible one of the ten thousand Elvis impersonators in town really *is* 'the

King,' but I wouldn't bet on it." Crawford stared at his boots as if counting to ten before continuing with blatantly forced patience. "Look, if you're a cop show junkie, you know the first forty-eight hours of an investigation are vital. So, just answer my questions."

She stood studying him, their faces level since he still sat on the chair arm. Sure, he was an overworked Alpha male doing a thankless job. But, hell's bells, the man was building a case against her innocent friend—a woman who'd been there for her in the past. Ally wouldn't provide the tools to help him.

"I will not break doctor-client confidentiality." She enunciated each word. "If you want to know about their sessions, ask Pam."

"I told you, she's not talking."

"Then maybe you should spend your time tracking down the *real* killer," she snapped.

"This is ridiculous." Crawford poked a thick index finger at her. "If your friend's innocent, what's the harm in answering my questions? I'll get a court order for their file," he threatened. "You're just wasting everyone's time."

Damn bully. As her temper spiked, Ally struggled to hold onto her cool counselor's persona. It was a short fight. Surrendering to the impulsive nature that had landed her in hot water her whole life, she took aim at the man's ego.

"Let me give you some free advice, Detective. Dominant posturing may excite some women, but studies show it loses its appeal in the long run. If you've had complaints from your sex partners about your attitude or anything else, I'd be glad to make you an appointment for therapy."

Anger sparked in his indigo eyes, and he slowly stood to tower over her again. Erotic awareness skittered down her spine. Issuing what was basically a sensual dare to this powerful male was as foolish as poking a stick at a rattler.

"Doctor Skye..." His voice was low and intimate, as his feral smile kicked her heartbeat

into high gear. “I’ve never had any complaints in the bedroom, in the shower, on the kitchen counter or against the wall.”

Jeez, could he be more arrogant? But the mental images his words painted increased the caffeine-like rush flooding her blood stream. Okay. He turned her on. But as comfortable as she was with her sensuality, Ally was discriminating in her bedmates. Her tastes ran to funny, sensitive men, the direct opposite of this combative cop.

“In fact,” he continued in the same seductive baritone, “my *sex partners*, when they aren’t too exhausted to speak, have nothing but praise for my performance.”

Ally’s mouth went dry. Then enlightenment struck like a box to the ears. Crawford was trying to intimidate her with his virility since his physical presence hadn’t done the trick. Well, this wouldn’t be any more successful than his last tactic.

Thanks to her free-love-advocating, New Age parents, Ally found few sexual practices between consenting adults distasteful, much less scandalous. And this man thought he could embarrass her with his “wild sexcapades?” Ally laughed. Sure, it was her way of releasing the sensual steam created by imagining athletic couplings with Crawford. Still, her amusement had the added bonus of wiping the smirk off his face.

She was *laughing* at him...a full, earthy, sexy-as-hell laugh. Zack glared at the source of his frustration, unused to being comic relief. He needed his cop’s edge to coerce suspects and witnesses. But this therapist, whose head barely reached his chin, wasn’t afraid of him.

“I was raised in a California commune,” Dr. Skye explained in her throaty voice. Still chuckling, she rubbed tears from the corners of her vivid green eyes. “You’ll have to do better than a list of common lovemaking spots to shock me.”

“There’s nothing *common* about my—” The ring of his cell phone cut him off mid-defense, thank God. What the hell was it about this woman that made him act like such a macho

jerk?

Granted, he might have a *small* chip on his shoulder about sex industry workers, since his now-ex-wife had been busted on a phone sex scam. And working Vice prior to his Homicide promotion *could* have affected his opinion of even legal sex businesses—like therapists who counseled bedroom losers.

Still... Zack frowned. His aggressive reaction to Dr. Skye was over-the-top, even given his current time-crunch. If she'd just stop complicating his request for information...

Pulling the phone from his pocket, he answered, "Crawford."

As he listened to his partner crow about finding neighbors willing to testify to the Shaffers' violent arguments, Zack watched the sex therapist stride to her corner desk. The rear view of the good doctor was just as fine as the front.

Her shiny red hair was twisted up in a neat knot at the back of her head, leaving the slim line of her neck visible. He'd give odds her pale, smooth skin was sensitive, maybe even ticklish along her jaw and behind her delicate ears. Damn, he wanted to find out.

Dr. Skye reached her oak desk and slipped onto the chair, her movements flowing like those of a dancer he'd once dated. He squelched thoughts of slender, flexible limbs so he could concentrate on the call.

"Harry." Zack cut off his partner. "Did these witnesses say the Shaffers argued the night of the murder?"

"Yeah, a real blow-up. Lots of screaming, glass breaking."

"Did they see Mrs. Shaffer leave the house like she said she did?" Zack continued.

Across the room, the tempting therapist made a show of reading the papers on her blotter. She shuffled the same pages from one stack to the other and back again, obviously eavesdropping. *Busted*. Despite the pressure for him to obtain the Shaffer file, then get the hell over to the courthouse, Zack smiled at her small deception.

“The neighbors are a pair of busy-body sisters, but they spent an hour watching *Survivor*,” his partner explained, “so they aren’t sure if the wife left. And they were asleep by the time Mrs. Shaffer says she returned and found the body.”

“Okay.” Zack checked his watch. “I’m headed to court from here, but let’s meet back at the station at six. It looks like I’ll need a warrant for the Shaffers’ therapy file.”

As his partner ended the call, Dr. Skye met Zack’s stare. Her stubborn chin lifted, and she didn’t blink or look away.

Slipping the phone into his pocket, he stepped forward just as she stood and rounded the desk. *Hell*. He’d hoped to trap her in her chair, giving himself the psychological edge. They must teach therapists the same behavioral role-playing exercises he’d had at the police academy.

She held up her hand, traffic-cop-style. “Don’t waste your breath. I’m not turning over my files. What happens in this room is confidential—between client and doctor.”

“Dr. Skye, if I have to slog through red tape to get a warrant, there’s no guarantee I can keep your name from the media.” It was hardball, but with the clock ticking, Zack couldn’t afford to be nice. “Do you want it known your counseling failed? That your patient ended up stabbing her husband instead of planning a second honeymoon?”

“I’m not worried about negative press.” Standing battle-ready at the edge of his personal space, she folded her arms below her bust and seemed to stiffen her spine even further.

Her breasts looked round and full pressing against the thin fabric of her light blue jacket. Zack tore his eyes away from the tempting sight. Unfortunately, she was so close he could smell her perfume, and the mouthwatering mix of vanilla and cinnamon churned him up. How could a fresh-baked-cookies scent be so sexy?

“Besides,” Dr. Skye continued, “it’s the police who’ll look bad once Pam is cleared.”

“I think you absorbed too much sunshine on that commune,” he shot back, glancing again at the wall clock. He’d be lucky to make it to the courthouse on time, even if he used his siren.

“God save me from optimists. This is a slam-dunk case, but I still want that file.”

“We don’t always get what we want, Detective.”

For several seconds, her words hung in the air, stimulating thoughts of the many things he’d like to get from and do with the seductive doctor. The grating sound of a buzzer shattered the moment. She reached across her desk, her blue pants molding to her backside.

While he admired the view, she pressed a button on her speakerphone. “Yes, Gladys?”

“Should I reschedule your next clients?” a disembodied voice asked. “Or do you want them to wait?”

“Please have them wait. I believe the detective was just leaving,” Dr. Skye instructed with a triumphant smile.

As she straightened, he let his gaze travel slowly northward to meet her eyes. And she noticed his appraisal, alright. A flush reddened her cheeks as she frowned. It was gratifying to see her confidence slip a notch.

“Yeah, I’m leaving, but I’ll be back soon,” Zack warned. “You’re just delaying the inevitable.”

He stalked to the door, a strategic retreat in his battle to get the file. Despite dreading the paperwork to generate the warrant, Zack already anticipated his next skirmish with the gutsy therapist. Let Dr. Skye believe she’d won the war. He’d be better armed next time. And Zack wouldn’t accept anything less than her total surrender.