

# *REFLECTING THE FUTURE*

Cricket Starr

## Chapter One

"You know what this station needs, John? We need a holiday!"

Caught in the middle of pulling off his shirt, John Forge paused for a heartfelt sigh. Tugging the neckline down so he could see, he glared at his morale officer, sitting blissfully nude on the bed. In spite of his irritation he took a moment to admire her petite form. For a small woman she really was curvy, just like a surrogate should be.

*Just like a surrogate should be.* Everything about Suzie Shelly was by the book, except that recently she couldn't seem to keep her mind on business. She was always bringing up off-the-wall ideas during their twice-a-week morale-building sessions, a time when all he wanted to do was fuck. Most of the time he didn't mind that much. Listening to Suzie's schemes was sometimes as much fun as being in bed with her.

But tonight he had a lot on his mind and discussing ways to improve other people's morale wasn't high on his list of things to do. What he needed was his own morale taken care of.

"Do we have to talk about this now?" he growled.

At his cross tone, her blue eyes widened. "No, Captain. It can wait."

Discarding his shirt and pants, John slid naked onto the bed next to her. "How many times have I asked you to call me John when we're in bed?"

"Lots," she said brightly. "But section three, subsection sixteen of the morale officer's handbook specifically prohibits me from using the first names of officers while practicing intimacy."

John rolled his eyes. Suzie must have quoted that subsection to him at least a hundred times in the past two years they'd been "practicing intimacy". He knew why the prohibition was in place—to prevent what was supposed to be casual intercourse from becoming serious.

Trouble was he was already pretty serious about his morale officer, and damn it, he wanted her to call him by his first name!

Gathering her into his arms, he kissed her tenderly, putting all of his so-far-unvoiced wanting into it. "Section four, subsection ten also prohibits kissing, but you're willing to do that with me."

Suzie smiled. "That's because you kiss so very well...John."

Anything that got her smiling and saying his name had to be repeated. John kissed her again. This time her mouth opened beneath his and accepted the thrust of his tongue deep inside. John experienced the taste of Suzie, all warm like ginger and cinnamon, and inside him a deep contentment grew, even as desire made his cock as hard as iron against her.

She was his woman...for the next hour or so at least, and so he could love her as much as he wanted. He just couldn't tell her that he loved her. If he did she'd slip out of his arms and start another lecture on how "it wasn't real" and "every man felt like that about his morale officer once in a while". That's what had happened the last four times he'd screwed up and used the L-word. Once he'd even tried to discuss commitment with her, and that had really gotten him a lecture on keeping realistic expectations.

A lecture wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to make love with Suzie and if keeping his mouth shut would do the trick, then that's the trick he'd use.

He'd just bury for the moment how much he loved her and wanted more of a relationship with her. Hell, he'd even thought about asking her to enter into a permanent marriage contract, an "until death do they part" kind of contract. But he knew that the moment he spoke of it she'd remind him of her existing contract with Ares Mining Limited. She was in charge of improving morale for all fifty-six men, women, and children of the Martian mining colony, Ares Mining Station Twenty-One—not just him.

The men were pretty easy to keep happy, at least the twenty-six unattached ones that worked the mines and labs of the station. Suzie spent an hour or so having sex with them once in a while, and that kept them satisfied. But Suzie wasn't content to just keep the men happy. She spent a lot of time working on ideas to improve things for everybody...such as this holiday idea that he didn't want to think about right now.

John also tried not to think about what she did with the other men. It was her job. But he couldn't help wishing that she could make him her only priority when it came to sex. At least at the moment he was her top priority and John intended to make the most of that.

She kissed him again and John took comfort in Suzie's kiss. It was warm and welcoming, and when she opened her mouth he again swept his tongue inside as if it belonged there. When she kissed him, he felt like she put more than duty into it. She made him feel special.

She made him feel as if she belonged to him. Whether or not it was true.

He wanted to believe it was true. At least for a little while.

So he did.

She ran her hands up his back, her nails scratching lightly. John knew she kept them short on purpose—so she didn't leave marks when she climaxed. Even so, sometimes she left marks on him and that pleased him that she would lose control. It was another bit of evidence that he was special to her even if she maintained that she played no favorites.

Perhaps her mind told her that, but her body knew otherwise. He could tell she reacted to him unlike any other man in the colony. Or at least he was pretty sure she did. In any event she was his favorite woman.

His favorite woman did his favorite thing with her teeth on the edge of his ear, tugging on it as he ran a line of kisses down her neck. She moaned as he returned the

favor by tugging on one of her nipples with his teeth, using his hand to carefully tweak its twin.

Suzie reached for his cock and grasped it firmly with a practiced hand. One stroke and he breathed a small curse. Two and he grabbed her shoulders and rolled her under him. She stroked him a third time and he pressed her hard into the pillows.

There wasn't a fourth stroke.

John never wanted sex with Suzie to progress as quickly as it always seemed to, but he couldn't help pulling her hand off him, pushing her knees apart and entering her with one long stroke. Now it was Suzie's turn to curse...not loud and nothing that would offend any man she was with. Suzie was a lady even in bed and made it a point to keep some control. For example it would never do to say something offensive or to call out a name that wasn't that of her client.

Control was always something she fought to maintain, even as he fought to relieve her of it. If she ever completely gave it up he knew he'd convince her she belonged to him once and for all. To date he always felt she managed to reserve some part of herself when in bed.

But she did get carried away once John was inside her. She let him know that with every moan from her throat and the clench of her pussy around his cock. She might put on an act that she was indifferent as to who bedded her, but John knew she enjoyed being in bed with him.

Or at least that's how he saw things. From the few times he'd actually discussed Suzie with one of the other men she serviced, it did seem her behavior was different with him. Not that he'd confront her with it...you didn't do that with a morale officer.

But sometimes he wondered if maybe she didn't feel the same about him as he felt about her.

Now that he was in his favorite position in the world, lying on top with her sweet face displayed on the pillow, he could take his time. He could stop and savor her, enjoy the way her hair fell in short blonde curls around her face, see the play of emotions in her bright blue eyes. Passion, yes, but more than that. She smiled and was happy. He made her happy, with his kisses, his arms and his cock. She wanted him.

*She wanted him.*

He moved, a slow stroke that pulled him slowly from her body then he drove back in again. Not as hard as the first time and maybe half the speed, but just as long a stroke. Her eyes widened as he hit deep within her. He could fill her completely, and she was long enough to accommodate his length and breadth.

John couldn't help the thought that they were made for each other. It always felt like this with her. Like he was at home within her. It always felt this good.

But Suzie wasn't a woman to take his lovemaking lying down. She let him control the pace for a while, but then she started doing a little something with her hips that threw him off balance and he had to adjust to keep from toppling off her.

John couldn't help a brief grin. She always did this, and it drove him crazy. But it was a great kind of crazy. Finally, when she showed no signs of letting up he twisted and carried her to ride on top of him.

Now Suzie held control and she grinned down at him. "Gotcha, caveman."

"Right back at'cha, darling," he said, using his pet name for her. He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "You wanted to do the work? So work!"

And Suzie did. She moved up and down with a little twist to her hips that wiped the grin off his face in two seconds and seriously endangered his control in four. Fortunately, a little cry came from deep within her throat, telling him her climax was close and he didn't have to worry about finishing first.

Not that he was worrying about anything at the moment. Instead he grabbed her upper thighs with his hands and held her as Suzie lifted and fell and twisted and his balls tightened until they were nearly painful.

And then he came, hard and fast, and she slowed to draw it out for him. In the middle of her orgasm, she cried out something that might have been his name, her sheath squeezing the cum from him as it shot deep within her.

She cried out again and then collapsed against his chest, a soft weight that felt like nothing at all.

With the last waves of passion washing away, leaving behind a satisfied contentment, John settled into the pillows behind him and cradled Suzie in his arms, letting her warmth and softness ease into his side. Her arms slid around his waist and she nestled into him, her breath hot and sweet against his throat.

Ah, to keep her with him for the rest of the evening...or the rest of their lives. That's what he really wanted, to keep her for the rest of their lives, regardless of what she had to say about her duty to the other men, her job and how he couldn't really feel what he knew he felt.

He knew what was real and what wasn't. He wanted a home and Suzie in it with him.

She sighed, and for a moment he wondered if she didn't want that as well. She rubbed her head against his shoulder and leaned up to smile into his eyes.

Wasn't there more than a passing affection in her smile for him?

"So, about the holiday..." she began, her voice teasing.

John made a great show of a heartfelt sigh and feigned reluctant interest in hearing her proposal. Most of Suzie's schemes to raise the morale of the colony turned out to be at least entertaining, if not completely successful. What with the possible upcoming changes to the station that he was trying hard not to worry about, he and his people could use a good distraction.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked.

"There hasn't been that much to celebrate lately, so perhaps we could make up an occasion. Since winter is just beginning, I was thinking we could celebrate that old Earth holiday that comes at the start of winter. You know the one, Christmas."

"Christmas?" John creased his nose, trying to remember just which holiday that was. He'd left Earth as a young man, after being raised in a very poor family eking out a bare existence in the city. His parents had moved frequently during his childhood, chasing jobs and opportunities, and with money as tight as it had been his family hadn't been able to celebrate much of anything.

Heck, he'd been happy when he'd had a roof over his head.

Unconsciously, he tightened his arm around Suzie. Strange as it seemed, here on Station Twenty-One was the first time in his life that he'd felt like he had a real home. Now all he needed was a family to go in it, marriage and children.

Sensitive as always, Suzie looked up at him. "What is it, John?"

"I like the idea."

Suzie beamed with enthusiasm. "Good! It will be a Christmas just like in the old books. We'll have lots of decorations and lights with bright colors, songs, fancy food and good wishes for everyone. We could decorate the dining hall with an old-fashioned Christmas tree and give out presents."

"Presents?"

"Sure, simple ones for the adults. Practical items mostly, but toys and games for the children. Maybe we'll have a Santa Claus distribute them."

As she mentioned the name a memory came to him from his childhood. A memory of a fat, bearded man in red, handing him a red and white striped crook-shaped piece of candy. It had been one of the rare occasions he'd gone into a big fancy store in the city with his mother. Just as they'd come through the door the big man had shouted "ho, ho, ho" and given it to him.

There had been a big debate over his keeping the treat until the man had assured his mother in his deep voice that the candy was free. It was a candy cane, a present, he remembered being told—to celebrate Christmas, a holiday of good will toward men and gifts for those who had none.

He'd taken nearly a week to finish the candy cane, nibbling a little bit each night until there was none left. It had been delicious and the best present ever, if only for how unexpected it had been. John's life as a child had held too few happy surprises, something he planned on remedying with his own children should he have them.

Something else he wanted to have a serious discussion with Suzie about—the idea of having children, something possible on the Martian mining colony where they lived. They were on a new frontier, where new families were encouraged. But it was hard to plan children with a woman who didn't take you seriously when you asked her to be your wife.

For now his responsibilities included the kids on the station, and the idea of giving them the same thrill he'd had on getting that piece of candy so long ago really appealed to John. Only he'd do more than give the kids candy. There'd be presents, special ones for each of them.

"Could I play Santa Claus?" he blurted out before he could stop himself.

Suzie startled and stared at him with wide-open eyes. "You'd want to? I was going to ask—you are the logical choice—but I didn't think you'd agree."

John warmed considerably at the look of admiration in her face. "I think it's a great idea." In fact, it was getting greater all the time.

To his dismay, she bounced out of the bed and pulled on the clothes she'd been wearing when she'd arrived. "I'll get right on it, then!"

"No reason you have to do it now," he couldn't help complaining. "It could wait for a day or so, or at least until tomorrow morning." He'd hoped to persuade her to stay in bed with him all night. It had been a couple of months since she'd slept with him.

"But I want to get the order in tonight. It will take at least a week to get here as it is. Besides," she hesitated putting on her shoes and didn't look at him. "I have another appointment tonight."

John had to resist letting his jaw drop. Suzie almost never had double-booked on a night she spent with him. "Who with?"

"You know I'm not allowed to say," Suzie smiled brightly at him. "It would be better for you not to know, anyway." She leaned over and gave him a sweet kiss on the cheek. "It was fun with you. You are one of my favorites."

*One of her favorites.* John fumed silently as she closed the door behind her. That was the standard closing line of every morale officer he'd known in the past ten years. This was the first time in over a year that Suzie had used it with him.

Double booking on his night with her, bringing up station business during their lovemaking and using standard surrogate language with him. It all fell into a pattern. Of what he couldn't say, but he didn't like it at all.

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Suzie checked her display one more time. The screen held an inventory of all the stuff she was ordering from the Stellar Trading Company's interspace website. She was making her list and checking it twice—to verify she hadn't missed a single item. She wanted to make the first Christmas on Mars the best she could possibly manage. It would blow her budget for the rest of the year, but provide the kind of celebration she was hoping would keep her memory alive on Ares Mining Station Twenty-One.

The expense wouldn't be wasted. After all most of the items could be saved and reused for subsequent holidays...for after she was gone.

A pang of dismay slipped through her, but she quickly suppressed it. This was not the time to be feeling bad about her upcoming departure. She hadn't even made up her mind...yet.

Her finger hovered over the submit button, but just then a pop-up window appeared, floating in the middle of the screen. "Special offer, available only for the next ninety seconds! Grab bag of fifty-six assorted surprise items, perfect for holiday gifts!"

Assorted gifts? She peered closely at the small image on the pop-up. It certainly did look like a lot of interesting items, most of them small but intriguing. She could make out a few small toys, what seemed to be a pocket laser, jewelry and grooming supplies, including a couple of mirrors. The number was interesting as well as there were exactly fifty-six people on the station.

Suzie sat back in excitement. There'd be something for everyone! The cost was just a little over her budget...she'd have to cut back on something else. The clock on the pop-up was winding down with only thirty seconds left.

Regretfully, Suzie removed from her list one of the Christmas tree ornament collections she'd picked out and just as the clock was running out, accepted the pop-up offer. With a bright "ding" the gift assortment was added to her inventory.

Somehow they'd live without the two dozen "golden-wire birds of peace". No one would miss them, and maybe she could have some of the children make ornaments to put on the tree in their stead.

Of course she hadn't even decided what to use for the all-important Christmas tree that all the books indicated was needed for their celebration. Mars didn't have any natural vegetation large enough to substitute and the artificial trees the catalog had offered were far too expensive, either to buy or ship. She'd have to improvise something.

After one last check, Suzie submitted her order and it disappeared from the screen with a soft whoosh. Mission accomplished, she turned off the machine and headed for her sanitary. As she'd told John, she did have another client tonight and needed to shower. Section two, subsection three of the morale officer handbook stated clearly, "surrogates must attend a morale appointment clean and without residue of previous encounters".

If it was one thing Suzie understood, it was how to go by the book.

She dropped her robe and stepped into the warm water. As always it smelled fresh and clean...you'd never suspect with the kind of filters and clarifying apparatus attached to the line that this was the exact same water she'd been using for the past two years. Even though the station was supplied with plenty of water, Suzie appreciated that she didn't have to be cautious given her special needs.

In fact, the recycler was so efficient she could take as long a shower as she wanted...and often did, particularly on nights when she'd been with John.

She smelled her fingers, which still held a little of the scent of his hair, and smiled dreamily, remembering how the coarse strands had felt against her skin. Her cheeks



still bore some sensitivity from the roughness of his beard, another sensation she rather enjoyed. Somehow John always managed to have a little bit of a beard, as if the facial hair suppressor he used could only do so much.

Such an intensely sensual man, with all those hormones driving him—how could any beard suppressor compete?

He was a big man, black-haired and grey-eyed, who exuded power and control. John was a throwback in so many ways, a man from a time when you needed strength to move equipment, not buttons. She knew he'd been in the Ares Mining Company for nearly fifteen years, at least ten of it spent here on Mars.

He'd had morale officers before, and this was her second assignment, so it wasn't like they didn't both know the rules. Even so, she knew she'd gotten too close to him. Several times he'd talked of love and permanence between them.

As if that were possible.

Suzie sighed. She was no better. For the past two years, she'd been his surrogate, as well as that of the other unattached men. But they would fade into the background of her memories while John she knew she'd remember the rest of her life.

Even so, it still wasn't going to lead anywhere. Her job was to be the stand-in lover to all the men, and occasionally she'd fall for one of them or the man would fall for her. The book talked about that and said it was natural...that didn't make it real.

Her looks and spirit had lifted her out of the obscure inner-city orphanage she'd grown up in, where no love had ever lasted more than a few days. Children transferred in and out in days and those in charge never stayed long. Only Suzie had been a constant. Always there, always alone.

She'd never known what it felt like to have someone care for her on a permanent basis. She wasn't even sure it was possible to feel that way everlasting.

Suzie wasn't sure that she even believed in love.

She'd stayed at the orphanage until she'd grown old enough to leave and take up training. Training in how to make other people happy, something she'd been good at for many years.

Trouble was, now there was really only one man she really wanted to make happy, sexually at least. It was even affecting her work. Tonight was the first time in two weeks that one of the men not on her regular schedule had come asking for a morale boost. It was like everyone was avoiding being with her.

She had to admit that she wasn't a very good morale officer anymore.

*Morale officer's handbook, section ten, subsection three.* "When a morale officer loses perspective, she must arrange transfer, preferably at the end of her assignment". Her assignment was up in two weeks. Barely time for the holiday celebration she had planned.

All her life she'd wanted to belong somewhere. Station Twenty-One was the first place she'd felt completely at home and now she was afraid she was going to have to give it up.

Shaking her head, Suzie held it back into the spray, wetting her hair and washing the smell of John's hands from it. John...she couldn't even remember to call him Captain when she was in her own cabin...much less when she was in his bed.

Grabbing the soap, she slid it across her breasts, removing the scent of his mouth on them, then did the same for her neck. She bore a few small marks...always did after being with him, but her freckles tended to hide them. She had good coloring for hiding love marks.

The ones on her upper thighs, where his fingers gripped her in the throes of orgasm, the other men seemed to have learned to live with. At least no one asked about them anymore.

She put her hand between her legs to where evidence of her captain was still most apparent. Sadly she let it slip from her fingers into the spray. Funny thing, he was the only one she ever did this with, ever regretted washing from her body.

She even enjoyed performing oral sex on him, too. Somehow he just tasted good.

Too good.

Inside her something tightened, and her clit swelled awake in spite of the workout it had had with the captain. With a sigh, Suzie reached for the soap and used it to pleasure the small nub with practiced ease until she was leaning against the shower wall, her body caught between want and completion. Two more strokes and she came, shuddering, John's name on her lips – as always.

Lately she'd had to bite her tongue when with another man to avoid saying John's name. Another reason for her to depart and leave him behind.

She leaned against the wall, letting the warm water wash away the soap, taking the last evidence of John with it. She'd smell and taste only of the cleanser and herself for her next client. As always.

Pulling herself out of the shower, she dried off and dressed in a clean gown, then prepared her quarters for her next client – clean sheets, a tastefully scented candle.

She also turned on her computer and brought up the screen where her transfer request still sat, unfinished and unsent. With rapid keystrokes she finished the few lines needed to complete it. Her finger hovered over the submit key for a long time.

Suzie closed her eyes for a moment and imagined John loving her the way he kept saying he wanted to. But then she imagined the new surrogate coming, and his eyes wandering in that direction once he realized he could be sleeping with her instead of Suzie. She saw his face once he realized that he'd confused love with availability.

After all, there wasn't any such thing as love...not like the books and vids spoke of. Suzie couldn't ever see herself a woman in a committed relationship with a man.

She wanted to belong somewhere but much as she wanted to, she couldn't if she couldn't do her job as morale officer. She couldn't continue to be morale officer here, not with John as a distraction.

She'd just have to find another station to make her home.

Resolutely, Suzie pushed the button and her transfer request disappeared into interspace.

## **Chapter Two**

In his office, John went over the latest batch of incoming dispatches on his terminal screen. He groaned aloud at one of them. It said another company inspection team would be arriving in a couple of weeks to evaluate the station.

With a sigh he studied the walls around him, his home these last few years. The mine wasn't played out, but it no longer delivered the quantity of ore that it had in the beginning. As a result, there was now the possibility that the company would decide to shut it down and move the people and equipment to a new spot. Mars was a big place and there were lots of likely spots to drill for metal ores, minerals and the rare elements that were here.

He wouldn't be moved to a new station at first, but the bulk of the people would be, with a new station chief in charge of them to ramp things up. That's how the company did things.

Sure, once this station was finished he'd likely get a new job elsewhere...but he liked it here and he liked his people where they were. He didn't want to see them redistributed. He didn't want to see what had become his home disappear.

John shook his head. He'd hoped to keep the company happy so that this station might last beyond the usual three-year mark for station survival. If a study group was being dispatched this early, that wasn't likely to happen.

He turned to the other posts, going through them one by one and clicking the acknowledgement button as he completed them. Finally he saw one from Suzie announcing the upcoming Christmas holiday and the date and groaned again. It would have to be just about the time the inspection team would be here.

John headed for her office. Maybe he could have her reschedule it for a day or two later.

Suzie didn't look surprised to see him. She pointed to her screen and the brightly decorated electronic message announcing the holiday. "I've already announced to the station that our first official Christmas holiday is next fifthday!"

"Fifthday?" John frowned. "So I saw. But that's a workday—why not make it sixthday or seventhday?" After the inspection team's departure, he thought but didn't add.

She gave him a look that was pure female exasperation. "Captain, you can't declare a holiday then put it on a restday. A holiday is a day off from work—otherwise why have it?"

"Yes, but that's so soon, I won't have time..." John's voice trailed off as he realized what he'd been about to say. In addition to the complication of the evaluation team

being here, he'd wanted to have a special present for Suzie. With the holiday so close he wouldn't have time to properly shop and get anything shipped here. At her sharp look, he decided he needed to give some sort of completion. "We won't have any time to get presents."

"Oh that's all right. I'm sure most people will be giving small items anyway. This isn't supposed to be that big. Besides, I bought a selection of gifts that we can use so everyone gets something." She grinned at him. "With you being our Santa, I thought you'd be able to do that."

"You did?" John gave that some thought. Maybe there'd be something he could select for Suzie from there. "Even so, you could put it off for a couple of weeks. The end of the year review is coming and there is a lot that I need to do before them."

Suddenly Suzie looked away. "It really can't wait that long. I wanted to have the holiday before I leave."

That brought made him forget all about her unfortunate timing for Christmas. "Leave? You mean leave the station?"

She hesitated and still didn't look at him. "John, you know my contract was only for two years."

"With a two-year extension option ..." he butted in.

"...which I didn't ask for," she finished. "I've asked for a transfer."

Shocked, John leaned over her desk. "And when were you planning on telling me—that is report to me, as station captain—that you were going?"

"I was waiting until I heard from my replacement. I just got the notice from the company this morning. She'll be here in a couple days." Finally she looked up at him, her smile artificially bright. "You will like her. She's a blonde too."

Suzie thought he liked her because she was a blonde? It was all John could do not to grab her shoulders and shake some sense into her. "Your hair color is not important to me. I want you, Suzie. Just you."

"John, I know you think you have feelings for me..."

"And you have none for me?"

"It isn't that." She looked up at him, her expression helpless. "I have feelings, I just don't trust them. Feelings like that can fool you. You know I go by the book...and the book says that it isn't appropriate for a surrogate to fall in love with a client."

"But it happens. It did happen and you know it." He leaned over the desk. "I think you fell in love with me. Otherwise this wouldn't be scaring you so much. Every time we make love it makes you see just how much we mean to each other."

"I'm not scared. But I am not going to let what is obviously a passing crush control me either."

"You are scared. Otherwise you'd believe in your feelings. Every time we get in bed it's clear we're meant to be together."

Suzie set her pretty jaw. "You are right. Going to bed with you is part of the problem, but that's something I can control. Section four, subsection five of the morale officers handbook states that I can deny service with sufficient cause. Loss of perspective is sufficient and so I hereby invoke that clause. I think it better that we not go to bed together anymore."

John's jaw dropped. "You're refusing me?"

She folded her arms and looked resolute. "As of now. Yes."

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"And then she turned me out of her office and closed the door," John finished in a huff.

The others in the room murmured words of sympathy, but he thought he detected a hint of amusement as well. He turned a steely gaze at them and there was a flurry of quickly suppressed grins.

*Damn straight...they'd better suppress those grins. This isn't funny!*

He looked around at the impromptu and very unofficial meeting of the station's officers, unofficial in that it lacked the station's morale officer as an attendee. She being the reason for the meeting, it seemed prudent not to invite her.

He'd called everyone as soon as he left Suzie, inviting them to his boardroom for the evening, ostensibly for beer and a card game. When they arrived and found the beer and glasses, but no cards, everyone had known something was up.

Dr. Alixon Reman, second officer and the station's doctor, took a sip from her glass, apparently using it to hide her mouth, the corners of which still twitched mischievously upward. She was a beautiful woman, whose Middle Eastern Earth background was obvious from her black curly hair, dark eyes and bronze skin, but her muscular arms bared by her sleeveless coverall saved her from looking delicate. When she'd swallowed her sip and composed her expression into one of polite concern, she spoke. "So, our by-the-book morale officer has decided to move on...because her book doesn't allow for love."

Harry Reman, Alixon's younger brother and supply officer in charge of the kitchen, farm and life support, nodded in agreement. "A shame, really. I've been working closely with her on this Christmas project she has going and it's been a real delight. I'm going to miss her," he said wistfully. At a sharp look from his sister, he added. "As a friend, of course. I've never taken advantage of her other services."

John knew that was true. He'd once given into temptation and used his security clearance to surreptitiously see who Suzie's regular clients were by checking her schedule. Once he'd gotten over his shock at knowing just how many men needed her regularly, he'd noticed that Harry wasn't one of them.

The Reman brother and sister pair had been working together in the mines since childhood, practically growing up on Mars. John suspected the rough-and-tumble

mining environment had made Alixon wary of developing personal relationships with the men working around her, and she kept a stern eye on her brother as well. Sometimes John felt a little sorry for them both...for Alixon, unable to let her guard down and Harry, unable to tell his sister to back off.

"She isn't gone yet," John said decisively. "And if I have anything to say about it she won't go. I just need to find a way to convince her to stay."

Hans Drucker leaned forward. In charge of the mining operation and the station's construction, he was a burly man, blond and meaty. His big hands clutched together. "You said the new woman is light-haired too?" he said with interest through his thick Slavic accent. "Nice to have new woman around...particularly one that doesn't shout captain's name during sex."

John stilled. Hans was on Suzie's morale-building list, but by mutual agreement he and the bigger man had never talked about it. "She says my name?"

With a shrug, Hans took a deep gulp of his beer, most likely wishing it were vodka instead. One time he'd even gotten Harry to plant extra potatoes in the station's hydroponics garden, saying they were needed for his diet...but Harry had quickly figured out the man had only wanted to make a home brew from the vegetables and had made a point of serving potatoes at every meal to use up the surplus.

By popular vote potatoes were no longer a welcome crop on Station Twenty-One for any purpose.

"I used to say 'My name not John', but she look so upset I stop saying." As the only man on the station John couldn't physically intimidate, Hans grinned happily at his captain. "Maybe new woman like me best this time."

"If I can keep Suzie for myself, you can have the new one...with my compliments," John told him.

Alixon folded her arms and glared at both of them. "If you've finished divvying up the morale officers—without their permission I must add—perhaps we can get back to the point. No one here wants Suzie to leave."

From the corner seat a slender man of Asian heritage leaned forward, the light hitting his shining black hair and elongated eyes. They glowed dark with concern. "But how will you get her to stay?" he asked softly. "She's already made up her mind to leave, and won't listen now. She's even decided not to share the captain's bed again."

Kamian Shi watched over the engineering labs, and was the newest addition to the station. As a result he seemed reticent to enter most conversations unless they reflected on his laboratories. Kamian's labs took advantage of the special conditions on the Martian surface and meant investment and permanence. It meant the company was willing to keep them there and expand them into a real colony. It meant the station's survival.

When the man had arrived, John had been very pleased. Adding the labs and subsequent personnel had made it clear that Ares Mining Station Twenty-One had a future beyond when the basic metals ore veins of gold, copper and silver had played

out. It meant there might be more to the station in a few years than empty buildings in a cracked environment shell, like his previous three stations.

It meant more families and kids and a permanent home. Like the home he wanted to share with Suzie. If he could ever get her to agree to stay.

He knew if he could get her to bed, he'd get her over this idea she had to leave him. Trouble was getting her to bed. At this point she had the rules on her side...she could cut him off from sex for the next couple of weeks until she was gone.

He felt a strong pang at the idea of Suzie being gone, out of his life forever. It just didn't seem possible that could happen and he'd do anything to make sure it didn't.

John took a deep sip of his own beer, barely noticing the excellent flavor, while he bleakly considered the situation. For too long he'd been alone, rootless, moving from one mining station to another, never staying longer than a year. For almost three years Ares Mining Station Twenty-One had been his home, and he knew that the last two years were entirely due to Suzie's presence. He'd known practically from the beginning she was the woman for him.

Even when he'd had to share her with other men, it had been enough to know she was his at least twice a week.

But now he wouldn't even have that, and according her plans in a couple weeks she'd be gone. No more dreams of living in a permanent Mars colony with Suzie and a family of their own.

No more Suzie at all.

Alixon cleared her throat, catching his attention. She stared thoughtfully into her drink. "Hans, does Suzie really say John's name at..." she paused for a moment, apparently looking for words. "At inappropriate times?" she added finally, her dusky complexion bright pink with embarrassment.

Hans grinned at her and John could tell he enjoyed the doctor's discomfort. "Oh *ja*. Many times. Mostly when she screams in passion." He leaned closer to her and whispered confidentially. "I'm good at making a woman scream."

Alixon's eyebrows shot up and she stared at him before dropping them. After a moment spent composing herself she looked thoughtful. "I think maybe Suzie has something more than a crush on you, John. And that makes her uncomfortable. She told me once that morale officers go through intensive conditioning to maintain control of themselves at all times. For Suzie to say a man's name, particularly with someone else, means that conditioning has failed."

John tapped the table in front of him. "How could that happen?"

"Well," she said slowly. "I suppose it could happen if she'd developed strong feelings for someone."

"You mean she really has fallen in love with me. And that's why she's leaving?"

"That's what I think it means."



Exultation nearly made him give in to a cheer but he stopped himself. After all, what good did it do for her to love him if she just intended to leave and forget he ever existed? "So what do I do now? She loves me but not enough to stay here."

"I don't think how much she loves you is the problem. I don't think she believes in love. I've talked to her about her childhood. She grew up in an institution...no one to love her, no one for her to love. This is probably the first time she's experienced it and she hasn't the faintest idea what to do about it." A slight smile showed on her face. "It isn't in the book, you see."

Hans and Harry chortled, Kamian smiled, and even John had to suppress a laugh. Suzie's continual recital of rules and regulations was well known.

"So because love isn't in her handbook, she has to go to the few references to it she does have," he said. "And that's the reference to losing perspective and refusing service."

Harry spoke up. "You know Suzie has that handbook of hers memorized from beginning to end, but she doesn't always follow the rules. She refers to it when she wants to make a point—uses it to her advantage. Maybe we should take a look at it and see if there something in it we can use to keep her here."

His sister stared at him in open admiration. "Good idea!" She activated the lounge table's display so they could all read at once. As the pages came up, along with the thick scroll bar showing how many pages there were, they all groaned at the size of the task.

Harry notified the staff on duty in the kitchen, ordering more beer and some munchies to go with it. It was going to be a long evening.

Two beers later, everyone was in a much better mood. Some of it was the food and booze, but a great deal of it was the handbook. The *Ares Company Official Handbook for Morale Officers* detailed the appropriate behaviors and duties of sexual surrogates or morale officers as they'd come to be known in the frontier worlds of space where long stays without female companionship had been deemed unhealthy for the men.

Since few women were willing to live on a mining station, women had been brought in to serve the men's needs, but more than sex was involved. The women were all volunteers, with healthy sexual appetites, and they were specially trained for the sometimes difficult job of keeping morale up on the isolated stations. John had the utmost respect for the ladies and the job they did.

To Suzie, the handbook was practically a tome of worship.

To John and his crew it was fucking hilarious. It was a document describing sex and sexual activities—including the appropriate body parts—cloaked in euphemism and corporate-correct language. With expressions like "manhood", "sensitive bud" and "vaginal orifice", interspersed with phrases like "fellatio defined", John had to admit it did make for amusing reading.

Harry was taking a turn reading aloud. "Most clients will prefer straight intercourse, but it is recommended that the surrogate familiarize herself with the following titles for alternatives. *Bosun's Sexual Perversities*, *The Joy Of Interstellar Sex* (ed

5), *Helena's House of Pleasures*." He frowned over the last title. "Hey, isn't that one of the books you own, Sis?"

Alixon choked on her beer while Hans perked up and stared at her, all speculative interest in his face.

"You know," he said, "the new morale officer is going to be a while getting here. If we get Suzie to commit to captain, I'm going to have to wait a long time for sex."

"She'll be here in a week," Alixon said primly.

"Ja..." he said meaningfully, "a *long* time to wait." He wiggled his heavy dark blond eyebrows while her dusky skin turned all shades of red.

John leaned back and suppressed a laugh. Hans and Alixon, a couple? That could be an interesting development. There always did seem to be some kind of tension between them and he could see them being good for each other.

Harry choked on his beer and seemed to examine the interaction between his sister and the big man with amused glee. John wondered for a moment if the young man didn't see the possibility of gaining a sex life of his own should his sister suddenly develop one.

But this was not solving his problem. He wanted Suzie to pay attention to their sexual tension and so far examining the rulebook, while illuminating in some ways, wasn't providing any answers.

Blushing, Alixon locked eyes with the big, blond engineer. "I don't think a couple weeks without sex would hurt anyone."

"Sex necessary to health. Even says so in book," Hans replied. He leaned closer to her, his voice slightly huskier. "I like dark hair same as light. Sometimes better."

Alixon's eyes opened wider, then she tore her gaze from him and returned it to the pages displayed before them. "Wait a minute. I just had an idea!"

She used the pointer to quickly turn back several pages and read aloud. "Section one, subsection six—it is imperative that morale officers do their utmost to ensure the health of all those within their jurisdiction by encouraging healthy sexual activity. To this end they must work to satisfy those with special needs," she said triumphantly.

"What good does that do?" John asked.

"Well, it means that she can't refuse service to someone who's been too long without sex."

John shook his head miserably. "She was just in my bed a couple days ago and the new officer is coming in a week. Suzie's not going to think a week is too long," he cast at quick glance at Hans, "for anyone to wait."

"Yes that's true. But I wasn't thinking about you and your needs. There are men who've never had sex since they came here."

Harry turned pale. "Sis, I'm all for helping John and Suzie, but you can't mean..."

"No, not you," she growled at her brother. Instead she looked at Kamian, whose eyes widened. "I had someone else in mind."

Now it was their chief scientist's turn to blush. "What are you talking about? I have no special needs..."

"Kamian, you haven't been to see Suzie at all, have you?"

"Not that it is anyone's business...but no. I'm not...well..."

She waved her hands impatiently. "I know, I know. You aren't interested in women or men alone. You get your needs from watching others, right? You're registered as a voyeur." Everyone stared at her, Kamian included, with his jaw dropped.

Alixon flung up her hands. "Okay, so I read your file. It's right there in your sexual preference selection."

Kamian stared at her. "You read my private file?"

"I'm the medical officer as well as second on this station. It is my job to be familiar with everyone here, so yes, I read your file."

Hans' grin grew broader. "You read my file, too, little doctor?"

Alixon ignored him, but her cheeks glowed pink again. "The *point*," she emphasized, "is that Kamian has not been given service in the six months he's been here. And he has special needs so Suzie must make certain to do anything in her power to satisfy them...even if it means doing something she doesn't want to do."

Kamian stared while John looked daggers at all of them. The scientist spoke first, his vocal cords so tight he practically squeaked. "You want me to tell Suzie that I want to watch her and the captain having sex?"

Alixon folded her arms. "You have to admit, it would get her to make love with him again."

John bit back the desire to tell Alixon just what he thought of her proposal. Make love with an audience—how humiliating would that be? He examined the troubled-looking scientist.

"I suppose I could ask her something like that," Kamian said slowly. "Not a lot of people are willing to let themselves be watched...which is why I haven't said anything before." He looked at John. "Would you mind?"

Mind? *Yes*. But on the other hand, if it was his only hope of getting into bed with Suzie again? Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad.

He gave Kamian a long stare. "You'd tell her it would have to be me and her you want to watch?"

The man's mouth twitched into something that could almost be a smile. "Actually it could be very..." he paused for a long moment, "stimulating to see the pair of you in action. And it would help you both, I think."

John suppressed a groan. If it would get him back in bed with Suzie, then it could be worth it. It had to be worth it.

"All right," he said finally. "That's what we'll do."

## **Chapter Three**

Suzie paused in the hallway and tried to tamp down on her nervousness. It was hard to believe how uncomfortable she was about this given the number of times she'd gone to bed with John...that is, Captain Forge.

But it wasn't every day she actually had to ask him to go to bed with her. Particularly asking for this reason and particularly after telling him she couldn't service him anymore. Of all the headstrong, impetuous actions she could have taken, that was one that she should have known would come back to haunt her.

Now she needed to go back on that, and ask for his help...and it was quite possible he'd refuse. He could refuse because he was angry or because he didn't want to have sex with her to satisfy the sexual needs of another man.

Or he might refuse because through the shock of her denying him service he had finally realized that he didn't really love her. Suzie's heart hurt a little at that thought. While she didn't believe he loved her, she didn't like to think of him no longer wanting her the way he had. It really was best that she get off the station before she could get hurt any further.

Any of those reasons would be good enough. She'd tried to tell Kamian it was possible that John wasn't the right choice for this, but he hadn't listened. His point was that he was most comfortable with her and with John...that is, Captain Forge. He'd sit in the background and not be any trouble.

They'd hardly even know he was in the room. Even though he would be in the room.

Suzie closed her eyes. In all her time as a surrogate she'd dealt with more than a few odd situations but never one this unusual. But it wasn't going to get less unusual by her standing here in the hall. She had to face John and ask him to go to bed with her.

She raised her hand and gently knocked on the door. At his curt response she opened the door. "Captain, I have to talk to you."

Five minutes later, John was staring at her, his big hands folded in front of him as she stammered her way through her explanation. To her relief he didn't seem to be angry...in fact it was almost like he'd expected her to come to him.

Of course he might have expected she'd change her mind about providing service. She'd even thought about doing so a couple of times in the past few days. She would be gone soon enough so why deny the pair of them the pleasure of being together these last few days. It was less than two weeks now... Inside her something cried out over that.

John's voice interrupted her thoughts. "I have to say this is the most unusual request I've ever heard. You need me to fulfill your duties?"

"Yes. If you're willing."

He nodded slowly and her spirits rose. They fell just as quickly when he held up his hand. "On one condition."

"What's that?"

"I want you to put me back on your regular duty roster."

She breathed a sigh of relief. *That's all? No problem with that...*

But John wasn't finished. "And..."

"And what?"

"And you'll spend every night with me when you aren't scheduled to be with someone else...including sleeping over."

That meant he'd be spending a lot of time with her...but she couldn't see any way around it. She nodded her agreement and watched him smile, finding her breath catch when he did.

John had a very sexy smile.

"So tonight then," she said.

He nodded and picked up his handheld and that was Suzie's cue to leave him to his work. His voice stopped her before she got to the door. "Tonight...um, where?"

She hesitated. Her quarters would be the most appropriate and there was space enough for a watcher. "My room."

John paused then without looking up, nodded. "See you tonight."

Suzie wasn't sure what had just happened, but while she'd gone into John's office to talk him into something, somehow she felt like she was the one who'd been had.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been nearly a year since John had been in Suzie's quarters. Their meetings had always been in his at his preference. It was enough to share her with the other men, much less her bed with their ghosts. But she wanted this to happen in her space, so her space it would be. He'd cope.

For a moment John paused outside the room, marked "Morale Officer", feeling like he had ten years ago on his first official visit. It had been exciting, sensual and erotic to be invited into that room by what had at the time been to him the most beautiful and sensual woman he'd ever seen. His first woman, truth be known, but in her sensitive and capable hands he'd performed like a champion and when he'd left her, they'd both been wearing smiles of satisfied appreciation.

That's what a good morale officer did, satisfy the needs of her clients. Trouble was that simple sexual satisfaction wasn't what he wanted anymore and Suzie had never

been just any woman. If she could only see that as well...that's why he'd asked her to spend all her nights with him, so she'd be forced to recognize the truth.

He knocked and Suzie opened the door for him and he stepped inside her quarters. For a moment all he could take in was her, dressed in a long silken robe, her uniform for these kinds of encounters. In his quarters she'd often dispensed with that and worn her normal clothes when she visited...at least until he'd stripped them from her.

It was another indication of how she was regarding this encounter between them, treating it as if it were a normal part of her job rather than the kind of lovemaking that they'd become used to.

Uncomfortable with that thought, he looked around. The décor of the room took him back to those early years in the mines. While the rest of the station was utilitarian, the design of the morale officer's quarters had always been a miniature pleasure palace. In addition to the requisite oversized bed, it boasted a sitting area with a couch sized for two and a pair of matched, cushioned chairs. Heavy fabrics draped the walls in deep reds and burgundy, and the floor was covered in a thick carpet that he knew would feel soft on his bare feet...or any other bare body parts if it came to that.

He also knew that it was stain resistant and easy to keep clean, but that practical consideration faded from his mind as he noticed the touches that Suzie had made to the place, which doubled as her private bedroom.

Large white candles decorated the corners of the room, many of them lit, and the bed itself was hung around with gauzy curtains that seemed to catch the light and glow slightly. The candles must have held some kind of scent as the room seemed filled with a sweet aroma. He recognized the smell that was so much a part of Suzie, the lingering scent of her candles.

The effect was warm and welcoming, and in spite of everything, John felt instantly more relaxed...a relaxation that faded away as soon as he saw Kamian sitting in one of the cushioned chairs in the corner of the room. He was dressed in a large dark blue men's robe similar to one Suzie carried, and he held a glass of what looked like red wine. At John's quick glance, the other man turned his attention to his wine and took what seemed to be a fortifying gulp.

Suzie looked quickly between the two of them and her face turned troubled. She held out the robe and indicated a pretty screen that filled one corner of the room, providing a sheltered place to disrobe. "Why don't you undress and I'll get a glass for you."

Taking the robe, John did as she asked, reflecting that more and more this was feeling like one of his earliest morale-building visits, which didn't improve his morale at all. Somehow he'd hoped he'd grown beyond that with Suzie.

It only took a minute to change from his uniform shirt and pants into the soft, comfortable robe. It still smelled fresh from the cleanser, as he knew everything would in Suzie's room.

His sheets were only changed once every two weeks—hers every time they were used. It was just one of the advantages of her position within the organization, the privilege of perpetually having fresh sheets and clean laundry.

For a second he thought about that. He didn't really think something like that would make a difference to Suzie, but it was something to consider. No woman liked to live in a mess. He might spend a little time fixing up his room to make it more appealing to her.

Or perhaps Suzie would want to do it herself. She could move her candles into his space. He wouldn't mind having quarters that smelled this good. With Suzie there it would smell like home.

Once robed, he left his clothes on the hook next to Kamian's and returned to collect a glass of wine from Suzie. She pulled him to a narrow couch that barely sat the two of them. In the distant background he was still aware of the other man's presence, but now Suzie took center stage for him. She too had a stemmed glass of what seemed to be wine, sipping it carefully.

John tried his and found it excellent. It must have come in from Earth on the latest transport. It would have come from Suzie's special stash and was rich and full-bodied with a beautiful color.

Rich and full-bodied, just like Suzie.

He took several sips until he was sure he was feeling it. He was going to need alcohol to relax enough to perform for an audience the way he was supposed to.

Even Suzie seemed awkward and far too aware of the other man in the room. For a moment John wondered if she was regretting the situation her job had put them both in. But she could have said no if that were true. No surrogate could be forced into something they didn't want to do.

Which meant that either Suzie didn't mind having sex with an audience or she didn't mind for some other reason. Maybe it was just because she enjoyed having an excuse to go to bed with him again.

John really hoped the latter was the case. After all, it was the reason he was there.

Sitting so close to her, he could pick out the scent of her hair, the fragrance of the shampoo she used filling his nose. It was sweet, floral and sexy. It was so Suzie.

But it wasn't just her hair he smelled. It was all of her. She smelled like no other woman to him...here or on Earth. He'd know her fragrance anywhere. It was the scent of his woman.

For a moment it was enough to sit with her and take in her presence. Having forgone her company for the last several days he understood just how much he loved being with her.

Just being *with* her. Not making love or having sex or whatever anyone else wanted to call the physical act of love. He didn't need that to enjoy her. Just sitting next to her was a gift.

She slid just a little closer to him, letting her thigh rest next to his, and he felt the warmth of it through the thin fabric of their robes. Where her garment gaped across her chest he could see the swell of her breasts.

John swelled as well, his cock hardening under his robe. In spite of the presence of the other man in the room, sitting in quiet attentiveness in the corner, John wanted his woman...any way he could get her.

Any way she would let him have her.

But Suzie seemed to be unaware of just how much he desired her. She slid her hand along his thigh as if coaxing his response. Maybe she didn't know. John fought back a smile. Could Suzie really believe she'd lost her attractiveness to him?

He said nothing and let her hand wander up his thigh, sipping his wine as if unaware of what she was up to. He could feel her concern, the touch of her fingers growing hesitant as they slid along his skin, tentative until she reached his crotch...

Reaching there to discover that his cock was long, hard and ready for action.

*So much for not being interested.*

Her hand tightened along his length and Suzie mumbled a curse. John laughed out loud and grabbed her hand before it could escape.

"Gotcha," he told her and tugged her captured hand to his lips to kiss her fingers lightly. "Never believe I don't want you, darling."

"It wasn't that...but," her eyes slid to the silent man in the corner of the room.

"There is no one here but us," John told her firmly, hoping he believed it himself. "Only the two of us—that's all that's important right now." He took their glasses, slid them onto the table that fronted the couch and pulled her into his arms. She was a warm, sweet bundle and felt so right there.

"Only us, Suzie," he said and lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips were soft and warm and moved under his in their own tantalizing way. For a moment it was enough to feel her lips this way, to feel the welcome in her kiss, but soon he had to deepen it and taste her better.

His tongue slipped along the crack between her lips and she opened them in invitation. John didn't immediately take advantage, but instead just allowed his tongue a brief visit inside her mouth.

He wasn't in any hurry tonight. This would take all evening, he promised himself. He wanted to spend the entire night making love and then hold Suzie to her promise to let him sleep with her. By the time this night was over, Suzie would know just how far he was willing to go to convince her she needed to be with him and that he was the only man for her.

His hand slid to the curls on her head and secured her as he continued to explore her mouth, letting his tongue flit across hers, taking her breath deep into his lungs. He wanted to absorb her into him, swallow her tastes and smell her heady perfume. The



candles in the room gave off a hint of incense but it was nothing compared to the musk of Suzie, warm and rich.

He wouldn't have believed it possible to get harder, but he did. His cock jutted out from the gap in his robe, reaching like a heat-seeking missile for the woman sitting beside him. It was all he could do not to rub himself against the silky fabric covering the skin of her thigh.

His hand slipped into the front of her robe and found her soft, full breast, the hard tip peaked and ready for him. He closed his fingers over it and tweaked it gently, eliciting a soft noise from Suzie, a purr that came from deep in her throat. John growled back and closed his mouth again over hers.

Untying her robe, he let it fall open, revealing her glorious curves to the light in the room. Another sharp intake of breath came from the corner as their watcher saw what he did...Suzie's body, heavy breasts and the thatch of pale hair that topped her mound. John had meant to completely ignore the fact that they had an observer, but suddenly the thought of someone watching them didn't seem so embarrassing.

In fact, it could even be useful. For once there would be a witness to their lovemaking, someone to confirm what he'd known all along...that there was something very special between Suzie and him.

He knew that it wasn't just sex. That there was caring...real caring between them and it was evidenced in how they made love.

Perhaps Kamian could convince Suzie of this where he had not. It was always possible.

So he pulled Suzie's robe open further and left her body bare to his eyes...and those of their watcher. Let the man be witness if that was his chosen sexual preference.

He knew what his own sexual preference was...Suzie, any way he could have her.

Abandoning her mouth, he turned his lips to worship her breasts, laving each in turn, letting his tongue wrap around one nipple while his fingers tugged on the other. This elicited more sexy little purrs from her. He slid the robe off her shoulders, letting it fall to the couch, revealing all of her to his eyes and to those of their watcher.

Only the barest sound of a man shifting slightly on the chair and an occasional harsh breath told him that Kamian was still in the room.

John imagined what the other man was doing. Surely by now he had his hand in his lap, fondling his organ, imagining it was someone else's hand on him.

Meanwhile Suzie's hands were busy, one stroking his back, the other on his cock, giving it long strokes that made him groan aloud.

John tore his mouth from Suzie's breasts and laid a line of kisses down her stomach to where the soft blonde curls that decorated her mound waited for him. Neatly trimmed, of course, short, but still attractive to his eyes. Sliding off the couch onto the floor put him just at the right level. He knelt on the floor next to her and spread her legs to make room for him.

He nuzzled the soft hair, enjoying the feel against his mouth. Her body's scent came to him, heavy and redolent. Clean...Suzie always smelled clean, but there were some smells he was happy she couldn't wash away – they were too much a part of her.

He couldn't help filling his lungs with her scent and letting it drive his arousal even more. It was one of the things he loved about her, the scent that told him what role he wanted for her in his life. That smell of hers, which drove him wild.

And her taste. He dipped his tongue into the cleft at the top of her thighs and caught her flavor on his tongue. Suzie moaned and caught at his head with her hands, but she didn't try and stop his sensual assault on her body.

Why would she? He knew she loved the way he gave her these special intimate kisses. Now he applied himself to using his lips and tongue on her until she cried out, her body shaking. Eyes wild with passion, she pulled on him, tearing his mouth away from her pussy.

"Enough for now. I want to do the same for you."

John couldn't help his grin. He loved having Suzie's mouth on him. She switched places with him and knelt naked between his legs. John realized that their guest could now see his erect cock, but that didn't bother him.

Let the man look. John had nothing to be ashamed of in that department.

As her lips closed over the end of his cock, all thoughts fled his mind, of their silent watcher, or of anything else. All there was for him in the world was Suzie's mouth, its warmth and wetness, its heat making him harder still. All he felt was the way her tongue slid over his tip, catching his precum and collecting it as if it were the sweetest nectar.

All there was in his mind was how mind-blowingly good Suzie was at making love to his cock with her mouth. Too good, in fact. In moments he was ready to climax, and that was far, far too soon.

With a short growl, he pulled her to her feet, then lifted and carried her to the bed. Its position made it line of sight for their watcher, but John could care less what the man witnessed. He laid Suzie on the smooth silken sheets and tore off his robe, throwing it behind him.

Her eyes widened as she took in his form and his heavy cock ready for action, and he could almost imagine her licking her lips in anticipation. Sure she might have sex with other men, but he knew that she loved it with him.

That love had scared her into banning him from her bed but thanks to their silent watcher, she'd reconsidered that position. Maybe now he could persuade her to give up her position as a morale officer, to make her home with him and become a permanent part of his life – his wife and mother of his children.

Anything was possible. And he was ready to try anything.

Now he leaned over Suzie, supporting himself on his arms above her and staring down into her eyes. She didn't smile, but she looked happy to see him there.

He smiled at her. "Are you ready, darling?"

Now there was just a hint of a curve to her lips. "I'm ready...caveman."

Fitting his cock to her pussy, John drove himself into her to the hilt. She was hot and tight and he stayed still, afraid to move and finish too soon.

He had a plan tonight—he wanted take at least an hour and see that she had three orgasms before they were done. With that in mind he started stroking deep within her, taking it long and slow.

Within moments Suzie was making low moans that built to a crescendo, and John could count off one of the orgasms he was looking for. Even so, he felt like he'd only barely built up momentum before she was again making the moaning sounds that preceded a climax.

She screamed his name, and her nails dug into his backside.

Too fast. He slowed down, drawing things out. Finally he realized if he didn't stop he'd finish long before he wanted to. He pulled out of her.

"What?" Suzie gazed at him in surprise. "What are you doing, caveman?"

"Trying something else." Sitting up, he turned her over and pulled her up onto her knees. Her beautiful bottom hung before him, so tempting. He bent his head and again tasted the sweetness of her folds, even spending a little time tonguing the tight bud of her anus.

Suzie moaned. "That feels so good."

Kneeling, John entered her from behind, slowly, taking his time and drawing out the moment. Suzie moaned over his slowness and even tried to speed things up by pushing back, but he grabbed her hips and held them in place.

Usually she took the lead but tonight he was in charge of the lovemaking and he wasn't going to let her forget it.

Finally he was seated inside her, and from this angle she felt even tighter. He pulled back then surged forward and Suzie cried out. She grabbed a pillow and held it close to her. He took up a set of long strokes, and used his grip on her hips to push her forward and back along his shaft, pistoning into her from behind.

When he'd reached the pace he wanted, John let his finger dip into her anus with its sensitive nerves, slipping it inside to caress her sheath from the other side. He felt his cock through the double layer of skin. Suzie moaned and leaned back into his hand, obviously enjoying his finger there.

Her pussy was hot and tight and when he reached his peak, he slowed, savoring the moment, hoping to draw it out longer. But Suzie lost control, making her third orgasm a reality, and her pussy tightened along his cock and milked it hard.

He didn't have a choice now... A few strokes later, John came, really hard, shouting her name and shooting hot cum deep inside her.

"John, John." Suzie cried his name into the pillow she clutched to her face.

Waves of passion rocked through him even after he'd emptied himself into her. As they diminished John leaned against her back, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close. They fell on their sides, still locked in an intimate embrace.

He whispered into her ear. "This is what's between us, Suzie. I care for you. You know that I do. This is real."

She trembled, as she always did when he'd made her come that way.

A short and indistinct cry came from the corner of the room and John startled, suddenly remembering their visitor. The cry had the quality of a muffled orgasm.

He lifted his head just enough to see Kamian wiping his crotch with a small hand towel then adjusting his robe to cover himself. The scientist's face was studiously turned away from them.

John couldn't help his smile. Apparently the man had gotten what he needed.

Without a word, the chief scientist disappeared behind the screen. Moments later he reappeared, fully dressed, and without a word let himself out of the room.

Sated, Suzie seemed to melt into the bed, her eyes barely open. Looking half-asleep, she made no comment when John rose from the bed and blew out the candles then rejoined her.

This was the first of the nights that she'd promised he could stay with her, and he had no intention of leaving. John held her close and when he fell asleep, he dreamed of the day he'd have the right to share her bed every night.

## **Chapter Four**

John went to work the next day in a better mood than he'd enjoyed in a week. Some of it was waking up in Suzie's bed after the best sex he could remember having in months. More of it was that over the breakfast they'd had in her room she'd shyly told him that she was glad he was officially back on her list of clients.

It wasn't the commitment he really wanted...but it was better than the situation they'd had. He'd even gotten a commitment to meet again tonight since no one else had asked for her attentions. If John had his way, no one would be asking for her during the next couple of weeks, either. He'd spread the word that the new morale officer was on her way and he knew the men would be willing to wait for her arrival.

He had Suzie's promise to spend the night with him. Smiling, John realized that in some very real sense, sleeping with Suzie was almost as satisfying as making love with her was. If that wasn't a symptom of a real relationship, he didn't know what was.

Of course another symptom of a real relationship was working together on a project. He'd already gotten Suzie's approval to take over the gift-giving job. "Operation Santa Claus" was how he was now thinking of it...making sure that everyone on the station had something to open up when the big day arrived.

Of course what he really wanted was to be certain that Suzie had something very special. Something that would make it clear to her what he really felt about her.

Halfway to his office, his locator sounded. It was the loading dock, and John suddenly remembered that today was shipment day. The man in charge sounded amused. "Boss, I think you might want to come down here."

When he arrived, John understood why the man had been laughing. He and a group of others were standing around a crate the size of a small land vehicle that had been off-loaded from the weekly transport from Earth. It was marked as from the Stellar Trading Company and was addressed to Suzie.

John joined them in their smiles and helped the other men lift the heavy box onto a motorized dolly. "I guess Christmas has arrived on Mars," he said.

Suzie's eyes lit up and she clapped her hands together like a child when she saw the crate. "Wow! Look at it!" She looked around her miniscule office. "It's far too big to open up in here. Let's move it to the dining hall."

With a grin John followed her, pulling the dolly. Most of the station was built underground, taking advantage of the natural caverns that led to the mine, but the dining hall was one of the few rooms built at least partially aboveground, and had both skylights and windows that looked out on the open Martian plain where the station was

situated. The room's location and size made it an ideal place to hold celebrations of all sorts and so Suzie had designated it as Christmas Central.

As they arrived in the hall, he noticed that it was a nice day outside for once, with no high winds or dust storms to worry about. The air was clear to the mountains on one side and the horizon on the other. Through the heavy puncture-proof windows John saw the flat surface of reddish dirt and rock, while above them a distant sun lit the pale pink sky.

He watched as she opened the crate to uncover boxes and bags of intriguing objects, with lots of bright colors and shiny materials predominating. He tried to take a closer look, but she shooed him away.

She held up the inventory list. "I have to make sure they sent everything and I can't do that if you're pulling stuff out as well."

So John sat back and enjoyed watching her work. Eventually she pulled out one large box and handed it to him. It was heavier than it looked. John lost some of his grin as he adjusted the bulky package under his arm.

"These are the presents," Suzie said. "There should be something for everyone. As our official Santa Claus your job will be to pick out one present for every person on the station."

John stared at the box in his arms. Okay, so how hard would that be? He'd make a list and check it twice, and line up presents to people. "You sure there is something in here for everyone?"

For a moment she looked worried. "There are enough items in there. You might have to get a little creative to make sure everyone has something appropriate."

She looked apprehensive so John put a soothing hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Suzie. I'll make sure that everyone is pleased with his or her present. That's Santa's job after all."

He wished he could have canned the look of gratitude she gave him and saved it for another day. She really wanted this holiday to be perfect, and John realized that as Santa, much of it would be his responsibility. Well, that was fine with him. As station chief, he'd spent the last three years trying to keep this station content. This would just be doing the deed in a costume.

Speaking of which. "Suzie, did you remember to get a Santa outfit for me?"

"A Santa suit? What is that?"

John thought back to his one encounter with the Christmas icon. "A red pair of pants and jacket, trimmed in white. Same thing for the hat. Big black belt and boots and a long, white beard."

Eyes wide, Suzie shook her head. "Oh, no! I'm afraid I didn't!"

He hid his grimace. "That's okay. I'm sure we'll think of something."

"It's like the Christmas tree," she said mournfully. "There is still so much we don't have."

John gave her a hug. "Suzie, I'm sure it will all work out. We've got several days and the people in this station are used to improvising."

He wasn't sure she believed him but she smiled gratefully anyway. John hoisted the box of presents in his arms, vowing to take them to his office and make sure he found something appropriate for Suzie. With the effort she was going through making Christmas, she deserved something really special.

He left her taking inventory of the rest of her purchases and muttering to herself about what to do about a Christmas tree.

\* \* \* \* \*

Suzie stared at the array of items inside the box. In all her life she'd never seen so much—well, *junk!* Stuff sparkled, and shined, just as promised in the catalog, but it wasn't at all what she'd envisioned. Discouraged, she weeded through the bags and boxes, putting much of it aside. Everything she'd ordered was there, but she couldn't help her disappointment at the quality. Much of it was cheaply made and of the flimsiest materials. That was the last time she relied on catalog pictures.

With a sigh, she sat back and stared. What was she going to do? Some of it would look okay hanging from a tree...a very tall tree so you couldn't get a close look at it. But she didn't have a tree any more than she had the Santa suit John needed.

Suzie threw her arms around herself and tried not to give in to despair. She'd downloaded several books about Christmas in the past week and read each of them faithfully, wanting to understand the holiday. Each described it as a magical time. She sure hoped that was right, because she could use a little magic right now to pull this holiday out of the disaster she currently foresaw. No one would be impressed by decorations made with this junk. In fact, she should get it out of sight before someone noticed it.

She grabbed one of the bags to toss it back into the crate.

"Wow, look at all the decorations!" From behind her came a high-pitched voice, as well as several youthful gasps and exclamations.

Bag in hand, Suzie turned to realize that the dining hall now held the station's school-aged children, all six of them, along with one of their teachers, Ms. Beswick. She felt her usual unease around the woman, who was married to a miner not on her client list—for obvious reasons—but the woman's warm smile disarmed her.

The woman held out her hand and shook Suzie's. "I hope you don't mind, Ms. Suzie," the woman said, using Suzie's unofficial nickname. She nodded toward the excited children. "We were in class, but they heard your Christmas box had arrived and couldn't stand not coming up to see what was in it."

The children crowded in close, smiling, laughing and exclaiming excitedly over the bags of garlands and boxes of ornaments that she'd distributed during her inventory.

At the bright eyes and smiles of the kids, she felt her dismay fade over the unimpressive contents of the crate.

"So pretty!" one little girl said, holding up what to Suzie had looked like a ball stuck all over with cheap glitter. "It's shiny!"

Suzie couldn't help her laugh. Apparently one person's tawdry was another's treasure. One of the boys came over with one of the garlands looped around his neck.

"Can we help put them up, Ms. Suzie?" he asked hopefully. "We can hang them around the dining hall."

Ms. Beswick looked almost as excited as the children. "Would that be all right? I could help supervise them if you don't mind."

Suzie looked around at the eager faces. Well, why not? She could use the assistance. "I guess we could hang some of the garlands on the walls. We still don't have a tree to decorate and put the presents under..." she began but her voice trailed off at the stricken looks on the children's faces.

"A tree...you mean like in a forest?" one of the older boys spoke up. "There aren't any on Mars." He looked thoughtful.

One little girl stepped closer to Suzie. "There are no trees on Mars. We won't be able to have one. No Christmas tree for the presents," she said. Tears welled in the little one's eyes and she looked so sad it was all Suzie could do to not put her arms around her. For a moment she wished that the child were her own so she could comfort her.

The urge caught her by surprise. When had she begun to want children? That had never been a part of her plans in the past, but now...she realized she did want to have a child. Perhaps this was another symptom of how John had gotten under her skin.

The boy who'd spoken before still seemed locked in deep thought. "It doesn't need to be a living tree," he said, "right? Just something with branches." Suddenly he grinned at her. "I think I know what we can use!"

He whispered to his teacher, who laughed and told him to go ahead. Immediately he headed for the communications unit on the wall.

Bewildered, Suzie looked at the other woman for an explanation. "Bobby has an interesting idea," the teacher said. "He's calling his father."

She clapped her hands and gained the children's attention. "In the meantime, let's all help Ms. Suzie deck this hall!"

The impromptu decorating crew went to work with considerable zeal, enthusiasm and a lot of giggling. Suzie busied herself with opening the bags and making the tough decisions as to how much should go where.

After about a half hour had passed, two men from the mining crew arrived carrying a long pole, along with Hans, chief of the mining operation. For once the big man refrained from any of his usual teasing, suggestive comments that had occasionally embarrassed Suzie. Instead he smiled and kept his distance, and she had to wonder what had changed.



She also wondered about the pole, particularly when the men set it up on end and she realized that long spikes covered it, folded into its length. They secured it into a heavy, flat base to make it stand upright then one of the men flipped a lever on the bottom end of the pole.

All of the spikes unfolded and Suzie now saw that they stuck out perpendicular around the pole. They were positioned at about six centimeter intervals along its length and were longer at the bottom than near the top. The result actually resembled a metal tree, nearly four meters tall.

Her jaw dropped and Suzie let out a cheer of celebration. They had a Christmas tree!

The man standing next to Bobby rubbed the boy's head. "Good thinking, son. It really does look like a tree. I think we've got a spare set of tunnel lights that we can use to light it. I'll be right back."

He left, leaving behind Hans, who grinned at her. "This a cleaning drill bit for scrubbing the narrow tunnels, but it's broken." He pointed to a few of the "branches" that she now saw were noticeably shorter along one of the sides. "We were going to trash it until Bobby called. He thought it looked enough like a tree for Christmas."

"It's perfect," she told him. They could turn it so the broken branches were against the wall. It was a little big... They wouldn't have nearly enough ornaments to deck it out properly...

"Leave that to us," someone said and Suzie realized she'd spoken that last aloud. Suzie turned to see that Ms. Beswick had come up, holding the little girl who'd been crying earlier.

The child now glowed with happiness. "It's a tree!" she said. "We got a Christmas tree for the presents!" She jumped down and went to help the other children in dragging over some of the garlands to throw on the bottom branches of the "tree".

Again Suzie got that weird urge to procreate. Was it possible that John might want children? She shook her head to clear it of that thought. Christmas' magic was really getting to her if she was thinking about kids that way.

The teacher spoke. "We'll put the children to work making ornaments. It will be a fun thing for them to do over the next few days. Plus I'll get some of the mothers together to help. Is there anything else you need?"

"We need a Santa suit for Captain Forge," Suzie said quietly so the children couldn't hear. "He's going to be giving out the presents."

Ms. Beswick's eyes lit up. "Oh how fun! I bet several of the moms would love to help with that project, particularly if they get to fit the costume to him. I think I have some red fabric we can use and we'll improvise the hair and beard."

The woman's knowing smile reminded Suzie how attractive John was. Even a married woman liked being near him.

But she was the one he liked to sleep with. Suzie remembered how wonderful it had felt to wake up next to John this morning. Part of her wanted to wake like that every day.

It was very hard to remember that she was due to leave in less than two weeks and after that she'd never sleep in his arms again.

One of the children called and Ms. Beswick headed away, leaving Suzie alone with her uncomfortable thoughts—and Hans. She steeled herself for one of his usual suggestive comments.

Hans took a look around the busy room, the children pulling garlands from the bag and fixing them to the windows and wall under their teacher's helpful direction. Some of the station's women had entered the dining hall and were helping their children with the decorating, while others were making lists of what else was needed.

The big man grinned down at her. "Suzie, you make a big celebration for us all. I think everyone have a great time this holiday." He landed a pat on her shoulder that staggered her and turned to head off.

Suzie called after him. "Hans, about your appointment this week..."

Hans shook his head. "I think it better we not keep appointment. I hear new woman coming and I can wait until then. Besides..." The big man's voice trailed off as if he were thinking about something. "Besides, I think it time I have serious talk with lady doctor. I may need special medical care."

With a grin he walked off, whistling some strange tune and leaving Suzie gaping after him. In all the time she'd known him, Hans hadn't been sick a single day.

\* \* \* \* \*

John finished sorting through the presents in the box. There were, as Suzie has told him, just as many gifts as there were people on the station...an amazing coincidence, but not one he wanted to spend a lot of time worrying about.

He made a list of people on the station and then went through the presents, assigning the more obvious presents first. The children were easy enough. Several games and a couple of dolls were divided up, and there were some small pull toys for the toddlers.

The gift box held an assortment of items that would appeal to women, and John went through them all, looking for something for Suzie, but nothing struck his fancy and he began to worry he wouldn't find anything.

A knock on the door caught his attention and he turned to find Kamian smiling at him. For a moment he wondered what to say, then decided that silence was the best solution. He had nothing to apologize for, but the situation was awkward.

The other man seemed to understand and merely nodded. "I wanted to talk to you, Captain."

John pushed the items back into the box and put it aside. He indicated the seat in front of him and the smaller man took it before handing over a handheld electronic tablet. John stared at it for a moment before he recognized its contents as a transfer request.

He stifled a sigh. So Kamian had decided to move on. Involving him in last night's harebrained scheme to get Suzie to stay had been a major mistake. They'd embarrassed the man and now he wasn't going to stay.

"I wanted to make sure it was okay with you, Captain. That I...that is, that we do this."

*We?* John stared at Kamian, then back at the request. He read the name on the form. "Miri Laschi? Who is that?"

"My fiancée back on Earth. We've been promised to each other for quite a while. She is why I declared my sexual preference as I did." Kamian gave him a rueful smile. "I did not wish to be unfaithful to her while we were separated, but it is hard to get the company to understand these things. Declaring myself to be a voyeur keeps them happy."

"You mean you aren't?"

The other man shrugged sheepishly. "Well, not exclusively. Every once in a while, I do enjoy watching."

John couldn't help asking. "So did you enjoy last night?"

"Last night. Yes." Kamian's smile turned poignant. "Last night was very special. It is rare to see two people who feel so strongly for each other make love. That's what I saw last night, real love. It made me rethink my situation."

He gestured to the form. "For some time I've been reluctant to expose my Miri to life in a mining colony on Mars, but you and your Suzie have made me reconsider. Seeing you make love to your Suzie made me want to bring my lady here and make our marriage happen."

Kamian grinned. "Besides, this is not an ordinary colony. We have a community here of people I enjoy being with and I think Miri will like it as well. Here we will have a home suitable for raising a family. And next week is the first Christmas on Mars and I want to spend that day with my lady. So if you will sign the form, then we can have her transfer here before then."

John could barely hide his delight. So their chief scientist not only wanted to stay, but to bring his fiancée here? With a huge grin at this twist of fate, John grabbed his stylus and signed the form, handing it back to Kamian.

The other man took the tablet and gave a short bow, a twinkle in his eye. "Thank you, Captain. And may I say, Merry Christmas?"

"Merry Christmas to you, too."

After he'd gone, John leaned back in his chair, savoring the moment. This meant there would soon be a new couple on his station, and likely children to come as well.

Even better, a man like Kamian would attract other scientists, and inspire more projects apart from the mining operation. Another reason to keep the place open even with reduced output from the mine. With Kamian staying it could become easy to convince the imminent survey committee that the station should remain open indefinitely.

Maybe Kamian and Mari would want him to officiate at their wedding. It had been a while since he'd done so, years ago at another station. He still remembered how lovely the bride had been. She'd brought with her an old-fashioned wedding gown and a veil, all white and lacy, and had been the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in it.

For a moment he imagined Suzie in such a getup. She was his perfect woman and now more than ever he wanted a real relationship with her. He wanted her to be his wife...nothing less would do.

Again John pulled the box of presents onto his desk. Now if only he could find the perfect gift for her. As he sorted through the box, one item fell onto the desk, a little apart from the others. It was a thin, ten-centimeter-long oval, two pieces of dark, polished wood held together by a hinge on one end and a clasp on the other.

Something about the object attracted his eye and he picked it up, undid the clasp and opened it up.

One side held a mirror and the other had a thin sliver of metal embossed with words. "Love's true face reflects forever," he read.

Both the metal strip and the mirror seemed far older than the case. Tarnish was embedded in the metal and dark flecks stained the outer edges of the mirror. As old as they seemed to be, John decided that somewhere along the way someone had reset both into the current wooden case, which looked much newer.

An antique looking glass? This was an interesting gift for Suzie. It was unusual, very much like her and he suspected she would appreciate something as old-fashioned as a hand mirror. The condition of the glass bothered him though. Maybe it would show a distorted image and he wouldn't want to give it to her in that case.

John looked inside the mirror and nearly dropped it onto the table. It wasn't a mirror at all...it couldn't be. Instead of himself, he saw Suzie...but not just any image of Suzie. It was Suzie wearing a white dress, her head covered in a sheer veil with an edge of white lace framing her beautiful face.

He stared dumbfounded at the glass and its image. It was a reflection of Suzie, wearing a wedding veil and dressed like a bride, just like the woman in the wedding he'd officiated at. That's what he saw in the glass.

And she looked happy...very happy, her eyes shining with all the love he wanted from her. What was this—a mirror that reflected the future? He could only hope.

Hands trembling, John closed the mirror case and set it carefully on the desk. No doubt about it, he had the perfect gift for her now.

## **Chapter Five**

It was getting to look a lot like Christmas—on Mars! Suzie smiled at the result of the station's inhabitants' decorating efforts. Garlands lined the windows of the station's dining hall, and soft white fabric had been fastened on the outside to the bottom of each to simulate snow. With the barren red soil in the distance it was strange-looking, but oddly satisfying anyway.

The walls were covered in cut-out stars and snowflakes and other images of Christmas cheer, copied from the illustrated books that they'd pulled from the station's online library.

Their improvised drill bit tree was lit up with lengths of mining lights that reflected off the glittery balls and additional tinsel paper ornaments that had been made by the children. As the teacher had promised, they'd managed to add to the ornaments Suzie had ordered until the tree was filled. Soft, white fabric was spread underneath the tree and the largest chair on the station had been placed next to it, a throne for their Santa to sit in.

Suzie folded her arms and gazed happily around the room, which was now as bright and loaded with holiday cheer as a crate full of cheap decorations could make it.

But it looked better than that and she knew the reason why. It looked better because every person who'd hung a garland or put a string of lights on their makeshift tree had done so with goodwill in their heart and with the idea of making the holiday coming up a celebratory time for everyone. At one point or another the whole station had passed through the hall with something to add to the decorating, or to donate something to the cause. It had become an effort on the part of them all.

It was holiday magic all right...the best kind of magic because it came from the caring of those involved.

Several of the women on the station had taken great pains to approach her about the plans for a holiday dinner and other treats during the two days they'd selected to celebrate. Many had special dishes that they'd enjoyed back on Earth and wanted to share with the station. Suzie had referred them to Harry, who she'd put in charge of the menu. She thought he'd enjoy the attention of all the station's ladies, particularly that of Jana, one of the few unmarried women miners.

A couple times she'd come across them talking well after normal working hours and she wondered if there wasn't something of a budding romance beginning there.

Suzie smiled. She'd also had similar encounters with Harry's sister, Alixon and Hans, the pair of them seeming much more companionable than before.

So much going on to make this station more like home and part of it was due to her. She felt really proud of that. Something she'd started had grown into a community effort. This was the real job of a morale officer – to improve the community she was part of.

In many ways Suzie wished she could stay part of that community after her replacement came next week.

John wanted her to stay. He'd said as much many times. He'd even used the "I" word when she let him. If only she could be sure that it was his heart and not his libido talking. If only she believed that what she felt about him was the same thing.

She sometimes thought she did. The thought of leaving the station, and him, filled her with a sadness she almost couldn't bear. But was not wishing to lose someone enough on which to build a permanent relationship?

Never in her life had she known of love lasting long. Suppose she chose to stay here with John and things didn't work out? What would become of her then? Could she really go back to being a morale officer?

Too many questions. Better that she not spend her last few days here worrying about it. Not that she had much else to do. In the past few days her calendar had mysteriously opened up, all of her regular clients canceling their appointments. Obviously her appeal to the men had faded with the announcement of a new morale officer coming.

Fulfilling her promise to spend those empty nights with John, she'd spent the last several nights with him, making love, sleeping in his bed and waking beside him. With every day it was getting harder to imagine leaving him behind and moving on with her life.

If she weren't careful she wouldn't have a life to go back to.

It wasn't fair to John either. He'd be very unhappy when she left if he didn't have someone else to be intimate with and it was her duty to make sure he was taken care of.

As painful as that sounded.

Tomorrow the new morale officer would arrive. Part of Suzie's job would be to introduce the new woman to the station—in particular to those she'd been responsible for servicing. She was sure that the men of the station would welcome Mary Jane, happy to have a new woman around. Perhaps even John would find Mary Jane more attractive.

A pang hit Suzie over that, but she forced herself to ignore it. She was leaving and it would be Mary Jane's job to take care of the men...all of the men, including John.

It wouldn't be fair to leave John with no one. She'd have to try and get the handsome captain interested in her replacement instead.

No matter how she felt about it.

Mary Jane Jackson was statuesque, blonde and everything Suzie had been afraid she'd be. She was the perfect replacement, just enough like Suzie to be familiar, but more exotic so she'd be a big attraction to the men.

She even had bigger breasts, Suzie noticed, and tried not to feel bad about it.

The woman held out her hand and smiled brightly. "It's so nice to meet you!"

Suzie took her hand and shook it, misgivings growing by the moment. The woman was even *nice*!

Suzie helped carry her bags off the transport, although there was barely any need. As soon as they came out into the dock, several of the men were there, ready and eager to meet the new woman.

Suzie remembered when she'd first arrived how the men had clustered...all but John who'd held back and simply watched. But there had been no denying his interest in her, even from the beginning.

Looking around Suzie realized that John wasn't there this time and that made her relax for the moment. She had to admit that she dreaded the moment she would have to turn over her favorite man to her replacement.

In the meantime Mary Jane was talking to men clustered around, smiling and flirting...not too much, but just enough to make it clear where her interests were—in all of them.

"How nice of you all to come and greet me," she said. "Such hospitality, I swear." She batted her long eyelashes. "I'm looking forward to getting to know each and every one of you."

Suzie had to smile. The woman was a professional, just as much as she was...or had been.

When was the last time that she'd flirted this way with the men under her charge? It had been a while, she realized. For the last year, most of her attention had been on the captain and she'd rarely visited with the men, joking and talking with them after hours and soliciting their attention. Somehow she'd stopped caring if they wanted her.

Maybe that's why the others had stopped asking for her services, rather than because they hadn't wanted to compete with their leader. A fine morale officer she was if that were true. No wonder all the men were so happy to see Mary Jane. The woman was paying attention to them just like she should have been all this time.

Oddly enough, no one seemed to blame her for that lapse. She'd heard no complaints and she doubted that John had either. Surely he would have said something earlier if he'd felt the men were being neglected.

She straightened her shoulders. Well, the men weren't going to be neglected any further as far as she could see. Mary Jane was the perfect surrogate and would be a fine asset to the station. Suzie would leave the needs of the men to someone they deserved and she'd move on.

But to what? What would she do if she couldn't be an effective morale officer any more? What could she do if she'd fallen so hard for a man that she didn't want to have sex with anyone else?

Perhaps she should talk to a company representative and get some career guidance. Or she could even talk to Mary Jane about it, as she'd just came from company headquarters and might know what options were open.

"I hate to cut this short, but I'd really like to go to my quarters and freshen up." Mary Jane shot Suzie an unmistakable look asking for help. The men had gathered even closer, obviously very happy to see her.

Suzie stepped in. "Perhaps someone can help us?"

Immediately several men volunteered to carry Mary Jane's bags to the guest quarters where she'd be until Suzie relinquished her official position at the end of the week.

As Suzie watched the men's eagerness she wondered if she should have packed and moved out. It was clear that the new woman needed the big morale officer's bed more than she did.

She followed the men to the lift that would take them into the station from the supply shuttle's landing bay. One of the men lagged behind with her, Carlin. He hadn't asked for service for a while and he surprised her by putting one arm around her shoulders.

"Ms. Suzie," he spoke quietly so only she could hear. "I want to thank you."

"For what?"

"For deciding to bring in someone new. It's nice to see a fresh face."

Suzie could almost have laughed. Carlin's stare was nowhere near Mary Jane's face, but fixed to the woman's swaying rear end.

He tore his gaze away and grinned sheepishly at her. "It has been a long time."

"I know. But I've been here."

Carlin sighed. "Yeah, you have. And don't get me wrong, Ms. Suzie, you were great to be with. But a man doesn't like to tread on another man's territory."

She stiffened. "But I don't belong to anyone."

"That's not what I meant, exactly. The captain is crazy about you, Ms. Suzie and you seem to feel the same way about him. Most of didn't want to interfere with that. We knew if he were happy, he'd settle down and stay our captain. He's too good a man for any of us to want to see move on."

"You've been avoiding me because you wanted the captain to stay here?"

He grinned. "Not quite the way I'd put it, but that does sum it up nicely." He glanced up at Mary Jane's rear end. "I sure hope no one falls in love with this one too quickly. She's hot."



Suzie trudged after the new morale officer and her entourage into the depths of the station. Mary Jane was hot, Captain Forge was in love and everyone expected her to move in with him. What was a self-respecting, independent woman to do?

Well, one thing was certain. It was John...that is, Captain Forge's job to welcome the new morale officer and Suzie would at least see to it that he did.

John was in his office, wrapping bits of colored paper and ribbons around small items when she walked in. Suzie told him that the new morale officer was here, that the men seemed to like her and then she made her proposal.

Through it all, John sat perfectly still, staring at her as her nervousness grew.

He took a deep breath. "So you think I should invite the new morale officer to my quarters tonight instead of you. No, I won't do it."

Ruthlessly Suzie stamped down on how pleased she was at his comment. "But John...that is, Captain, it is customary for the head of the station to be the first client!"

"Only if the head of the station isn't involved with someone. I am involved – with you."

"But John, we can't be involved. I am the current morale officer...it's against the book."

John folded his hands in front of him. "No matter what the book says, I have no interest in any woman but you." He gave into a great sigh. "Let's be frank with each other for once. You know I'm in love with you, Suzie. I want a permanent relationship with you. A marriage contract."

Suzie's jaw dropped. "But I can't be married. I'm a morale officer!"

"So quit being a morale officer and be my wife instead."

"I can't do that!"

"Why not?"

Why couldn't she? Because it wasn't who she was...what she'd trained to do. Even if she wasn't very good at it at the moment, she couldn't just stop being a morale officer. "It's important to me. I help people and make them feel happy," she answered finally.

He folded his hands under his chin. "You care about me, Suzie. I know you do. Is it that you don't love me?"

"John..." She hesitated. "I don't know what love is. I care about you. But more than that...I just don't know."

He reached out and took her hand. "How can you not know how we feel about each other? It is so obvious to me and everyone else."

"It's just sex. You want me, but you'd want anyone."

"Like the new morale officer? You think I would want her over you?"

"Well..." Suzie's voice trailed off as John's eyes narrowed in irritation. It took a lot to anger him but it seemed he was fast approaching that point. "How can you say you wouldn't? You haven't even seen her. She is lovely and all the men like her already."

"Do they?" John seemed to calm down and something that might have been humor passed through his eyes. "Perhaps I should see her for myself. Very well. I'll make a deal with you."

"A deal?"

"Tonight I will ask Mary Jane to service me, but you have to be there too."

"Me? You mean you want both of us? At the same time?" Suzie froze inside. At some level she could deal with John and another woman together, but not right in front of her. She tried to imagine him kissing Mary Jane, his arms holding her close, and her stomach churned. She did not want to be there when he made love to another woman.

"Yes, both of you." A feral grin that she didn't like at all took over his face. "Perhaps this has always been one of my fantasies, to have two beautiful women at once. You can show her just what I like and we can both evaluate her performance."

Suzie blanched. This was not what she'd wanted, at all. But she couldn't very well refuse. He'd made some valid points...and it was within the rules of the book.

It bothered her that he'd gone so quickly from not wanting Mary Jane at all to wanting both of them. He could have put up a little more of a fight.

Even so she schooled her face and nodded. "I'll tell her and we'll see you tonight."

After Suzie had gone, John pulled from his drawer the small oval mirror and rechecked the image. It was still as he remembered, a picture of someone who looked a lot like Suzie wearing an old-fashioned wedding outfit. With great care he wrapped it in gold paper, added a ribbon and put her name on it.

It was a dangerous game he was playing. Suzie might have been so offended by his suggestion that she would have refused to have anything to do with him. And he hadn't met the new woman at all. If she was going to be morale officer here, his special request might be a very bad way to start their relationship. Not that he intended that relationship to be anything but professional. He had no intention of becoming one of her clients.

His intention was to prove to Suzie once and for all that he had no interest in making love to anyone but her. If he had to invite another beautiful woman into his bed and then ignore her to prove just how much he'd rather have his sweet but stubborn little darling, then that's what he was going to do.

## Chapter Six

Mary Jane looked surprised when Suzie told her about John's request. For a moment she looked as if something amused her, then she agreed and said she'd meet Suzie at his quarters.

The woman had been a morale officer for nearly ten years. Suzie decided that she'd seen a lot of situations even odder than this one. She wondered if she'd be as open. It was hard enough now contemplating sharing a man with another woman, much less one she was so fond of.

Okay, fond wasn't probably the right word. But she wasn't going to use the word that came closest to her mind when she thought of John. No one could force her to say she was in love with the man.

She couldn't say it when she didn't know what love was. All she knew was that she didn't really want to share John with anyone.

Her stomach ached as she dressed that night in her surrogate robe and stood outside the door to John's room. Mary Jane was nowhere in sight in the corridor so she knocked on the door.

It opened and Suzie walked in to find John and her fellow surrogate waiting for her, both dressed in robes as she was and both of them enjoying a glass of wine. Suzie checked the time...it was the time she'd said they'd be there. She wasn't late.

"You aren't late," John told her, handing her a glass of wine. He must have seen the way she'd glanced at the room's clock. "Mary Jane is having trouble adjusting to station time and was early." He gave the other woman a warm smile. "We were just getting acquainted."

*What did that mean? Surely they wouldn't have started without her!*

Suzie sipped her wine and tried to relax. Even when she and John had made love with an audience she hadn't been so nervous. But then the other man had stayed away from them, preferring to observe rather than participate.

From the sensual smile on Mary Jane's face, that wasn't likely to happen tonight. She was ready to be part of any action and the way she eyed John didn't give Suzie any kind of comfort.

She gave herself a mental shake. John wasn't her man to be jealous over. He was fixated on her, not the other way around. That was one of the reasons she'd wanted to introduce him to Mary Jane, so that he'd get over the notion that he wanted her permanently.

So why did she not like the way he was smiling at Mary Jane?

John swirled the wine in his glass. "This is awkward. Perhaps we should all sit for a bit." They followed him to the sitting area of his quarters. Mary Jane took a chair while John sat on the couch.

Suzie made a point of sitting next to him, letting her leg rub against his. Other than another smile, he showed no sign that he'd noticed so she rubbed again, this time harder.

After a long moment, Mary Jane put her glass down and moved behind the couch. "Perhaps you'd like a backrub?"

John leaned back and looked up at her. "That sounds great."

She began to rub his shoulders and he groaned and leaned further back into her hands.

"Like that?" Mary Jane purred.

He closed his eyes and nearly whimpered. "Oh yes."

Suzie's eyes narrowed. Okay, so it had been a while since she'd given John a backrub. That wasn't a regular part of her routine when with him, even though it was well within her abilities. All morale officers were trained masseuses and could be called upon for massage therapy as needed.

It's just that it hadn't been needed. John had other ideas when it came to releasing his tension and to her knowledge had had no complaints about how effective her attentions in that area had been. But he was certainly enjoying Mary Jane's hands on his shoulders now.

Well, two could play that game. Suzie slipped off her slippers and ran one foot along the calf of his leg. John's smile grew broader.

John opened one eye a crack and winked wickedly at her. "That feels good too," he murmured. Encouraged, Suzie moved to the floor in front of him, lifted his foot and began to rub it.

John relaxed back into the cushions, Mary Jane working the kinks from his shoulders and Suzie massaging his feet. "Now *this* is heaven."

Without thinking about it, Suzie glanced up at Mary Jane and both women shared a brief moment of amusement. Was there a man alive who didn't love getting rubbed, even if it was his less sensitive places?

Speaking of which, Suzie decided to move further up John's legs and give his calves some attention. He spread his legs to give her better access and she moved between them.

Mary Jane moved further down John's chest, massaging the muscles with practiced hands. Her moves had stopped being completely therapeutic and became more sensual by the moment. Not to be outdone, Suzie rose onto her knees, closer to his beginning-to-bulge crotch, her hands now caressing the well-developed upper thigh muscles.

The robe across his crotch bulged even more.

Mary Jane leaned forward, running her lips along the back of his neck and her hold on him became a true hug. Suzie cringed as John leaned back into the other woman, obviously enjoying her embrace.

The scene reminded Suzie of her first time with John, two years earlier. That had been just a normal encounter, until John had pulled her into his arms and kissed her senseless. Kissing was against the rules but she hadn't protested.

She realized now that she'd fallen for him on the spot.

Any moment he'd kiss Mary Jane and have another morale officer under his sensual spell. She waited for that, not wanting it to happen, hating that it was inevitable.

But it wasn't. Instead of grabbing Mary Jane, John broke away from her, leaned forward and seized Suzie, pulling her up across his chest. His mouth descended on hers with even more than its usual intensity and she gasped, her mouth opening to his.

John took full advantage of that. His tongue swept inside and engaged hers in a sensual battle, robbing her of breath. Under his robe she felt the full length of his erection hard and ready for her.

Well, ready for her and Mary Jane. Unfortunately.

Suzie was becoming more and more aware of how much she didn't want to share him with anyone, even a fellow morale officer. Even if she wasn't supposed to feel like that, she did anyway.

She wanted John for herself. Abruptly she understood how he must have felt all these months, knowing that she was sleeping with other men.

Of course it was a little late to be thinking of that now. She'd invited Mary Jane into John's bed, practically forced him to take her there. John was the one who'd insisted that she be present.

She was committed to finishing this with them both no matter how much it bothered her.

But it was she he was kissing and holding close, not her rival. Now John stood, and holding her hand, pulled her toward the bed. He slid onto the bed and knelt in the middle facing her.

For a moment Suzie stared at him, seeing the desire in his eyes, seeing the way he stared at her...and only her. For a long moment they stared at each other.

Mary Jane came up from behind and gave Suzie a hard shove. She fell forward and John caught her against his chest. Suzie turned in his arms to see Mary Jane grinning at them both.

"If there is one thing I've learned over the years, it is when I'm not needed. I think that you and the captain should work things out." She retied her robe and slipped her slippers back on. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment with a man who honestly wants my attention."

In a moment she was gone and Suzie and John were left alone on the bed.

He gave her his wicked sensual smile and she melted inside. "I only want you, Suzie. MJ knows that."

"MJ?"

"That's what she told me to call her. We had quite a talk before you came."

"You invited her early, didn't you?"

"I had no intention of making love to her and didn't want any misunderstandings. There have been enough of those around here."

"You mean your insistence on having both of us here was a trick?" In spite of her outrage, Suzie couldn't help her sense of relief. John hadn't really wanted MJ as a surrogate.

His next words confirmed that. "Let's just say that what I want in life will never require more than you in it. And in my bed. Speaking of which, I didn't ask you here to fight with you."

"No, I guess you didn't." She leaned into him. "So what do you want to do?"

He opened up her robe, pulling it from her shoulders. "Get you undressed for a start."

"I should undress you, then."

John grabbed her hands. "Not this time. All this time you've serviced me, Suzie, and taken the lead. It's my turn to do the same for you. Let me make love to you."

She lay back and let him take the lead, as he put it, uncovering her bit by bit, kissing each inch of skin as it was revealed, enjoying the feel of his hands and lips. He was gentle and thorough, his touch sending frissons of anticipation through her. This was John as she'd always known him, intense and sensual.

This was the man she loved. Even if she'd never told him so. Perhaps she should, now. But as she opened her mouth, he covered it with his own in another sensual kiss that drove all thoughts from her mind...other than one, that she really needed more of this from him.

He worshiped her breasts, taking care with each one, massaging the softness with his hands, using his lips and tongue to tease the nipples into hard points of sensitivity. Suzie moaned, giving herself over to his control.

Normally she didn't surrender so easily. After all, it was her duty to satisfy the men, not look for completion herself. That she'd always found satisfaction with John had been one of the reasons she'd enjoyed being with him so much, even in the beginning. Now it was only too easy to lay back and let him do whatever he wished.

Particularly since what he wished to do was so excellently done.

She began to need more than his mouth on her breasts. Suzie started to sit up, but John pushed her back onto the bed.

"I get control."

"But I want to help..."

John grabbed her hands and loosened the belt from his robe, using it to fasten her wrists together. "I guess if I'm going to get what I want, I'll have to tie you to the bed."

"You wouldn't dare!" she started to say, but then he looped the end of the belt around the frame at the head of the bed. Her robe lost its belt next and then her ankles were tied, but with some space between them.

"There. That should hold you."

Suzie tried to free her hands but the belt was snug. "Untie me, John!"

John considered her for a moment then leaned over her. His eyes bored into hers and he spoke very softly. "Do you really want me to untie you?"

*Did she?* Now that she was secured, it didn't seem that bad. In fact, it was kind of...well, sexy. She pulled against the belt and felt her pussy get warmer.

John grinned at her. "I don't think that you do. Tell you what, if you really want me to free you, just say so. Say 'mistletoe', and I'll untie you."

*Mistletoe?* Suzie giggled but when he pulled off his robe and revealed just how full and erect his cock had grown, her amusement faded. Instead, her pussy grew damp and she felt a trickle of cream slide down her inner thigh.

John noticed that sudden flood of arousal from her. He captured some on his finger and licked it, nodding approval. "Now I know I'm right. You love this."

She couldn't very well argue when he had such compelling evidence. Instead she stretched back onto the bed and let her head fall on a pillow. "Very well, caveman. I'm under your control...do your worst."

John's head disappeared between her thighs and his mouth landed on her clit. Suzie wriggled her hips and cried out his name. John's worst was very, very good indeed.

Within moments she was barely able to remember her name, much less his. She pulled hard against her bonds, the muscles straining in her arms, but she couldn't get free. Tension rose within her. Her back stretched against the bedsheets, satin smooth and sweet smelling.

*Fresh sheets*, the thought came to her. John must have changed his sheets today...and just for her benefit. So considerate.

He sucked hard on her clit and slid one finger into her vagina, working gently up the inside, pressing gently. *So very considerate and if he kept that up she was going to come...*

A shockwave passed through Suzie and she screamed her way into a mind-bending orgasm. Secured to the bed she couldn't twist about like she usually did, so instead she shook in place, giving out loud squeals. John slid a second finger in next, working them in and out, mimicking what his cock would soon be doing. But his cock was far bigger than one or two fingers. He had plenty of space to play.

He was having a lot of fun playing with her and Suzie knew it. John's smile just seemed to keep getting bigger. From what she could feel against her legs, his cock was getting bigger too.

After he'd made her scream again, he sat up and knelt between her legs, giving her a good view of just how hard and erect he was. It was...impressive.

John smoothed the skin of the head of his cock with his hand, sliding his fingers along the shaft. He closed his eyes, clearly enjoying the sensation. Suzie wanted to touch him, but he was in control now. It was up to him if she was to be allowed to play with his cock. Instead, he seemed content to do it himself.

It was so sensual watching him stroke himself, pleasuring his cock. It made Suzie hot, watching him, unable to do a thing about the situation, and if she'd thought she'd been aroused before, now she was red-hot.

John opened his eyes a crack and she knew he was watching her squirming, and that he understood just what his masturbating was doing to her.

It was making her crazy. Suzie moaned as she watched him pull on his cock with his own hand. She wanted to be the loving hand pleasuring him, but she was tied to the bed. It was enough to make a woman mad.

Mad with lust and all he did was grin at her instead of untying her and giving her what she really wanted. She wanted him, but good.

He took her bound ankles and held them high, exposing her nether folds. He leaned forward to breathe hard on them, heating the rich cream of her arousal. Suzie moaned in response, the only response she had available given how he'd secured her to the bed.

All of a sudden, being under his control didn't seem so bad...and when his mouth closed on her pussy again, she shrieked his name. "Please, John..."

He ignored her and instead sucked hard on her clit, licking her folds and angling his tongue deep inside her until she could barely stand it.

She cried out again, then a third time. "John, please. I need you inside me."

She didn't have to ask again. Still holding her ankles with one hand, he angled his cock at the opening of her shaft and speared deep within her. He was hard and long and Suzie whimpered at just how fabulous he felt within her. In two strokes she was panting. No control left, she gave herself over to his touch, his cock deep within her, his mouth covering hers.

Hard and intense...this was more a claiming than it was sex. In sudden clarity Suzie understood just what he wanted – to possess her. The way he looked into her eyes, with desire and triumph, confirmed it.

Desire and triumph...and something else. "Suzie..." His words were harsh and breathless. "I love you."

He did...she knew it. And suddenly she knew something else as well. "I love you too."

His smile turned as bright as the lights on the station's Christmas tree. "I knew it," he whispered triumphantly, and kissed her with such intensity that it was like electricity pouring through her.



And then he began to move and sex became a celebration of lovemaking, hot, passionate and joyous. Real lovemaking. His hands held her close to him. Suzie was still held captive by the belts, but even more so by what she now knew she felt for him.

John slowed now and took his time, making each stroke last, each thrust deeper than the one before. At this angle she could only accept him inside her, and it drove her wild. In moments she was close to coming and then she wasn't close but actually there. If anything he got harder and longer and she was screaming his name over and over again.

Then John slowed and he seemed to falter as he too reached climax. Suzie's breath caught as he did, and she moved the only muscles she could, letting her pussy clench tight around him, milking him, and this time when he finally released he roared.

"Suzie!"

For a moment all they could do was stare into each other's eyes, knowing how different things seemed to be. John's fingers almost shook as he untied the robe belt around her ankles and let them fall to either side of his body, his cock still buried deep within her.

He'd softened but not so much that when she bore down again, he didn't make an appreciative moan.

"Mistletoe," she whispered. "Untie my arms, please."

He grinned at her, but did as she asked.

Finally they were lying together on the bed, John's arms still holding her tight to his side possessively. For a moment she was content to be there, too drained from what had been the most intense sensual experience of her life to move away from him.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve," Suzie said, running one lazy finger down his chest.

"I know. I have the gifts in a bag and my suit all ready for the next morning." John sighed. "I wish I could relax and enjoy it. Tomorrow is also when the committee will arrive to evaluate the station. I'm not looking forward to having them here. I just hope we make a good enough impression and that we can keep them from phasing out this station."

Troubled, she stared up at him. "You really think that will happen?"

He kissed her forehead. "It might. Ore production has been off, but the laboratory results have been promising and our chief scientist likes it here. That might balance things. I'm hoping for the best. This station has become my home." He tilted her head up to stare into her face. "I want it to be your home too."

"I know you do," she said and she did. She just wished that she knew for sure what she wanted. Yes she loved him, but that didn't answer the question of what she was going to do with her life. She couldn't be a morale officer and his wife.

And if she wasn't a morale officer, what was she?

## Chapter Seven

John made a point of being in the station's landing bay when the small intra-Mars transport arrived, carrying the company's inspection team. The committee consisted of two men and a woman, and when John first saw them, he wasn't at all comforted. They'd come in from Mars headquarters—a long flight under the best of circumstances, and these hadn't been the best. While the weather had seemed clear when they'd left, one of the sudden wind and sand storms that plagued this portion of the planet had whipped up and made their flight more than a little interesting.

He stifled the urge to groan as the three climbed out of the transport and straightened their clothes, their faces drained and a little green from their rough trip. Each of them proceeded to glare at him as if he were personally responsible for the weather and as a result he waited to approach them until they seemed to have recovered their ability to stand without leaning against the rails of the walkway.

He tried for cheerful sympathy. "Welcome to Station Twenty-One. I won't ask about your journey...I'm sorry it was so rough. Those sandstorms can't always be predicted. It's one of the reasons we built the station underground instead of using a dome. Even the hardest bubble surface would have been etched by the storms before much time had passed so we didn't bother with one. The few windows we have we used plastasteel, which is impervious to the sand."

It was an attempt to show them just how much effort had been put into building the station, but the committee members didn't seem impressed. The oldest member of the team, a heavyset man, stepped forward, looking grim. "Christopher Nichols. These are my assistants, Ms. Dasher and Mr. Rudolph. I'm glad to hear you've found a way to avoid the worst of the storms. Even so, it must take a lot of resources to keep this place warm and filled with air."

"No more than any other place on Mars. And we've a good source of water, an underground glacier that can serve our needs for a hundred years."

The other man nodded and looked less grim, sharing a significant look with his companions. "I take it then that you're satisfied with this location, Captain Forge?"

John relaxed a little bit. The initial question must have been a test of how much he cared for his station. "I am and I hope you will be too."

"We shall see. Now if you will show us to our quarters for the next couple of days I think we need a moment to relax and clean up. We'll start the inspection later today."

Their path took them through the dining hall and past the holiday decorations and the Christmas tree. All three of the visitors looked about with disbelieving wonder.

"What is this?" the woman asked.

John couldn't help his grin. "Our morale officer decided we needed a holiday to celebrate...so this is Christmas, Martian style." He waved his hand around the room.

Now all three turned their gaze on him. Nichols' eyes were particularly piercing. "Christmas? The old Earth holiday?"

John nodded. "It's really gotten the station involved. Everyone pitched in to help decorate and plan a celebration. Today is officially Christmas Eve and tomorrow is the big day."

"Tomorrow? But that's Fifthday, a work day!"

"There is no point of having a holiday on a non-work day," John said, recognizing he was repeating Suzie's argument. She was right after all. "A holiday has to be a release from work or it isn't really a holiday."

"An interesting point," Nichols said with a touch of humor.

Just at that moment a group of the station's children ran through the room, playing some chase game and singing one of the Christmas carols that Suzie had found the words and music for. They were so enthralled with their activity that they didn't even notice the newcomers, instead passing by as if they weren't even there.

The committee shared glances and for a moment smiles appeared. Nichols even chuckled and John admired the rich deepness of the man's voice. It was far closer to the "ho, ho, ho" he remembered the Santa of his childhood having than what he'd managed even with all his practicing.

Nichols waved a hand forward. "Let's move on to those quarters then start the inspection immediately. Given that it's a holiday tomorrow, I think we might want to finish up early this afternoon."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was almost time for dinner when a jubilant John knocked on Suzie's door. "The station passed with flying colors," he told her when she opened the door. He sailed into the room and pulled her into his arms. "The committee decided that between how well we're established and the increase in staff that our chief scientist wants, there is no reason to shut down our station. We're good for at least the next two years."

He gave her a hug. "Some of it is due to you. They were really impressed with the spirit of the people here."

"That's wonderful," she said, but something in her voice told him she wasn't as happy as she should have been. He looked around and saw the moving crates she'd been filling, apparently preparing to move to make way for the new morale officer, MJ. Suzie was scheduled to trade quarters with the woman, although he still had hopes of redirecting her directly to his rooms instead.

Something was clearly bothering her. It might just be that she was reluctant to give up her quarters after all this time, but he should find out for sure. "Is something wrong?" he asked, lifting her head to see her eyes.

She stared up at him and for a moment he wondered if she were going to tell him what was on her mind, but then she waved off the question. "It's nothing that can't wait. We should get to the dining hall. Harry and his crew have been working too hard for us to be late."

The entire station sat down that night for the first annual Christmas feast. It was a diverse dinner, as diverse as those at the station, many of the dishes specialties donated by the various families and individuals living there. All of the food was delicious as were the drinks—beer and wine for some, and a delicious fruit punch for those too young, or those disinclined to imbibe. A merrier crowd would have been hard to find.

John sat in his chair and tried to enjoy the party. For the first time in weeks he could relax about the station's future. The inspection team, Nichols and the rest, had decided to join them and were happily helping themselves to the bounty on the tables. Everywhere he looked there was a happy face.

Except for Suzie. She'd taken a seat near him, but not next to him, much to his dismay. Why wasn't she sitting in the chair he'd saved for her? It wasn't like he hadn't pointed to it as soon as they'd come through the door. But instead she'd walked past it and taken a seat next to Harry instead. Not that Harry needed the company. On his other side was one of the female miners who was sharing more than a few smiles with the shy head of the kitchen.

John looked about and realized that everywhere he looked were couples. In addition to Harry and the miner, there were Hans and Alixon sitting together and from the looks of things they were getting along pretty well.

Kamian's woman had arrived, a shy little lady with long dark hair and a sweet face. John could see why the scientist wouldn't have wanted her on a normal mining station with its rough-and-tumble ways. But their station was more civilized than that and John was proud of the changes. From the possessive way the man's hand slid across her shoulders while they ate, the pair was certainly happy with each other. He might be officiating at their marriage sooner than he thought.

Even MJ, new to the station, had a collection of men around her, and was flirting with all of them. John could see that their new morale officer was going to do a great job.

But their old one was evading him and he was sitting alone. Frustrating, that's what it was.

The children of the station seemed particularly excited and John couldn't wait to play Santa for them in the morning. He was pretty sure that all but the youngest of them would be able to recognize him even with the fake white beard and wig that the station's ladies had created for him. The suit they'd made was red enough, but somehow he'd been unable to get them to make it large enough to allow padding to give him the robust chubbiness that he remembered Santa Claus having when he was a child.

So he was going to be a slender, broad-shouldered Santa...the kids wouldn't mind so long as they got a present from the bulging bag he had hidden in his quarters. That at least was all prepared, gifts wrapped and marked for distribution tomorrow morning. In addition to what Suzie had ordered, the parents had brought him additional gifts for their children, so his bag was overflowing with goodies. Some of the other station members had added to his pack as well.

He just hoped that Suzie would love her present, the antique mirror with its mysterious image of a bride. He hoped she saw herself the way he did.

Her avoiding sitting with him and sudden lack of enthusiasm worried him. Something was up and it made him uneasy that she wasn't willing to talk about it.

As delicious as the food was John could barely taste a thing.

Finally dinner was over and the children got up to sing a set of Christmas carols, backed up by the all-station orchestra who, for once, seemed to play mostly on key. What they lacked in talent was made up for in enthusiasm and everyone seemed to enjoy the concert, including their guests from corporate headquarters. Nichols in particular seemed to enjoy the festivities. His fingers tapped in time with the music and an occasional deep laugh boomed out of him.

When the music program was over, John rose with his glass in hand. "I'd like to propose a toast," he said, his eyes on Suzie. "To Suzie Shelly. It was her idea to bring Christmas to our station and give us something to celebrate. In so many ways she's responsible for making this place a home."

Around him everyone rose to their feet and lifted their glasses high. John pointed his toward Suzie. "To our Suzie, the best morale booster on Mars! May this be the first of many Christmases we celebrate with you."

"To Suzie!" everyone said and drank.

Suzie sat, her face stricken, and suddenly tears welled in her eyes. "Thank you..." she said, but her voice faltered and John realized something was very wrong. Then she seemed to pull herself together.

"Thank you. I'm so glad you've enjoyed this... I'll remember all of you," she said, then stood and bolted from the room.

Alixon leaned closer to him. "Go after her, you fool," she muttered under her breath as John stood frozen. Her words broke through his surprise and he took off down the hall where Suzie had disappeared.

By the time he caught up with her, she was halfway to her quarters. John grabbed her shoulders and tugged her to him and Suzie broke down in tears.

"Suzie, what is wrong with you?" he asked in frustration.

"John..." Suzie's voice trailed off. "I got my transfer orders today. I'm going to Hercules Station. I'll be leaving on the first shuttle after the holiday."

She buried her head in his shoulder, and he caught the sweet perfume of her hair. "I'm going to miss you when I'm gone."

"So don't leave." John said. "Marry me and stay here. Everyone here wants you to."

"I can't, it's too late. I requested the transfer and now that Mary Jane is here, she's going to be the station's morale officer, not me. If I stay I'll have to refuse my transfer and that's cause for termination from the company. You can't expect me to do that!"

He dropped his arms and stepped away, letting his frustration show. "Suzie, you make me crazy. I love you, you love me, but can I get anything like a commitment from you? What would it take to make you see that we have to be together?"

"I don't know." She seemed to think about it. "I need a sign. Something I can believe in."

"A sign from me?"

"I don't know. Maybe you...maybe just the universe. I need to know that it will be all right, that I'm making the right choice."

"A sign from the universe," John put his hands on his hips and sighed in disgust. "You mean like magic...a miracle. Sometimes I think you are right. It will take a miracle for us to be together."

"John..."

Suzie reached out to him but he pulled away from her. The whole thing just hurt too much. She wanted her job more than she did him.

"I do care for you," she said.

"I know you care for me. I just wish you cared enough," he told her. He turned and walked away, leaving her behind. He thought he heard call after him, but this time he refused to give in.

Later that night, John stared at the ceiling of his quarters, alone in his bed for the first time in days. Suzie slept down the hall, or so he presumed. He wondered if she found sleep as elusive as he did. He wondered if she was as tempted to wander to his room as he was tempted to wander to hers.

It was Christmas Eve. Visions of sugarplums, whatever those were, should be dancing in his head, but instead he only had visions of a life without Suzie in it and what a dismal prospect that was.

When Nichols had told him the station would continue as it was and probably be expanded, he'd been so happy. That feeling...the feeling of being home, had meant everything. But now he'd have his home but not have his love in it and that was unacceptable.

John sighed. She'd told him that being responsible for others' happiness was important to her. That was the reality of her job in the company, to make others happy...and to keep her job she needed go someplace else.

He'd asked her to stay, to give up her job, her position in the company, and stay with him...but she couldn't give it up.

Was his job more important to him than hers was to her? What did it mean, that he insisted on forcing her to do something that he wasn't willing to do himself?

It wasn't enough to have a home. He wanted Suzie even more than this place, the people and his position in it.

There was only one thing to do. John pulled himself out of his sleepless bed and activated his communications unit. In moments he had the required form on the screen and had filled it in. After a moment's hesitation, he added his electronic signature and sent it off.

Returning to his bed, he told himself that it had been the only thing to do. After all, without Suzie he had no home anyway.

## Chapter Eight

The early morning pounding on his door was John's Christmas morning wake-up. Groggy from too little and too restless a sleep, he pulled himself from his bed and tugged on a robe before answering the door.

Before him stood Nichols, holding a handheld and looking stern. "What's all this about?"

John tried to rub the sleep from his eyes, and wished he'd already had his first cup of coffee. "What do you mean?"

Nichols' frown turned deeper. He held the handheld out and John saw that the screen held his transfer request. "I thought you wanted to stay here," the other man said.

John shrugged. "I decided I needed a change."

"A change to Hercules Station? Where there isn't a captaincy open, but where you'll have to go back to being a second? What kind of sense does that make?"

"It's a good station..."

"But you love it here...don't tell me you don't. Yesterday it would have taken a thermal bomb to get you out of here." Nichols narrowed his eyes. "I don't suppose your decision has anything to do with the fact that Hercules is where that morale officer of yours has been transferred to?"

John decided that silence was the best answer. Instead he tried to close the door, but Nichols pushed his way inside. "This isn't over, Forge."

"I have nothing more to say," John said. "My reasons for leaving are my own and none of the company's business."

"Harrumph!" Nichols folded his arms across his chest and looked disgruntled. He looked around the room and seemed to startle when he saw the hanger holding the red Santa suit on a hook near the bed. A huge grin grew across his face and he walked over to finger the material. "Very nice." He held it up to him. "Probably would fit me, too. I've always wanted to play Santa Claus."

"Wait a minute, that's my Santa suit," John said.

The look Nichols gave him was positively devilish. "You want that transfer?"

"Yes..."

"Then I play Santa." The man grabbed the suit, wig and beard. "I'll just take these back to my quarters and get dressed." He spotted the bag by the door. "And I'll take that too," he said and threw it across his back with a surprisingly practiced gesture.



Now heavily burdened, he headed for the corridor. "Better get dressed, Captain. It's Christmas morning and you have work to do."

Not the work he'd planned, John thought gloomily as he watched his suit and bag disappear down the hall. He'd been looking forward to giving out the gifts.

Grumbling, he dressed and headed for the dining hall where the party was already underway. From what he could see, the children must have dragged their parents out of bed early. Almost everyone showed the signs of a late night and too early rising.

Even so, everyone looked happy, even clutching their mugs of coffee and helping themselves to the sweetened rolls Harry had laid out on the counter.

Well, everyone except for Suzie, who took a mug but refused a roll. Her eyes were red and there were dark circles underneath as if she'd spent the night as sleeplessly as he had. Most likely she had. John tried to get near enough to speak to her, but she managed to keep the room between them and short of making a scene he was clearly not going to get close to her.

Finally he gave up. It didn't matter anyway. She'd find out soon enough that he would be leaving with her.

Several people gave him curious sidelong glances and John was reminded that he'd told everyone he'd be playing Santa Claus. Obviously they were wondering where his suit was. For that matter he was wondering the same thing.

Where was Nichols, anyway? The kids were beside themselves with anticipation, having been told that Santa was due any minute, and it was well past time to start handing out presents. For a moment he wondered if the company representative could have forgotten.

"Ho, ho, ho!" The loud booming laugh announced the missing man, and John relaxed as the red-suited figure came into the room, flanked by his assistants, who'd somehow found matching green outfits that made them look like Santa's elves. If John hadn't known better he'd have sworn that their ears were even slightly pointed.

Much as he had wanted to play Santa, John had to admit Nichols filled out the suit better than he had. Somehow on the shorter man the suit seemed to stretch in the right places, giving him a round stomach that matched the images of Santa Claus that Suzie had dug up and placed around the room. Even the cheap white beard and hair looked more realistic.

And the man certainly had the "ho, ho, ho" laugh down pat! Every time he boomed forth with one, his belly shook with the effort, just like in the old poem. The children in the room giggled and the adults smiled as he walked around the room, shaking hands with the adults and handing out small candy canes to everyone before settling into the large chair that had been placed next to the Christmas tree.

John unwrapped his and bit the end off, enjoying again the flavor he'd tasted so long ago when he was a child. For a moment he wondered where the candy canes had come from. They hadn't been in the bag when it had been taken from his room and there were none on the station. That had been one of the things Harry and his crew had

been unable to duplicate, the taste and shape of candy canes. Nichols must have brought them with him.

Which was really odd given that the man hadn't even known they were celebrating Christmas here on the station.

John took another deep sip of coffee, and tried to shake free his suddenly suspicious thoughts. What did it matter where the candy canes came from? The kids and adults were happy to get them.

They were even happier when Santa opened the bag and began to hand out presents, calling the names out in his deep voice. Each child ran up and took their presents, some having the presence of mind to say thank you while others just stared wide-eyed over their package, smiling their thanks.

Each child retired back to their parents and opened the wrappings and soon the room was filled with happy cries as the new toys were revealed.

Finally Santa was done with the children and began on the adults. John waited with baited breath as one after another of the men and women of the station were called up to get a present. Would Suzie look at the wedding picture he'd wrapped for her and see herself, and more importantly see the message he was trying to give her...that it was her destiny to marry him?

He did notice when Alixon got her present, which was a physical book Hans had given him earlier with her name on it to slip into the bag. John could tell from here that it was a sex book. She looked at the title and blushed, but didn't look too unhappy when the big man sat next to her and opened it, pointing to something he apparently found particularly interesting.

Hans and Alixon. A fascinating combination...both had a lot to bring to a relationship and they had at least one interest in common. But who could have predicted it would be sex?

Not that that should be a problem. After all, sex was a great thing to have in common with a lover.

One by one the other station members were called up to receive a present, even MJ, whose present he'd gotten from Suzie—a set of her special candles.

Finally he heard Suzie's name called and John sat up to see her walk across the room and tentatively accept her present. From the look on her face, she knew it was from him. He watched as she returned to her seat and stared at the slender package, which he knew held the mirror. He waited for her to open it, to see her reaction, but before she did Santa called out his name.

John waited, but Santa called it again, this time with an impatient tone that John didn't want to test. The man might yet refuse to let him transfer with Suzie.

With reluctance John rose to collect his present.

Suzie recognized John's handwriting on the tag at once. Apprehensively, she took the gift from the mysterious Santa that she knew wasn't their captain.

What was it John had decided she should have? Something from the gift assortment she'd ordered, or something more personal? She could feel his gaze on her as she returned to the side of the room she'd carefully selected, as far from him as she could be. Their fight last night was still much on her mind. How could it not be when she'd spent her entire sleep cycle lying awake, wondering if he was right?

Did she love him enough to stay here and give up her position in the company? Was it even the right thing for her to do?

Suzie slid her fingernail under the fastening of the wrapping on the package and loosened it, then slid the present free from inside. She stared. It was a small, flat oval made of wood and hinged on one side, the surface glossy with polish. Without thought she stroked the smooth surface. It felt old...she could almost imagine the number of other fingers that had touched it before. Through it she felt a connection to the past.

Others had touched this before. Others had received it for a present – possibly other people in love.

The catch slid open easily and inside was a mirror on one side, and a small strip of metal. That attracted her first. It said, "Love's true face reflects forever".

Then she looked into the mirror and nearly dropped it. One thought came to her – *John loved her – the image proved that!*

Suzie jumped to her feet. There was no way she could leave him, no matter what the consequences. She went to run to him, but he wasn't in his seat. Looking about she finally saw him, standing near Santa and looking oddly at a small box in his hand.

In a moment she was beside him, holding the mirror in her hand. "John..." she began and when he looked at her, she saw the hope in his eyes. Uncertainty hit her. There was so much to say...how to begin?

*How about starting with the truth.* "I love you and I want to stay here with you."

He laughed. "I was going to leave with you."

Suzie's jaw dropped. "Give up the station? But you love it here!"

"I love you more. You were right, you shouldn't have to make all the sacrifices."

"If I can stay here with you, that won't be a sacrifice. I love it here too. I'll find something to do."

John put his arm around her and she melted into him and into his kiss. For a long moment their lips were locked until she remembered where they were and that everyone on the station could see them.

When she broke from his embrace there were smiles and cheers all around them. Even Santa gave a short ho, ho laugh.

Suzie held up the mirror. "I love the picture."

John smiled. "I thought you would. It looked so much like you."

Confusion spread through her. "Like *me*? But it's a picture of you!"

She opened it up and looked again. It was the same as when she'd first looked, an image of John, handsomely dressed in an old-fashioned black suit, with a white shirt and a narrow black tie. His dark hair was slicked back and his face held the sensual smile that always gave her a thrill.

Suzie showed it to him, "See, it's you!"

But John shook his head. "It's a picture of you, Suzie. Dressed like a bride. Look again."

He pulled her closer to him so they could see at the same time and this time both of their jaws dropped. The image had changed to show two people standing together, dressed in old-fashioned wedding garments. The bride's face was Suzie's and the groom was John.

They looked at each other then again in the mirror. The couple in the mirror smiled back and then kissed each other.

Slowly Suzie lowered the mirror and stared at John. "I guess when I said I needed a miracle..."

"This does seem to rate," John said.

"Mind if I see?" From behind them Santa rose and held his hand out. Wordless, Suzie handed it to him.

He chuckled as he looked inside, then showed them how it reflected him, or the Christmas tree, and anything else so long as neither of them was looking directly into it. "Just a mirror...unless true love's face is there. Magic is what it is—the magic of love, which is the best kind."

He pointed to the box in John's hand. "Aren't you going to open that?"

John did to reveal three gold rings. One was large enough for a man, and the others were a pair sized for a woman featuring a plain gold band and a ring set with a sparkling diamond solitaire.

"Wedding rings..." John said.

Santa hefted the now empty bag onto his shoulder. "Something I think you need. Think of them as a present from the company, or something like that. Oh and those transfers of yours...consider them trashed. We like to keep our people where they will do the most good and right now that's here on Ares Station Twenty-One."

He grinned and in spite of the beard Suzie recognized the company representative John had introduced her to the day before. Nichols, she remembered.

He turned to her. "That means your transfer as well, but we're keeping you on the payroll. We have a new position for the spouse of a station chief...first mate. The job is pretty much what you were doing already, keeping the people on the station happy. Like dreaming up bringing Christmas here. I think you'll be fine in the role."

"What about MJ?"

The jolly man glanced over at the new morale officer, surrounded by the satisfied-looking men of the station. She'd obviously had a very busy few days...and nights.

He chuckled. "Oh, she'll have her hands full as morale officer. I think there are going to be a lot more people on this station and they'll need a surrogate. And when she has time, she can help you on your projects as well. You'll both be kept busy."

With a wink, he gestured to his assistants who came to stand with him. "And now I think my job here is done." Turning to the assembled people in the room, he raised his voice, "Merry Christmas to all!" He then whispered to Suzie and John. "And to all a great night!"

Then, flanked by his people, he strode from the room. Stunned by their sudden disappearance, it took a moment for Suzie to realize what she was missing. "Hey, he took my mirror!"

"I guess he did." John said. "But that's okay. I'll share my present with you." And he slid the solitaire ring onto her finger.

Neither of them were surprised that it fit perfectly.

## Epilogue

Eventually the story became known as “a visit from St. Nichols”, a tale all the more thrilling for its mysteriousness. In the excitement of the day, their visitors had slipped away and when someone thought to look for them all three of them, and their ship, had left the station without alerting anyone on duty. It was as if they’d disappeared into one of the Martian sandstorms.

They found John’s Santa suit, and his beard and wig, still on the hanger they’d been stored on, apparently unworn, in the guest suite’s closet. It appeared that Nichols had come with his own suit, which when they thought about it seemed perfectly appropriate.

John contacted headquarters, but while there was no record of Christopher Nichols or his people in the company files, nor had any inspection team been sent to evaluate the station, everything had been arranged just as the jolly old elf...or whatever he had been, had promised. Station Twenty-One had been selected for expansion, Suzie’s transfer had been canceled, and she’d been reassigned as first mate provided she contracted marriage with John. How all this had happened wasn’t explained...it was as if someone had broken into the company’s computer system to make the changes.

John sometimes wondered aloud if their mysterious visitors didn’t have hacker skills but like the candy canes, it was something that no one wanted to question too closely.

John and Suzie got married within the week, with a borrowed wedding veil and gown for her and a black suit for him. The gown and veil weren’t quite what John had seen in the mirror...but to his eyes all the more lovely for being real and not a reflection.

In the years afterward Christmas became a regular event on Ares Mining Station Twenty-One. The first few years John played Santa, but by the fifth he couldn’t anymore. Christy, his two-year-old daughter, kept pulling off his beard and crying “Daddy” in front of the other children, so he turned the job over to Hans.

Now it was the big blond’s turn to have his son glaring suspiciously at him from his mother’s arms, Alixon, laughing from the sidelines.

Gifts were still mostly passed out by Santa and opened in the main dining hall, although that room had been enlarged twice to accommodate the larger number of station residents and their families. Private gifts were given when they were of a more personal nature.

Like the one Suzie was wrapping for John that Christmas Eve. With Alixon and MJ’s help she’d found another catalog company willing to ship to Mars with the most delightful array of items—items of such a personal nature that they came in very plain packaging with no hint as to their contents.

Suzie only hoped John enjoyed his present as much as she intended to. A bright ribbon around the box and it looked fine. She went to hide it under the bed when her husband suddenly came into the room. As she tried to hide it behind her back he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms, and kissed her as if it had been weeks and not just a few hours since they'd last seen each other.

Five years and they were still as much enamored of each other as when they were first married.

"Hello, wife," John said.

"Hello, husband," she whispered back. "Christy in bed?"

"Yes, visions of sugarplums or whatever little Martian girls dream of dancing in her head."

"Well it is Christmas Eve."

"It certainly is." He looked over her shoulder at the box she had behind her back. "And is that a present for me?"

"Maybe. But you can't have it until tomorrow night."

John dropped a line of kisses down her neck. "Why can't I have it tonight? Tomorrow we'll all be tired. I tell you what, I'll give you my present if I can open this one."

*He had a present for her?* He must have hidden it well—she'd looked all over their quarters and hadn't spotted a thing. "All right, I'll show you mine if I can see yours."

With a grin John disappeared into the back of their storage closet...a place she'd thought she'd done a good job of searching, and emerged with a long, thin bundle. He presented it with a flourish.

"Oh, John!" she said when she'd unwrapped it. It was a short and sheer nightgown, much like what she'd occasionally worn in her days as a surrogate, but in the daintiest pink rather than the usual red. Stepping out of her work clothes she slipped it on, letting the delicate fabric whisper down her body like a loving hand.

She turned in the mirror and admired herself. She looked beautiful and sexy. "I love it."

When she turned she realized John loved it as well. His erection strained the front of his pants in a way she'd not seen in a while. It had been some time since she'd had anything sexy to wear for him. Suzie stepped toward him, letting her hips sway. "I guess in a way this is a present for both of us."

He took a deep breath. "You look fantastic." His eyes fell to her present to him. "Is there something like that for me in here?"

For a moment Suzie wished there was some sort of little thong or other sexy item for John. She'd have to look into getting him a sexy undergarment at the next opportunity.

Still he should find what was in the box interesting. "Why don't you open it up and see?"

John didn't need a second invitation. Soon the ribbon was off and the contents in his hand. Soft leather straps formed two sets of cuffs with hook-and-loop fasteners and a sturdy cord between them. John stared and his lips twitched. "I'm not sure I understand."

Suzie slipped onto the bed next to him. "You remember that night that you tied me to the bed?"

A faraway look came into his eyes. "Yes. I wanted to show you how good letting me have control would be."

"I was thinking it could be fun to try that again." She took the cuffs from him.

John grinned. "I could just tie you up with robe belts again."

"Perhaps but those are too easy to get out of. You could break one very easily." Suzie fastened one of the cuffs to his arm. "I was thinking these would hold you better so that maybe this time we could take turns."

"Take turns?" John asked, staring at the cuff on his wrist. "You mean you want to tie me up." He settled back onto the pillows. "What's this all about, Suzie?"

What was it about? She took a deep breath. "John, we've been married five years now."

"So? Haven't they been good years?" He seemed worried.

"They've been great...but," she hesitated. "But we've gotten into a rut."

John's eyebrows shot high, and he stared at the cuffs around his wrists. "You want to get out of a rut?"

"Something like that. I want to be sure we never take sex for granted."

With a sudden move he threw his cuffed hands over her head and trapped her within his arms. "Suzie, sex with you is one thing I could never take for granted, ever."

She struggled, but realized that there was no way she could get free unless he wanted to let her go. The funny thing was that until she released the cuffs he was trapped too.

Finally she stopped struggling and smiled up at him. "I guess you've got me."

"We've got each other. Now and in the future."

"Now and in the future. I like that, John."

He leaned over to kiss her, driving all thoughts out of her head. She barely heard his, "Me too".

She did hear his last breathless remark before he fell onto the bed with her, his hands still cuffed behind her back. "Merry Christmas, Suzie. And as the fat man said, to us a very good night."

*The End*



## **About the Author**

Cricket Starr lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband of more years than she chooses to count. She loves fantasies, particularly sexual fantasies, and sees her writing as an opportunity to test boundaries. Her driving ambition is to have more fun than anyone should or could have. While published in other venues under her own name, she's found a home for her erotica writing here at Ellora's Cave.

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