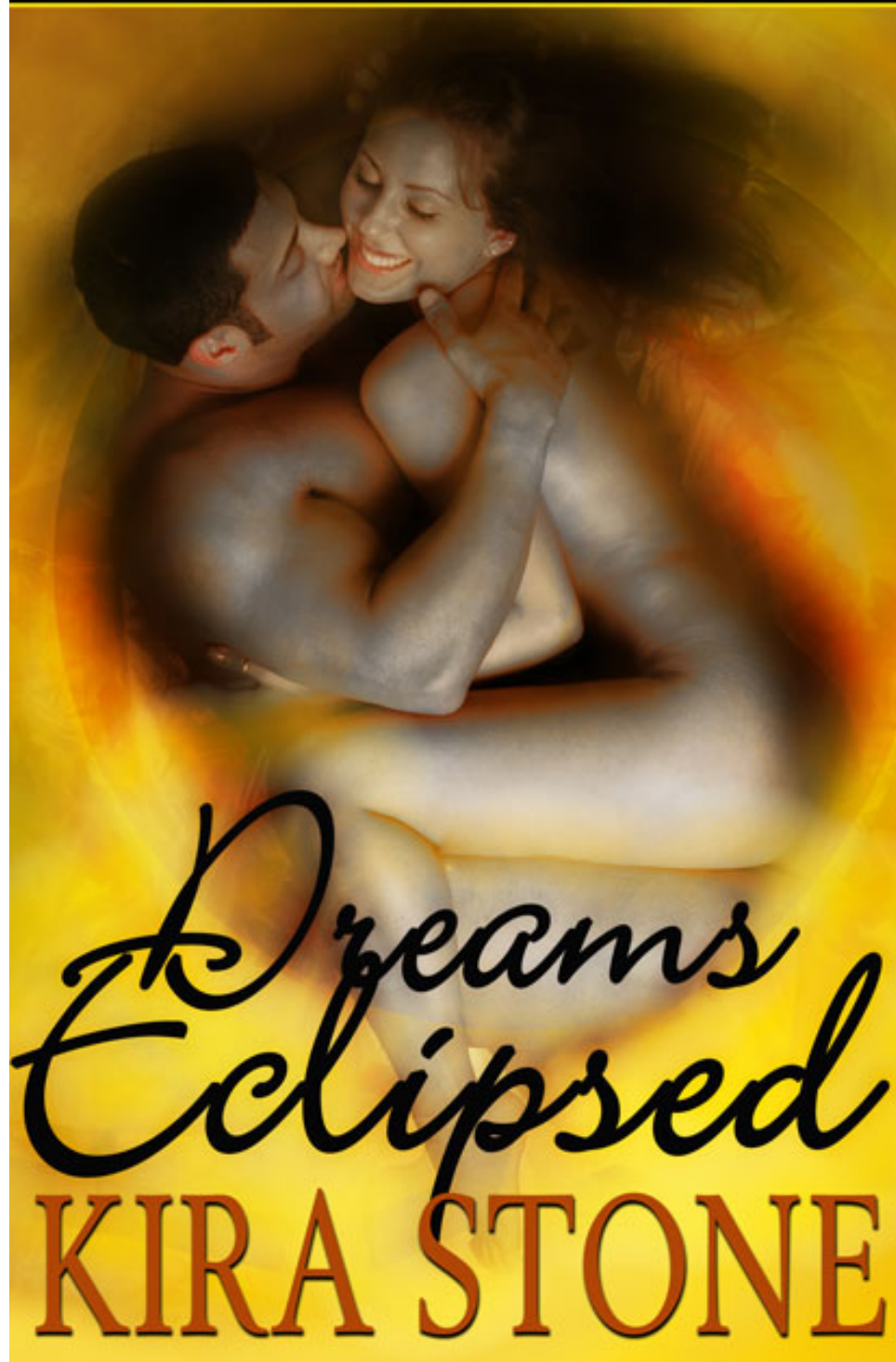


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Dreams Eclipsed

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DREAMS ECLIPSED

Kira Stone

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Chapter One

Living a Dream

Janet Widgeon sauntered into the smoky jazz club through the employee entrance, her stiletto heels clicking on the varnished wood floor. Sweet, sassy blues rolled down the dimly lit hall to welcome her. She was early, far earlier than she normally arrived at the Zodiac Club, but pacing in her apartment hadn't lessened her anxiety.

Is he as excited about tonight as I am? Is he already here, waiting for me?

The burly bouncer stationed at the employee entrance greeted her. "Evenin', Miss Janet." His thin black lips curved slightly upward as he took in her skintight, siren red dress. A sign of high praise coming from the stoic man.

Though she wore three-inch heels, she had to stretch to kiss the beefy man's cheek. "Evening, Trent. How's the mood tonight?"

"Hotter than Maria's gumbo."

Janet chuckled. "Don't let her hear you say that, or her next batch will violate our fire code."

Trent ducked his head in agreement. "True that."

She fingered her slim, sequined purse—it was the same shade as the dress and shoes—as she surrendered to her curiosity. "Any messages for me?"

"None of the friendly sort, if that's what you're asking." Even in the dim light she could see his eyes sparkle with amusement.

With a nod, she spun on the wobbly point of her shoes and headed toward the bar's crowded interior.

"Going to your office, Miss, or should I ask one of the girls to bring a glass of white wine to your table?"

"I'm far too restless to concentrate on paperwork tonight. I think I'll mingle first, and then find a seat when Jim begins his first set."

"You have yourself a fine evening then, Miss Janet."

The dress clung to her curves as Janet penetrated the hazy atmosphere where a broad mix of patrons congregated around small tables in front of the stage. Tonight's headlining act was a real coup for the club. Jim Byrnes owned a nightspot in Vancouver and rarely played anyplace else. How her manager had sweet-talked him into taking a trip to bayou country was a secret that man wasn't telling.

A relatively new kid on the national jazz scene, Chris Thomas King, was currently warming up the room with good, old-fashioned blues. Janet hummed along with his

rendition of the old Blues classic *John Law* as she circulated through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries with old and new friends.

Jim's name was a big draw, and Janet was pleased to see her staff keeping up with the clientele's high demand for fresh glasses. Most of the customers wouldn't want a meal so late at night, just a few Cajun snacks to keep the alcohol company. Janet noted that Maria and her kitchen staff seemed to have those requests under control as well.

There was only one question remaining on her mind. By the time she completed a full circuit of the room, Janet had that answer too. *He's not here.*

Instead of being disappointed, a tremor of excitement rippled along her spine. He wasn't here. Yet. But he would come. She was sure of it.

Trent signaled for a barmaid to bring over a drink as Janet sat down at an empty table, the one reserved for her exclusive use, in a dark corner at the right edge of the stage. Usually she invited others to join her, but not this time. The only person whose company she desired now knew where to find her—and would, sometime before the night was over.

It had been exactly a month ago that she'd first met him, a friend of a friend who shared her fondness for delta blues and late-night conversation. They'd talked until dawn threatened to cross the line from speculation to fact. He'd left her with a passionate kiss and a promise to return the following Saturday.

In fact, he'd come back again and again to the Zodiac Club, never staying beyond closing, never asking if he could take her home or inviting her to his place. But after their last encounter, she knew their next meeting would end differently. The sexual tension between them had hit a boiling point. Next time, they'd either turn up the heat until their rising passion was finally given a chance to burn, or they'd shut off the gas for good.

And now that night had arrived.

Janet sat alone and waited for him to appear through the blues of Chris Thomas King and then Jim Byrnes' opening set. She enjoyed both musicians thoroughly, yet part of her remained aware of the lingering emptiness beside her.

As Jim's second set began, Janet succumbed to a trickle of doubt. Had he forgotten about their date? Lost interest? Met someone else? Normally she didn't allow the presence or absence of a man to cast doubt on her self-worth, but this man was the exception to every personal rule she had about dating. She'd been so sure he felt the same way and now...

"Why do you wear such a sad face, *cherè*?" a rich, masculine voice asked from the shadows behind her.

She gasped in surprise. She'd never heard him approach, but somehow he stood beside her, a living advertisement for sin.

Inside the dark club, his face looked chalk white. The rest of him was encased in black from neck to toe. A lightweight ribbed turtleneck tucked into a pair of pleated pants. A sports coat hung over one arm, the opposite hand rested in his pants' pocket.

So much the man she remembered, still more shadow than substance. The only part of him that vibrated with life was the pair of quicksilver eyes which now pierced her soul.

Irritated that he'd made her doubt herself, she snapped, "You're like a damn ghost."

"You didn't answer my question," he pointed out, moving to her side.

Janet knew his courtly manners wouldn't allow him to sit in the empty chair until it was offered. She'd keep him on pins and needles for a few more seconds to satisfy her moment of pique. "You've missed most of the show. Jim Byrnes, for heaven's sake!"

"Is this transgression so severe you'd rather I go?" His whisky-smooth voice whispered against her ear.

Pure lust snaked down her spine. How could she be inches away from orgasm just from the sound of his voice?

She crossed her legs to ease the ache between them under the guise of giving him easier access to his seat. "No, of course not. Please, join me. Would you like something to drink? One of Maria's snacks perhaps?"

He settled his coat on the back of the wooden chair before lowering himself into the seat. His large hands soon rested on the table, tapping his fingers in time to the wailing notes of Jim's sax. "Nothing, thank you. For the moment, I'm content."

Janet wished to hell she was. Now that he was here, sitting beside her and looking good enough to devour whole, a new restlessness gathered in her limbs. She toyed with the empty glass on the table, trying to listen to one of her favorite musicians. It shouldn't have been a hard task. Knowing that he could disappear as suddenly as he'd arrived made her hyperaware of every move he made.

"Relax and enjoy the show. I'll be here when your maestro is finished."

His words weren't enough to reassure her. It took the touch of his cool hand upon hers to quiet her nerves. To further seal their connection, Janet turned her palm up and laced her fingers through his. His light chuckle told her he understood why she'd done it and was amused by her precaution.

Together, they enjoyed the remaining songs, even crooning to each other when the tune was familiar. After the encore ended, there were details which required her attention. Janet attended to them as efficiently as possible and ensured the rest of her staff did the same. Within an hour, the place looked like any other bar after closing time. Dark and deserted, the memories of a successful event hanging like dust motes in the air.

And she was alone with the man who embodied her deepest fantasy.

"Dance with me," he said.

The heat that had been simmering at her feminine center since he'd arrived flashed into superheated steam. His sharp eyes were sure to pick up the rapid pulse throbbing in her neck, but she did nothing to settle herself. She hoped he'd be just as open with her in return.

"The band is gone. We have no music," she replied, even as she stepped into his embrace.

"We'll make our own."

His strong arms closed around her, and she sighed. This was where she was meant to be. In his arms, nothing else mattered. Problems didn't exist. She was at peace.

"Woman, what you do to me ought to be a crime," he murmured against her carefully tousled brown locks.

"And what do I do to you that's so bad?"

"Stir up longings better left alone."

Because, on some deep level, she sympathized with the sentiment—there were reasons this was her first attempt at a relationship in a long, long time—Janet didn't question him further. She snuggled against him, wrapping her arms around his muscular waist and pressing her breasts against the flat plane of his chest. His embrace tightened, holding her with equal intensity.

As one, they swayed back and forth, the shuffle of their feet the only sound in the club until he spoke again. "I wasn't going to come tonight."

Since he had, Janet refused to let the announcement rip her from the serenity she'd found in his arms. "Why did you?"

"Because I'm a fool." He spun her away, and then reeled her back in. "A fool who can't get you out of his mind. Or his heart."

His declaration sent her spirit soaring. "I guess that makes two of us."

His pale eyes narrowed with ferocious intensity. "You know what this means?"

Overwhelming happiness brought out a rare giggle. "That we're a couple of naïve underachievers?"

He playfully nipped at her jaw before he drew back to look at her, his gray eyes serious and steady. "That you're mine and mine alone, until our bodies turn to dust."

They no longer moved. It seemed as if the entire world had paused to hear her answer.

Janet knew she'd never crave another man the way she did him. What she had to know was if he acknowledged the opposite was also true. She couldn't stand the thought of sharing him with another woman. With anyone. "Does that sentiment work both ways?"

His grip tightened on her waist. "Yes," he bit out. "Now answer me, woman. I grow tired of waiting."

She spoke the promise that had been in her heart since she'd first laid eyes on him. "I'm yours, until the end of time."

He growled in triumph, sweeping her up into his arms and twirling her through the air. By the time he set her feet back on the ground, his lips were feasting on hers. Their tongues dueled in a mating ritual all their own.

"I have to be inside you," he told her.

Janet could barely think past the electric surges he was sending through her system. "My office. It's not far."

He shook his head once. "Here. Now."

Without waiting for her answer, he backed her up against the bar. He buried his face against the side of her neck, suckling the sensitive skin in a way that would definitely leave a mark.

She threaded her fingers through his long dark hair, angling his head so she could trace the curve of his ear with her tongue. "Lift me up."

He helped her onto the polished wood surface with seemingly little effort. His hands lingered on her waist as she lowered the zipper of her dress. Her breasts ached for his tongue but she made revealing them a slow, tantalizing process. The fabric fell, leaving only the matching red strapless bra to hide her puckered nipples.

His fingers flicked open the front clasp. The cups peeled away, offering her small breasts to his gaze.

His hands skimmed up her sides, brushing his thumbs over her distended nubs. That cool touch brought a fresh rush of dampness to the juncture of her thighs. She bowed her back, thrusting her breasts toward him, silently demanding more. With a groan, he buried his face between her aching globes. His tongue left a warm, wet trail in the sensitive valley.

Greedily, he took one dusky brown nipple into his mouth. A long, hard pull left her gasping for more. He complied, shifting his attention to its twin.

Janet made room for him to get closer by resting the arch of her shoes on a high stool to either side of him. With her legs spread wide, the scent of her arousal drifted up between them.

His nostrils flared to inhale an extra dose. His whole body shivered in response to the unique chemistry she exuded. "My woman, my love. Your scent is imprinted on my memory. No matter where on earth you go, I will be able to find you."

"Continue to love me like this, and I'll never go far."

His fingers encircled her ankles, glided up the back of her calves, then over her knees to the top of her thighs, pushing the filmy skirt out of his way. "Nice," he commented when he encountered the scrap of red silk that covered her sex.

In the next instant, he tore it away with his strong fingers. The dress required a bit more finesse, but it too disappeared as he drew it off, over her head. His eyes, now a shade of liquid mercury that belonged to no other being she'd ever met, roamed her naked body. Her slim, understated curves weren't to every man's taste, but his expression told her he approved of every bit he could see.

"Now I'm ready for that drink," he announced.

She opened her mouth to protest, but the words turned to sighs as his thick fingers parted her short, dark curls. Janet leaned back on her elbows to give him better access to

her quivering pussy. From that vantage point, she watched him lick up the juices dripping from her molten core. Each time his tongue grazed over the knot of nerves bundled at the apex of her creamy slit, her hips tilted upward. The muscles lining her empty channel bore down on nothing but the river of desire he drew out of her. She wrapped her legs around his back and tried to pull him deeper.

His low chuckle against her clit triggered a mild quake throughout her body. An orgasm, a weak one. Somehow, she felt cheated.

She must have made a moan of discontent for he raised his head. "Am I not treating you well?"

"For a man impatient to be inside me, you're certainly taking your sweet time getting there."

Slowly, deliberately, he licked her flavor from his lips. "And is that what you want from me now, my love?"

"Yes."

"Like this?" He penetrated her with his finger. Just one, fast and hard and deep.

It wasn't even close to being enough. "More. I want more of you."

He added a second, holding them still within her. His eyes glittered with a challenge. "Better?"

Enough playing around. Her whole body hummed with want. That minor eruption had left her more desperate for his cock, not less.

She nudged him away with the pointed toe of her red shoe, a moan escaping her compressed lips when his fingers abandoned her aching sheath. It did, however, give her the room she needed to sit up. With her feet resting on the stools once more, she slid the palm of her hand over the front of his pants.

Her fingers squeezed the long, hard length of his erection. "This is what I want."

He rested his hands on his hips, giving her unrestricted access. "Everything I have is yours to do with as you like."

Janet freed his engorged cock from his pants with a deftness that belied her lack of experience. The white column of flesh twitched with an unmistakable eagerness when she stroked him from base to tip. A pearl of fluid glistened from the tiny slit. She longed to run her tongue over it, lap it up.

Not this time, she decided. She had more pressing needs. "Lose the fancy threads, fast."

The belt flew in one direction, his shoes went another. A pair of black silk boxers came off with the pants. The turtleneck disappeared over his shoulder. Then he stood before her, gloriously naked and proud.

Her hands skated over his bare chest. The cool, hairless skin felt like marble. It was hard to reconcile a cold surface with the sexual heat she sensed simmering inside him, but she didn't pause to delve deeply into logic. This was a dream come true. She was determined to live it without question, without reservation. Just this once.

She wet her finger, drawing it slowly out of her damp mouth. With it, she traced the circumference of his flat nipple.

His fingers curled into fists but he stood his ground. "Now who's taking their bloody sweet time?"

"There's so much of you. I have to explore in small bites." She used her nails to tweak his puckered nub, mimicking a playful nip. "Sit down."

He kissed the inside of her knee, then moved her foot off the stool so he could settle upon the round cushion. Her lips took up where her fingers left off, dotting kisses across his shoulders, his neck, his jaw. Her hands drifted down to cup his diamond-hard erection. Using all ten fingers, she stroked his shaft, adding pressure to simulate the clenching of her empty, starving channel.

His hips rocked with her slow yet steady motion. "So tight, so warm."

"So ready for you," Janet replied. "Fill me. Fuck me. Never let me go."

In one smooth movement, he pulled her off the bar and onto his rigid erection. Her dripping wet core welcomed him with a desperate hug. His penetration drove away the ache she thought would never be fully appeased. He went so deep that Janet could no longer tell where he ended and she began. Their physical connection created a unity she'd never experienced before. A completeness which left no room for doubt or trouble to creep in.

"Incredible." She tangled her fingers in the long hair cascading down his back.

"Perfect."

His large hands clutched her ass and seated her more firmly on his cock. She used the bar rail as leverage to lift herself up. He pulled her back down. Push. Pull. Out. In. Driving her toward orgasm, the kind that would wipe away "her" and leave only "them".

His eyes blazed with animal hunger. "I thought I was immune to witchcraft, but you've bespelled me."

His words further fueled her lust, and her love for this strange, strong man. However, the physical sensations rioting through her left no brain cell untouched. She was a creature fueled by passion, needing him and the pleasure he could bring her. Later she would give him the words of love he deserved, but now she couldn't think beyond finishing this beautiful thing they'd started together.

"Harder. Faster," she begged him.

His arm locked around her waist, pinning their joined bodies together. He carried her to the nearest table, knocked the chairs stacked on it away with a sweep of his arm, and then laid her across the top of it. He followed her down, ravishing her breasts with his sharp teeth. A series of short, quick strokes with his massive cock brought her to the brink of orgasm. Her internal muscles clenched around him, holding him deep as she ground her hips against his.

"Come with me."

"Always. Janet," he panted.

He arched his back, his body tensed. He roared as a hot rush of semen flooded into her. His pulsating shaft triggered her own spasm. In an explosion of earth-shattering pleasure, Janet climaxed.

The room spun.

She saw stars.

And then her world went completely dark.

Chapter Two

Beta Test

Program override invoked. Session terminated.

Dr. Archer Tate watched as the error replicated itself across the screen, line after line, until it filled the monitor. As if he were too dense to get it the first time, which apparently he was since this counted as the fourth occasion Janet Widgeon had crashed the Zodiac system during a Dream.

That wasn't supposed to be possible. The Zodiac had a built-in failsafe in the event of a program glitch as well as a backup unit designed to safely end the session if the primary unit went down. Even if a Zodiac Dream—a computer-generated vacation for the mind that evolved on neurological input from the Dreamer—received a logic error it couldn't resolve, the system should pick up at a calculated future point, like skipping over a scratch on a DVD. The abrupt shift in circumstances might startle the Dreamer, but it would keep them going until the program could run its course or the Dreamer exited the system on their own.

For reasons Archer had yet to understand, the Zodiac wasn't making that transition whenever Janet climaxed in a Dream. The program in both the primary and secondary systems stopped milliseconds after a routine set of calculations occurred—calculations that revolved around her orgasm, yes, but routine nonetheless. The abrupt termination dropped her from fantasyland into cold, hard reality in a heartbeat.

Not good for a product that was due to be released for commercial use in two months' time.

After the first instance, Archer and the rest of the project team went over every nut, bolt and wire that comprised the mechanical meat of the virtual reality machine. They'd exchanged the current Dream bed for a brand-new unit. They'd sent Frannie O'Brien, a senior member of the Quality Assurance group, into the VR world, armed with Janet's diary on her first Dream, so she could replicate it down to every gasp and moan. Situation normal all across the monitoring board.

So they'd sent Janet back in, only to have the Zodiac spit her out when she climaxed under the attentions of her Dream lover. They switched the Dream scenario, ran Janet through a battery of physical tests and had Frannie duplicate Janet's reported and recorded movements a dozen times. Everything checked out.

Until Janet Dreamed again. Two more trips resulted in two more sudden, unprovoked disconnects.

Another round of tests on both human and machine produced more questions than answers. The only constant across all of them was Janet Widgeon. She did what no

other person had been able to do since Archer started working on the Zodiac Project six years ago. Jeopardize it.

Disappointment etched deep lines on every face in the room. Archer was beginning to think they might be permanent. They were so close to releasing the Zodiac technology to the public sector, and now this.

"The plaque outside her office door should read 'Janet Widgeon, Dream Crusher' rather than Finance Manager," he joked.

No one laughed; it was all too real a possibility. Whatever Janet was doing to cause the abnormal termination of her Dreams had to stop soon or they'd lose the multimillion-dollar bonus from the private organization funding them for getting the technology approved for human use ahead of schedule. Archer had plans for that money. He wasn't going to let the project's bean counter flush his bright future down the VR toilet.

If only he could figure out what she was doing...

Dr. Samuel Bartel, the Zodiac Project's head honcho, nudged him. "I'm waiting for your assessment, doctor. I need to know where we stand."

Archer replied, "Once again, the Zodiac terminated the program at climax. It neither launched the break code to skip the anomaly, nor did it transition to the backup service as it's designed to do. It simply crashed. Hard."

"And what of our Dreamer?"

"Currently, Ms. Widgeon is in Stage Two of the Dream sequence, judging from her numbers."

"That means she's in a deep sleep, but not actively Dreaming, right?" Dr. Bartel asked.

"Right. The drugs haven't worn off yet. It'll be another two hours before she comes around." Archer didn't add that she'd probably have one hell of a hangover when she did, given how hard and how fast she dropped out of the Dream this time. There was nothing they could do to ease any discomfort she might be feeling until the med techs checked her out so there was no point in raising the issue.

Besides, Frannie would see to Janet's needs. They'd become pretty close given how much Frannie had to know about what was going on inside Janet's head. And Archer was quite happy to leave the woman in Frannie's hands.

"Oh, fuck me," Houston said, scanning the pages spewing out of the printer at the far end of the room. "This chick is off the chart."

"Is that good or bad?" Dr. Bartel asked him.

If it had anything at all to do with Janet, then it had to be bad news as far as Archer was concerned. "Let me see it." He held out his hand to the dark-skinned programmer.

Houston gave him the summary page. Dr. Bartel read the data over his shoulder. It was very bad indeed. Not only had Janet somehow managed to terminate the program

while inside the machine, but she'd accomplished it during what was probably the best orgasm of her life. This woman had been fucked, but good.

And in a few hours, Archer was going to have to hear all about it.

"For those of us who don't read code as well as you do, Houston, would you mind giving us a summary?" Dr. Liam King asked.

"Vampire Does Jazz, that's what we called this one," Houston reminded the group. "Looks like Ms. Widgeon waited in the bar for Mr. Undead to arrive. Gotta love that random timing routine."

Dr. Bartel smiled tolerantly, looking every bit the sweet old grandfather which often got better results than Archer's fierce scowl. "You did a fine job as always, I'm sure. But if you could, please stick to the facts and save the self-congratulations for a later time."

"Right. They tangoed alone, after all the secondaries split. The dance slides into a horizontal mamba. Or maybe I should call it a vertical mamba since I don't know how anyone can have sex on a barstool laying down."

"On a barstool," Liam repeated, curious.

"Uh-huh. And a tabletop, once her vampire lover cleared the deck."

"It's unnatural," Archer declared.

Houston gave him an I-guess-you-don't-get-out-much look.

Archer hated the idea when they came up with it, and didn't like it any better now. "Vampires aren't human. They're not even alive. It's like having sex with a corpse, and that's not normal."

"You speaking from experience?" Houston asked him.

"Hell, no," Archer replied with a cocky grin. "I prefer women with less mileage on them than an odometer in a New York cab."

Liam shook his head to erase whatever mental picture he'd drawn and replied, "Careful, Arch. Your prejudices are showing. Vampires are very hot right now. You wouldn't want to alienate a potential customer base by insulting them, would you?"

Archer bit his tongue to prevent himself from responding. He suspected that listening to Janet relay her sexual Dreams had given the psychologist some very vivid jerk-off material.

Not that Liam was alone in that respect. All the members of the project team had sex on the brain more than usual lately. Archer included, despite the dry, dispassionate way Janet presented her...involvement. But until they could figure out why Janet's orgasms were shutting down the Zodiac program, they *had* to think about it. A lot.

"Dead or alive, that vampire's one lucky bastard," Houston added. "I wouldn't mind putting my shoes under her bed a time or two."

Dr. Bartel frowned. "Really, Houston, it's not appropriate for you to refer to Ms. Widgeon in such a manner."

Archer bristled. "Houston shouldn't be criticized for being the only one with the guts to voice what we're all thinking about anyway."

None of the men denied it, not even Dr. Bartel, who was approaching his seventy-eighth birthday. Janet had starred in a few of Archer's fantasies lately too. Then she developed the Ice Bitch persona that he'd come to know so well. For everyone else associated with the Zodiac Project, she was all sweetness and light. To him, she was no more approachable than a mama bear at whelping time.

"Thinking about it is one thing, Archer, but mentioning it aloud is quite another," Dr. Bartel said. "I know you're frustrated by the lack of progress on this issue, but do try to remember that she's on our side."

Archer had had enough of the unending praise of Ms. Widgeon. She wasn't some paragon of virtue. She was a damn saboteur. "Are you sure about that?"

The old man cocked his head thoughtfully. "What are you implying?"

"I think it's time we examine the possibility that Janet Widgeon is not only producing the result but is also the cause of our problems."

"Ridiculous," Dr. Bartel replied without a second's hesitation.

"Boy, Arch, when you go out on a limb, you go all the way to the leafy green tip, don't you?" Liam said, laughing.

Even Houston wore a smile. "The lady calls one of my guys once a week to fix some stupid computer snafu. She couldn't boot up the Zodiac let alone disable it, even with the technical manual in front of her. You're barking up the wrong tree, man."

Archer ground his teeth. Couldn't they see the plain truth before them? "Look at what we do know. Four Dreams. Four serious system malfunctions. The only common denominator is Janet. No one, not even Frannie who has logged more time in VR than anyone else, can reproduce the error once, let alone four times. If Janet's not causing the problem, then who is?"

"*What* is causing the problem, I think, would be a more appropriate question," Liam replied, his green eyes flinty. "After all, it's your machine producing the error."

"Yes, but only when Janet is Dreaming. Every other test has been a success. If the problem is with the Zodiac, why does it fail only when she's in it?"

"Maybe the Zodiac doesn't like her any more than you do," Liam shot back.

Dr. Bartel got to his feet, a sign that the meeting was adjourned. "I suggest we use the next hour or so to analyze the new data and see what, if anything, we can learn from this experience. When Janet is ready to join us, I expect each of you to make her retelling of the events no more embarrassing or difficult than it needs to be."

The old doctor waited until the others filed out, then spoke to Archer once more. "I urge you to listen to Janet with an open mind. A good researcher doesn't jump to conclusions, he proves them."

Hurt that a man he respected found fault with his scientific methods, Archer replied stiffly. "I prefer to think that my record speaks for itself in that respect, sir."

“Until this issue came up, I would’ve agreed with you. But your personal feelings about Janet are blocking your common sense. You need to work with her, not against her, if you’re going to solve this technical puzzle and get us back on track.”

The old scientist walked out, his heavy steps thumping in time with the blood pounding in Archer’s temples. Work with Janet. What the hell did they think he’d been trying to do for the last month? He’d barely gotten more than four hours of sleep any night since the Zodiac first crashed. Every waking hour was dedicated to finding the faulty part. There was none. The only stone left unturned was an investigation of Janet, herself.

And if no one else had the balls to call her on it, then he’d do that dirty job himself.

Chapter Three

Again and Again and, Oh My God, Again

"Stop this thing, I want to get off."

A feminine chuckle echoed in the space between Janet's ears before she heard an answer. "I thought you just did."

"Not funny." Okay, it was mildly amusing, Janet admitted to herself. It was just that there were far too many people interested in dissecting her fantasy sex life these days for her to joke about it.

"How do you feel?"

"Like a truck hit me. Repeatedly." Perhaps that's what was causing all the banging going on in her head.

"I have a House masseuse standing by to loosen you up as soon as we can pry you out of there."

The thought of a first-class massage brightened Janet's outlook considerably. Although her mind was extremely active while she was in the Zodiac environment, her body wasn't. She'd been lying in the same position for about five hours, and her muscles weren't going to be very happy with her when it came time to move them.

Janet's focus swam in and out of reality as she tried to hang on to the details of her most recent adventure. She remembered her nightclub lover. The taste of his lips, the feel of his hands on her body. The way his cock penetrated so deeply it felt like he could reach her soul. And the sense of total completeness she'd experienced as her body convulsed with pleasure.

And, oh boy, wasn't it going to be fun to admit that in front of a room full of men?

They'd treated her respectfully thus far, but they couldn't hide the bulges below their belts as they left the debriefing. At first she'd been flattered. As time went on, fueling their sexual fantasies had begun to grate on her nerves. It wasn't so much the telling she minded but its side effects. She'd turned down more dates from men on the team in the last month than she'd had offers in the previous five years working for Hendrix House. She'd seriously considered telling them she was lesbian just to take the pressure off, but as Frannie pointed out, every man on the team was well aware that it wasn't pussy that got her off.

"Zodiac Chamber sterilization complete," a metallic voice announced.

Janet would have jumped for joy if it were possible. It wasn't. Even now that she had permission to move, it took all of her strength to lift her head from the pillow to see the woman who entered the Dream Chamber. "Hey, Frannie."

The woman disconnected the IV and electrodes linking Janet's body to the heart of the Zodiac. Her corkscrew red curls seemed to wave in a greeting all their own as she moved around the capsule-shaped bed Janet rested in. "Welcome back. This will only take a minute, and then we'll get you into a Relaxation Room."

Although Frannie was gentle as she went about her task, frustration colored her voice. Janet's hopes that this would be the last time she had to relate the details of her sexcapades to the project scientists sank to a new low. "Let me guess. Same results."

"Actually, no. It seems the speed of the disconnect exceeded the time of your other three events combined. Your readings were practically off the chart."

"How is that possible?"

Frannie shook her head, causing her hair to wave like a bouquet of antennae. "No one knows."

Naturally. And until they figured it out, the Zodiac couldn't be approved for public use. The money the collective brain trust known as Hendrix House expected to make off this one radical invention to fuel other realms of highly experimental research couldn't be tapped. So even though Janet's connection to the Zodiac Project was solely as financial manager, she'd quickly earned the title of chief guinea pig. Lucky her.

Her friend finished removing the sensors, then helped Janet to sit up so she could slip her arms into a thick, warm robe. Janet leaned heavily on the young woman's arm as she shifted her axis from horizontal to vertical. Together they tied the belt to conceal her stiff, naked body before they shuffled out of the Dream Chamber like a pair of conjoined twins.

Dr. Tate paced the corridor, his shoes making no sound on the noise-dampening tiles. He was often restless when he had something on his mind. She'd learned from office gossip that he'd shoot hoops, sometimes for hours, because it helped him organize his thoughts, or so he claimed.

Whether or not the exercise did anything for his productivity, Janet couldn't say. It certainly did something for the females watching him. Dark hair and tan skin displayed more muscle than fat, a factor which set him apart from many of the scientists on Hendrix grounds. Definitely eye candy, but she refrained from thinking of him in more intimate terms. Her relationships often ended badly, and she'd never developed a taste for failure or rejection. Never mind the fact that he'd been one of the few men who hadn't asked for a private meeting between the sheets.

So she contented herself with watching Dr. Archer Tate from a distance. At least that's what she'd been doing until her name was chosen in a random lottery to select additional beta-testers among the project staff. Her prize, a Zodiac Dream experience. Now whether she wanted to or not, she saw rejection in his eyes every day.

And she didn't even have the fun of dating him first.

Some prize.

As soon as he spotted them, Dr. Tate pounced. "What happened? What do you remember?"

Frannie tried to put him off. "Janet needs downtime before you rip into her, doctor. We have a meeting at four to discuss her Dream. Can't you wait until then?"

"We need every bit of information Ms. Widgeon can give us toward solving this problem. Who knows how much detail she'll forget in the next two hours?"

Seeing her relaxing massage vanish before her eyes, Janet sagged. Dr. Tate looped an arm around her waist to support her, lest she fall to the floor in an ungraceful heap and knock herself out cold.

It'd happened before.

"I have nothing new to tell you," Janet informed him wearily. She tried to stand on her own two shaky feet. His warm, solid embrace beckoned to her. She had to resist, particularly now when he wore such a skeptical look.

His grip tightened on her, holding her at his side. "There must be something. You blew the readings off the scale."

"Equipment malfunction? Microwave interruption due to recent sunspot activity? A rare convergence of my chakras?"

He shifted her in his arms, half carrying, half herding her toward the dressing rooms. "I calibrated the equipment myself. Before and after readings match. The only system anomalies occurred at the end of your Dream sequence."

Great. Another fucking mystery to solve. Literally. "Might as well round up the troops, Frannie. Dr. Tate isn't going to leave me in peace until I give him all my dirty little secrets."

* * * * *

Archer sat down in one of the posh, ergonomic chairs spaced out around the oval conference table while he waited for Janet Widgeon to dress. She'd looked like hell coming out of the Dream Chamber. Her chin-length cap of brown hair hung limply, her sleek frame narrowed by stress. She could barely stand on her own two feet, not to mention a headache with enough punch to take out a world-class boxer swimming behind her doe-brown eyes.

And then he'd gone and attacked her like a ravenous dog after fresh meat, no doubt earning Frannie's evil eye for the rest of the week.

He hadn't set out to be a bully. He had his suspicions and he planned to investigate them thoroughly, but not until she'd had some time to recover. Then he'd taken one look at the way Janet was clinging to Frannie, and his anger came flooding back. This was so unnecessary! Why was she punishing herself like this?

He had over ten gigabytes of data about Janet's life and her Dreams. Blood work, psych evaluations, medical history, personal history, even her employee evaluations. He knew her better than he knew any other woman, including his mother, sister and former live-in girlfriend. But none of those bits and pieces could tell him what he really needed to know. What went on inside her head while she Dreamed?

If only she would trust him with the truth...

If only he could open her brain and ferret out her secrets the way he could the electric panel at Zodiac's heart...

If only he wasn't continually distracted from his analysis by fragments of the detailed descriptions of her sexual adventures...

As he mulled over his frustrations, other high-ranking members of the project team dribbled into the conference room. Janet and Frannie arrived last, taking the seats directly opposite him since they were the only ones left.

Dr. Bartel flipped through a sheaf of data printouts attached to his clipboard. "Good afternoon, Janet. How was your Dream?"

"No complaints aside from the usual, Dr. Bartel."

He glanced at the others seated around the table. "Ladies and gentlemen, did we learn anything from this most recent test run?"

One of the medical technicians produced a graph with blue lines. Archer thought it resembled the Rocky Mountains skyline. Not good.

"Her brain waves are all over the map. It's as if the drugs which put Ms. Widgeon into the necessarily receptive trance also trigger a hyperactive dream state."

"We knew that already," Archer reminded him. "That's unusual, but not unheard of among our other beta-testers."

"Yes, but this time her activity went way above her previous readings."

"Do you have a theory about why that is?"

The med tech turned to Dr. Bartel and answered, "A guess. A hunch. I won't call it anything more solid than that."

"Let's hear it," Archer demanded.

"Ms. Widgeon is becoming more proficient at manipulating her environment each time she enters the Zodiac. Her Dreams are more vivid, the random factors are more under her control. She's able to do more, so her brain is more active."

Liam dropped his two cents into the conversational slot. "Could it be that this abnormal disconnect is a self-defense mechanism? That somehow her brain is sending a disconnect signal to the Zodiac when she's on the verge of a mental overload?"

"Possible, sure, but it would take a lot more investigation—perhaps even the creation of new evaluation tools—to say for certain," the tech replied.

Liam's speculation was possible, Archer admitted silently, but not likely. The Zodiac wasn't designed to be a mind-reader, per se. There were millions of calculations a second involved in executing a complete virtual reality Dream experience. None of them were based on mental telepathy. If her body sent danger signals, he'd expect to see the warning show up in the vitals. Nothing indicated Janet was in physical distress when the disconnect occurred. Strong feelings, yes, sexual feelings, absolutely, but not dangerous ones. If there was less tangible communication going on between woman

and machine, he'd leave it to Liam and his brain wave buddies to track it down. Archer had more likely ideas to pursue.

"Archer, what's your opinion?" Dr. Bartel asked him.

"I've done all I can think of to pinpoint the problem out here. The next logical step would be for me to Dream with her so I can observe the process from the inside." And make sure Janet wasn't doing something to sabotage their work.

Frannie looked at the others seated around the table. "Is that wise? We haven't been able to replicate Janet's glitch so we have no way of knowing what'll happen to anyone who follows her in."

"The risk is minimal," Archer informed her impatiently. "She makes it out okay. Anyone along for the ride should, theoretically, be fine as well."

"It's that 'theoretical' part that worries me."

"It's a low-level, calculated risk I'm willing to take." He'd worked it out on paper. Outside the one variable he couldn't predict—Janet herself—the Zodiac would function as designed. He trusted his machine. He wasn't worried.

"What will you do?" Janet asked him. "Inside the Dream, I mean."

"Observe."

A faint blush brought some much-needed color back to her cheeks. "I was referring to the scenario. What role would you play?"

"I'll be a bartender or something. It's not important."

Janet frowned. "My Dream lover and I are always alone at the end. I don't think having you around to serve drinks will add to the romance, do you?"

"Why don't we make this simple? Write me in as your mysterious lover." There was no way she could conceal her actions from him during sex. In fact, he couldn't come up with a single reason against it.

Slowly, Janet said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

If she were truly innocent, what valid reason could she have for not wanting him along? "Why not?"

"I work with you," she reminded him. "It could make things very awkward for us down the road if we were to engage in...sex."

"Virtual sex," Archer corrected, unwilling to let her wiggle out of this. Her reluctance only added support to his hypothesis. "We're both professionals. I don't foresee a problem."

Janet didn't look convinced.

Dr. Bartel gently cleared his throat. "I admit the situation is highly unusual, not to mention deuced awkward. I can't order you to do it. However, I do feel this would be a logical next step."

Archer gripped the arms of his chair to keep from jumping with joy. There was no way she could turn him down now. "What do you say, Janet? Is it a date?"

Chapter Four

Positive Is Negative

Janet sat at a table in a crowded hotel bar, sipping a Long Island Iced Tea. Probably a convention in town, she speculated. Or, like her, they were stuck in Cleveland overnight because the airport had shut down due to bad weather.

Talk about clichés. Couldn't Houston and his hackers come up with a better Dream script than this? It was going to be hard enough to feel at ease around the sexy doctor, given that she knew nothing about his intimate practices while he had several detailed accounts of hers. Why use a sleazy setup that would only emphasize the fact that they were there to have sex?

Or was that the point?

"Hey, it's about time you showed up."

Janet looked up at the gorgeous man standing beside her table. He had a half-empty drink in his hand, not his first judging by the glassy look in his eyes. "Dr. Tate, what a surprise to see you here."

"We agreed to shuck formality under the circumstances, remember?"

Vaguely. The drugs enabling the transport to the Zodiac world to take place reduced the real world to a fuzzy jumble of impressions. The longer she remained in the VR world, the harder it was to recall details from the real one.

"Care to join me, Archer?"

"Why waste time? We both know where we're going to end up."

Philadelphia. That was her final destination. Was it his as well? She couldn't remember. She should have paid more attention to the script. "My flight was canceled. I don't have to be anywhere until tomorrow morning."

He smiled, predatory and hot. "Neither do I, which is why I picked this scenario. Not much point in running through ten pages of script if all we're going to do is have sex."

"Sex?"

His hungry blue eyes roamed up and down her body. "Sex. You and me. Now. What do you say?"

Yes was the answer he obviously expected. After all, that's why she'd come down to the bar. To find a man to spend the night with. She was so tired of being alone.

Wasn't she?

"Your room or mine?"

"Yours," he said, taking her hand to help her up. "The hotel double-booked us."

The elevator ride to her floor went by in the blink of an eye. Janet was already having second thoughts.

When considering a no-strings, one-night stand, lack of personal knowledge about one's partner was a plus. She shouldn't be disappointed because she couldn't recite his favorite color or his happiest memory. That type of intimacy required a relationship, something she wasn't likely to find in a hotel bar.

But it would have been nice if they'd had a drink together first. Something to prevent her from feeling as if he'd paid for an hour of her time and intended to get every nickel's worth for it.

Archer, seemingly unaware of her inner turmoil, extracted the keycard from the death grip her fingers had on it and unlocked the door. "After you."

Janet turned on the lights, then quickly turned them off. No lights. This was about raw coupling with a stranger. She didn't need lights for that. In fact, she rather preferred not to look him in the eye. She felt cheap enough.

"I hate the smell of cigarette smoke but the bars are always full of it. You'd think quitting the damn things would be enough punishment without having the odor turn your stomach for years afterward." Archer stepped into the bathroom and started the water running. He had to shout to be heard over the noise. "Wanna get wet?"

He hadn't left her any room to say no after an explanation like that. If she didn't rinse off, she'd spend the rest of the night worrying that she'd make him nauseous. Talk about a mood killer.

"I'll be with you in a minute." Janet started removing her blouse, one pearl button at a time.

Archer ducked back into the sleeping area. Janet got a glimpse of tan, naked skin before she turned her back to him. Whew! Finding him attractive wasn't going to be a problem.

"Want some help with that?" he asked.

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

"This isn't something I ordinarily do."

"Have sex?"

"Have sex with someone I don't know."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Turn around, and I won't be so much of a stranger."

She did, keeping her eyes fixed on his left earlobe. In that area, the lack of clothing hadn't changed him. However, a significant portion of him rubbed against her belly. Janet found it sexy and a little unnerving since she was still fully dressed.

"I don't think —"

He put a finger to her lips. "That's right. Don't think. Just go with it."

Archer leaned down, capturing her mouth in a soft kiss. Her fingers explored the ripped expanse of his chest. "You didn't get these shooting hoops," she said.

He grinned. "How do you know about that? Seen me play?"

"By proxy. You've got quite a fan club."

"Right now the only one I want cheering me on is you."

Archer stepped backward, leading her with both hands into the bathroom. He stepped into the tub so she could finish undressing.

Fog coated the mirror. It was almost too humid to breathe. The tiny exhaust fan couldn't keep up with the thick plumes of steam rising from the shower.

Then Janet noticed something else to take her breath away. Archer, under the spray. The translucent curtain broadcast his movements like a film noir. Dark, gritty and, in this case, not suitable for audiences under the age of eighteen.

Archer coated his body with lather, from head to toe. His hands kept returning to his cock and balls—lifting them, fondling them—whenever they weren't otherwise occupied with rinsing the soap from his skin.

The warmth suffusing her body as she watched him had nothing to do with the atmospheric conditions of the room and everything to do with the gorgeous man putting himself on display. Mechanically she drew the tails of her silk blouse out of her skirt's waistband, her attention completely absorbed in Archer's actions.

Her bra joined the pink blouse on the counter. As Archer caressed his hardening erection, Janet did the same to her nipples. She'd never witnessed a man in the throes of self-gratification before. Did he know she was watching?

He arched his back, letting the water run over his chest. The silhouette of his cock jutted out at a right angle to his body. His hand skated over his abdomen, then lowered to cup his sex. He gripped his cock and stroked it slowly.

"Hurry up or there won't be much hot water left," Archer said.

The comment jerked Janet out of her lusty daze. She quickly stripped off her remaining clothes and joined him. The way his blue eyes lit with approval as he brushed the shower curtain aside strengthened her confidence that she was doing the right thing by going along with his plan.

Archer wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her against his hard chest. "Kiss me."

His firm lips separated hers after one short intake of breath. Diving deep, he tickled her tongue, filling her mouth the way he would soon fill her body. Janet tried to return his passion in equal measure, but her concentration was split between staying on her feet and not letting him push her under the scalding-hot waterfall at her back.

He captured her hand and brought it to his engorged cock. "Feel this. This is how much I want you."

Janet palmed his erection. Impressive. Hard. A spurt of pure lust snaked down her spine. All that was all hers. She stroked him from stem to head, caressing him as she'd seen him do. It felt even better than it looked.

He pressed his face into the curve of her neck and bit lightly. "I like that, baby. Don't stop."

Baby? She had a name. Why didn't he use it? Couldn't he at least give her that much intimacy?

Janet tugged a little too hard on his cock out of irritation, and he gave her a questioning glance.

"Sorry." Even though she wasn't, not really.

"Let's wash up and get out of here. I think both of us would be happier with more room to move around in."

They returned to the bedroom after quickly toweling off. Archer took the middle of the mattress and spread his arms out wide. "Come here."

She sprawled across his chest. His hands journeyed over her curves. She could feel the head of his shaft knock against her feminine gate. Physically her body was responding to him. Dampness seeped from her core, an unmistakable sign of desire for the man under her if not for the man under the skin.

Mentally, however, she felt many steps behind. Something was missing from this encounter, but Archer wasn't giving her time to find it. Everything about his movements screamed, "Now! Now! Now!"

She gasped as he embedded his cock into her narrow channel. He was a tight fit, almost more than she could handle.

"So hot, so good," he told her.

He lifted his hips off the bed to deepen the connection. To keep her balance, she placed her hands on his pecs. He thrust in and out of her slick core, puffing like a steam engine. It didn't take long for him to reach his peak. He came in a hot stream she could feel within her intimate depths.

She didn't feel so much as a tremor in return.

He continued to buck and groan under her, leaving her nothing to do but hold on. Finally, the last echoes of his orgasm faded into barely perceptible ripples. Her job here was done.

"Your turn, baby. Come for me."

Or maybe not.

She didn't feel even remotely close to climax, but she closed her eyes and thought of another man, another time and place. Of being with one who loved her. That raised her internal temperature until she dictated the pace of their lovemaking, grinding against Archer. His softening erection slipped out of her channel, but he arched to bring her clit more firmly in contact with his pelvis.

He twisted her brown nipples between his fingers. She'd rather have his hot lips tugging on them and coaxed him into doing so by lowering herself to his mouth. He took the hint, and that was enough to bring on the electric buzz of orgasm.

Janet shuddered through a weak climax, then collapsed on the bed next to him to give her aching arms a rest.

"Was it good for you?" he asked.

Compared to what? A director's couch audition? "Yeah. Fine. Good."

"You sure? I expected something more...dramatic to happen."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

He shook his head. "I have no complaints. That's not what I meant."

Janet no longer cared to hear what he meant. She just wanted to be rid of him so she could get dressed and forget that this event ever happened. She glanced around the room, mentally scrambling for a way to politely tell him to get lost. She spotted a blue door, the Zodiac's emergency exit. A one-way ticket back to reality. It would be a coward's way out but, at this point, she was willing to take it.

"I'll get dressed in there," she told him, pointing to the escape hatch.

"No, not yet—"

But she had already opened the door.

Chapter Five

Post Mortem

Archer slammed his fist against the conference table causing everything on it to bounce. "Shit!"

"I don't see why you're so upset. Janet finally produced a set of normal readings."

He glared at Houston. Didn't the programmer understand? Normal readings meant Janet hadn't done whatever it was she normally did while Dreaming. "The goal of the exercise was to reproduce the anomaly, not avoid it. We failed."

Dr. Bartel cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to have to be this personal, Janet, but did you achieve orgasm during this Dream?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"But it didn't trigger the system shutdown as it had before?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea why that might be?"

Archer couldn't wait to hear her excuse. It had better be a damn good one.

Janet glanced at him briefly before responding. "Not really."

"Oh, come on," Archer said, "you must have some clue." She was holding something back. Even without a psychology degree he could read that much in her body language. She reclined with her arms crossed over her chest, distancing herself from the conversation by looking away from the assembled group.

When Janet remained mute, Dr. Bartel said, "I know it's unfair of us to ask for your candid insight yet again. If there was another way around the problem, I assure you we'd take it. However, you remain our best source of information when it comes to pinpointing this system anomaly. If there's anything you can add, no matter how insignificant it may seem, we'd very much appreciate hearing it."

Her brown eyes pleaded with the old doctor to be let off the hook on this one. "It's nothing. Really."

"If you have something to say, just say it," Archer demanded. "All this stalling is counterproductive."

Janet bit her lip, then blurted out, "I didn't enjoy it."

Archer was stunned. So, seemingly, was the rest of the room as no one spoke for several long seconds.

"Are you saying Dr. Tate behaved...inappropriately?" Dr. Bartel prompted.

"Oh, no! No, I didn't mean that." Her hands went out in front of her, as if pleading with Dr. Bartel for forgiveness or understanding. "It's just that I didn't feel as

emotionally connected to Dr. Tate as I had with my other Dream lovers. He didn't make me feel special."

Janet was blaming *him* for this? What a crock! If she'd had a problem with the way he handled their business, she could have said something. But she didn't say a thing. Not one fucking word!

And now that she needed an excuse to account for her lack of performance, she cast the blame on him. He was more convinced than ever of her calculated participation in ruining the project. He couldn't sit by and let her get away with it.

"You came, didn't you?" Archer pointed out angrily.

"When I closed my eyes and imagined I was with someone else, yes."

"I didn't hear any complaints," Archer shot back.

"Of course not. All you wanted to hear was me cheering you on."

There were tears in her eyes now. Being painfully familiar with this particular weapon in the female defensive arsenal, he didn't let it stop him. "After all the bragging about how well you pleased your anonymous lovers, can you blame me for expecting more from you than your cold fish responses?"

"Archer, shut up," Liam ordered.

Janet's face had gone deathly pale. "I'm so glad we could be professional about this."

"I wish you had been a professional. At least then I would've enjoyed being fucked over!"

"That makes two of us," Janet said softly as she got to her feet.

Silence thundered through the room after her departure. Frannie was the first one to break it. "I'll go."

Why bother? Archer wondered. Whatever embarrassment Janet might be feeling was only fair given the grief she'd caused so many others. What a waste of time and manpower! And he was no closer to learning her biggest secret. At least he wouldn't be plagued by fantasies about her sexual prowess from now on. He knew for a fact she didn't have any, regardless of how she'd made it sound.

Addressing the psychologist, Frannie added, "Make sure Dr. Tate understands what a complete ass he is while I'm gone."

"I don't get you people. You act as if she's the one who's been wronged here."

Dr. Bartel frowned. "Archer, I think you've made your position perfectly clear on this subject. Please be quiet."

Unbelievable. Even Dr. Bartel was on Janet's side. Didn't he see that this failure to reproduce the glitch only added to his claim? "Why am I the bad guy? I kept my end of the deal. She didn't keep hers. You should be thanking me for showing you what she really is, a faker."

"I believe I can prove otherwise," Liam informed the group.

"Please do, Liam. I think all of us would welcome a fresh perspective."

Liam nodded his thanks to Dr. Bartel, and then focused on Archer. "Since you designed and built most of the Zodiac, I assume you know how it operates?"

Archer nodded, aware that if eyes really could shoot daggers, he'd be dead right now. Many times over. He'd never seen the psychologist so angry. "I think it's safe to say I have a general grasp of the concept, yes."

"So you're aware that the Zodiac makes adjustments to the preprogrammed scenario based on a Dreamer's psychological data and preferences recorded during previous trips?"

Archer gave the psychologist another nod. This belaboring of the point was really childish, but Archer couldn't criticize Liam's methods without digging himself a deeper hole with the project team.

"Then maybe you'll also recall that the person first in—that would be you in this case, Archer—has a certain amount of influence in the Dream, and that Janet, who followed you, would have none except what you gave her."

Oh, fuck. Liam had a very valid point. A single, simple detail Archer had overlooked in his haste to validate his theory, a mistake which put an entirely different spin on the results. It was very possible that Janet couldn't do what she normally did during a Dream because she hadn't been the one in command.

Could he feel lower than chicken shit? It was a theoretical question which didn't require any research to come to a proven conclusion. The answer was an unequivocal yes.

Archer closed his eyes and tilted his head toward the ceiling as Liam's explanation continued to hammer away at him.

"The further you deviate from her previous experiences, the more likely it is that a new scenario will evolve along a different tangent. Janet's Zodiac fantasies thus far have centered on a male lover who forsakes other commitments, sometimes even his personal ethics, to be with her. That's about as far as you can get from a one-night stand. Did you even look at her preferences before you decided how to play it?"

No, Archer hadn't. He'd figured that listening to her Dream reports had told him what he needed to know. Another assumption that could cost him his career, the respect of his peers and any chance he had at pursuing other dreams.

Maybe he should be the one charged with sabotaging the project. With his rampant stupidity.

Resigned to whatever punishment the rest of the project team chose to dish out, Archer admitted, "I focused on the objective, not the path we took to get there. I see now that it was the wrong approach to solving this problem."

Houston, who had been silent up to this point, said, "You got that right."

"The one bright spot," Dr. Bartel said, "is that we've proven it's possible for Janet to end the Dream normally under certain circumstances. Does that help us at all?"

Houston held up two sets of printouts. "The code from today doesn't look any different than what we normally see when the Zodiac functions as designed."

"What about the detailed analysis of that versus her previous sessions?" Liam asked.

"My guys are still decoding her last two aborted dreams—it's far easier to write code than it is to decipher someone else's—but I doubt we'll find what we need in them. The process logs show calculations were made, but it appears that the changes based on those calculations weren't saved, as we discovered with her other Dreams."

Liam frowned. "How could it be missing? I thought the computer super brain recorded everything as it happened."

Archer had wondered about that himself so he and Houston had looked into it. "Although by human standards the electronic transfer of data bytes seems instantaneous, it does take a micro unit of time. In Janet's case, the machine shuts itself off before the most recent information—the critical stuff we need— gets transferred to long-term storage. No transfer, no saved data."

"What else do we have to go on?" Dr. Bartel asked the group.

"Janet mentioned one difference she'd noticed between this trip and her previous ones. Perhaps if we explore that difference, we'll find a clue," Liam suggested.

Sure, buddy, let's drive that knife in a little deeper. Suddenly Archer had a much greater degree of sympathy for Janet's role in the Project. "I failed to trip her trigger. Seems pretty clear to me."

"Perhaps you could take us through the Dream step by step," Dr. Bartel suggested. "I'm sure your information would be just as valuable as hers, for comparison purposes."

No one was going to give him a break. Admittedly, he didn't deserve one. But if they kept stuffing crow down his throat, sooner or later he was going to give them a graphic demonstration of spontaneous regurgitation. "The plot wasn't anything fancy. I approached her in a hotel bar and suggested we have sex."

Liam looked disgusted. "You didn't buy her a drink first? Dance with her? Maybe talk to her for three seconds as if she were a real human being?"

Agitated, Archer ran his hands through his short hair several times before he replied. "Our goal was to have sex. Having dinner, or even a drink, would have delayed us."

Houston rocked back in his chair. "Damn, man. Did you leave bills on the dresser too?"

"No, of course not."

"What happened once you reached the room?" Dr. Bartel asked.

Janet had been stiff, hesitant. Instead of talking with her about it, he kept pushing her.

Upon reflection, Archer suspected he'd done it primarily due to his own large dose of performance anxiety. Knowing the researchers were going to be tracking his every move made him want to show off, get in her pants in record time. Something the rest of them had been unable to do, no matter how many times they'd tried.

That was going to go over really big with this crowd.

In an attempt to keep some of his skin intact, he went with the facts. "I suggested we shower off the stench of cigarettes from the bar."

Houston shook his head. "Boyo, you suck. Didn't you do anything right?"

"Sure I did," Archer shot back sarcastically. "I inserted Tab A into Slot B, just like the sex manual said."

He'd invaded her sweet, tight body with all the finesse of a clinical exam. She hadn't been into him at first, he knew that. So he went after her hard and fast. So fast that the only thing he accomplished in record time was turning her off entirely. He'd thought his orgasm might have been the ticket to triggering hers, but he now realized she'd accomplished that pretty much on her own.

The chances of salvaging his male pride after this screw-up were slim to none. He'd go down in project history as the fastest, and worst, fuck this side of the Zodiac.

What a pathetic epitaph to his otherwise impressive career.

"Gentlemen," Dr. Bartel said, "I can see this latest test was not well designed or well executed. Let's chalk it up to a learning experience and move on. Assuming Janet is willing to work with us again, what should be our next step?"

"Janet and I will have to go back, do it right this time." How in hell he was going to talk her into giving him another chance, Archer didn't know.

"You?" Liam scoffed. "I don't think so."

Frannie returned then, cutting off the discussion. Every eye in the room immediately zeroed in on her. "I sent Janet home. She asked me to apologize to the team for the way she ran out. I told her to stuff the apology, preferably down Dr. Tate's throat."

Liam gave her a wink of approval. "I'll tell her the same thing as soon as I get the chance."

"That may be tomorrow. I couldn't talk her into taking off more time than that."

Archer wished Janet wasn't so noble. Her rapid return didn't give him much time to come up with a plan to get back in her good graces. There wasn't enough flowers and chocolate in the world to fix this debacle.

"So what did you decide while I was gone?" Frannie asked.

Houston slung his arm around her shoulder, buddy-to-buddy style. "You mean besides the fact that Archer's a first-class asshole?"

"If it took you more than a second to reach that conclusion, then this project is in more trouble than I thought."

Dr. Bartel closed his notebook, signaling an end to the meeting. "That's enough, people. I'm sure Dr. Tate recognizes the errors in his decision-making process and will take steps to ensure it doesn't happen again."

Without a doubt. He'd lost major ground, not only with Janet but with the rest of the team as well. Another mistake like this one and he'd have to learn Chinese because the hole he'd be in would be that deep.

"All the more reason to have someone else join Janet on her next run," Liam argued.

"And I suppose you'd nominate yourself for that job?" Archer asked him.

"I couldn't do any worse than you."

Archer let the challenge hang in the air as he tried to get past the intense urge to choke the shit out of the picture-perfect head-shrinker. "I messed up. I admit it. But that doesn't mean I'm not capable of giving Janet what she needs. Besides, no one else knows the Zodiac's mechanics better than I do. It's got to be me."

"You act like you're the only person in this room with enough IQ points to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. If Janet were just another component of your precious machine, I'd agree with you. But she's quite human. Your engineering skills don't mean shit where she's concerned. If you want answers from her, I'm the best one to go."

Archer leaned over the table, damn near shouting. "Don't you think that if it were a matter of asking Janet the right questions we'd have the answers by now?"

"Hell, no. Not with the way you've been bullying her," Liam replied.

"She doesn't have to tell me. She could have relayed the information through anyone on the project team. She knows that. The fact that she's kept the knowledge to herself means she doesn't have it or she's unwilling to part with it. Either way, that puts the ball solidly in my court. I know the Zodiac inside and out. She won't be able to slip anything by me."

"You've already made up your mind, declared her guilty. That's hardly a scientific approach. You've lost your objectivity, Archer. You don't deserve to spend quality time with her."

"Quality time?" That wasn't even close to describing what the psychologist really wanted from Janet. "At least Janet knows what I'm after when I talk to her."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Liam demanded.

"How eager would you be to Dream with her if sex wasn't part of the deal?"

"I could ask you the same question, pal."

Archer shook his head. "My primary motive is to figure out what's wrong with the Zodiac so I can fix it. I don't deny that Janet turns me on, but I'd be demanding to go in whether it was Janet or Frannie, or even Houston."

"You leave my black ass outta this," the programmer interjected.

Frannie spoke up. "It occurs to me, boys, that the person most qualified to decide who goes Dreaming with her is Janet."

Dr. Bartel nodded his agreement. "I agree. She may choose from any qualified member of the project team. Let me know what she decides."

Chapter Six

Clearing the Air

Janet returned to work the following morning as she'd promised, feeling happier than she expected to be about it. Dr. Bartel was responsible for that. He'd called her to confirm privately that Dr. Tate's behavior inside the Dream environment hadn't left her with permanent scars. At the end of her reassurances, the old doctor informed her that he'd placed a moratorium on Dreaming for a full week. The project team in general, and her specifically, had been pushed too hard lately, he'd said. They could all use a break.

One member of the team wouldn't be pleased by the delay, but Janet reminded herself that she had no reason to care what Dr. Archer Tate thought. She had seven Tate-free days ahead of her.

Or so she thought.

An hour before noon, he poked his head in her office. "Hi. May I come in?"

"I'm afraid not. I have an appointment now."

"I'm it," he told her.

Janet consulted the calendar printout. The entry blocked out the time but gave no indication of who she was to meet with or why. It gave her a very convenient out. "Your name isn't listed."

"I thought if you knew it was me, you'd cancel it."

She probably would have. She wasn't ready to see him again. However, to throw him out now would be childish. Unprofessional. She refused to stoop to his level. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Us." He shut her office door and took a seat in one of her visitor chairs.

"There is no 'us', Dr. Tate."

"Call me Archer. I think recent events entitle us to use first names."

His hesitant grin generated a dollop of heat in her belly. It was hard to ignore the fact that the last time she'd seen him smile that way, he'd been naked. And a hairsbreadth away from kissing her. Though the joint Dream as a whole left a bad taste in her mouth, it didn't cancel out her appreciation of his fine male form.

Doing her best to ignore her body's traitorous response to him, Janet said, "If you insist, Archer. The fact remains, aside from Zodiac research which won't be an issue for several days, we don't have anything to say to each other."

That certainly seemed to be the case when he regarded her in silence for several seconds. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. I'm stating a fact."

"No, no. About the way I treated you yesterday. I'm sorry."

Janet couldn't think of a single topic she wanted to discuss less with him than the events of yesterday. "Accepted. Is that all?"

Archer's blue eyes narrowed. "You don't believe I'm sincere?"

"I'm sure you truly regret some of the things that happened yesterday. What I don't believe is that you feel any guilt about your actions, only the result they had."

He crossed his legs as if settling in for a long stay. "Since I have no way to prove it, I'll table that discussion for now. I did have reasons for my behavior. Would you like to hear them?"

"No."

"I think you'd be surprised by the explanation."

Her temper heated. "If you're pissed because I didn't lie to preserve your macho image, then outline your complaint in a memo. I'll be sure to file it appropriately." She picked up a sheet of scratch paper and dumped it into the waste bin to emphasize her point.

He watched it drift down, and then returned his crystalline blue gaze to her face. "I suspected you were sabotaging the Zodiac Project. I wanted to catch you at it."

"What!" The nerve of this man! She'd done everything he'd asked of her. Bent over backward, and then some, to help him find the flaw in his design. "How dare you accuse me of sabotage. Get the hell out of my office!"

"No. Not until my half-hour is up."

"Then I'll leave." She opened the bottom drawer of her desk and extracted her purse. "And to think I defended your behavior last night when Dr. Bartel asked me if I thought you should be taken off the project. If I'd known what you were really thinking, I wouldn't have bothered. You're obviously delusional."

"You defended me?"

That sweet, dopey grin was back. She wanted to slap it off his face. "Don't let it go to your head. I plan on stopping by Dr. Bartel's office after lunch to correct that mistake."

"Please stay. We need to talk this out."

His voice had softened, but her seething anger left her immune. "No."

Archer reached for her as she walked past him. Having anticipated that move, Janet swung her purse in an arc. It connected with the side of his hard head, producing a satisfying thump. Unfortunately, it wasn't designed for combat and one of the handles ripped. The contents went flying.

He stumbled back and dropped into the chair he'd recently vacated. "Ow! What do you have in there?"

The answers lay scattered around his feet. She crouched down, her tight yellow skirt riding high on her thighs, as she gathered them up. "None of your business."

"It is if you're carrying a concealed weapon."

She jerked the compact travel hairdryer out of his hand and jammed it back into her big-bellied purse. "It's not loaded."

"What about this?"

Janet snatched up the can of pepper spray and dumped it into the bag along with the sparse makeup supplies she carried in a large coin purse. "Touch me again and you'll find out."

A pair of lacy underwear, two paperback romance novels and a hairbrush were reclaimed and put back where they came from.

As he watched the items disappear into the voluminous bag, Archer asked, "Are you living out of your car or something? Do you need money so badly that you're willing to sabotage my project as a way to pay off a debt?"

This was just too much. Angry tears blurred her vision as she rescued a pen from under her empty visitor's chair. "No one is paying me to ruin your fucking project, Archer."

"You're certainly doing a good job of it for someone who isn't trying."

A roll of antacids had landed under her desk. She grabbed them along with a bottle of aspirin and a few pieces of hard candy. "If I wanted to sink your pet project, it'd be long dead and buried. One phone call from me, and your grant money would disappear. That would certainly put a snarl in your timeline, wouldn't it?"

"Effective, perhaps, but not very smart. Everyone would know it was you."

"Would they? Funding sources dry up all the time. It's my job to get new dollars in before the old ones disappear. So maybe I missed the signs, didn't act fast enough, but no one could say I did it deliberately."

"It has to be you. You're the only one with a motive."

"What motive?"

"You hate me."

Janet sat on her heels and stared at him. "I should have known better than to expect a mature, rational response from you."

"Call it professional jealousy then. Or an opposing philosophy about the way I spend funds for the Project. Hell, maybe you think I murdered your favorite camel in a past life. I don't know. Whatever your reasons are, it all boils down to the fact that you can't wait to see me fail."

"Until yesterday, I didn't know you well enough to hate you." She recovered a small pack of tissues, took one out, used it, tossed it and stored the remaining ones in her purse. She took a last look around the floor for anything she might have missed. "I can't even fathom what I did to give you such an impression."

"You avoid me. You've been on friendly terms with most of the project staff, but whenever we have to talk I get Janet, the Ice Bitch."

"That's because I choose my friends from the group of people who don't treat me like I'm something they scraped off the bottom of their shoe."

"Are you implying that I do?"

Just when she thought she had her emotions under control, Archer said something asinine to trigger another wave of gut-churning turmoil. "I'm not implying anything. I'm flat-out saying it."

"That's not at all what comes to mind when I look at you, Janet."

Janet tried to stand up, but her right foot had fallen asleep. She settled for rearranging her legs in a more demure position. "I know what I'm talking about, Archer. It's not as if you're the first man to find me lacking and assume the blame for everything that went wrong thereafter rested with me."

Until now, Hendrix House had been her refuge, her salvation. But somehow Archer must have found out about the old accusations and figured she was playing the same game with him. Who else had he told? Would she have to abandon her job and start a new life all over again?

"You want to explain that one to me?" Archer's voice was unsteady, nowhere near his usual arrogant tone.

"Not really."

"If it has any bearing at all on the Zodiac Project, I need to know."

It did, at least when it came to their ability to work together. Maybe if she explained what had really happened back then, they could put this incident behind them for good. "Several years ago, I worked for a small company contracted to do experimental research. Top secret government stuff. Somehow, the government learned that confidential information was being leaked. When the federal investigators stepped in to find out who, many of the fingers pointed to me."

She'd never suspected before then that friendly behavior could get a person in so much hot water. Thinking of how naïve she'd been made her sick to her stomach. Janet hugged her belly and continued. "They tried every trick in the book to get me to confess. I lost my job, my apartment, my friends and my fiancé. I lost everything, except my faith that they'd eventually find me innocent. After eight long months, they finally did."

The reason it took so long to clear her was that her fiancé had been the guilty one. The Feds couldn't believe that she'd lived and worked with the man without also being involved in his crimes. But that's precisely why James had hooked up with her. To be the decoy. To take the blame when he ditched her and flew to South America with his real girlfriend.

His letter to the lead investigators included a remark about how he'd really earned the money he'd embezzled by having to fuck such a lousy lay.

Janet gripped her purse fiercely, speaking more to herself than to the man sitting next to her. "Nothing, not money nor love nor fear, could get me to risk everything I've worked so hard to earn back. Nothing."

"I...I...didn't know."

She glanced up at Archer and was surprised to see how shaken he looked. Though she had no idea why, she was suddenly struck by the urge to comfort him. "I swear to you, Archer, I'm not the source of your problems. Not intentionally, at any rate."

He took her hands in his—his large warm hands—warming them from both sides. It required conscious effort for her not to press more of herself against him.

"I believe you."

"You do?" She had a hard time reading the expression he wore. The closest she could come was a mix between hope, caution and shame.

"I'll apologize again for the way I've treated you, Janet. I never set out to hurt you. I just was so damn sure you were keeping something from me and I had to know what it was. The more I chased, the further you ran which only made you look guiltier to me." He shook his head. "It's amazing you agreed to Dream with me at all."

"You didn't give me much of a choice."

"Well, I'm giving you one now. Stay with the project, see it through, or go back to your regularly scheduled life. Your choice. No strings. No repercussions."

Whether he meant it as one or not, Janet viewed the question as a challenge. Experience taught her that his suspicions wouldn't be entirely put to rest until the true explanation for the Zodiac's anomaly was found, a nearly impossible task without her cooperation. If she wanted to stay at Hendrix House then she had to continue to do whatever the project team asked of her until the real culprit—mechanical or biological—was identified.

"As long as you need me to help with your investigation, I'll be involved."

"Even if it means Dreaming with me again?"

As Janet scrambled for a response, her office door slammed open and Liam walked in. "Campaigning already, Archer?"

Chapter Seven

Decisions, Decisions

Archer stepped in front of Janet, as if to shield her. "I wasn't aware I had to report my every movement to you."

"Only where Janet is concerned."

"Janet," she said, as she stood now that circulation had returned to her feet, "can take care of herself." She glanced over at Archer. "Speaking of which, how's your head?"

He touched the spot where her purse had connected. "Another week or two, and I think this goose egg will be ready to hatch."

"What did you do to her?" Liam demanded. Before Archer could protest the accusation, the psychologist pulled her into his protective embrace. "Did he hurt you? Are you okay?"

Janet wiggled away. "I'm fine, Liam. The only casualty here is my purse." She held up the one defunct strap.

"While we're out, I'll buy you a new one," Liam promised.

"Campaigning already?" Archer asked him. Though he used a lighter tone, his words carried the same accusation as when Liam had uttered them.

"We're going to lunch," Janet explained, not pleased with either of them treating her like a juicy bone instead of a human being. "Or rather, we *were* going to lunch. Before I go anywhere with either of you, I want to know what campaign you're referring to."

"It has to do with your next Zodiac trip," Archer replied.

"If she's willing to go another round," Liam interjected. He turned to Janet. "You don't have to participate if you don't want to. No one would blame you for walking away."

She'd weathered tougher circumstances than these. She didn't like it, but she wouldn't back down. Who knew how many other members of the project team harbored the same suspicions Archer did? She had to clear her name. "I'll do whatever is necessary to iron out this technical wrinkle. I've already given Archer my word on that. Now please cut the suspense and tell me what's going on."

Archer joined them to form an intimate circle. Liam's chest brushed her arm on the left, Archer's on her right. She found her new position arousing. Slightly distracted by the blended masculine scents, Janet fought to keep her focus on the conversation.

"Here's where we're at," Archer began. "When your Dream shuts down the Zodiac, the information about what caused the system failure doesn't reach long-term storage."

The only way to get the answers we need is for someone extremely knowledgeable about the Zodiac's operation to be with you when the disconnect happens."

"We already tried that, remember?" She did, especially the part where he was warming up in the shower. That was going to play a big role in her private fantasies for months to come. After all, turnabout was fair play. "You didn't get the information you need then?"

"Actually, last time I made a lot of mistakes. Not only did I fail to please you, but the approach I selected made it impossible to get the critical data."

She pushed against him with her shoulder until he gave her enough space to retreat behind her desk. She needed some extra breathing room. "And to fix that oversight, you're telling me I have to have VR sex with you again?"

"Or me," Liam offered. "Or anyone else on the project team for that matter. Who gets that honor is entirely up to you."

Janet bit her lip. She longed for a man who would generate the kind of primal heat in her that forced the rest of the world to disappear every time they kissed. Could either of these two men give her that feeling? She doubted it. The only place she'd ever met that kind of man was in the pages of a romance novel.

"Does it have to be a real person? Can't I pick one of Houston's Dream dates like I did before? There's got to be a way for you to play voyeur."

Archer explained, "I know I mentioned that possibility before, but honestly the best way to observe this kind of situation is to be right on top of it—no pun intended. If I'm even ten feet away or looking through a lens, or any one of a hundred other things I could be doing to spy on you, I may miss the critical clue."

"What if the glitch occurs only when I'm with a Dream lover?" Janet asked.

Archer waved off her argument. "We could debate what-ifs for months. The only way we're going to eliminate possibilities is to conduct more experiments."

"And I can pick anyone on the project team?"

Archer and Liam shared a long look, but it was Archer who replied, "That's what Dr. Bartel said and I guarantee whoever you choose will happily cooperate. However, brain boy and I feel the best chance for success is with one of us. I know the system better than anyone, and Liam knows all about how your mind works."

"What about Houston?" she asked them. The dark-skinned man from Chicago had a luscious body and a warped sense of humor that could make her laugh when she thought even smiling was impossible.

"Houston crossed his entire team off the list. Said they'd be too distracted checking out their handiwork from the inside to treat you right," Archer told her. "Frannie scratched her name off too. Apparently she already knows she's not your type. That leaves me and Liam as the most senior members, unless you have a thing for older, balding PhDs."

Janet chuckled. The thought of her and Dr. Bartel bumping uglies, even virtually, was very amusing. She had a great deal of affection for the old scientist but not in a way that would help here. "No, I think Dr. Bartel's virtue is safe from me."

Liam smiled. "Then all you need to do is pick which of us you think has a better shot at getting you to that trouble spot."

"It's not as easy as you make it sound," Janet replied.

"Go with your gut instinct," Liam encouraged her.

Her gut was too preoccupied with a bad case of butterflies to impart any useful advice. She looked between them. "Isn't there another option?"

"Not right now, no." Archer softened his voice. "It's a simple matter, Janet. Just choose which one of us you'd rather see in your bed."

While Janet admitted his advice was sound, she didn't find either man suitable for the job. From a purely physical point of view, she knew, and approved, of what she'd be getting with Archer, Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome. However, she'd already been down that road once with him, and despite his explanation, she wasn't eager to leap back into bed with him so soon.

Liam, on the other hand, appealed to her more in that respect. She couldn't imagine any woman being disappointed by his blond, All-American good looks. However, Liam tended to coddle her, often treating her like a fragile glass sculpture he had to protect from a cold, cruel world. He wasn't controlling or demanding, just persistent about easing her way through life. That didn't usually translate into hot sex.

Maybe she was selling these two men short. Maybe both of them were capable of being the type of lover she most desired under the right set of circumstances. A successful outcome hinged on figuring out what those circumstances were and how to ensure they'd achieve them. Until now, that had largely been left to Houston and his team. They wrote the scripts, she just followed along.

"What scenario did you plan to run?" Knowing that much would give her some idea of who would be better suited to the environment.

They exchanged a look which said they hadn't gotten that far in their discussions. Figured.

"We, uh, thought we'd leave the time, place and position up to you," Archer admitted.

"Speak for yourself," Liam said, glaring at the crude terms. "I'd be happy to craft a romantic environment for us."

Liam's suggestion triggered a bright moment of inspiration. "Excellent idea," Janet said. "Go for it. Both of you."

Archer frowned. "Both of us? I don't understand."

Janet relaxed against the back of her chair, feeling as if she'd just found the key to solving world hunger. "You each possess qualities I find attractive. Lest that go to your little heads," she said as they perked up, "neither of you is perfect. To determine which

man is right for this job, I have to consider how all three elements—who, where and how—will work together.”

“So what are you proposing? A competition?” Archer asked.

“Exactly. Come up with a concept of what you think it’ll take to get the job done. The scenario I like best will be the one we use, along with the man who wrote it.” Janet picked up her ruined purse, deciding she’d have lunch, after all. With Frannie. As she sailed out the door, she said, “Good luck, gentlemen. I think you’re going to need it.”

* * * * *

“So who did you steal your idea from?” Liam asked him as they returned to Archer’s office.

Going in, everyone who was aware of the challenge assumed the psychologist would win, no contest. Those predictions were right in one respect—the quick decision indicated there hadn’t been much debate involved in reaching it. About an hour after Frannie delivered the entries to Janet, the authors were summoned to her office for the voting results. Archer one, Liam zero.

It was a tossup as to which of the three of them had been the most stunned.

Archer pulled a file from the stack on his desk and riffled through the handwritten pages. “No one. I tried to put myself in her shoes. I guess it worked.”

“Did you wear her pantyhose too?”

“Kiss my ass.” Archer wasn’t going to apologize for coming up with the better plan.

“Kudos to you for winning,” Liam said, reluctantly, “but how does pinching your toes into her size eights translate into a Dream where she has sex with both of us? I’d think one dedicated lover, someone who knows her well and can open her eyes to what a wonderful person she is, would be more attractive to her.”

Janet didn’t want to be worshipped. She already got plenty of attention from the project team as it was. When she escaped into the Zodiac world, she just wanted to be enjoyed. Thoroughly. In that respect, two could do the job better than one. “With the exception of me, Janet’s Zodiac lovers have been mysterious. A fantasy figure who represents intimacy without personal or emotional risk. We can’t give her that, so I had to come up with something else to distract her from feeling self-conscious.”

“What, exactly, did you have in mind?”

He flipped a copy of his winning entry into the psychologist’s hands. “Read it and weep.”

Liam skimmed through it. “It didn’t occur to you to ask for my feelings about ménage sex before proposing this to her? What if I refused to participate?”

Actually, Archer figured the psychologist would have plenty to say when he read the game plan. Not that Archer particularly wanted to hear it. “Only one of us really needs to go. I’m sure Houston’s crew can program a replacement for you if the idea makes you uncomfortable.”

Liam shut the office door, paying far more attention to the simple act than it required. "As it happens, I have no objections to the concept. Been there, done that, you know."

Archer caught the flicker of what appeared to be real pain across the psychologist's face. "Seriously, Liam, opting out isn't a big deal."

"I'm not going to back out, although you may when you hear what I have to say."

Oh, crap. What now? "Is this the part where you confess you're really in love with me?"

"Not even in your Dreams."

"Then there's no problem."

Liam rested his back against the doorframe. "I must admit, I'm not in love with the idea of seeing you naked."

"Same goes," Archer replied with a rueful smile. "I don't think I'd kill you if your dick touched me by accident, but I fully intend to keep Janet between us so we don't rub together any more than absolutely necessary."

"Then why—" Liam shook his head. "Never mind. For the record, I'm probably more forgiving than you are in that respect but that's not where I was going. See, I'm serious about Janet. Really serious."

Archer felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, like an animal sensing danger. "What are you trying to say?"

"My scenario was part of a bigger plan, one leading up to a marriage proposal. I wanted to show her how good we could be together so when I ask her to marry me, she won't be afraid to say yes."

Archer leaned back in his chair. "I didn't realize the two of you were dating."

"We aren't, not in the traditional sense."

"Then don't you think popping the question is a bit premature, especially since Janet opted for Door Number Two?"

Liam nodded. "Way too soon. I said it was the first step in my plan, not the final one. The fact remains that I care about Janet very much and I'd rather not conduct our first sexual experience in front of a live audience."

Too bad, Archer thought. Besides, it wasn't like they'd really be having sex. No matter how good a Dream was, it was still only virtual reality. "For the sake of the project and the woman you claim to care so much about, get over it. Otherwise, consider yourself benched. The needs of the project outweigh your personal desires right now."

"What about you? You've been quite determined to go another round with a woman who...what did you call it...oh, yeah, responds to you like a cold fish. I think you'd be happy to turn the reins over to someone else."

Would he ever live that down? Thankfully his coworkers had stopped filling his gym locker with iced halibut after the first couple days, but there remained a tendency

to slide a fish reference into any remotely applicable conversation. "I've been clear about my motives. Shagging Janet isn't one of them, although I'm not going to complain about that part of the deal."

"Then you don't want her for yourself?"

"After this trip, assuming we're successful, she's all yours."

"I have your word on that?"

"Work with me instead of fighting me every step of the way on this and, yes, I promise."

The psychologist stared back for one long, assessing moment, then said, "It's a deal."

After Liam left, Archer tried to tackle the next hurdle, the process of redesigning the Zodiac's Sleep Chamber to accommodate three pods, but his concentration was blown. No sense pushing on when his mind wasn't on the task. He instructed his monitor to display his notes on Janet instead.

Janet and Liam. Archer couldn't picture it. The woman he'd come to know preferred to earn what she had. Liam's idea of handing her love on a silver platter wouldn't work. Janet wouldn't trust anything that came too easy. And with good reason.

Janet had left quite a bit out of her espionage story. Thanks to Houston's hacker skills, Archer had a much better idea of what Janet had been facing during that federal investigation. Her assets seized, her reputation torn to shreds. And all because her boyfriend couldn't keep his dick, or his greed, leashed.

She could have used her past as an excuse to bail on the project. Instead, she chose to meet his challenge again and again. Now it was time that he meet hers by doing everything he could to give her an experience she'd never forget.

He checked his email and discovered a memo about the Dream Prologue, one version for Janet and one for him and Liam. It would be the last thing they heard as the chemicals which linked mind and machine dripped into their veins.

The men's instructions were short and to the point. Play nice with each other. Put Janet's needs above your own. Look for and remember potential causes for the system malfunction. And whatever else you do, don't let her doubt, not even for a moment, that she's the most beautiful, desirable woman you've ever met.

Janet's opening required more sophistication. For the previous trip, Archer had written the terse intro, believing that it didn't require much in the way of imagination to launch a one-night stand.

Smarter after lessons learned, Archer turned that task over to the pros. He read through it quickly. The possibilities of what could happen circled through his mind.

The chemicals also lowered inhibitions. Like hypnosis, people wouldn't act in ways they were morally against but it left a lot of leeway. That fudge factor now worried Archer since he knew his sexual preferences were likely to be far more varied than hers.

Added to the fact that he knew what a sweet treat her body could be and the naked vulnerability she'd be putting in his hands, and Archer started to have second thoughts about his ability to go slow and easy with her.

Please, Lord, whatever else happens, let me treat her right this time.

Chapter Eight

The Start of Something New

In Cyr Castle's large, formal dining room, Janet trailed behind a fussy maitre d' to a table at the edge of the second tier. After being seated and left to her own devices, she gawked at the lavish décor like the tourist she was.

Walnut cabinets lining the walls held treasures of eras gone by. Round tables of various diameters were covered in white linen. Pewter plates and candle holders topped them. It was the kind of place that wouldn't have prices on the menu because if you had to ask, you couldn't afford it.

As she sipped sweet, clear water from a crystal glass, Janet looked over the black iron rail upon the beautiful people below. By and large, the tables were populated by women. Very attractive, single women. No surprise, since the castle advertised their specialty as providing a relaxing atmosphere for businesswomen.

Did she fit in with the crowd? Her dress certainly did. It was a one-of-a-kind creation by a new designer. An intricate design of tiny jet beads decorated the cream silk bodice which left her shoulders bare. The tulip skirt flared out a bit at the hips and had another few inches of beading at the hem, just above her knee. The overall effect gave her an hourglass shape she never thought she'd see when she looked in the mirror.

Although she wasn't totally comfortable wearing expensive outfits she didn't own, Janet enjoyed having something fashionable to wear. To make her feel special, beautiful. The dress certainly helped, as did the sophisticated hairstyle, painted nails and a freshly scrubbed complexion she'd received in the spa shortly after her arrival.

But did she fit in?

Janet took another look around the room and decided she did. More comfortable now that she knew she didn't stand out like a poor relation, Janet picked up the menu. The waiter had explained the evening specials, but she wanted to peruse the other choices. This trip was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and she didn't want to miss out on any experience.

She had her face buried in the vellum pages when a polite cough brought her attention to a waiter hovering at her shoulder. "Yes?"

"The two gentlemen near the entrance would like to join you for dinner."

Janet looked them over. The tall one with neatly trimmed dark brown hair had on a double-breasted suit of dark gray. Expensive, but he wore it nonchalantly, giving the impression that the cut or the label didn't matter to him. The other man, a blond in a forest green suit which emphasized his classic good looks, smiled benevolently, as if reassuring her that he was more civilized than his friend.

Archer and Liam had arrived.

"I'd be delighted to have their company," she said.

The men sauntered toward her after being discreetly beckoned by the servant, seemingly oblivious to the number of female heads that turned to mark their passing.

When they reached her side, Liam raised her fingers to his lips. "Good evening, Janet. You look lovely." His warm breath brushing over her skin sent a spray of shivers down her spine.

Archer did the same when his turn came, lingering a beat longer than customary. "I'm honored to be having dinner with the most beautiful woman in the room."

A little overdone, but off to a much better start than the last Dream. Janet let out a soft sigh of relief as she gestured for the men to take their seats. Liam chose a chair on her right, Archer the left.

Janet returned her attention to the menu. "There are so many selections to choose from. I'm not sure where to start."

"May I make a suggestion?" Liam asked her.

"Of course."

He flipped through the pages until he reached a section she hadn't seen yet. It offered a variety of fondue-style meals for groups of two or more. Janet read through the combinations, each one an epicurean delight.

"You're suggesting we share?" Janet asked them.

"Sharing is what Liam and I do best," Archer replied.

She knew better than to swallow that whopper whole. Then again, maybe it would be a good test. If they couldn't share a meal, it would be impossible for them to share a bed.

"Do either of you have a preference?" she asked them.

"As long as it includes meat, I'm not picky."

Liam glanced warningly at his cohort, then said, "Anything you select will be fine."

She gave their order to the hovering waiter, then gestured for the men to select a wine to go with it. "So, gentlemen," Janet said once they were left to their own devices, "what brings you to my table?"

"You," Archer replied.

"Seriously," Janet said, treating them like hotel employees, according to the script. "If this is going to turn into a sales pitch for a time-share vacation, I'd rather get it over with during the salad course so I can enjoy the rest of the meal."

Both men chuckled, but it was Liam who answered. "No sales pitch. No hard sell of any kind. We'd just like to share the meal with you. Is that so hard to believe?"

Frankly, yes, Janet wanted to tell them. She wasn't accustomed to being the most sought-after female in a crowd. She scanned the thirty or so tables again. Other women

were now in the company of men, but only a few and none of them had two escorts as she did.

"Let's just say that the men who approach me usually don't have romance on their minds." Her accountant brain got more attention than she did. How pathetic was that?

Not that she intended to mention Hendrix House. She'd vowed, as Frannie hooked her up to the monitoring sensors, she wasn't going to be Janet the Accountant or even Janet the Lab Rat, but rather Janet the Woman. It was a promise to herself that she'd do everything in her power to keep.

The salad arrived. Janet picked around the edges of the colorful roughage dotted with fruit and a tangy dressing. "Do you know the history of the place?" she asked them.

Liam did. His explanation about the Scottish clan chief who built the first structure and its modifications took them well into the second course of crusty bread and Swiss cheese fondue.

Cubes of raw chicken, lamb and shrimp appeared next, along with a variety of sauces to dip them in once they'd been cooked in savory broth. Veggies simmered away in a second pot. They each took turns, occasionally offering advice when they hit upon a pleasing combination of tastes.

Feeling at ease since they were getting along so well, Janet spoke about her joy of traveling and her desire to explore the island. The men listened, really listened, adding commentary where appropriate. The wine steward kept their glasses filled and by the end of the main course, Janet was feeling very comfortable with them indeed.

When caramel and chocolate had melted together for the dessert course, Janet began to wonder when she might see them again. "Do you have plans for tomorrow?"

The men shared a glance. Liam replied, "No, not yet."

"I was thinking of talking a walk around the perimeter of the island."

Liam's brow creased in concern. "The trail is quite treacherous in places. You may wish to go with a guide."

"I'm sure I can find my own way. It's a small island so I'm not likely to get lost." She savored the mixture of sweet caramel and cold, crisp apple on her tongue before she added, "Sometimes walking into surprises is the best part."

The last of the dishes were cleared away, and Janet declared her intention of turning in early.

"May we escort you to your room?" Liam asked her.

Janet knew she'd have no trouble finding it—she wasn't that inebriated. However, she did consider the purely female satisfaction she'd get by leaving the public dining area on the arms of two such handsome men. Petty of her, perhaps, but an opportunity she couldn't pass up. "I'd be delighted, gentlemen."

Liam must have sensed her need to show off because he took a circuitous route to the exit. Looks of envy and admiration followed them into the hotel lobby where they squeezed into the tiny cage lift instead of taking the stairs.

Once they reached the massive wooden door guarding her room, she faced them. "I had a very enjoyable evening."

"As did we," Liam replied.

Lord, that man's gorgeous when he smiles, Janet thought dreamily.

"Would you like us to come in?" Archer asked her. "Make sure everything's as it should be?"

As much as that idea appealed to her, she decided she'd rather let the anticipation build a little. "I can look after myself."

Archer brushed the back of his index finger over her cheek. "Are you sure? We could turn down the covers, start a fire to ward off the night's chill."

Erotic tingles shimmied up and down her spine. Her heart raced as if they'd taken the stairs after all. Was it a result of the wine or the way both men smiled at her? "Thank for the offer, but I think I can handle it."

"Then we'll just say goodnight and be on our way," Liam replied.

Except neither man departed. Janet felt like they were waiting for some cue from her, and she didn't know what to do. "Well, goodnight then."

Liam kissed her cheek. "Until next time."

"Sleep well." Archer's blue eyes danced with a puckish gleam.

Janet turned her back to them as they disappeared down the spiral staircase. She fit the old-fashioned key into the lock and let herself in.

The bed dominated the room. Though she'd seen it earlier, she marveled anew at the four-poster affair with a canopy top decorated in Clan Livingstone plaid. It had two steps to help one reach its lofty surface. The wood had been stained a cherry color. Small pillows of various shapes concealed the top half of the mattress that was as large as a California king.

Janet longed to feel the texture of the fabric under her fingers. Would it be light like silk or heavy like crushed velvet? Would the mattress be cloud soft? She couldn't wait to find out.

The wardrobe contained a selection of outfits in her size, from sleepwear to formal attire. She carefully replaced the dress she'd worn on a padded hanger and removed a black negligee from another. It slid over her body in a waterfall of silk. Too bad there wasn't a man around to appreciate the way it clung to her curves.

That had been her choice, Janet admitted to herself as she dove under the incredibly soft covers. To her surprise, the men had respected it.

Maybe tomorrow she'd find out just how good they really were when it came to sharing...

* * * * *

The scientist in Archer realized that “sleep” here in the VR world would last mere nanoseconds. As long as it took for the program to switch tracks and load the next sequence. Still, he had trouble falling asleep.

The room he shared with Liam made a monastic cell look posh. There was barely enough space for the short, narrow beds and undressing made bumping into each other unavoidable. They’d managed with awkward politeness, but the tension of sleeping naked next to another man lingered in his limbs.

At least, that’s what Archer blamed for his insomnia. To blame Janet, for anything, was beyond his abilities at the moment. Apparently the prologue admonishment to put Janet’s feelings above all other considerations was in full effect.

Good for her, not so good for him. His mind filled with thoughts of how to please her. Predictably, his cock was eager to comply, but Archer would sooner exit the program than masturbate under Liam’s nose. Some things he just didn’t need to share.

He flipped over onto his stomach, then jammed his knee into the wall in an effort to give his growing erection additional room. He wiggled around a bit then gave up on finding a more comfortable position. There just wasn’t one.

A truth, he feared as he pushed his mind into shutting down for the transition, that would come back to haunt him again and again as long as they Dreamed.

Chapter Nine

The Morning After

Janet woke slowly and with great reluctance. Light filtered through a crack in the heavy drapes, signaling that the sun had risen. She buried her head under the pillow, willing the world to give her a few more hours of darkness. But her body issued a series of imperatives, ones which required her to seek out a bathroom.

Leaving her luxurious bed was a Herculean task best accomplished in a series of small steps. First, she flipped over onto her back. Next, she wiggled her way to the edge and dangled a foot over the side. Her toe probed a bit, but didn't encounter anything she could perceive as the floor. Rats!

A knocking sound interrupted her internal diatribe on inconsiderate castle gremlins who moved the floor while the guests were sleeping. "Just a minute," she called out.

Janet threw off the comforter. A slight breeze skittered over her bare belly. She made a leap of faith and landed on cold stone about a half a foot farther down than she'd expected, then tugged the short gown back into place.

The fire had dwindled to glowing embers so the rest of the room was equally chilly. She hopped across it, trying at the same time to neaten her appearance so she didn't look like a complete slob when she greeted whatever castle functionary had summoned her to the door.

A pair of masculine smiles beamed at her when she opened it. Definitely not what she'd expected. "What are you doing here?" she asked them.

"Seeing if you're ready to go for that walk," Archer said as he took in her outfit. "Guess not, eh?"

"Not quite." She shut the door and rested her head against it. At a second knock, this one somehow sounding more concerned than the first, Janet pried open the door once more and spoke to them through a crack. "I'm not prepared to receive visitors."

"Yeah, we got that part," Archer reminded her, grinning wickedly.

Liam cleared his throat. "We can come back later if you'd prefer."

Decisions at this hour? The man must be nuts. "Stay or go, it's up to you."

She left the door open and retreated to the bathroom. She discovered a robe on the back of the door which she put on to cover what the nightie did not. When she returned, her bladder was much happier though her brain remained sluggish.

The men had made themselves comfortable in the seating area in front of a bay window. They rose to greet her.

"Mornings are tough when you're not ready for them," Archer said.

Janet agreed wholeheartedly. She preferred to wake in slow stages or, even better, spend the morning cuddling under a warm blanket. Assuming that she had someone to cuddle with. Which she often didn't.

Liam put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a smile every bit as tactile as the pressure of his hand, then set her free with a light squeeze.

Damn, but they looked good in their casual slacks and highland wool sweaters.

She crossed her arms over her chest to hide the fact that her nipples were evidencing their own joy at having such attractive company. "What do you have planned, besides waking me up, that is?"

"Whatever your heart desires," Liam replied.

"Anything?" Even in her foggy morning state that seemed hard to believe. Surely some activities would be out of bounds. No matter what Archer's original scheme had been, she couldn't envision all three of them getting naked together.

Okay, she could envision it. In fact, she'd spent much of the night dreaming about it. However, in the clear morning light, Janet couldn't see Archer submitting to the intimate touch of another man, a likely occurrence if they were all to get naked together.

"Anything," Archer confirmed, his voice lowered to a timbre that implied rumpled sheets and writhing bodies. "We want to see you satisfied in every way possible."

The idea of taking these two men back to that big, warm bed sent a bolt of sexual awareness straight to her loins, the first beginning steps of a mating dance so old it had no beginning or end. It would definitely be a new and thrilling experience, but one she wasn't ready to jump into until she got a sense of how Liam would approach it. If he didn't drop some of his laid-back, guardian attitude, Archer would leave him in the sexual dust.

Janet turned to the psychologist and looked into his cat green eyes. "If I, for example, suggested that we shower together so I could watch you masturbate, you'd be okay with that?"

His body jolted as if shocked.

"Never mind. It's not that important," Janet told him quickly, afraid she'd offended him.

Liam had to exercise his mouth a few times before it made meaningful sound. "I don't have a problem with it. I'm just surprised by the request."

"Then you'll do it?"

"Sure."

Janet smiled at him as Liam took her hand. It had been an impulsive request, but as her mind dwelled on it, she realized it would be one of her fantasies come true. Things were definitely looking up.

"What about me?" Archer asked her.

Oops. She hadn't considered how Archer would occupy himself while they were in the other room.

"You could order breakfast," Liam suggested.

Archer gave him a flat, unfriendly stare. "Thanks."

"Liam, go into the bathroom. I'll join you in there in a minute."

Janet stepped closer to Archer and brushed a lock of hair away from his ruggedly handsome face. Uncertainty wallowed in the depths of his blue eyes. The fact that this strong, cocky man could be vulnerable where she was concerned caused fingers of affection to squeeze her heart.

"Can I talk you into two for the price of one?" he asked her, his tone only half joking.

Archer didn't like being left out. Janet couldn't blame him. However, this was one of those battle lines. He'd either keep his agreement or break it. She had to know, before this went any further, which came first when the choice was between her desires and his project. "No, not this time."

From his expression, she guessed he was trying to respect her decision, but he struggled with it. "Are you going to have sex with him?"

"Eventually, but not without you. For right now, I'm content to watch. I promise." She felt some of the tension in his shoulders drain away. "Liam's waiting. I should go."

"Not without a kiss."

It was a demand, not a request. Still, she saw no reason not to give in to him. More than that, she *wanted* to kiss him. "I'd like that."

Janet suspected he had something grander in mind than a peck on the cheek, but she didn't expect the firestorm that Archer unleashed. The hand on her spine skated upward until he could cradle her skull. He tilted her head to the perfect angle, then began to fuck her mouth with seductive domination.

If he had stopped there, she might have been able to resist the temptation he offered. But he still had one hand left and he used it to press her against his engorged cock. He was hard, he was hot, and he left no doubt in her mind that he wanted her.

She trembled with that knowledge. She knew deep down inside that her response was more than simple lust, and she was equally certain that she wasn't ready for anything else. She had too many insecurities when it came to Archer. Knowing how he felt about her watching Liam's hands-on skills gave her hope, but it was only a start.

Liam poked his head out the door. "Are you coming?"

She kept her gaze pinned on Archer as they ended their kiss, but she couldn't stop a smile from spreading across her lips. "I'm breathing hard, but I've got a ways to go yet. How 'bout you?"

Liam laughed. "Keep talking to me in that liquid sex voice and our little adventure will be over in no time."

Liam disappeared again, but the spell was broken. "Fifteen, twenty minutes tops. Then we'll do something together," she promised Archer.

"The two of us?"

"The three of us." Liam didn't threaten her heart. Archer did. Until she could come up with a way to protect herself from that disaster-waiting-to-happen, she hoped to find safety in numbers.

"That's something, I guess."

He released her, and she was surprised by how empty she felt. She missed the simple act of touching him. And although it was harder than she wanted it to be to walk away from him, she stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door.

* * * * *

Archer paced the confines of the bedroom, trying very hard not to picture whatever was going on behind the closed door. He'd thought he'd been making progress with Janet. Why did she choose to shut him out, just when things were starting to get interesting? Was there more he had to prove? Other acts for which he had to atone?

He expected the process of building her up to a fevered pitch to last over several hours if not several days. She had to trust that they would put her needs before their own. Hell, that's why he agreed to retreat with Liam last night instead of carrying her off to bed as his body had begged him to do.

He shook his head. He might be down, but he wasn't out. Not yet. Not ever, if he had his way. It took losing her, temporarily, to another man to bring home the truth he'd been trying to ignore ever since that day in her office. He was falling in love with Janet Widgeon, and he wasn't going to settle for second place in her bed or her heart.

He had given his word to Liam that he wouldn't turn this Dream into a competition. He would follow through on that promise, for Janet's sake. But when they returned to their normal lives, all bets would be off. If he could make Janet happy here, he could make her happy out there too. Liam's plans be damned.

Chapter Ten

Kicking Up the Heat

Janet's head was still spinning from Archer's kiss when she walked into the bathroom.

Liam leaned against the counter, his arms crossed. "Want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"Archer and whatever game he was playing with you out there."

No, she didn't. It wasn't a game, and it wasn't the reason she'd sent Liam away. However, he did deserve some kind of explanation. "He's worried about being left out. I told him we weren't going to do anything earth-shattering without him."

Liam curled his lips in a rueful smile. "I'll try not to take that personally."

How the hell did other women do this without tripping over an ego every time she turned around?

On the flip side, at least she didn't have to worry about failing to trigger the malfunction. Both men were going to bail on her before they got to the bedroom if she kept abusing their feelings this way.

"I'm sorry, Liam. I appreciate what you're doing for me. I really do."

"You still want to go through with it then?"

Janet ran her hands around his waist, under his sweater. "Oh, yeah," she said, lifting the warm fabric over his head.

Good thing she was supposed to find him sexy, Janet thought, as she ran her fingers through the mat of blond hair covering his broad chest. If the test was to resist his gorgeous bod, she'd be in serious trouble. "I never knew you were hiding such perfection under your starched, white shirts, doctor."

Liam gathered her against him and lowered his forehead to hers. "It's yours to enjoy any time. All you have to do is ask."

"Seriously, Liam, you're gorgeous." She'd never seen such perfection. Archer was well-built, but Liam was a work of living art.

"Yeah, I did all right in the genetic crapshoot." He looked a little embarrassed by the admission.

Could the rest of him be this fine? "Show me what else you've got."

Liam toyed with the fly of his pants, releasing the buckle of his belt and the clasp underneath it. "Is this a spectator sport or do you plan to join in?"

Wow, that was a ripple she never considered. She'd been so fixated on living out the fantasy she'd left unfinished with Archer that she'd blocked out the other permutations. "For now, I'll stick to the sidelines."

He shrugged. "You're calling the shots."

Liam lowered the zipper slowly. He shuffled his feet, kicking his shoes off and herding them to the side, out of the way. As a result of all the activity, his pants settled lower on his hips. He was killing her.

"Do what you'd do if I wasn't here," she instructed, thinking that would hurry him along.

Liam shrugged and bent over to pick up the sweater from where it had fallen on the floor. The fabric stretched tight over his ass in the process. Janet had to bite down on her lip to prevent a moan from escaping her. He stood up, the pants magically staying in place, while he folded the sweater and placed it on the counter. Then he leaned against it, removed his socks and started to fold them.

"Liam!" she said, exasperated.

"What? Am I doing something wrong?" The glint in his eye already admitted his guilt. "I'm just following your orders."

"I want to see you naked, Liam. Now."

He stripped off his underwear along with his pants in one fast move. His cock, now free, twitched with joyful anticipation. It was every bit as glorious as the rest of him.

"Please tell me the hunger in your eyes isn't because you're dreaming of breakfast right now," Liam begged.

She licked her lips, slowly, deliberately. "What I'm thinking about putting in my mouth wouldn't fit on a fork."

Liam winked at her. "Let me know when you're ready for your first bite." He opened the shower door and started the water running.

Lordy, the man was hot. Muscles rippled from neck to ankle with every move he made. His sac rested at the juncture of his rock-solid thighs. And his cock—longer than the length of her hand from the tip of her middle finger to her wrist, she bet—stretched out toward her.

"Want some help?" he asked.

Puzzled, she raised her eyes back to his face. "With what?"

"Getting naked."

"I'm the oogler, not the ooglee. I don't have to get naked."

Liam tapped on the glass partition that cordoned off the shower stall from the rest of the room. "You do if you're coming in here with me."

Duh. She'd watched Archer through a sheer curtain. That wasn't going to work as well with steam-coated glass.

She divested herself of clothing in quick, efficient movements. She'd worry about being seductive later. "After you."

Frown lines marred the smoothness of his tan forehead. "I don't get a second to enjoy seeing you naked first?"

"No." She gave him a nudge toward the glass enclosure. Her body couldn't compare to his, and she didn't want to give him time to catalogue her shortcomings.

Janet stepped into the shower behind Liam. A second set of knobs had been installed at the opposite end from where the spray pelted his body. She started a gentle rain and adjusted the temperature to her preference, then realized Liam had been waiting for her to issue further instructions.

"Do whatever you'd normally do."

He ducked under the spray, getting his whole body wet. Water ran in thick rivulets along the grooves of his chest to his waist and down his corded legs. "It'd help if I understood what you're trying to accomplish."

Boy, did Liam know how to turn bathing into a sexual event. Just watching him get wet got her wet. "Satisfying my curiosity, mostly."

"About anything in particular?"

"How guys jerk off." She'd downloaded a couple of porn clips after watching Archer, but they hadn't purged her desire to watch it up close and in person.

"Let me know if you think I'm doing it wrong."

"You're the expert here. I'm just along for the ride."

He raised a brow, mocking her choice of words. But then he closed his eyes, pushed his damp hair away from his brow and retreated into his own world.

Janet settled on the shallow bench under her showerhead. Her butt scraped against the anti-skid stickers that crisscrossed it in regular intervals. She watched through the dual sets of mist as he applied soap to his body. He ran the bar over his abs, then circled lower following the line of golden hair down to his cock.

"Are questions allowed?" she asked him.

"Simple ones that won't tax my brain too much, sure. Especially if you use that sweeter-than-honey voice you get when you're aroused."

She could do that. No problem. "What are you thinking about?"

He soaped the inside of his thighs, then fished around for a washcloth and proceeded to lather it up with an amazing amount of suds.

"Now or in general?"

"Now."

"I'm thinking about you."

"Come on, I'm serious."

"So am I."

"Why me?"

"Because I find you very attractive. Because I'm curious about what watching me is doing to you. Because I'd like to know why this is a fantasy for you."

"I'm wet in places the water doesn't reach, if that helps you at all." It wasn't a fib, even if Archer's kiss had as much to do with that as watching Liam.

"It does," he replied, his voice dropping an octave or two.

Water splattered over the tile. Steam billowed up between them. Janet didn't want anything impeding her vision, so she adjusted the temp to something warm but far from hot as Liam wrapped the small square of cloth around his cock.

How could he feel much of anything through the material? she wondered. "Wouldn't it be faster to use your hand?"

"Probably. Is that what you want?"

"You're the driver."

"No one said you couldn't help navigate."

"Then it wouldn't be called *self*-gratification."

One hand continued to stroke his soapy length, the other fondled his balls, almost as if they really were independent orbs he could twirl through his fingers. It was, by far, one of the most erotic sights she'd ever seen.

"Tell me what you're thinking," she ordered softly.

"You."

"That was before. What about now?"

"It's all you. Wondering if you like what you're seeing. What it would feel like if I had your lips closing over me instead of this rag. Shall I go on?"

What he was saying definitely had an effect, on both of them. She could see the blunt head peeking out of the folds of cloth. If talking like this helped him get there, she was all for it. "Yes, please."

"I'm thinking about how good it'll feel when I slide into you."

His grip now encompassed all five fingers. His cock lengthened until the head was visible all the time.

What would it taste like? How would it feel against her tongue? Would he groan his approval as she drew him deep into her mouth, or would he be the strong, silent type?

"I can hear you thinking all the way over here," Liam informed her. "If I can share my thoughts, so can you."

"You said you were thinking about my mouth on you. What would it be doing, exactly?"

"Oh, God." His head fell back, letting the spray strike his face. "Okay, I deserved that one. Ummm...how about any damn thing you want, short of biting it off."

"Kissing it?"

"Yeah."

"Licking it?"

"Oh, yeah."

"If I do it right, will you scream?"

"Screaming is a little extreme but it's possible, I suppose."

The washcloth fell on the ceramic tile with a wet slap. Liam rocked his hips back and forth as he thrust through his bare fist.

Lust oozed from her body. She was torn between wanting to witness the finale from a distance and going up close and personal to push him over the edge. "What would I have to do to make it a certainty?"

"Hum."

"What? Now?"

Liam shook his head, droplets flying from his hair in a halo of rain. His hand stroked his cock in long, fast tugs. "Take my cock into your mouth," he bit out in between short breaths. "Deep as you can. And hum."

He was on the verge of orgasm. She could no longer stand idly by. She wanted to be a part of the awesome forces at work in his body, soon to shatter him. She promised Archer they wouldn't have sex without him. No penetration, then. But there were plenty of other things she could do, and she wanted to do them all.

She shut off the shower at her end, then crossed to his. Since his eyes were still closed, Liam didn't have any clue she'd moved until she pinched his erect nipples, hard. His eyes opened in a flash, his green irises locked onto her with laser beam intensity.

"Illegal contact downfield. Should I cry foul?" His knuckles brushed her belly as he continued to stroke the long, hard length of his swollen shaft.

"What's the penalty?"

"This."

His hands landed on her hips and spun her around. Instinctively she put her arms up, turned her face to the side as the rest of her connected with the wall. Liam captured her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head. He inserted his feet between her legs and nudged them apart until she spread for him. He pressed her body against the tile with his own, his erection riding the cleft of her ass.

He rose up on the balls of his feet, then slid back down. Her vaginal muscles clenched, trying to grip and hold him. Emptiness prevailed. Liam never got close enough to journey inside her.

"Is this one of your fantasies too?" Liam asked.

Each thrust scraped her distended nipples over the uneven wall, sending sparks of lust through her feminine core. It may not have been one before, but it certainly was now. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"Tell me what you want, Janet."

"I want you to come. I want to hear it. Feel it." *Live it. Be it*, she added silently. She wanted to share an orgasm so powerful it would consume the electricity for the entire place, leaving them in a new world of their own making.

As he worked his fist over his cock, the plump head rubbed against her small anal opening, seeking entrance. Out of fear of the unknown, she clenched her buttocks, trapping his velvet-shrouded shaft between her nether cheeks.

"Oh, fuck," he moaned against her shoulder. He humped against her, fueled by the extra friction her resistance provided. "I'm coming."

So was she. All it would take was one touch on her swollen clit to send her over the edge. But she couldn't angle her hips to bring that desperate spot into contact with the wall or anything else. "Help. Me too."

Whether it was a response to her request or simply to satisfy himself, Liam wrapped his arms around her once more. He pounded her ass with his hips. His cock, so hot and full, teased her without mercy.

So close. She was so damn close.

"Janet," Liam panted. "Janet."

"Now, Liam."

He tossed his head back and let loose a long, guttural moan. His fingers curled over her mons, roughly parting her silken folds in search of that knot of nerves. He plucked it once...twice...and then she too was shouting out her completion as waves of muscle contractions tore through her body.

Behind her, she could feel a stream of fluid, thicker and hotter than the water, course over her lower back. Liam jerked against her, emptying his balls as his climax ebbed. His hold gentled and Janet turned around in his arms. The spray felt cold on her back, washing away the recent sticky warmth.

Liam kissed her lips, softly. When he pulled back, she opened her eyes for the first time since he'd pinned her against the wall. That's when she noticed they were standing in the dark. "What the hell?"

Archer's voice, colder than ice, replied, "That's what I'd like to know."

Chapter Eleven

Status Check

"No sex. That's what you said." Archer retreated to the other side of the room and sat on the counter next to the sink. He was afraid if he continued to stand so close to the shower stall he'd give in to his urge to smash through the glass and snatch Janet out of Liam's arms.

"Foreplay, not sex," Liam told him. He reached behind Janet and turned off the water.

The sudden silence, save for the water circling down the drain, was almost worse than having to raise his voice over the roar of the spray. At least then he had a reason to shout. "Looked like sex to me."

"Is that why you turned out the lights?" Janet asked him.

"I didn't touch the lights."

"Then what happened?"

Archer's eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He saw Janet running her hands over the glass, searching for the way out. Liam got there first and pushed open the door as if he knew exactly where to go, guiding her out with his palm resting just above the curve of her shapely ass. Not wanting to give Liam further excuses to touch her, Archer activated the lights with a flip of the switch.

As they blinked owlshly, adjusting now to the new brightness, Archer grabbed a towel from the large selection draped over the warming bars and tossed it to Janet. "You tell me."

"I have no idea. I was a little...preoccupied." Janet wrapped the bath sheet around her body and reached for another towel to dry her hair.

Liam grabbed one for himself, then proceeded to wipe the droplets from his face. "What are you doing in here anyway?"

"Checking up on you."

When the lights started flashing throughout the suite, he suspected it was a sign of impending system disruption. It wasn't a signal Janet had mentioned before, but he couldn't think of any other reason for the strobe effect. Then he'd barged in to find them fucking each other's brains out.

Hunch confirmed.

But the disconnect hadn't happened, despite the rather noisy arrival of their mutual orgasm. So where was the problem? Had his intrusion somehow prevented the glitch from happening?

And why did that matter so much less to him than whether Janet found Liam to be a more skilled lover?

"We're doing great. Thanks for checking." Liam hugged Janet to his side. His tone was one of possession and dismissal.

Janet was not Liam's. Not yet. Archer clung to his fading rationality on the subject of sexual sharing as he addressed them again. "Breakfast is on the balcony. Would you mind waiting out there for us, Janet?"

She glanced from him to Liam and back again. "Come with me. We'll talk it out. The three of us, together," she urged him.

Archer felt compelled to yield to her wishes, but one look at Liam's smug grin strengthened his resolve. If things were going to get ugly—and he suspected they might—he didn't want her at ground zero. "We won't be long."

"Fine. Beat each other's brains in, I don't care." She stormed out.

The slam of the door caused the lights to flicker again, but this time they stayed on.

"Is that what we're going to do?" Liam asked, after he secured a bath sheet around his waist.

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Then maybe I should wait to get dressed. Bloodstains."

Juvenile. His behavior, starting this pissing contest. Even if he could win it—and Archer wasn't as confident that he could, having seen his opponent's prime physical condition—he'd lose Janet's respect. Archer wasn't willing to pay that price.

"Oh, get dressed." Archer tossed the man his pants.

Liam caught them with one hand, brow raised. "What gives?"

"I thought we agreed to share."

"We did. We also agreed to make Janet happy." Liam grabbed his sweater and drew it on. "I think I was starting to get pretty good at it."

"My point," Archer said, gritting his teeth, "is that we're supposed to be working on Janet together. It does shit-all for the project if you guys disappear when I'm not around to see it."

Liam dipped his head in a halfhearted acknowledgement of wrongdoing. "I admit we went a little further than I'd planned. Can you blame me?"

No, Archer couldn't. If the positions were reversed, he probably wouldn't have resisted either. Those sexy sounds Janet had been making stiffened more than his resolve. He decided to let it go since there was no way to change the past. "Just don't hog all her attention."

"Deal." Liam fastened his pants and started to thread his belt through the loops. "Are you willing to take a suggestion?"

His first knee-jerk reaction was hell no. Then again, Liam was the one who got her juices going. Even if Archer had somehow figured out the key to her brain, it seemed

that Liam knew a little more about her libido. What harm would it do to listen? "Go on."

"Don't be afraid to fail."

"Say what?" Failure was not an option, as far as Archer was concerned.

"Your paranoia is contagious. We all know why we're here. Wondering when and how the problem is going to happen isn't going to make it happen any faster. Remember the first time you tried to force the issue?"

Yeah. Mediocre sex. The memories of which made him want to kick his own ass for wasting the opportunity. Under Liam's hands, Janet sang and writhed and did all the things she'd claimed she'd done with her imaginary Zodiac lovers. Archer definitely didn't want to add to his pile of regrets this time around.

"So what do you suggest I do? I can't ignore the Zodiac's issue."

"You'd better find a way, at least when Janet is around. Otherwise, take a seat at the back of the bus and let me drive."

Not Liam. Janet. She was in charge. Liam had the right idea though. He needed to resist his impulse to coach her along, prod her in the direction he wanted her to go. She knew what needed to be done. He had to trust that she'd get them there in her own sweet time.

Damn it.

* * * * *

After a quiet breakfast, Janet suggested they take the walk they'd discussed over dinner. Though Archer suspected it was a ploy to get them away from the huge bed which lurked against the wall like the proverbial white elephant, he and Liam readily agreed.

The path they followed came to an abrupt end as a wall of rock rose above them. As far as mountains went, it was a short one. Hardly worthy of the title. Still, the climb to its pinnacle looked foreboding. The spray of ocean mist, fog and rain kept the surface thick. Loose scree would shuffle under every step, making the difficult trek even more dangerous.

"I'm going up," Janet announced. She attacked the rocky promontory with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Liam started after her. "She's going to hurt herself."

"No, she's not."

Archer's calm, matter-of-fact voice pulled Liam up short. "How can you be certain? She's not an experienced climber. What if she falls?"

"She won't." He'd been mentally chewing on the blackout, what could have caused it and why it was temporary, as they walked. He'd put together a theory, one that Janet was unknowingly about to test for him.

Archer kept his eyes on Janet's backside as she ascended. From time to time, there was a very, very faint shimmer around her as the program adjusted to her desires. If she needed a grip, it would be there. She wouldn't fall unless she specifically wanted to do so. He'd never seen a Dreamer—not even Frannie—with such finite control over the Zodiac environment. Archer was stunned. And impressed as hell. No wonder she'd been able to shut down the system.

"She's rewriting the program as she goes. She could climb all the way to heaven if that's what her heart was set on," Archer told Liam.

Liam looked so conflicted, torn between wanting to believe but unable to accept that in this VR world, anything was possible. "I'm sure you're right but I'd feel better if I was up there with her, just in case."

The psychologist climbed the steep hill with great ease, despite the loose rock that shifted under every step. Not to be outdone, Archer chose another path, one with less loose stone, but requiring greater skill to reach the top where Janet now stood. Soon, slightly out of breath, he joined the others on a flat tablet of stone.

They seemed to be on the edge of forever. The water churned up frothy white foam around the jutting shards of rock. Blue sky met blue water at the horizon. Clouds occasionally drifted by, but never stopped long enough to block out the warm sunlight. No matter which direction they looked, nature, pure and undisturbed, looked back.

Janet spread her arms, embracing the view. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Magnificent," Archer replied.

His approval referred to her and not the scenery. Gusts of wind nipped at her clothes, flattening them against her body. Her dark nipples were starkly outlined against the thin fabric of her blouse. Janet tilted her head back, letting the sunshine wash down her throat. He longed to trace its path with kisses, revealing more of her body as he went, showing the world just how beautiful she was.

Archer broke the mesmerizing contact to check that Liam hadn't fallen off the face of the cliff. He stood near her, opposite Archer, so he had the same erotic view. And apparently a similar reaction to it, if the erection tenting the front of his pants was any indication.

The psychologist took a step forward, freeing Archer from his stasis. Together they advanced on Janet, somehow sensing the time was right. Together, they'd sneak through her defenses and set her passion free.

Chapter Twelve

Freedom

Freedom. The word sailed through her spirit, zapping the doubts tying her down.

During her other Dreams, the ones without Archer or Liam, the process had been a subconscious, simple one. Janet accepted the fantasy aspects. In many ways, this experience wasn't a fantasy at all. These two men existed. They could no longer deny that what happened inside the Zodiac would affect their relationships outside the VR world. In Janet's experience, change usually meant loss.

Thus far, that fear of change, bucking the status quo, had kept her from completely opening herself up to the delights that Archer and Liam offered her.

During their walk, she'd finally reached the decision that she was tired of reining in her passions. In this fairytale place, anything could happen. She could fall in love and live happily ever after. Even if only for a few VR hours.

Janet shut her eyes and drank up the wind's loving caress. It passed on, then returned, as if tempted beyond its will to learn more of her. The cool air stroked her nipples, causing them to pebble. That felt good. But it was the devilish tongue of wind licking at the juncture of her thighs which caused her to shudder in delight.

She spread her legs a bit, letting the jet of air delve into her moist core as deeply as it dared. She tilted her head back, offering her neck up for the wind's teasing caress. Her hair feathered out as if toyed with by a soft, hand-like stroke.

Janet had never given much credence to her great-grandmother's claim of being born with a witch's gift for detecting the cycles of the seasons. Now she had no doubt. She could feel spring, taste it in the air. She became a part of it in a way that had never happened before. Then, with one last caress of her most sensitive skin, the wind departed.

Like waking from a long, much-needed rest, she became aware of the world in new ways. Her senses delivered a barrage of messages, including the fact that the men were approaching her from either side.

Janet could only smile as she realized the wind had left her with another gift, an abundance of erotic energy that urged her to join in the celebration of spring the pagan way. By mating.

"Beautiful," Liam said, stroking her cheek with the back of his finger.

"Lovely," Archer echoed from her opposite side. "Absolutely divine."

A good choice of words. That's exactly how she felt. Divine. Like she could do anything, be anything. A small part of her acknowledged that she had Archer to thank for that. His brainchild made it possible.

She turned toward him and looped her arms loosely around his neck. "Thank you," she said.

The surprise that crossed his face nearly made her laugh out loud. "What for?"

"At the moment, just for being." To prevent him from asking another question, Janet tightened the circle of her arms and brought his face down so she could kiss his lips.

One hand went to her waist, the other to the back of her head. He seemed to understand she wanted to keep it simple for a little while longer. He let her lead as she tasted him inside and out.

Janet loved the way he smelled. She peeled back the collar of his shirt and inhaled deeply, content for the moment to be so close to him. Her body hummed with the warmest desire. It traveled through her bloodstream like molasses, slow and sweet.

He kissed her hair, her cheek, her temple. The hand at her waist now moved in little circles at the small of her back. Another pair of hands reached out for her as heat closed in behind her. Liam.

"Sweaters off, gentlemen," she instructed them. She wanted to feel their bare skin.

Liam was the first to comply, perhaps because she had yet to relinquish her hold on Archer. As Liam brought his naked torso in contact with her back, he wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her to him. She let him ease her away so Archer could toss his own sweater aside.

Archer's bare chest appeared before her. She braced herself by placing her palms on his abdomen, then leaned in to lick his nipple. His stomach caved as he inhaled a short, sharp breath.

"Like?" she asked him.

"Like," he agreed, raising his hands to her neck where his strong fingers massaged the cords there.

Liam did the same at her hips, using enough pressure to soothe without bringing pain. The motion rocked her against his rigid erection. Her pussy clenched with want, perfuming the air around them with the scent of her arousal.

Janet moved from Archer's nipple to his neck, where she sucked his Adam's apple. For a second, his fingers tightened in her hair and she thought he might pull her away. But he just held her there, his arms tense.

She rose up on her toes, dragging her still-covered, hardened nipples over his chest. Then Liam pulled her back into the cradle of his hips. Up over Archer's hard lines, sliding back down to Liam's warm embrace. Up and down, forward and back. A slow, languid fucking motion that nearly caused her to come without any penetration at all.

How had she ever resisted these two men for so long?

Archer tilted her face up and kissed her lips. His tongue pushed past her teeth to trace the ridge along the roof of her mouth. She let him dive as deeply as he wanted to

go, excited by the way he filled her. His tongue caressed hers, leaving no part of her mouth unloved.

Liam ran his hands over the front of her hips to the top of her thighs. Long, strong strokes. "That is so erotic to watch," he said. His cock seconded the statement, insistently pulsing against the curve of her ass.

Archer withdrew a bit, his eyes twinkling with a light brighter than the sun. "If we don't lie down soon, we're going to fall down."

Janet didn't want to stake herself out on the ground like a virgin for the taking. Too passive, too predictable.

Liam shook his head as if he were seeing the same image and trying to banish it from his mind. "No sacrifices. Just worship. Let us worship you, Janet."

That sounded better, but still not what she wanted. She liked standing between the two men, feeling both of them close around her, rubbing against her. However, she also understood Archer's point. Without resistance, if any of them caught the other off guard, used too much force, they could topple over.

Then the solution came to her. She took each man by the hand. "This way."

After they grabbed their sweaters, she led them to a place where the rock had been carved out by human hands thousands upon thousands of years ago. Archeologists, tomb robbers and curious tourists desperate to take a bit of the magic home with them had left the empty, circular cairn bare of historical remains. Big slabs of stone worn smooth by Mother Nature and the passage of time stood on end in a circle around it like protective sentries. More stone tablets formed the walls of the cairn itself, leaving the top open to the sky. It had held up against the elements for nearly four thousand years. It ought to be able to withstand whatever the three of them could throw at it.

"Here?" Liam asked, his voice betraying his surprise.

Archer nodded before she could. "The circle of life. No end, no beginning. Just one continuous loop through time."

The death of her fears, the rebirth of her passion. The death of her insecurities, the birth of hope that these men would love her in ways which would make it impossible for those insecurities to return. Shedding the past, living in the moment, knowing the future would be there when she was ready to face it.

"Let us show the world how incredibly sexy you are," Archer said, his voice a soft, seductive version of his usual authoritarian tone.

She went easily as he pushed her into Liam's arms. Once again she found herself resting against his body, her back to his chest. He guided her arms upward, out of Archer's way. She felt the cool stone behind him and knew she'd chosen well. This special place would keep them all from getting hurt.

Archer brushed her hair away from Liam, giving the other man access to nibble at her neck. Then Archer started on the buttons of her blouse. His blue eyes, intense and packed with desire, locked on hers as he thumbed the small plastic disks through their

respective holes. Liam helped by tugging the tails out of her loose cotton trousers. His warm fingers snuck under the fabric to caress her lower belly, further stoking the fire that already burned so brightly there.

She longed for more intimate touches, even as she resisted making any move that would rush this wonderful experience to a quick, though pleasurable end. However, she couldn't stop herself from brushing her butt over Liam's cock.

Liam groaned at the contact, sucking a little harder on the soft flesh covering her shoulder. Still, her eyes were locked on Archer, promising him the same treatment when the time came.

Finally her shirt hung open. Liam wouldn't let her arms down so she could slip it off. Instead, he parted the fabric and raised his hands to cup her breasts. Through the thin silk of her bra, he rolled both nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

For just a second, she let her eyes close, her head fall back. Tremors of pleasure zigzagged through her body. A fresh wave of cream poured out of her molten core. When she found the concentration to open her eyes once more, Archer still stood in front of her, only now he caressed his erection through the front of his pants. A dark spot was spreading across the fabric.

When he discovered she was watching him, he hastily jerked his hand away, clenching it into a fist. "Sorry, sorry. I just needed..."

"Show me what you need," Janet encouraged him softly.

She felt Liam release the front clasp of her bra. At the same time the first cold rush of air blew across her exposed nipples, Archer freed his cock. The fat, purpled head glistened wetly in the sun. She ran her tongue over her lips, imagining the salty, tangy taste of him.

"Oh, dear God," Archer said, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. His fingers wrapped around his shaft and pumped once, then again. A fresh dollop of pre-come bubbled out from the tip and fell to the dirt below.

She bucked in time with Archer's thrusts as he continued to masturbate in front of her. Her intimate juices soaked her panties. Her heart hammered with desire. Janet longed to have his massive cock buried in her, fucking her senseless. Liam soothed a few of her aches by continuing to play with her breasts, but she wanted more. So much more.

"Ditch the rest of your clothes. I want to see all of you," she told him.

Though she didn't realize it until she felt the fabric in her hands, her arms had lowered to grip the powerful thighs underneath her, holding Liam's aroused body as close as possible. Her shirt slipped away as Archer removed his pants.

"You like watching him," Liam said, his voice thick and hot in her ear.

"Yeah," Janet replied.

"You like him watching you." Liam covered her crotch with his hand, pressing down on the wet fabric as if to illustrate his point.

It wasn't necessary. She knew exactly how lust-crazed she was. "Yeah."

"Then I'll let you in on a little secret," Liam said, his voice dropping so only she could hear. "I like watching him this way too."

Good thing her logic circuits were already drugged beyond her capacity to fully process that statement. Otherwise it would add another layer of complexity to an already complicated future.

Live in the moment. No worries, no fears.

Without those concerns, she felt wonder slide through her. She tilted her hips to bring her pussy into deeper contact with his hand. "Think we should tell him that?" she asked, turning her head so the words were lost in a mumble against Liam's throat.

"He knows, or at least he suspects."

Janet stilled. She couldn't believe Archer would willingly place himself on display in front of a man who just might take the show as a personal invitation. What could convince him to do such a thing? Was it possible that Archer felt as Liam did?

"I prefer women," Liam added, giving her a strong hug. "It's just that sometimes I think about other things, wonder what it might be like. You know?"

She did. There were a whole bunch of erotic pictures floating through her mind now, and she pondered what pleasures each one of them might bring. "Does he? Is that why he knows?" *Is that why he came up with this idea*, she wanted to ask him. *Is it really more about you than me?*

Liam's chest shimmied under her with silent laughter. "Trust me, he's not interested in anyone but you. I mentioned it only because I thought you'd like to know."

That jived with what she knew in her heart to be true about these two men. That Archer had a single-minded focus that was almost frightening in its intensity. Once he set his heart on it, nothing would distract him until he'd reached his goal of seducing her completely. Liam, on the other hand, could multitask with the best of them. Yet he put her pleasure above his own, made himself vulnerable to her so she wouldn't feel alone.

She relaxed against him once more, her body humming with desire. Archer, now gloriously naked, stood in front of them, waiting for her next command.

"Then let's give him something to look at so we can enjoy his reaction together," Janet whispered to her ally.

Liam stole a quick kiss from her lips. "Thank you."

"I'm sure you'll find a way to pay me back."

And he did, almost immediately. His quick fingers loosened the buttons on her pants so he could slip his fingers underneath the waistband. They parted her damp curls, searching for the little knot that so fiercely craved attention. She shrieked in both surprise and pleasure as he rubbed over it in a hard stroke.

Archer bounded forward. She held him off with a hand. It was the best she could do until she got enough breath back to explain, "Good. So good. Not bad."

"He makes you scream?" Archer frowned.

"Takes two," she told him. Her eyes fell to his twitching cock and back to his eyes.

Liam answered the question that still hovered over the small, rocky enclosure. "It seems she likes watching you as much as you enjoy watching her."

His eyes narrowed with uncomfortable speculation. "What about you?"

"I'm...coordinating."

Janet reached out for Archer. His hand met hers halfway. She raised it to her mouth, sucking the traces of seminal fluid from his skin. "What do you want, Archer?"

His gaze burned so brightly that it sent a palpable wave of heat over her body. "To be buried inside you, balls-deep. To hear you gasp my name with every thrust. To fill you with my seed as your nails rake my back. To send you into that little slice of heaven where the rest of the world ceases to exist."

Tears pricked her eyes. She'd pushed him too far. She wanted words of love, or at least lust, from him. Instead, she got another lecture on the damn disconnect. "I'm doing what I can to make it happen."

From behind, Liam shook her. Distantly, she heard him say, "You've got it wrong. That's not what he's saying."

But in between one second and the next, Archer was in her face, his broad shoulders blocking out even the sun. He was breathing down her neck, breathing so hard that every gust billowed out her hair. "If you shut us down when I'm so into you that I can't see straight, you damn well better be prepared to have company in the darkness 'cause once I have you, I'm not going to be able to let you go."

Janet bowed her head, tears leaving a hot trail over her cheeks. "I know. You need to be there when it happens."

Archer pressed closer, his body fitting against her curves. Liam scooted his hand out of the way as Archer's cock took its place. As he ground against her, Archer said, "Whether it happens or not, I need to be here. Be inside you. Be a part of you. Nothing else matters."

As she was trying to puzzle out what he might mean by that, Liam squeezed Archer's shoulder to get his attention. "Ease up."

He did, but only enough to allow air to flow into her oxygen-starved lungs. "I'll do whatever it takes, Janet. I'll share you with Liam. I'll even give up my seat on the project. Just, please, please don't ask me to leave."

Though he didn't say the words she most wanted to hear — *I desire you* — Janet could see the total commitment shimmering in his eyes. It was enough. "Stay then," she said, running her finger up the side of his shaft where it pressed against her belly. "Show me how much you want me."

Chapter Thirteen

Burning Up

Janet expected Archer to plant himself inside her as quickly and deeply as humanly possible. Instead, he lifted Liam's hand from his shoulder and brought it to his lips. Slowly, he took the first digit into his mouth and suckled it, licking the taste of her cream away.

Archer removed the finger with a pop, proving just how much suction he'd been applying to the task. "You taste good," he informed her.

Liam's erection stabbed at her bottom. His arm across her belly imprisoned her there when she jumped at the urgent prodding. She knew Liam was doing that to hide his reaction from Archer. Not that he had much left to hide, given the way he was moaning in ecstasy.

He'd been licking her juices from Liam's finger. Her legs trembled with the knowledge of what it likely cost Archer to make such a gesture. What it might cost Liam down the road for letting him. Her heart swelled with love. Maybe it was time for her to make a demonstration of her own.

She ran her finger around the tip of his cock, spreading the moisture over it. She raised the wet finger to her lips and did the same before licking the digit clean. "So do you," she told him.

Janet turned to Liam, who was already waiting. He ravaged her lips, kissing her until there was no trace of Archer left on them. "Oh, God. I am such a dead man," Liam said when he realized what he'd done and what Archer might do to him later for it.

"Some things that happen here can stay here," Archer told him, obviously uncomfortable yet trying so hard, for her, not to be. Then he transferred his intense gaze to Janet, where there was no trace of uncertainty at all. "Some things will be with me forever."

Janet slipped into Archer's arms. She met his claiming kiss with equal passion. She wished it were true. She wished it were all true, that both these men loved her enough to be vulnerable to each other, to love her in a way that eclipsed every other sexual encounter both inside and outside the Zodiac.

The moment, the moment is all that matters.

Archer cupped her bottom and rocked it against his erection. She moaned into his mouth and tried to wiggle closer. Archer gripped her thighs, then pulled her up his torso. Janet had to wrap her legs and arms around him or risk falling. He pinned her to the rock wall next to Liam with just enough force to keep her where he wanted her. His hips flexed, rubbing his cock over the soft fabric that shielded her pussy.

"You two are so hot," Liam announced.

She could hear the rasp of skin over fabric from two different sources. Liam, she thought. He still had his pants on. "Strip," she ordered him shortly.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"You heard the lady," Archer commanded. "Do it."

Archer buried his head against her neck, opposite from where Liam watched. His thrusts picked up in tempo. Sweat rolled down his spine. She clung to him, trying to pull him deeper despite the barriers in the way.

"I'm not going to last much longer," Archer warned.

Truth to tell, neither was she. But given the wonders of the Zodiac, it didn't have to be a one-shot deal, for any of them. "This time make it fast. It'll make you last longer the next time," she said in between gasps.

"Oh, yeah. Oh, fuck yeah."

The first spurts of his orgasm landed on her belly. If only she had a bit of a ledge to rest on, so she could free up her arms for something else. And then, like magic, the ledge was there. Just enough for her butt to rest on. She kept her legs around him but raised her hands to his small, dark nubs. She tweaked them hard.

Archer hissed, bowing backward as he came in a rush. The cords stood out on his neck. A guttural cry echoed off the surrounding rocks as he spilled his seed all over her chest.

"Janet, Janet." He repeated her name over and over, until the very last shudder had him slumping against her in exhaustion. He gathered her against him, seemingly unconcerned about the mess being smeared between them. "So good, baby."

Funny how she didn't mind hearing that endearment now. "I'm glad, sugarplum," she teased in return.

Archer choked out a laugh. "Sugarplum?"

"Plum-colored," she explained, her fingers grazing the still damp head of his cock, then raised her fingers to her lips. "And sweet-tasting."

"Can I help with the cleanup?"

Both she and Archer turned to Liam. He still hadn't shed his pants, despite the fact that he must find them painfully constricting. He was looking at Archer. Janet realized what he was asking. Apparently Archer did too, and didn't know what to say.

When the silence lingered a little too long for comfort, Liam suggested, "Let me grab a sweater for you." He turned his back, in search of discarded clothing.

Archer lowered his forehead to hers. "I'm sorry. I know I said I'd share, that I would do anything you wanted, but I don't think I can—"

Janet stopped the flow of words with a short, hard kiss. Archer wouldn't be Archer if he did something that crossed his personal boundaries. "It's okay."

"Sure?" He looked doubtful.

"Absolutely." She glanced over to where Liam was shaking the dirt from a sleeve. His own sweater, she guessed by the color. "Although we can't leave him out entirely."

Archer surprised her by saying, "I have an idea."

"As long as it includes me or Liam catching up to you in the O count, go for it."

"O count?" He grinned. "I thought it wasn't polite to keep score."

"It is when I'm trailing behind," Janet replied pertly.

This time Archer laughed out loud. "Well, let's see what we can do about that."

He switched places with her so that it was his back against the hard stone. "Can you make the seat a little deeper? Maybe with a slant?"

She thought about it, even though she didn't entirely understand what he had in mind. The Zodiac did though, because the stone changed right in front of her eyes. Archer relaxed, and put his feet up on two smaller rocks to either side of his stone-age recliner.

He let his legs fall open and patted the space between them. "Come, sit."

"What about Liam?" He still lingered on the far side of the cairn. His own fear of rejection, fear of facing Archer after the slight, keeping him apart. She knew exactly what that felt like.

"Sit. Trust me."

Janet decided she owed him the benefit of the doubt and did what he asked. Once seated, Archer called out to Liam. "Get over here, or you're going to lose your chance."

He came, his hands fisted in the sweater he'd been toying with. "My turn?"

Archer gestured toward Janet's torso, where semen still coated her breasts. "Seems our girl got herself all dirty. Wanna help her get clean?"

Liam scoured her body with his gaze. "That's quite a sticky mess."

"Yeah, but she's not too thrilled about it and I'd prefer to keep her happy. What do you say?"

"Thank you," Liam replied. His voice was husky, and it wasn't entirely from lust.

"Shut up," Archer replied good-naturedly. "Save that tongue work for something else. Oh yeah, and get naked so she doesn't have to ask you again."

She'd trusted him, and he'd found a way to pull them together. Janet reached for his hand and squeezed it, her heart swelling with love for him.

Wait a second. Love? Archer? No, no, no. Not that much. Not that way.

Her heartbeat fluttered, then kicked into high gear. Archer immediately soothed her by cradling her against him. "Shhh. Let me hold you. Let Liam take care of you. It'll be good. You'll see."

Liam finished removing his clothes then leaned against the rock, between her legs. He wrapped his hands around her bare ankles. "Where should I start?" he asked. "At the bottom and work my way up?"

"Start at the top and work your way down. Clear the field as you go."

Although this made little sense to Janet, Liam seemed to grasp the message. "Right."

Liam leaned in and took her mouth in a sensual kiss. His hands grazed the sides of her breasts. She arched toward him, hoping for another storm of pleasure to sweep her off to a place where thought was impossible.

Archer rested his hands on her shoulders, lightly rubbing the tension away as she surrendered her body to Liam's explorations. He left her lips, kissing a trail down her throat. When he reached her left breast, he took the whole of it into his mouth. His tongue rasped against the proud, sensitive nipple. God, it felt so good to be surrounded by that moist heat.

Liam released her with a pop, then went back for seconds. Janet cupped the back of his neck to hold him there. Each lick shot a magical bolt of fire to her clit. She scissored her legs, trying to ease the ache between them. It didn't help. She needed to be filled, stretched, consumed from the inside out.

Archer's breath picked up in rhythm. "Sexy, Janet. Very, very sexy."

"Me?"

"You," he confirmed, kissing her temple. "With a little help from our friend." He ruffled Liam's blond curls.

Liam paused, a brow raised in askance.

"Hurry up," Archer told him.

"Planning another mess for me to clean up?"

"You got it in one."

Shivers of anticipation milked more wetness from her core. Archer didn't give her much time to ponder what he had in mind. After a slight realignment of their bodies, he tilted her head back for a deep kiss. His hands feathered over her breasts to keep them warm in the wake of Liam's absence.

The psychologist had other things to do, like lick his way across her abdomen as he tugged off her panties. Once they were gone, she spread her legs in anticipation. The rough texture of the stone support scratched the back of her leg. Hard as a rock was good for some things, but not for crawling around on. Why stay here among the wind and cold when they could be spread out among the pillows atop her huge bed?

"What the hell?" Archer stopped kissing her and looked around her castle suite, his face turning a distressed shade of white. "How did we get back here?"

Janet plucked at his nipple, tweaking it hard enough to give him a slight sting. "This soft bed is much more pleasant than the rough stone, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but—"

He was killing the mood, a fact which Liam hastened to point out to him. "Archer, do you need to figure it out right this fucking minute?"

Archer searched the room once more, ending up at her eyes. A crooked smile spread across his lips. "No. I don't."

His body stressed his continuing enthusiasm. Feeling his hard length under her got her juices flowing again. She rubbed her pussy over his engorged cock, back and forth. At Archer's command, she lifted herself up. This time when she came down, his rigid shaft penetrated her as if it knew right where to go.

"Ohhhhhh," she said as she relaxed her muscles and settled him deeper inside her. "I do like that. Do it again."

He obliged, raising her up with his powerful grip on her hips. He held her there with him barely connecting, then controlled her slow descent onto his straining shaft. "Feel good?" Archer asked when she moaned again.

"So very, very good."

"Any time you want to stop, say so."

"Don't stop. Don't ever stop."

Archer chuckled and lightly bit her shoulder. "Not until you're completely satisfied, I promise."

Janet tried to pick up the pace, but Archer was a hard taskmaster. On the downstroke, she managed to grind a little against him. Because she didn't face him, there was no pressure where her body craved it the most.

That didn't prevent her from finding pleasure in other things. The look on Liam's face, for one. His hand stroked his own flesh, mirroring her movements. He kept licking his lips, staring at her as if she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"Ready for more?" Archer asked.

Janet quivered with anticipation. "Now?"

"Oh, yeah."

Again, Archer gave the stage directions and Janet was happy to let him lead. Liam ended up sitting between Archer's calves, his legs over Archer's to form a diamond shape. Janet bent over in relative comfort without having to dismount him. The result had her face in Liam's lap. She took him into her mouth and began to suck. Liam leaned back on his elbows so he could watch her.

With her ass exposed as it was, Archer could play with it. He squeezed and slapped. His finger toured dark, hidden places. Janet liked that. A lot. And because her mouth was full, she told him how much the only way she could. By humming.

What she'd thought was hard under her tongue suddenly became inflexible. "Janet, you're gonna kill me," Liam said, jerking his hips so that his cock pistoned in and out of her mouth.

Janet protested when Archer took her away from Liam. He shushed her with loving reassurances and pulled her back into his arms so that her back grazed his chest. He wrapped his arms around her belly and motioned Liam closer.

"She needs you, Liam. Let her feel how much you want her."

It only took once. One touch of Liam's penis throbbing against her clit, and Janet was gone. Flying in the world of moonbeams and dreams that only these two men

could weave for her. Her body merely a figment dimly remembered. She existed solely on joy.

"That's it, Janet. Come for me," Archer rumbled against her ear.

"Come. With. Me." She tried to form the words as she ground down on his shaft. Had he heard?

"Not just yet."

Liam grunted with the effort of holding back. "You're inhuman if you can hold out. I'm about to go blind, and I don't have your first-class seat."

"A few more minutes. That's all I ask."

Liam backed off, hands up. "What? What now?"

Janet heard the words, but they didn't connect with her brain. She felt the loss of Liam's presence and mourned it. She wanted that feeling to go on, but lacked the energy to make her feelings clear. She whimpered.

"I've got you, baby," Archer said, cuddling her to him. "Maybe we should give her a chance to rest."

"No. Please. More." They'd given her what she wanted but it still wasn't enough. Her heart was racing out of control. The need for completion gnawed at her. They were on the edge of something truly magnificent, and she badly wanted to reach it. "Archer. Please."

* * * * *

Archer had never been so hard in his entire life. Her wet core surrounded him. He'd heard the term fitting like a glove, he'd even tossed it around himself on occasion, but in his experience gloves were often ill-fitting. Janet was the exception that proved the rule.

"Oooooohhhh," she said on a long breath as she rose up and then settled around him once more.

"My sentiments exactly," Archer replied.

"Good?" Liam asked him.

What was the point of asking such a stupid question? Archer didn't waste his breath on an answer. Not that he could have said a word if he wanted to, for at the same time Janet reached down between his legs to tease the small inch of skin between his balls and his rectum. His hips arched off the bed, driving himself deeper in her.

"Easy," Liam barked out, holding Janet by the shoulders so she didn't topple over. "Spread your legs. Spread hers too. I'd like a sip of the paradise you've got."

Archer did, but only because he suspected that it would be the last little push that would take Janet over the edge one final time. And this time he'd go with her.

He kept Janet against his chest, fondling her breasts.

"Hmmm, sweet Janet," Liam murmured as ran his tongue over her clit.

"HMMMM," Janet hummed back to him. "Archer?"

"Right with you, baby." She was so sexy, but he could also see she was nearing the end of her energy reserves.

Liam licked the cream from her body with wet, noisy enthusiasm. She trembled every time his tongue danced over her clit. The heady smell of sex filled the air. His balls burned, straining for release.

"Archer!"

He could feel her inner muscles trembling, on the verge of a titanic explosion. "Go with it, baby. I'm right behind you."

"I'm gonna...I'm gonna..."

His body continued to slide in and out of her on autopilot, so close to coming that he didn't think anything could stop it. Her muscles tightened for the initial burst of semen as she found her own release.

Then, just as he was about to erupt inside her, the orgasm froze in his balls. His entire world went dark. The last thing he heard as the world slipped away from his grip was Liam shouting, "Shit!"

Chapter Fourteen

The Lost Boys

Janet felt woozy. Leftovers of a drunken binge sent the room on a slow spin. Since all the walls were a pale cream, it didn't much matter whether or not they moved. No doors or windows, just four solid walls with a bed in the middle of the enclosed area. Odd, but she couldn't work herself up to being alarmed about that.

What did bother her was the fact that she couldn't recall how she came to be where she was. In fact, she didn't remember much of anything. Had she been in an accident? Was she in a hospital?

She lacked any aches and pains, so an injury didn't seem likely. But if not a hospital, then where? "Hello? Anyone there?"

Light moved in a complex swirl within the wall opposite her. The birthing of a rainbow galaxy, Janet thought. Until the galaxy coalesced into a face of a pissed-off, black leprechaun. Or maybe he was supposed to be a cherub.

"Too funny," she said in between bouts of giggling.

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know," he said in a deep voice. It sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it. It certainly didn't seem to belong to the funny face, and yet they were obviously part of the same two-dimensional being.

"Okay, okay, then you tell me. Who are you? Wait, maybe I shouldn't ask. Talking to a leprechaun on my wall and hearing him talk back is a pretty good sign that something isn't right with me, don't you think?"

"Actually, I find it reassuring."

"Forgive me if I fail to agree."

"I'm not a figment of your imagination."

Janet really liked the way her imaginary friend's face wrinkled up when he was irritated. "Prove it."

"Some things you gotta take on faith. The fact that I'm not a mental brain fart is one of them."

A mental fart? Only a guy would say something like that. If this unhappy cherub wasn't part of her imagination, then she was developing a male side. She could cope with anything but that. Time to change subjects. "Okay, Fig. You win this round."

"Fig?"

"Short for Figment." When his scowling countenance didn't lighten, she added, "You didn't give me anything else to call you."

The face turned dark and cloudy. Not that it wasn't already. "My name is Houston."

"Pleased to meet you, Houston. I'm Janet."

"Janet? You remember your name?"

"Well, sure. You remember yours, don't you?"

Her grim-faced cherub looked a little nonplused at that. Then his face relaxed into a beaming expression. "You'll do, girl."

"Do what?"

The two-dimensional face went back to its former, stormy expression. "That's going to take a little explaining. First I need to ask you a few questions. Are you up for that?"

"Until I get a better offer, sure." Maybe she'd actually learn something useful, like where she was and why she was being held here. "What do you want to know?"

"How do you feel right now?"

"Confused. Maybe a little warm."

"No headache?"

"No."

His expression lost some of its tension. "What's the last thing you remember before waking up in this room?"

"Irritation."

"Like skin irritation?"

"No, like 'I don't want to do this' irritation."

There was a pause, as if his face had lost the signal from his body. By the time she recognized that as odd, Houston was speaking again. "Do you recall why you felt that way?"

"Because something had irritated me?"

A thin coil of steam rose from the cherub's ears. "Let's not make this any more difficult than it already is."

His face froze again. Like putting his connection to her on hold so he could take on another face in another room. And if she thought there was any part of that statement that made sense beyond the grammatical, she needed to go back to calling him Fig.

He snapped back to her channel. "Where do you remember being last?"

"We were discussing irritation. Yours with me, mine with the world in general."

The steam started to rise again, a little thicker this time. She wondered what would happen when his temper reached full boil.

"Drop that line of questioning. I'd like to know, prior to waking up in this room, where is the last place you remember physically being?"

Janet thought back. Fragmented pictures flashed through her mind like someone fanning vacation photos too fast for her to catch more than a blur of color. "On vacation. I think. Somewhere green."

Something she said set off happy-colored rockets from his ears, which was a nice change from the steam. If only she knew what that something was so she could do it again.

"Do you know where? Was anyone with you?" Houston asked.

"I can't remember. Everything gets kind of smoky gray after that."

In the blink of an eye, the face was frozen again.

* * * * *

Houston squelched the queasy feeling in his stomach as he mentally navigated the gray space between his own existence and Janet's version of reality.

"I've decided I'm not going to speak to you anymore," Janet said once she realized he'd returned to her frequency.

Hadn't they already had this discussion? "What's the problem now?"

"You're rude. I don't speak to rude figments."

"I'm not a figment of your imagination, and I'm not rude."

"Yes, you are. And now you're steaming fireworks from your ears, but I'm not going to be charmed by it this time, little man. If you need someone to talk to, tell it to the hand. This face isn't receiving anymore."

Hands? What was she talking about? All she was supposed to see was a face that very loosely resembled his own. A face that apparently had steam coming out his ears, which certainly was an apt statement about how he felt at the moment. "Get over it, sweetheart."

"Over it? Was exactly am I supposed to get over? The fact that I'm stuck inside a cube with no way out? The fact that the only person I can talk to is a cartoon face on the wall? The fact that I can't remember how I got here or why?"

When Houston volunteered to act as the Zodiac Interface, he did so because he was the most expendable of the core project team. They really needed Archer and Liam to handle this situation, but they were out to lunch in a whole 'nother way.

They were operating in uncharted territory. Understanding how to use the equipment was only a small part of the task. The much bigger one was figuring out how much to tell her without corrupting the data or sending her into another mental tailspin. And right now the readouts indicated Janet was working herself into a fair tempest which wasn't good for anyone.

"I really suck at guessing games. If you're looking for an apology, you're going to have to tell me what I did to offend you."

"You took another face."

They really were fucked now. The woman was bonkers. She put up a good front, but it was obvious the error zeroed out more than her memory of the Zodiac Dream. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"I don't believe you."

He tuned into the conference room and left Janet to stew. "She's nuts," Houston declared. "She lost some of her stuffing out there in cyber-world."

Frannie shook her head. "Not possible."

"Archer said this type of meltdown wasn't possible either, but here we are."

At Frannie's nod, a med tech pointed to a thick binder, stuffed with reams of paper. "This is Janet's brains." She pointed to another heap of white sheets stacked beside it. "This is her brain on drugs. We're scanning it for discrepancies both by computer and by hand. So far we haven't found a significant difference. No difference, no defect."

Houston had plenty to say about that, but Dr. Bartel prevented the two sides from butting heads. "What makes you suspect a brain injury, Houston?"

"She keeps talking about my head as if it was a phone. She's getting all worked up because I'm 'taking another face'. It's gibberish."

"Well, she's entitled. I mean, it's rude, don't you think?" Frannie asked.

"It doesn't mean anything, so how can it be rude?" Houston challenged back.

"Sure it does." Dr. Bartel gestured for her to continue, so she added, "How would you like it if the only connection you had to the outside world kept putting you on hold, ignoring you while he discussed you with someone you couldn't see or hear. That's pretty damn rude in my book."

Houston muttered under his breath. When he tuned back into Janet's world, she was pacing again. "I'm sorry," Houston told her. It was just as gruff as the previous apology, but this time he meant it.

"I'm really trying not to go nuts here. Popping in and out whenever you feel like it isn't helping."

"Yeah, I got that now. I'll try not to do it again without warning you first. Deal?"

"Why don't you tell me where I am and why I'm here while I think about it?"

Houston decided that the hypothetical situation was still the best way to go. "Let's pretend you really did take a vacation."

"Let's not," Janet replied. "I've decided this is all a dream. A dreadfully boring dream. I'd like to wake up now."

She closed her eyes and scrunched up her face with the effort of trying to hurl herself back into the waking world. It didn't happen.

She opened one eye. "You're still here."

"There's only one way out of here, Janet. You got to work with me, so we can find it."

"What do you want from me?" she asked warily.

"To pretend."

Janet threw her hands up in the air. "All right, all right. I'm pretending. Now what?"

"Describe your ideal vacation to me. What would it be like? What would you do?" Her face slowly drained of color. Houston didn't know if it was some glitch in the system, or Janet's honest reaction to what he'd asked her. "What's the problem now?"

Janet thought about it. She saw rolling green hills, an old pile of stone, and heard the wind rustling around her. "Someplace green. Like Scotland."

"Is anyone with you? What are you doing?"

The scene jumped around, and she saw herself with a couple of men doing things she'd never considered doing, and certainly not in the open. Could they be planting these thoughts in her head, like brainwashing?

Suddenly his questions didn't seem quite so innocent. "You've kidnapped me to be your sex slave. That's what this is all about, isn't it? You've isolated me here, cutting me off from my friends and family, and now you want me to talk dirty for you. Well, I'm not going to do it, so you can take all the other faces you want. I'm through talking."

"Time for me to jet. I'll check back in an hour." Houston dropped the eye contact with the tech Interface, then turned to his companions. "Un-fucking-believable. She thinks I'm her Dungeon Master. Now what the hell am I supposed to do?"

* * * * *

Archer kicked and his body drifted through the Milky Way of stars. It was like swimming, only without any water. Everything he'd heard about space indicated that it was supposed to be cold. For him, the temperature was a bit on the warm side. A bit bright at times too, like driving on a country road at night then getting hit by the brights of an oncoming car.

As dreams went, this one wasn't bad. He wished there were a few girls in it though. Naked girls with dark hair and cinnamon-colored eyes...

Wait a second? Where had she come from? He'd never seen anyone like her before.

Or had he?

Archer attempted to place the elusive memory, but it streaked away on the tail of a comet. Since he didn't feel the need to pursue it, he pushed off in a new direction, eager to get up close and personal with a few more heavenly bodies.

Chapter Fifteen

Building Blocks

Janet didn't understand her violent reaction to the cherub's request. It's not like she hadn't been propositioned before. But her first thought was, *No, I can't do that. That would be cheating.*

On who? That was the second question, the one that disturbed her. Did she really think she had to be faithful to her ex-boyfriend? No, she felt no need to stay true to that lying scum now.

Nor did the face of her ex match the vision that flashed before her eyes. He'd been there and gone before she could blink. The only thing that she was sure of was that she knew him, except she didn't have a clue about who he was or how they'd met.

It bothered her to think that she might have memories missing. Her ex had taken away a lot of things from her. Physical things like their house and her car. Less tangible things, like her self-confidence and her joy of jumping into the unknown, just for the sake of adventure. She'd lost so much and she'd only scratched the surface of reclaiming any of it. The idea that she'd been fooling herself, that she was just as crazy as this whole dream...well, it wasn't pleasant.

On time, judging by her internal clock, the grumpy face lit up. "Ready to talk to me?"

"No." It was the truth. However, since he was the only source of information she had until she could get herself out of this mess, it behooved her to make an effort to meet him halfway. "Not that I won't," she added.

"Thanks. That'll make it easier on both of us." The cherub flexed his tiny wings a few times, stretching. "Let's go back to the vacation thing. Let's pretend it was real, and that it involved you and two guys."

Again a handsome face flashed before her eyes, but it was there and gone before she could do more than gasp at the knowledge. "Why were there two of them? Was one a backup or something in case I didn't hit it off with the first?"

"We were hoping you could tell us."

"You know I went on this fantasy trip, but you don't know what we did?"

"That pretty much sums it up, yeah."

"One of those guys must know. Why don't you ask them?"

"Good question, which brings us to the reason I'm here. See, we're not sure what you did with them."

"What I did? With them?" She had trouble wrapping her mind around the fact that she'd gone away with two men instead of one, even if the second was only a backup.

What had he done? Just stood around and watched from the shadows? "How is knowing what we did going to help you locate them?"

The cherub blew out a perfect smoke ring. "I'd really like to be able to explain that one to you, but it's over my head."

Janet glanced up at the white wall above him, but there was nothing there. "I don't see it either."

"See what?"

"Whatever you think is hanging over your head."

The cherub tried to look up with even less success than she had. When he turned his attention back to her, there was a tiny smile curving his lips. "You and I just might get along, after all."

Janet gave him a mocking bow from her seated position on the bed. "So what do we do now?"

"Figure out where you put them."

"I thought we just settled that."

"No, you don't understand. See, in a way, you're still on your fantasy vacation. You haven't returned home yet."

"Then my fantasies aren't any better than my realities, 'cause I got to tell you, Houston, this sucks."

The cherub laughed. "It does indeed, but you and I are going to change all that."

"How?"

"Do you believe in magic?"

Janet thought about it for a few seconds. "I believe in miracles, but magic? I don't think so."

"Smart woman. How about science? Wonderful things they can do with science these days. Some might even consider it magic."

Why the emphasis on sleight of hand? Did they think she could pull those men out of a hat? "I guess it all depends on your perspective."

"You're not going to make it easy for me, are you?" the cherub grouched. "Let's try this another way. I want you to think pink."

"Think pink?"

"Yeah. Close your eyes, and fill your mind with pink. Nothing but pink all around you."

She didn't much care for pink, but she attempted to surround herself in it. It was a bit like being inside one of those spun sugar mixers.

"Boy, when you do something you don't kid around," Houston said.

Janet opened her eyes and discovered that while she was internalizing, pink had also invaded her white room. It dripped down the walls, oozed up through the floor,

and even coated her bed. In fact, everything in the room was now pink, with the exception of herself and Houston. The sight of it made her nauseous.

"What happened?"

"It's magic."

"Cut the crap, Houston. This is freaky. Did you guys drug me or something?"

"Yes."

She couldn't have heard him right. Even if they'd sent her on an acid trip, why would they admit it? Unless they never intended to let her out of this room alive. "What did I ever do to you?"

"The drugs make the magic possible. You can't have one without the other."

"For the record, I'll live without this kind of magic."

"That's not an option right now."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No. Believe it or not, I'm trying to help you."

"Why?"

"Aside from the fact that I'm a wonderful guy?"

Janet crossed her arms over her chest. "Yeah."

The cherub's face darkened to a black expression. "Because the men who went on this little trip with you happen to be my friends, and I want to make damned sure I get them back in one piece."

"Tell me about them. What's their names?"

Houston wagged a fat finger. "That's cheating. You have to remember, or it's not going to do us any good."

"Then why did you drug me? Wouldn't I be a lot more useful to you with a clear mind?"

"No."

Janet stretched out on the bed. Her lids drifted down out of self-defense. Another minute, and she'd need to find a pink toilet in which to deposit the pink contents of her stomach.

What was wrong with blue? Why couldn't Houston have asked for a blue room, perhaps with dark wood accents and cream bedding? No, not cream. A dark blue. A dark, royal blue. That would be so much better than this pink crap.

"Janet, what are you doing?"

His voice sounded a little tense. Not that she cared. If they were going to drug her and keep her in the dark, they didn't deserve her help. "Ignoring you."

"Then you're not changing the color of the room again?"

Janet sat up and looked around. The pink was gone, every last dribble of it. What she had now was exactly what she had described to herself. Sky blue walls, dark furniture and a royal blue blanket folded neatly at the foot of her canopied bed.

"Only if you gave me hallucinogens."

The cherub shook his head. "No, the drugs are mood enhancers, lower your inhibitions and makes your mind more receptive to input, that kind of thing."

"You got me drunk!" No wonder she was talking to grumpy cherubs and watching the colors of the walls change. She'd always been strangely affected by alcohol.

"It's not that. I don't know what it is, but it's not that." Houston's face bounced as if jolted and said, "I need to check on something. Be right back."

* * * * *

Houston slapped Frannie's hand away from his butt. "Pinch me again, little girl, and I'll show you how easy it is to snap your fingers."

She snatched them back, out of his reach. "How else were we supposed to get your attention? It's the only part of you that's not wired for sight and sound."

"Don't tell me we have another crisis," he said wearily. This Zodiac thing was hard work.

Frannie smiled at him in a way that made his body hum with something much more pleasant than exhaustion. "She's doing it, Houston. She's got more brain wave talent than anyone else we know."

That was pretty hard to believe since they had some of the biggest brains in the world to work with, but Frannie was jazzed about something which meant there might be hope for Liam and Archer after all. "Explain."

"Janet's changing the room on her own. She's morphing back to what's familiar to her. It's not even close to a match yet, but the building blocks are there. The readouts are expanding into three-D." On the screen, two of the technicians were jumping up and down, gesturing at pages they gripped tightly in their hands.

"You think if she rebuilds the room, they'll come?"

"That's exactly what we're thinking. There's a good chance that by putting the room back the way she remembers, even subconsciously, she'll pull them into it too. If she doesn't, then we'll have fewer problems isolating the code to find out where they went."

Houston looked around the dark conference room at the others. "Any more words of wisdom before I go back in?"

"Hurry up," the gray-haired med tech suggested. "You've already exceeded the safety parameters of your waking Zodiac state. I can give you about five more minutes, then you're out."

"Watch them, not me," Houston said, pointing at the monitors that reported the life signs of the two men he was trying to save.

Dr. Bartel said, "Keep her distracted. People usually remember better if they aren't concentrating solely on the thing they're trying to recall."

"Gotcha." He started to shift his perception inside when a hand on his butt stopped him. "Frannie," he growled. "This better be important."

"What's going to happen when they all get together?" she asked.

Dr. Bartel leaned forward. "I'm not sure I understand the question."

"Whatever triggered the interrupt would be the last thing she remembers, right?"

"Right. That's the point we're all trying to get to," Houston confirmed.

"But wouldn't that just short everything out again? If nothing changes, it'll be a repeating loop."

"Pull the plug," Houston suggested. "Once they're together in the same space and time, override their commands and bring them out."

The med tech swiveled around in her chair. "Any override command triples the stress they're under. You could kill them that way, after what they've already been through."

Houston checked the monitors, but they weren't shouting out any bright ideas. "Frannie, you came up with this problem. Do you have a way to solve it?"

"Give her a message to relay to the guys. Tell them to think with their big brains instead of their little ones until they get home."

Dr. Bartel's eyes lit up at the suggestion. "That's it!"

"How's that going to help?"

A warning bell went off at the desk. The med tech scrambled to make the necessary adjustments, but her face was grim.

Frannie patted his butt cheek one more time. "Just do it, Houston. I'll explain it all to you later."

Houston mumbled something about smart-ass women, then ducked back into Janet's world.

* * * * *

During Houston's absence, Janet amused herself by playing with the furnishings of her room. She figured she might as well enjoy being in the Land of Insanity since they seemed determined to keep her there.

"I see you've done some more redecorating."

"Every girl needs a hobby."

"Change anything you like. While you're at it, maybe you can also tell me what you planned on doing with those two guys."

She shook a finger at him as she mentally pushed the walls of her room back another ten feet. "I don't discuss my sex life with anyone. Not even cute little cherubs."

"It's not fact, it's fiction." He made a dopey, pleading face. "Tell me a story, Janet."

Janet contemplated the possibilities. "I'm really not sure. I suppose it depends on the men. I wouldn't want them to do something they were uncomfortable with."

"It's your fantasy. They'll do anything you want."

"What does that mean? Like I said, I wouldn't want them to be forced into anything they didn't want to do."

The cherub rolled his eyes. "They're men. Aside from attacking their privates with a cheese grater, they're pretty much okay with anything you'd ask of them."

"Yeah, I don't think they'll need to worry about that one."

"There ya go. So what'll it be?"

They'd need a bed big enough for three, with soft fabrics and lots of pillows. "I want to make them happy," Janet admitted.

"Take your clothes off," Houston said gruffly.

Janet looked down at her naked body. "They are off. Shouldn't that bother me?"

"Not where you're going, but I was talking about the men. Take your clothes off and they'll be happy. We're simple creatures."

She didn't think it was sound logic to take an imaginary cherub's word for that. All men were not created equal. "What are the odds of this working? Of me finding them again?"

"This is uncharted territory. Anything could happen."

"So if I screw up, those men are vegetables for the rest of their lives?"

"Well, there's always a chance that they'll find a way out on their own."

That did heaps to boost her confidence. No wonder Houston didn't start with that tidbit of information right off. "Let me guess. That's dicey too?"

The cherub snorted. "More like the chances you have of winning the lottery without buying a ticket."

"So what happened to them in the first place? What did I do?"

"If we knew that, we wouldn't need you to figure it out." A slow, almost feral grin spread across his face. "I imagine the guys are going to have a lot of questions for you."

When she got out of here, she didn't plan on hanging around. She'd be headed someplace without computers. Or black cherubs.

The face on the wall stretched like taffy. It snapped back into focus, only to be pulled the other way. "There's something wrong with your face."

"My time's up. It's all on you now."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell the guys they...think...big..."

The cherub face fractured like glass. When the sounds of tinkling crystal had faded, so had Houston. She was on her own.

She didn't want to be alone. She wanted to find the men she'd lost and get out of this freaky world. She wandered around the room, trying to remember the faces of the men she'd seen. The memories were so close. Their names were right on the tip of her tongue...

Chapter Sixteen

Where the Boys Are

"Janet?"

Janet jumped at the voice, then dashed across the room and flung herself into Liam's arms. "You're okay! You're back!"

He returned her kisses and gently lowered her to the floor. "You missed me?"

"More than you can imagine. Don't you know what happened?"

He slowly shook his head. "You turned white and disintegrated, like ash. By the time I looked up for Archer, he was gone..."

"What about you? Where did you go?"

"Nowhere, really. I just sort of hung out here, except everything in the room wobbled, as if it were made of taffy. Pretty scary, until you suddenly returned. Care to tell me what happened?"

"I will, as soon as Archer gets here."

"You mean he's not with you?"

"No. I assumed he'd be here, with you." A sickening sense of dread filled her. She was so sure Archer would be waiting for her. Why wasn't he here?

"I think you better tell me what you can remember."

They sat on the couch. As quickly as she could, she filled him in on where she'd been.

"This grumpy cherub, did he have a name?" Liam asked her.

"It was Houston." She remembered him now. How embarrassing to know someone and not recognize them even though she was staring him in the face. Sort of.

"I'll have to compliment Houston on his sense of the ridiculous next time I see him."

"He wanted me to tell you and Archer to think big. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Not really."

Janet got up and began pacing. The room felt colder than it had before. Being naked left her chilled. She got a robe from the closet and slipped into it. "How long do you think it'll take Archer to show up?"

"I don't know."

"Well, how long has he been gone?"

"I don't know."

"What do you know?" she demanded in exasperation.

Liam stared at her so long she thought he might have taken another face in the same way Houston had. Finally, he blinked and asked, "Would you mind sitting with me? I need to ask you something."

Janet didn't see what difference it made, sitting or standing, but she joined him on the chair. She began to warm up as soon as he put his arm around her. "What do you want to know?"

"Your ex-boyfriend. Did he ever hurt you?"

"How could that possibly be relevant now?"

"It won't be, if I'm wrong. If I'm right, it could mean the difference between finding Archer and losing him forever."

Yikes. Okay, she could do this. It wasn't as if Liam didn't already have enough clues about her psyche to put it together already. "He wasn't physically abusive if that's what you're asking."

"Pain is inflicted in a lot of ways. Physical pain is usually the easiest to get over. How did he hurt you, I mean, before you found out about his crimes?"

"He made me feel stupid, mostly." She snuggled deeper into his arms, nipped at his neck. "Do you really need to know this right now?"

Liam kissed the top of her head. "I think so, yes."

Janet stopped trying to tease him out of the conversation and sagged against him. "He demanded that we have sex, but with him it seemed to be more of a chore than a joy."

"What happened, Janet? Tell me."

"I told him I loved him, that I'd try to do better. He had some suggestions. They didn't help. Eventually, he stopped trying."

"He stopped having sex with you?"

"No, he just stopped trying to please me. As long as he got off, he didn't much care whether I enjoyed it or not."

"What did you do then?"

Deciding that Liam couldn't think any less of her if he heard the rest of it, she admitted, "I tried to do as he asked. It was never good enough. I never questioned why he insisted on staying together. He was just using me. I was so stupid."

"You weren't stupid, Janet. You were trying to please the man you loved. There's nothing wrong with that."

Liam got on his knees before her. He lifted her chin and kissed her with the same tenderness he'd shown her before. She found great comfort in it, but not passion. Couldn't she make any real man tremble the way she did her Zodiac lovers?

When he broke away, he said, "You're a special, strong, exciting woman, Janet. Any man who had your love would be honored beyond measure."

"True love between a man and a woman is a myth, a dream."

"Oh, it exists. Believe me."

"Maybe on Zodiac Island, but not in the real world. Not out there where it counts."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because all my real relationships have been short and not too sweet. It's only inside the Zodiac VR world that I can find love. With these imaginary men, I'm in heaven. There is no heaven on earth for me."

Liam stood up and hauled her to her feet. "When Archer gets back and we return home, I hope to convince you otherwise."

Archer. OhmyGod. "Why did you let me go on whining like that when Archer is still missing?"

"First of all, you weren't whining. You were sharing your feelings. Second of all, it was an important part of finding Archer."

"Then you know where to find him?"

"Yep," Liam confirmed. He took her hand and guided her toward the bed.

"Where? Damn it, stop leading me around like a donkey and tell me!"

Liam placed his hand over her heart. "He's right here."

"That's crazy."

"Humor me." He got on the bed and stretched out. "Do you remember what we were doing right before we all disappeared?"

Bits and pieces had been coming back while she'd been too distracted with her past failures to notice. It only took a few seconds to access her last fleeting memories. What she recalled caused her face to burn. "Yeah, I remember."

"What was going through your mind?"

She closed her eyes and let herself relive the moment. Archer's cock was buried deep inside her, taking her higher with each thrust. She was exhausted but refused to stop as her body gathered for one final orgasm that was sure to make her see stars.

"I was in heaven. I wanted to make sure I took Archer with me when I made one last trip to the stars."

"There's our answer."

Sure, clear as mud. If she had any more circular conversations, her brain would surely turn into a merry-go-round. "Never mind. As long as you get it, I'm happy. Just tell me what we have to do."

"Take another trip to the stars," Liam said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Sex? Now? Even if you're interested..." A glance at his thickening shaft informed her that he was. "I'm not."

Liam dangled his legs over the edge of the bed. He made come-hither motions until she stepped between his knees. He put his hands on her waist, lightly caressing the sensitive skin he found at the base of her spine.

"You took Archer to the stars with you. Now I have to take you back so you can bring him home." He took a nipple into his mouth.

She fisted her hands in his hair to keep him doing what he was doing with his tongue. "Isn't that going to be a bit difficult without Archer?"

Liam dropped his hands to her butt cheeks and squeezed. "It'll be tough, but I think I can manage. With your assistance, of course."

"It just feels wrong somehow, starting without him." It took awhile to get the sentence out since Liam's attention to her breasts made her gasp every other word.

He gripped the top of her thighs and lifted her onto his lap. When he fell backward, she had no choice but to follow him down. She braced herself with one hand to either side of his head.

Liam brushed the hair from her face. "Close your eyes and think of him. Let me be his hands."

She tilted her hips, bringing his hard cock in contact with her nether lips. Liam pushed into her, inch by delicious inch. Her muscles welcomed him with a tight hug. He palmed her breasts and forced her back to take him more deeply. The head touched the opening to her womb and set her in motion, rocking against his pelvic bone in the quest for release.

"Ride me to the stars, Janet. Find Archer and bring him home."

* * * * *

Space was boring, Archer decided. Sure, the exploding stars were neat and watching the birth of a new galaxy had been kinda cool. But mostly he was bored. And lonely.

He wrapped his fingers around his balls and jiggled them. Yep, there was a spark of interest there. So he'd jerk off. At least it gave him something to do.

He reclined, or at least he told himself that he was reclined. It was hard to determine the difference between that and standing when there was no firm foundation either way. He bunched a gaseous cloud into the shape of a pillow and put it behind his head. Yeah, that was comfy. Now all he needed was a little inspiration.

He tugged at his penis as he cast about for inspiration. A black hole? Those rings around Saturn? Maybe that comet would fly by again, and this time leave the body to go with that beautiful face...

He thought about that. What she would look like, how she would feel under his hands. Like heaven, he supposed. A damned romantic notion but one he found arousing. He slid his hand over his lengthening shaft and thought about it some more.

As the ideas crossed his mind, the stars rearranged themselves like a cosmic Etch A Sketch. Slender curves. Long legs. Small, perfectly round breasts. Not bad.

The image grew until it was almost life-size. Archer pictured himself fucking her deep and hard. His hand mimicked the short, fast strokes. That's how it would feel, he

told himself. Tight. Wet. Warm. He'd hear her panting for him to come, so close to her own release that one would trigger the other. He wanted that so badly.

"Come with me, Archer."

He hadn't realized he'd closed his eyes until he jerked them open. His starry beauty was poised to take him in, just as he imagined. He gripped her nonexistent waist and felt firm flesh. He helped her settle on him. "You're just the way I dreamed you would be," he told her.

She jerked her hips, riding him. She tossed her head back and moaned. "Yes, yes, yes."

He twisted the small cluster of light that represented her nipples. That earned him another sexy moan. "Come down here. Let me suck them."

He could smell her feminine cream, feel the wetness of it dripping down his balls. He took a nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. She bucked against him, but somehow it didn't feel quite right.

In a move that was too smooth for real life, he changed their positions so he was on top. He could feel the friction of the sheets as he slid his hands under her shoulders. He looked between them as he began to thrust, watching the sunlight bounce off his gleaming shaft. It was pretty amazing, better than anything else he'd seen out here.

Except for maybe the comet girl. She was pretty hot.

"Come with me, Archer. Hold on tight and come with me."

She was practically sobbing with desire. For him. Had he ever heard anything more sexy in his life?

He hunched up until his knees were in line with her hips. Her long legs had nowhere to go except around his waist. He tightened his grip on her shoulders and pumped with short, fast strokes. "I'm right with you, baby."

He could feel her tremors begin. His own climax gathered in response. No way was he going to let her go alone. The pads of her thumbs brushed over his pointy nipples, taking him even closer to the edge.

"Archer, please, please come with me."

"All the way, baby," he murmured before capturing her mouth in a soul-deep kiss that triggered their mutual release. His body felt awash with fire as he emptied himself into her. She clenched him and held him deeply as the stars rained down around them.

Chapter Seventeen

Homecoming

Archer opened his eyes only because the obnoxious asshole next to him wouldn't stop shoving. "What!"

"Hi," Liam said inanely.

Archer watched in disbelief as Liam's eyes filled with tears. He looked down at Janet to ask her what Liam's problem was only to find tears in her eyes too. "What's wrong with you two?"

Janet and Liam shared a look, then Liam said, "We're just very, very glad to see you."

"I missed out on something good again, didn't I?"

Janet took his face between her hands. "You didn't miss anything. I promise."

Because it seemed to be what she needed, he lowered his head and kissed her. He intended it to be a sweet kiss, to thank her for one of the best orgasms of his life.

She responded with more openness and feeling than she'd ever shared with him before. What a turn-on! And, as impossible as it was, she was making him hard again. He tried to pull out to give her a break, but her legs were still locked around him and now so were her arms.

Janet turned to Liam. "One more time?"

"I don't think that's wise."

They both sounded so sad, so serious. "What's the deal, guys?"

She set him loose. "Nothing, Archer. It's nothing."

Something wasn't right and he meant to get to the bottom of it. "No one is going anywhere until you level with me."

There was another one of those shared looks he was coming to hate. Then Liam said, "I think he needs to know. He'll find out anyway, I think he'll take it better if we tell him here."

"Whatever you say. You're in charge," Janet mumbled.

Archer found it difficult to concentrate with the way Janet was nibbling at his neck. He nibbled back, shared a few quick kisses. He was really starting to warm up when Liam threw a bucket of cold water on them. Literally.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Archer leapt off the bed and went after Liam. "What the hell did you do that for?"

Liam pitched a robe to him and held out another one for Janet. "Get dressed."

"Why the rush? We have time."

Janet had gotten to the edge of the bed, but standing seemed to be beyond her capabilities. Liam gently wiped the water droplets from her face, then helped her into the robe. "The deal is that you two are a dangerous combination."

"Fuck that! You just want her for yourself. Well, too bad. She's mine."

Archer lowered his shoulder, planning to ram some sense into Liam. Janet got there first, swayed, and would have fallen if Archer hadn't wrapped his arms around her instead.

"It's okay, baby. I've got you." He kept his arms tight around her. However, he kept his eye on Liam.

Janet went back to nuzzling his neck. "I can't seem to help myself," she said.

"Let her go," Liam ordered.

"Why should I? The lady seems to be perfectly happy where she is."

Janet's busy fingers had opened both robes so their flesh could meet. Her hands dipped lower to fondle his sex, stroking him to fullness. "I want to fuck like bunnies, Archer."

That sounded pretty good to him. He grabbed her ass and lifted so she could wrap her legs around his waist. He positioned her over his straining shaft.

Liam grabbed his dick with icy fingers. He would have dropped Janet entirely if Liam hadn't helped him to support her weight. "What's your problem? You heard the lady. I'm just giving her what she wants."

"You'll kill her."

That stopped him, but only for a second. The smell of her sexual heat enticed him. He wiggled his hips, trying to free himself from Liam's grasp. "Bugger off!"

Janet moaned and arched her back so that her wet pussy rode over Archer's abdomen. "I need you, Archer. Help me."

Liam squeezed harder. "You'll kill her."

Liam was serious. Archer didn't know what had put the thought in the man's head but his eyes glittered with dangerous intent. "I don't see how."

"The disconnect. Last time she took you to heaven and left you there. If you two go at it again and repeat history, she won't have the energy to come after you again."

Archer had a vague recollection of hanging out amongst the stars. "You mean she really sent me into orbit? Why didn't that happen with you?"

"I presume it's because right now she cares for you more than she does me. Just be glad it worked in your favor, or she'd never have been able to find you again."

That was music to his ears. She really cared about him. Not only that, but apparently she'd had to move heaven and earth to get him back.

He peppered her throat with kisses. "You beautiful, smart, sexy woman."

Liam twisted his dick. Hard.

"Ow! Fuck! That hurts!"

"Keep that in mind. I'll rip it off if I have to. We have to get her out of here before you two self-destruct."

"Fine. You go first. Janet and I will be right behind you."

Archer could practically feel her pain. Her breasts ached for his touch. His tongue. Her clit so swollen that it bordered on torture. She yearned for him to fill her. She told him so with every soft mewl in her pretty white throat. It would only take a second. One more time, just like she asked.

"Oh, for crissakes! Can't you two knock it off for more than three seconds?"

Liam inserted his free hand in between their bodies. His fingers deftly stroked her to a weak climax. It wasn't what she wanted. It wasn't what Archer wanted either. He was about to protest when she sagged against him.

Liam snatched her away and scooped her up into his arms. He headed for the exit in long strides. "Get the door. Hurry!"

Archer couldn't move. Janet didn't want him to do anything but satisfy her every craving. He knew that as surely as he knew his own name. He couldn't move without her permission, and she didn't want him to leave this room.

"What are you waiting for?"

"She doesn't want me to go."

Liam swore in some language that Archer didn't recognize. "Stop thinking with your dick and start using your brain. She's not responsible for her actions right now. She saved us. Now we have to be strong enough to save her."

Archer convinced his feet to move by telling himself he was only following Liam to be closer to her. It was the truth, if only part of it. But when he tried to turn the handle of the oak paneled door, it didn't budge.

"It's locked."

"Janet, honey, it's time to go. Unlock the door," Liam ordered gently.

"No, I want to stay here with Archer. And you."

That pleading note in her voice drew Archer like a siren's song. He was beginning to feel a hint of Liam's urgency. "Baby, listen to me. I want to be with you too, but it can't be here. Open the door and let me take you home."

"Don't you love me? Don't you want to stay with me?"

A weaker man would be on his knees, begging for her forgiveness. Archer drew on his love for her to give him the strength to refuse. "Yes, baby. I love you very much. That's why we have to go. I promise I'll be yours forever if you want. But not here. It's not safe for us here."

The French doors blew open. A chill wind rushed in. "I'm staying. I like it here. You'll stay with me, won't you, Liam?"

Archer heard the bolt slide back in the oak door. She was writing him off. She didn't trust him to keep his word. That hurt, but it was something he could work on later. Once they were back where they belonged.

"All three of us are going, Janet. We can't stay."

The wind howled with rage. Archer tugged on the iron ring bolted to the heavy wood, throwing all his weight into the effort of drawing it open.

The wind formed an invisible fist that punched Liam below the waist. He let go of his burden and the eager wind spirit was there to catch her and carry her away. Archer started after her, but the gusts kept him at bay.

"Go then, since that's what you desire so much. Leave me alone. I'll be fine with my new lovers to care for me."

Behind them, the door opened with such force that it cracked the plaster wall. The drapes around the bed shook as if ravaged by hurricane force winds until they were freed from their moorings. They drew together around the bed, closing it off from view. The last glimpse Archer got was of three insubstantial sprites closing in to pleasure the woman he loved.

Half bent with pain, Liam tugged on Archer's robe. "Get moving."

"We can't just leave her like this!"

"We have no choice." Liam shouldered him across the threshold.

As soon as they were clear, the portal closed and the bolt slid back into place. Archer hammered on it with his fists. "Janet! Let me in!"

Even in the corridor, the wind continued to howl. Liam had to shout to be heard over it. "She'll be fine. We're the problem. We have to go first. Once we exit the program, they can bring her down."

Archer knew that—Zodiac was his creation, after all—but turning his back on Janet now, when she needed him, was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Logic couldn't override the fear in his heart. "If you're wrong, if she gets hurt, I'll kill you."

"If I'm wrong, I'll let you."

Chapter Eighteen

Living a Dream

Janet opened her eyes and took stock of her situation. White. Everything was white. Any second that damn cherub was going to show up and tell her she failed.

How could that be? She'd found them, hadn't she? She remembered everything now. How could she have failed?

The unfairness of it made her howl in frustration.

"Hey, we made it!"

That was Archer's voice, but where was he? "I can't see you."

"I can't see you either, but at least we're together."

Janet needed to see him. See that he wasn't harmed. But someone had given her a transfusion of lead for blood. She couldn't move more than a finger, and even that small effort took most of her energy.

"We made it back? All of us?"

"We're in the Zodiac Chamber," Liam confirmed from the other side of the room, sounding as tired as she felt.

Archer grunted. "Move over."

She twisted her head to look up and there was Archer. Sweating, pale and decidedly grumpy. "How did you get here?"

"I flew. Now move over before I pass out on the floor." A rivulet of sweat dripped from the end of his nose. "Please."

Janet scrambled, at a snail's pace, to get to the other side of the small Dreaming bed. She didn't fear him passing out on the floor so much as passing out on top of her. But Archer managed to remain upright until she'd cleared a space for him, then he belly-flopped into position alongside her. He looped one arm around her waist and drew her against his side. "Better."

The fact that they were both naked bothered her—they weren't in the Zodiac love nest anymore—but she couldn't bring herself to push him away. It comforted her to know she wasn't alone and, well, because she was still attracted to him. Warm. Familiar. Archer.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"You moved heaven and earth to get to me. I figured the least I could do was cross the room to reach you."

Awww. That was sappy enough to start tears falling.

He kissed her neck. "Everything's fine now, Janet. Stop worrying and hold me. Or, if you prefer, I'll hold you. But space is a really lonely place, and I'm not ready to be apart from you yet."

She lay on her back and let Archer drape himself over her. The weight of his body seemed light compared to her own. A shiver of pleasure danced down her spine. She hoped the drugs wore off soon because it was going to be a pain if she continued to react like this every time the man so much as looked at her.

In no time, Archer was gently snoring against her breast. She ran her fingers through his brown hair.

They'd been through a lot. Even though none of it had been real, it felt real. It left real impressions stamped on her heart. As impossible as it once seemed, she'd fallen in love with the man in her arms. He made her feel loved, special.

And that was the crux of her dilemma. Her past relationships had failed when they were based on real-life encounters. How could she trust a love generated by a flaky computer and some fancy pharmaceuticals?

She couldn't. That was the bottom line. Real or not, love just didn't last.

Janet closed her eyes and rushed into sleep to keep the wealth of unhappy tears from slipping free.

A storm of intruders woke her later. How much later, she didn't know. Didn't ask. She still felt out of kilter with the rest of the world, her mind in a place where time had only a vague meaning. Frannie and one of the med techs disconnected them from the machines, removed the IVs and helped them into their robes.

Liam stood apart from her and Archer, his back to them as he dressed. Perhaps he felt awkward around them. She could understand that. She wasn't very comfortable with her own skin at the moment.

"Ready to check out of this place?" Archer asked her.

He was smiling. Her heart stuttered in its rhythm, then beat on. She had to curl her fingers into fists to prevent herself from reaching for him. "Yes. Definitely."

She followed Frannie down the long corridor to the conference room where the other members of the project team waited. Archer trailed along beside her, his hand resting possessively at the small of her back.

Why weren't things sliding back to normal? The side effects of her Zodiac trip should be wearing off by now. Why did she still feel deeply connected to Archer? Why did he continue to treat her as if he genuinely cared about her?

Dr. Bartel greeted her with a gentle hug. "It's good to see you," he told her. "You had us worried."

"Houston is the one you should be thanking," Janet replied. "We'd still be in the ether if it wasn't for him."

She'd expected Archer to peel off toward his data sheets as soon as he spotted them. She actually felt him tense beside her, then quiver like an excited terrier when he spotted the printouts so fresh they were probably still warm from the printer. However, he stayed at her side, even going so far as to hold out a chair so she could sink into it.

Liam, still silent and reserved, sat on her right. Archer took her left. Frannie and Houston circled around the table and sat opposite them.

"I like you better without the wings," Janet told the large black man.

Houston grinned, showing most of his straight, white teeth. "That picture was worth a thousand words, I'm sure. But if I ever see it, the words you hear from my mouth won't be fit to print."

"They won't get it from me," Janet assured him. She'd never be able to do the image justice. Her skills at description just weren't that good.

"You'll get no promises from me," Archer broke in. "It'll be nice to have a bargaining chip next time I have to negotiate a contract with you."

The rest of the team crowded in where they could, except Dr. Bartel who held court from the head of the table. As soon as the room settled down, the old scientist quirked his brow. "Well, Archer?"

After a pause of dramatic silence, Archer grinned. "I got it."

Dr. Bartel bowed his head in relief while the rest of the room erupted in cheers. Congratulations rained down on their heads. Backslapping, hugging and even a few kisses were liberally shared between team members. Janet caught her friend blushing after a particularly enthusiastic lip lock Houston laid on her. Apparently she and Archer weren't the only ones brought closer together by the Zodiac's wiring kink.

Once Dr. Bartel brought the noise back to a level where he could be heard, he announced, "I declare the next three days an official project holiday. I don't want to see any of you in these halls until next week. Is that clear?"

Janet tensed, waiting for Archer to explode. Now that he had his long-awaited answer, she doubted anything short of a nuclear bomb could blow him out of the lab.

Therefore, she was extremely surprised when he leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Three days in bed sounds pretty good to me. How about you?"

"Uh, yeah." She hadn't done much of anything except lounge around in bed lately, but that was how the Zodiac operated. Her body craved REM sleep. Her soul craved another night with Archer.

As the meeting broke up, Janet hoped to make an unobtrusive escape. However, Dr. Bartel caught her eye and she couldn't bring herself to be rude to the kindly old scientist.

"Janet, we owe you a large debt of gratitude."

"Glad I could help."

"You say that lightly, but I assure you your contribution to this project is not going to be forgotten."

There wasn't much she could say to that. She kissed the man on his wrinkled cheek. He left and another was waiting to take his place.

"I'd like to talk to you about something." Liam's green eyes flicked over to Archer, and then came back to her. "Something important."

Whatever it was, it would have to wait. If she didn't get out of here soon, she was going to faint on the spot. She needed food, and sleep. Not necessarily in that order. "As soon as I've had some rest. Like Dr. Bartel said, I think we could all use a break before we try to straighten out any...side effects left over from our Dream."

"You're right. I should have thought of that. Have dinner with me tomorrow night? My place?"

"Sure. Sounds great."

He kissed the top of her head and sauntered out. Janet felt his absence, but it was nothing compared to the ache she'd feel when Archer said his goodbyes. She might work with these two men in the future, but she'd never be as close to them as she'd been inside the Dream. It made her future seem like a vast wasteland devoid of color.

"Ready to go?"

Janet smiled at her friend. "More than you know, Frannie."

She glanced over her shoulder where Archer was engaged in an animated discussion with Houston. No long goodbyes, no awkward parting words. It was for the best. She bid him a silent farewell and then followed the redhead out the door.

"Hey, wait up!" Archer jogged down the hall to catch up with them. "Trying to leave without me?"

"You were talking to Houston. I didn't want to interrupt."

"Shop talk. It can wait." He put his hand against the side of her neck, his thumb brushed the line of her jaw. "Where to? Your place or mine?"

"Frannie's," Janet said, backing away from his touch. "I'm staying with her."

"You can stay with me."

He was getting that stubborn look. She was going to have to explain. "Frannie, Archer and I need to talk. You go on ahead. I'll meet you outside."

"You sure?"

Janet gave her friend's hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sure."

As soon as Frannie was out of hearing, Archer said, "What's going on with you? I thought we were getting along pretty well now."

She had poured out enough of her private thoughts and feelings to the team. She wasn't going to have this discussion in the hall where anyone could walk by and hear them. "Let's go to my office. We can talk there."

As soon as they were in her office, Janet went directly to the window. The view of the quiet green countryside didn't relax her as it usually did. Strained nerves caused her to bunch her shoulders.

Archer came to stand behind her. He put his hands on her waist. "I love being with you, Janet," he admitted. "You fit in my arms like you were made to be there. It's scaring me."

She sighed and relaxed against him, her head resting over his heart. "I feel the same way."

He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her to his chest. Her soft bottom brushed against the hard evidence of his lust. "That's what you do to me just by talking to me."

When she wiggled a bit more insistently, he eased up so she could turn around. "Why me?"

Archer looked down into the depths of her dark amber eyes. "Damned if I know."

He kissed her, although not with the demanding, get-in-your-pants urgency she expected from him. He took his time. He planted his hands on either side of her head, his eyes never leaving hers. He kissed her nose, her cheek, her jaw, before finally touching his lips to hers.

"Open up, Janet. Let me in," he murmured, his lips brushing over hers as he formed the words.

"I can't do this. I just can't. I'm sorry." Gently, she pushed him away. She could feel the fabric of her heart tear as she did. So much pain, but better she deal with this now, than to feel ten times worse after they'd woven more of their lives together.

"Liam?"

She turned back to the window, unable to handle his pain in addition to her own. She had to look out for herself first. That was the only way to survive, right? "A friend, nothing more."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The Dream is over. This is the real world. And in the real world we don't belong together."

"Sure we do."

Janet faced him, her arms hugging her chest in a poor imitation of his embrace. "Would you have said that a week ago?"

Archer shrugged. "No. I didn't know you a week ago like I do now."

"Exactly my point. You love a Dream. A Zodiac Dream. Not the real me. And I won't have a romantic relationship with a man who doesn't know me." Never again would she believe a man who claimed to love her after a short acquaintance. If they were to build a life together, he had to accept all of her faults and she had to be sure she could live with his. When it came to Archer, Janet was anything but sure.

Red irritation stained his cheeks as his quick temper heated to a boil. "I knew you well enough to win the damn contest."

"Because of the project. Not because you cared."

Archer grabbed her arms, holding her so she couldn't back away. "I know better. Let me prove it to you."

Janet wanted it to be as easy as he made it sound. Life wasn't a fairytale or a computerized simulation they could manipulate to suit them. Eventually fear and doubt would creep in, take over, until there was nothing left but regrets. She deserved better than that. They both did. If he wasn't smart enough to see that for himself, Janet would have to be strong enough to resist for the both of them.

Janet shook her head. "No."

"It's going to take some getting used to, I know. I mean, us? Together? But it works, Janet. Now I can't see myself with anyone but you."

She felt panic rising within her. Why couldn't he accept the inevitable and move on? "This is insane. We can't jump into a relationship after a few hours of chemically enhanced sex. Until recently, we couldn't even be civil to each other."

He frowned, but said, "You can argue all you want, honey, but your body is telling me the truth."

She followed his gaze to where her hand gripped his with white-knuckle intensity. She hadn't even realized she'd done it.

When she attempted to let go of him, he entwined their fingers and held on. "We've been given this chance at happiness. We'd be fools to waste it."

"How will I know if you've fallen for me or the Zodiac woman you think I am?"

His blue eyes blazed with anger. "You know me better than that."

"No I don't, Archer. I know the man I met at the castle, but he doesn't exist here."

"They're both me."

From the look on his face, she was breaking his heart as well as her own. It would be so easy to spare both of them that pain by giving in. By living the dream for a while. But eventually it would end, whether it took days or weeks or months. How much worse would they feel then?

"I can't risk it. I just can't."

Archer's eyes filled with pain. She had to bite down on her lip to keep herself from taking back her statement. It was best for them this way. Really.

"That's the coward's way out, Janet. And if that's the way you're choosing, then you're not the woman I fell in love with, after all."

"I'm sorry, Archer."

He glanced at her, a sad look on his face that she knew would haunt her forever. "I love you, Janet. Here, there and everywhere. If you ever find a time when that matters to you, let me know."

Chapter Nineteen

Settling Down

Archer bounced the basketball off the short brick wall surrounding the court. Thoughts bounced around his head in a similar fashion. How was he going to make this work? How was he going to get the girl?

No answers came to him, only the iron resolve that he would find a way to keep Janet in his life and his bed. Somehow.

He sprinted toward the far end of the court, tossed the ball up for a shot that hit the rim and ricocheted out of reach. By the time he slowed his momentum and turned, another man was shuffling the rubber ball between his hands.

"You wanted to talk," Liam said, in a flat, distant tone.

The psychologist was obviously not happy. Understandable, but it didn't make the situation any easier. "Yeah," Archer said, jogging over to him.

"Why here?" Liam shot the ball into Archer's stomach with a bit of extra force.

Archer caught it and tucked it under his arm. He ignored the sting in his belly from where it had hit. "I'd rather not have this out in front of witnesses."

"You mean you'd rather Janet not find out about this discussion."

"I plan on telling Janet either way, but I didn't think it was necessary to involve the rest of the project team in this."

Liam's disbelieving look fired his knee-jerk anger. Archer dribbled over to the basket, made a clean dunk and recovered the ball for another go at the net. Liam came from out of nowhere, stole the ball and scored. Damn, the man had fast hands.

Bringing the ball back down court, Liam said, "You wanted to talk, so talk."

The repetitive noise of rubber slapping blacktop called to Archer's competitive nature. He took up a guard position and said, "The deal is off."

"You mean you have no intention of stepping nobly out of the way now that our joint Dream is over?" Liam feinted to the left, then drove straight through to the basket and sunk it. "I'm *so* surprised."

Archer reclaimed the ball and fired it into Liam's stomach. "Fuck you."

Liam didn't even try to catch it. He avoided the hit and caught the rubber missile on the rebound. "I'm not your type, remember?"

Christ, could this get any more complicated? He'd designed the Zodiac with the idea of freeing people from their inhibitions, making dreams come true. A great idea, but he'd never taken into consideration the aftereffects. What good would come from

shucking people out of their emotional shells if they couldn't return to their old lives when it was over?

"I'm not going to apologize for failing to find you attractive," Archer told him.

Liam studied the ball in his hands. "I'm not going to apologize for the opposite."

"Then I'd say we're even, although I do have to wonder why you claim Janet is meant to be your wife if your interests... lie elsewhere."

Liam's head snapped up, his green eyes glittering with steel barbs. "I love her."

Yikes. He really did. Love for the gorgeous, feminine accountant was clearly stamped on the psychologist's handsome mug. "I'm confused."

Liam rested against the brick of the building and closed his eyes. "Tell me about it."

"Well, doc, you see there's this guy I work with who—oopf!" He didn't think to dodge, he just took the gut shot. Breath whooshed from his lungs as the ball dropped to the ground.

"Asshole," Liam said, laughing. He corralled the rogue basketball and walked over to where Archer stood, doubled over and trying not to heave.

Slowly, Archer straightened up, rubbing the sting from his belly. "If this is going to be a full body contact discussion, I think I'd like to reschedule."

"I can keep my punches to the verbal kind as long as you promise not to hit me below the belt."

Archer swiped the ball from Liam's grasp and started bouncing it between his hands, just enough to keep him moving around so his muscles didn't tighten up. "I suppose that depends on your intentions with Janet. I'll do whatever it takes to have her."

"Think she will? Let you have her, that is?"

"I'm working on it. What I want to know from you is if you're willing to let her go."

"I love her."

Archer bounced the ball a little faster between his hands. "You said that."

"Do you?"

"I wouldn't be having this conversation with you if I didn't."

Liam shouldered Archer out of the way, stole the ball and made another shot. Nothing but net.

Unable to keep his lips sealed, Archer said, "Is there anything you suck at? Besides dick, that is?"

Archer never saw the punch coming. The next thing he knew, he was on his ass. The ache in his jaw told him it would hurt like hell in the morning. Blood dripped from a cut on his lip. Archer wiped it away with the back of his hand. "Happy now?"

"Yeah, I think so." Liam reached out his hand.

After a pause of a second or two, Archer took it and let the other man haul him to his feet. It took a bit of probing to determine that nothing was broken or missing.

Satisfied that a trip to the med center wasn't in his immediate future, he lowered his shoulder and drove into Liam as if that one body was all that stood between him and the goal line.

Liam went down on his butt, hard. For several stunned seconds, he sat there in silence. Then, out of the blue, he started to laugh. A chuckle quickly turned into a chortle, ending in a full belly laugh that caused him to roll over on his side and gasp for air.

Not at all the reaction that Archer expected. "What's so funny?"

Still grinning from ear to ear, Liam picked himself up off the asphalt. "My life seems determined to take me in circles. Guess I haven't learned my lesson yet."

"Is that supposed to make sense to me?"

"Let's just say I've been here before." Liam shook his head, in rueful amusement. "I can't seem to win."

"Does that mean you'll let me have her?"

"It means I won't try to change her mind if that's what she decides she wants."

"Why?" This seemed too good to be true. Archer certainly wouldn't give up that easy.

The psychologist got a look in his eye that aged him far beyond the mid-thirties he appeared to be. "I'm not an easy man to live with. If love were enough..." He shrugged. "She'll be better off with you."

Archer didn't want to know what circumstance would leave such a deep wound as the one currently exposed in Liam's expression. He'd won, and that was the important thing right now.

He held out his hand to shake. "You're not a bad guy, King. For a homo."

Liam's green eyes reflected acceptance of Archer's teasing. "You're still an asshole," he said, shaking hands. "But this quasi-gay boy is going to rip your balls off and feed them to you if you hurt her."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

To break the uncomfortable air, Liam turned away and went after the ball. He started dribbling around the court and executed a three-point shot that would have made an NBA starter weep it was so pretty.

"Why didn't you go pro?" Archer asked him.

"Not allowed." Liam recovered the ball, tossed it up through the net in a reverse dunk, then shot it back down the hole once more. "Janet isn't going to be easy to convince. She needs to know your feelings for her aren't a Zodiac malfunction."

"The Zodiac takes its cues from the Dreamer. It can't manufacture what isn't there."

"Well, you can spend the next few years giving her a good enough basis in physics and bio-technology to convince her of that."

Feeling certain the other man had a better suggestion, one he probably wasn't going to like, Archer braced himself before he asked, "Or?"

"Or we can convince her that actions speak louder than words."

"We?"

"You didn't think I'd let you have all the fun, did you?"

Archer took a deep breath and prayed for patience. "What did you have in mind?"

* * * * *

Janet looked up when the knock came at her door. For an instant, she believed it might be Archer, finally coming to talk to her after two weeks of silence. But she found Liam watching her instead. Though she tried not to show it, he must have picked up on her disappointment.

"Expecting someone else?"

Janet shook her head. "No, just surprised to see you. I thought everyone had gone home."

Liam circled around her desk. He settled his hip on the corner nearest her and cupped her cheek with his hand. "You haven't been sleeping well."

She hadn't been sleeping at all. Every time she closed her eyes, Archer's face came into focus. The way he looked as he was about to come. The love in his eyes when he'd opened them to find her in his arms after the cold emptiness of space. The heartbreaking sadness he wore when she refused to change her mind about their chances for a real relationship.

Had she been a fool to let him go?

It was no longer open to debate. Fool or not, Archer wanted nothing further to do with her. If he had, he would have tried to visit her by now. It just proved her point. The Zodiac could make anyone believe in love happily ever after, but there was no place for such fairytales in the real world.

"I have a lot of work to catch up on." She rubbed her stomach, trying to soothe the persistent ache.

"Nothing with a deadline of tomorrow morning." At her questioning glance, he added, "I checked."

"Still, there's prep work to do if I'm to meet the next one."

Liam swiveled her chair by the armrests so she had to face him. "He's not worth killing yourself over."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to this proposal."

She tried to turn back to the pile of papers on her desk, but Liam wouldn't let her. "Would you like to know what Archer is doing right now?"

"No."

As if she hadn't spoken, Liam continued, "He's in the Zodiac lab. Obsessed with his creation, like Dr. Frankenstein. He could be here with you instead of me, but he's chosen his lab over you. Is that the kind of man you want?"

God help her, she did. She loved the way Archer threw himself into whatever task he'd set, whether it be an aspect of the Zodiac or making her come. She knew she wouldn't always come out on top in a battle of his priorities. There were times she wouldn't be able to promise him the same. However, those moments in between, when they could wrap up in each other and forget about the rest of the world, would be well worth it.

If the love they'd expressed for each other in the Zodiac was real. But it wasn't. Why couldn't she let that go? "There's no future for us, so the question serves no purpose."

"Answer it anyway. Is Archer Tate the kind of man you'd want to spend the rest of your life with if you could?"

Though her throat was dry, her eyes overflowed with moisture. "Yes," she whispered.

"Oh, Janet, I'm sorry." Liam surrounded her with his strong arms.

As she cried out a bit of the emotion she'd been repressing, Janet wished she could dictate who possessed the key to her heart. Liam, she'd discovered, would be ideal. His compassionate nature suited her far better than Archer's often abrasive attitude. But as she gazed into Liam's eyes, she didn't feel anything beyond a deep affection. They'd never be more than friends.

She pulled out of his embrace and blew her nose. "Not your fault, Liam. Some things just aren't meant to be."

"Never say never." He smoothed his hand over her back.

Not wanting to argue over something she couldn't change, Janet asked, "Did you come here just to check up on me?"

"Yes, in part."

"What's the other part?"

Liam returned to his perch on her desk. "Archer needs you to test another scenario."

Her heart skipped a beat. Archer needed her!

Even before the elation blossomed, she was cursing herself for getting so happy about being used. "I thought he identified the problem with the abrupt terminations."

"He did. He's spent the last two weeks in the lab correcting the problem. He's confident he's got it licked, but only you can say for sure."

Dreaming again. Dreaming with Archer. Could she do it? "I don't know if that's such a good idea. Couldn't Frannie do it?"

"She's working on something with Houston. A confidential project that no one is talking about. I get the feeling she won't be available for a while. Besides, you're the one

with the gift for triggering orgasmic anomalies. You really need to be the one to give it the stamp of approval."

Liam was right. It was cowardly of her to halt progress on the project because she feared what it would do to her heart to make love with Archer again. This would likely be her last chance at true love, even if it was only an illusion. "Tell me when and where."

Chapter Twenty

Written in the Stars

The last golden rays of daylight spilled over the green hills in front of her. A scattering of yellow buttercups waved in the evening breeze. Amidst a dense cropping of them, a picnic dinner had been set. Wine chilled in a bucket of ice. Finger food – fruit, vegetables and thick slices of ham – had been removed from the wicker basket and spread out on the patchwork quilt.

Only one thing missing. The bugs.

Her halter dress – blue gingham, for crissakes – squeezed her waist as she climbed to the top of the nearest rise. She gazed out over the empty valley, a vista that didn't exist in any corner of the globe. It was hard to remember that none of this was real.

A sudden breeze ruffled the curls at the base of her neck, almost as if someone was tickling her, trying to get her attention. *Archer.*

"Nice night for a picnic," she said, wishing she had the courage to turn around. She loved Archer. Could she really leave him once the Dream was over? The answer seemed so clear a few hours ago. Now she didn't feel nearly as confident.

"Nice?" Warm lips kissed her spine, between her shoulders.

Apparently her dress didn't have much of a back to it, despite its prim front. Knowing he stood so close, she leaned back a little and was rewarded with a warm embrace. "Yeah, nice. Very...country."

"Country." Archer's flat tone had her smiling. "Would you prefer something more rock and roll?"

He spun her out of his arms, then reeled her back in. A dance move that left her giggling as he gathered her up in his arms. But as soon as she met his eyes, the emotion she saw there stole her breath.

Love.

Archer loved her.

At least this Archer did.

Slowly his hands drew up her sides, brushing the sides of her breasts on their journey to her jaw. He cupped her face with both hands. "Janet?"

"Yes?" Her heart was beating so fast she feared she might pass out. She couldn't let that happen. Especially not now when they were trying to prove the Zodiac no longer short-circuited at her command. "Maybe we should eat something."

For a second he froze, as if he'd been smacked in the face by a stunning revelation. One he didn't particularly care for. Still, he brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips. "You want to eat? Now?"

Janet nodded. Her stomach was a bundle of nerves. Adding food to the mix might help.

"Okay." Archer let her go.

Instantly she felt chilled. Goose bumps broke out over her bare skin. Her nipples puckered too, but that had an entirely different cause.

Archer wore jeans, the kind that had been faded to a velvet softness by a thousand washings. A tight black t-shirt stretched over his broad chest. His bare biceps bulged where the short sleeves had been turned back. Fingers of wind ruffled his dark wavy hair. He looked sexy, and sweet. And entirely too fuckable for her self-control.

Smiling as if he could read the thoughts crossing her mind, he sat on the edge of the picnic blanket and invited her to take a seat beside him. Once she settled down, he extracted a sweater from one of the hampers and laid it over her shoulders. It was identical to the one he'd been wearing at Cyr Castle.

"Comfortable?"

Hell, no. She now understood the old adage about being as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Since ignoring her attraction to Archer hadn't worked to calm her nerves, it was time to face it head-on.

"Come here," she purred, leaning toward him.

Archer met her halfway. Like a gulp of champagne on an empty stomach, he went straight to her head, making her feel dizzy. She swayed toward him. His strong arms closed around her, giving her balance and support.

"I've got you," Archer murmured.

Janet had no doubt about that. She took one more nip at his lips, then gently pushed him away. As she busied herself with filling a plate for each of them, she asked, "So how was your day, dear?"

Archer laughed. "Dear? I know you have more original names for me than that."

"I was trying to stick to the script." She took a bite of ham.

"What script?"

"This is a Dream, so there's got to be a script, right? This setting has a June Cleaver feel to it, so I improvised."

Archer accepted the plate she'd handed him. "There is no script. No plot. Not even a theme."

Now she was really confused. "I thought we came on this Dream to test the fix. See if I could break it. How are we going to do that if there's no scenario to run?"

"We don't need a lot of bullshit when we both know we're just here for sex, do we?"

Those words triggered an eruption of red fury inside her. Had he learned nothing? "How dare you—"

Laughing, he tackled her, pinning her arms and legs to the ground with his weight. "Gotcha!"

Her body shivered under the warmth reflected in his gaze. She steeled herself against it, trying to stay focused on the mission. "Are you saying I was invited here under false pretenses? I mean, if you fixed the problem, then you don't really need me."

Archer's expression turned serious. "I do need you, Janet. Every second of every day."

He settled his mouth over hers, kissing her sweetly. Inside, Janet's heart wept from the love he poured into it. How she wanted this man! Physically, sure. But also emotionally, and in every other way. She wanted to keep him in her life as permanently as he was etched into her soul.

Janet ran her hands over the sculpted muscle of his back. Her thighs hugged his hips, bringing his thickening erection against her anxious pussy. She arched against him. The intimate contact released a fresh wave of desire into her bloodstream. No one else had rocked her senses so thoroughly. Only Archer. Forever Archer.

"Janet," Archer said, his voice hoarse. "Let me make love to you?"

Oh, the man had learned his lesson well. He no longer took her avid participation as a blanket consent. There was something to be said for spontaneity, but this time his question promised more sexual delight than any other fantasy she could dream up. Here he was giving her the words she'd never hear back in the real world. A gift she couldn't refuse.

"Yes, Archer. I want that. Very much."

Without letting go of her gaze, he shifted his weight to the side. His deft fingers unfastened the button behind her neck and drew the straps down, revealing her body to his hungry gaze. His palm caressed the soft skin of her belly. His light touch tickled, causing her to giggle.

His hand moved up to cup her jaw. "Such a beautiful sound."

Janet captured his wrist, brought it to her mouth where she could plant kisses on his skin. Not satisfied with that small taste of him, she licked his index finger from knuckle to nail, then took it inside her mouth. She suckled it, swirled her tongue over it.

Archer groaned. "That feels good, but I have something I think you'll like even better."

He tried to tug his hand out of her grasp, but she had other ideas. "So do I."

Janet guided his hand down her body. The scrap of lace covering her pussy already bore evidence of her arousal. She slipped his hand underneath the material, pressing his fingers into her wet folds. The first contact between his finger and her clit sent an electric jolt through her body. Instinctively she tilted her hips to give him better access.

Archer, the good, obedient boy that he had become, pushed a cream-slickened digit into her tight channel.

"Yesssss," she hissed, delighting in the erotic invasion.

"Show me your breasts," Archer demanded.

Eager for his attention on those aching buds, Janet peeled away the stick-on cups so that the satin cups of her bra fell away. A slight breeze, her old lover, licked the tips. She palmed them, cupped them, trying to entice Archer to suckle and ease their ache.

"I love it when you're wanton," he told her, rewarding her with a second digit inside her pussy.

His words only half penetrated the lusty haze clouding her brain. "Archer, please fuck me."

"Gladly, and soon. But first, you have to be ready for me."

"I am, I am."

Her breath hitched as he curled his fingers inside her. Her body stretched to accommodate him. She lifted her hips off the blanket, trying to force him to go deeper. He moved with her, instead of resisting. "I won't rush this," Archer told her.

"But I'm ready. And willing, in case you haven't noticed." She didn't bother to keep the note of irritation out of her voice. She wanted to feel his cock inside her, filling her completely. She wanted to feel him thrusting. Hard and fast and deep. Why wouldn't he *fuck* her?

"Relax, baby. I won't leave you unsatisfied."

As if to seal his promise, Archer ground against her clit with the pad of his thumb. Waves of pleasure rolled over her, each one causing her internal muscles to flex around his fingers. Janet pinched her nipples, adding to her enjoyment. His hot, wet tongue would feel better, but since he didn't seem inclined...

"Give me one of those."

Archer nudged her hand out of his way with his nose. His tongue snaked out and laved her taut nipple. He began to move his hand, rocking his palm over her pussy as his fingers glided in and out of her channel.

Janet moaned, holding his head to her breast. Her hips pumped in counterpoint to his hand. His digits penetrated deeper, but it still wasn't completely satisfying. She wanted more. She wanted their bodies joined so completely that they'd never again be separate entities.

Archer licked her breast. Not just the rosy bud, but the entire mound. Then he sucked it into his mouth, drawing on it almost to the point of pain. He let go of it with a pop, then subjected its twin to the same treatment.

Tension began to coil low in her belly. The first warning tingles of orgasm spread through her limbs, making her body tremble.

"Come for me, Janet," Archer urged her. "Let me feel you fall apart."

Janet replied through clenched teeth. "Not now, not like this."

"*Exactly* like this, my love. For me."

Though his request made little sense, it soon became a purely academic point. Climax slammed through her body. She arched upward, pressing her body to his in any way he would allow.

"That's it, baby. Let it all go."

He kept finger-fucking her until the aftershocks became too intense for her to bear. She pushed his hand away then, gasping for air. "Why?"

"Because I know I won't last long once I'm inside you, and I wanted to make sure you had one hell of a ride first."

That explanation was so totally Archer that she giggled in between shallow breaths. "All right. Now what?"

Archer shifted until he was kneeling beside her. In one smooth move, he pulled his t-shirt off. Under it, his skin was gorgeously tan. Janet sat up and started attacking the snap at the waist of his jeans. "That's more like it."

"I'm going to remind you of that when you complain because I failed to last longer than two seconds inside you."

Archer slid her dress off her arms and gently nipped her bare shoulder. As he kissed his way up the smooth column of her neck, Janet lowered the zipper. His full cock fell out into her waiting hand with no underwear to get in the way. She stroked its hot length, smiling when he groaned.

"One second. Maybe."

"A big, strong guy like you," Janet said, sliding the soft material over his rounded bottom and down his thighs, "must have more control than that."

"Not where you're concerned," Archer growled.

He pushed her onto her back, with just enough force to let her know he meant for her to stay there. The jeans came off in a flash, tossed aside to disappear in the tall grass. He slapped her hip, leaving behind an arousing sting. "Turn over. I want your ass in the air."

"I don't think so." Her protest was more to drive him wild than any real desire to object.

"You had your ride, now I want mine. If you don't like the way I do it, then opt out." He waited, glaring. She made no move to comply. Finally, he crawled up her body until he met her nose to nose. "Please, Janet."

She couldn't resist him when he begged so sweetly. She gave him a smacking kiss before turning over on her belly.

"On your knees." The space of several heartbeats passed before Archer added, "Please."

She adjusted her position as he'd requested, and he drew her panties off to expose her ass. Again a cool rush of air caressed the dark curls between her legs. The chill was quickly replaced by warm, moist breath.

Startled, Janet looked down between her breasts to see the top of Archer's head resting between her legs. "Archer! What are you doing?"

"This." He licked her pussy from clit to anus and back. "Oh, yeah."

Janet might have responded, if she was capable of speech. But the sensations rippling through her body left no room for thought. She sagged against his hungry mouth and let him feast.

Archer placed his hands on her ass and positioned her right where he wanted her. He thrust his tongue into her. She could feel him licking her sopping walls. She tried her best to let him know how his efforts were pleasing her. "That's...oh...yes...uhmm...God!"

His chuckle vibrated against her clit. Then he took the small nub between his teeth and sucked, hard. Orgasm clawed her from the inside out. This time Janet couldn't keep the scream inside. She howled her pleasure, her fingers burrowing into grass as her body bent in spasms. She writhed, drawing out her pleasure as long as possible.

When she sagged with exhaustion, Archer pushed her hips down, guiding her to straddle his waist. As her sensitive nipples scraped over his chest, Janet thought she could take no more. These two climaxes were the best she'd ever had. If this didn't shut down the Zodiac's program, nothing would. "Congratulations, Dr. Tate. I believe you've solved your problem."

"Only half of it," Archer said.

In her post-coital haze, she'd forgotten that Archer was still waiting for his fifteen seconds of glory. "Give me just a moment to recover and then I'll take care of you."

He rolled her over and settled between her legs. He brushed the sweaty locks from her face with a touch so tender it brought tears to her eyes. "That's what I want, Janet. For you to take care of me. And for me to take care of you. Always."

Always. Always in the Zodiac world only lasted as long as the drugs used to put her in this state lasted. Hours at best. The tears started falling in earnest then. To avoid a protracted conversation that would solve nothing, Janet cupped the back of his head and urged him to meet her halfway in a passionate kiss.

Archer entered her in one slow thrust. Her lax muscles quickly accommodated his girth. She sighed with contentment. This is what she'd been craving. This feeling of completeness.

He rocked into her, the head of his cock reaching the entrance to her womb. "Tell me you love me."

Her body was awash with mind-numbing pleasure. Only a fragment of sanity remained. She shook her head, unwilling to give him that last bit of herself.

"Damn it, woman, say it! I know you do!"

The words she'd been keeping trapped behind her compressed lips slipped out at his urging. "I'm yours, Archer. You complete me in ways I never imagined possible."

His triumphant howl signaled his climax. Hot seed bathed her inner walls, and triggered her own release. As her third orgasm overtook her body, Janet wasn't surprised to see the edges of her vision darkening. Without a fight, she gave herself up to the encroaching darkness...

Chapter Twenty-One

Dreams Can Come True

She didn't quite believe him, Archer figured. That's why Janet continued to lay still as a statue with her eyes tightly shut. He caressed the side of her beautiful face, his cock still inside her. "It's okay, honey. The world didn't end. Open your eyes."

"It didn't?"

She was awake, but not yet ready to face what that meant. Liam had been so right about her. That irked him a bit. But in time he would learn her needs and desires every bit as well as the psychologist. "Nope. Sorry to disappoint. I told you I fixed the bug."

Janet looked up at him, her big brown eyes reflecting her inner confusion. "But the world went dark."

"A good orgasm will do that," Archer informed her.

"Congratulations."

Something was very, very wrong here. Archer expected more than this flat response. But she was shoving at his shoulder, trying to get out from under him. Archer backed off.

Janet got to her feet and started dressing. Her jerky, quick movements made the process more difficult. "How do we get out of here?"

Archer rolled onto his side and propped his head up with his hand. It was hard for him to concentrate on the conversation. The setting sun backlit her lithe form, set her skin aglow. God, she was beautiful. "Wait for the program to run its course, or use the emergency exit. Probably hidden in some tree since there're no doors here."

"You said there's no scenario. How does Zodiac know when to terminate the Dream?"

Archer reminded himself that although she'd had lots of Zodiac experience, very little of it was under normal conditions. "When the objective is met or when the Lead Dreamer signals that the Dream is over."

"Well? Game over." Janet looked around, trying to spot the escape hatch. "Game over!"

Archer scrambled to his feet. She was well and truly panicking now. He worried that his fix to the Zodiac might have created a different problem. "Janet, honey, calm down. There's no need to freak—"

"Don't call me honey! Don't pretend that I mean a damn thing to you! I played your stupid game. I saved your *fucking* career by being your sexual guinea pig. Now shut this Dream down and let me go home!"

Her breasts heaved with each outraged breath. Her dress still hung from the waist, exposing them to his sight, though she no longer seemed to care. Archer fought the distraction of those jiggling globes and concentrated on coming up with the right words to explain what Janet apparently didn't understand.

"You mean the world to me, Janet."

She scoffed. "Yeah, right. The Zodiac world."

"This one and every other."

"You're just saying that because you're Dreaming. Once we return to the real world, you won't feel that way anymore."

"Won't I?" He paused for a moment, concentrating on the one thing that might change her mind. "We're meant to be together, Janet. Our fate is written in the stars."

Janet glanced up to see the twilight sky. Amidst the black background, the stars spelled out the words, *I love you. Will you be mine forever?*

Instead of glowing with happiness, Janet looked defeated. Her voice was barely louder than the wind whispering through the trees ringing the clearing. "Now that my humiliation is complete, will you let me go?"

She still didn't understand. "My marriage proposal embarrasses you?"

"Your proposal?" Janet shook her head in denial. "This is my Dream. You can't manipulate the program."

Now she was finally getting it. She just had her facts backward. Archer got to his feet, wanting to kiss the pain away from her expression. But he couldn't, not yet. Not until she really understood he meant every word. "I'm the Lead on this one. Those words are mine."

"Why would you do that? How is that going to prove you fixed the problem? *My* problem?" She crossed her arms under her breasts, pushing them up.

His mouth salivated with desire to suck her nipples until she begged for mercy. Begged him for more. His cock was definitely in favor of that idea too. That was one of the problems with the Zodiac program. The Dream world was largely what one made it, and with Janet around it became a very sexual place.

Archer ignored his libido and spoke with his heart instead. "I realized after our Dream with Liam that it was your feeling of completion that triggered the disconnects. Through orgasm, you were telling the Zodiac that you needed nothing more, you were fulfilled. The logic functions interpreted that thoroughly satisfied feeling as a Stop command."

"Then why didn't it happen the first time you and I Dreamed?"

"I said *thoroughly* satisfied," Archer said. "That first time, I was only interested in technical results. Not very satisfying for you, I'm afraid."

"I still don't understand why you're running this show instead of me. What's that going to prove?"

Her voice had softened, so had her body language. Archer prayed she would continue to listen to him. She probably wasn't going to be too happy with him about this next bit. "Frannie ran through your first Dream and triggered the disconnect by projecting a sense of total completion during orgasm. I worked with John, a new programmer Houston hired, to correct the programming logic. We ran a few tests, proved the glitch had been fixed."

"You're not answering my question, Archer. You don't need me for your experiments anymore, so what am I doing here?"

He took another step toward her. Near enough to touch, but there was still an emotional distance he couldn't bridge. "The Zodiac now interprets any nonverbal command it doesn't clearly understand in a visible way." Archer looked up at the stars, still holding in their literal, unnatural configuration. "I wanted you to see what was in my heart. I didn't think I could convince you how much I love you any other way."

Janet bit her lip as her beautiful brown eyes welled up with tears. She seemed on the brink of running from him again, but instead she teetered forward and fell into his arms. Her tears fell quietly as she snuggled against him. "Oh, Archer. What am I going to do with you?"

"Well, you could always marry me." He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"This feels like a dream," Janet said.

"Does that mean yes?"

"It means..." She stepped out of his embrace, uncertainty still stamped on her face. "It means you need to ask me back home. In the real world. Where it counts."

"I tried, you didn't believe me." Damn it, that's why he'd staged this whole thing. So she'd know how much he cared. He laid his heart out in front of her and everyone on the Zodiac Team. Stripped himself as naked as she had been during her involvement in the project. Wasn't that enough?

"It's so easy to fall in love with you here," Janet told him. "You're sweet, unreserved. Outside the Zodiac you're not the same man. You hide your feelings. I know what's in your heart now, but I need to know you'll let your day-to-day self feel the same way. I can't live with a man who keeps part of himself hidden from me."

So that was it then. That was his only option. So be it. "Zodiac, Dream over."

* * * * *

Janet wasn't sure what to expect when she opened her eyes. Certainly the Zodiac Chamber with its sterile white walls and the liquid lead feeling in her limbs. The big question mark was Archer. Would he understand her needs? Did he love her enough to make himself vulnerable to her? To face possible rejection?

She wasn't kept in suspense for long.

"Janet?" It was a pale imitation of Archer's usually strong voice. "Will you —"

The intercom buzzed, then delivered Frannie's bright voice. "Congratulations, guys! The champagne is chilling. We'll have you out of there in no time, then you can celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Janet asked.

"Oh, shit. Houston said the batch file... Never mind. I'll get you out of there ASAP, 'cause I'm just dying to know what happened between you two."

"No." Archer's voice was louder. Clearer. Closer.

Janet turned her head to see Archer swaying beside her Dream bed. She scrambled, at the fastest pace her leaden limbs would allow, to make room for him. "Lay down before you fall down, Archer."

Stubbornly, he shook his head. His naked body glistened with sweat, the evidence of how much effort it was taking for him to stay on his feet. "Stay out until I give the command, Frannie."

"No way," Frannie protested. "You guys need —"

"Zodiac, Master Override 31371."

Janet realized, with a slight shock, that the command number corresponded to her birthday. Coincidence? Or, perhaps, another indication of how much she was on Archer's mind.

Suddenly Archer sagged, dropping to his knees. Janet leaned over, trying to see what had happened to him. "Frannie, get in here. Now. Archer just collapsed!"

"I can't," Frannie replied, her voice tight with worry. "His command locked us out."

A cold, sweaty palm landed on top of Janet's left hand. "Will you —" He used that grip to pull himself up a little higher. "Will you marry me?"

With a shaky hand, he pulled a sapphire and diamond ring off his right pinkie. He held it out to her. Janet felt her heart squeeze with pure joy. "You really mean it?"

"I'm sure as hell not down on my knees to scrub the floor." He grimaced. "Okay, minus one for me in the romance department. The question remains. I love you, Janet. I love you inside the Zodiac and out. I love the way your eyes get all dark and flinty when you want to hit me for doing something stupid. I love the way your body melts against mine when we make love. I love your stubborn chin and your warm heart. I love everything about you, Janet. I can't stand the thought of opening that door without knowing you'll be in my life. For good. So, how about it? Will you marry me?"

Salty tears made it almost impossible for her to see his face clearly. She spread out her hand so he could slide the ring into place. "Yes, Archer. I'll marry you."

Cheers went up, reminding Janet that they had more unseen observers than just her friend. She didn't care. She was ready to face the world and whatever Dreams may come.

About the Author

Kira Stone lives in a warm, many-chambered cave tucked away in the Scottish Highlands. A diverse group of ever-changing beings keeps her company. As they relax in front of a roaring fire, devils dance her delight and angels sing her bawdy songs. Faerie folk often stop in for a cup of mulled wine and to listen to her tell passion-filled stories. If you look in the dark shadows, you might even find a sexy human hanging around too. And when daylight turns to dusk, together they somehow find a way to keep the cold, uncaring world at bay for another night...

Okay, maybe not. LOL.

When multi-published author Kira Stone isn't living in a fantasy world, she's writing about one from her ordinary house in Ohio with a few feline companions (who don't sing nearly as well as the angels do). Is it any wonder she prefers the cave?

Kira welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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