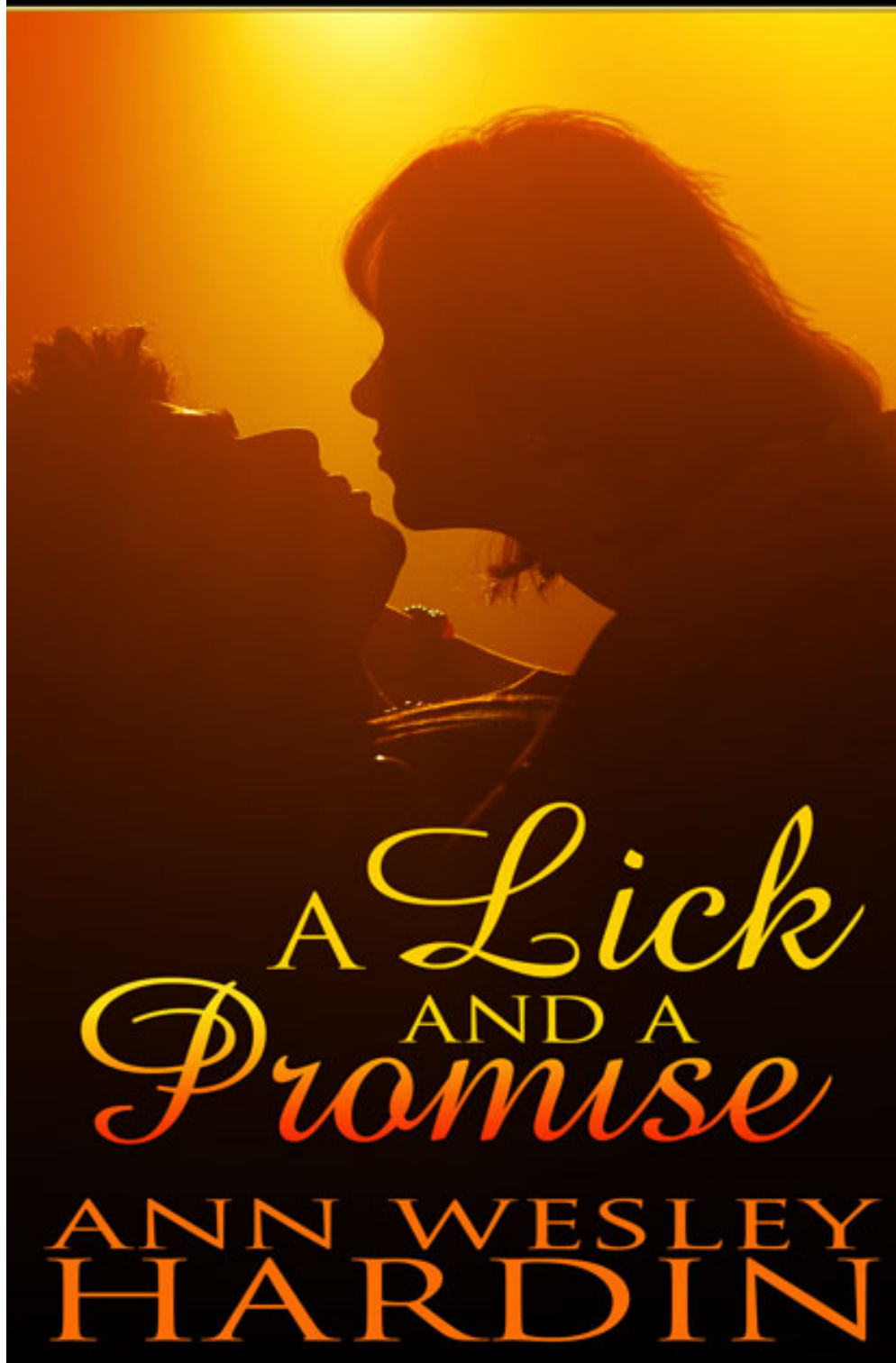


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A Lick and a Promise

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A LICK AND A PROMISE

Ann Wesley Hardin

Dedication

For Bron, whose utter brilliance was instrumental in brainstorming this plotline.

For Liz, Sunny, Cearha and Rae, for waking me up and grilling me thoroughly at the Bat-B-Q that night. Yes, I still have the transcript. You will suffer for that someday soon.

For Jane, who listened to every wandering, nebulous detail of my early thoughts on this book and then gave me Penny and Poppy.

And for Christine, whose final, brutal critique made me seek and find my missing middle. Don't try this at home, boys and girls.

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Prologue

The phone rang. She answered it. Frantic, garbled voices on the other end. Something unspeakable. A tragedy.

She doubled over, screaming. Then she collapsed, shattering on the floor, fragments of her soul flying out in all directions.

You're sleeping. It's a nightmare. Wake up.

But she couldn't. Her arms and legs wouldn't move.

She screamed again, a hollow, internal wail no one heard. Suction at the top of her head. Skeletons and gargoyles danced 'round her feet.

Wake up.

She reached out sluggishly, scrabbling for purchase. This nightmare had become a mainstay—one she would never wake up from—but lately she'd found a way to cope. A place to go to get away from it all.

Help me. I need you.

A bright orange light filled the room, her limbs shuddering as it wrapped around her. Her brain swelled and unlatched, its life energy reaching out of her body in tendrils and into the mysterious void. Then her whole spirit followed, propelled upward and into the light, far from all worldly concerns. She floated on her back, suspended in space, outside of her body yet hyper aware of all feeling and sensation.

Within seconds, a man loomed behind her, large and imposing, like a guardian angel. He arched over her and his hands wandered everywhere. Stroking, fondling, petting her flesh. But not really her flesh—more a weird combination of cells and soul. He licked up her body and caught a nipple between his teeth, nipping gently, sending her into a keening vortex of pleasure while his fingers parted her labia.

With great reverence, he mouthed each breast, rolling his tongue along the areolas, cupping them in warm, open lips and pausing to gaze at each one as if he'd never seen a breast before.

"Who are you?" She murmured.

He buried his face between them, pushing them up against his cheeks. "Does it matter?" Several deep, lingering breaths gusted out of his chest. Taut muscles loosened and he laid his ear over her thudding heart.

"No."

His face was unformed, nebulous, yet she realized he spoke without moving his lips—the low, soothing words of a lover. The timbre of his voice wove in and out of her body, vibrating her organs as if she herself were speaking, massaging her soul into

relaxation. "I found you." He sounded awestruck, as if he'd searched a long, long time. As if he'd never expected such a gift.

"I'm so glad," she murmured. As long as he gentled her by avidly worshipping every millimeter of her body, exploring every crevice and fold, hill and valley, then eagerly tasting them afterward, who wouldn't be?

"You're my food. I need you." His fingers whispered around her crevice, slipping inside, bending and swirling along alert tissues. "So soft, so beautiful."

She arched into his touch and spread her legs farther, longing for more, while vaguely wondering what was going on. "I need you too."

She'd been in this world before. Most of the time, alone. Occasionally, she met others, communicated with friends, her cousin Trish. It seemed to be a compartment in her brain where she worked on issues that were bothering her, made amends or simply reached out for those she loved dearly and those she missed desperately. A safe haven.

But suddenly, it'd become a romantic rendezvous point. A love shack of the mind.

He went to work on her, towering between her legs, one large hand cuddling her thigh while the other gripped his cock. Crouching, he nosed the head into the entrance of her vagina, rotating it in her creamy fluid until it was slippery and fully engorged. Using her gentle suction to keep it in place, he braced himself high, hands on either side of her head, his face slightly above and obscured.

The stiff tip of his cock slid against her clit, focused and clean, and he began humping gently against it without penetrating her. Tip to tip. A patter of rain. So delicate and vivid and curiously intimate, she felt like he was tapping the pieces of her soul together with a sliver of glass.

Bringing her feet to her ass, she hoisted her hips to meet him ping for ping. They lay together, suspended in the ether, only two points bopping in a controlled, balletic fencing bout.

His abs and pecs shuddered, straining to hold back. She watched their undulations in fascination. She had never fucked such a fine specimen, and wondered briefly if he was the product of an overwrought mind or if he existed somewhere out there, available for a piece of real action.

She tried to see his face. Would she recognize him? Because normally she met people she knew here. But every time she looked, he turned it away or melted into soft candle wax or undefined mist. The body, however, remained crisp.

His shoulders were broad, square, their muscles well defined and powerful without a bodybuilder's bulk. He was a big man—not just physically, but also a forceful, awe-inspiring presence—long legged, ripped and solid as an ox. Again she thought of guardian angels. But they hardly went around fucking people. At least not in any religion she'd ever heard of. Speaking of fucking...

Pressing her clit against his head, she clutched his hard ass to hold it still and pivoted her hips. He countered in the opposite direction, creating a steady, mounting friction.

"Fuck me," she moaned. "I need you to fuck me."

His voice was tight. "Not yet. We hardly know each other."

The orange mist surrounding them vibrated with low-frequency chuckles.

"You have a unique way of introducing yourself."

"I try."

Their wide, lazy circles became smaller, tighter, narrowing down to a bull's eye. Her skin flushed and dampened from the singing nerves underneath as the tremors and twitches of approaching bliss consumed her.

"Come for me. I need to hear you," he groaned.

"Don't stop. Don't stop."

"Never. I'll never stop."

He dropped his forehead against hers and she braced against it, closing her eyes, clenching her teeth, coiling her abs to spring over the top.

Out of the corner of her lowering lids, Trish appeared, swaying like gossamer in a corner, frantically waving her arms. But when she focused, the vision had dissipated.

They pounded against each other, flesh sticky and aromatic with pungent desire. She hooked her feet over his rippling back, circling wildly on the pivot of his pre-cum-soaked head. Her pussy expanded and contracted. A ticklish stream of juice trickled out, lubricating her last remnant of control 'til it slipped out of sight.

"Come," he rasped.

"I am," she breathed. "You come too."

Beware! A shrill echo in the fog.

Trish? Her eyes flew open, head flew up and collided with his chest. A sharp magnetic scent hit her nose, a rustling, the snap of static electricity. But no one else was there. A chill coursed over her flesh, blended and enhanced all the other carnal sensations, and she surrendered herself to this dream lover and an insistent, relentless orgasm.

Chapter One

"He was there again this afternoon when I took a nap." Dove Hansen set down her frosty microbrew and stared across the table at Karen Elliot, her fencing partner. They'd just finished another Thursday night lesson at Salle Seattle and had come to the bar for their customary post-bout cold one. As usual, Karen looked cool and blonde, coiffed and clean, while Dove sat there with her brown, unruly shag dampened and matted from her fencing mask. How did some women get away with that? Sometimes, she hated Karen.

"So you're telling me there's this guy who comes and fucks you silly in your dreams," Karen snorted. "That takes *While You Were Sleeping* to a whole new sick height."

"Cut it out," Dove complained. "You're always saying I don't open up and share. That I don't know how to be a girl. But when I do, this is what I get." Which was, sadly, all too true. She didn't often gab about herself. Had no interest in discussions about hair, nails and the asshole-man-from-hell most women loved to do to death. All her life, she'd avoided the girl groups her cousin Trish used to drag her into and had sought friendships on an individual level. She preferred one on one to gaggles, and had a tendency to limit information about herself to a need-to-know minimum.

This was her attempt to bond. And Karen had to go and get sarcastic. Again.

"You're right, doll. I'm sorry." Karen patted her hand and took another sip, casting an eye over the bar at the handful of men who were studiously ignoring them. "These dreams have been going on for what, a month?"

"Six weeks."

Karen nodded and mulled.

But were they just dreams? Once in a while, Dove wondered. Especially after today, when she'd awakened lathered in a moisture that bore no resemblance to sweat. Her imaginary fuck buddy had been licking her stomach, working his way down, when suddenly he'd turned away, turned back, told her he had to go and faded.

Typically, this was the way their afternoon delight ended. Something would happen, his attention would waver and he'd be gone, leaving her frustrated and on the verge of cataclysmic orgasm, yet never quite attaining one.

"Okay. Tell me more about Casper the Fucking Ghost. Gimme the juicy bits."

"No."

"Come on!"

"No. It's too weird."

"Weird is my middle name."

Dove knew that. She laughed. With the exception of Penny and Poppy Pilgrim—the dotty great-aunts she lived with—the only weirder people in her orbit were Arnie and Ava Simpson—her employers.

A rocket scientist and a proctologist, they'd given birth to a majestic little man with a bountiful brain capacity. That little man, Michael Walker Simpson, was her charge. Only five years old and already studying calculus, he'd been reading since two—everything from comic books to physics manuals. And he could recite them all, word for word.

Dove figured, at the rate he soaked up knowledge, he'd be in college by ten. Technically, she was his nanny and tutor. But the kid didn't need anyone to teach him. Mostly she was there to guide his emotional development and make sure he didn't kill himself in the science lab Arnie'd set up in the garage.

In the ten years she'd taught the *crème de la crème* of the gene pool, he was the most gifted child she'd ever met. Possibly the most gifted ever born. Many geniuses suffered bumpy social lives, and Michael was no different. There was simply no one his age to understand—or tolerate—him so he didn't belong to any playgroups. Dove wanted to expose him to as many children as she could, though. "Speaking of weird, I'm going to enroll Michael in the kinderfencing group. He's already displayed an interest and I think he'd do well."

As luck would have it, she'd been researching other salles for Michael when the Maitre d'arms had casually mentioned the new youth program he intended to start. It would make her schedule a whole lot less hectic to enroll Michael there with her instead of charging all over the city for their different activities.

"How is the little oddball?"

"Uncontainable."

"The media hasn't gotten wind of his existence yet?"

"No, thank God." Arnie and Ava wanted him to have as normal a childhood as possible, out of the limelight and absent from doctors' bell curves. Not an easy task but an important one. Dove worked closely with them to ensure it and had an extravagant salary to show for it. Too bad she had no time to spend it.

"Look at that dopey expression. You love that little shit, don't you?"

Dove smiled. "Stop. So do you."

"Who wouldn't? I'm glad he's not the fruit of my loins, though."

"I hear ya." As much as she adored him, saying goodbye at the end of the day brought a relief so intense she often crashed. He made her so tired, her social life suffered. Not a good thing, but at least she still had the energy to fence twice a week—as long as she had an afternoon nap. And that hadn't been too restful lately, thanks to Dream Lover.

By no means an expert on imaginary friends-with-benefits, it still seemed to Dove that the guy was insatiable. Maybe he wasn't getting any in real life either and had to

resort to accosting her in the ether. Like her. But could she really call them *dreams*? They seemed more like hallucinations, with conversations and everything.

What was going on here?

Every day it began the same way. She'd lie down on the sofa in her room and close her eyes. As her body sank into that drugged, comatose state where she could hear but not move, a light would explode behind her lids and her muscles would convulse with surges of electricity.

She'd always reckoned her nerves were shorting out, that her body had extra energy to release, much like the twitches most people had as they fell asleep. But now she began to wonder if the phenomenon had anything to do with sleep at all. She was too aware and the visions too vivid. She could see, talk, smell, hear and above all, feel everything.

So far, however, she hadn't gotten a good look at his face. He typically hovered just to the side of her field of view and when she turned her head to look at him, he'd dodge her and laugh.

"Well, I think these experiences you're having are just symptoms of a woman badly in need of a good lay. How long has it been?"

"Since Peter Pump-and-eat-her?" The guy who had only one method for sex. Good question. Dove had stopped counting at three months. She didn't like to focus energy on what her life lacked, preferring to count her blessings most of the time. Still, a body had its needs. And Dove had her standards to meet those needs. So far, she hadn't met anyone she felt compelled to spread for.

A few of Peter's friends had asked her out after their breakup—underlining how casual that relationship had truly been—and she'd gone. She'd been willing to try. But even as she did, Dream Lover's visits had increased in frequency, endurance and intensity until she could almost taste him on her tongue and had begun to prefer him.

Time to do some research on the phenomenon perhaps. Or to see a psychiatrist.

"My brother is always willing to pinch hit, he told me." Karen smirked and took a sip of beer. "He digs your baby blues, do-me hair and jiggly ta-tas."

"I'll keep him in mind," Dove giggled.

"You've got that slightly edgy, goth-girl-lite thing going on. Drives him ga-ga."

She flipped her tragus ring back and forth. "At least he appreciates my *individuality*." Maybe Karen was right and this was her body begging her mind for some desperately needed sex. Maybe she'd give Karen's brother a call and get herself a real, flesh and blood fuck buddy.

Silently, she wondered if he could possibly compare.

* * * * *

Probabalist Anthros loped through darkened yards in a densely populated Seattle neighborhood. Behind, he still smelled the stench of irradiated metal and melted bird-

shit where he'd landed his cruiser. The acrid odor seemed to trail out in a comet tail wake and although he owed it entirely to an overwrought imagination, he feared it would lead them to him.

Could he be more exhausted? His voyage to Earth had taken the better part of five years as he'd zigzagged across the solar system, dodging Queen Win's Markarian spooks and others who would detain, if not hurt him.

Finally, he'd landed and could at long last contact the network. They were nearby. He could vaguely sense them. He'd have to get some rest, though, to recharge his telepathic acuity and home in on their exact location.

Finding them was critical. They'd have money for him, supplies, an Earthling identity and a place to live. After all, they'd been expecting him for years now and during that time, had carefully crafted him his very own human history.

They also might have information on the current whereabouts of his test stock—the Simpsons. He'd risked his ass getting those two specimens to mate, and word had reached him that they'd completed a successful spawning. Queen Win's henchmen would find the offspring too unless Anthros got there first. He'd already made contact. In dreams. It was a start.

More than anything, he needed that child. The bastard of two nations, his interspecies experiment, the most superior life form ever engineered...

And his people's last hope.

His head started spinning, so he stopped next to a neatly manicured, tiny house and braced a hand against the wall to steady himself. The oxygen-laden air curled through his lungs and hit his brain like opium. He'd get used to it, he knew. His body had been genetically altered to acclimate. But the renewal process—triggered by the oxygen-rich atmosphere—would take a few days, possibly weeks. Until then, he'd be woozy, confused and vulnerable. That's why he needed to find his human protectors...the network...after he lay down...for a minute...

His head lolled and he spied a burly hedge. The perfect hiding spot. He lunged sloppily toward it with large, heavy steps—and crashed into some squat metal tubes. The clatter barely registered in his consciousness. He was going down more quickly than he thought.

Spinning away from the sound, he became entangled in a couple of hanging metal chains. He cursed and swatted himself free.

With a sigh, he settled onto the soft grass at the edge of the shrubbery, rolled under the thick brush and closed his eyes.

Sleepy lust nipped the edges of his body and he grimaced. There would be nothing fun to wake up to. After half a decade alone in his ship, he could use a nice piece of ass in the morning. Too bad a quick, hard fuck was totally out of the question. His former comrades and brethren would find him if he indulged. The scent of sex pulled them like light to a black hole.

Oh well, there was always the other way. The way he'd used with increasing desperation the closer he'd gotten to Earth.

With the release of a deep breath, he let loose the shackles 'round his mind and journeyed out to the center of the universe to seek *her* again.

* * * * *

"Sleep is a waste," Michael declared as Dove tucked him in for the night. "There's lots to do."

Smiling down at the five-year-old, she petted his forehead and perched her butt on the edge of the mattress. "I know, sweetie. There's just not enough time, is there?"

He gazed blearily up at her and stifled a yawn. "Mother says time is imaginary. So it can't be time for me to go to bed."

"Nice try, rocket man. Go to bed."

"But it's Friday."

"Not if time doesn't exist."

Inquisitive bronze eyes widened and a button nose twitched before a smile curved his precious mouth. "Score," he said and his eyelids fluttered shut.

A huge metallic crash outside made them fly open again. He bolted upright. Laika, his Belgian Malinois and four-legged familiar, shifted from a curled-up wad on the bed and lifted her black snout.

Crap, Dove thought. *Seconds from a clean getaway*. It wasn't that he was a pest, or trouble of any sort, really, but Michael was quite simply the most exhausting child she'd ever mentored. Normally, Dove had the entire afternoon and evening to rest and recharge from tutoring him all day, but tonight Arnie and Ava had a date. Since the local teenagers had such a hard time handling the miniature man, Dove frequently acted as babysitter too.

"What was that?" Michael asked.

She shrugged and moved to the window, peering through her reflection in the glass. "Probably a cat hitting a trash can. Or a raccoon." She turned back in time to see Michael's chubby fingers signing a question to Laika.

Friend or foe?

Arnie and Ava had taught Michael sign language as an infant. A complete waste of time, as it turned out, since he'd been talking since one. Now he was tutoring Laika. Also a waste of time. The dog was downright psychic.

Had Dove not been long accustomed to odd people, she'd have been totally freaked by the Simpson clan.

Laika took a second to process Michael's question, then rolled an eye to the window. After a moment, her tail thumped against the mattress.

"If it was a raccoon or a cat, she'd bark," Michael said. "She hates other animals. She wagged her tail."

"Well, maybe it was the neighbor putting out the trash," Dove said. "She likes Mrs. Connor."

"Trash collection is on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

Dove closed her eyes, drew a deep breath and mentally counted to ten. *Go to bed. Please, please go to bed.*

"I know. You're tired, so I have to go to bed." Michael plopped back down and Dove's eyes flew open. Laika stared at her and her tail thumped three more times. "You too," she told the dog. Laika let out a martyred sigh.

"It's gusty tonight," she said, reaching out to smooth a lock of dark hair off his forehead. "Witchy. Did you see the full moon?"

"It's not full," he whispered. "It's a waning gibbous."

"It's still pretty through the scudding clouds."

He nodded and his slender body twitched. Dove sat next to him until his breathing evened out. Peace at last. She switched off his lava lamp, signaled for Laika to follow her into the hallway and closed the door.

"Just you and me, poochie." They trotted down the stairs and into the kitchen. She tossed a biscuit into the dog's mouth and opened the fridge in search of a soda. Popping the tab, she headed into the living room to surf the cable movie lineup.

Well, what do you know.

ET the Extraterrestrial had just started. Dove shook her head in irony and sat down on the sofa to watch. Between juggling her crazy aunties—who ran a halfway house peopled with recovering alcoholics, white-collar criminals and lobotomized freaks who'd taken one too many shots of electric Kool-Aid—and Arnie Simpson's relatives, who scanned the heavens in search of UFOs, it seemed every path she took somehow circled back to alien life forms. Not that Dove believed in any of that claptrap. But most others in her orbit did. Why did smart people have to be so loony? Why couldn't they be normal, like her?

Dove had her fair share of IQ points, but she also had a practical nature. No one would ever catch her musing about the unseen, unlikely and unproven.

What about Dream Lover?

A brain fart. A hallucination. A descent into insanity?

Pick one of the above. Or none of them. She was horny. That's all. He didn't exist, and unless she started behaving like he did in her everyday life—making plans and getting pissy when he didn't show up, inviting him home to meet the fam, picking out curtains—then it was an innocent enough fantasy.

She watched as Elliot heard a noise and went outside to see the swing on his swing-set gliding back and forth. God, she loved the upcoming Reese's Pieces scene.

Another metallic sound split the night air. Along with a bellow of gobbledygook.

Laika hopped up from the floor and trotted to the back door. Her tail gyrated and she scratched at the glass. Must be Arnie and Ava returning early. Dove turned the sound down on the TV and opened the sliding door to greet them. Laika bounded into the shadows.

The back patio of the bungalow had a brick pathway leading to a single-car, detached garage. The Simpsons never used it to shelter their car, however. Instead, it contained an elaborate laboratory and mini-museum for Michael. It also served as a one-room schoolhouse. And no expense had been spared on supplies.

Dove glanced at the vacant driveway and shivered in the late spring breeze. Her gaze followed the outline of the garage and she spotted the two galvanized steel trashcans upended on their cement pads. She crossed over to set them right and in her periphery, something shifted.

The swing on Michael's swing-set.

It was *swinging*.

She froze. Adrenaline gushed into her blood. She shot a glance at the open patio door and every scene of every stupid, investigating girl in B horror flicks charged through her mind. *You weren't supposed to come out here, shithead!*

The hedge around the small property rustled. Dove swiveled toward it and saliva pooled in her mouth. No way was she turning her back on whatever lurked out there. Slowly, she edged onto the patio toward the door. *Stay calm. It's probably nothing. Where the hell is the dog?*

Laika trotted out of the shadows.

A breath hissed from Dove's chest and she brought shaky hands up to smooth her hair. Laika looked calm. No barking. No raised ridge on her back. "Come on, Laika. Inside."

The dog obeyed until a low whistle stopped her in her tracks.

"Mr. Connor?" Dove squawked. "Mr. Connor, is that you?" *Want some fucking Reese's Pieces?*

Silence.

"Quit with the pranks. You're scaring me." *M&Ms?*

Another whistle had Laika loping back toward the hedge. A strange, bluish glow backlit the leaves and a snapping, electrical sound echoed in the night.

A failing transformer? Dove didn't recall seeing one close by, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. Did transformers ever whistle? Something popped and a magnetic scent wrinkled her nose.

Laika hurtled out of the bushes, butt tucked up tight, ears back and a wild look in her eyes. Clearly something was wrong. She needed to call the electric company. Maybe the police. The cordless phone was inside. Dove spun on her heel.

"C'mere, Laika," a deep voice slurred.

Her spine undulated.

"C'mere, doggie. Nice doggie."

Laika wiggled like a belly dancer, front legs prancing. Dove's jaw dropped. She never acted this way. Not even when greeting Arnie and Ava. What was going on? Did the dog have a secret life? Another family?

"Who's there," Dove called. "Do I know you?" Must be some neighbor kid having fun at her expense. Innocent pranks were all well and good, but if the boy didn't reveal himself soon, she was going to be pissed.

The glow of headlights lit the pavement to her left and a red beemer hummed into the driveway. Thank God. Now she had some backup.

Arnie killed the engine. "Hey," he called as he and Ava slammed the doors and headed up the walkway.

"You're home early."

Arnie freed his signature sly grin. "The Prod Person got anxious and wanted to check in before the movie. Cell phone signal's scrambled. Everything all right?"

How'd she know? Again. As usual, Ava looked stunning, the watery light from the moon making her white hair gleam. The night sky always softened her, the velvety atmosphere wrapping her in dewy blanket that made Dove think of mermaids in a fish tank.

She waved a hand. "Oh, fine. The usual. But someone's behind the hedges teasing the dog. Also, I think a transformer went. I heard a snapping noise and saw a weird blue halo."

"A blue halo?" Ava stiffened. She scanned the hedges, green eyes swiveling randomly until they seemed to focus on one spot.

Arnie glanced at her. "No transformers around here," he muttered. "Who's teasing the dog?"

"Some kid, probably. Male. Sounded kinda drunk."

They all looked at Laika, sitting in the middle of the grass, her back to them, head cocked and ears alert.

"She didn't bark," Dove added. "Seemed very excited, in fact. I was just heading inside to phone the police when you came home."

"Don't call the police," Ava snapped uncharacteristically. "I don't think he means any harm." She and Arnie stared at each other. Dove watched their faces.

Of the many unsettling qualities they possessed, this one often gave Dove chills. They seemed to communicate on some wordless level. As if through telepathy. Or maybe through microscopic changes of expression too small for an unfamiliar eye to detect. In the end, it didn't matter how they did it. It was the fact that they could that got to her.

Jealousy stabbed her heart. She'd kill to have that kind of deep soul connection with a man. So far, at thirty, it had eluded her.

She'd had plenty of relationships, some good, some bad, most of them bordering on indifferent—Peter Pump-and-eat-her being a prime example. The aunties scolded her all the time about her failure to mate. Said her standards were impossibly high and threatened her with spinsterhood, like them.

Perhaps they were right. Dove didn't know. What she did know, however, was that she had no intention of settling. There were certain unshakable qualities she wanted in a husband—high intelligence, high sex drive and high income, to name a few. If no one ever turned up possessing them, so be it. She'd be a spinster. Too bad that idea depressed the hell out of her.

"I'll go investigate," Arnie said. "I suggest you stay here."

"But the electricity—"

"Probably some atmospheric phenomenon," Ava said. "Geomagnetic storm, Aurora Borealis, maybe."

Not that Dove knew of. She would've given Michael a redundant lesson on it. "You couldn't get a cell phone signal?"

Ava shook her head. "Satellite radio in the car is messed up too."

Well, perhaps Ava was right and it was an aurora. They were visible once in a while from Seattle. Dove lifted her face to scan the skies. The bright moon and marine clouds would interfere with a viewing and she didn't spot any telltale waves. No sense waking Michael up for nothing.

"Are you from the network?" a slurred voice cried out.

The two women stiffened and squinted into the shadows.

"Nah, I'm a geek from Boeing," Arnie said, a smile in his tone. For the last four years he'd been subcontracted to design a new, commercial super-jet and was currently overseeing construction up in Everett.

"You smell like a Markarian."

Ava gasped and her hand shot to her throat. Dove suffered another adrenaline gush. "What do you think he means?"

"Hush," Ava hissed.

Oh Boy. Possessed with the patience of a saint, Ava never snapped. Tonight it'd happened twice. She definitely knew more or suspected more than she let on.

"I suggest your sniffer isn't working too well at the moment," Arnie chuckled. "Come on. I'll help you up."

The hedges danced and rustled and two shapes, one small yet powerful and the other large and imposing, staggered into the light.

Dove froze at the sight of the magnificent stranger. Wide, muscled shoulders and a broad expanse of sculpted chest topped a slightly leaner waist. Her rapt gaze traveled over straight, agile hips and dragged endlessly south over a hard-boiled length of leg before returning to a head curtained in seal-sleek, straight black strands.

Even with his head bowed and his shoulder-length hair partially hiding them, she could make out exquisitely crafted features wrapped in swarthy, satiny flesh.

Her mouth watered and she swallowed hard. A snapshot of him naked, over her, spreading her and pumping into her barged, unwarranted and unasked, into her mind. He seemed somehow...familiar, though she'd never seen anyone like him. Or, at least, she amended, familiar to her suddenly pounding heart.

The fantasy dissipated quickly, though, as he leaned over and dry-heaved onto the grass.

Long-fingered hands braced his knees while wave after wave of fruitless nausea overcame him. Disgust rose in her throat and she glanced away, unwilling to throw up herself at the sight.

Obviously, he'd already gotten rid of the night's liquid drugs and was now in the throes of aftershocks. Unbelievable for a grown man. And such a shame. She would've loved to fuck him.

In morbid fascination, her eyes hopped back to his pathetic form. How could he possibly lower himself to a drunken binge and a nap in the shrubbery? And yet, in spite of his repellant display, he had an athletic, commanding air. Almost regal, like a warrior or a soldier.

He wore a loosely draped tunic of heavy, velvety fabric. Smudges of dirt and God-knew-what-else were smeared across the front and seemed to cover some sort of emblems or pattern. Nestled in the deep vee of the tunic's neckline, a thick silver chain, weighted by a large medallion, glittered amongst thatches of chest hair.

His gorgeous legs were encased in a leather-like substance—badly wrinkled and straining at the seams. What was that around his waist? A tool belt? Perhaps he'd come from a wild costume party.

"Anthros!" Ava yelped.

The man's head shot up and unfocused eyes drew a bead on her. "D'ya know me?"

"I mean, I mean...Arianos," she stuttered. "Um. *Mark* Arianos! What. Are. You. Doing here?"

The man cocked his head. "Is that my identity?"

Dove shook her head. He didn't even remember his own name.

"Yes. And drunk again, I see," Ava shrilled.

He listed, caught himself and pointed to the house. "Is this my new home?"

Un-freakin'-real.

"You can stay here as long as you need to. It's the least I can do for a...cousin who's come from...so far." Ava lurched forward, gave the surprised man a quick, awkward hug and, with lips pulled back tightly over clenched teeth, turned to Arnie. "Let's get him inside, hmmm? Tsk. Tsk. What *are* we going to do with him?"

Arnie's head reared back and he stared into her eyes. Then he blinked. "I suggest coffee is in order."

"Coffee?" Mark looked perplexed.

"It's a drink. A drink we have here in America." Ava glanced at Dove and murmured, "Mark is from a small star..."

"Starbucks?" Mark perked.

Ava jumped as if someone had pinched her. "A star-t-l-ingly small tribe..." she drew a deep breath. "Tribal *village*." She coughed and braided her fingers in front of her. "Off the Mediterranean coast. Yes."

"We don't have Starbucks," Mark complained.

Dove's jaw dropped. "I thought Starbucks was *everywhere*."

"No coffee in my world."

"No coffee at all?"

"Not this kind," Arnie said.

"They drink tea," Ava added. "Native tea. Made from leaves. Of the tea plant. His village is somewhat...remote."

Arnie laughed. "Something of a vacuum."

"He's familiar with American culture," Dove noted.

"I study it." Mark's head wobbled and he blinked. "You drink lots of coffee."

Ava and Arnie exchanged glances. Ava made a helpless gesture with her hands. Dove frowned. What was wrong with this picture? "You study us?"

He hiccupped a nod.

"Are you an anthropologist?"

For some reason, he stuck out his hand. Dove automatically clasped it and shook. "Anthros, probabilist," he stuttered.

His palm mated firmly with hers, his skin rough and dry. Even through the alcohol-induced relaxation of his muscles, she felt the strength of his fingers and another distinct, masculine force that made every feminine cell in her body sit up and beg.

"He's trying to get his visa so he can teach statistics at the university," Arnie said with a smirk.

"And a MasterCard," Mark muttered. "Or American Express. I need money."

Arnie slapped him on the back. "Don't we all."

"To buy coffee at Starbucks."

"We have coffee right here. Free."

"Wouldn't water be better?" Dove asked. "You must be dehydrated." Why she even cared was beyond her. He appeared no better than a bum. Still, if he was educated enough to pursue a professorship at the uni, he must have some redeeming qualities. Maybe she should reserve judgment for a while.

Mark straightened and swiped a dirty sleeve across his mouth. "Water?"

"H₂O," Ava put in.

An expression of horror scrunched his handsome features. "No more oxygen!" he bellowed. Then leaned over and gacked some more.

Dove hopped backward in case his heaves started producing anything. She loved a good footbath, but this was ridiculous. "How about some Reese's Pieces?" she sneered. "Do you remember what *those* are?"

He hiccupped and turned his head to look at her. His pale gaze sauntered around her body. A swirling bubble of chaos expanded in the atmosphere surrounding him and its turbulence hauled back and slapped her in the face.

Her instincts told her to flee. This man had *major* conflicts.

Then the bubble popped, his bleary gaze sharpened and his eyes brightened. One corner of his mouth curled up slightly and he licked his lips. Slowly. "Will their trail lead me to you?" He stared at her. Into her.

Tingles washed down her thighs and her stomach knotted. What sort of insane world did she occupy when a totally hammered, hurling loser could make her thoughts turn to rough, sweaty sex?

Let me find you, a seductive voice in her brain requested. *Let me eat the sweet things out of your...*

Dove dropped her eyes as a rush of heat charged her face. Did her panties just get damp? This was ridiculous. First off, she didn't know him. Secondly, he appeared to be an alcoholic. Thirdly, he didn't seem to have a home.

So how come he had such a powerful carnal effect on her? *Please don't let me succumb to the bad-boy syndrome*. She'd experienced that pubescent nonsense already and wanted no part of it ever again.

And yet...

When she glanced hesitantly back at him, his eyelids had drooped and he swayed on his feet. Laika leaned against his side and gazed adoringly up at him. "Nice doggie," he whispered, stroking her head with a flutter of fingertips that made Dove dizzy. Laika's tail wagged three times. So did Dove's. "I'm glad they found your namesake in time to save her."

"What?" Dove snapped out of her daze. "Laika, the Russian space dog, died in orbit—" As had other unfortunate animals involved in the Soviet space race.

"Look at the time!" Ava declared. She hustled in between Dove and Mark and plucked at his biceps. "Let's get you a hot shower, a hot meal and a soft bed."

Mark looked at her fondly, took a step to follow and crumpled into a heap at their feet.

Chapter Two

"What's going on?" A tiny voice squeaked.

They spun around.

Michael stood in a pool of light from the doorway, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"I'll get him back to bed." Dove hastened to his side and scooped up his thin, tired frame, relieved to be escaping to the relative peace of a little boy's room, where she could think.

On their weekly strolls through Pioneer Square, studying architecture and perusing antique maps in the rare bookshop, they'd encountered many homeless people. Dove had explained, as best she could, the factors that might lead to such sad circumstances, but she'd also taken him to volunteer at her aunts' outreach center where he could balance the disturbing sights of the wretched and lost with those who had taken steps to turn their lives around.

But this. This was personal. As worldly as her little charge seemed, he'd never witnessed a man passed out drunk on his lawn before, and a relative at that. Every protective gene she possessed charged to the surface and she had to question his parents' judgment at allowing Mark to stay at their house.

How well could they possibly know him? In the four years she'd cared for Michael, she'd never heard him mentioned. There were no family snapshots that included him, no mail from a *remote* island in the Mediterranean—which, now that she thought about it, sounded like a steaming pile of bullshit.

Geniuses were well known for lacking common sense and street smarts. Perhaps Arnie and Ava were finally displaying a flaw. As comforting as that was on one level, Dove felt upset and alarmed for Michael's safety. But how could she express it without offending them?

"Why were you outside?" Michael murmured as she placed him limply on the bed.

"Mommy and Daddy got home and I went out to talk to them." She held her breath and waited for the inevitable questions.

"Who was that man lying down?"

Just the facts, Ma'am. "Mark, your cousin."

"My cousin?"

"That's what Mommy said."

"Why's he lying down?"

"He's tired." Well, it was the truth, after all. "He's going to sleep here."

"Oh," he yawned and rolled over onto his side. "Tell me a story."

She closed her eyes and let the tension leak slowly out of her nostrils. Safe. Until morning, at least. "Which one do you want to hear?"

Muffled voices filtered up the stairs, a thumping noise. Arnie must be dragging Mark to the guest room off the den. Without waiting for an answer, she began reciting Michael's favorite fairy tale from the brothers Grimm, raising her voice slightly to mask the activity below.

Once Michael had entered dreamland again, she rose and stepped out into the hallway to close his door. Descending the stairs, she paused midway as stifled conversation drifted past.

"I'm surprised you recognized him after so long," Arnie said.

"He's unforgettable and all the signs were there. Besides, he predicted you and Michael."

"I remember you telling me about that vision."

Oh, please. *Mark Arianos, Mystic of the Mediterranean*. Dove almost laughed out loud at the absurdity.

"He's out of it," Ava said.

"Probably when the air hit him," Arnie suggested.

Yeah, Dove thought. How many times in their youth had she and Trish assumed they were okay to drive after a night of excess, only to get slammed once they'd stepped out of the bar?

"How long will the effects last?"

"Weeks, maybe. We'll see."

Weeks? Sounded like more than alcohol was involved.

"He might go looking for a fix," Arnie said. "We'll have to keep an eye on him."

"I wonder if there's anything we can do to ease him through it?"

Whoa. A *fix*? Could he be a junkie? Did he need to detox? Were they going to let him do it *here*? Dove pressed cool hands to hot cheeks.

"I suggest a shot of nitrous oxide now and then might not hurt," Arnie mused.

"Not a bad idea. I'll ask him what he thinks."

Like he'd say no to a drug?

"Can you take time off work next week? I can't."

"Not really," Arnie muttered. "Might be able to bug out early, though."

"Call Robert and Marjorie."

Wonderful. Robert and Marjorie Walker—self-proclaimed alien hunters and total California crackpots.

"They could be here by Monday."

Not if Dove could help it. No doubt remained. She had to step in. Michael's well-being depended on *someone* acting like a rational adult.

She'd have to get the aunties involved. They'd know what to do, how to handle it. Maybe they'd take Mark in or at least knock some sense into the Simpsons about the dangers inherent in a detox situation. It wasn't a family-friendly event, fer chrissakes!

Dove bolted down the stairs and rounded the corner into the kitchen so abruptly they jumped. "Penny and Poppy are right over in Fremont."

Dubbed the Center of The Universe, Fremont claimed the largest population of eccentrics and artists in Seattle—a fitting home for a brace of nutty spinsters bent on saving the world, one miscreant at a time.

Dove had an apartment on the third floor of the outreach center. The money she insisted on paying for rent went a long way toward helping the aunts survive by providing a dependable monthly income. The rest of the money supposedly came from federal grants and donations and Dove shuddered to think about what might happen to them when the time came for her to move out. Those worries often kept her awake at night.

But as much stress as the aunts had caused Dove over the years, that's how delightful they'd been too. And right now, they were more than delightful—they were a lifeline.

"Why uproot Robert and Marjorie," she tripped over her words. "He can stay at Pilgrim's Progress until he, er, gets back on his feet."

Arnie threw Ava a speculative glance. She pursed her lips in thought. "I'm not sure that's the best place for him right now. I think he needs to be around his own kind...um...his own kin."

Who seemed to be nothing but a bunch of enablers. She had no choice, had to go for it. "Is he on something besides alcohol? I'm sorry. I wasn't eavesdropping, but I overheard you say he might go looking for a fix."

Ava and Arnie stared into each other again and Dove received a machine-gun splatter of coded text across her brain. It flashed for a moment like a Broadway marquee and then dissipated. She gripped the corner of the kitchen counter to steady herself. Must've been one hell of a stress-induced cortisol rush, she reasoned. Either that or she'd entered their personal radar-range for a blink.

"He's not on anything," Arnie said slowly, gaze still boring into Ava's. "He's sick."

Like Dove hadn't heard that a million times—mostly from Trish's parents. It was the enabler's classic defense. It surprised and disappointed her to find such a glaring weakness in two such intelligent people—one of them a doctor, no less. For Michael's sake, she had to call them on it. "He's sloppy drunk!"

"Tipsy, compounded by low-altitude sickness."

"There's no such thing."

"It's a new phenomenon."

Mark *had* complained of too much oxygen. Could Arnie be right? Dove reined in her straying thoughts. This argument was rapidly entering the *yeah-right* zone. "I thought he was from an island. Aren't islands pretty low?"

"Not his," Arnie snickered, inflaming her with his inability, or downright refusal, to see the gravity of the situation.

"Look," Ava got up and placed two firm hands on Dove's shoulders. "We know you're worried. But we have it under control. Why don't you go home and get some rest. We'll see you on Monday."

That was it? She was being dismissed? *Now just wait a cotton-picking minute...* She opened her mouth to protest, but Ava spun her toward the door. "Have a good weekend."

"But—"

"Goodnight," Arnie punctuated, handing over her purse.

She hovered on the threshold, gulping air like a beached trout, trying to think of something, anything, to get them to see reason. They formed a human wall between her and the stairs, folded their arms, and vaguely sinister smiles curved their lips.

She slumped. If body language had sound, theirs would be screaming, *mind your own business*. This was their child, their home, their dilemma. Her services were not needed at this time. For the first time in all these years, she felt she didn't belong. Wasn't part of the family. The fragility of her bond with them had never been more apparent. Despite the closeness they'd shared through their love for Michael, she was still just an employee.

"Goodnight," she whispered.

But that didn't mean she wouldn't meddle on the sly. Low-altitude sickness, her hind end. Time for a consultation with Penny and Poppy.

Climbing into her SUV and cranking the engine, she checked the time on the dashboard display. Ten o'clock. The aunts would be in frilly, ethereal dressing gowns, floating through the mansion to turn off lights. They'd leave one on in the sitting room and one on the porch. They'd put a blanket on the bench-glider and a cooler full of bagged sandwiches and pop-top cans of juice on the threshold.

Their only rules were, if you ate, you stayed; if you stayed, you worked. This simple plan had succeeded beautifully for decades until drug use blossomed. But like the troupers they were, they made phone calls, aligned themselves with the necessary medical professionals and soldiered on.

Dove truly admired them, even when they drove her completely crazy with their wild ideas. You'd never know from looking at them or listening to them the sort of steely resolve they possessed. And, at this hour, Dove wouldn't get the chance to do either until tomorrow. As urgent as the situation seemed, they couldn't very well storm the Simpsons' house and kidnap Mark tonight.

She sighed, exhaustion overtaking her at last as she pulled up to the curb in front of the house. Tempted to just spread out across the backseat, she managed to make it up the three-flight fire escape, through her door and into bed before crashing.

Hours later, dimly aware of the approaching day, lightning bolts flashed her eyeballs under sleep-closed lids. Her body arched and heaved to staccato electrical jolts. Through slitted eyes, she watched herself levitate, then settle back onto the bed, in her room. Everything seemed the same, except instead of twilight creeping through the window blinds, the world was encased in an orange haze.

Powerful arms laced with dark hair came over her from behind. One hand cupped her chin and pulled her head back against an unyielding chest.

"I've been trying to get in here to find you," came a sonorous masculine voice. "I couldn't, earlier."

As usual, the warmth of his chest and the strength of his insistent, gentle grip reassured her. "Is it you?"

"Yes."

She tried to rotate her body, to get up and see him, but her limbs stayed glued to the mattress. The atmosphere around her took on a watery thickness, making every move sluggish and difficult. A familiar image bobbed into her periphery—swarthy skin, a dark curtain of hair. She turned her head to focus on it and, as usual, it turned with her as if orbiting on an invisible spoke, remaining in her field of vision but just out of direct sight. Confusion coursed through her. "Mark?"

He chuckled low in his throat. The resonant sound pinged off her skin.

Mark? The hurling loser? What was he doing here? *Where's Dream Lover?* Her body remained paralyzed, so she stopped struggling. In the interior of her sleep-drugged mind, a little voice told her she had to be dreaming, yet the heat of his hand on her chin, the security of his chest against the back of her head and the erotic effect of his voice on her flesh confirmed this was no ordinary dream. She tried paying careful attention this time.

When the hand released her chin and palmed her neck, its roughened flesh gently sanding hers, her nipples contracted and her cunt announced a five-alarm fire. Definitely no ordinary dream. She writhed and tried to turn toward him again, wanting to see him, wanting his hands to move lower, to move everywhere, yet not wanting it if this was Mark.

He dodged her again, playfully bobbing in and out of her line of sight while his fingertips got intimate with every inch of her throat. Then he reached far over her, his hair tickling her, and stroked her naked thigh, applying enough pressure to keep her locked down, but tenderly enough so she knew she could escape if she could just make her damn legs work.

Too bad she couldn't. Too bad. Just too. Damn. Bad. Everything about him felt familiar, sounded familiar and did familiarly incendiary things to her body. If, for some

psychological reason, she'd personified him and that person happened to resemble Mark, then so what? Mark was pretty darn hot. *Just go with it.*

Her lips relaxed and opened slightly. She slicked her tongue across them and when his chest expanded from a deep breath and he came nearer to her face, she licked him too.

He didn't pause to confirm the invitation. Just seized his opportunity and swept a hot wet tongue across her, sucking bits of flesh into his open mouth, nibbling their edges and moving on for more. "So hungry," he groaned. "So hungry for this. For you."

"Me too," she gasped. Hungry all right. Starved being the better word. Not necessarily for him, whoever he was. For a real lover. A *sober* lover. Still, this wasn't so bad.

He leaned over her even farther, forming a canopy with his lean, muscular body, and his engorged cock poked her nape. His fingers danced along the closed petals of her center and she sensed the heated closeness of his mouth to her pussy. Magically, her legs spread open without any signal from her brain. Amazing, she thought, and giggled.

The giggle turned into a gasp as he scooped his arms under her ass and hoisted her hips to his lips. Without further fanfare, he nudged her labia open with his nose and began furiously sucking and licking.

Smokin' heat billowed up from her cunt and spread through her thighs and legs, invigorating them enough for her to raise them and coil them around his shoulders, pinning him to her pussy. Her heels pounded against his body. He slurped and moaned against her tingling flesh, making satisfied animal sounds that vibrated into her pelvic bones. Within seconds, every bone in her body began singing his personal pleasure song and the beat reverberated into her organs and veins until the bliss twisted into a keening melody of need.

The desire to fill herself with him overwhelmed her and she grabbed his hips to lift them and dislodge his cock from the back of her neck. It popped over her face and into her mouth like a heat-seeking, guided missile and she eagerly swallowed his length, desperate for its fullness in her throat, the velvety texture against her taste buds and some measure of control.

He groaned and pumped his hips, fucking her mouth, yet never letting go of her pussy. In her mind's eye, she broke free and watched them sixty-nining. The deliciously carnal vision of herself getting eaten caused her pussy to gasp and gush. He pulled his face off her and gazed into the milky pool, licking his lips in anticipation. Bringing his hands out from under her ass, he gently spread her labia, flicking the tip of his tongue into the tender center of her cunt.

The hot, soft point of his tongue probed every sensitive crevice, popping in and out and swirling around as if dancing to a pornographic Hokey Pokey.

Dove muffled a giggle against his cock and the vibrations squeezed some salty precum onto her tongue. His tongue hit her clit the same time she increased the suction on his head and they both exploded into pulsating white light.

With a gasp, she awoke, hips pumping, skin lathered and tears leaking out of her eyes.

Alone. All alone. God.

Talk about a mind fuck.

* * * * *

"Cousin Mark. You awake? Cousin Mark?"

The whispery voice filtered into Anthros' heavy, murky head and he felt the stirrings of semi-consciousness.

"There's a pretty sunrise. Want to see it, Cousin Mark?"

Anthros struggled upright, on full alert, then wilted back down onto the mattress when the thick atmosphere failed to move out of his way. It hung around him like a dense, velvet drapery, binding his movements with a resistance akin to swimming underwater.

With tremendous effort, he cracked open his eyes. His lids dragged across the sticky, glutinous orbs. Blinking almost hurt. If danger sat beside him on the bed, there was little he could do about it. Then again, killing him in his sleep would've been the way to go.

A small, shadowy figure took form and Anthros adjusted his head to try and focus on it. Wide, curious bronze eyes gazed back at him from beneath a messy fringe of dark hair. Thin shoulders barely filled the seams of a colorful T-shirt emblazoned with the words *Beam Me Up, Scotty, There's No Intelligent Life Down Here*.

"Hi," the little being said. "I'm Michael."

Anthros' muscles loosened. No threat from this one. "Hello, Michael," he muttered. His voice sounded thick and aqueous. Every breath he sucked in felt as if it were straining through pinched nostrils. He opened his mouth to compensate and pulled in moist, cloud-like lungfuls. "I'm Anth—"

"I remember you," Michael said. "You used to tell me stories when I was little."

I did? Where the hell was he? He remembered landing, galloping through neighborhoods looking for the network, a dog licking his face, talking to some people who resembled Arnie and Ava, and then, nothing.

Michael.

The changeover process had begun, he knew. The rest, however, escaped him. A sea of fog clogged his mind. *Michael*. The name meant something. But what? "Stories?" he croaked. Perhaps the child could jog some memories.

"Can you tell me that story again?"

"Which one?"

"The one about the boy. He gets frozen in suspended animation and travels through space to save the ruined planet."

Anthros spun his wheels, but nothing took hold. "Planet Smoothie?"

Michael giggled. The sound awakened a distantly familiar, pleasurable feeling in Anthros. "No, silly. The planet in the chain of stars."

"Ahhh. Starbucks."

Michael sighed. "Mother and Father can't talk to me before they've had coffee, either. Okay," he got up and plucked at Anthros' tunic. "Let's walk to Starbucks."

Now *that* sounded good. He wanted to try some coffee. The humans practically lived for it. Inhaling deeply, he closed his eyes and concentrated on each major muscle group, willing them to work in tandem and pull him out of bed.

Torso up, check.

Legs over the side, check.

Now if only he could lift his ass.

With a groan he levered his arms to push himself off the mattress and rock to his feet. Good thing he was in fighting shape. A lot to be said for isometrics in zero gravity.

Michael reached out and tucked a tiny, soft hand inside Anthros', tugging gently. "Come on. We'll get Mom and Dad coffee too. We'll surprise them when they wake up."

Something was missing. "I have no money."

Wordlessly, Michael slipped from the room. Anthros rummaged the deep pockets of his mind for hidden strength, pulling at scraps of muscle-memory, autonomic data and the fuzzy, dog-eared remnants of mental notes he'd written himself in case of such an emergency. A small part of him registered that his responses to current stimuli weren't appropriate and could, in fact, be detrimental. But having no clue where he was right now, leaving didn't strike him as dangerous.

He knew for certain he wasn't with the network. And he also knew he needed to get there. Venturing out with the boy might lead him in the right direction—after he got his first taste of coffee.

Michael returned with a bulging, animal-skin container—a wallet!—stuffed with paper money and credit cards. "Dad won't mind," he said. "Let's go."

He placed one finger near his lips and said, "shhhhh" as they tiptoed through the house. Pale gray morning light cast them in shadows. Following the boy and trying to keep quiet brought forth a mischievous sense of glee he hadn't felt since his own boyhood, and when they stepped outside the front door and paused on the stoop to smile at each other and say, "pew," he almost giggled too.

"Down the block. That way." Michael pointed to his left and they started out.

Low, gray-blue clouds and a salmon sky contrasted sharply with the intense greens of the vegetation. The houses were all different from each other—unlike Anthros' hometown.

The dense scent of marine life, the soupy air and the muted, opaque colors of the dawn combined into a lulling magma that oozed up from the depths of the earth, down from the heavens and met in the life-sucking quagmire surrounding him.

Trying to keep up with the boy and process his incessant chatter fucked with Anthros' brain and his body. Somewhere in his mind, he knew he looked sloppy, spastic and probably bordering on obscene. He hated that he appeared stupid. His pride hovered uncertainly between the need to soldier on and the need to give up. Which was the better tactic in the long run? Did he have a choice?

"Mom and Dad didn't tell me you were coming," Michael said as they trotted past Trader Joe's. "How long are you gonna stay with us?"

"That depends," he murmured. "I got lost. I need directions."

"Where do you want to go?"

The exact location escaped him, but the general area had been engraved on his brain. "The center of the universe."

"Oh." Michael shrugged his fragile shoulders. "Fremont."

Sounded vaguely familiar. "You know how to get there?"

"Sure. We go there a lot. Dove and her aunts live there. They help people."

"Who is Dove?" Why did that name sound familiar?

"My nanny. She's pretty." Michael stopped suddenly and gave Anthros the once-over. "You'd like each other." He continued trotting.

We already do. Ridiculous. How could Anthros know this nanny? He'd been out of touch for five years.

"She looks kinda *alternative*. Like you."

Anthros had no idea what that meant. They went past a building with fabric in the window—a store, he supposed—and a faint odor of fossil fuel hit his nose. Following the scent, he spied a low, curved glass building with a half-dozen cars parked in front. A sign in the window caught his eye.

We have nitrogen! The colorful lettering proclaimed. *Get it in your tires today! First five customers free!*

Anthros hooked a finger into the collar of the boy's T-shirt and brought him up short.

"Ouch. Hey!"

"That sign over there, what does it mean?"

Michael squinted and his tiny, rosebud lips moved silently. "I think they want people to put nitrogen into their tires instead of plain air."

"Tires?"

"Yeah. You know. The tires on their cars." The boy squinted up at him. "Where are you from, anyway?"

Anthros inspected the vehicles in front of the store. *Tires*. He didn't recall hearing that word attached to cars. But it didn't matter. It was the nitrogen he wanted.

If he could get a hit, his head would clear and he would be normal. Focused. He'd be able to find the network and get to work immediately. If he could fulfill his mission objectives without having to go through the changeover process first, it would be as near to a miracle as he could possibly hope. "Can I buy nitrogen?"

"You don't have money."

"Will you buy it for me, instead of coffee?" He wanted the coffee badly. But it could wait.

"The store isn't open yet."

Anthros strode up to the glass and peered inside. Dark. Empty. Off in one corner stood a huge floor-to-ceiling display full of black, round tubes. A sign above it said *Tires*. He glanced back over his shoulder at the cars. Every one of them had four. Staring down the street, he saw dozens of cars. Some drove by. Which ones had nitrogen inside the tires? Even if he knew which ones, how could he get it out of the tire and into his lungs? His hand drifted to the knife in the scabbard at his waist.

"It opens at ten. We can come back later." Michael plucked his sleeve. "Come on, let's get coffee."

"What time is it now?"

"Six-thirty."

Desperation leaked through his seams as he followed the boy the remaining few yards into Starbucks. They opened the door, stepped inside and the rich aroma of freshly roasted coffee transported him into euphoria.

Teenaged humans in various states of dress or undress milled behind the counter. One girl had purple hair. A boy with a multitude of piercings poured milk into the steamer. Another being appeared to be both boy and girl, Anthros couldn't tell, and she had a vine of tribal tattoos creeping from eyebrow to breastbone.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, he'd seen a similar assortment of creatures in a cantina.

"Hey, Mikey," Purple Hair called. The others chimed in too.

"You're up early." The tattooed lady-man pressed a bony hip against the counter and peered coyly up at Anthros. "Look, it's Han Solo!" she said to the rest.

They snorted and stared at him.

"He's not Han Solo," Michael said. "He's my cousin, Mark."

"It was a joke," Pierced Boy said.

No one else had anything to add.

A gust of steam from the cappuccino machine reminded them of their purpose. "What'll it be?"

Anthros snapped out of his fascinated daze and inspected the chalkboard offerings behind the counter. "I'll have...coffee."

The group exchanged glances and Purple Hair snickered behind her hand.

"Dude, we're fresh out," the Shemale replied. This brought the house down.

Anthros glanced at Michael. "They don't have coffee."

"It was a joke," Michael giggled, joining the others in another hearty laugh.

The fog in Anthros' head thickened. "So there *is* coffee for sale?"

"Can I have some of what you're on?" Pierced Boy asked.

"What I'm on?"

"Mark'll have a venti café mocha. Make that three. I'll have a decaf frap."

"Bringin' it home to the parental units?"

Michael nodded and pulled out Arnie's billfold. By now, the small storefront was filling up. Sleepy people in sweat suits formed a short line. A plump, middle-aged woman sat down at a table and booted up her laptop. Several dogs on leads stood outside, barking for their owners to return. Most spoke gibberish. Some of them Anthros understood.

It reminded him there'd been a dog last night—one with a famous name. The dog belonged to this boy. He'd understood that one. Clearly. "Laika," Anthros mused aloud. "Does she come here too?"

"No. We can't bring her out in public. She hates other dogs. She also hates strangers and men." Michael looked speculatively up at Anthros. "Did she try to bite you?"

He shook his head. "No. She wagged her tail."

"Whoa. Hey," his eyes widened. "Why were you lying down in my backyard?"

Must've passed out from oxygen. Why else? He couldn't very well tell the boy that, though. "I was tired. I traveled a long way."

"Where do you live?"

"The Markarian Galaxy," he said automatically, then cringed. About to backpedal—how, he didn't know—he saw a huge grin split Michael's face.

"Dad says I live in the Mike-alien Galaxy."

A chuckle rumbled deep in his chest, boiled up his throat and burst out. Michael covered his mouth and hunched his shoulders but couldn't contain himself either. They laughed their heads off. And while they were laughing, bits of data peeked out from behind a cloud and clustered.

Mike. Alien.

You used to tell me stories...

Part Mike, part alien.

Tell me the one about the boy...

Half human, half Markarian.

He travels through space to save the ruined planet...

Anthros sobered up pretty quickly.

"You're funny like my dad. I wish you could stay."

A different barista handed them a tray with four cups wedged into it and reached for the money the child held aloft.

Anthros cupped unsteady fingers behind the boy's head. "I have a feeling we'll be together for a long time." Sooner than later, if he could get his hands on some of that nitrogen.

They stepped outside and an overwhelming sense of urgency sent him seeking his knife. How many cars had nitrogen instead of air in the tires? What were the odds of finding the one tire he needed in a sea of black rubber? Could he take the boy back home, deliver him to the protection of his parents and wait the three hours until the car shop opened? Would he have another chance alone with the boy?

The moment of clarity faded and the fog thickened again. He had to take immediate action. He shoved the tray of coffee into Michael's arms and fumbled for his knife.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked.

"Getting some nitrogen from those tires."

A tiny hand grabbed his arm. "You can't do that. It's against the law. They'll arrest you."

Anthros froze. He knew that. He did. Somewhere in the deep, clouded recesses.

This situation was grave. His judgment was more impaired than he realized. He looked down at the boy. The last thing he needed was to be detained for criminal activity and clearly he was too addled to control his baser impulses—the instinct to get the job done and get home as soon as possible. His best hope now, he thought, would be to get to the network first, and then get the nitrogen. Once he could think properly again, he'd find or create an opportunity to nab the boy.

"Mom and Dad would be really mad at you. Besides, all you have to do is open the air-valve."

Anthros looked from the boy to the tire and back again. There must be a way to salvage the situation.

Michael sighed and shook his head. "See?" He bent down and pointed to a black cap on the tire. "That's where the air goes in and out."

"Oh. Thanks for telling me."

Pulling up from his crouch, Michael raised his eyebrows and whistled. "Why would you want to slash a tire for nitrogen?" He picked up the coffee tray and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Think up a lie and think it up quick. "I uh—"

"That's just weird."

"It was a joke," he tried.

Michael pulled a doubtful face.

"A private joke from when I told you stories."

The boy's face relaxed slowly and his eyes slid from side to side. The wheels were turning. "Oh yeah," he said at last. "The boy needs to suck on the nitrogen canister so he'll get used to the atmosphere on the planet."

A long, quiet breath hissed out of Anthros' nostrils. "Yes."

"No offense, but that's kind of a dumb joke."

"I haven't had my coffee yet." This got a titter. Diversion—always a handy tactic. Anthros uncurled some fiddleheads of memory. "Do you know the one about the two astronauts who went to a coffee bar on Mars?"

A gamine smile, "Nooooo."

"They left after five minutes."

Wider smile. "Why?"

Anthros shrugged. "It had no atmosphere. What did the pirate say when he first landed on Mars?"

A splatter of giggles. "What?"

"There's no arrrrrrgon!"

Michael exploded. "I have one. Why..." he gasped. "Why was the astronaut hungry?"

Anthros scratched his head. "I don't know."

"It was launch time."

"That's a good one. Okay, my turn."

"No, mine."

"You just told a joke."

"You told one before that. So I get another one."

As they tottered up the hill toward home, Anthros found, to his surprise, that bathroom humor had no space or time boundaries.

* * * * *

Dove clattered down the iron staircase, gripping the handrail for dear life and taking the turns on the fly. She wanted to collar the aunts before they wandered out to market and got hopelessly ensnarled in weekend foot traffic. With tourist season winding up in the Greater Seattle area, Fremont, with its oddball ambience, duck tours and statues of the Seattle Troll and Vladimir Lenin—salvaged from the former Soviet Union—had become a popular destination. The aunts thrived on the seasonal hustle and bustle and often spent hours advising visitors.

Generally, though, Saturday mornings were quiet at the shelter. By the time the aunts served breakfast and cleaned up, most of their boarders had departed for their required jobs. The ones who didn't have an outside job were enlisted into service to the house itself—a giant, three-story Victorian that demanded constant maintenance.

Today looked like window-washing day. Assorted fruits and nuts were toiling diligently with spray bottles of vinegar and sheets of newspaper. A single-mother handed her little girl a garbage bag and gently told her to pick up the trash. A symbol, Dove thought, of what they were all trying to do with their lives.

Good on them! Perhaps she could take a lesson and recycle Dream Lover into a flesh and blood man. Trash into treasure. Could they do that these days? Seemed science had an answer for everything. Why not her little dilemma?

Speaking of dilemmas, she tried to maintain focus on the purpose for this visit. Not an easy thing to do when her pussy still hummed from this morning's frisky activities. Ever practical, she'd inspected herself using a hand mirror and, lo and behold, she'd been red and swollen. Could be the onset of a yeast infection, but Dove was pretty sure she itched for entirely different reasons, and over-the-counter remedies would not provide relief. Unless *he* bent her over the counter...

Stop it! You're here to talk about Mark. Why did Dream Lover look so much like him? Stop it! She rounded the front corner of the house and skipped up the wide, creaking stairs to the veranda, letting herself in through heavy oak doors. A bell jingled, announcing her presence.

"Just me," she called, taking a moment to clear her head, breathe in the heavy, ancient wooden scent underlying the typical breakfast aromas of coffee and bacon. Now there was a reality to hang onto and savor. She loved the smell of this old house, of her aunts and the comforts they sought to bring to a troubled world. God knows she needed those comforts herself today.

"In here," Penny warbled from the kitchen in the back.

"Ooooh, Dovey's here!" cooed Poppy. She shuffled into the hallway, a dishrag clasped in knobby hands, silvery-blue, inquisitive eyes shining with delight. "We were just talking about you."

"Uh oh," Dove teased, embracing the old lady. Even though she lived directly above, their paths didn't often cross these days except for the times she brought Michael to volunteer. The way of life, she supposed, making a mental note to invite them up for dinner sometime soon.

"You give the best hugs," Poppy tittered, pulling away. "Doesn't Dovey give the best hugs, Penny?"

Penny fluttered over to get hers. Both aunts automatically fluffed their short, snow-white hair. Even in their eighties, they still retained a girlish concern with appearances. It paid off too. Never any shortage of gentlemen callers for these two old birds.

"Absolutely," Penny agreed. "Too bad they're wasted on *us*."

Here we go again.

Both aunts raised their eyebrows at her. "Is there anything you want to share?"

"Nada. And don't start."

"Killjoy," Penny said.

"There's another issue I need your help with."

Their hands flew up in concern. "Oh dear. Of course we'll help. Won't we, Poppy?"

"Oh anything. Anything at all!"

Can you write me a scrip for hallucinations? Right. Dream on.

"You can't tell us without coffee to fortify you." Penny plucked at Dove's arm. "Come sit down."

Dove let them lead her to the farmhouse table. They hovered around her, clucking and cooing.

"Would you prefer tea? Tea is so much more soothing than coffee."

"*Much* more," Poppy nodded.

"Coffee's fine," Dove said.

"Flavored or regular?"

"Regular."

Penny sighed and her shoulders sagged. "I suppose you want low-fat milk in it too."

Poppy's bony finger poked Dove's shoulder blade. "Try the half-and-half," she whispered.

Dove sat up straighter. "I'll try the half-and-half."

The aunties danced with delight. So easy to please, Dove thought. One of their many traits she cherished and wished she had inherited.

Penny shuffled over to a hulking, yellow cast-iron gas stove and lifted a percolator off the warmer. Late morning sunlight beamed in through an as-yet-unwashed window and glittery dust fairies tumbled in its wake. "Did you see the Northern Lights last night? We bet Michael loved them."

Dove frowned. So there *was* an aurora last night? Why wasn't it on the news this morning? "It wasn't visible on Queen Anne," she said. "Although I did see a flash."

"Oh goodness," Penny trilled. "So beautiful—rather brighter than normal, wouldn't you say, Poppy?"

"Yes. Brighter." Poppy's head bobbed.

"It carried in a weird, burning smell too." Dove took the opening to describe everything that happened last night. Penny plopped a steaming cup of coffee in front of her, and as she described Mark's mysterious and disturbing appearance, she stirred the requisite cream into the brew. When she finished, she looked up to see the aunts pursing their lips at each other, eyes dark and sharp.

Penny noticed Dove staring and cleared her throat, turning her back and inspecting the leftover food on the counter. "Is this what you wanted our help with, dear?"

"Yes."

"What did you say this man's name was?"

"She said Mark Arianos," Poppy chirped. "I must admit, it sounds vaguely familiar."

"I don't know why it would." Penny fixed a stern eye on Poppy, who flinched slightly and swallowed.

"Of course, I could be wrong. This old mind..." she trailed off, but Dove caught a streak of worry across her brow.

"There's a group of galaxies with a similar name," Dove supplied. The odds that Poppy'd heard of it were slim, but who knew what arcane information lay in the dusty corners of her mind? She'd been around a long time.

Dove shrugged. "He's a Mediterranean mystic. He probably named himself after them for some reason." Another reason to steer clear. People who changed their names to reflect their professions generally displayed other wacky characteristics as well. To wit, Geoff Links, a golf pro she'd dated who bellowed "Fore!" every time he orgasmed.

"And you say he appears to have a substance abuse problem," Penny said. "Not uncommon for the more mystical among us. We should talk to him and find out."

"Oh, yes," Poppy parroted. "We *should*."

"The problem is Arnie and Ava don't want me to interfere." Dove smacked the spoon against the thick stoneware mug and let it clatter to the table. "I'm afraid for Michael. If they let Mark detox in that house, it could be dangerous or traumatic."

Dropping her dishrag, Poppy laid a hand on Dove's shoulder. Penny pulled out a chair and sat facing her, signaling Poppy to do the same.

"We have a room opening up on Monday, don't we, Penny?"

"Yes. Our dear Mr. Sparks has gone and gotten himself an apartment. Another success story. I'll miss him, though."

"Oh, yes. He's been such a help. I remember when he first came here—"

"Can we stay on subject?" Dove interjected. The old ladies startled and she immediately felt bad. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I'm stressed out because I'm also worried the Simpsons are enabling Mark."

Their faces melted into solemnity and, for perhaps the first time, they looked old to Dove. Old and deadly serious.

"Tell us more about his behavior, dear," Penny said.

"Don't leave anything out," Poppy instructed.

"Every detail is crucial to the evaluation."

Chapter Three

Anthros opened his eyes. Vivid sunlight ruptured against his retinas and shattered into full spectrum. He slammed his eyelids shut and shuddered through the light-induced brain-freeze, clenching his teeth so tightly he feared they would splinter. *Trapped in a fucking prism.*

"You passed out again," a female voice said.

Feathery tentacles tickled his palms and he startled, fisting his hands around clumps of them and ripping with a killer's instinct. With little resistance, they came out of whatever body they were in and he raised his hands to see long, green strings falling out. He yelped and swiped them away.

"It's okay. It's just grass," a male voice said.

A tiny voice trembled. "I'm scared."

So am I.

A frightful sense of isolation and despair breached his gut. How had he not counted on total mental meltdown, these crippling physical effects? How had he not known? Would he survive the acclimation, or would the light toast his retinas and the oxygen corrode his brain?

Am I dying?

He'd always assumed that since his test stock survived, he would too. But Arnie had been planted here as a malleable infant. And he'd been placed in a tank with a filtration system that slowly allowed increasing amounts of Earth-air until the timer went off and he was ready to emerge.

Anthros hadn't had the means to construct such a complicated machine—nor did he want to risk shoddy craftsmanship. Arnie's unlatching mechanism had failed. He'd had to send techies to open it. Then they got disoriented and misplaced it, and...well...the best laid plans of Markarians and men.

"Take your time. We'll help you up when you're ready."

"I'll take Michael inside," the female said.

Anthros cracked an eyelid. Arnie's face swam into view. He slid a hand under Anthros' shoulder and guided him to a sitting position. Anthros' head wobbled helplessly from side to side and a sickening self-hatred for his own weakness made him want to bellow and flail. But he hadn't the strength to do either.

"What happened?" He remembered sending the boy inside with the coffee and kneeling next to a red car in the driveway.

"I suggest you OD'd," came Arnie's calm voice. "The pressurized air shooting out of the tire knocked you silly."

Yes. He recalled a cold spear through the chest.

"Michael said something about nitrogen in tires. Is that what you were after?"

Anthros tried to nod, but his chin slammed his chest and his head rebounded backward, nearly knocking him over again.

Arnie steadied him. "We'll see if we can get some. For now, though, I suggest you let me help you up and into the house. You could probably use some breakfast. Hunger and thirst will make you lightheaded too."

Made sense.

A couple of hours later, Anthros felt immeasurably better. Fortified with embryonic proteins and tasty carbs, he savored another sip of cold cappuccino and sat back with a sigh. Ava had unearthed an enormous, soft white bathrobe for him to wear while she washed his clothes. Arnie had painstakingly – and a trifle embarrassingly – shown him how to shower. And Michael had watched it all.

As more and more memories pieced together in his mind, he realized his mission had been totally fucked up. The identity the network crafted for him was worthless in the face of the new one Arnie and Ava had created for Michael's benefit.

However, he also realized the benefits of the screw-up. As the boy's cousin, he held a position of trust. This trust would make everything easier and quicker since he wouldn't have to waste time gaining it or finding a way around the lack of it. Perhaps he could forget about the network – and the plot to establish an earthling identity – and concentrate on snatching the boy and making his getaway.

The beauty of it all was that Arnie and Ava themselves were unknowingly aiding and abetting. While he showered, Arnie had run out for the nitrogen. He'd reported back that it was created in a machine at the store, hence not portable. But problem-solving Markarian that he was, he'd had his tires filled, transferred some of it into a colorful bag of rubber called a "balloon" and had handed it to him through the bathroom door.

"How're you feeling now?" Ava asked from the sink. She scraped some dried egg off the plate with her thumbnail and ran the dish under a stream of water.

"Quite good. Almost normal." "Almost" being the operative word. His telepathy hadn't returned yet. However, he was pretty certain theirs was still fully operational.

A buzzer went off and Ava crossed the small room, opened a door and rummaged inside a white metal box. "Your clothes are ready." She tossed them onto Anthros' lap. Warmth enveloped his lower extremities and a clean, meadowy scent wafted into the air. Fascinated, he lifted the tunic to his face and buried his nose in it. The pleasure was almost sexual.

He glanced up to find Ava gazing at him with a fond smile. "The only better smell is Michael, fresh from a bath."

For some reason, his chest tightened and something in the vicinity of his stomach drooped. He massaged a hand across his abs. Must be breakfast settling in. "I'll go get dressed," he said, rising.

And he did, while a recording of the boy's *Mom this and Dad that* looped in his head. He'd prepared for parental protectiveness. Not involvement. It bothered him. But he didn't know why.

A few minutes later, he returned, near the top of his game—nothing quite like a full breakfast, hot shower and clean clothes after five years of roughing it.

"I suggest it's time to pow wow." Arnie scraped out a chair and sat across from him at the table. Ava wandered over and did the same. "There's no need for introductions, obviously, but we are curious about why you came."

To steal your son. Anthros locked down the thought before it had the chance to leak out. Humans were ferociously protective of their offspring. Although Arnie was a purebred Markarian, he'd been socialized as a human and would most likely display the same behaviors. Plus, he had no alliance to his motherland, political or otherwise.

Naturally, Anthros had superior powers and would be able to overcome these piddling obstacles. But unfortunately, some of those powers had been temporarily defused. For how long, he did not know.

What if they never come back? Like poisonous vapor, the idea swirled and coalesced in the fear centers of his brain. He shook his head and drew a deep breath to clear it. Best not to dwell on the unforeseeable.

"My life's work is studying human behavior and probabilities." If they thought he'd come down to further his understanding, they'd be far more likely to give him information, and the story had the added benefit of being true.

"Last night you mentioned a network, that you needed money."

Anthros felt Arnie's energy probing his mind and he shuttered it as best he could. God only knew what secrets he'd revealed before he'd realized whom he'd stumbled upon. They both clearly remembered him from the early days of their courtship. Perhaps he'd erred in being so bold with them back then.

"Is someone expecting you?"

No use pretending otherwise. These two were smart. They already knew too much. Best to play on that and maintain their trust. He nodded. "Yes. Human contacts. They have a job for me. Living quarters. An identity."

"Too late for that," Arnie snorted.

"Yes, I'm afraid we might have screwed that up already," Ava said.

"My bride named you Mark Arianos. Like that isn't a dead giveaway." Arnie poked her in the ribs and they giggled geekily.

Anthros couldn't help smiling at her clever, quick thinking, but his ignorance of the events of last night must've shown on his face because they launched into a short, confusing exposition.

Foolishly sensing no danger, they openly admitted the minimal information they'd mined from his thoughts. Perhaps being plastered on oxygen had some good points—it had inspired allegiance to him and made them want to help. But now, it could prove his undoing.

"So this network is going to help you set up shop here, to further your studies?" Ava asked.

He'd hoped they'd draw that conclusion. "Exactly."

Arnie leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. The testosterone level in the room kicked up a notch. "How did you know about them? I've been involved with an extraterrestrial study group for years and haven't ever heard of a network."

He had niggling suspicions. Good. It showed his genetic superiority. Anthros had chosen him well. But he'd have to stay on his toes. He shrugged and rubbed his face. Half-honesty was the best policy. That, and surprise. "They're registered with the Intergalactic Travel Bureau." *More like an Underground Railroad.*

Both their jaws dropped and they leaned forward. "What?"

He built on the truth-based lie. "Every planet has a hostel, as a courtesy to interstellar voyagers."

"You have got to be kidding," they howled in tandem.

Anthros pretended to smile. "It's handy for vacationers." They were also used as pit stops between legs or as emergency landing areas. Or to disappear. "But Earth is so remote, as far back as the records go, no one's ever come here." And that part was true. Most nations didn't have the technology required to travel so far. His did. But not for long.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Arnie muttered, a bemused expression on his face. "So it's like a cosmic *Michelin Guide*."

"Do they give out ratings?" Ava giggled. "Stars, maybe?"

"Earth on One-Hundred Dollars a Day," Arnie quipped.

Ava laughed, but Anthros didn't get it.

"How'd they know to expect you?" She asked.

"I contacted them the same way I did you. Through thoughts. All the people—or beings—who run these hostels are, shall we say, open minded."

They all laughed this time.

"I can't believe ETI never heard of this. Intergalactic travel bureau." Arnie shook his head and his eyes silvered. "They'd freak."

"I'm freaked," Ava said.

"You have to know someone," Anthros said.

"Who did *you* know?" Arnie asked quietly. Anthros' gaze locked with his and he read sorrow and loss within it. "My biological parents?"

His heart rate quickened. For the first time, he wondered what psychological effects his actions had caused. What damage he had wrought on an innocent baby by ripping it from its people. Why hadn't this occurred to him before? Could Earth air be changing more than his physiology? "I never met them," he lied. And dropped his gaze.

"Do you know why they sent me here?"

"No."

The whole experiment had been fucked from the beginning. First the *incident* with the Apollo spacecraft—a fender-bender of galactic magnitude that still made him twitch. Engine failures, limping back to put Arnie on the troubled Apollo craft, and the subsequent, horrifying crash-and-burn that killed not only Anthros' couriers, but presumably and unbeknownst to Queen Win, Arnie's intended mate as well.

Anthros couldn't bear to think about it.

Was this the *fate* Queen Win was testing? Was it an act of chaos or were all those involved shaping their own destinies with their incompetence? The lackluster engineers, green pilots and megalomaniac control freaks such as himself. Everything they did, or failed to do, steered them right down this disastrous path.

What did it all mean? What would it all amount to?

Even without the frivolous Queen Win, his planet was a mess. Markarian infrastructure was crumbling. The genetic engineering that had been going on for generations to protect racial purity had come back to bite them in the ass. The people were all alike. Every one of them. Society had ceased functioning without the variety of talent and specialty of skill. Civilizations were either stagnant or vanishing. What had once been a great and powerful nation now stood sputtering on the brink of ideological ruin.

So he'd betrayed his queen by deciding to breed a superior being. Inject some new genes into the cesspool. Unfortunately, treachery was a capital offense. So here he was, with the seeds to change his world, but no longer welcome in it.

"Where is the network? Can we take you to them?" Ava asked.

To withhold this information at this point would be a tactical error. They'd wonder why he wasn't honest and forthcoming. Yet he didn't want the network anymore. Wanted to stay here, close to the boy.

"Is it time to go to Fremont yet?" Michael appeared in the doorway, a toy space cruiser clutched in his hand. It reminded Anthros of his own cruiser, parked in the center of the city, camouflaged perfectly where no one would ever notice it.

"We're not going to Fremont, honey."

"Cousin Mark said he wanted to go there," Michael protested.

"I did?"

"You said you got lost on your way to the center of the universe."

The location of the network. Damn. His loose, drunken lips had fucked things up.

Ava laughed. "Oh, honey. That's just a nickname for Fremont. It's not really the center of the universe."

Saved.

"That's not what Penny and Poppy say," Michael argued. "They told me it's a gathering place—"

"Their *home* is the gathering place," Ava corrected.

Arnie laughed. "A gathering place for whackos."

Michael howled. "No, they said—"

"It's like a story, baby. A fairytale," Ava got up to stroke his hair.

"A myth, perhaps," Anthros underlined. But not. "I was tired and didn't know what I was talking about."

"You're always tired and you never know what you're talking about!" Michael stamped his foot and his face reddened. "You suck on tires and don't know how to take a shower. Will somebody *please* tell me what's going on?"

"Honey, I already told you. Cousin Mark is from a different country. His customs are different from ours. He's here to study us."

"The Discovery Channel never did a show on a place where the people suck nitrogen from tires."

"I suggest The Discovery Channel doesn't know everything," Arnie said. "They never hired me."

The doorbell shrilled. What was this human obsession with bells and whistles? It amazed him, the things he hadn't noticed while he was here out-of-body.

Out-of-body...

Her.

His dick jumped and he shifted in his seat. An image of luscious curves, the taste of hot, satiating pussy juice, the feel of delicate, firm and tactile lips, followed by a garbled message coming through the wires that sounded like, *Fuck me. Fuck me hard.*

Glory be. His telepathy came roaring back.

Ava rose to answer the door and a twitter of female voices launched him to his feet. One of them was *her*. Now his sex drive came roaring back. A distant Markarian force field rumbled and undulated, some faces turned in his direction. He locked and barred thoughts of sex from his mind. If he got physically aroused, they'd sense his presence. If he actually acted on that arousal, they'd smell the hormones and find him. If they found him, they'd kill him.

And the humans thought *their* sexual activity carried health risks. His entire body quaked with the effort of containment.

* * * * *

"This is an intervention." Dove shook in her flip-flops. She had no idea what damage this action would reap. Perhaps they'd simply throw her out. Perhaps they'd be angry for a while. Perhaps they'd fire her—which would be too traumatic for words. She couldn't imagine a life without Michael anymore. But she'd decided to take the risk for his sake. And the aunties had backed her up.

"Now, now, Dovey," Penny stroked her arm and stepped in front of her. "No need for drama." She turned to Ava and smiled sweetly. "We're just here out of concern."

"Concern," Poppy confirmed.

"Dovey said this young man might have a drug or alcohol problem. Might we talk to him? Just for a while."

Ava's hackles rose. "I'm a doctor. I think I can handle it."

"Of course you can! We don't doubt that for a minute, do we, Poppy?"

"Not a minute!"

"It's just that we're, well, we're old. We fret. If there's a needy soul out there and we know about it, Poppy and I don't sleep well. Why, we even lose our appetites. Don't we, Poppy?"

"I haven't had breakfast yet!"

Ava rolled her eyes, but a slight smile curved her lips. She glanced at Dove.

"I—" Dove stammered and before she could stop them, tears welled. "I'm sorry. I'm so worried. I don't mean to insult you—"

"It's okay," Ava sighed. "Not to worry."

"Thank you."

"I wouldn't want anything less than stellar care for my son. Right? I'm a big girl and I can handle a little questioning from you." She turned to the aunties. "The issue has been resolved, though. Mark is fine and no illegal plants have been harmed."

"Wonderful. Wonderful!" Poppy clasped her hands against bright red lips.

"Thank you for stopping by." Ava spread her arms and began herding them backward toward the door.

The aunts tittered and surrendered ground and Dove lapsed into confusion. Were they going to give up so easily? Had they caused so much commotion for nothing? But then Poppy's eyes rolled back in her head and she swayed. "Oh! I'm feeling faint." A trembling claw gripped Penny's arm.

"My dear, are you all right?"

Ava narrowed her eyes. Dove stared at the floor.

"I'm fine. Fine." Poppy fanned her face with her free hand. "Except, well..." she turned back to Ava. "Might I sit down in the kitchen for a minute?"

"Her blood sugar has plummeted," Penny crowed.

"Do you have any muffins? A crumb of toast?"

Ava pinched her nose and shook her head. Dove peeked through lowered lashes. Such blatant manipulation embarrassed her, but hell. It worked. Ava sighed and took the old lady's arm, leading her into the kitchen with soft, kind words.

Following at heel, Dove wondered what other tricks the aunts had up their sleeves and realized, with new admiration, that obvious or not, their gentle, non-confrontational style would keep everybody's blood pressure and humor intact.

Score one for the octogenerians.

As she emerged from the dim hallway into the sunny kitchen, a charismatic force met her halfway. Tall, authoritative, sober and *clean*, Mark towered in the center of the force field. Her heart started pounding so frantically she covered her chest with her arms, fearing he would see a cartoonish, heart-shaped impression on her skin.

If she *were* in a movie, she thought crazily, this is where the camera would circle and zoom in for a close-up of wide, anxious eyes.

The soft, draped fabric of his tunic undulated with exotic heaviness against lean hips. The tool belt cinched his waste with a renegade slant. Clenched in one hand was a venti cappuccino—she could tell from the foam—en route to tactile lips as he slung his head back for a long, last draught. Did she imagine it or did his hand tremble?

She focused on those hands and recalled their imprint on her last night. This man had definitely, at some point, held a position of leadership. Dove had shaken enough hands in her life to clearly recognize superior confidence when she felt it. So what had happened to bring him to this low point—addicted, unemployed, homeless and seemingly at the mercy of a long-lost cousin?

From the corner of his eye, he drew a bead on her. The paper cup came down slowly. He crushed it, threw it aside, licked his lips and stared.

Suspended in his gaze, she wilted against the doorjamb, praying for the tide of drool to stay in her mouth.

"You must be Dove." The timbre of his voice stroked her skin and made her feel naked—on a lambskin rug. Coming from him, her name sounded like sex. By contrast, there was nothing sexual in his attitude or his steely eyes. In fact, unlike last night, he seemed watchful and tense. "Michael has mentioned you."

In what context? Dove swallowed and found the strength to push away from the wall. "That's right. And you're Mark Arianos."

He inclined his head slightly, peering down his nose as if taking her measure. The front strands of his sleek hair had been braided with suede cording and pulled back into a feminine half-pony tail. On anyone else, the style would've looked totally gay. On him it looked savage and dangerous.

Dove spied a curious tattoo on his temple. Or was it a burn scar? She tilted her head to get a better look and he turned his face away, as if to prevent her from seeing. Once again, she sensed an aura of chaos around him. Conflict. Confusion. Wariness.

A bad feeling settled beneath her rib cage and infused the individual bones. *There be trouble ahead*, she thought.

Arnie, Ava, Michael, Penny and Poppy stood in a semicircle surrounding him. Penny had taken out her reading glasses and perched them on her nose, the better to see him with, Dove supposed. Mark bowed his head at the old ladies and allowed them a long minute of transfixed inspection before smiling coldly. "Do I pass?"

Poppy jumped. "Why, yes. Yes. You do."

Penny passed Poppy a slice of buttered toast she'd swiped from a plate on the table. "We're here because Dovey was concerned after meeting you last night —"

"I'm aware of that. There's no cause."

"Yes, there is —" Dove protested.

Penny stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm. "We have a home, a halfway house. People stay there while getting back on their feet."

"The Simpsons have everything I need."

"I'm sure they do. But if you need assistance getting a job, with a drug problem —"

"I'm fine. Last night was an aberration."

Not if Dove had heard Arnie's and Ava's post-mortem correctly. She opened her mouth again.

"I'm sure it was," Penny interrupted. "A young man likes to tie one on once in a while."

"I was exhausted from a long journey and a bit ill."

"More than just ill," Dove snipped. "I was there. Remember?"

"Oh, I remember you," he said without looking at her. His jaw tightened and his nose twitched.

Arnie sniffed and his head swiveled in Mark's direction. He glanced at Dove, then back at Mark and smirked. Mark stiffened perceptibly. Dove swore a tremor ran the length of his body. The glitter in his eyes went out and they darkened and deadened.

"Well, drunk or not, we like to be certain you're aware of all available resources. Here." Penny unclasped her small purse and fished around inside, pulling out a business card and handing it to him. "Pilgrim's Progress is always open, should you ever need help."

Mark blinked hard. "Pilgrim's Progress?" His chaos bubble expanded to room-size. Dove ran a visual of the crowd. Only she seemed to notice it.

"You've heard of us?"

"I have. You're quite...famous. In certain...circles."

Poppy giggled.

"What circles?" Dove couldn't keep the sneer out of her voice. He might be charming her aunts, but she'd witnessed his downside. "Alcoholics Anonymous? Methadone clinics?"

Dead black shark-eyes fixed on her. "I don't know those places."

"If you studied American culture, you would."

"Mark studies pop culture," Ava said.

"Oh, please!" Dove cried. "I'm not brain dead. Something isn't adding up here. Oh, Jesus." She ran fingers through her hair and faced her employers. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm getting a very strange vibe. I don't mean to question you or give you a hard time, but—" *But what?* How could she possibly explain the cold unease in her heart? This foreboding that not only was all not as it seemed, all was not safe, either.

It was stupid. Irrational. Perhaps even hormonal. But more than anything, she wanted to remove Michael from Mark's presence. To take him somewhere. Anywhere. Some hidden, frantic, cornered voice inside screamed *DANGER!* Yet she had no justification for it.

Mark seemed perfectly sober and controlled this morning. She preferred him tanked and silly. His drunkenness had disturbed her, sure, and she didn't want Michael around it, but this...this coldness. She shivered. He had the dispassionate air of a sociopath or, at the very least, the air of someone who could so easily spin off kilter he had to keep a death grip on his emotions.

Drunk Mark was unsettling. Sober Mark was downright frightening.

A sigh quaked out of her chest. "Maybe I just need a vacation."

Far, far away.

With Michael.

Too bad she'd get arrested for kidnapping.

Ava stepped forward and put an arm around Dove's shoulders. She and Arnie stared at each other and then both of them looked at Mark. Something seemed to ripple through him. He sucked in a breath and turned back to Dove. "Besides caring for Michael, do you work with your aunts at this halfway house?"

"Dovey helps when she can," Poppy offered. "She lives on the third floor."

Dove heard Mark's teeth grind together. His muscles coiled so tightly she wondered if he had rage issues to go along with the substance abuse and killer instincts.

"In Fremont. Like I told you before," Michael piped up. He grinned at Mark, then at the aunties. "Mark stopped here 'cause he got lost on his way to the center of the universe."

There was a collective gasp.

The Broadway marquee exploded across Dove's brain. Words flew helter-skelter, voices, strange languages, sounds and images. The brightness singed the insides of her eyeballs and she swayed.

Mark caught her elbow and held tight. She listed toward his body, but he locked his arm and kept her from making contact. Twin jackhammers pounded her temples. A migraine? She'd never been prone to them before, but the jagged shards splintering her cranium sure as hell weren't normal. Then again, little was these days. Was she going

down the tubes? For the first time in her life, she understood why someone might be driven to drink. And this freak show had barely begun.

* * * * *

Probabilist Anthros, welcome to the center of the universe! Penny clapped her knobby hands and clasped them at her lips, sending Anthros a warm, unwanted mental welcome. *Everything makes sense now.*

He stood in a spotlight of human mind-waves with fists clenched so tightly his forearms cramped. Despite his colossal fuck-up, the situation *had* improved enough to where he could regroup and reformulate a workable plan, one he'd intended carrying out tonight. That is, until his fuck buddy showed up to wreck it.

Dove'd been the instigator—had brought the network here with the intent of separating him from Michael—but not because she knew the truth about Anthros. Because he scared her.

Scared her sufficiently for her to view him as an enemy.

Yes! It does! Poppy's echoing brain chirped. *I sensed it from the beginning.*

No, you didn't.

Closing his eyes, he tuned out the mental chatter and focused on the flak spraying out from Dove's soul.

As lighthearted and freewheeling as she'd been in the sack, that's how suspicious and angry she was in real life. She believed he had a drug addiction. To her, he epitomized a pathetic loser and he didn't sense one shred of compassion or empathy for his alleged plight. How paradoxical for her to live at what she thought was a clinic and to help once in a while. If he had time, he'd investigate why, what internal forces drove her to help people she held in contempt. But he didn't have time. He only had time to sidestep her misgivings and try to carve a path around them. Win her over. But how?

Cross my heart! Poppy intruded. The Force was strong in this one. *His name sounded familiar to me because that's where he's from and when Dovey said he was a mystic...*

That's right, Penny conceded. *And, of course, there was an aurora.*

Dove had no idea her aunts ran an intergalactic outpost. Her beliefs were firmly wedged in a reality rooted in current science. And this extended to her out-of-body trysts with him. She thought they were hallucinations, dreams. She feared for her sanity. But mostly, she panicked over the boy. The intensity and irrationality of this fear would be his greatest obstacle. There'd be no way to anticipate what she might do to protect Michael.

There be trouble ahead.

Well, he already had an in with her, admittedly a tenuous one. Could he fortify it? Win her faith in the ether? Convince her to trust him enough to stop interfering with his plans?

It would mean revealing himself. But hey, if she had no idea her out-of-body sexcapades were real, that meant she wouldn't know her dream lover was real. She'd think it all was a figment of her imagination.

He'd never let her see him before. Not for any particular reason, except it'd been fun to tease her. Her frustration had kicked his libido up a notch and made his orgasms that much more forceful. Plus, the excitement of controlling her, confusing her, keeping her on edge and unsure, had proven intoxicating. He'd have to let that go. Would have to let her see him. Perhaps she'd think her subconscious was urging her to trust him.

After making her come, he could plant ideas in her head. Suggestions. Manipulate her emotions so she'd let down her guard. The imagination was a powerful tool.

It bothered him to find he wasn't above using it as a weapon against her. Anthros had never been the sort who took pleasure in fucking with a woman's head. He considered such tactics unmanly. Unfortunately, his mission objectives took precedence over her sanity and his self-respect.

You will come and stay at Pilgrim's Progress, won't you? Poppy pleaded. *We've gone to so much trouble, more than usual. We'd hate to see it go to waste.*

Well, his sanity too. Living in such proximity to Dove would require super-human control. Even though he possessed super-human qualities, he didn't think himself capable of that much strength. *I'd prefer to stay here.* He tilted his head at his test stock. *They know me. They can help me.*

The aunts spun to address Arnie and Ava, who stood frozen in wonder.

Oh, it's imperative he come with us. We have everything he needs, Penny said.

Everything! Poppy agreed.

Arnie snapped awake and glanced at Anthros, eyes full of amused irony. *I suggest you've found what you were looking for.*

Penny and Poppy's joy pulsed in the air. *We'd be so honored to host someone of your stature. And so handsome. What a thrill!*

A thrill indeed!

Ava chimed in, *Yes. I'm afraid Penny and Poppy are right. Our resources are limited compared to theirs, to say the least. And Dove is about to go mental. I can't afford to lose her. It's best for you to go.*

His teeth clenched and he nodded tightly. Hoist by his own petard—whatever the fuck a petard was. If only the network had gotten here before he spilled. If only he'd gotten *there* before running into Arnie. If only he'd kept his fucking pants on and his virtual cock dry.

If only...

Yet, a shard of hope remained. He knew the boy's location, had established a friendly relationship with him. He also had the Simpsons and the network on his side—a dazzling coup he hadn't reckoned on. The availability of nitrogen couldn't be discounted, either.

Unfortunately, he also had this rampant, reckless horniness for Dove. He couldn't exorcise it from his mind. No matter how he tried, a splatter of her shadow remained on his psyche like an indelible stain. Desire had hobbled him. If he let loose enough to charm her and gain her trust, those feelings would slip out and curl through the universe.

An unavoidable risk. Like many Earth men before, his dick might be the death of him.

Chapter Four

Tossing her keys and purse on the credenza in her room, Dove kicked off her flip-flops and shimmied out of her shorts. Peeling off the sweat-dampened tank top, she padded into the bathroom for a mid-morning shower.

As panic had flooded her system at the Simpsons', her body had responded, as usual, with a flood of perspiration. Always happened. She hated it. It made it easy for fencing opponents to read her. Made it easy for *any* opponent to read her. And take advantage. Certainly *Mr. Arianos* had noticed. Maybe that's why he wouldn't let her near him. What man in his right mind would want a swampy sponge, sodden with fear and hate, swooning in his arms?

She sighed and rolled her eyes.

Why couldn't humans be like chameleons?

Unscrewing the faucet, she removed her undies while the water heated up and turned to inspect herself in the vanity mirror. Usually smudgy and roundish, today her features looked sharp and pinched, eyes hollow, enormous and hunted.

She didn't trust Mark. Didn't trust any of them. The Simpsons were hiding something and so were the aunties. Obviously no one felt a physical threat or they wouldn't allow him in their homes. But everything had changed after Dove's white-out in the kitchen.

Suddenly Arnie and Ava had encouraged Mark to bunk at Pilgrim's Progress, whereas before they'd been reluctant. He hadn't been happy about it. Had to be bullied. But he'd eventually relented and would be here this evening.

God forbid they wait until Monday, when the resident miscreants would clean Mr. Sparks' room. Nooo. The aunties rushed home and scoured it themselves—something they never, ever did anymore—citing thin skin and sore joints. They treated him like a visiting dignitary. Dove snorted. His name didn't come up on a computer search. How famous could he be?

Steam billowed out of the shower, enshrouding her in comforting heat. The knots in her shoulders eased in the palms of the calming, thermal massage.

She stared at her image in the mirror as it grew misty and soft with condensation and her brain followed, getting spongy and porous, sending tentative feelers out into the drifting void.

A clear, curved line—the width of a fingertip—etched the balmy surface of the glass. Pins and needles crept across her limbs. The line swept down into a sharp angle and back up the other side, swelling outward and curving back on itself in the shape of a heart.

Dove yelped. Her hand flew to her mouth and an atrophied spine refused to tell her feet to get out of there.

A beam of light speared the voluptuous steam and a bright apparition appeared. Moist, white tendrils swirled into a vague human form. From behind, a force cupped her breasts. She could almost make out individual fingers. But not quite.

Fear gusted out of her nostrils and she relaxed. The phantom urged her into the shower stall. "Back again," she quipped, stepping under the spray. "So soon?"

He didn't answer.

"That was quite an entrance."

Silence.

Fine. She'd make do with a silent fuck.

Seething vapors wrapped around her, hugging, caressing. Droplets of water pelted her skin like tapping fingers and darting tongues. She steadied herself with a palm against cool tile and the showerhead rotated, turning the fine mist into a single jet.

Ethereal hands cupped her ass, tilting her hips up. A hard shaft wedged between her cheeks and she was pulled backward to lounge on the lap of a cloud.

Dancing spears of thermal energy parted her labia, exposed her clit and angled it into the singeing geyser. Dove convulsed like a live wire. Then Dream Lover shifted and his cock poked up between her legs and into her pussy.

Hot water spurted against her clit, its hard, steady spray whipping her toward immediate climax. So Dream Lover rotated the head again, turning it into a slow, rhythmic pulse. Sneaky bastard.

Her clit twanged in frustration through the downbeats until the hot rod in her cunt began a syncopated thrust. The alternate pounding on her clit and plunging in her pussy sucked the angst right out of her head and into her crotch. Her nerves didn't know which way to turn. "This is torture," she said through her teeth, throwing back her head for purchase, only to have it land in hot fleece.

No. A faint voice reverberated up from the drain. *True torture is not being able to do this.*

The showerhead circled again and the pulses came quicker, a rat-tat-tat on her clit. He thrust faster, harder, inhaling her body into his sultry, succulent phantasm.

She would not think about how weird this was. She would not. Instead she was going to focus on the zinging thrills in her vagina, the rasp of his scorching cock and the staccato jolts on her clit.

Bracing herself between the wall and the door, she clenched her teeth, scrunched her eyes and allowed her whole body to be swallowed in his mists. With a giant shout, she heaved herself up and out, gasped in cool, fresh air and surrendered herself to the most freakingly awesome orgasm she'd ever had in her life.

Good thing Mr. Sparks had vacated the room downstairs. Her moans bounced off the tiles and into the clouds with a squishy plop and she reclined, panting, against an icy, solid surface.

Her eyes flew open and she stood at the pedestal sink, enveloped in a cotton-fluff world, blinking into the empty shower stall. Darting a glance at the mirror, she saw the heart tremble and melt—droplets of water beading and weeping like tears. Inside he had written two words—*Open me*.

* * * * *

From across the dining room table, Dove glared at Mark. She ought to be elated she'd won this little battle, ecstatic that he couldn't get his paws on Michael anymore. Instead she felt edgy and disconcerted. Why? Gee. Could it be the *Cone of Evil* encasing him?

After grudgingly electing to stay at Pilgrim's Progress, he'd taken the afternoon to "get his things together". What things? He had no luggage. Only the weird clothes on his back. Oh wait. He'd arrived with a bouquet of colorful balloons. *Balloons*. What the fuck? Arnie'd said Michael gave them to him, but Dove knew her charge better than that. The only balloon Michael had any interest in whatsoever was the Hindenburg.

This was getting nuttier by the minute.

Rational Dove wanted to run away for the evening to a quiet solo dinner and maybe a movie. Suspicious Dove forced her to join the gang in the humongous dining room for the Saturday night feast, to keep an eye on Mark.

She'd always hated that side of her nature. But as it turned out, she'd needed it. It'd never failed her when Trish was in trouble—at the bar when she should've been working. In jail instead of on vacation. On a corner buying drugs when she should've been buying Christmas presents...

Her suspicion had failed her only once—when she'd ignored it. Unfortunately, that one time had been a whopper. And now she knew where her cousin was all the time—in Sound View cemetery.

She choked back a glob of bitter regret.

In another life, she would've been a detective. Probably should've been. Then she'd be chasing down real bad guys, preventing real crimes and having real lovers in exotic locations instead of chasing intuitions and irrational fears and having goddamned pseudo-sex with her own mind.

Pouring ice water into a tumbler, she gripped the jug handle and stared herself down in the buffed silver plating.

At least her lush, swollen sexual desire for Mark had been vacuumed into the void of his sobriety. That'd been one distraction she hadn't needed...

Her forehead crinkled. Despite her disgust, her pussy had pounded for a sauced sot. He'd been hurling all over the place and she'd wanted to do him like crazy anyway.

In fact, if he'd acted as silly and accessible this morning, she might've weakened and had a fling—eventually. Could that've been part of the reason she'd been so desperate to get him involved with the aunties and, by default, with her? Maybe it hadn't been only for Michael's welfare.

What did that say about her?

You need sex. You need sex. Lather, rinse, repeat.

That's all it said. That's all! No need to analyze. But as she passed the water jug to her left and accepted a bowl of mashed potatoes from her right, the idea that she was capable of enabling slipped into the worry drawer in her mind.

He'd been withdrawn since arriving. Had answered questions in a clipped tone and avoided eye contact and accidental touching at all costs. His body language shouted *keep out*. But now, as she eyed him covertly, his head wobbled and a pea tumbled off his fork before he could get it into his mouth.

He watched the pea hit the plate, then looked at the little pile remaining on his utensil. When he was about to shovel them in, another skittered off, bounced and rolled to the center of the table.

Distracted, he let the fork droop and a Niagara Falls of LeSeurs hit the floor.

The single mother immediately slipped out of her chair and cleaned them up. No one said anything, but Dove noticed some stolen glances. Mark just sat there watching the poor woman.

"Aren't you going to help?" Dove asked. *Please don't make me add chauvinist pig to the ever-growing fault list.*

He blinked and a slow, wolfish smile spread across his chops. "Why don't you? I'd like seeing you on your knees."

Her spine hit the back of her chair with gale force, ejecting syrup between her thighs. The sudden, feverish glint in his eyes squished her stomach into a writhing mass as she imagined looking up into those eyes with his cock in her mouth. Imagined those eyes peering at her from below, a hot tongue laving her pussy.

His low, dirty chuckle echoed in the room. The fruits and nuts turned assorted shades of pink. Some exchanged glances.

Penny and Poppy bustled in from the kitchen, casseroles in their hot-mitted hands.

Before Dove could gather her wits for a scathing reply, Penny said, "Mark, did you bring anything here with you?"

How he could have brought anything with the aunties not knowing, she couldn't fathom. The aunties practically did a strip search on their boarders before allowing them inside.

Awareness snapped into his gaze and, without another word, he got up and left the table.

She followed shortly after. The fire escape passed directly under his window and she intended sitting there as long as necessary, snooping through the blinds. The action

marked an official new low, but she didn't give a shit. The handbasket was already stuffed, packaged and stamped with express postage to hell.

He sat on his bed, rocking spastically back and forth, a red balloon at his mouth. She felt her lip curl. Ay carumba. Blowing up another one? He didn't have enough already? Did he have a fetish?

His right arm melted and flopped onto the bed. With his left hand, he lifted it and the balloon to his mouth again. Pathetic.

About to give up and move on, she did a double-take. Wait a minute. Was he going to tie it around his arm and shoot up? The balloon was withering between his fingers, not inflating. No. He got it to his lips before it went completely limp and inhaled deeply, closing his eyes and holding it in his lungs. The ecstatic expression on his face looked like he'd taken a hit from a doobie.

Shit. Fuck! He *had* brought something with him. She spun to inform the aunties and froze. They'd asked if he had anything in a tone more cagey than curious. If they *knew* he did, they hadn't stopped him. They'd essentially sent him to his room to use it. Not only that, *Arnie* gave him the balloons. It sure as hell hadn't been Michael.

She clawed at her chest with feeble, trembling fingers. Were Penny and Poppy demented? God knew they were old.

No way. *No way!*

Their minds were still sharp. Sharper than hers, most days. What about Arnie? Ava? What the holy fuck was going on around here? What did Mark have in the fucking balloons? What the hell came in a balloon? Helium...

Oh, yeah. He's addicted to squeaking.

Nice one, Dove.

Could she swipe a balloon, sneak into Michael's science lab and analyze the contents on his gas monitor? She had a key. Laika would tattle, though. What to do. What to do.

Get out! a desperate voice screamed.

She glanced right. Left. As if there were anywhere else to go. Even if there were, she couldn't take Michael. And now more than ever, she had no intention of going anywhere without him. That left only one course of action. Something she hadn't done in a very long time because saving Trish had been a futile effort in frustration and grief.

Stand and fight.

She blinked.

Could she do it? The attack plan was elegantly simple.

Her eyes narrowed and her spine straightened. She clamped her dangling jaw. *Enjoy your balloons, buddy boy. Squeal like a mouse. I have a pin. And I'm not afraid to use it.*

* * * * *

Dove convulsed, her body heaving and undulating against a backdrop of misty orange haze. Human-shaped shadows danced across her eyes, hands reached for her, touched, disappeared. Faces formed. Expressions appeared and changed, morphing into someone else like a badly edited slideshow of family pictures.

She waited for him. Called for him, yearned, her body starting to thrum in anticipation. *Come to me*, she commanded silently. *I want you*.

Need is more like it. After the stresses of the day, something in her cried out for sameness. Security. When he'd become synonymous with that, she had no clue. He was imaginary, for cripes' sake. A figment. Yet amidst the turmoil of current circumstances, he seemed more like a lifeline.

You seriously need medication.

She hadn't tried summoning him before. He'd always come whether she wanted him to or not, whether she thought of him or not. This time, she wanted to try to make him appear. Needed the release only he provided. The pleasure. She definitely needed endorphins. At least *that* drug was all natural and safe.

Yet she didn't want to beg. Didn't want him unless he wanted her.

You're borderline certifiable.

She sensed him circling in the ether. He could hear her—she had no doubt. A connection had been established out there in the Universal Consciousness, but it wasn't the only one, either.

Others came and went as if saying, *Me? Did you want me?* Then they continued onward, sifting through ten million thoughts, beating the bushes of a world of minds to find what they were seeking.

How the fuck could he find her? Seemed *everyone* was out partying tonight.

Padded room, anyone?

A hand clasped her chin, pulling her head against the unyielding wall of his chest. A sigh leaked out of her parted lips, bunched muscles wilted. "It's about time," she said.

"I couldn't get in."

Typical male excuse. *I wanted to call, but, honey, I couldn't get a signal*. "What, the line too long? Bouncers at the door?"

He chuckled, a low, sexy, *familiar* sound. "Static."

"Oh. Well, that explains it."

"Listen." He tightened his grip under her chin until she was well and truly trapped. "If I had a choice, I'd be here fucking you every minute of every day. When I say I can't get in, I mean it."

Whoa. She'd been joking. Really. *Want a restraining order to go with that rage?* Right. From where, a *higher* court?

"Unnecessary."

"Oops. Sorry. Didn't know I said that out loud."

"All your thoughts are out loud to me."

"Oh." That changed things. She hadn't realized. Crap. Conversational forensics overtook horniness for a minute.

"Forget hiding anything. You're safe with me. You should know that by now."

True.

"And I'm not angry."

"Then why the manhandling?"

"Don't you want to be manhandled?"

"Well, yes —"

"Then I'm manhandling you." Though his grip under her chin stayed firm, his fingers began kneading her cheeks. His other hand cupped her forehead, finger-combing her hair, gliding over her stressed brow with soothing warmth. His fingertips grazed her earlobe, tracing the shell and gently daubing inside.

"That's not manhandling," she sighed. "Manhandling is rough."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"You've been misinformed." Both hands fanned out over her cheeks, stroking down her neck to her chest. His hot, sinewy torso shifted forward and her head lifted with it, so she watched big, gentle hands flow over her breasts, and strong, supple fingers flick her nipples into hardened peaks.

He nuzzled her hair, burying his face in it, inhaling her scent. She felt his massive chest rise and fall with each deep breath, his stomach muscles coil and tighten with restraint.

Her pussy throbbed so feverishly, she figured it glowed like the orange haze surrounding them. A beacon in a steamy window to the universe, heeded by one lonely traveler.

"How did you find me?" she asked on a sigh. "Why did you come?"

"You were calling," he rasped, stroking up to her neck again and tilting his forehead onto hers. God. No wonder cats loved their necks scratched. She'd had no idea there were so many nerves there, or in her ear, on her nose, eyelids, all the places he paid minute attention to, unlike any other lover.

She chuckled through dreamy relaxation. "I like a man who comes when called."

"Then I'm your man."

No argument there. Her skin began zinging. No area went untouched. He ran his thumbs along her collarbone, into the hollow between, cupped her shoulders and slid down her arms. The magic thumbs grazed the sensitized baby-skin inside her elbows, along the underside of her wrists. Then nestled into her half-open palms, snuggling between her fingers and nuzzling each joint.

"But the first time, how did you find me?"

"I searched."

A man of few words. "Yes, but —"

"You wanted to be found."

She sure as shit did. "But why you? There are so many others out there." *How did I get lucky enough to escape the short, paunchy bald ones?*

He chuckled. "We match."

"You mean like soul mates?"

"I hate that term."

"Me too. But how else would you describe it?"

His rubbing slowed to wide, lazy circles on her stomach. She tilted her head farther back, trying to catch a glimpse of his face, but he slid backward too, avoiding her gaze yet again.

"Like an element. Two distinct and whole atoms—each having a separate job—combining and making something new. Powerful. Something they can only make together."

She went limp. "Oh." Was that her voice? It sounded so tiny.

"We're fine apart, but together we're better."

"I can deal with that."

"Me too."

"So, what are you waiting for? Let's get together."

A force leaped over her and spread her legs. Strong hands slid up her naked thighs, and ten velvety fingertips began tapping at the door of her salivating pussy.

Her hips unhinged, thigh bones lying flat on the mattress as wide as they could go. He centered his face between them and grazed her labia with his nose. Softly, gently, his lips fondled her pussy. His tongue inched into her tunnel, tasting, sampling, dabbing at the cream around the edges.

All sensation sharpened and focused on that one spot. His hands smoothed her pelvic bones, cupping them gently and holding her hips in place when she began to moan and writhe.

With utmost tenderness, he suckled her lips, pulling each one separately into his mouth, tonguing, nibbling and laving until his moisture mingled with hers and made her slick, hot and achy.

"Is there anyone else in your life. Another man?" He asked quietly from between her legs.

"No," she whispered, but couldn't help an image of Mark popping into her brain. "Not really. Just Mark. He scares me."

"I'm sure he doesn't mean to."

Perspiration dampened her flesh. She reached down and threaded her fingers through silken strands of his hair. Though she could lift her head to watch, his form was foggy, hazy – like a ghost. Casper the Fucking Ghost, as Karen had joked. And she found herself preferring it this way, closing her eyes, relinquishing control and being an utter slave to the sensations he anonymously aroused.

“This Mark. Does he attract you?”

“Not like you.” Her anonymous lover. Did she have commitment issues she hadn’t realized? Fears she couldn’t face in the real world? Had watching people fail time after time, watching Trish fall until she couldn’t get up again, affected her more profoundly than she realized? Is this why she had to make someone up? She’d think about it. Later. When her horniness had abated.

“But he does, some?”

“Not worth talking about. He’s scary.” Circling her hips, she tried bringing her clit into contact with his tongue. The hardened nub sought him desperately, its nerves plumping and surging unbearably and telegraphing its lonesome misery to the rest of her body.

His hands slid down her hips and under her ass, cupping her cheeks and kneading the flesh that’d been firmed by years on the fencing strip. Dove was glad for that now – even if her lover was fake, at least her ass was something he could brag about to all his fake buddies.

She giggled, covered her mouth to stifle it and he stopped for a second. Great. Now he’d go and get all wounded. Men were so fucking fragile. Why a woman wasn’t allowed to laugh during sex was beyond her. Wasn’t it supposed to be fun?

“Am I tickling you?”

“Um. No. No.”

He hoisted her hips and buried his face in her cunt, rubbing her essence all over it and wiggling his head against her thighs until she bucked and erupted in laughter. “Now am I tickling you?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “You monster.” She should’ve known he wouldn’t react like any other man. Yes indeedy. She’d invented a keeper.

That low, sexy chuckle of his rumbled through the billowing atmosphere and the next time she bucked, he caught her nub gently in his teeth and flicked it into madness with the tip of his tongue.

She came in a frenzy of sparklers, shouting and gripping his head. His lips latched on to her with the power of a vacuum and she felt her fluids being drawn into his mouth.

Then, through his teeth, he spurted a mouthful back into her open, gasping pussy. She almost flew off the bed. The hot fluid sprayed out in thin, sharp arcs that gurgled and bubbled in the antechamber of her cunt, fizzing almost like soda pop and bursting against her sensitized nerves. “How...how...” she gulped.

"You've got to work it into a foam in your mouth."

"Oh my God." Her head flopped back onto the pillow and she drew a shaky hand across her brow. He folded her bent knees up against her chest and gently rolled her over onto her side. Then he moved behind her, his abdomen cupping her ass. She felt the solid swell of his cock investigating her pussy. "You never stayed long enough for me to come like that before," she murmured, recalling how he used to hit and run.

"Tonight I wanted to leave you with more than a lick and a promise."

Lifting her top leg slightly, he eased the tip of his velvety head into her opening. His chest settled against her spine and while one arm held her leg aloft, the other came under her neck in a headlock, his hand sliding down far enough to fondle a nipple as he slipped his cock deeply inside.

Jagged puffs of breath traveled her ear canal, grazing the drum and making it spasm like a clitoris. She flinched and trembled in the headlock, wanting to escape the torture and needing to stay forever. Her head shook, so he steadied it with his own, trapping her in a dizzying fury of vibration.

His hard cock filled her, balls snuggling her labia, fuzzy thighs sanding the back of hers. The heat of his chest on her back and the mold of his face against her neck, rubbing up and down like a cat marking its territory, had her whimpering with each languid thrust.

Her slickness allowed him to move like a well-oiled piston. He let her top leg droop onto the other one, tightening her around his slowly pumping shaft and bringing her clit into contact with the thick, ridged vein underneath.

"Maybe this Mark likes you. Maybe you should give him a chance."

Why did Mark keep intruding into the conversation and spoiling the mood? Did her subconscious know something she didn't? See something she'd missed? Was DL trying to pawn her off on him? Good luck with that.

He groaned and a film of sweat broke out on his forehead. He rolled it against her cheek, his musky, aroused scent rising like steam into the air between them. The hand that had supported her leg palmed her mound, middle finger sliding down the wedge of her crevice so its entire length became devoted to massaging her clit. Up and down it slid, harder, softer, faster, slower. His other hand plucked each nipple in turn, palming and kneading her breasts. And all the while, his engorged cock was rolling and twitching inside her.

With all the other sensations clamoring for first place, the delicate motion of his hips barely registered until the walls of her pussy started humming. His bulbous head teased her G-spot, making the band of nerves contract and wrap around him. Pleasure fanned through her muscles and ligaments, softening and stretching them like taffy. She pressed her ass against his abdomen, spreading her legs and wiggling to urge him deeper. He allowed her only so much movement, though, before he gripped her pelvis and held her steady, insistent on a methodical torture that was killing her.

"Take it easy," he whispered. "We have all night."

"What was the rush before?"

"I had many distractions. Now there's just you."

He harnessed her upper body with rippling, muscled arms, lifting her slightly off the mattress and bringing his hands up to cup her face. Sweeping her damp, shaggy hair back, he pressed open-mouthed kisses along her cheeks, his pinkies grazing the bones of her eyebrows and tracing the fine tips of her lashes.

Many distractions. Most in the afternoon. Although she hated to, she had to ask. "Were you married?" She'd hie to a nunnery if he'd been taste-testing her while actually prepping dinner for the little woman.

"No."

Or doing homework with the, "Children?"

He hesitated. "No."

Phew. "Then what distractions?"

Ten fingers pressed her lids closed and covered them like a sleep mask. One by one, his fingertips tapped the tension out of her brows until her eyelids felt heavy, drugged and unwilling to re-open.

"I was traveling. In a ship."

A businessman? Who took business trips in ships?

"Now I'm here."

His magical hands left her face, stroking back down to her breasts, cupping them and flicking each nipple in time with some up-tempo thrusts. Even though she lay anchored on the mattress, she felt suspended from him with his arms supporting her middle and his cock spindling her cunt.

"Are you real?"

He thumped his cock against her backwall, sending jolts of pleasure through her body. Her labia caught and held his balls. He pressed his chest to her spine and tightened his arms around her torso. "Do I feel real?"

Her *yes* caught in her throat and came out as a half gasp, half moan. "Where do you live? I'd like to meet you, do this. In the flesh."

"I'd like it too. More than you know."

She'd heard that one plenty of times before. Usually on Internet dating sites with men who'd only signed up for cyber-sex. Yet this didn't seem the same, unless she was fooling herself. "Can we?" She hated begging. *Here goes.* "Please."

"Perhaps someday."

Damn. "Why not now?"

"I'd get caught—"

"Then you *are* married."

"Caught up in you. Obsessed. I'd never get anything done."

"We'd get used to each other."

"You really think so?"

"No."

They chuckled.

A huge part of her wanted to pressure him, demand more. Was reality too much to ask? Maybe so. For both of them. At least right now. All the dating manuals advised women to be carefree around men. Let them do the chasing. Or at least just relax and let things evolve at their own pace.

It was good advice. Dove hated being pressured and rushed by men, and nearly always broke it off immediately when they did. Why should men feel any differently when women pressured them? Regretfully, she let the matter drop. She'd tipped her hand enough for one night.

"Well, I'm glad you're real. Or am I going crazy? Because I think I might be."

"You're not crazy. You're...*open-minded*. Available."

"And you're all those things too." She waited tensely for his response. The only sound in the room was a gentle air whistling through his nose. *So is Mark.*

"I won't lie to you, Dove. Above all, I need you to trust me." He held his body stiff and still against her, his cock stiff and still inside her. The only movement came from her pussy muscles clamping and releasing his hard shaft, the nerves in her G-spot tightening, narrowing and sharpening.

"I trust you," she gasped around the undulating edges of orgasm. "You're dependable." About the only thing that was these days.

"Yes," he whispered, the heat from his mouth mesmerizing her. "As are others in your life."

"Are you leaving me?" she asked desperately. "Please don't."

"I'll always be here for you. We'll always have this."

But was *this* enough? The way she felt right now, the way she longed for it, needed it, anticipated it and found a weird satisfaction in it, perhaps so. "Promise?"

"Yes. Here's your lick." His warm tongue lapped down the side of her neck. "And here's your promise." He twisted his hips and heaved her over the precipice to shatter into a prism of colorful light and sensation. Following closely behind, his low moans and growls enhanced the vibrancy of her climax.

Her body twitched and spasmed, breath coming in short spurts, and he clung to her, spooning, the moisture on their skin increasing the friction and the bond between them. She clenched his fuzzy arms, fingernails digging into firm, resistant muscles and rolled her head back to rest between his cheek and shoulder.

Hot, heavy breath jetted across her face and when she turned her head, he solidified, and she saw a tattooed temple before it slumped against her brow.

Holy shit.

She launched off his cock, twisting out from the tangle of limbs and landing on the floor with a thud. "Mark?" Her frantic gaze searched the room, empty, wet pussy screaming in cold, lonely shock.

"Mark?"

Nothing.

He had vaporized.

Chapter Five

Walk softly and carry a big stickpin. Dove tiptoed down the fire escape, weapon palmed at her side, and peered stealthily around the windowsill into the dining room. All the boarders were present and accounted for, seated at the table and digging into a hearty Sunday breakfast. Including her target.

She slipped around the side of the house to the front, knowing the bell on the door might rat her out but hoping to squeeze through the six-inch allowance between door and jamb. Her breasts would be an issue, but if she sucked in her stomach and slid in one at a time...

Sweet. She made it! Bounding up the stairs, she scurried down the oriental runner in the hallway and slipped into Mark's room. Third on the left.

Pasting her weight against the closed door, she paused to case the joint. The number of balloons skiing the ceiling were markedly fewer this morning. Fine with her. Made her job that much easier.

She snatched a string, reeled in a balloon and poised the pin.

What if it's hydrogen?

The spark from the pin, hell, the static from her feet on the carpet would turn her into a human warhead. *Sure, Dove. Arnie, Ava and the aunties are in Al-Qaeda. Didn't you know?*

Ridiculous. But still. She sucked in a breath, held it, closed her eyes and...

Pop!

She cracked an eyelid. Aside from the dead balloon at her feet, all seemed right with the world. Cool. It took no time at all to make mincemeat of the rest.

She briefly considered leaving the evidence on the floor for Mark to find—just to rub his nose in his own assholiness—but decided against it. Better not to open the forum for questions. This way she could plead ignorance.

Tucking the shredded Latex into her pocket, she paused. Breakfast had just started. She had a little time unless he choked on the shards of shell the aunties inevitably left in the scrambled eggs.

Padding to the closet, she slid the door open and peeked inside. His Majesty's tunic hung royally from a quilted hanger, the crisply washed pants folded on the shelf. Some other odds and ends provided by Pilgrim's Progress made for a pathetically small grouping. Had he left his *island* in a hurry? On the run?

What does it have in its pockets?

Dare she?

She whipped his pants off the shelf and shook them out, feeling around the waistband for a telltale slit. Nada. Hoisting the oddly heavy article high, she inspected the weakened seams.

No dice.

Folding them back exactly as she'd found them, she reached for the tunic. Manly pheromones wafted out of the fabric and fucked up her head with a weird *deja vu*. Well, what did she expect, she *had* sniffed him before. Still.

Clearing his scent from her nose and finding nothing yet again, she hung it back up. Oh yeah. His tool belt. She'd forgotten about that, but there it hung on a nail in the wall. Lifting it off, her hand nearly dropped to the floor from the weight. She sent up a thankful prayer. The thud would've rivaled an earthquake.

Hauling it into the light, she sat down cross-legged on the carpet and spread it out over her thighs.

Man. If this thing had been part of a costume, he'd spent a helluva lot of money. A thick slab of leather made up most of the belt, intricately carved silver buttons studded it and an equally ornate buckle graced the tip. But it was the tools that captured her attention.

A thick hexagonal metal tube—now what could that be for? It looked almost like a massive Allen wrench. Must be some big ass bicycle he rode. She giggled.

Next up was a knife. Typical. Bone handle. Curved blade.

A sextant? She thought those went out with the dinosaurs. Michael would love to play around with that. She'd have to get him one.

A tin kit with some weird ass shit inside. Gauzy bandages with funny writing on the package, a language she didn't recognize. Fruity smelling ointment. A dental pick, of all things, and a bottle of clear liquid that smelled like...ether.

That one she recapped quickly, waving her arms around to dissipate the fumes. If he came in and smelled it, he'd know someone had been snooping.

But why did he have it in the first place? It was an additive in gasoline. Highly flammable and quite toxic, it belonged in a garage, not a house.

She rummaged through the rest of the items in the tin and pulled out a tiny, clear glass bulb. Her heart plummeted to her toes as she remembered another, sinister use for ether. One her first cousin had known intimately.

To freebase cocaine.

The walls of Mark's room tilted, curved and narrowed into a cone, and in her mind's eye, she saw herself sitting in the middle. Alone.

The aunties had let him in with it.

This was bad. Really bad. Worse than she could've imagined. What if, after all these decades, Penny and Poppy had finally been seduced to the dark side?

Further damning evidence came in the form of the balloons Arnie'd supplied. Smugglers often used balloons to hide cocaine, swallowing the packets and shitting

them out later. But that hadn't seemed the case last night. Mark had inhaled the balloon, not eaten it. When she'd popped them, they had no scent, no funny white powder inside.

Unless she could find Mark's stash, there'd be no just cause for accusation, to call the police or even kick the bastard out of the house. It wasn't a crime to have a glass bulb, a vial of ether and some goddamned balloons!

Her head was about to explode.

She launched her knuckles into her eye sockets and pressed hard. Tears leaked out and she began to shake. This couldn't be happening again. Not to the aunts, not to Arnie and Ava. Not to Michael.

Not to her.

She didn't have the strength to go through another drug war. Didn't want to be accountable for the fate of another irresponsible loved one. Didn't want to *lose* anyone anymore.

And yet, she couldn't turn her back on them if they needed her. Could she?

Time was running out. The breakfast hour advancing. She'd have to search later or better yet, corner him and read him the riot act.

Today was his first and last day here. He might not have any drugs on him at the moment, but his intent was crystal clear. No matter what she had to do, no matter what she had to say, he was so, so out of here.

And then he'd trot right back to Michael's house. Where they'd welcome him.

Dove flopped backward onto the floor, staring at the ceiling, fortitude and resolve seeping out of her ears. Oops, there went her sanity too. Puddled underneath her in a gelatinous mess.

Breathe. Breathe. In. Out. In. You can do this. You'll think of something. Just breathe.

Could she breathe, think and walk at the same time? She had no choice, had to get out of his room. Now. Crossing to his bedroom door, she eased it open and peered through the slit. The coast was clear. She sprang out the doorway, shut it and strolled casually back down the hallway. Another door opened and out spilled the little girl and single-mom.

Dove pasted on a smile. "Morning."

The woman smiled shyly back. The little girl waved and did a double-take, locking on Dove as if she'd seen a ghost.

Dove broadened her fake smile and raised her eyebrows, pitching her voice higher. "Man, I'm starved. I think they have fresh huckleberry jelly for the toast today."

The little girl relaxed visibly and giggled, tucking a small hand inside the mother's and pulling her toward the stairs. "Huckleberry's my favorite."

"I knew it." For some reason, she had. Dove quickened her pace. "I better get there first."

"Nooooo."

They giggled and clattered down the stairs, storming the dining room just as Dove's smile became genuine and a platter of bacon made the rounds. The little girl skittered to the sideboard, hogged the bowl of jelly and smirked.

Dove's eyes narrowed. "I'll get you..." A tiny spark appeared in the girl's eye, jolting Dove with unsettling memories of another carefree girl, a long time ago.

Wincing, she shook it off and felt Mark's awareness as she slipped into an empty seat at the opposite end of the long table. She glanced at him but didn't focus, and still she felt a jagged tingle of resentment in her nipples and a flash of red-hot anger in her tender pussy.

Bitterness hissed through her blood stream, stopping her temporary good mood on a dime. Everything had been *fine* until he showed up.

He'd ruined *everything*.

Even her most cherished fantasy.

Why did such a rat bastard drug addict have to look so much like her Dream Lover? Had her mind been playing tricks on her? Her brain sorting through the day's problems in order to help her solve them?

Mark was the cornerstone of her angst. A good reason for him to appear in dreams. But as her *lover*? She wanted the old one back. The faceless one who teased her mercilessly, drove her nuts. At least then she could fantasize whole hog. Go for broke. And more importantly, maintain hope. Now the whole experience had been tainted with evil reality.

But why? It was never real to begin with, she reminded herself.

And therein lay the problem.

She'd begun wanting it to be real. Without realizing it, she'd been edging into a preference for Dream Lover over all other men, wondering if he existed, hoping he did and that someday she'd find him in the flesh.

To discover Karen and her own boring logic were right all along and the dreams were a symptom of biological stress was a major letdown. Not only that, it pissed her off. *Someone* had to be held accountable.

She couldn't stop herself from shooting Mark a glare. A fatal move. Despite her abhorrence, and his stony face pointed down at his partially eaten breakfast, there was no denying his overall hotness. Whatever had been in the balloons hadn't caused visible scars.

Crisply dressed in a tight black T-shirt that accentuated the sleek hair and swarthy skin, he looked more broodingly dangerous than usual. The heavy, exotic silver chain still adorned his strong neck and she could see the vague outline of the medallion between some seriously sculpted pecs.

If possible, his shoulders looked even broader without the heavy tunic. Muscled arms had a smattering of dark hair, and though one of them perched casually on his

knee and the other one rested mildly on the table, Dove knew they could snap her neck in a heartbeat if she didn't watch herself.

Maybe she shouldn't have burst his bubbles.

Another glance at his chest and her brain suddenly focused on the imprint of the medallion. It had the same pattern as the belt buckle. Interesting, but she drew a blank. Part of her wondered what culture the motif sprang from. The other part couldn't care less. It didn't appear Mayan, Egyptian or Celtic. Not Aztec or Greek or Inuit. Curious and meaningless at the same time. She mentally shrugged.

Her gaze lagged on the return trip to her own plate. Mark glanced up and caught her staring.

The iceman cometh.

He didn't like her either. At least not while sober. While drunk, he'd probably like anything with a cunt.

It struck a perverse note inside and she decided to rattle his cage a little, torture him. Punish him for ruining her life. What would be the worst thing she could do? He didn't seem to relish attention from her. Avoided it at all costs. Touching was the worst though. Heh. She'd touch him later, but for now...

Brightening her gaze, she jutted her breasts out, relaxed her tight lips and pulled them all the way back across her teeth. Bringing a strip of bacon to her mouth, she tilted her head and licked the meat, nibbling gently on the tip.

The fingernails on his right hand dug into the tablecloth. The fabric bunched. His left biceps morphed into Mt. Rainier.

"Mmmmm." Her breathy sigh carried across the table. She knew 'cause she saw him flinch. "Tasty," she cooed.

He turned his tight face and stared out the window, fingers drumming the tabletop.

"Penny and Poppy sure know how to cook," one of the fruits named Gregory Banks said.

"They sure do," answered a nut called Sal.

"I love meat for breakfast," Dove purred. "Salty meat."

Mark groaned.

Sal eyed him. "Feeling okay, Mark?"

"Peachy."

"How's your adjustment going?"

He didn't answer.

"Someone got up on the grumpy side of the bed." Greg and Sal chuckled. Then their eyes turned kind. "It gets better, my friend. You just gotta wait it out."

"Keep busy," Dove added in a husky voice. "Active."

Sal and Greg nodded. "Keeps the mind off your troubles."

"Relieves stress."

Mark pounced out the door so fast, he seemed to have spontaneously combusted.

Oh, the power.

Oh...the power!

That's it! She'd seduce him into insanity. Flirt, touch, spend the day crowding him. Foolproof plan. He wouldn't be able to tolerate it.

Her deliberate, enticing smile slackened and drooped. She frowned at her toast. Was she that unattractive to him? Didn't matter. She disliked him intensely. Though, desperate as she was, she probably would've done him anyway. He apparently didn't return even those spare feelings. But why did it cause a pang? Like she cared!

It wasn't as if she were unattractive. She knew she was pretty. Maybe not a doll-baby but more than serviceable. Karen's brother wanted a hook-up.

Mark's frigidity wasn't her problem. Perhaps he was gay. Or misogynistic, or...married? Nah. Someone would've said something. Hmmm.

He'd escaped to the front yard. She spied his fabulous physique through the picture window. He stood rigidly in the center of the small garden, then his neck unlocked and his head fell back. He lifted two fists to the heavens but stopped short of dramatically shaking them. Then they came down and raked that silky hair. Hard. Almost yanking it out.

My, my.

Penny shuffled in with a blueberry torte.

"Morning." Dove stood, stretched and pecked her aunt on the cheek. "Hey, is there anything Mark and I can do for you today? It's gorgeous out. Thought we might dig in the garden a little."

Penny rearranged various platters on the table and centered the torte. "That would be lovely, dear. The raspberry bushes are bursting. I'd love to make some pies."

"Done." She smiled, narrowed her eyes at her target through the window and made a beeline for him.

* * * * *

Anthros stood in a whirling vortex of helplessness and searched for shattered segments of control. After last night with Dove, his sense of self-preservation had fractured and his resolve to save the remnants of his own civilization had the hairline cracks to prove it.

He had to get out of here. Fast. Couldn't relinquish everything he'd lived for, worked for and been willing to die for.

In the weeks before his arrival on Earth, she'd been a distraction, a sex toy, someone to have fun with. And she remained all those things. But last night something had shifted inside him. Something tender, vulnerable and treacherous.

She'd talked of a genuine relationship. Of wanting more. Displayed some of her inner yearnings.

For *him*.

He hadn't realized he craved these things too. Had never given it a moment's thought. How could he miss something he'd never had?

Worse, he wanted it with *her*.

She'd gotten to a deeper place. A place of addiction. Obsession. A place that'd been empty so long it'd gotten cobwebby and moldy until the light from her soul had cleansed it.

The longer he stayed, the deeper she'd forage. The deeper she foraged the more he'd enslave himself to her. In no time at all, he'd be dragging her out to the garden shed in back, tearing off her clothes and...and dying at his brothers' hands.

Yet fulfilling his mission, taking Michael back, meant eventual death too. He was okay with that. It's what he'd signed up for. What ate at him was this wayward urge to die for a woman—*this* woman. His self-destructive hunger to have her in the flesh. Just once. Well, maybe twice. How many times could he manage before the spooks arrived? Three? He'd never had real sex before. There was no way to judge.

But what good would that do him, her or anyone? What sort of spineless creature had he become? Worse, had this weakness been there all along, part of the DNA-level failure of his entire race? Was he as inferior as the rest of them, and if so, what other inadequacies were looming down the pike? Flaws he couldn't predict, couldn't conceive until faced with them.

Dove appeared at his side, wrapped in that tight, sky blue T-shirt and those equally snug denim shorts. The T-shirt had a plunging neckline and he could see the luscious swell of her breasts. Thin material hugged her waist, outlining her belly button—the one he'd repeatedly dipped his tongue into last night—and barely skimmed the top of her shorts.

His cock danced at the sight, its hardening length digging into the seam of his jeans and turning them into an inescapable, torturous chastity belt.

"Hi, cowboy. How's about you help me rustle some raspberries? If you're good, I'll let you feed me."

He understood the *feed me* part. At least his dick did. The rest, however, was gibberish. Feeling unsure, he decided not to answer. Instead he watched her out of the corner of his eye and shoved his hands into his pockets. Pinching the blood out of his cock proved harder than he'd expected.

"C'mon. You know the score. If you eat, you stay. If you stay, you work."

"Work?"

"Yeah, big boy. Work. You're not used to it?"

"I'm used to it. It's all I do. You didn't say work. You said rustle raspberries."

She shimmied up to him and her nipples scraped his arm. Little bumps appeared on his flesh. The universe echoed in a collective gasp and a mental spotlight searched the galaxy. Fuck.

"I was flirting. You know what that is, don't you?" Her voice had dropped an octave and with her hands in her back pockets and her breasts reaching out for him, he considered surrendering now.

"I don't like to flirt." Maybe she'd give up and go away.

She moved closer. "I think you do. C'mon. Live a little." The warmth of her breath edged through the fabric covering his shoulder and fanned out in tentacles across his chest, making it ache for the feathery touch of her fingers, the soft succulence of her lips, the slink of her tongue.

It took every ounce of strength he possessed to freeze his limbs, his face, his jaw. "Stop it."

"Why?" she murmured, swaying her hips and closing the distance between their faces. "You're a sexy guy."

"Please."

"I don't have a boyfriend. I need one."

"Dove—"

"Badly."

Extreme frustration made his gaze lock on hers. Whoa. Her mood hit him upside the head. She looked different than usual. Those blue eyes, so large, sparkly and passionate, drugged and heavy in his virtual presence, had vanished. These eyes had all the fire of a white dwarf star.

This is a trick. The transmission rode in on pure malevolence, shocking him with its vehemence and slapping him into sanity. Were it not for telepathy, he'd have been completely fooled by the wet, inviting lips, wide gaze and welcoming smile. Did all men have to contend with this? He'd do anything for her, just to see that smile, smell her lusty fragrance. Do anything just for the *hope* of a good, rollicking fuck. Talk about a weapon of mass destruction.

He almost laughed. Here he was playing mind games with her by night and she was playing physical ones with him by day. Who would win? He was afraid to answer.

He couldn't call her on it either. Not if he wanted her eventual trust and goodwill. Somehow, he had to maintain composure and not bring the rivalry into the open where it would be dissected. "You're a desirable woman," he said through his teeth. "If I had a choice, I'd fuck you every minute of every day..." *Uh oh.*

She blinked. Her mouth opened and closed. She blinked again.

Genius Chrysler! Isn't that what Arnie used to say? Seemed to fit his situation nicely.

"What did you say?"

He ignored the question. If he moved on quickly, she'd forget he'd told her the same thing last night. "I can't get involved."

"Did you just say..."

"Forget what I said. The answer is no."

"Why?"

"I have...problems." True enough, and an admission that might get him some sympathy.

"I know. We can work on them together."

"No. I won't drag you into it."

Her hand landed on his forearm and she kneaded his sweaty flesh. The tingles prickling his skin stung like poison darts. Somewhere out in the nothing, Queen Win cocked her head.

He peeled her fingers off, cupping them in his palm and firmly handing them back to her. "I've got to go."

She plucked his shirt as he strode away. "You have to work. It's our policy."

He stopped. "Will they throw me out if I don't?"

"Yes."

Perfect. If he refused to work, the aunts would be forced to maintain appearances and turn him out. He'd return to the Simpsons' and take Michael *out for coffee* in the morning. "Then I'll collect my things."

Did she mutter *No! Dammit*. Never mind. He hurried through the door and bounded up the stairs. Pausing on the landing, he gave his head a vigorous shake. His brain twirled in response and he gripped the railing until the sudden dizziness subsided. No problem. Another shot of nitrogen and he'd be good to go for another few hours.

With heavy steps, he traversed the hallway and opened his door.

* * * * *

Dove's heart clunked in her chest like a lead balloon until she heard Mark's roar all the way out on the lawn. *Missing something?*

Grinning, she wiped her hands together and set them on her hips, resisting the urge to do a victory dance. After all, she wasn't out of the woods yet. He might go stomping back to the Simpsons'.

She composed her face, wouldn't do to look too happy or guilty, and skipped up the porch steps into the house.

Mark slammed into her at the foot of the stairs. The impact of his huge body knocked her into the wall and they grappled each other for purchase. Musky man-vapors assailed her nostrils, making her woozy and clumsy. His rock-solid chest provided no spare flesh to hang on to. She rebounded off the wall and landed against him, arms automatically looping his waist, hips colliding with a steel-rod of a leg. His

hands gripped her ass and they swayed as one, both trying to pull back but locked into a knot that wouldn't untie.

Her body sang a recognizable tune, pussy clamoring for contact, legs lunging for and wrapping around his own memorable long limbs. The pounding of her hormones left no doubt in her heart that Mark had indeed paid her a visit last night. Every inch of him felt the same as Dream Lover—satiny flesh, silky hair, muscled shoulders. His scent, his breathing patterns, the beat of his heart. The weight of his touch.

Sure as shootin', her heart stood up and shouted *howdy*.

Her mind, however, needed convincing.

It was impossible, after all. She'd been trysting with DL for weeks. Way before she'd met Mark. Pure coincidence, she told herself. Guessing what his body might feel like took no stretch of the imagination at all. You could tell just by looking he'd be great.

So how had she known before she met him? Easy. He was perfect. That's why. The ideal physique. One celebrated in magazines, billboards and porn flicks. Her imagination had created DL and Mark just happened along at the right moment. A common enough occurrence.

Right?

But what about his scent?

Department store aftershave.

The rhythm of his breath?

Fast. Medium. Slow. How many were there?

The unique pressure of his touch?

Again, hard, medium, soft. Not much variety there.

Your instincts?

Um—

Boarders drifted in from the dining room.

"Oh dear, what's going on?" For two old ladies, Penny and Poppy could hustle when they had to.

Dove untangled her arms from his and sprang backward, wiping sweaty palms on her shorts, reluctant to meet his gaze.

Mark spun around. "My balloons." His Adam's apple bobbed. "They're gone." A note of hysteria cracked his baritone. Dove's facial muscles scrunched in contempt. He was utterly disgusting. Pathetic.

Penny's eyes widened. "Gone?"

"Where to, dear?" Poppy said.

"If he knew, he would find them," Penny snapped. "Did you leave a window open?"

His head bobbed back and forth like a dashboard ornament.

"We'll have to get more. Call Arnie."

Poppy booked into the office off the kitchen.

A cold, metal vice clamped Dove's heart. No doubt remained. The aunts were enabling Mark. She prayed for fortification. Perhaps age had finally caught up with her vibrant aunties. Pilgrim's Progress would have to close its doors, no longer a place to seek help and healing. Grief hollowed her out, but she struggled to compartmentalize. A long, weary road lay ahead. A lot of work. Too much to worry about all at once. Later, she'd make a list to ease her mind. Questions and concerns were flying in from all directions, tangling in her brain and confusing the hell out of her.

Just for today, she had to take the twelve zillion steps one at a time. Just for today, stabilizing Mark and keeping him from Michael was first and foremost.

She cast him a sidewise glance. Despite the fact that he hadn't been upstairs long, he must've dug into his stash. He was trying to stay steady, but his head kept bouncing. Every time it did, he startled and blinked.

Poppy emerged from the office, face pinched, clearly distressed. "The Simpsons are in California, visiting someone. I got Arnie on his cell. They won't be home until tonight." She stared at Penny.

Visiting the alien hunters, Dove supposed. They hadn't mentioned they were going anywhere, but Arnie considered his plane an extension of his car and hopped around on day trips all the time. He'd see no need to inform Dove.

A chunk of tension broke off. One problem already solved. Mark couldn't run to them as had been his intent.

"It's Sunday. The store's closed," Penny said mysteriously, and frowned.

"The police station isn't," Dove announced. "Mark's high. He could be dangerous. I'm calling 911."

A collective gasp from the boarders.

Penny stopped her with a surprisingly strong, knobby grip. "No."

"He's not high, dear. He's coming down," Poppy said. "He has moments of clarity and then he crashes again." She fanned a hand over the crowd. "It's part of the *adventure*."

"Yes," they all murmured.

"Bullshit," Dove said. "I saw drug paraphernalia in his room."

"You were in my room?" Mark slurred.

Shit. Busted. Oh, what the hell. "Yes. I popped your balloons. Want to share with the class what was in them?"

He shrugged. "Nitrogen."

"That's a creative way of putting it," Penny declared "Plain air. Seventy-eight percent nitrogen."

Poppy giggled.

"I need it."

Nitrogen? Nitrous oxide? Laughing gas? Still a drug and no laughing matter. "Like you need ether to freebase?"

"Oh my." Poppy sobered.

"Freebase?" Mark looked perplexed. "No—"

"Enough!" Penny elbowed in between Dove and Mark. "Let's get you to your room." She glared over her shoulder. "Dove, you must trust us. We've been through this hundreds of times and you haven't. Not once."

She reared back from the hard look in her aunt's eyes, the harshness in her tone.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"No, you don't!" Poppy crowed.

"Worse, you've betrayed the trust of this house. No one enters someone else's room uninvited."

"No one!"

"So stop making unfounded accusations and pitching childish hissy-fits. You're not equipped to diagnose and you're certainly not helping."

Heat charged Dove's face and she slumped, chastened and embarrassed. "But—"

Penny stabbed an index finger at her, "Hush. There'll be no more of this nonsense or I'll have to ask you to go to your room." She stiffened her spine and adjusted her apron. "Not. Another. Word."

So this was what it was like to be nine again. Every cell in her body felt red and raw. The aunts had never spoken to her this way. Never. But then, she'd never interfered with them either.

What was it about Mark that set her off? Normally she ignored the boarders and they ignored her. But it was a polite ignoring. This hostile tension with Mark was totally off the wall. The aunts were right. She was out of her league.

She glanced at the sympathetic faces surrounding her. Sal winked. Gregory Banks smiled. Tears pricked her eyes.

Mark hiccupped. "The ether is for my cruiser."

"His *cabin* cruiser," Poppy shouted. Penny ran a shaky hand through white locks.

"My ship."

Dove sniffed and swiped her eyes. "Is that how you got here?" DL said he'd been in a ship too, she thought numbly.

He nodded. "The ether starts the engines under...uncertain climatic conditions."

Dove stared into him and chewed her lower lip. He appeared utterly sincere, not shifty or nervous. His explanation seemed plausible and certainly accounted for some of the oddities in his tool belt and his general disarray upon arrival. A long voyage could do that to a person.

But the laughing gas remained problematic.

She recalled Arnie and Ava had talked about getting him some. Did it have medicinal value, like methadone for heroin? Had Ava prescribed it?

Had fear and the wretched experience with Trish closed Dove's heart to alternative possibilities?

In less than forty-eight hours, her whole life had derailed. Her aunts were pissed, and rightly so. She wondered if she'd survive intact. Maybe if she kept her mind open and an ear to the ground, she would.

"Would you like to rest this morning instead of doing your chores?" Poppy was asking.

Mark took a deep breath and steadied himself with a hand on the banister. "No."

"Are you quite sure? You've babbled a bit."

"I'll be careful. It's not as bad today."

"Good. Well, under the circumstances, I'd rather you not climb the ladder to finish the windows."

"Dovey's going to collect raspberries. Why don't you help her?" Poppy twittered.

"Sounds good."

Penny pursed red lips. "Dove, you have to understand that what you see and hear might be corrupted. Mark's body is adjusting." Her words were firm, her voice gentle.

"I understand."

Her features relaxed. "His behavior and his thoughts might be erratic."

"I get it." At least, intellectually she did. *Open mind. Keep an open mind.* She focused on his face. He was watching her. A mischievous gleam backlit his eyes. *Uh oh.* "You're sure you want to work? I thought—"

He licked his lips and a small smile curved them. "I changed my mind."

Dove's stomach fluttered. *Crap.* She hated his erotic power over her. She really had to get a grip. If he was going to morph back into Super Horn Dog, this was going to be a long day. "I don't really need help."

"Of course you do," Poppy cooed. "There's hours of weeding, pest patrol and—"

"Make sure to bring me the berries as soon as they're picked," Penny put in. "I'll make several pies for dinner tonight."

A murmur of appreciation went up from the crowd.

"Well, scat!" The old ladies each reached out and patted Dove's arm in a gesture of forgiveness before bustling back into the dining room, clucking and clearing the few remaining dishes.

She looked at Mark. His gaze snapped up from her breasts. "What do you know about hoes?"

A grin split his face and his pearly whites dazzled her. "Nothing. Want to teach me?"

"No."

He trotted after her like a clumsy puppy.

Chapter Six

"Here. I'll collect berries. You start hoeing." Out in the garden, Dove shoved the instrument into his hand. With his jerky movements, he'd probably crush the delicate fruit, sending the aunties into fits of despair. He'd be better off scraping dirt.

Open mind.

She drew a few calming breaths, trying to enter the Zen of gardening. It was wonderful to have a day outdoors. Low, blue-bottomed clouds clotted the white, hazy sky. Watery sunlight filtered through the breaks with the promise of another rain-free day. She noted that since Mark had shown up, it hadn't rained at all. But stretches of sunshine weren't uncommon in late spring, once the dreary autumns and winters had passed.

A native Seattleite, Dove couldn't imagine living anywhere else. It had a youthful, vibrant, creative energy she thrived on. Not to mention incredible food. Yeah, the rainy season could be tough, but Dove found satisfaction and contentment in the contrast and the ever-changing marine clouds scudding like digital artwork across the sky, providing interest throughout the mild seasons.

Mark looked at the hoe, held it out to his side and jiggled it. Loosely gripping the end, thumb on top and index finger curved along the side, he stepped into a relaxed stance and glanced back at her.

The authoritative pose galvanized her—the natural, unconscious way he balanced himself and the hoe. She paused from her task of sorting matching gloves out of a basket and inspected him tip to toe. "Have you fenced?" He sure as heck held that hoe like he had, like it was an extension of his arm.

"Of course. My whole life."

A zinging thrill straightened her spine. "Me too. Epee."

White teeth flashed. "Is there any other weapon?"

She smiled back. "Nope." Awkward silence descended as sexual awareness skittered to a deeper interior chamber and an important commonality settled in their psyches. "Do you compete?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore. I teach. But I haven't done that in a while."

"You're a fencing master?"

"Yes."

A tiny pilot light inside her soul fluttered and flared. "I still need some saber." Expertise in three weapons was required—foil, epee and saber. Finding the time and the energy had been the rub. But she wanted it badly.

"I'd be happy to work with you," he said quietly.

I'd be happy to learn from you. Judging from the chilly side of his nature, he'd be an exacting taskmaster and a fierce opponent on the strip. Had that been where the feeling of danger came from—his warrior side?

It took a hell of a lot of mental and physical grit to become a fencing master. And she could tell by the way he stood and gripped the hoe that he wasn't lying about it. Had she utterly and completely misjudged him?

She cleared her throat and looked away, handing him a couple of giant filthy gloves. He took them, agile fingers fluttering against hers, and slipped them on. "Maybe we could go and free fence some night at Salle Seattle. I'm a member there."

"I'd like that. More than you know."

"In fact, the owner is looking to start a kinder group." She choked as his words sank in. *More than you know.* DL had said the same thing, with the same tone and inflection last night. Her pulse thrummed. "Perhaps...perhaps you'd like to apply for a job?" If he needed extra cash while getting back on his feet and pursuing his studies at the university, Salle Seattle might be his ticket. His legitimate ticket, she reminded herself. Fuzzy feelings of hope had crept in and she really didn't want to feel that way right now. Her head was too messed up—probably from trying to keep her mind open. All sorts of crap could collect in there now.

He frowned slightly, glanced at her and looked away. "Perhaps."

"Something to consider, anyway. I'm going to get Michael involved. He's interested."

His gaze swiveled back and narrowed. "Is he?"

"It's a popular sport around here. A lot of kids compete, go on to nationals and get college scholarships. This area is loaded with young talent."

Mark stared at her but she could tell he wasn't seeing her. A sudden image of him in a fencing costume started her heart pounding. Even dumpy men looked almost unbearably sexy in the uniform, and unlike the sparkly white student's gear, a fencing master wore black.

"I believe your aunts mentioned this fencing school to me a long time ago."

"A long time ago?"

He muttered something under his breath. "Yesterday."

"Oh." Why hadn't they told her he fenced? They had to know it would've warmed her to him faster. Maybe they didn't care how she felt about him. It wasn't as if she was actively involved in their work. Why did that sadden her?

"Seems like forever."

Dove grinned. "Yeah, this place has a way of suspending time."

He smiled, almost gratefully, and then brought them back to purpose. "So I dig up weeds with this thing and turn them back into the earth?"

"Yep. That's the way the aunts like it done. The decay restores *nitrogen* to the soil."

He took her small dig like a man. "They'll grow back."

She rolled her eyes. "I know."

He laughed deeply and richly and the vibration of it went straight to her cunt. Her nipples stood up and took notice.

"Your aunts are good people."

"Yes, they are. I admire them."

"But you don't like the people they help."

Her mouth opened and closed. She swallowed. One shoulder rose, as if to hide her face in shame. "It's not that I don't like them — you — it's just that —"

"You're afraid."

If he'd taken rib spreaders to her torso she couldn't have felt more exposed. "How'd you know?"

"I know what fear looks like." He listed slightly, righted himself and cursed.

"Why?"

His eyes darkened and deadened into the shark eyes of yesterday. She felt trapped, yanked in, stripped and alone. The words spat out of his mouth. "I've seen it in the mirror."

He stood in the dirt, still as stone, powerful and hewn, beautiful beyond comprehension yet looking more starkly misplaced and lost than anything or anyone she'd ever seen in her life.

Something tender unfurled in her soul. Something distant and wispy and vaguely unfamiliar. But she knew that was because she hadn't felt it in so long. They'd have to get reacquainted, she thought. Her and sympathy. Long lost friends. "What happened to you? What happened to bring you down?" Her voice sounded so papery she barely recognized it. But then, when she thought about it, she barely recognized the woman she'd become lately. Hard. Bitter. Detached.

Except with Michael and DL.

But, she supposed, a child and a fake lover were safe. The ultimate safety net. And Laika. Dogs were always number one on the safe list.

Not the people her aunts took in and certainly not Mark Arianos.

She suddenly and keenly missed the carefree, fun-loving girl she'd once been. The one who charged all over the city with Trish, searching for crushes. The one who'd pretend to be British in a pizza parlor, just to make Trish laugh. The one who painted toenails with Trish, read horoscopes with Trish. Planned her future.

With Trish.

A quiet sob clogged her throat.

He turned the question back at her. "What happened to bring *you* down?"

"I miss Trish!" The words burst in the air, reverberated against the clouds and spilled back down over her like buckshot, nearly bringing her to her knees.

"Who's Trish?"

"My cousin." She scrubbed her eyes, scouted for escape, found none and returned her gaze to his. "She died of an overdose."

"You couldn't save her."

"No one could!" she shouted.

"But you tried."

"Everything."

His jaw clenched. "I know you did."

"How? How could you know?"

"Because I'm trying to do the same thing. For myself. For everyone."

Overwrought yet littered with a riot of unexpected, confusingly positive feelings, Dove turned away, picked up a basket and parked herself next to a black raspberry bush. His gaze bored two holes into her back, but she didn't want to respond to him. Didn't know what to say, what to do or what to feel.

He'd grubbed around the abandoned mineshafts of her being and found the mother lode and she didn't want to let him blast away inside her anymore.

So he was trying to save himself. Whoop de do. Who wasn't? There was nothing particularly noble about him. Did he think he was special?

No, a tiny voice said. He didn't seem to think so at all. Quite the opposite, actually. Now that she thought of it, he spoke very little about himself. Instead he asked questions of others, underlining his claim of being an anthropologist.

So again, what had gone wrong in his life? He'd masterfully deflected her question by lobbing it right back at her.

Arnie'd mentioned he wanted to pursue a professorship in statistics. He had a boat he sailed halfway around the world in. He was a fencing master. All hallmarks of a highly competent, educated individual. Couple that with a seemingly high if erratic sex drive and he met two-thirds of her requirements.

Unfortunately, he had a flaw she couldn't forgive.

Or could she?

What if he gets better? What if this is a temporary, circumstantial condition?

After all, people left Pilgrim's Progress and went on to live sober, fruitful lives all the time. Not everyone ended up in a coffin, like Trish.

I can't believe I'm thinking this. Time to euthanize the enabler gene.

Finally, after a silence as soggy as the sea air, she heard the muffled sounds of metal on dirt. Dove picked through the raspberry brambles carefully, trying to avoid the inevitable scratches that welted and itched like a sumbitch. Two baskets later, Mark straightened, leaning on the hoe and swiping an arm across his brow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

She stopped and validated him with a glance. "You didn't do it on purpose."

"How long has it been?"

"Can't we drop it?" She softened the words with a wry grin.

He didn't smile back. "No. You should talk about it."

She cracked open and spilled. "About five years. The thing is..." Did she want to go there with him? Tell him the wretched secrets about her family no one else knew, not even Karen? "No one really grieved for her. No one seemed to care."

"No one?"

"Her parents mainly." Anger collected in her sternum. *Open mind.* "They're a different generation. More stoic. They've been through so many struggles."

He nodded, eyes dark, sympathetic and unwavering.

"They were refugees from Europe. I don't know how much you know about World War II."

"Some."

"Quite a few children were removed from their families in the war zones and shipped over here. Marte, Trish's mother, almost died from malnutrition. It left her infertile. But she lived with some cousins here, met Clive and a few years later, they adopted Trish. Apparently, she was trouble from the start. Maybe they couldn't handle her after what they'd been through in the war. Maybe they were relieved when she died." A horrid, incomprehensible thought. But Trish had been unstoppable. They'd all been through hell. "The aunties, though. They didn't seem too sad, either. They just kept saying she's in a better place. Well, duh. I knew that. But her death hurt me."

"Of course."

"I had no one to cry with."

He quietly laid the hoe down and moved slowly toward her.

She dropped the basket and held up her hands. "No. No. It's okay—" But she was already wrapped in a steel band, being pulled in tight against the moistly hot, solid security of his chest. "I don't need to cry anymore. I'm past it."

"Yep."

A big hand cradled the back of her head and pressed it to his shoulder. Then he bent his own head and trapped her there, just like DL had last night.

"So you can let me go." Her voice quavered and thin liquid collected in her nasal passages. She sniffed.

Every inch of her body was plastered to his. Her face, wedged under the dark, humid, supple and scratchy shelf of his jaw had grown wet with sweat. So why not tears too?

With a soft heave, she let the first sob escape. The others followed like a wave of lemmings off a cliff.

She cried quietly into his neck, unwilling to attract attention, and he held her without a word. His big hand stroked her hair. The stresses of the past couple days hopped on the Trish bandwagon, and with each heave, Dove felt cleaner, airier. She should've sought therapy and done this long ago, but then she'd have missed this opportunity to feel the heart of gold pounding inside Mark.

After a while, the steady beat of that precious organ began soothing her and her sobbing subsided into occasional hiccoughs.

Not long after, his sturdy frame teetered, as if she'd sapped the strength right out of him. The weight of his head on hers eased and his shoulders drooped.

She stepped back, spent, the illusion of strength and comfort shattered but permanently encased in a bubble of his kindness. "Thank you. I needed that."

"My pleasure." He listed in her wake and one foot plopped heavily out for balance. He shook his head and sputtered a few foreign words. "I hate being this way in front of you."

Well, knock her over with a feather. It hadn't occurred to her he'd give a shit what she thought of him. "You do?"

"I'm not weak. Not normally."

Her snort masked tenderness and hope. "We all have weak moments. Is this just a moment?"

"Yes, but you probably don't believe it."

She didn't reply, unsure how to answer. She *wanted* to believe him...

"I wanted to impress you."

"You did?" *You did.*

He bobbled. "I wanted you think well of me."

She was starting to. "Since when?"

"Since the beginning."

* * * * *

Since the beginning of time, it seemed. He knew he shouldn't be wading in this far with her. Had gone way too deep already. But he couldn't seem to help himself. Especially now that he knew she had a fighter's soul.

The women in his world were ultra-fems, as Queen Win had decreed they should be. He hated it, the way they sat around all day, waiting for men to serve them, acting as if one glance was worth more than money.

They'd never callous their palms with a sword or taint their skin with sweat. Digging in a garden would be as alien to them as he was to Dove, and was yet another weary reason his civilization was doomed. They'd rather let it falter than break a nail.

But Dove got down and dirty in more ways than one. Many more ways. Every way that counted.

She'd been sidelined by battle scars, but that core of steel remained. It's what made her fight for Michael even though she had no idea why. Her warrior's instincts had been ruffled and they were frighteningly accurate. She followed them without hesitation.

If he didn't know better, he'd deduce she had ancient Markarian blood, particularly with her affinity for out-of-body sex. But that was too illogical to contemplate. For the most part, her specific thoughts were garbled. He mostly received images and feelings from her mind and she was too young to be Arnie's intended mate. Besides, the babe almost definitely perished in the crash.

Still, his kind or not, he had scruples and was depleting his self-respect by playing her. He would be the ultimate cad to allow anything more than mild affection to develop and then betray her and leave. Yet that seemed the road he'd been forced down when she'd popped the balloons.

Without nitrogen, he couldn't be held completely responsible for his actions. So he should be honorable about it and go to his room. Now.

If he could get his legs to work. "I'm not feeling well."

She scurried to his side and braced him, pressing a cool hand against his forehead. "You're overheated. Let's get you to bed."

Dirty ideas looped-the-loop inside his mind. Plans to yank her down on his bed, pin her beneath and tear off her clothes with his teeth. Nibbling every centimeter of that soft, white flesh sounded good too. Yeah. Then licking the thin film of sweat off her body to replace the potassium he'd lost with the hoe. He'd finish her off by fucking her senseless, then start all over again.

Fortunately he'd adapted enough to harness these impulses. How much temptation he could take without acting, however, was anybody's guess. "The porch will do."

Certainly by now, Queen Win knew he'd survived. No chance of her discerning his location, though, as long as he kept his breeches buttoned. Dove's hand at his waist didn't help. Nor the fingers that kept slipping below his waistband, tickling his hip bone and calcifying his dick.

They reached the porch and lumbered drunkenly up the steps. He fell heavily onto the bench glider, on his back, and she tumbled on top of him.

Their faces collided, noses bashing. Her breasts squished against his chest. She giggled into his cheek. He gripped her shoulders, intending to push her away and she lifted her head and smiled.

He wrenched her lips down to his.

Crazy lust spewed all over the floorboards and out to the four corners of the universe. Their mouths latched, suckling and licking, pulling and teething. He mashed her closer until their teeth engaged and she gasped. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

He clamped her to him, bending his legs through hers and braiding them together. She writhed and moaned, sliding and testing for the best fit until she found it and their forms settled and merged, becoming one and forcing his cells out of habitual clusters to form an entirely rearranged being.

He'd forgotten the sheer bliss of physical contact—those stolen moments in his teens when raging hormones overwhelmed the dangers and he'd seek an equally horny female. He'd never crossed the line, though. Those who did had a tendency to disappear. And as he grew and developed acute mental skills, his physical needs had been trained to feel satisfied.

Until now.

As transcendent as mental petting with Dove had been, he realized it was pond water compared to Starbucks, an energy pill instead of eggs and bacon, logical understanding ruffling the fringes of emotion instead of his entire self blooming with unchained sensation.

I knew it! Queen Win shouted.

Dove opened her eyes.

"Ignore her," he muttered, running his tongue along her lower lip, relishing the intense flavors that'd been diluted in the ether.

You bastard! roared Queen Win.

"What's going on?" Dove lifted her head. He took the opportunity to graze on the tender plumpness of her cheek and found it as lushly erotic as her breasts and her ass. Amazing. Something he could publicly fondle without social recrimination. Women were walking, talking sexual miracles.

Another gust of intergalactic hot air.

A boyish mischievousness gurgled in his chest. *You can't see me.*

Off with his head!

Playtime over. *Not if I get you first.*

Frosty silence.

I know where you are, he threatened.

The frigid breeze of her mental exit hit him. Nothing if not childish, she'd flounced off to pout. But she'd be back. With a plan. He knew better than to underestimate her. Or her fiendish henchmen.

"The neighbors must be having a fight," Dove said. "Gives me an idea." She nibbled his jaw, raising goose bumps on his arms. He arched his cock against her pussy, sliding his hands underneath her shirt. "We could have make-up sex for them."

He groaned and imagined her hot, succulent pussy grasping him and sucking him inside, the slide of flesh on flesh, her supple legs around his waist. There wasn't one thing in the universe he craved more than her body squeezing his, pumping under his. Her breath on his shoulder, her moans in his ears.

Thank God Queen Win's interruption had come to the rescue. In another minute, his control would've irrevocably snapped. Besides, someone else had been watching too. "We can't." Her crestfallen expression almost undid him. In a perfect world, he'd deny her nothing. Nothing. "We're not alone."

She stiffened. A curtain fluttered to their left. She dropped her head onto his chest and a sigh quaked her body. "Poppy."

"Yes."

"Crap."

He chuckled.

"She'll tell everyone."

He laughed.

"You think it's funny now..." but she giggled too. "Just wait...wait until dinnertime."

They dissolved in hysteria. His diaphragm contracted like a giant bellows, forcing all the air out of his lungs. Panic overtook him—a sense of drowning. His arms flailed. His chest unlocked and flooded...

* * * * *

"Mark?" Dove scrambled off and shook him. "Mark? Oh shit. Aunt Penny!" He lay wheezing and twitching across the bench-glider, the whites of his eyes peeking through fluttering lids. His teeth chattered like castanets and he muttered incomprehensible gibberish. "He's having a seizure!"

The aunts bolted out. Boarders swarmed the porch.

"I'm calling 911." Dove wheeled toward the door.

"No!" Poppy snatched her arm.

She shook her off. "Yes." Was it only this morning she hated him? *Don't die.* Tears pooled in her eyes. *Please. I beg you.* "Yes," she hissed.

"No." Mark bolted upright. Everyone clustered. He sat as if stunned, his widened gaze slowly scanning the crowd. A small smile curved his gorgeous mouth when he caught sight of Dove. His eyes locked on hers and his teeth flashed. "I'm all right." Sure hands scraped his face. He held them out in front of him, turning them over and over as if seeing them for the first time. "It's complete. I'm through."

"Wonderful!" Poppy clapped. The rest of the boarders joined the applause.

"Everything's so clear." He glanced right, left, up and down.

"It's like putting on new eyeglasses," Sal said. Everyone murmured agreement.

Gregory Banks slapped him on the shoulder. "It only gets better from here, my friend. You can breathe easy now."

Mark inhaled. "Yes. I can."

"That was fast!" Penny said. "A record, I think. Don't you, Poppy?"

"A record, definitely!"

"Well he was so healthy otherwise. So strong."

"So dedicated!"

"We knew you'd come through for us swiftly. Great job."

Another rousing round of applause. Someone stomped. The single mother whistled through two fingers. Poppy pumped a fist. "Let's hear it for the boy!" She wiggled her creaking hips and everyone laughed.

Dove stood transfixed, thumping with pride and joy. She'd never been present at a triumphant turning point like this and the support and love surging out from the others warmed and humbled her. What had she been missing?

The shell around her heart cracked and burst. If Trish had survived to experience this, she would've been healed. But she hadn't been strong enough. Through nobody's fault.

Mark had.

She slithered through the mob and tackled him. "I'm so happy for you."

"It's good to be free." He hugged her tightly, then gently extricated his leg from under her ass. She slid onto the bench next to him, reminding herself they were being watched.

Everything about him seemed sharper, more authentic. She wouldn't have believed it possible if she hadn't seen the transformation with her own eyes. "Are you sure you're all right? Shouldn't you see a doctor?"

"He's fine, dear," Penny interjected. "Remember my advice."

Dove sniffled and nodded.

Mark's hand cupped her face. "You were worried."

"Nuh uh."

"I think you have a crush on me."

She gurgled. "No way."

"I think you do." He leaned in so only she could hear. "You tipped your hand earlier, my love."

The endearment sizzled through her, even though she knew it didn't necessarily mean anything. After all, he was Mediterranean. He probably said that to everyone. "That was just hormones."

"I think not." His soft voice had a notched edge, raising her blood pressure a little and making her wonder what, if anything, it meant. At this moment, he seemed a fifty-fifty blend of the previous divergent personalities. She hoped he'd settle into a seventy-thirty. With the seventy being the horny side.

Penny scooted in beside him on the glider. "Why don't you take the afternoon off. Rest or do something fun with Dove to celebrate. Then come see us in our office later this afternoon. We have a lot to discuss."

"Okay. I will."

"Um. Oh dear. This is always hard to discuss." She fanned pink cheeks and addressed the others. "Would you all give us a private moment? Just a short one."

The boarders mumbled and shifted. Some had already returned to work. "We always miss the good stuff," Sal winked.

"Feelings, sensations will be magnified now that you're normal, like us." She cast a worried eye at Dove. "They might be hard to handle at first. You might be tempted to do things you'll regret later. Go slowly until you get used to it and are quite certain of yourself."

"I understand."

She leaned over and reached across him to Dove. "Do you understand, dear?"

Although it pained her to do so, she nodded.

"I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt. I'll explain it better later." Her eyes danced across the dispersing crowd. "When we don't have an *audience*."

And that would be...when? Dove thought.

"Never," Mark muttered.

She shot him a glance and surprised a despairing, rueful look.

Chapter Seven

They sat alone in awkward silence for a couple of minutes while Mark stared into space and Dove tried remembering even *one* of the gazillion things there were to do in Seattle. Geez. You'd think she'd have at least a few brain cells left. "How about canoeing on Lake Union?" she finally asked. "It's a gorgeous day and you're a boater."

His eyes darted around in their sockets, landing on her for a microsecond before flitting away. "Canoeing?"

"Yeah. Unless that's *beneath* you." Some captains were pretty snobby about these things. "Don't you miss the water?"

"Not particularly."

She sighed, hoping she hadn't misstepped and awakened The Iceman. Though Penny had put the kibosh on an immediate shagfest, Dove still figured they could use the time to get to know each other better. "I could show you the Seattle Center. The Space Needle is there, museums. We can get coffee later." Probably her best bet. There was tons to do and she could take him to the Experience Music Project and the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. With his interest in pop culture, he'd eat it up.

Visibly relaxed, he turned to her. "Excellent. Let's go."

She trotted upstairs for her purse and keys, tossing them to him as they headed for the curb. "You drive." Though protective of her car, experience had taught her how pissy men could get when women drove. She wanted this "date" to go smoothly.

Mark paused and fingered the keys, separating them and looking at each one, stopping at the fob. An expression that could only be described as relief crossed his features and he firmly pressed one of the buttons on the fob.

The alarm blared.

He grabbed her, crouching over her and covering her with his body. "Stay low!"

Dove laughed. Hysterically. "It's not gonna blow." Through tears, she grabbed the keys and fumbled with the fob until reaching the deactivation button. "It's just the horn."

He ran shaky hands through his hair and scraped his face. "I knew that."

"What do you drive back home, a donkey cart?" She couldn't stop laughing.

"Arnie pressed a button to start his car."

"Oh. Yeah. He's got a remote starter. I don't." She dangled the keys. "Take two?"

He waved them away and smirked. "Guess you'd better drive."

Score one for a self-deprecating sense of humor. She really was liking him more and more.

The ride passed with easy camaraderie. Along the way, Dove pointed out a few places of interest. He seemed especially taken with the giant Seattle Troll statue and she made a mental note to bring him back later for a closer look.

Within the hour, they'd arrived and parked.

Mingling with the hordes enjoying the glorious weather, they strolled through the center, passing underneath the Space Needle and the monorail. The brightly painted, undulating architecture of the Experience Music Project loomed ahead and Mark stopped dead in his tracks. "I've been here before."

"Have you?"

"Well, I've seen it," he amended.

"Quite the spectacle, eh?"

"It's rather interesting. Looks like a space station."

She hadn't thought of it that way before. To her, it resembled something a kindergartner might make out of clay. "You know, it kinda does."

Mark craned his neck, glancing behind them around the small amusement park. Children covered every square inch, swarming one central spot in particular. Dove spotted a large, oblong object, silvered and glittering in the sun. It had petite fins on the sides and back, resembling a baby orca. "A new sculpture's been installed." Parents sat on a smattering of metal benches. Squeals of glee split the air as the various rides took off. "You want to go down and see it?"

"It can wait."

"Then let's go in." Dove looped her arm through his. He gazed down at her with an expression so tender she melted and had to harshly remind her yammering pussy to hush. "I have a pass. It's free," she stuttered.

"Good." He nodded. "Because I have no money."

Surprisingly, she didn't mind.

They entered the building and got their hand stamps. Mark seemed mesmerized by the giant spaceman in the lobby. "Shall we do the Science Fiction Hall of Fame first? I think you'd enjoy it. Unless you're heavily into music."

"I'm more into science," he said. "Lead the way."

"Michael's going to be mad he missed this," Dove commented as they perused the displays of books, movie posters and the etched-glass plaques on the wall of fame.

"We'll come back, with him," Mark said. "Hey, I watched some of these movies with Arnie."

She'd seen a handful herself. Never a huge SF fan, she hadn't realized how pervasive the genre was in American culture. "It's a walk down memory lane, isn't it?"

They paused in front of a glass case filled with stunt tasers and blasters from movies and television shows. A small crowd of boys clustered, oohing and ahing at the famous props.

Mark snorted. "Nobody has weapons like that."

A sea of faces lifted. "The Klingons do," one little boy said.

Mark waved a hand. "The Klingons are idiots. Mental midgets. They don't even have plasma torpedoes yet."

A collective howl. "No way! They're the best. They invented the Stasis Field Generator."

"Who told you that? It's a lie."

Dove smothered a giggle, dragging him away from the affronted mob. They trailed behind, sneakers shuffling, firing out questions. "What about Warp Speed?"

"Oh, well, that's easy. All you have to do is bend time and space. Anybody can do that. Even," he paused, a sneer in his tone. "Klingons."

A bunch of the boys elbowed each other, clearly enjoying Mark's antics. They all stopped in front of a giant, ugly mask from the Cantina scene in *Star Wars*. Mark pointed at it. "I know him."

"Cool!"

"Sweet!"

"He's an excellent politician. Benevolent. Very, very smart."

"But fugly," a boy said, breaking them all up.

"Handsome is as handsome does," Dove said, and at this moment, Mark was the handsomest creature on Earth. Who knew he was so good with kids? Forget the university, he really needed to head-up the kinder fencing group. And father her children...

"My mother says that too."

They giggled and howled their way through the rest of the displays, arguing with Mark on every irreverent point, and finally approached the crown-jewel—a life-sized replica of the alien mother from the movie *Alien*.

Part skeleton, part Tyrannosaurus and all freaky-scary, it shocked them into silent awe.

Mark glanced down at the open-mouthed boy beside him. "Looks like my queen."

"Dude. You have an evil queen? You're lucky. We just have an evil old president."

One of the dads moseyed up and placed his hands on the boy's shoulders. "Yo, Dad. Check it out. It's the mother from *Alien*!"

The father exaggerated a total body shudder. "Looks like *your* mother when we leave the seat up." They roared and slapped each other a high-five.

"No, looks like my teacher," another boy said. "Mrs. Bishop."

"Mrs. Bitchup? I had her," the dad answered. Half the boys collapsed onto the floor, clutching their sides and swabbing the tiles. He clapped his hands. "Time to go, guys. Who wants the roller coaster?" With a thunder of sneakers, they departed for the amusement park.

Mark watched them go, then turned to Dove. "Do Arnie and Ava bring Michael here?"

She nodded. "Sure. On the weekends. Wherever he wants to go. They're very indulgent since they don't see much of him during the week."

"Is that when you take care of him?"

"Yes, while they're working."

"And you play with him, like that father?"

"Sure. I teach him too. Not that he needs teaching. You know." She stepped closer, cuddling up to him as chastely as possible. "You were awesome with those boys. You've got the touch."

"I liked them." He sounded surprised. "I never spent much time with children."

"No brothers or sisters? Nieces or nephews?"

He shrugged. "A few. I never met them."

"Never? You come from a broken home?" How sad, and perhaps the cause of some of his problems.

"You might say that." He frowned. "Yes. Broken is the right word."

She sighed, resisting the urge to pet his cheek. "At least you have a cousin here. Which one is your cousin, by the way, Arnie or Ava?"

His jaw tightened and he turned his face away. "Arnie. Arnie's my uncle's child."

"I've met Mr. Simpson and the rest of the clan—"

"They're not related to me."

"But—"

"Arnie is adopted."

Whoa! He'd never told her that. Never even hinted. She'd been suspicious based on looks alone, but it wasn't something you asked your employer in casual conversation.

The Keep Out sign flashed across Mark's features, as if he'd spoken out of turn. She decided not to press the issue. In time, maybe he'd open up. "Do you want children?" The question blurted out. "I mean, someday."

"Of my own?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Now I do. Are you offering breeding services?" He certainly knew how to lighten the conversation. Okay. She'd play along. Probably best in the long run, anyway. He'd just been through a fiery trial and didn't need more hot and heavy right off the bat. Aunt Penny was a wise woman.

Dove giggled. "You're a regular riot."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"You really should consider teaching the kinder fencing group," she hedged. "Get some practice first."

"I was thinking the same thing." His teeth flashed down at her and their eyes locked. A blue flame flickered in his and she weathered an answering flare in her own. His head dropped closer. Hers lifted. His biceps bunched and started drawing her in.

"Yes. Or no."

"Maybe —"

Like a whisper, his lips grazed hers. Her eyes rolled and closed and she moaned. She heard a breath blow out of his nose, felt his lips gently latch and suckle. The rock hard hill of his biceps swelled beneath her fingers as his hands slipped to her waist. He kept their bodies apart, focusing all sensation on the kiss as he moved into a rhythmic invasion of her mouth.

A melting, liquid desire shot through her and fanned out in all directions, warming her racing blood. The need for his toned body in her arms, his hard cock between her legs, his honed features burrowing in her neck and his low, familiar words in her ears rose up and hammered at the door of reason.

The door cracked open in response and an orange glow framed its edges. The flame grew thicker, sending out flares that exploded into sparklers as his tongue braided hers. The sparklers filled her brain, expanding it with bronzed heat until the door disappeared and she hovered on the threshold of her other world.

Dream Lover beckoned. Talk about bad timing. Mark's lips devoured hers, his kneading hands urged her closer. Her pussy screamed for contact. *He* was Mr. Right Here, Right Now. Yet she almost felt ashamed, as if she'd been caught with an illicit lover.

Her brain went black as if someone had flipped a switch. She sorta had been caught. Penny had cautioned her and she really needed to listen. Drawing back, she licked his flavor off her lips and threaded her fingers through his hair to keep him away. "We have to stop."

He blinked tightly and his jaw twitched. "I want to see how far we can go."

Bright joy burst in her heart. She wanted to explore a relationship too. Now more than ever. "We can do that."

"We'll go slow. Experiment." Fervent hands fondled her waist. "Maybe we can do more than I've been led to believe."

Her head bobbed. "Yes. Absolutely. But we should heed Aunt Penny's advice too. I wouldn't want either of us to get hurt."

"No." He grimaced. "We wouldn't want *that*." He glanced at the alien mother and his lip curled. Dove sensed intense dislike. Hatred even.

"Does she really look like, your queen?" What Mediterranean country had a queen, anyway? Only Spain, as far as she knew.

He barked out a laugh. "She looks like my queen's soul. Outwardly, she's actually quite beautiful."

So Sofia had a dark side? She shrugged. What monarch didn't. Dove elbowed Mark in the ribs. "I had an ex-boyfriend with the same problem."

A seductive voice to her left cooed, "But not your current one."

The throaty tone belonged to a wafer-thin blonde who almost matched Mark's height and had the legs to show for it.

"You haven't seen me before I've had coffee," Mark said, tossing her a perfunctory glance and slinging an arm around Dove's shoulders.

"Not yet, anyway," purred the blonde.

Dove mentally rolled her eyes. Who trolled for men at the Sci-Fi Hall of Fame? Not exactly Seattle's hottest pick-up joint. "Perhaps after our threesome..." She ogled the woman from head to toe, licking her lips and smiling widely. "Mark likes girl on girl." Leaning back into him, she felt his lips on her hair.

The blonde swallowed and edged away, high heels clicking faster and faster the farther they got.

Dove and Mark looked at each other. He had a hot gleam in his eye. "Don't get your hopes up," she said. He deflated.

They laughed, exited and climbed the stairs to the Experience Music Project.

Dove had to ask. "Is that a fantasy of yours?" An important question, she thought. Best not to have too many shockers down the road.

It took him a beat to answer, his mind clearly elsewhere. "You and that woman?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Really?" She pumped a mental fist. Although she could handle boobs and lips, her libido shut down when it came to licking clits. Feeling safer, she added, "She was flirting with you."

"I told you, I don't flirt."

"You're allowed to flirt, you goon. It doesn't bother me." Did it? Didn't matter. It was the Cool Girl thing to say. Never show them your angst.

"Dove, I'm not a flirt." They had stopped in front of a private music booth containing an elaborate drum kit. EMP had many such small, dark rooms, to give visitors a feel for what it'd be like to play in a recording studio with a rock band. He flung open the door and gently shoved her inside. "I'm a man of action."

He followed and closed the door before she could turn around in the cramped space. Arms of steel snaked around her middle, pulling her back against him so her ass cheeks framed his solid cock.

A picture window in front of her overlooked the lobby, one story below. She doubted anyone could see them, though. Particularly from the waist down. Mark had apparently noticed too. "I'd much rather do this," he murmured, "than flirt." Without

permission, his fingers slipped inside the waistband of her shorts and slid easily down through soft, curling hair to her crevice.

Their presumptuous activity awakened images of Dream Lover, how he never asked. Just took. And how horny it made her. Yet another of his and Mark's eerie similarities.

Screw the aunties' warnings. How much trouble could they get into in a public place? And his hands felt so good. He parted her labia and let his fingers do the walking all over her pussy. Her head fell back onto his shoulder and his tongue tickled her ear, easing along the outer shell and darting in and out of the tiny pockets.

"For once, I want to give you a real orgasm." His other hand inched up beneath her baby T-shirt to her breast, nuzzling into the lacy cup and finding a nipple.

Strange way to word it, as if he'd tried before and failed. The shocks coursing through her body trumped his weird turn-of-phrase. Imaginary wires between her nipple and clit tautened with each pinch and stroke until it felt like her abs were stretched over the bass drum on the floor at her feet.

He thrust his cock deeper into the groove of her ass, pumping gently and bending her forward slightly. She stepped into the motion and her foot came down on a pedal. *Boom.*

The tempo of his fingertip at her clit increased and her hips circled, bumping the cymbals and knocking the drumsticks onto a snare. *Clang. Ting.*

"You all right?" *Boom.*

"Fine." *Ting.* "Don't stop."

"Never."

Boom. Ting.

Clang.

"We make beautiful music together," she gasped, and the act of trying to suppress her giggles launched her muscles and nerves into overdrive.

He nibbled the side of her neck. "Think we could start a band?" Two fingers slid into her cunt while his palm flattened against her clit, forcing her to press harder and wiggle wider. A vigorous pinch on her nipple tipped her center of gravity and she stumbled.

Whirr chikka chikka,

"Nice solo."

Boom.

"I wrote it myself."

His fingers plumbed deeply, separating gently in a vee, spreading her and stroking different areas at once, inch by inch. She humped his hand, low whimpers and gasps joining the instrumental in the tiny room.

"So far so good," he said, as if to himself.

"Very good," she breathed, as the tension mounted to a crescendo. He leaned them back against a wall. A voice filled the room.

Take a seat and locate the pedal on the floor. Pick up your drumsticks...

Dove gurgled, hilarity bubbling up and threatening to overwhelm horniness. "Must've activated the audio lesson."

Hold your drumsticks loosely, using your wrists...

Mark unhinged his wrist.

Listen to the following rhythm, then see if you can imitate it...

"I always wanted to learn how to play an instrument," he quipped. The tape pounded a bar. Mark tapped her clit. The tape played a varied rhythm. Mark nailed it.

Excellent...

Dove's knees jellied and her legs spread, spine arched, ass still clenching his iron erection.

Another, faster tattoo-on-tape. Mark pinched her nipple in time. Soon he was grooving to an advanced syncopation on both clit and nipple.

Good job! Now try a drumroll...

"Omigodno."

He wedged his arm under her breasts, hoisted her up and spun her around, lifting her so her legs automatically wrapped around his waist. Bracing her ass, he turned them again so her spine hit the wall, then he pinned her there and dry-humped the crap out of her.

Red hot ribbons wound through her nerves, making them throb and scream for escape. She opened her mouth to breathe, but it came out in a shriek as the orgasm tore through every piece of her.

Boom.

Boom.

CLANG!

Chapter Eight

"Based on the history you gave us, we'd set up an identity for you as a fencing master." Penny tapped a pencil on the reams of paper on her desk and peered over the top of her reading glasses at Anthros.

He tore his gaze away from the antiquities and oddities decorating the cozy, wood-paneled room. Some of them, he swore, came from his galaxy. One bust eerily resembled Queen Win as a princess, nearly scaring him out of his skin.

"We planned on getting you a job at Dovey's school," Poppy added.

"Yes. We felt you and Dovey would get along, and we were right." She winked. "We're not above a little matchmaking. Are we, Poppy?"

"Not at all! She's been so lonely."

"All work."

"Yes, devoted to Michael. It's lovely. But she needs a friend."

"But," Anthros interjected, sending two exploratory fingers out to slide along Queen Win's hand-carved nose and draw an imaginary mustache under it. "I'm an alien."

"Nobody's perfect," Poppy shrugged. "Everyone's an alien."

"In their own way," Penny finished and shuffled her papers with a sigh. "It'll take a while to get all your documents redone under the Mark Arianos alias, but it can't be helped. Mr. Banks can expedite it. He specializes in identity theft."

"On the Internet!"

"He's quite the wizard. But he never steals money."

"Oh, no. He'd never do that." The two old ladies locked eyes and their cheeks pouched with repressed laughter. "Sal is the one who does that for us." More giggles. "Don't tell Dovey. She'd have a shit fit."

"On my honor." Anthros shook his head and chuckled.

"He just borrows a few cents at a time."

"From billions of people!"

Leave it to a Markarian. "How does Mr. Banks steal identities?" He'd heard of personality theft, but this was a new one.

"He uses dead people."

"Long dead," Penny observed. She gazed out into space. "I wonder if there was ever a real Mark Arianos?"

"I wonder if he'll ever use up all the dead people?"

"They're a renewable resource," Anthros quipped, breaking them up. These two fascinated him. He couldn't believe how slippery and sly they were beneath the dotty exterior, or how expansive their network was. They'd make awesome spies. "What name did you originally choose for me?"

They lit up like supernovas, obviously proud of their subterfuge. "Neil Gagarin. We wanted something a little exotic for you, but not an attention grabber."

"We thought John F. Kennedy might be a little too *obvious*."

Penny laughed her head off.

"Either one's a good name," he grinned. "But I don't mind Mark."

"Oh, Mark is a wonderful name!"

As long as it got him into the fencing school, they could call him anything they wanted. A plan had taken root in his mind.

He didn't want to leave Dove. Not anymore. Not ever.

She was hovering outside the door and had been the whole time. He sensed her—her curiosity, arousal, vulnerability. He felt better with her out there. Stronger in his purpose. She'd already moved halfway over to his side and he knew he could count on her full, unwavering support if she deemed his purpose worthy. And if she loved him. She'd do anything for those she loved. That's what scared her. But he could ease her fears—already had in the ether. They needed each other.

Acclimation had clarified more than his eyesight. Both his vision and outlook had changed.

If he betrayed her, if he ripped Michael away, she'd be ruined. Everyone here who'd helped him, cheered for him, would be ruined. Besides a firm belief in Karma, he simply couldn't find the cruel reserves he'd need to commit such an atrocity, especially not against Dove.

He couldn't save his world with the tears of another. Time and again throughout history, it'd proven a sure path to failure. It pained him to not have seen it sooner, but it wasn't too late. Alternate plans seemed to spring into his mind like the weeds in Penny and Poppy's garden, had in fact been planted there earlier, under the sun, with Dove working by his side. He felt enriched, fertile and rarin' to grow.

That's where Salle Seattle came in.

He and Dove would train Michael to fight. With Arnie's know-how and access to materials at Boeing, they'd build cruisers and import soldiers from other nations.

The aunts could set up a boot camp here at Pilgrim's Progress.

He'd tell them his dilemma. Ask for help. In his heart, he knew they'd rise to the occasion. They were all warriors, every blessed one of them.

The time-frame would stay the same. No set-backs were necessary. And he could stay here, with Dove. At least for a while. He needed to give her a chance to rebuild herself. To save someone instead of losing someone. To love again.

To love him.

Today, at Experience Music Project, he'd discovered precisely how far he could go with her sexually and remain in the safety zone. The probability existed he could penetrate her, as long as he didn't lose his mind over it, have an orgasm or both. But that remained to be seen and was theoretical only. Could she accept his sexual limitations once she knew why he had them?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. But he had to try.

Tonight Dream Lover had his work cut out for him. Maybe he could pay her a short visit before then, as Mark. Let her see him full on. To prime her...

* * * * *

What could they possibly be discussing in there so long? Late afternoon stretched into early evening with Penny, Poppy and Mark sealed inside the office, muffled conversation and the occasional outburst of laughter filtering out into the hall.

Dove dusted, polished, changed light bulbs, ran the carpet sweeper and shamelessly tried to pick up any morsel of conversation she could. No luck.

When she'd straightened the pastoral over the fireplace for the umpteenth time, she gave up, wandered outside and up the stairs to her apartment. Soon she'd have to start dinner. The aunts had apparently forgotten the time. Mark must be mighty fine company—something she already knew and already missed, even though only a couple of hours had passed. But first, she had some personal business to take care of.

You are so screwed. Look at you. Mooning like a bitch in heat.

She didn't necessarily want to initiate a full-blown sextravaganza tonight—not when she had to get up at the butt crack of dawn to watch Michael and not under the watchful gaze of the entire house—but she wouldn't have said no to a stroll around Lake Union or more slap and tickle. Maybe even some oral action.

In her mind, the plans were set. Fencing this week, with an innocent ice cream after, dinner another night, maybe spend one evening necking lakeside in her car and then, if they were still into each other, a total fuckfest next weekend—at a hotel.

It was a good plan. Solid and safe. Perhaps a tad slower than she'd normally go, but the aunties would be watching to make sure she and Mark followed their advice.

Normally they thrilled at the sound of a man's footsteps on Dove's fire escape and wanted minute details the next day. But Mark was a patient. Dove understood the difference and recognized the concerns.

Even though her body howled for him, she needed to guard her heart. He could fall off the wagon at any moment. And with tender feelings blooming alongside the carnal ones, it would be wise to take more time to evaluate his commitment to sobriety before getting too deeply involved.

Still, she was horny as hell and if she didn't do something fast, she was going to molest him in front of everybody. Locking her door, she made a beeline for her bedroom nightstand, where she kept *her* stash.

Tossing aside multiple dildos in assorted materials and sizes, she homed straight in on her pussy hugger, a nubby, pliable c-shaped contraption that jiggled the G-spot and the clitoris simultaneously. While she hungered for the thick thrust of a swollen cock, she wanted to save her desperation for next week—to have the real thing first—pumping hips and muscular ass, honed thighs bracing against her, a torso to rub, eyes to gaze into.

Kicking her shorts off, she flung herself on the bed and spread her legs. Plunging both ends of the toy into her mouth for extra lubrication, she opened it, felt it spring to automatic life and gingerly inserted it into her vagina.

The larger end settled up against her pubic bone inside, the smaller over her clit and portions of her labia. She pushed it up as far as it would go, then lay back, arms over her head, back arched, reaching for the pillows as imminent orgasm loomed already.

She imagined Mark's mouth where the instrument was. Those tactile, expressive lips sucking tender flesh, hot wet tongue gliding in, flicking, licking. She could feel the solid heft and roundness of his head between her thighs, five o'clock shadow sanding her skin, the tickle of his silky hair.

Would he make satisfied animal sounds when he went down on her? Or would he be silent, intent, focused? What would he sound like when she went down on him?

Snatching a dildo, she added to the fantasy. Slipping it between her lips, she suckled on the soft head, licked around the firm rim and filled her mind with images of Mark's coiling abs, his hands in her hair, jeans unzipped and cock protruding.

His energized scent, a unique combination of electrified air and faint, sweaty male arousal, wafted through her memory banks. Her face against his neck.

The foreplay at EMP had awakened trust, affection, and she knew she'd have trouble fighting those feelings for any substantial length of time if he stayed sober. The muffled sounds of his deep laughter, combined with Penny's and Poppy's, struck a warm note, filling her with not only hope, but a craving for hope. And as she lay with her toy, arching and writhing to his imagined lovemaking, that hope intensified in his absence.

Away from him, she could think better. Concentrate and parse her feelings. His presence scrambled her senses and emotions together. Only when alone could she fully understand them separately.

Perhaps that was DL's role, she thought as her stomach clenched in rising bliss. The electrical pulses from her clit fanned out into her torso and limbs, the internal stimulation filling her insides with glowing waves. DL was her fleshly needs made emotional and Mark was her emotional needs made flesh. Talk about fucked up. She wished she could combine them. Make one man. But then she'd probably die of pleasure.

Which was what she was about to do anyway. Pulling a pillow over her face to blunt the noise, she chewed on it and moaned as the orgasm torqued through her. Mark

stayed on her the whole time, sucking like a fiend, nibbling her clit as the pleasure shocks ebbed and crested again and again. Her pussy gasped open for him, hot and achy for his cock.

And then DL was there, really there in Mark's image—rising and stripping off his jeans, settling his heavy body over hers, spreading her wider with his knees and poising his thick, swollen member near the entrance to her slickened cunt.

Dove flung the pussy hugger aside and guided him inside, no longer having to imagine the agile, smooth pumping of his hips, the slap of his balls, the silky firmness of his ass cheeks under her clawing fingers.

He fucked her mercilessly, seeking his own relief, rising up on his arms to look down at her, his eyes filled with hot hunger, his features straining against need.

Dropping his head, he forced his tongue into her mouth, jousting and tangling with hers to the rhythm of his thrusts.

She didn't question his materialization minus the usual bells and whistles, the merging of reality and dream, the way his flesh felt more solid, his movements more articulated. Perhaps emotional connections had strengthened their communicative powers. Perhaps she'd entered a higher level of consciousness, an altered state on a more elevated plane—a humming, thrumming and vivid virtual reality.

Or perhaps the oral orgasm had indeed killed her and she'd entered Heaven.

She neither knew nor cared. Every ounce of renewed energy was now focused on one humdinger of vaginal bliss.

He pounded into her. She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and he slumped on top, sliding his arms around her and pulling her against him. Their bodies fused in a molten exchange, moans zinging the air liked forked lightning until the frenzied energy whipped them into the stratosphere and back again, to drop panting on the bed.

With each gasping breath she took, the solid weight of his body eased. Her arms seemed to sink inside his torso until, finally, she was hugging herself and once again he was gone.

Poof.

She hated that she was getting used to that.

Outside on the curb, a car screeched to a halt. Dove startled, then pounced off the bed and hopped into her shorts, running to the window to look. Arnie sprang out of his car and charged up the walkway. Something in his attitude made her backbone tingle. She hightailed it down the fire escape and around front in time to hear the bell jingle and Arnie bellow, "Anthros! Get *the fuck* out here."

Footsteps scurried into the hallway, the heavier tread of Mark's boots. Arnie stood pale and stiff with a snarling, ugly expression on his face. The atmosphere surrounding him swirled and billowed as if steam were literally coming out of his ears. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

Dove hovered uncertainly on the threshold. "Who's Anthros?"

"You fucking bastard," Arnie spat. "I ought to kill you right now."

"Arnie!" She trotted inside the hallway, glancing from one man to the other.

"It's okay." Mark spoke quickly and softly. "Let me explain."

"Shut the fuck up." He lunged forward and exploded in Mark's face. "You come near my son and it's the last thing you'll ever. fucking. do. Understood?"

"Yes. I have no intention—"

"Understood?"

Mark closed his eyes and nodded. He didn't back away or flinch from Arnie's wrath. Instead, he seemed curiously resigned.

"We decoded your signals."

"What signals?" Dove screeched. Penny and Poppy bolstered her on either side, making soothing noises.

"ETI's been recording them for years. We just couldn't get a handle on them until now. You've planned this, engineered this. You brought me here—"

The Extraterrestrial Institute? The crackpot alien hunters organized by Robert and Marjorie? What did they have to do with anything?

"Yes—"

"And then you came to steal my son."

"What?" Dove stumbled forward. The aunties hauled her back. "What are you talking about?" Either Arnie'd been smoking some good stuff or Dove's initial and irrational fears for Michael had been right. She reeled. Penny steadied her.

"Yes, but not anymore," Mark said.

He admitted it?

"You'd better believe not *fucking* anymore! I suggest we escort you to your ship and you get your fucking, lying ass the *hell* off my planet!"

Mark held up his hands. "Arnie, please—"

"Now!"

"Gentlemen. Gentlemen!" Poppy crowed, boldly stepping between them like a ref in a prizefight. "You're disrupting the peace of this house."

"Ms. Pilgrim, I apologize," Arnie clipped through his teeth. "But I'm a little pissed off at the moment."

"Why yes, I can see that. And with good reason. But I've been chatting with Anthros tonight and we've come up with an alternate plan."

"Who's Anthros?" Dove asked.

"Excuse my French, but I suggest I don't give a flying fuck what his alternate plan is."

"Will you at least listen to it?"

"No." He stabbed a finger into Mark's chest. "I wouldn't trust anything he says. He's a scumbag."

"He's not a scumbag!" Dove bellowed. "Don't call him that!"

Mark made a strangled sound.

Penny laid a hand on Arnie's arm. "What if Michael was in grave danger and Anthros was the only one who could protect him?"

"Who the hell is Anthros?" Dove squawked. "Will somebody please fill me in? How is Michael in danger?"

Poppy clawed at her. "Dovey, come into the kitchen with me. I'll make you tea and explain."

"Good idea. Come on, Dovey. Leave the men to work out their problems in private."

Dove shook them off but they kept coming. Like a bad dream, they swelled and grew, becoming stronger and more physically assertive the more she dodged. "Let me go."

But they circled and closed, herding her backward toward the kitchen, cooing and gurgling and making all sorts of white noise so she couldn't hear what Arnie and Mark were saying. She caught snippets, though.

"same biology...socialized differently. ...don't raise their own children. ...removed at birth and sorted into the gene pool...forbidden to breed. Others..."

Huh?

"...love of family meant nothing...needed to save my race...new superior blood into the breeding stock. We are dying..."

Penny charged ahead and rattled the kettle, turning on the faucet full blast. As they passed a small radio on a shelf, Poppy flicked it on.

Dove wheeled and made it back to the hallway before the old lady could grab her. The Top Hits of the Sixties flooded the downstairs.

"Michael was a means to an end...wouldn't have been harmed."

When the moon is in the seventh house...

"...saw his relationship with you and Ava. Dove's relationships... My body... changing, adapting...think more clearly than I ever have before..."

and Jupiter aligns with Mars...

"saw my original plan through human eyes... Destructive and cruel. You have my word..."

Arnie pinched his nose between two fingers and sighed. "Tell me one thing, Anthros. *Why* should I trust you?"

"Because I'm..."

"with Dove."

"Who. The. Fuck. Is. Anthros?" she screeched.

Mark spun on a heel and faced her, his features a twisted, tortured caricature. "I'm Anthros."

"Okay! Was that so hard?"

"I came in a spaceship from the Markarian Galaxies to reclaim a half-human, half-Markarian child, Michael Simpson."

Her lips moved. Nothing came out. The floor became one with her feet.

"But now," he turned back to Arnie, dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "I'm your child's sworn protector."

"Read his mind!" Poppy said. "We did, and oh my. It's glorious in there. So smart. So passionate."

Arnie perched his fingers on Mark's head in what looked like a Vulcan mind meld.

Dove's brain fizzled and shorted out. The aunties pressed their bony old powdered bodies against her as close as they could. The better to hold her up, she thought. "Should we call the psyche center?" Dove whispered flatly, intuitive knowledge of their answer settling in a shroud of Novocaine.

"Oh no," Poppy said. "He's telling the truth!"

Dove raised her eyebrows at Arnie. Why, she didn't know.

"He is," Arnie confirmed. "I'm from there too." He continued the mind meld.

Pop!

There went her last brain cell. "What about Ava?" she mumbled, mostly because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"She's human," Mark said.

"Well..." Penny hedged. "We're not quite sure about her."

"Dovey." Poppy plucked at her arm. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Dove plopped down on the floor, staring straight ahead, her mind a giant white mushroom cloud. Penny and Poppy got down beside her. The men remained as they were, testosterone fumes and some other, weird magnetic scent choking the air.

"Honey, it's best to just rip off the bandage."

"Rip it off!"

"What. Are. You. Talking about?" Dove mumbled.

"Well," Penny's breasts heaved. "Mark, er, Anthros and Arnie, *everyone* in this house is an alien."

"Everyone?" Arnie and Mark boomed simultaneously.

The aunts hushed them with a wave. "Dovey's in crisis."

"And we're not?" Arnie said. Mark snorted. Some of the testosterone dissipated.

"Dovey, just about everyone on Earth has some alien blood. They've been immigrating forever and we've been *processing* them."

This isn't happening.

"Yes!" Poppy's head bobbed. "Sweetie, when Queen Win took the Markarian throne, there was a mass defection. Citizens feared for their lives because genetic inferiors were being eliminated. Just like the Europeans during WWII." She sighed. "Some governments just never learn."

"Although some of ours do go back way before them."

"Way back!"

Tell me this isn't happening.

"The Flower Children were my favorite, though."

"Oh, yes. The Flower Children! So gentle. They just drifted down." Poppy's fingers fanned the air. "Like mist." Everyone stared at her until she noticed and cleared her throat. "Free love drew them here."

"Honey, look at me."

If I don't look at her, maybe this'll stop happening.

"Try to understand our dilemma, dear. We couldn't tell you without losing everything. Our government would've treated them like freaks. But they weren't. And they had nowhere else to go."

Penny took Dove's hands and clasped them. "Dovey, what I'm about to say might shock you."

That's already happened.

"What?" Dove shouted. "What *else* couldn't you tell me?"

Penny sucked in a breath and let it whoosh out, blowing the hair off Dove's face. "Trish was one of them."

"What?" Of their own accord, Dove's knees rose to her chest. Her flip-flopped feet found purchase on the slick wood flooring and pushed, sliding her slowly backward, toward the door.

"We couldn't tell you before," Poppy repeated, inching along the floor beside her. "We wanted to but couldn't figure out a way. So many lives depended on our utmost secrecy."

"Mr. Sparks found Trish at the Space Needle. In a cryogenic tank. He worked there, you know." Penny scooted her butt to catch up. "She was a foundling, not an immigrant."

"Somebody must have misplaced her," Poppy said. "My goodness. I can't imagine being in that much of a rush."

Fully extended, Dove's legs bent again and pushed.

Penny rowed alongside. "We never found out who she belonged to so the Martins raised her. But she never acclimated properly. I think her tank had broken at some point."

Arnie pointed at Mark. "I suggest he's the expert on malfunctioning cryogenic tanks."

A visible shudder racked Mark's body. "May I inspect it?"

"Yes! We still have it out in the shed, don't we, Penny?"

"Why, yes. I believe we do." Penny pursed her lips. "Anyway, Dovey. She used drugs to make herself feel better, but they didn't work."

"We let her try everything."

Dove's spine hit the door. "You let her?"

"You never know what might help," Penny shrugged. "Anyway, honey. Trish didn't die."

A jagged spear sliced through Dove's chest and wedged in her breastbone. With a shout, she scrambled to her feet, tears streaming, nose running. "Stop fucking with me!" They were nut jobs. Every blessed one of them. They'd have to be evaluated. But who could she call? Who could help? Where could she go? She was only one woman.

They're watching me.

Were they dangerous? Would they hurt her if she didn't play along?

They have me surrounded. Outnumbered.

"Oh baby, we're not, er, fucking with you. Dovey, listen."

"No!" she plugged her ears like a child, but their strident voices screwed the words in.

"Honey, she flipped. She went back in time to start over again."

Should I call the police? The government? Who in the government?

"Well, she didn't really go back. More like a side step. Time is a plateau. It's not linear."

"True," Penny said. "Anyway, Trish really *is* in a better place. We weren't lying about that."

"Dovey doesn't believe us," Poppy observed. "She needs proof."

"I can show her my cruiser," Mark offered. "Take her for a spin."

"Can I go too?" Arnie asked. Mark nodded. "Sweet." He scratched his head. "Where'd you park it?"

This is happening. She tuned them out. Didn't want to hear.

Penny stroked Dove's hair, moving between her and the door. "Dove, I think if you talked to Trish, you'd recognize her."

Dove's chest constricted. She wheezed. *Humor them or they might go ballistic.* "You...you know where she is?"

"Oh, yes!"

Dove took her shaking fingers out of her ears. The two old ladies beamed at her. Poppy smothered a smile and hunched her shoulders in glee, pointing at Penny. "You tell her."

"No you."

"Someone tell me!"

Poppy slapped Dove's shoulder. "She's right here."

"Here? In this house?"

Penny grinned. "Out in the yard."

"With her mother!"

The single mother and child.

Last straw. Mindfuck complete. Choking on her sobs, Dove shoved through the human barrier and tore out to her car.

"Wait!" Mark charged down the path behind her.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

She hopped inside, gunned the engine and peeled out just as his hand hit the door handle.

Where can I go?

At least I still have Dream Lover.

Why did she think that? Why the fuck did she just think that? She was as nutty as they were.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, she saw him standing in the middle of the street. Her stomach pitched and yawed. *I could show her my cruiser. Take her for a spin.* Is that what Mark had said? Surely he'd meant his cabin cruiser...

What if it's true? What if he's an alien? What if Arnie's an alien? What if they're all aliens?

Except Ava. A port in a storm. They didn't think she was one of them. Surely she'd play it straight with Dove.

Mindlessly, she raced across the Fremont Bridge and wound her way up Queen Anne Hill. Ava awaited, door open, as she propelled herself out of the car.

"Arnie called and said you might turn up. He told me what went down." She ushered Dove inside and into the kitchen. Plopping a shot glass on the table, she filled it with vodka, and slid it over. "Believe me, this'll help."

Dove tossed back her head and swallowed the vile liquid. She hated vodka, but Ava was a genius. Within seconds, her whole body began to relax. Breathing came more easily. Ava poured her one more. She downed it and accepted a hot tea chaser. "Is it true?" she sputtered. *Open mind.*

Ava scraped out a chair and sat across from her, fingers braided. "Yes," she said simply. "Every word."

One of the double doors slammed shut in the wind. "It can't be."

"It is."

"It's crazy."

"I know."

"It can't be."

"It is." She launched into her and Arnie's history and courtship, visions of Anthros, Arnie's genetic testing. She brought out a folder of the results and let Dove read for herself. Then she offered up a packet of top-secret ETI missives, including the signals that'd come from Anthros' cruiser as it crisscrossed the galaxy. "Now that they've broken the code, the computers are generating millions of pages of text, diaries, if you will, of generations of intergalactic travel, immigration. It's phenomenal."

"How did you break the code?"

Ava shook her head and smiled. "We let Michael listen to it a few minutes. He crafted a primer."

Dove's jaw dropped. "That's crazy."

"I know."

"All this evidence—" A door creaked open.

"And that's just a drop in the bucket. Anthros' spaceship is out there in the city somewhere."

They both looked out the window at the storied skyline, as if they might somehow spot the cruiser. "Where do you think it is?"

"I don't know."

An image of the new silver sculpture outside EMP. It hadn't resembled an orca as much as it had a spaceship. "I think I already saw it. At the Seattle Center."

"No kidding!"

"This is crazy."

"I know. But the cruiser is all the proof you'll need."

So this is what it felt like to be in deep shock. Numb. Cold. Mindless. So much information skittered through her brain, it had clogged completely. No conscious thought could drain out. Just dribbles of fractured ideas, warped sensibilities and total incongruities. "If Anthros brought Arnie here, he must be really old." No wonder he wouldn't have sex with her. Maybe he couldn't.

"Well," Ava shrugged. "They don't oxidize way out there. He looks about our age, but we'll have to ask him."

"Space, the ultimate antioxidant." He wasn't a drug addict. He wasn't Ava's cousin, Mark. He wasn't a Mediterranean mystic. He wasn't human.

He wasn't any of those things.

He was an alien. Named Anthros.

This was crazy. "So all this time I thought he was drunk, he was acclimating to our atmosphere."

Ava nodded. "Arnie put nitrogen into some balloons to stabilize him."

"Everyone in my aunts' house—all the fruits and nuts—all these years." *Trish. Oh God, Trish. Let it be true.* "Ava, is time a plateau? Is time travel possible?"

"I believe so."

"How?"

"It's all about perception. Desire." Ava leaned into her explanation. "If you imagine only the present, what do you see?"

"Craziness."

"Listen. People want to move forward. It's a basic human desire. Except for those who want to go back. People are rarely satisfied with where they are right at this instant. Now imagine if you could be completely and utterly in the moment. Nowhere else. No *desire* to be anywhere else. That's when it's possible. Because there's only here. Only now. Nothing else exists.

"Except craziness."

"Now stretch that out. Inside, you're still who you were in the past. You're also who you'll become. It just hasn't been awakened yet. But you can awaken it and then it's there, on the plateau, alongside what you were and what you are. Bingo. You can play hopscotch with yourself. It takes considerable concentration."

Dove stared at her. "That's crazy."

"I know. I'm working on it."

They laughed. And laughed. And the more Dove tried to hold them in, the faster the tears leaked out until she fell apart completely and melted into the table, sobbing. "This is crazy."

"I know."

She lifted her sopping face. "How did you and Arnie handle it when you found out?"

"If you're looking for a normal reaction, you're looking in the wrong place. We're crazy."

Dove nodded wetly. "I know."

They laughed again.

"But what am I supposed to do with this? How am I supposed to understand? To cope? What am I supposed to feel?"

"It's unprecedented, hon. You'll just have to muddle around awhile."

"This is cr-" hiccough. "Cray-" hiccough. "Crazeeee!" It ended on a wail.

Ava came around her side of the table and patted her head. "I know, sweetie. I know. And Dove, I want to apologize. You were right about Anthros. You sensed the dangers. I didn't believe you."

She lifted her face. "I know."

"Seems we all have a spot of telepathic alien blood."

"America really is a melting pot." She dropped her head back into her hands, the shards of a splintering headache jabbing every corner of her brain. "Michael is in danger."

"Arnie and Anthros are sorting it all out right now. Anthros is letting him deep-probe his mind to prove his good intentions. He wants to be Michael's bodyguard."

"You trust him that much, even after all this?"

"Strangely, yes. We go back a long way and after all, if it hadn't been for him, I never would've met Arnie. In a perverted way, I owe him everything. Even Michael. He gave them to me."

Did he give me back Trish?

"So I think it'll be all right."

All right. What a concept. Like everything else, it was relative. "Where's Michael?"

"In his room, sleeping. He had a long day. He *asked* to go to bed."

"That's crazy."

"I. Know."

Chapter Nine

On the bed in the Simpsons' guest room, Dove inhaled the fading vestiges of Mark's scent on the pillow and flung it across the room. So much for a real-life fuck buddy. She had no intention of boinking an alien—no matter how wonderful Ava claimed it would be. Hopping up, she stripped the bed, wadded the sheets and stuffed them in the closet. Better a bare mattress than the memories of his not-quite-human flesh against hers. She shivered.

Alien.

Ava's proof had been well-presented, factual and, ironically, level-headed. Dove wasn't one-hundred percent sure she believed the evidence, but she knew beyond a doubt that Ava did. And for the most part, she trusted her employer's judgment and sanity. A small, sick piece of her gut told her it was true.

If Mark's cruiser was indeed parked in the Seattle Center, she'd be getting her own irrefutable proof tomorrow. Did she really want to *go for a spin*? Not in this lifetime. Right now, she wanted to stay as far away from him as possible. Quite simply, he freaked the shit out of her.

According to Ava, he'd been directed to "plant" Arnie and Trish here as babies, watch them grow and, hopefully, mate. Although she'd listened to the rest of the absurd story, she'd failed to properly absorb it. What stuck in her mind was the single, revolting fact that Mark had caused Trish's problems. He'd sent her here and she'd suffered.

This she couldn't forgive. No way. No how.

Open mind. He was following orders. He never intended hurting anyone.

But he had hurt someone. Someone she loved dearly. Someone who, until today, had been dead. Oh God.

If this was where having an open mind got her, she preferred her old, sealed one. But there was no going back. Tomorrow, she'd have to investigate the Trish angle. She wasn't sure she could handle it.

Laika sniffed her way into the room and curled up at Dove's feet, abandoning her post in Michael's room for some reason. Dove scratched her ears, aching for the sense of familiarity. Comfort. Security. She tried going over the facts Ava'd laid out on the kitchen table. But her eyes kept fluttering shut from sheer emotional exhaustion.

With every flutter, mild electrical surges looped through her body. Dream Lover was orbiting. Thank God. She so needed him right now.

Laika's tail thumped three times. Dove's eyes flickered open. It thumped again. Three times. Where had she heard that pattern before?

Never mind. She had an important date.

Through the orange mist, Mark appeared and kneeled on the bed beside her.

"What are you doing here?" She struggled to rise, get away, pushing at him with limp, useless hands. "Leave me alone!"

"No." He grabbed her flailing arms and forced her back down. "Listen to me —"

"Let me go. I don't like you anymore."

"Not until I explain."

"Fuck you and the saucer you flew in on."

He ignored her, incensing her further. Fine. She had a trick up her sleeve. Locking her mind, she forced her glued eyelids to open. An image of the guest room overlaid the orange haze and she focused on the objects in it—a small white dresser, a tissue box. Some scientific journals.

With a mental strength she'd never before used, she tuned Mark out completely until he'd all but disappeared, and focused her energies on calling Dream Lover.

Violent white light exploded behind her eyeballs. Her body heaved off the bed. Ribbons of green and yellow light zipped across the screen of her mind and powerful jolts rocked her brain. She heard herself cry out—a plaintive, mournful yelp—and out of the intense, flashing background came his arms, snaking around her head, cradling her to his chest while he murmured soft, comforting words. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Thank God," she choked.

"Rough day?"

"You don't know the half of it."

"Tell me."

So she did. Everything. Sobbing, shouting, every emotion she'd carefully compartmentalized spewed into the ether and enshrouded her. She finished on a wail, "I don't know what to do!"

"I'll help you."

"How? You're not even real."

"I am."

"No, you're not," she said miserably. "You're an illusion. Shit. My whole reality is an illusion."

"Dove, nothing is an illusion." His hands rubbed her face, fingering her hair and massaging her temples. "Everything is real. It's just that sometimes we can't touch it or taste it."

"I can't have a relationship with a goddamned cloud. I need a real man."

He made a strangled sound and she tried to turn to him. But once again he stopped her. "Maybe you can have both. Maybe it's right here in front of you."

"Where?"

He seemed to have trouble swallowing. "In the center of the universe."

"Fremont?"

"Yes. Maybe someone's there, waiting for you, hoping for you...loving you."

She snorted. "Who, Mark Arianos? Anthros? Whoever the fuck he is? Forget him. He's a monster."

Dream Lover whimpered—a shocking, unsettling sound.

A thumping noise intruded from the real world. Laika's tail. One. Two. Three. Pause. One. Two. Three.

Where had she heard that before? Oh yeah. Laika'd done that when she'd met... "Mark! Holy shit." She wrenched out of his arms and hit the vaporous ground running.

* * * * *

He had no choice. Chasing after her, he dodged mental roadblocks she threw out—people from her past materialized, clutching at him. A wall of angry dogs snarled and nipped as he flew by. Chunks of hate and anger pummeled his thoughts, coming at him like a meteor field and every bit as gritty and deadly. The portal into her mind was closing fast. If he didn't get inside in time, use every power available and then some, she'd slam it shut and lock him out forever.

Her Force took him unaware. She'd never used it before. Perhaps she didn't know she had it. He certainly didn't. From its sheer vigor alone, he knew beyond a doubt that she had Old World Markarian blood—the pure stuff, before genetic engineering had polluted it.

According to Penny and Poppy, nearly every Earthling alive today had some. The defections had begun right before Queen Win took the throne, and she'd most likely destroyed all the records—a shocking revelation he'd barely begun processing. He had so much more to learn before storming the castle.

But that was neither here nor there. First, he had to storm Dove.

There had to be a key. An insight into her psyche he could appropriate and use. He swifted through conversations, searching, sifting and practically tripped over the answer. "Stop running," he bellowed. "You've run from relationships long enough."

She wobbled.

"Who's going to help you now, if not me?"

The swirling vapors of her mind ground to a halt. He sensed confusion, denial, abject terror.

"Don't be a coward about this."

She turned, her voice hissing with toxic fumes. "I'm not a coward."

"Your dreams are a crutch."

Again, louder. "I'm not a coward!"

"Prove it."

The clash of metal as swords descended and clattered at his feet. Ornate sabers and epees flew at him, carved hilts bashing and clanging. He dodged them, spinning, and snatched a heavy rapier out of the clouds.

She advanced swiftly, gracefully, wielding her sword with an elegant, feminine perfection that made him want to freeze and ogle. "En garde, you fucking bastard."

Okay. The ogling could wait.

Dove attacked, barreling Anthros backward down an imaginary strip with clean, fleet action. With an aggressive thrust to his upper arm, she captured and controlled his blade, dingling him before he could disengage.

Damn. She was good. And he was out of practice. Bad combination. But she wouldn't be expecting him to copycat.

With keen accuracy, he mimicked her bold move, jabbing her arm in the same spot repeatedly to establish his dominance, her lack of control, and mainly to piss her off. At the last possible moment, he swung his back leg forward and fell into a flèche. Dove parried and riposted with an adroit nick to his chest. Anthros felt the stirrings of a major hard-on.

He stood still, daring her to attack, and opened up a clear target, knowing what he'd do when she took the bait. She danced around in front a few seconds, taking his measure, then came an inch too close. He feinted high, threatening her face. She reacted poorly, leaning back and he lunged, dropping his blade and striking her toe.

"Shit," she muttered.

"Problems?"

"No."

They circled each other warily. Dove played cat and mouse by opening a line and inviting Anthros in. He attacked. She counterattacked. It went back and forth until Anthros sensed her impatience. When she made her predictable charge, he simply extended his arm and let her run into his blade.

Steam billowed out of her ears. She was about to snap.

Again, she bounded in. Anthros advanced and held his ground until the action became so close and intense that their bell guards clashed. "Corps à corps," he said and snatched the sword from her grip, flinging it into the mist and yanking her against him. "That's an illegal move."

"Let me go," she snarled.

"You came in too close. Fatal error, my love."

"I'm not your love."

"I beg to differ." He captured her lips in his. She writhed against him, pummeling his chest and clearly trying to kick him in the balls. He evaded her knee, grabbing her ass in one hand and pressing her hips against his aching cock. Looping his leg around hers, he locked her in tightly.

"You trapped me." Her right arm pinwheeled, preparing to swat. He caught it midair and brought it behind her back.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

Her left arm flew out, palm stinging his cheek. He caught this one too and paired it with the other, cuffing both wrists in one hand. "That hurt," he hissed. "Kiss it and make it better."

"In your dreams."

"Actually, this is my dream." He clasped her chin and forced her face up. She snapped at his thumb. Best not to French her right now. Instead, he bear-hugged her, sliding his calf to the hollow behind her knee and unhinging it so she sagged over backward.

They fell to the ground and he covered her with his body, braiding their legs and swiveling his face to avoid her teeth. "There's no escape, Dove. Don't even try."

She writhed beneath him, agile body arching against his until they slid naturally into that perfect fit, preventing any and all movement. But her legs had opened just enough for his cock to slip between them and up into her pussy. Touché.

"Get it out. Get your dick out of me," she growled and clenched her cunt muscles as if to push him out.

"No."

"I don't want you here. I don't want to have sex."

"Your slick pussy says different."

"You're forcing me. That's illegal on Earth, you freak."

He felt a momentary twinge of conscience and probably would've pulled out had this been a physical encounter. But laws were sketchy about mind-rape, and he intended taking full advantage. "That would work, but technically we're not on Earth. And I am not just any freak." He thrust deeply inside and she gasped. "I'm a freak who's crazy for you."

"Worse than crazy. You're a rat-bastard."

He conjured a *Gauche*—a small knife used defensively in fencing. Only he used it offensively, holding it to her throat, speaking to her in a figurative language she understood. "Are you frightened?"

"What do you think?" she spat.

"Why? I'm not hurting you."

"You're threatening me."

"So?" He twisted the knife, teasing its sharp tip down her jugular, jabbing his cock deeper. Pinning her to him. "Threats can be meaningless bluster. Are you unsure of mine? Do you think I mean them?"

She sputtered helplessly, trying to tug her arms free. But they were still wedged firmly behind her back.

"Do you really think I'd hurt you?"

"You came here to snatch Michael. Of course you'd hurt me. You'd hurt anyone in your way."

"That's where you're wrong. Besides, I have other plans now. Didn't Ava tell you?"

"Maybe you lied."

"I promised to never lie to you."

"But you did. By omission. Everyone lied."

"We had good reasons."

Though she held herself stiffly, refusing to meet his gaze, her thigh muscles relaxed and accepted him.

"I had no choice. You know that. Dove, you know what loyalty means. To fight for the safety of others, even if that loyalty is misplaced. Don't you?"

She didn't answer. He pressed the tip of the knife into the soft flesh of her throat and speared his cock repeatedly into her. She flinched, her body quivering with the strain of holding her neck perfectly still. Her pussy spasmed wildly, sucking his dick like a mouth. It struck him she might have an orgasm with the knife on her neck. That her body relished danger, submission and fear, even as her mind rejected them. But he didn't think she'd react this way if, in her heart, she distrusted him. She did trust him. He just needed to get her to admit it. "Don't you?"

"Yes," she hissed through her teeth.

"Then why the anger?"

"I didn't hurt anyone else in my quest to help." She choked on a small sob. "You hurt Trish."

Her chin set and her lower lip trembled slightly. She was moving away from rage and back into sadness. His heart cracked. "I know. I'm sorry." The knife disappeared from his grip and he palmed her cheek.

"You hurt her."

"If I could erase it, go back and change it, I would."

"You can. You can flip back in time."

True. It would mean leaving Dove, though. And that he refused to do. Unless... "Is that what you want?"

"Yes." Her hips rotated and her pussy clasped him. "No."

"I'll do anything you ask."

Her face crumpled. She nuzzled his neck and he loosened his hold on her, tucking his face against hers, stroking her arms. Their hips heaved together, apart, together. Her legs slid up around his waist.

"Don't make me choose." She butterflyed her fingers down his spine, raising goose bumps of tender, aching need. "I can't."

* * * * *

Her passion for him was inching its way back. It ticked her off slightly, his mastery over her body and emotions. The psychological swordplay had been riveting, sensual, exciting. He wielded all his weapons with a masculine exactitude that made her heart pound. Could she send him back in time? Destroy any chance of a future with him? God, but she was a selfish bitch for thinking of herself when she had an opportunity to right a terrible wrong.

"You have to choose," he said. An enormous easy chair materialized. Mark slid out of her, lifting her up, and set them down with her facing outward on his lap. In front of her, a giant, gilded mirror appeared.

He spread her legs as she watched in the glass. "Look at yourself." Mesmerized, she did. "You're naked."

"Yes." Round, firm breasts, still perched fairly high on her chest. Pale skin, narrow waist. Overly full hips. Her shaggy hair, normally on the spiky side, curled softly against dewy cheeks.

His hands glided up and down her open thighs, stopping to cup her pussy. Resting against his warm chest, her spine tingled at the scratch of his fine hair.

"Not just physically naked. Look inside. See yourself." She gazed more intently as he fondled her labia. One set of fingers spread them gently while the middle finger of the other hand inched inside her vagina.

Slowly he drew it back and forth so it hypnotized both her clit and G-spot with each stroke. "What do you see?"

"Sorrow." The word spilled out on its own. She hadn't even thought it. Had he bewitched her? She blinked.

"Why?"

"I died with Trish." She didn't say that. Did she? It seemed the universe was speaking for her. She shook her head vigorously.

He pressed her clit with a separate fingertip and began circling, still massaging inside with the other. "You didn't die. You went into hibernation."

"Suspended animation." Her nipples hardened and sensitized. She fondled them and leaned back, straining against his fingers.

Beneath her, he shuddered. "Please, don't talk about cryogenic tanks. It's a sore subject."

They chuckled.

"You've been living in a dream. A dream the past created. It's time to wake up."

Her nerves zinged. Tingles washed down her thighs and curled her toes. "Yes."

"You should be in the present. In the real world. You need to choose where you're going to live." She turned to look at him. He suckled her lips, nibbling and pulling, tracing her teeth with his tongue. "We aliens aren't so bad."

"But not as superior as you imagine yourselves either. You sure do screw up sometimes."

"Humans, of course, don't."

They laughed again.

"You've trusted me with your body, with your mind. Have I abused that trust?"

"No." Her muscles clenched in imminent orgasm. "You've always been there for me."

"Then let me stay. Trish is here with you. She'll grow into the same person, only better. If I flipped and kept her at home, she'd disappear from your life forever. So would Arnie."

She hadn't thought that far. How horrid. Unthinkable. "Michael too." Too many people would be affected by one tiny change. Poor Trish. But it couldn't be undone.

She gazed at Mark. His eyes caressed her features like a physical touch. His chest swelled and he held his breath, waiting, it seemed, for the words he desperately needed to hear. "And you'd be gone forever."

He dropped his forehead onto hers. "Yes."

"I can't let that happen." His breath hissed out and he slumped against her. She lifted her buttocks and he shifted his hips, pumping his cock gently into her pussy. Arching back, she twined her fingers through his silky hair, gripping it and tilting his head forward and over her shoulder. She kissed his cheeks, his nose, his chin. "What a mess you made," she whispered.

"It brought me to you."

"So it's been you all along. You're my dream lover."

"At your service." His hips tilted and circled, his cock filling every inch of her, grazing every nerve with wispy tenderness.

"You're a conniving, sly dog. How could I ever trust you?"

"You can't. Don't ever expect a fair fight where you're concerned."

Her independent side groused. Her other side bloated with lust.

"But," he added hopefully, "I think you trust me anyway."

"You know, in a crazy sort of way, I do." She nuzzled his thighs with her ass, wiggling his cock deeper. Then just sat there hugging it in her pussy. "Have you ever had a relationship? Not just sex, but a loving relationship?"

"Like the one Arnie and Ava have? No."

"No wonder you raped me. Hate to tell you, that's not the way to treat a woman."

"You liked it."

"That's beside the point. You need to learn how to treat women." Her muscles contracted sharply and he groaned. All this time, they'd hardly moved, but her cunt knew his cock was there and was forcing a keen response from both of them.

"I don't care to learn how to treat women. I just want to learn how to treat you. And I did."

"You're impossible."

"Wrong. I'm possible. Very, very possible." Two tiny thrusts catapulted her to the precipice and she teetered. "The proof is at the amusement park."

"I'm not going on *that* ride." Maybe not literally. Figuratively, she was already on it, engines ablaze and blasting into the great unknown.

* * * * *

The next afternoon, Dove parallel parked at the curb in front of Pilgrim's Progress, handed Trish her bag of new toys, watched her skip off to find her mother and trudged up the front steps of the porch.

Arnie and Ava had enlisted the not-so-crackpot alien hunters to care for Michael, giving Dove a whole week off to adjust to her new world, sleep and reconnect with Trish. This morning, she'd arrived at the shelter and made a beeline for the little girl, ignoring the aunties and saving Mark for later.

Now mentally and physically exhausted, she planned on getting a nap before finding him and telling him what she'd learned. She wanted to be at the top of her game when she did.

The bench-glider creaked. She looked. He sat there, watching her. Waiting for her, she supposed.

She met his gaze and he leaned forward, elbows on knees, fingers laced in front of his mouth, eyes enormous, dark and disturbed. "How'd it go?"

Her shoulders relaxed and she threw out a hand. "Wonderful. She's...Trish." She smiled. "Only younger."

He nodded, his face open, soft and unsure.

Dove edged toward him. He leaned back. She sat down next to him and put a hand on his knee. His knee was shaking. She turned and looked him straight in the eye. "You gave her back to me. Thank you."

Breath hissed out of his body. "Unfortunately, I didn't do it on purpose."

"You know," she sat back and leaned against him. "That's okay." And suddenly, it was. "If you hadn't shown up—" her voice clotted and she swallowed. "I never would've known."

A big, tender hand settled at the back of her head and she automatically rubbed against it.

"If I'd known what I'd find here, I would've come sooner."

"I believe you."

"Nothing would've stopped me."

"M—Anthros, you came here for a good reason. Your logic might've been a little flawed, but hey, you had no one to brainstorm with. It was courageous, what you did."

"It was stupid."

"You were desperate."

He snorted. "Still am."

She giggled. "How, after practically raping me last night?" She launched the glider with her feet and they swayed back and forth.

"I didn't rape. I virtually ravished."

"Semantics. You had your way with me, mentally or physically. Bastard."

He inspected the glider's frame, as if mentally crafting one, and gave them another push. "You don't look too unhappy about it."

"Who said anything about being unhappy? I want more." Lots more. With her flawed, other-worldly hero. Geez. It would take some getting used to. But hell, she'd been unwittingly living with it for years. Lily Tomlin had been right. Reality really was a mass assumption.

"Me too." He shifted, stiffened.

She squeezed his thigh, feathering her fingers along the inseam of his jeans, inching higher. "Make-up sex is pretty hot. I'd be happy to introduce you to it."

He took her hand off his leg and folded it into his. "Dove, there's something you need to know about my sexual abilities." Booted feet propelled him off the glider and it wobbled in his absence.

"Something bad?" Ava had assured her that alien sex was not only safe, it was delightful. And so far, he hadn't disappointed.

"Certainly not good." He paced the porch. "I've dreaded telling you."

Her intestines knotted around her heart. She braced herself. Did he have some weird disease? Instead of sperm, would space cooties crawl out of his cock?

Pause for total-body shudder.

At the railing, he turned his back on her, leaning on it and peering out at the street. "Sex, the scent of sex and its inherent loss of control are beacons to my people. They're crafted that way so no one can breed unauthorized. For genetic engineering purposes."

Oh no.

"As much as I want to make love with you, and I do —"

"They'll find you. Your evil queen will find you."

"Yes."

"And if she finds you, she'll find Michael."

"Yes." His knuckles whitened on the rail. The wood creaked and snapped. He released it. "Yes."

Wouldn't you just goddamned know it. Shit. "So we're stuck with out-of-body."

Turning, he folded his arms across his chest, palms against pecs, hands tucked in. "Unfortunately. But yesterday, at EMP, I took you into the music booth to experiment. To see how far I could go."

Realization struck and she joined him at the rail, reaching for him. But he didn't reach back. "You didn't come."

He shook his head. "It's not easy, but I can maintain control at least until that point. But Dove." Agony twisted his features and his voice cracked. "If I penetrated you, if I fucked you like I *need* to, made love to you like I'm desperate to, all would be lost."

"Oh, Anthros!" If her life sucked, blew chunks, bit the big one, what about his? She wanted to embrace him, tell him everything between them would be okay. But everything wasn't okay and she wasn't sure it ever would be. Did that make her a bad person? "What did you do before? At home."

"The same thing I'm doing now. Out-of-body."

"You've never had sex?"

"No." He made the admission frankly, without embarrassment. "The last few days I've become acutely aware of what I've been missing," he added wryly.

"You're a virgin?"

"Should I spell it out for you?" He unleashed his dirtiest smile yet.

"Wow. Wow."

"Just a technicality."

"No. More than that. A lot more." She would be his first woman. Imagine that. Frightening yet glorious. Too bad they'd never get to do it.

His dirty smile faded and he looked down at his feet. "Do you still want me?" The plaintive question hung in the air between them while her pussy screamed *unfair!* "They already know I survived the voyage. We can fool around up to a point. The rest will have to take place in our minds, though."

Could she handle it? She opened her mouth to say yes but slammed it shut again. To say yes would be tantamount to a promise, to deny herself sex ever again. Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse.

Did she love him enough? Did she love him at all? She drifted away. "I have to think about it." Too much had happened the past few days.

He acknowledged her words with a tilt of the head, then pushed off the railing to go inside.

"What? You're not going to put a knife to my throat?"

Pausing at the door, he kept his back to her, his tone tight, clipped and raspy. "This time, I'm not going to play dirty. Now that I have some idea of what *special* kind of torture a sexless existence is, I wouldn't force it on you."

The controlled, quiet click of the closing door left a hollow echo in her heart, like footsteps in a lonely, empty house. For the first time since he'd appeared in her life six weeks ago, he'd left.

For good.

Unless she stopped him. She turned toward the door and wrapped her hand around the knob.

A life without sex.

Her hand dropped.

A life without Anthros.

Her hand clasped the knob.

No dick.

Hand dropped.

No Anthros.

Hand raised.

She twisted the knob. Poppy pulled the door open before she could and came out, dragging a grim-faced Anthros along with her. The iceman had returned. "I wasn't eavesdropping," Poppy said. "I just couldn't help hearing as I walked by the window."

"Okay. Sure." Dove tried catching Anthros' eye, but he wouldn't look at her. She couldn't blame him. She wouldn't look at her either. "I'm ticked at you and Aunt Penny already, so it doesn't matter if you were snooping."

"Oh, I know you're pissed." Poppy patted her white hair primly, then fixed Dove with a stern eye. "But imagine yourself as a refugee from a police state engaged in ethnic cleansing."

A right hook to the gut. Talk about a sucker punch. The aunts were getting adept at that lately. Dove fell back a step.

"We had to hurt you to save scores of others. Many in our generation faced the same dilemma all over the worlds."

She shuffled her feet and felt nine again. "I had no idea."

"Now you do. What are you going to do with the information? It's not all about you, Dovey."

The Greatest Generation strikes back. She had nothing but highest admiration for the group as a whole, so why couldn't she forgive these two individuals? She seriously had to grow up.

"Anyway. You do have a right to your feelings. But anger doesn't change anything."

Dove met her gaze squarely, lifting her chin and taking her lashes like a woman. "No, it doesn't and I'm sorry."

Sharp eyes softened and she clapped her hands. "There's a dear!"

A tentative smile. "I had a wonderful morning with Trish." And she planned on many more over the years—including a trip to a pizza parlor, acting British and chasing down crushes.

Poppy glowed. "I'm so glad! Isn't she a lovely girl?"

"Yes."

"I think we made the right decision. Of course, we didn't have much choice at that point." She tossed Dove a rueful glance. "Sometimes you have to fly by the seat of your pants."

"I know," she choked. "I understand."

For the first time Dove had ever witnessed, the old lady's voice hitched. "My goodness, life isn't always a bowl of cherries, is it?"

"No." They embraced, four misty eyes got swabbed and Dove experienced a lightness of being she hadn't felt in five long years. "But most of the time, it is."

Everything finally was okay. She just needed to enlighten Anthros.

Poppy cleared her throat. "Now. Moving on." Straightening bony shoulders, she latched a knobby hand onto each of their arms. "I have some information that *is* all about you two."

Damn the tricky old coot. "What?" Dove chuckled. She glanced at Anthros and caught him staring into her with a shimmering, soft heat. Her insides got gooey.

A sly joy lit bright eyes. "Dovey, remember the aurora when Anthros arrived?"

She nodded.

"And how you mentioned Ava's cell phone was scrambled?"

"Yes. No radio reception either." A ray of hope. Auroras were a rarity in Seattle, but hell, she'd take what she could get. Beside her, Anthros shifted his keen focus to Poppy.

A smile beamed across her face. "Anthros' entry caused a geomagnetic storm. The effects were much more severe than the ordinary solar breezes that cause auroras. *But*, I've noticed even the slightest aurora *interferes* with remote communication."

Dove and Anthros exchanged glances. His eyebrows went up.

"I've never been able to contact incoming guests during one. You understand?"

A wicked grin cut Anthros' face. "Yes."

"And my goodness. There's *always* an aurora *somewhere*. I checked on the Internet and there's one expected over the North Pole tonight!"

"The North Pole?" Dove cried. "What good would that do us?"

Anthros folded strong arms across his chest and rocked back on his heels. "What was that you said last night—about never taking a ride in my spaceship?"

Dove's jaw dropped and she flung herself at him. "I never said anything of the kind."

He caught her and laughed, nuzzling her hair, brushing his lips across her forehead. She savored his scent, the feel of his body, his strength and how safe she felt with him.

"You were about to come after me, weren't you?"

Dove dipped her chin and peered up at him through her lashes. "Whatever gave you that idea?" Her fingers fanned out across his pecs, kneading them one last time—in clothing.

"I saw you reach for the door."

"The knob needed polishing."

His lusty chuckle zapped her nerve endings. "I think you have a crush on me that goes beyond physical."

She tossed her head. "Maybe a little beyond physical. You'd better watch yourself, though."

"I think you want to have my babies."

She grinned. "I think we need to practice first."

"Me, in particular."

True.

Wow. Just. Wow.

* * * * *

They arrived at the Seattle Center at dusk and hurried toward the amusement park. An impressive crowd remained, soaking up the last dregs of a second beautiful day. A dozen children hovered around the cruiser. As well as a pair of uniformed men.

Dove stopped Anthros with a hand on his arm. "We're in trouble now."

"Policemen?"

"Worse." Two college-aged kids, who were literally scratching their heads. "Park security." And, most likely, a youthful, drummed up sense of self-importance.

He patted her hand and peeled her fingers off. "Let me handle it."

They advanced into the circle of people and Anthros boldly strode up to the guards. "Excuse me. Is there a problem?"

The taller of the two glanced at him. "Dunno. We're trying to figure out who put this thing here. No one seems to know anything." Clear blue eyes scanned Anthros from top to toe, missing nothing. If trouble came, it'd be from him.

The stocky one nodded. "No one knows who to ask, either. Let's just get out of here, Kenny. It obviously ain't no terrorist bomb."

Kenny snorted.

Anthros ran a hand along the cruiser's sleek curves. "I made it," he offered.

"No shit," blurted Stocky Guard. "I mean, cool!" His cheeks reddened. The children snickered.

"You're the artist? Then maybe you can tell us. Who commissioned this? It's nice, by the way. The kids freakin' love it."

Anthros missed a beat, but Dove stood in awe of his quick thinking. "Boeing."

The two men looked at each other. "Why didn't we think of that? It's for the Sci-Fi Hall of Fame. D'oh."

"Just call Steve Jobs to confirm," Kenny said.

They guffawed. "Yeah. I have him on speed dial."

"Thanks, Mr...."

Anthros pumped both their hands. "Arianos. Mark Arianos."

They snapped him two small salutes. "Sayonara." And ambled off to wherever it was guards went.

"Let's go," he said quietly, taking her arm.

"Now?" she squawked. "There're so many people here." The kids still circled, tuned in to every word. Parents sat schmoozing on benches.

"Trust me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cylinder—the hexagonal Allen key she'd seen in his tool belt.

"What's that?"

"A fuel rod."

"Plutonium?" she drew back, alarmed.

"Don't worry. It's safe." He flipped a hidden latch, and a secret door popped open and revealed a compartment jammed with similar rods. One slot was empty. Anthros dropped his rod inside and the clear cruiser lid cracked open with a whoosh.

"Awesome!" a boy cried.

"Whoa!"

The spacecraft hummed to life, vibrating gently and emitting a pale blue luminescence.

"Get in." He hustled them both inside. The seats were surprisingly large. And comfortable. A jillion buttons and lights littered the control panel.

"Mom! Dad! Look!" Sneakered feet pounded across the pavement. Hands tugged at parents' sleeves. Some of the kids remained with the cruiser, open-mouthed and wide-eyed.

"Mom!"

"Hold on."

"Mom!"

"I'm *busy*."

Anthros pressed a few buttons. The humming grew into a drone. Dove's heart pounded.

"Dad!"

"Not now, son."

"Really, Dad. Look! A spaceman!"

A ripple of laughter from the parents. "Too much sci-fi on the brain today."

The boys and girls beside the cruiser had turned to stone. Anthros smiled at them. "Do you mind taking a step back?"

In one silent singular sensation, they did.

Anthros closed the canopy, pressed yet another button and in a blink and a gasp they soared over the Space Needle, circled and aimed for the North Star.

Dove tossed one last, backward glance. The children were still gazing skyward. The parents still chatting. "Oh my God," she giggled. "Too hilarious." And so true. How many times had she been guilty of that?

"Hiding in plain sight is always the way to go," he quipped.

She settled into the soft chair, placing a hand on his thigh and gazing out the canopy. Not much different than an airplane, she thought. Bigger windows. More leg room. Yeah, she could get used to this. "How fast are we going?"

"Mach 7 at the moment, we'll be there within the hour."

"You know, humans can do that too. We have a new plane. Arnie told me."

"Can they do Mach 700?"

Dove turned away in a pretend huff.

He laughed. "Thought not."

The spaceship hummed north and the weight of what was about to occur hovered between them, thickening and warming the thin, cool cabin air. Adrenaline began pumping her heart for her. What if nerves prevented her from making his first time good? He deserved it to be good. Smashing good.

As they zoomed into glorious, colorful light, she couldn't contain a small, worried whine, "It's so cramped in here. We can't stand up and we can't lie down."

Anthros didn't answer.

"I at least wanted your deflowering to be comfortable."

He powered down the engines, set the craft to hover, threw her a sly glance and pressed a red button.

Like blossoming rose petals, the canopy expanded and unfolded. Fresh, crisp night air wafted in, wrapping her in wonder, enchantment and possibility. Above, the heavens undulated in breathtaking ribbons of purple, pink and green. She could almost touch it and taste it, could almost imagine the bountiful light curling through and becoming an essential part of her.

He twisted out his seat, pulled her up, then yanked a lever. The seatbacks slid down and formed a giant bed.

"This is so Austin Powers," she murmured.

"We're at nine thousand feet. If you lose your breath, let me know and we'll descend."

"And get hit by an airplane."

"That's me. A thrill a minute."

"Don't I know it."

He grabbed her and kissed her and every ounce of anxiety drained into her pussy and leaked out in creamy dribbles. They already knew each other intimately, profoundly. How different could a physical consummation be?

Reaching under her shirt, his hands spanned her waist, kneading and stroking upward to her breasts. "Your skin is like heavy velvet. I love it."

"How was it before?"

He suckled her lips, moistening them with his tongue before answering. "Before, more like fine mist. I could never quite get a grip on it."

She realized she'd brought her real life sexperiences into her mental encounters with him. Since she knew what cock-in-pussy felt like, she'd transferred those sensations out-of-body and it'd felt almost like real sex.

Not for him, though.

"I'm going to lick every inch of you, suck and nibble and then open your legs and feast."

She ran hands up his arms, squeezing his biceps and savoring the future. "I don't have a problem with that. But, Anthros, I think you need to fuck me first."

He stilled, then yanked his head back. "Really?"

She nodded and smiled. "Hard, fast and sweaty."

"You're giving me permission to ravish you? I was trying to be a better man."

"This isn't the time." She spread out her arms. "Earth girls are easy. We can make love later."

Frantic fingers tore at her shorts. She whipped the T-shirt over her head and went for his, tugging it out of his jeans and flinging it into the back. His hands shook as he unbuttoned his jeans, so she slapped them aside, got on her knees and did it herself, peeling them down his legs and licking his thighs as she went.

He stepped out of them and she pressed her breasts against his shins, hugging his legs and running her hands back up to his ass to fondle those perfect, muscled cheeks. Still on her knees, she rose slightly and rubbed her face over his straining erection, mouthing him through silky, diaphanous underwear.

Shudders racked his body. Strong fingers laced her hair. He groaned. She glanced up and his eyes were squeezed shut, an agonized expression on his face.

She scrambled to her feet and cradled his face. "What's wrong?"

He opened his eyes and looked down at her and she noticed they were brimming. "Nothing. It's just..." He swallowed. "I've been so lonely. My body's been so lonely."

She rolled her forehead against his, wisps of her hair capturing the breeze and his tears and wiping them away. "Not anymore."

"This pleasure is almost painful." He tightened his grip, arms belting her waist, his hands fanning across her back and his fingers playing the bones along her spine. She shimmied beneath his touch, craving it on her ass, inside her pussy. Needing that hot, lapping tongue on her skin.

"You'll get used to it." But, would she?

"Not sure if I want to," he murmured. She gazed at him and he smiled, rubbing noses, nipping lips. The high plane of his chiseled cheekbone fit perfectly into her eye socket.

Faint chirping sounds rode the swirling breezes around them. Sparkling starlight dappled his flesh and flashed in his pupils. A bluish glow surrounded him. Man, she really needed a screaming fuck from this being. And she knew just how to get one.

"Think you can handle an orgasm?" She pulled away, one brow raised, eying him up and down. "Maybe we ought to hold off..."

"Not on your life," he growled, shoving her backward onto the seat and falling on top of her.

"Spacemen are so easy," she cooed, gasping as he shoved her legs open, speared his cock into her and butted her back wall.

A guttural roar pierced the placid night. He froze on top of her, inside her, pressing down on her so every inch of warm flesh melded. She wrapped her legs around his waist, squeezing with her thighs and laying her calves and heels across his ass. Their arms harnessed each other. He sucked her lips into devouring, open-mouthed kisses and she met his tongue thrust for thrust.

Desperate and needy, he humped her like an animal.

Quick, hard thrusts rammed her pussy, his balls battered her ass. Tender, budding emotions flew out into the aurora, propelled by unadulterated, feral hunger. Thrust after thrust grazed the nerves in her cunt, grating them into fine shreds of unbearable bliss. Her crevice juiced and oozed and his tempo jumped. Fine beads of sweat broke out on his skin, moisturizing hers in a primal, intoxicating essence.

Hued ribbons bent and wrapped around them, encasing them in a magnetic bubble that undulated and intensified with each frantic lunge. Static electricity snarled and snapped from the friction created between their two moving bodies. His skin grew almost translucent, lit from the inside like a light bulb.

It seemed he became one with the aurora, beaming, buzzing and glowing, his energy skimming off her like the magnetized ions danced in the sky. Her body

absorbed it, her pussy sucking it in until jagged arcs shot through her and sizzled out of her fingertips.

As her body arched into shattering pleasure, clit thumping and humming, she heard a fizzling pop. The individual threads of light within the aurora merged into a massive rainbow curtain, reaching from horizon to horizon. Anthros re-solidified between her legs, thrashing and groaning as orgasmic shocks stormed his system.

A singing filled the heavens like a high, clear note from a violin. Stars twinkled and crackled. Anthros went rigid. Steaming cum spurted into her. He gasped. Pumped some more. Paused. Then threw his head up with a triumphant shout, plunging into her again and again until every ounce was spilled.

The added heat and lubrication catapulted Dove over the edge. She had the sensation of flying upward, into the light, even as his spent body kept her grounded, pulsing into her until her claspings pussy trembled in release and they slumped together under the heavenly canopy.

Braided limbs sank into the seat cushions. Neither of them moved. His heavy breath in her ear throbbed in tandem with his heartbeat against her breast. Night air cooled the bits of sweaty flesh peeking out from the blanket of his warmth.

She wanted to stay cradled under him in the luminescent swag of the universe forever.

Finally, he lifted his head and gazed down at her, pressing tender kisses along her forehead and cheeks. They smiled and giggled, shifting to get more comfortable. He raised himself on one elbow and traced a fingertip down her breastbone.

"Did the earth move? I think the earth moved."

"I was that good, huh?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. You were that good." Bending his head, he nibbled a nipple.

Her hips circled restlessly, hungering for him again already. "You weren't bad either."

He cut her with a look and poked a finger into her ribs. She convulsed. "You're ticklish." He grinned and did it again so she slapped his hand away. "Another weapon to use against you. I'll have to remember that."

With a satisfied groan, he rolled off her, bringing her over on top of him. The cruiser dipped and the lingering pocket of magnetic atmosphere inside it dissipated.

"Don't you have enough weapons?"

"A man can never have too many."

She cuddled into his chest, rubbing her cheek along the fine hairs, savoring the gradient of his pecs. "Speaking of weapons, are you really going to use Salle Seattle to amass an invading army?"

"Yep."

"And overthrow your queen?"

"That's the plan."

"Can I help?"

His chest inflated and he stiffened. Was it her imagination, or did his heart skip a beat? "Do you want to help?"

She lifted her face. "Of course."

His arms tightened around her and he pressed her face against his neck, tilting his head to trap her there and inhale his awesome scent. God, she loved it when he did that.

"I think you're in love with me."

She rolled her eyes, even though he couldn't see them. "Nah."

"I think you are."

"I just feel sorry for you."

He squeezed almost painfully. "Admit it. You love me."

"Make me." A knife appeared at her earlobe. "Oh, no. Not this again." She slapped it away.

It came back, this time to her left shoulder blade, and traced out a little heart on her skin. "Open me," he whispered.

This time, her heart skipped a beat—skipped back to that afternoon in the shower, the weeping heart in the mirror. The first time he'd come to her with full faculties, full knowledge of her intent to booby-trap his mission. It occurred to her that there'd been more than just physical fucking going on at that juncture. "You're going to pay dearly for all that mind-fucking, you know."

"I certainly hope so." He shook her. "Now say it."

"All right already." She reared up and dug her elbows into his chest, grabbing his face in both hands. "I love you, you freak."

His pale gaze silvered like the twinkling stars above. "Told you so."

"You've morphed into quite the smart aleck." She smacked him and he laughed, the individual notes flew out into space, pummeling its crystalline curtain and making it billow and swoop into a gilded cocoon. "And, I might add, a flirt."

"I don't flirt."

"You are such a damn liar. I miss Dream Lover. At least Dream Lover was truthful."

"He's still here." Flipping her onto her back, he scooted down between her legs. "He wants to show you how much he loves you too."

Her mind cracked open and his flowed in, even as his lips parted her pussy and his probing tongue tasted her for the very first time. He lapped her slowly into oblivion, tongue searching and uncovering her tender clit, peeling back the folds around it, letting the fresh night air chill and invigorate it, then burying it again in the wet heat of his mouth.

As wondrous as her liaisons with Dream Lover had been, the slick keenness of his touch in the flesh was transcendent. Had he felt this way too, a few minutes ago?

Love, redemption and relief smashed the gates and roiled into a foaming wave inside her, rolling through untended, sullied pathways and washing every tainted corner clean.

Clasping his head, she exhaled darkness and inhaled incandescent bliss. He sighed, nestling his face between her legs. Supernatural love pitter-patted up through her pussy and into her heart until nothing else existed but their two fused bodies, the heavenly radiance, his lick and his promise.

Epilogue

Memorandum: The Eagle Has Landed

Star Date: 10,115

From: Royal Life Guard Kennard

To: Queen Win

We have located the traitor in the center of the universe and are monitoring his movements. We will await your next directive.

About the Author

They say there are eight million stories in the Naked City, and I think Jaci Burton wrote every single one of them. I don't know. She must've sneezed and missed a deadline because here I am at Ellora's Cave, and I couldn't be more thrilled.

Addicted to love? You bet. As well as all its sensual side effects. Great sex comes in many packages and I prefer mine wrapped in laughter, irony and sweet, edible substances. When not writing at the computer, I can be found in a fencing salle, cruising Internet auctions for vintage airline memorabilia, yelling at my children to let mommy write, or working my schlepmy nine-to-fiver. When I grow up, I'd like to be a full time Ellora's Cave writer, but until then, I'll just frolic in the outskirts of the Naked City.

Bon Voyage!

Ann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

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