



MU2: Madam Caesar

Lisa Marie Arnopp

Missed Me by That Much

It's great to be home with Dad and Artie. Sure I miss school and my boyfriend, but it's easier with the two of them keeping me too busy to mope. Dad, or Stanley Russell as the rest of the world knows him, is the epitome of Martians. Comprehending this means he isn't naturally loving, he and his friend built Artie to raise me. Artie isn't organic. He's like a robot nanny (man nanny).

Since last November I've been dating Jason, who has graciously agreed to be exclusive even over the next four months while I'm on vacation in Europe. For humans that's a pretty big deal but even more so when you consider that we're Martians. Martians aren't big on long courtships, so to have a commitment without being engaged is amazing. He's ready to talk marriage, I am not. Actually, if he wanted to leave things open it wouldn't have been awful either. Not that I'll have any chance to prowl. Martian men are territorial and he was resolute that we would pick up where we left off in August. Still, a part of me feels it's more than is needed. If we love each other, why put draw up rules?

By the way, we aren't from Mars. Our ancestors communicated mentally but adapted to audible language to assimilate to Earth. An unpredicted side affect was that after a few generations, we lost the ability to read minds. Without a native language, we've taken to picking and choosing earth terms. To refer to ourselves as Martian started as a joke in the 1950's and stuck. That's the danger of joking.

Whenever we talk, Jason tells me he misses me too. At times I'm sure he does but he has Blake. Blake is our friend and half-Martian. Well, so am I but no one knows about me except Dad, Artie and them. Everyone knows Blake is and the guys at Martian U are threatened and the girls are in love. One of them madly so. Karen tried to kill all other women in Blake's life, including me. Looking back on how often someone tried to crack the code to get into my dorm, she was hunting me the longest. Karen finally got me, in the ribs, with a bullet. I'm better now, getting there anyhow.

Artie, who is programmed for healthcare, has me on a regime to regain my strength and flexibility; weights, cardio, yoga, tennis, swimming. It's worse than Martian U. Swimming is my favorite now that the torpor of recovery has lessened. . Dad constantly warns me to go slowly. He came home early after he wrapped up his work at

Martian U a few weeks early. He's going stir crazy at home. We see three movies a week. Last week, I even got him to see a sci-fi. Martians aren't big fans of sci-fi because earthlings are always the heroes and aliens are always villains seeking to harvest or overthrow. No wonder we keep our race secret.

I'm swimming and getting some rays. The sun has done a good job tanning my skin and I look like a true Californian. Marin County is chilly but since I run cool, it's perfect. Full Martians run even cooler than me but hey, they can't stop time. Not all halfers get a boost on an old trait but I did. Blake got one too. He can read minds, which is beyond annoying. I've gone three weeks without it though and now I even miss that part of him.

My cell rings and I doggie paddle to the side and answer. "Hi Jason. I was just thinking about you."

"Hi honey. What're you up to?"

"Laps."

"Are you wearing your bikini?" All boyfriends are probably one-track, but Jason claims that halfers are better than full Martians when things get physical. It's flattering but a lot for a girl to live up to.

"Jason, we can't talk like that. Artie can hear." I roll my eyes flustered. Artie's robotic ears can hear me down the street. Plus, I wouldn't mind some personal contact as well. Talk is all talk – it's a painful tease with little payout.

"I'll do the talking." Jason's met Artie a couple of times. Once for Christmas and once after I was shot when Artie gave him an earful for wearing me out when I was recovering. The only reason Jason knows that Artie's synthetic is because I warned him. Otherwise, no one can tell.

"I can hear him." Artie says with a tall glass of iced tea. Told you. Artie's mostly pro-Jason and anti-Blake. Not that there's a competition or that Blake and I ever dated. We flirted and even kissed a couple of times, once mutually and once he surprised me. Don't ask. Per my manny, Blake's a conqueror with women and I need to stay away. This is a sore spot between the android and me.

I take a drink and grin at him. "Can we have some privacy?"

“As you wish.” He walks back into the house. “I can hear from inside, just so you know.” Robots, a curse and a blessing.

“When do you leave for Europe?” Jason asks.

“Tomorrow. We’ll be back the first week of August.”

“Nice trip.” Jason doesn’t sound happy. “I was going to sneak off and see you before you left. Could you postpone your departure?” Martian U is in its final week of school. I got early release because of my near death experience. Don’t be too envious. My assignments were completed remotely. Kind of makes me regret modern technology but then we had the capability since the Martian settlers landed on Earth. FYI, that was over two thousand years ago. Since we can’t go back, so Earth is our home.

“Dad would kill me. But let’s plan a trip before school starts.” I bargain. Sure Dad won’t like it much better then but he’s still scared stiff. Hopefully after a bullet-free summer he’ll relax and forget someone wanted me dead.

“You’re on.”

“Jason, we have to go.” It’s Blake. His voice is muffled but it’s him.

“I’ll call back later tonight.” Jason tells me as he opens the door and tells Blake to give him a minute.

“Is that Suzette?” Blake says softly.

“Suzette, do you want to talk to Blake?”

“Sure.” We haven’t spoken since I woke up in the infirmary. He saved my life. Or I saved his. I guess we kind of saved each other.

“Sweetie, it isn’t the same without you.” He’s cheery.

“I bet. You’re the top dog now.” I’m the Major and Blake’s the Captain. With me away, he’s calling the shots. Given his propensity for power, he’s enjoying my absence. Actually, thinking on it, he ran everything when I was there anyway.

“I’d trade in my power if you could come back. Here’s your man again.”

Wasn’t that all of half a second? I guess not everyone misses me.

“I love you.” Jason tells me.

“Me too.” And we hang up.

North Sea

At the crack of dawn, we're on our way. Martians are naturally morning people. I am not. As usual, Dad makes a crack about my half nature. I toss back a quip that I'm healing and he hushes. Manipulation was taught to me by Stanley Russell himself. It still bugs me that I can do it so easily. At least I have the good sense to feel as much guilt as I administer. Father doesn't have any qualms about meddling, manipulating or outright coercion.

Artie may be more human than Dad but he's a robot, so early works for him as well. Thankfully, I can sleep on planes, the painkillers make it even easier. After a layover in New York, we're over the Atlantic. It's morning, the next day when we land in Edinburgh.

Our hotel is near the castle. Both are beautiful. We'll tour the castle. Since we're here for two months, we'll tour everything. First tour will be the Mother Ship. Dad's philosophy is Martian first.

"Do you need to rest?" Dad asks once we've seen our rooms.

"All I've done is rest for weeks. I'm ready to go."

"Great." He smiles and makes some calls. Then we trek to the curb and catch a taxi to the harbor. The day is overcast. Our driver tells us they expect rain, at least that is what I think he says. His accent is thick. Dad pays the fare. Then we follow our notes.

"Mr. Russell?" A young rolls the last R in mister when he speaks. He has a dossier in his hand.

"Yes." Dad answers. "I'm Stanley Russell, this is Artie Mann and this is my daughter Suzette." He tows me in with one arm and I wince. My ribs are still sensitive.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Doug McBride." He nods and grins. Doug is six four and handsome. His hair is light brown and his eyes are blue. "I'm your guide for the summer." At least his accent isn't as pronounced as our cabbies.

We follow Doug, who has a nice butt, if you're into that sort of thing. God bless Levi Strauss. Doug takes us to a small speedboat. A woman in her thirties is dressed in a captain uniform. Artie catches her eye. Artie doesn't date. Dad thinks Tom had suppressed it when he created Artie. Artie thinks he lacks the chemical makeup of living

creatures. I've never asked about the anatomy. Either way, he doesn't date. Once a lady down the block had buddied up to him before deciding he was gay.

"I'm Cameron." She introduces as we climb onboard. Cameron is stunning with black hair and dark eyes. Once we're on the open sea, Cameron zips over the water. The hull barely touches the ocean. In no time at all, we slow and circle.

Punching some buttons, Doug summons a sea pod. It bobs up and Cameron steers us closer. Doug helps Dad in. Artie follows quickly without aid so Doug won't notice his odd bone structure. It's hardly a dead giveaway but his hands don't feel human below the skin. A little perplexed by Artie's gumption, Doug extends his hand to me. I, with my authentic skeleton makeup, accept it. Doug gets in last and secures the hatch.

The open space isn't much bigger than a freight elevator. The pod is a sphere and at eye level is a solid three hundred and sixty degree window. We're jammed in the close quarters and Doug places his hand on the small of my back to guide me away from the control panel. After some buttons are pushed and a lever repositioned, we descend into the North Sea.

"It will take some time. I hope no one is claustrophobic." Doug chuckles nervously. Perhaps some Martians couldn't hold their cookies.

I look into the water and see eight porpoises playing near the surface. Two are small. "Wow! They're so cute."

"Those are bottlenose dolphins. The two babies were born this spring." Doug is right next to me.

"Marvelous." I smile awkwardly. I'm feeling guilty because Jason isn't there and I'm flattered. It's been a month since I've had any male affection. Perhaps I'm getting a little frisky. Martian women have needs too.

The descent is smooth, or it was until we lurch.

Doug grabs my waist when I sway into him. "That happens."

"Ouch." He accidentally hit my bruise.

"Suzette." Dad and Artie say at once.

Doug holds his hands up afraid he hurt me.

"I had some broken ribs." I explain. "It's fine."

"Anyway, um, have you been to the Mother Ship Museum before?" Doug asks.

“A few years ago.” Dad answers. “Suzette was five at the time...”

“Seven.” I amend.

“So that was...”

“Almost fourteen years ago.” It’s like he doesn’t want to admit I’m aging.

“Right. Mars Stars, you’re growing up too fast.”

“Not much has changed. You know how Martians are.” Doug goes for the easy jab. “It’s pretty self explanatory but I’ll be happy to guide you if you’d like.”

“That’ll be nice.” I say.

Doug fiddles with the controls some more as he maneuvers to the opening.

“I am completely updated on the history.” Artie whispers to me.

I glare at him. “Did I speak out of turn?”

“No.”

The pod enters into a cave and then we hear the clank of metal on metal. Flipping a switch, the pod magnetizes to the hull of the mother ship. Doug opens the hatch and then a second. “After you.”

Dad and Artie climb down and Doug extends his hand to me. “Miss.”

“Thanks and call me Suzette.” I say and follow the others. The first room is a souvenir shop.

“Did you want to get Jason something?” Artie quietly says to me.

“Why don’t you come out and say it?” I dare.

“You’re flirting.” He says and I can’t respond since Doug is now in the shop with us. He’s pink in the face, so he may have heard Artie.

“This way to the engine room.” Doug urges us forward.

We follow like good little tourist. The engine room is as long as a football field and as tall. The engine was deconstructed for parts before the Mother Ship was sunk to avoid detection. We stand in a large empty cube of space. Murals are painted on the walls to depict its original state.

“There were two engines when the settlers traveled to earth.” Doug stands on a marked meridian line. “This yellow ten foot path was the only walking room. The mechanisms went up to within a yard of the ceiling.” He reaches up theatrically.

“They were a high concept quantum physic design. Each engine could operate up to a year without overheating but they switched back and forth much more frequently, usually ever month. The journey took just under thirty Earth years and they covered more than two hundred light-years of distance. Originally there were twelve hundred Martians all chosen for their good health, likely ability to adapt, potential fertility, crew to man the flight and maintain life on this ship and two hundred elders to ensure our history was salvaged. Half of the original Martians were between the ages of ten and twenty. Their purpose was to be prolific and with little else to do, they produced over one thousand children and grandchildren. In that time, three people died of natural causes.”

Doug holds his hand for us to cross into the next room. I’m bringing up the rear and he puts his hand softly on my back. He’s a touchy fellow for a Martian.

He delivers schpiel after schpiel as we see samples of the living quarters, the infirmary, the kitchen, dining room, dance hall, school, gymnasium, pool. It isn’t new knowledge but seeing makes it significant. The settlers were the only survivors of our lost world. There was a second ship sent to another refuge planet in another galaxy but they didn’t make it. Communication was lost after they had severe damage passing through a meteor shower.

“This section was used for schooling until the ninth century.” Doug stops at a map of the layout. “At that point a new one was founded in South America and once civilization crossed the ocean, it was moved to an island between today’s Florida and Bermuda where it got its name Bermuda U. Your Martian U was added in the eighteenth century to provide an alternative and more thorough education.”

This last comment is directed to Dad. Dad is the Engineer of Education. Nicolas Rafferty, the Assistant President, and Dad run things. The President, Ray Nathaniel, is a figurehead who enjoys authority without any personal obligation. Good work if you can get it.

As illuminating and adorable as Doug is, my head is pounding like a jackhammer. “Artie do you have my painkillers on you?”

“Are you not feeling well?” He pulls out a bottle of water and a pill.

“Is it your head?” Doug asks. “The synthetic air has that affect on some. Try this.” He hands me a basic aspirin. “And drink water.”

I take both pills and swallow a big gulp.

“Drink it all.” Doug insists.

Bobbing my head, I finish the water.

“Are you part human?”

“She is not.” Dad says tersely and takes an intimidating step towards Doug. Technically, this isn’t a slur on my character. It is something that is better left unknown.

“Didn’t mean it as an insult, sir. We are more opened minded around here in those regards. It’s just that the air is sufficient for full Martians.”

“Suzette is recovering from an unfortunate incident at Martian U. She’s been healing from a gunshot wound for a month.” Artie diplomatically explains to mislead Doug and mollify Dad.

Doug’s eyes admire me in a new way. “You’re the one that saved the halfer from his homicidal infatuated lover?”

“She was trying to kill me and the halfer is a good friend.”

Artie huffs to let me know he thinks I should re-evaluate Blake’s role in my life. No matter how much I try to explain that Blake is a good friend, Artie refuses to see it. Maybe after they meet, for now, I ignore his snide noise.

“It is an honor to meet you.” Doug says as if he hadn’t spent that last two hours walking me around the museum. “You’re a hero in these parts except with the Preservationists. There are few but they are agitated. New laws are expected to pass that will protect partial Martians and extend more rights to halfers. I’m half Martian.” He had been drinking water constantly. The air must bother him. Dummy me thought his throat was dry from all the talking.

“Oh.” I say.

“Aren’t you attending Bermuda U?” Dad asks.

“Yes. It’s don’t ask, don’t tell. Too many American Martians are intolerant. They’re all talk in the States but there are lots more. Plenty know the truth about me and I’m not the only one. Blake MacGinnis is a big deal to us. I hear he was at the Spring

Conference.” Bermuda U is ten times larger than Martian U and ten times easier to get in. “The halfers have an underground support group.”

“Blake is a Captain, a new level added to assist a Major. Suzette is his Major.”

“Well, Mars Stars, every new thing I hear about you is more astounding than the last.”

“Thank you.” And I mean it but I wish I could tell him that I’m half-Martian. Doug didn’t buy Dad’s excuse about my injury causing my sudden migraine. It’s gone now. One of the pills or the water did the trick.

Finally we’re shown the command room, which has props instead of murals. My mind wonders as Doug dutifully explains the controls and iterates more astronomical figures of the voyage. The throbbing stopped but I’m lightheaded. Food would be nice. I’m starving.

Back at the gift shop, I do some shopping. First I get a beautiful book with pictures from our home planet and the voyage. The flora and fauna aren’t that different. Some were transplanted in Scotland. For example kyloe, those crazy cows with the long bangs, are Martian cows. Like us, they are leaner than other cows. I pick up shirts for Jason and Blake that read “Mother Ship Museum, Bottom of the North Sea.” I stick my tongue at Artie, “See, I’m getting Jason a present.”

“Very good. Was the purchase driven by guilt?”

“Leave her alone.” Dad chides him. “She’s a pretty girl that is bound to get ample attention.”

I roll my eyes. “The attention I’m getting is due to your bragging.”

“Why are you getting Blake a shirt?” Artie moves to his next point of contention.

Dad waits expectantly for my reply. There was a time he worried I was too close to Blake. Kind of hypocritical since Dad recruited him and put him in my Troop but Martians can be hypocritical.

“You two.” I sigh.

“This is a better color for his complexion.” Artie picks up a bright pink tee with flowers that is clearly meant for ladies.

“His complexion is a lot like yours. Should I get you one?” I giggle. Dad has a very peculiar look.

“I look good in everything.” Artie tosses down the feminine top and holds a simple white to his chest. “Stunning, aren’t I?”

“Unbelievable.” I correct.

Doug returns with a bag and adds our souvenirs to the bill.

The Martian Spot

Resurfacing can't happen soon enough and when we reach the boat the fresh air is amazing. Even with the rain, I'm glad to be above sea level again. We eat a huge dinner after our long hours of touring. Martians are avid eaters, our metabolism is high, mine doubly so.

"Aren't you hungry?" Doug asks not knowing Artie's a robot.

"I'm on a diet." Artie dodges.

Really? Dad and Artie must think everyone is idiotic. I've never heard of any Martian dieting, at least not one that hasn't hit middle age and the slow metabolism that comes with it. Sometimes Artie eats when he wants to duplicate a recipe but why bother? We didn't come to Scotland for the cuisine.

"Nicolas Rafferty requested that I be available for your entire stay in Europe. Would you care to see any nightlife?" Doug has a notebook of attractions in the area.

"Sure." I say enthusiastically.

"Another night." Dad sternly suggests. "You're still not a hundred percent."

I pout.

"Let us go." Artie barter. "I'll watch her or am I too old for these clubs?"

"No. There are a few even your age, Mr. Russell." Doug says and turns red sensing he had inadvertently snubbed Dad. "The Martian Spot is Martian only so all age groups go." He's digging a deeper hole the more he tries to undo his words. Is it me, or do boys look cute when their mortified?

Dad laughs. He finds Doug's self consciousness about offending him more gratifying than the slights made on his age range. "If Artie goes with you, it's fine. Don't be late."

I overeat. It doesn't happen often but we went hours without food. Walking home will only begin to make me feel less bloated. There's no hope I'll wake up early enough to treadmill in the morning. I'll ask Artie to stall Dad. I'll go tonight if I'm not too tired.

"Um, are you two intended?" Doug asks Artie and me.

Artie frowns.

“No. Artie’s like an uncle.” I say. At my age, calling him my man nanny to a stranger isn’t cool.

Doug waits in the lobby as Artie and I go with Dad to our rooms. We need jackets for the cool evening. Not that Artie gets cold. His will be a prop.

“Why did you get upset when Doug asked if you and Suzette were intended?” Dad asks in the elevator.

Artie’s eyes shutter. They do that when he’s processing. “I’m designed to look thirty, so it makes sense that Suzette is catching up to my presumed age. Then I realized she’ll pass me and...”

“And leave you.” I say so he doesn’t have to admit that one day I’ll pass on.

“I’ll last ten generations.”

“At least.” Dad affirms.

“It’s illogical to be sad about something down the road, isn’t it?” What’s illogical is that the robot has more emotions than my father and handles them better than me.

I hug him. “I love that you already miss me.”

He frowns again. Artie does not like thinking about our mortal demise.

Artie, Doug and I walk through the street of Edinburgh. The rain has stopped and it smells wonderfully fresh. There are couples and groups of friends out as well. Castle Edinburgh looms to our left. Growing up on the West Coast, I forget that it’s so young. The buildings in Scotland are ancient in comparison.

Down a poorly lit alley, Doug knocks on a door. A thick man in his fifties lumbers out. “ID.”

We produce our identifications. I use my Martian U since it confirms I’m Martian. Martian businesses prefer that. My photo is hideous and he does a double take before realizing it’s the same person standing in front of him. With a jerk of his head, he admits us.

“This is the Martian Spot.” Doug talks louder in the club to compensate the noise factor. A live band rocks at deafening levels. “Martian and their families only.”

“Humans are permitted?”

“If they’re married or related to a Martian, and they don’t make a fuss about it.”

The place is full but we're lucky. We snag a recently vacated table in the corner too close to the band. The music is great but we won't be able to hear each other well. Doug orders us the house beer. Artie drinks. I guess when he drinks things that aren't his fuel, it runs through his system. I don't think he cares about taste but he can taste. He uses that sense to cook.

It's good beer. Artie never brewed homemade beer, but I'll ask.

"You're too young to be a Major." Doug says leaning into my ear so I hear.

"I'm the youngest. Dad is on cloud nine. And he wasn't the one that recommended me. At least, that was what he told me."

"He was honest." Artie chimes in.

Doug doesn't find it odd that Artie, who isn't huddled in to hear better, understood us. Maybe people are more gullible than I give them credit for.

"Would you like to dance?" Doug asks.

I look at Artie to see if he'd mind.

"It doesn't bother me." He hints that perhaps Jason wouldn't care for it.

"Let's dance." I can burn off more of my colossal dinner.

Doug has good moves for a tall lanky man. It's obvious that I'm from the States but I hide my apprehensions. When the band switches to a slower song Doug's arm slides behind me and he scoots in.

Suddenly, I feel like a fraud. I pull back, "Let's get back to our table."

He nods. Two delicate hands cover his eyes from behind.

"Guess who?" A cute red head asks. She's in a very short skirt and her top only has spaghetti straps. Only a Martian can dress that scantily in this weather. Her hair is in a French braid.

"Hilary." He pivots and hugs her. "You said you couldn't come tonight."

"I said I shouldn't but I did." Tapping his chest with her finger she adds, "And all for you."

"Don't believe that." Doug informs me. "She's crushing on the drummer."

"Eye candy. Only eye candy. You're the whole meal." She winks at Doug and then sticks her hand out to me. "Pardon Doug's ill manners. Hi, I'm Hilary."

"Hello, I'm Suzette."

Doug's head falls back in humiliation. "Come on Hilary. Join us for a while."

"I thought you'd never ask." She bats her eyes. Hilary knows how to work it.

I feel stupid thinking he was making the moves on me. I head back to Artie and the two lag behind in hushed conversation. Hopefully Doug isn't getting reprimanded for dancing with me. It was completely harmless.

Artie grins at me and before they get close enough he tells me, "Doug is asking his lady friend to find out if you have a boyfriend."

He's worse than Blake. "Sshh."

"Suzette, what brings you to Scotland?" Hilary casually scoots next to me. Her accent is easier to detect than Doug's but both are nil compared to the humans. Her "what" has a breathy sound to it.

"The usual. We were at the Mother Ship Museum today."

"It's a must see. How long are you in town?"

"I'm not sure of our exact itinerary. We won't go home for two months."

"That's a long time. Anyone pining for you while you're gone?" At least she prefaced with a few lead in questions.

"Jason, he's my boyfriend." There, I say it out loud. Doug knows I'm not available and Artie can stop being so smug.

"Being dating long?"

"Six months."

"So you'll marry him."

"We're not looking that far ahead."

She grins. "So you aren't serious."

"We are exclusive. I'm too young to say who I'll marry."

Hilary finds this amusing. "You're not full Martian."

Artie flinches, which is hard to make a robot do.

"Hilary, she's full." Doug injects. "How're things with you?"

She pouts and not in the aren't-I-cute way. "My resignation was denied. I have to wait a year to be reconsidered."

"Bummer." I say. "You don't like Bermuda U."

“It’s hard to cope with all the Americans. They’re so provincial. There’s a way to petition a transfer to Martian U. I’d need a sponsor with a lot of pull. It’s not easy. I’ll have to send an unsolicited email. You go to Martian U, do you know Mr. Russell?”

“Sort of. He’s my dad.”

“Liar!” I think she’s kidding. “You’re dad is Stanley Russell, the Engineer of Education and the man who recruited the first outed halfer to Martian U?”

“He is and he is in Edinburgh. Would you like to meet him?”

“I would love that. Would you be willing to introduce us?” She is beside herself with joy. “How does the halfer like it? What’s his name, Brian?”

“Blake.”

“Yeah. We heard someone wanted him dead.”

“It was a jilted lover trying to kill any women in her way.” Doug reminds her.

Hilary flicks her wrist at him, as if waving his words away. “Whatever, I’m sure there are plenty antagonistic to him.”

“Not in front of me they aren’t. I’m his Major.”

“You’re what, eighteen?”

Okay, that was a little harsh. “Twenty.” I’ll be twenty-one in July.

“And you’re a Major?”

“She is. I saw her ID.” Doug shakes his head for Hilary to reel in her attitude.

“We should go.” Artie decides. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you Hilary. Stanley would be willing to consider sponsoring you. Doug will get back to you about a good time to meet up with us.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll walk you back.” Doug offers. “Hilary, call me when you get home.”

“Will do handsome.” She kisses him and it isn’t virtuous. It’s long and hard and it feels like I intruded on an intimate moment. I’ll skip the treadmill and call Jason.

“Hilary is very affectionate.” Doug tells us on our way back.

“She’s your lover.” Artie states directly.

“Sort of.” Doug evades. “We aren’t going to marry but neither of us are in a relationship so we often comfort each other.”

Nice arrangement, I suppose. I couldn’t do that.

“Would you like to have a nightcap before you go to your room? Just the two of us.” Doug whispers so Artie won’t hear but he does.

“If we stay in the hotel, that’s fine.”

Artie’s eyes do that crazy shuttering thing but he doesn’t object. That’s as good as permission. He’ll probably stay hidden on the first floor. Doug is a stranger and I was shot merely a month ago. Artie won’t allow me to take off willy-nilly.

So Far Away

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Artie excuses himself once we’re in the lobby of our hotel.

Doug rocks on his feet uncertain what to say. We walk to the patio. “Hilary can be very forward. Her questions were over the line.”

“I see that. She was fine. Dad will like her.” Hilary is exactly how Dad wishes I were, forward and confident. Maybe I am too timid and or too human.

“She’s my best friend.”

“Then why aren’t you dating? The sex is good, right?”

“Great.” He admits and turns red. “Martian women are insatiable but most are passive in bed once they have their Martian hooked. Hilary treats every time like our first. She’s better than the couple of humans I’ve slept with.”

“I heard human sex is the best.” At least that’s what Jason tells me. Oh, and all of Blake’s partners rave about him.

“Take Hilary out of the equation and it is.” He looks at me. Doug is getting comfortable with the topic and me. “Have you ever been with a human?”

“No. Only Jason and he’s Martian.”

“I’ve never been with a halfer. I hear they are the best of all.” Probably from Hilary.

“You’re half.”

“And so are you.” Not only does he not wait for confirmation, he leans in and steals a kiss. First it’s a soft pressure of his mouth on mine but his appetite increases and then he ups the heat. His tongue slips into my mouth and we’re arm in arm, kissing on the back patio of my hotel.

“Please don’t say that. Dad doesn’t like anyone to know.”

“I won’t.” He pins me against a balustrade and resumes his advances.

With some force, I push him back. “I love Jason.”

Doug eyes bore into mine. “Not enough to commit to him.”

“I’m not Martian. It isn’t as simple for me.”

“Oh, I know that. So, while you’re here, why not leave your options open?”

“Because we agreed to be faithful.”

“A Martian agreed to celibacy for two months without cornering you into forever? Mars Stars, you must be fantastic.”

Actually, it will be closer to four months but who’s counting – other than my sex drive. “Doug McBride, I’m involved and that is the end of this conversation. I’ll see you in the morning.” I leave before I jump him and settle the myth if halfers are better than Martians once and for all. Doug’s lucky Artie didn’t take offense to his ascertaining my half nature. Lucky that Artie thinks it isn’t something to hide.

It’s midnight, which computes to after lunch at Martian U. I call Jason but only get voice mail. I don’t bother leaving a message. I try his room and nothing. Finally, I call Blake’s room.

“Blake here.” He answers. “Is this Suzette?”

Music blares in the background. “What’s going on?”

“We’re having a farewell party.” I hear a door slam and the music level all but vanishes. “Trying to find Jason?”

“Yeah. Where is he?”

“Probably running amok with his brother. They’re toasted.”

“At this hour?”

“It’s going to be a long party. How is Europe? Where are you exactly?”

I give him an update on my first day abroad. Flinging myself belly down on the bed, I kick my legs behind me. My ribs are sensitive but the stretching feels good. For once, Blake doesn’t interrupt my tale.

“Sounds educational.” Blake jokes.

“It is.” I pause. I consider telling him about Doug.

He doesn’t break the silence for a moment and then he speaks. “I hate talking to you on the phone.”

“Can’t read my mind this far away?”

“I can’t and it kills me. Sweetie, you’re a tease.”

I gulp. “You’re a big star in Scotland. They’ve heard about you and about Karen shooting us.”

“Martians? They are so secretive and yet they know all the current gossip.”

Snickering I roll over. “Blake, is it hard being half-human.”

“You’re half.”

“I know. At times, I wish I could admit to it. It’s just this girl I met said things that made me wonder if you get persecuted.”

“Not really. Plenty think rude thoughts but if I couldn’t read their mind, I wouldn’t notice the discrimination. You’re dad doesn’t want people to know you’re half and if he’s wrong, it’s not by much. If the time comes, you’ll know. You’re brave and strong.”

“Blake, that’s the kindest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Sweetie, you know I think highly of you.”

“You didn’t at first.”

“I did.”

“Not after the dinner.”

He chuckles. “What’s on your mind?”

“I miss you and Jason terribly.”

“Why?”

“It’s been a month.”

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing really. A Martian guy kind of hit on me. Don’t tell Jason. I drew the line. Doug knows I’m taken. It won’t happen again.”

“Doug?” He repeats to remember that name. “He’s Martian, right? He’ll try again. Didn’t you learn anything from Karen?”

“Then I’ll stop him again.”

“Sweetie, it’s only your guilt that would let it be a problem if anything happened.”

“You like to pretend you’re all Martian but you’re not. Stop acting like you think compartmentalizing my guilt is an option.”

Another pause and he huffs. “I really hate not being able to read your mind.”

“This is the best conversation we’ve ever had.”

“No it isn’t.”

“How was the conference?” I missed the Spring Conference for Majors and administration because I left early after Karen’s murder attempt.

“Mind-numbing.” Sounds on par with the Fall Conference.

“I should let you get back to your party.”

“Don’t go. The party can wait.”

“You never write.”

“I knew you were better.”

“You could’ve written.”

“Suzette, it isn’t always easy being friends with you.”

I frown. He’s telling me that he cares for me and keeping his distance isn’t easy. He’s always flirted and I’ve dismissed it but deep down, we’ve both known that we’re sweet on each other. “Did my father tell you stay clear of me? Did he threaten you? Or bribe you?”

He laughs. “He said it would ruin your life. And it was nothing to the telling off I got after you were shot.”

“What did he say?”

“Wondered why you took the bullet for me and not the other way around.”

“It wasn’t like we orchestrated it. We were flying by the seat of our pants. I hope you didn’t believe him.”

“He’s right, so don’t go blowing a fuse. And he’s right that I would ruin your chances for a future in Martian hierarchy. He was protecting you and I didn’t know enough to see it for myself.”

“What if he hadn’t told you to avoid me?”

“Then it would have just been me and you that weekend at my house. I would’ve kissed you even before you tempted me into tickling you. We would have had the best sex ever and now I’d be depressed because you couldn’t tell me that one day we’d be married.”

“Jason told you about that?”

“No.” Translation, Blake read Jason’s mind.

“Will you tell Jason I called?”

“No. He’ll read into it.” He’s right, as usual and as usual, it’s annoying. “About your little talent, I have some questions. When you’re back, we need to play with that some.”

“You want to test my stamina?”

“Are we talking about time stopping?”

“Blake, behave.”

“Sweetie, I’ve laid it out there. What about you? What if I hadn’t listened to your father? What if I didn’t heed his warning?”

“I don’t know. You’re probably right on the money. We wouldn’t have had sex the first night.”

He chuckles hard. “We’ll never know. I’ll hold to the idea that you would have ravished me.”

“You’re impossible.” I say while arousing images form in my mind. Good thing he’s too far to read my mind.

The music suddenly booms louder. “Blake?” Jason slurs. “What are you doing in your room? Who are you talking to? Is that Suzette?”

“Jason’s back.” Blake says stiffly. “Here.”

“Suzette, how are you? Why did you call Blake?”

“I was looking for you. You didn’t answer your cell or your room number. Where were you?”

“Hanging with Tim and some other people.” Tim is one of Wyatt’s old Troop. Wyatt is an egotist that lost his Major title and was forced into my Troop with his two loyalist, Tim and his sister Tara. Tim is cool. Wyatt and Tara are not.

“Oh. Are you guys getting along?”

“Sort of.” He’s smashed. “What are you wearing?”

“Bye Suzette.” Blake shouts and then the music dims again.

“He’s jealous. What did he tell you?” Jason’s words run together.

“Nothing that sounded jealous.”

“So what’re you wearing?”

“Nothing exciting.”

“Au contraire, mon cheri. Nothing is most exciting.”

I giggle. “I miss you even when you’re a sloppy drunk.”

Stanley Russell

Hilary doesn't meet Dad for a week. We were open to her joining at anytime. Doug tells me she's scared Dad won't like her. Doug has been a perfect gentleman since that first night. Blake doesn't get them all right. In his defense, he hadn't read Doug's mind. He's use to knowing inner workings and without them, his accuracy drops.

Finally Hilary sets a date with us. We meet for dinner at a small restaurant. Hilary arrives ten minutes late. She looks flawless. This time she's in conservative clothes and she fidgets. Her hair is down and flowing.

After making the introductions, she sits between Dad and Doug. The waiter brings a big salad bowl and plates for each of us. It's family style where we're served large platters and eat until our hearts content. He serves us and disappears. I'm very content.

"I'll sponsor you." Dad says before Hilary even asks.

"Don't you have any questions?"

"They've been answered." He'd done his research. Actually Artie did it but Dad knows what he wanted to know. "If you'd like, I can recommend you as well, Doug."

Doug looks at Hilary. "I was going to ask, if you didn't think we were taking advantage of your kindness."

I hold back a giggle. Dad has his kind moments but he's offering to sponsor eagerly, which means he's doing this for Martian U.

"Not at all." Dad says easily waving his butter knife as he over gestures. He's delighted. That's the only explanation for his emotions showing. Whatever Artie uncovered, must have been notable. "As for ramifications, they will be minimal. Martian U will embrace you and those that ridicule it will be three thousand miles away."

Hilary sits up straight. She hasn't eaten a thing. "Thank you. It's a huge honor. You're famous. I don't want to sound ungrateful but how fast will we know if we're permitted to change schools?"

"Can't say." Dad whips out his phone. "Nicolas, it's Stanley... Suzette is fabulous, thank you for asking. I can't keep up with her now that she's healed. Anyway, I was calling because... Yes for both of them. Have you mentioned it to Ray?... Hello

Ray... Uh huh... Uh huh... That's all I had to ask... Suzette is well... Pass my thanks on to Nicolas. I knew it wouldn't be a problem."

We're all staring at him when he hangs up. "It's done?" I ask.

"Done. Well, Ray needs to call Otis, he's the Bermuda U President, but he has two students that want to transfer that way. He'll make it sound like a trade that was instigated by me after I was impressed with meeting you two."

"They'll know it's more than that. I submitted a resignation." Hilary hangs her head.

"Regardless, Otis can't make an issue about it without causing turbulence. Martians don't cause turbulence unless they're cornered."

"Relax." I tell Hilary. "Dad's the best at politics."

She smiles at me and slumps a bit taking my good advice to heart. "At least I'll have a friend on campus."

I hadn't seen her since that first night. She was acting like the grand inquisitor at the time and I hadn't categorized her as a friend. I've never had a close girlfriend. I don't see this abrasive Scot being the first.

"Two friends." Doug says. "Or don't I count?"

"You count as two all by yourself. I meant a friend that knows the terrain." She winks at him. Yep, she's relaxing.

"We're going to Inverness in the morning. Doug plans to join us. You're welcome as well." Dad offers. He's very taken by both Scots. Told you he would love Hilary.

"Um, okay." She says stunned.

"You'll have to bunk with Suzette. We've rented a house. One room will have two beds."

"That's fine."

Nice that she has a say.

The next day, we pile into a big off road vehicle and drive all morning. Maybe that's melodramatic but it's tight in the backseat with three of us. Hilary took the middle since she's the smallest, so I shouldn't complain.

Roomie

To bide the time, I take in the countryside. It's beautiful and greener than any place I've ever seen other than maybe Florida. The big contrast is Florida is flat with tons of trees and Scotland is more diverse in terrain and flora.

The house is adorable, straight off a postcard. There's a low stonewall around the property and every plant is well tended and blooming. One pansy is a Martian pansy. Cottage is a better term for the dwelling. It's one story and one room does have two beds, two bunk beds. Ugh!

"You can have the top one. I'm the tag along." Hilary drops her bag on the mattress and starts hanging items that wrinkle easily. She has nice clothes.

"Thanks." I say. I've never shared a room. The walls are closing in.

"Do you have any pictures of your boyfriend?"

"Yeah." I boot up my laptop and pull up one of the photos from Christmas. Jason looks great and I'm kissing his cheek. It accomplishes two purposes; first, that Jason is good looking and second, that I adore him.

"He's cute. I love green eyes." She compliments. "Why the delay on marriage?"

I shrug. "We hadn't talked about it and then I had to leave school unexpectedly. We were interrupted before I could answer."

"So, it's a formality? Why not tell him over the phone?" Hilary bumps her head with her palm. "Duh, that's impersonal."

"We agreed to be faithful. So there's no hurry."

"Well, don't have a fit if he isn't. Martians can have sex without emotions, so if he doesn't abstain, it doesn't mean he doesn't love you."

"He won't. Why would he tell me he would be faithful and then mess around behind my back?"

"Because you were there and he meant it at the time."

Is she trying to make me doubt Jason? Won't work. She doesn't know us and her opinion is unfounded. I decide to turn the tables on the inquisitor. "Why aren't you and Doug together?"

"We don't match up well."

“Because he’s half?”

She’s offended. “No. Because he’s not a follower.”

“What does that mean?”

“Martians relationships usually have a leader and a follower.”

“Jason and I are equals.”

“Says the Major.” She condescends. “Traditionally the man is the leader and if the woman has any aspirations for authority, she rules the house. But it can go the other way. Ideally, one has final authority and the other supports them. Humans are the same way but they pretend they aren’t. Even their bible tells them it’s the best way.”

“I’ve never heard this.”

“It’s true. It says the woman should submit.”

How bizarre? I thought Christianity was about equality. “Well, it was written in another era when that kind of thinking was prevalent.”

“You mean when modern egos weren’t so easily bruised and women were treated like second class citizens. Doug may seem like a wimp but he gets his way. I think they call it passive aggressive.”

I don’t see that, but I don’t really know him that well.

“Suzette, you’re young and I’m guessing you were home schooled...” She’s only a year older.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I grew up in a Martian community. I’ve observed Martian families longer.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve figured all this out.”

“I’m upsetting you.” She sits on her bed and watches me unpack. “You’re an only child?”

“So.”

“Wondering if you feel imposed upon with me here.”

“No.” I fabricate although I don’t know why.

“Almost convincing. You’re not full Martian.”

I tilt my head and stare at her. “I’m very tolerant but if you go around Martian U accusing everyone of being a halfer, you’ll get into a lot of scrapes.”

“Yes, if I’m wrong. And if I were wrong now, you’d be on me like stink on poop. If my best friend wasn’t half, I wouldn’t know but you’re kind of emotional in a balanced way.”

This is going to be a long vacation at this rate. I put my suitcase in the closet and slam the door, which rudely fails to latch and swings ajar. With my whole body I lean against it, exasperated, frustrated, plain ole annoyed beyond belief. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be emotional. You’re right. Having a roommate is new to me.”

Hilary scans the room for something to do or say. Finally she takes me in, crossed arms and all. “You’re really pretty.” She states matter-of-factly.

“Thank you. You too.” Actually she’s stunning but I don’t feel up to being that honest.

“Can I try something?”

“What?”

“Trust me.”

I don’t trust her one bit. Still I comply.

She sits me in the chair and pulls out my ponytail. Then she brushes out my hair. “Why don’t you wear it down?”

“It’s easier up. When I want to look pretty, I do.”

“It’s up in your Christmas picture, didn’t want to look pretty then?” Hilary points at the computer screen with my brush in hand. “You have miles of nice legs. Try this.” She pulls out a denim skirt that is very short.

“Er, you’re smaller than me.”

“Shorter, definitely not thinner. It’ll fit with a belt.”

I slip off my jeans uncomfortably. I’ve never changed in front of anyone other than Jason. I don’t want her to think I’m insecure about my body, but I guess I am some. Quickly I pull on the skirt. It’s loose by a size.

She rolls her eyes and steers me towards the mirror. “Looks great.”

The skirt is nice and very short. “I’ll hang out if I bend over.”

“Then only do it if you want someone to check you out.”

“Dad and Artie will freak if they see me in this.”

“Let them. Old folks live to grouse about kids. Doug won’t mind.”

Obviously, he likes her in this skirt.

“Doug is into you.”

That too is abundantly clear. “He’s nice. If I didn’t have a boyfriend...”

“Yes, yes. Now are you going to continue to pretend to be all Martian?”

“Are you always so uncompromising?”

“I say what I think. Most Martians do. Of course it takes time to register that. We aren’t prone to many friends so we miss the obvious sometimes.”

So true – the part about few friends. I only have two close friends and then the rest are mere associates. “Dad isn’t brash.”

“He’s older. Older Martians are sly and manipulative. That takes self-control and that takes patience. What a stupid thing to consider a virtue? Aren’t humans so endearing with all their social etiquettes?”

“I guess.”

“Try this top.” Hilary pulls out a tank top from my suitcase. “The red will look nice with the denim.”

I do. She’s right. Doesn’t mean I like her.

“Let’s see what the men think?”

We go to eat lunch. Artie has sandwiches, chips and veggie sticks ready. A deli wouldn’t be any better. He looks up and stops. His pupils open and close rapidly.

“That’s a new look for you.”

“I’ll change.” Hopefully before anyone else sees.

“Suzette, you look summery.” Doug approves popping up from thin air. It’s a different reaction. A man has never stared at my legs this long. I shift feet to try to cover up but it’s pointless. One limb is as bare as the other.

Dad happens into the kitchen next. “Is that a new skirt?” He doesn’t seem to mind or notice.

Artie thinks it’s too revealing and grimaces.

“It’s Hilary’s skirt.” I say but how can they not know? When have I ever shown this much flesh in public? Dad hasn’t seen this much of me since he watched Artie change my diapers.

“Suzette needs to showcase those beautiful legs.” Hilary tactfully explains. “We’ll have to go shopping and have some girl time.” She rubs her fingers together behind her back for only my eyes to hint for me to get some money before our spree.

Oh yeah. The walls are closing in. I can’t breathe.

“Artie will take you.” Dad slyly manipulates.

“If he comes, it won’t be girl time.” Hilary elucidates. “I can drive if you let us take the car.”

Dad puts down his drink before he even took a sip. “Since we’re in close quarters for the next two months I have something to share with you. I’d like if you didn’t share this knowledge.” After getting two head nods from our guests, Dad continues. “Artie is a robot.”

“Shut up!” Hilary declares. “You’re some piece of work.”

“Thank you.” Artie approves. Now Dad and Artie think she’s the greatest thing since sliced bread.

“So he won’t ruin your girl time and Suzette stays near him at all times.”

Hilary still doesn’t get it. I decide to educate the Scot. “I was shot like weeks ago and they’re being a little weird about it.”

“Don’t downplay it.” Dad barks. “Don’t you dare make it sound like it wasn’t a big deal.”

“You didn’t think it was a big deal when Tara was shot.” Okay, I kind of snap but it’s true.

“She had a shoulder wound and she isn’t my daughter. You almost died.” Dad yells then he gets real quiet. No one speaks. He rubs his eyes. On the very rare occasions that Dad’s feelings show they are usually anger, glee, concern. I’ve never seen him scared or sad.

I hug him. “I’m sorry Dad.”

Artie pats my back. “We’ll ease up. You won’t have to be guarded all your life but indulge us for the summer.”

“Okay.” I’m crying. Dad kisses my hair and holds tighter than ever.

“You’re the one that saved the halfer.” Hilary knew the story as well as Doug. “Mars Stars!”

Doug smirks. "I know. Crazy, huh?"

"Blake had my back many times." I say but I would have done it anyway.

"When?" Dad pulls back. "When were you in danger?"

I gulp. I can't tell him about surfing. "When Wyatt picked the fight. And at the poker game, he avoided a fight all together."

"Oh, I thought it was more perilous than that."

"No. I keep life threatening situations to a bare minimum." I accept a handkerchief from Artie and dry my face.

"You girls have fun and don't spend too much." Dad tells us.

"We can't leave Doug." I say because I don't feel like being alone with Hilary. Artie will give us space, or the illusion of it anyway. I need a buffer.

Doug makes a puppy dog face as he flutters his long lashes at Hilary. "I'll be like the big sister you always wanted."

"I have four big sisters." She sneers. Large family for Martians.

"But you don't like them."

Hilary giggles. "I do, sometimes."

Anarchists

At the mall Hilary goes nuts. She's a shopping fiend. With a dozen items to sample, I figure I'm safe in a dressing room. That's what I thought until she comes by to take things she rejected and replace each with two new items. Three hours and four hundred sixty-two dollars later, we're loaded with half a dozen bags and at least ten new outfits, more if you consider all the possible combinations. I'll have to send stuff home via mail or get another suitcase.

"Where's Artie?" Doug asks. "I thought he was here to watch you."

My brow pops up in amusement. "He's near enough. Trust me."

We decide on a treat and the consensus is milkshakes. People watching is interesting in Scotland. Perhaps it's the change in scenery. Five guys loiter near the railing looking down at the first floor. A very blond one darts his eyes our way a couple of times. He looks familiar but I can't place him. We drain the shakes and chat. It's nice to leave the adults for a spell.

"Girl, you're going to knock 'em off their feet when you get back to school."

Hilary promises.

I'll get noticed for sure. "Thanks. You know, you're hard to get use to."

"I know, I know." She dismisses.

"She grows on you." Doug smiles.

"Hush. You liked me right off."

"I have abnormal taste."

"Well, well, if it isn't Doug and Hilary." It's the blond flanked by four others. They're Martians, because they are in perfect shape. Flab doesn't happen to Martians until middle age and even then, it's hardly as bloated as humans get. The leader is a little taller than me. His hair extra blond, not bottled, is cut short. His eyes are dark hazel and he has a gold stud in his left ear. Judging by their swagger, they think they are something special. Clearly Doug and Hilary don't care for them.

Then I remember him from the Fall Conference. He's a Bermuda U Major. He has a perfect smile as he grins at me. "And who is this divine creature?"

"Someone with standards." I grimace. "Please go away."

“Rude. Do you know who I am?”

“I know I don’t care. Please go away.”

“My name is Francis.” He’s smarmy.

“Please go away, Francis.” I turn my back to him and see Doug and Hilary watching curiously. Doug frowns. Hilary smiles proudly.

“Hey.” Francis forcefully seizes my arm.

I swing and slap his jaw. That was sudden even for me, but then I haven’t totally forgotten being shot either. A few people look but no one gets involved, at least not overtly. “Don’t touch me and go away.”

Sadly he’s impressed and I flash back to kicking Wyatt’s butt. Blake said it was some Martian perversion to be turned on by a dominant female. “Do you often strike people you don’t know?”

“Just assholes that grab me.”

He’s unfazed. “You’re American. Most Americans are more discerning in their company.” With a sneer he nods at my shopping buddies.

“Hence the request to leave.”

Artie stays back behind a pillar, ready. This isn’t out of my control but back up is always welcome.

“Francis,” I say coolly but kinder, “Doug and Hilary are my friends. I’m not an idiot. You don’t like them and they don’t like you, so please go.”

“She’s probably an *ordinary* girl.” One of Francis’ cronies says. *Ordinary* being a code word for human.

“She’s Suzette Russell, youngest Major in history of Martian U and Bermuda U, daughter of the MU Engineer of Education and savior of the halfer.” Francis is pleased to rattle my stats and my cage.

“Who’s this jerk?” I prompt Doug and Hilary.

Hilary catches the cue faster. “Son of the leader of the Preservationists.” Hilary keeps it short and snarky.

My eyes bug out. “Preservationists? Does that mean what I think it means?” Preservationist is the term for Martians that believe we should cut-off all halfers and

outlaw mingling with humans in general. I bet Francis doesn't have the intel that I qualify as a halfer.

"It means intolerant bozos." Hilary has some nuts.

I was wrong. She and I will get along great.

Francis closes in and I stop him. "Look Francis, you have five and I'm sure you feel confident but don't. Even if you get the upper hand, it won't last long. We're in a busy shopping center. Security has been alerted after I slapped you, so you and your buddies need to move along or if you prefer, we can go our merry way but there will be no confrontation."

He admires me. "You're some negotiator." Francis looks over his shoulders at his guys. "I think we'd get further than the upper hand."

"I'm undefeated."

"One on one, sure but..." If he really did a detailed study of me, he'd know my record is three. Perhaps he disregarded that fact thinking it too hard to swallow. It's the time stopping that makes it possible. If I heard that record, I'd doubt it too or think there's more than meets the eye.

"Then make your move or leave." I dare.

"You weren't at the Spring Conference. How ironic that the very halfer you saved took your place." Francis steps up as close as possible without actually touching me. It's intimidation and it doesn't work. "You're prettier than your picture."

Doug shoves Francis. "Back off."

Francis doesn't swing. Cool headed for a closed-minded young Martian male. "Has he seduced you with his halfer chemistry?"

Mockingly I ask, "Is that why you don't care for halfers? Because they're better lovers?"

A different goon lunges for me. I dodge and pin his arm behind his back. I throw him to his group. His hateful eyes narrow on Hilary. I'm guessing he lost her heart to Doug somewhere in the not so distant past.

"Security. What's going on here?" Artie walks up.

"Where's your badge?" Another guy asks.

“Right here.” Artie smacks the thug’s head and pulls out his phone. “Food court. We have some trouble makers.”

“We’re leaving.” Francis retreats, his eyes never leaving me. “Miss Russell, until next time.”

We haul our loads to the car. Artie takes the bulk of my packages.

“They were rather bold about their illegal opinions.” I can’t believe a Martian would willingly admit to being prejudice to another Martian. Actually, Francis didn’t admit it. On the other hand, he didn’t deny it either.

“Until Mr. Russell recruited the halfer to Martian U, he always seemed in line with Preservationists movement.” Doug shrugs. “Rumor is your dad hopes Blake fails proving segregation works. Francis probably wants to size you up for himself.”

“Stanley isn’t a Preservationist.” Artie vows for Dad.

“We never bought it even before we met you guys.” Hilary says. “Girlfriend, you are a tough cookie. Then again, Francis is nothing after being shot.”

“It doesn’t take a genius to see he meant to cause trouble. I took the chance of calling his bluff.”

“And it worked like an effing charm.” Hilary hugs me, which is unexpected because she’s a Martian and we aren’t really close. “I wouldn’t have done that and I’m no chicken.”

“I should have stepped up earlier.” Doug regrets.

“Stop that.” Hilary demands. “You’ve got to lose some of that sexist bullshit you learned from your parents.”

“Whatever. Men should protect women.”

“Suzette is quite capable.” Artie tosses the bags in the back of the car. Sensing my stare he glances up. “Yes, I truly believe that.”

“Then why did you have to come with us?” Hilary challenges.

“Because she abbreviates her adventures and Mr. Russell likes all the explicit details.” Not true. If I hadn’t been hurt, we would have come without the robot escort.

“He’s a sassy robot.” I explain, needlessly at this point.

Dad isn’t happy about our altercation. “Preservationists are more blatant in Europe.”

“And more abundant in the States.” Doug states fairly.

“Why would they think I would be sympathetic to their cause?”

“They think all American Martians are. At Bermuda U, the consensus is that Martian U is whacked to let in an open halfer.”

Dad breathes heavily as he thinks. “I extended his admittance and Suzette has saved his life. We couldn’t be farther from Preservationists if we were human.”

“There’s a rumor that you enrolled Blake to prove halfers couldn’t hack a Martian curriculum. Anyway, the local Preservationists are riled up.”

“They’re getting bolder.” Hilary rues.

“I heard there was an attempt on Caesar.” Dad pries.

Caesar isn’t his real name and he is currently a she. We burrowed the term from ancient Rome for the highest level in our Martian hierarchy. The current Caesar has been in the position for thirty years and I’ve never heard her given name.

“Publicity.” Doug guesses. “Mom said it was a poorly planned assassination, a few actually. Preservationists want to get Martians talking to weed out like minded individuals.”

Dad eyes dance up in recognition of sound logic. “Good point. They’d have to kill Caesar and Carl, her Successor. He’s ten times more supportive of blending and already a compelling voice to be reckoned with. There isn’t a likely member on the Grand Council who’s a Preservationist.”

“If there are any, they aren’t going to let it get around.” Artie deduces. “Caesar wouldn’t tolerate it.”

“I wonder what she’s like.” I muse.

“She’s incredible.” Doug answers softly. “Of course she’s wise, clever, just, all the things you read about. What you don’t get from MNN is that she’s very personable. She’s the life of the party.”

“You’ve met her?” Dad and I speak as one awed voice.

“I have. Would you like to meet Caesar?” Doug says hesitantly.

“Can you arrange that?” Dad must think it’s bravado but he doesn’t let it show.

“My mom is her assistant.”

“Would it be inappropriate to ask?”

“Mom can make that call.” Doug says. “She’s told me never to offer, so no promises.”

How vital information about Doug’s mother’s career escaped detection during Artie’s research is incredible. Then again, if you’re on the Grand Council, you have complete access to control what is learnable.

Old Habits

“I can’t believe I have to be there for a whole week.” Hilary complains as she gets some things to take home. “Kaitlin is the one getting married.” Kaitlin is her youngest older sister.

“You don’t want to miss the bachelorette party.” I remind her.

She stops to look at me and a wry smirk lights up her face. “Mary arranged for an exotic dancer. Mom nixed a full striptease.”

“Sounds juvenile.”

“I hope so. Why don’t you come?” She asks for the umpteenth time. “Or do you want alone time with Doug?” Shutting her suitcase she stands with her hands on her hips.

“Dad won’t let me. I asked.”

She has me in her arms immediately. “We are friends.”

“Yes. And it sounds like fun. But victim remember?” I lift my shirt and show her my scar from the end of the school year.

“Damn.” She touches it. “If you come they come and unless Artie can pull off a dress, he won’t be allowed at all girl stuff and you can’t go alone.”

“It’s my fault for getting shot.”

She laughs. “Show Doug your scar and those rock solid abs.”

“Get.” I point for the door, which is blocked by Artie the ever-present robot.

“Change of plans. We’re going to Glasgow for the week.” He’s smiling. Like always, he pled my case to Dad.

“Artie, you’re my hero.” Hilary kisses his cheek. “Wow, you’re even the right temperature.”

It pleases him to be told how convincing he is as organic life. “Suzette can go to the girl stuff provided I’m within a block.”

We pile into our rental and this time, the back isn’t too crowded though nothing but my opinion of Hilary has changed.

Glasgow is larger than Edinburgh and Hilary’s home is magnificent, it’s like a mini-castle. We don’t go in but Mrs. Addams meets us. She’s stressed out. You’d think

by her fourth daughter's wedding, it would be old hat. After apologizing for not being able to put us up since they have so many out of town guests, we go to our rental that is half a mile away.

Artie is fantastic at travel arrangements. Best of all I get a private room. I kick off my shoes and flop down on the bed and call Jason. Usually he calls but I don't have anything else to do. Sighing, I leave a voice mail.

The men and I go golfing. Artie offered to take me around town but he likes to golf and I have a party later that he'll chaperone from a nearby pub, so that didn't seem fair. At the first tee, Dad gives Doug a disclaimer that Artie's score has to be ignored. Even without using his hi-tech eyes and mind, he is always at or lower than par.

Finally, I'm dressed for a wild bachelorette bash. Dad and Doug join Artie for surveillance duty at the pub. With a slight lecture to not overdo the drinking, I'm released.

"Suzette, come in." Mrs. Addams welcomes.

"You have a lovely home." I tell her. It's a standard politeness but it's also accurate.

She guides me to the living room where twenty women are already tipsy and nibbling on appetizers. "Everyone, this is Hilary's American friend Suzette."

I wave feebly.

Hilary takes over and introduces me to her sisters. Seeing that it's Kaitlin's celebration, we meet her first. Rose is the oldest and the last two are the twins, Kelly and Kathy. They are all beautiful with red hair. The twins are identical but since Kelly is currently five months pregnant, I'll be able to tell them apart if I can remember their names. Half the party-goers are red heads, so I'm guessing it's mostly family.

"Time to open presents." Mrs. Addams, who told me her name but I can't remember, announces.

Kaitlin is shy, so the attention is overwhelming her. Rose and Kathy are on either side of her keeping her lubricated and comfortable. The presents lean to the erotic. Mine is the first non-joke or skippy teddy. It's a cute white pajama set with lace edges and little pink roses. Jason loves mine.

"That's from Suzette." Rose gestures to me.

“Thanks.” Kaitlin tells me. “It’s my favorite so far.”

“Yeah, but James isn’t going to be as inspired when you wear that over this.”

Kathy holds up her gift that is a black and see-through.

“Aren’t you happy to be an only child.” Hilary whispers in my ear.

“They’re great.”

“Now that we’re older.” Kelly adds from her other side and purposely loud.

“And now that Mom accepted that she isn’t going to have a son.”

The sisters cackle.

“We should have stopped after the twins.” Mrs. Addams winks at me. “Or before.”

“Rose use to tell us that the twins were adopted.” Another red head, Cousin Anna I think, reminds the oldest Addams sister. “Said you brought them home as playmates for her.”

“You take my sisters for a week and see if you don’t make up stories like that.” Rose double dares.

When the presents are gathered and the wrappings trashed someone turns up the music and three firemen come in bumping and grinding to the beat. The leader takes center stage in front of the embarrassed bride-to-be and the other two work the room.

“The brunette is giving you the eye.” Hilary smiles at me. “Even when they don’t know why they’re drawn to you, they’re drawn to you.”

I’d like to glower but the brunette fireman, who is now only in suspenders and boxers, takes my hand and makes me dance with him. The blond fireman has Cousin Anna and Mrs. Addams sandwiching him. The leader, who is shaved and extremely sexy, gyrates behind Kaitlin who is brilliant red with humiliation.

Next to join us is Hilary who has the moves to match the brunette. I quickly sit.

I guess it’s the typical thing you’d expect from a female stag party. Slipping out at midnight, as agreed, I am back with clothed gentlemen.

Generously, Dad allows me to sleep in. Doug does his touring duty and by dinner, Artie’s making us moo shoo pork. Sounds silly to eat Chinese in Scotland but Doug loves Chinese food and Artie’s a master cook. The original plan was Mexican but

the local market didn't have the supplies. Artie got a lead on another market that would have the desired ingredients, so that's for tomorrow night.

"Honey, how are you?" Jason answers.

"Finally I get a live person."

"Stop. How's Glasgow?"

"Fantastic. I went to a bachelorette party."

"With strippers?"

"Not really."

"Do you miss me more?"

"Not after the fireman last night."

"Better than Doug." He's jealous. Not really cute but kind of flattering.

"No way. Doug is hot." I tease.

"Suzette, you have better be kidding."

"Of course." Perhaps I took it too far. He doesn't ask what I'm wearing.

"Nothing much new other than we're going to a Martian wedding this weekend."

"Sounds fun. Can't wait until your home."

"Me too." Someone knocks on my door. "Call me next week."

"Sure. Love ya." And he hangs up.

At the door is Doug. "There's a great dance club in town."

"Cool. Let me change and we'll get Artie."

"Artie went to the other market. He won't be back for a while. Maybe we could go without him."

Everything good and obedient in me is screaming no. Everything that is restless and constrained is screaming yes. How to decide? Well, the good and obedient has run the show since May, so I go with yes. I put on a black skirt and blue blouse and we crawl out my window. No need for a jacket tonight, it's a pleasant evening. Everything I need is in my pockets.

Come Dancing isn't a Martian club. It's one hundred percent human and the crowd is young, our age. I'm having doubts. First, Dad is going to freak. Second, Artie will eventually find us. Third, I'm alone with Doug and liking it.

“We have a nightly worse ID picture contest. You’ll win with this.” The bouncer tells me and waves us in. Everyone’s a critic. I don’t take good posed pictures.

The room is dimly lit with a purple light and they have a DJ instead of a band. Doug takes me to the floor and we dance. He’s aware that our time could be truncated at any minute. The place is full so we stick close. When a slow song plays, Doug brings me up for a long wet kiss. He doesn’t linger. Cheek to cheek we sway to the rhythm.

Doug orders us some drinks and we find a stool for me to sit on while he stands. “Did you have fun last night?”

“It was a bit much.” I admit.

“I bet. Kaitlin’s the only tame one in the family.”

“They’re a spirited bunch. I can see why you like Hil...”

He kisses me again. “It’s just us tonight.”

“I’m dating Jason.” I remind him.

“It’s just us tonight.” He repeats and then gives me a passionate sampling that humbles the first two. “Damn.” Doug exclaims and pulls out his phone. “Hello... We’re at a club. It’s safe... Another hour...”

“Let me.” I take the phone. “Artie?”

“No.” Dad’s calm voice is frightening. Martians abhor showing feelings, so when one is there and it’s hidden, beware. “You’ll come home right now.” I guess it’s good one of us brought their phone but now we’re stuck.

We walk to the smoking patio where it’s quieter. “One night Dad. Nothing’s going to happen.”

He’s quiet. Thinking. Considering. Dad understands how difficult it must be. “Next time, you get permission first.”

“Promise.” I smile at Doug. “We’ll be home early. In a couple of hours?”

“We’ll be up.” It’s a promise.

“He’s letting us stay.” I return the phone to its owner.

Doug’s fingers run through my hair and we do that thing I shouldn’t do. His other hand caresses my side and his thumb strokes the outside of my breast.

“Let’s go dance some more.” I negotiate.

Reluctantly, he complies. After we're danced out, he goes to use the restroom before we walk home. Not wanting to be alone in a club, I do the same and we leave.

"Thanks. I needed that."

"The kiss or the break from the family?"

"Both but no more kissing. I promised to be faithful."

"I didn't." He dismisses.

"Did you talk to your mother yet?" I change the topic. It's been a couple of weeks and he hasn't mentioned it. Dad has twice asked me about it. He's too proud to ask Doug directly, so he's hinting for me. Not too controlling and I'm as intrigued by Caesar as any normal cool-blooded Martian.

"She'll be at the wedding. I'll hit her up there. That way she can meet you guys." Smart.

Cutting through the same park we took to get to the pub, he sits us on the bench. "I'm not as easily distracted as most Martians." He calls me on my change of topic maneuver. Yep, we're kissing again and now he's not keeping to the outer limits of my bra. Sliding under my blouse, he progresses.

Do I say no? No. Why? Because I'm a selfish brat. I do, however, manage to moan, with pleasure.

"What we need is to get them to go out without us." Doug says realizing we've reached our limits in a public location. "Do you think we can talk them into it?"

"Unlikely." Artie says behind the bench. "Shall we get going?"

Usually it's Dad that needs to be placated, but he's fine. Artie didn't care for my smooching another man. He doesn't harangue me but he does evoke Jason's name and our mutual commitment.

Doug gets a break. When his mother meets my father, she tells him she'll arrange a meeting with Caesar before anyone asked. Talk about luck. Even Artie forgives our indiscretion.

The wedding is magical. Hilary tries to socialize with us but her bridesmaid duties don't allow for it. All the romance and love makes me miss Jason and that makes me feel guilty. When Doug steals me away to a dark corner, I tell him no more. After another fifteen minutes of making out.

“Doug, I’m only kissing you because I miss Jason.”

“I’m only kissing you so you won’t.”

Caesar

A month later and I'm still not use to having a roommate. It doesn't help that Hilary says I snore. Other than feeling like I have no personal space, we're getting along. The next day we have a special invitation to meet Caesar. Turns out, Caesar knew of father's visit to Scotland and Doug's mother breeched the topic before he did.

Anxious about our appointment, I go out to the porch to call Jason. It's diversionary and pleasant.

"Honey, I was thinking about you?" He answers.

"You always claim that."

"I'm always thinking about you."

"You're relentless."

"Three weeks." He sings. "Consider this foreplay to foreplay."

"I know. It will be so nice to see you. Don't get me wrong. It's been great."

"How was London?"

"Everywhere you go is something historic and iconic. Sure, DC is the same but everything is so old here."

"Our culture is older."

"Yeah but Stonehenge is even older than it."

"Stonehenge is ours. There was a scientific scouting party."

"Two thousand years ahead of time?"

"They didn't know our world was coming to an end. It was exploratory." Jason thinks he knows everything. He's usually right.

"Are you sure?"

"Doesn't Doug know this?" When he says Doug's name it comes out a tad acidic. He was like that before I did anything egregious. Doesn't keep me from regretting my actions.

"He wasn't with us in London. Artie did the guiding."

"Oh." I can hear his relief. "He hasn't tried anything with you?"

Did Blake tell him? I don't think he would. There was another time that Doug was talking to me and he put his arm around me. I ducked out tactfully before he did

anything more forward. Other than being too attentive, he seems to have lost interest.
“No.” It sounds weak.

“Hmm?” Jason doesn’t push the point.

“Jason, do I snore?”

“No. Well, sometimes you make a wheezing sound when you sleep on your back. Who told you that you snore?” He’s implying Doug might be the source.

I’ve kept Doug at arms length, well out of my bed. I’d like to think I wouldn’t succumb to his whim if he pushed things that far but sometimes avoiding temptation is the best defense. “Hilary told me that.”

“Good.”

“Jason, I love you. I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

“I didn’t question it.”

“You sound a little odd.”

“I miss you, that’s all.”

“I miss you too. Three weeks.”

“See you then.”

I curl up on the chair. My nerves are offset thinking of Jason and seeing him soon. Doug was a friendly distraction. I should have refrained from even kissing but in the end, we didn’t go all the way. Isn’t that the next best thing? What if Jason kissed someone? The idea is dreadful. If he did, we’d manage. Should I tell him what I did? I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.

Hilary is sleeping when I get to our room. The perfect red head doesn’t snore or make any uncouth noises ever. Rather than focus on the potential “talk” I’ll have to have with Jason some day, I fantasize about seeing him again. Then I do something idiotic. I try to compare who is the better kisser. It might be Doug but I love Jason. Out of nowhere, I recall New Year’s Eve. Well, poop. Jason was passed out and Blake did the honors. Who needs to remember that?

Artie wakes us at the crack of dawn. Now I’m freaking out. Hilary helps me with my hair and puts on some make-up. With more debate than warranted for outfit finalization, I talk her into a longer skirt that I had with me from the States. I look mature and very presentable.

I envy Hilary. She's cool as cucumber. "The first time I met Caesar, I was anxious but trust me, after one visit you get over it. She's far more interesting as a person than she is imposing as Caesar." I hope she's right.

Caesar's palace isn't far from Inverness. We drive out to the edge of Loch Ness to a complex on a huge estate surrounded by a six-foot wall. This place is a low level castle. The Roman villa was built in the first century.

"Scotland has a right to roam. Anyone is allowed to walk anywhere provided they do not have any malicious intent." Doug educates. "Since we can't have that, they have sonic devices that deter humans from hiking too close. Technically they're illegal but earthlings can't detect them, well earth dogs but not humans."

"So no harm, no foul?" I finish.

A valet takes our car as we're escorted into the mansion. We're taken to a receiving room. Guards run a security check, scanning and patting us for concealed weapons or unauthorized devices. A gorgeous woman in her forties walks out. Even if she didn't hug Doug straight away, I could tell she's his mother. She has the same hair and beautiful blue eyes. Hers are even brighter and remind me oddly of Blake, who still hasn't bothered to write. Then she embraces Hilary like a daughter.

"Mom, this is Stanley Russell, Artie Mann and Suzette Russell."

"Mr. Russell." She takes Dad's hand in both of hers. "Your reputation precedes you. I'm Helen McBride."

"Thank you for having us."

"Nonsense. I'm glad we had a connection to extend the invitation. I knew Doug was hired to guide a VIP from Martian U. We were pleased to learn it was you." She turns to Artie. "Mr. Mann."

"Mrs. McBride." He shakes her hand. It would look impolite not to but he's hands don't feel human.

Helen's eyes glance down. She noted something off but like most people, she shirks it off. Then they dart up to me. "And Suzette. Another legend in the flesh and blood."

"Hello Mrs. McBride."

“Please, all of you, Helen. Mrs. McBride is my mother-in-law.” She chuckles at her trite joke. “Come, come. We have lunch waiting.”

The balcony overlooks Loch Ness. If you haven’t seen the Loch, it’s huge and dark. Ideal for perpetuating monster myths. A frail woman waits at the head of the table. Her hair is gray and pulled up in a bun at the base of her head. Her eyes are wise, gray and slightly covered with a milky layer. She stands and bows. We bow back.

“Madam Caesar, these are our lunch guests.” Helen introduces us to the most powerful Martian on earth. Father takes Caesar’s hand and kisses it. Artie mimics him. I curtsy, as pre-instructed. Doug gets another hug and Hilary curtsies.

Dad’s directed to sit on one side of Caesar and me on her other. “The famous Russells.” She exaggerates patting our hands and giving mine a squeeze. “I am most honored.”

“The honor is ours.” Dad replies and I nod approvingly.

“Caesar?” A tall thin man in his fifties hurries out and halts abruptly upon seeing strangers. Humbly he bows his head. “I didn’t know you had company.” His hair and eyes are dark brown. His features are sharp and distinguished. Compared to Caesar’s rounder and wrinkled appearance, he looks like the bad cop.

“Carl, join us.” Caesar motions to the chair at the other end of the table, which is set.

He sits without question. Helen makes the introductions. Carl smiles and loses his bad-cop façade. “I heard the Russells were in our neck of the woods.” He unfolds his napkin and puts in his lap but it slips off. He retrieves it and gets it right on the second try. Scanning each member of our party, he pauses longest at me. Then he turns to Caesar. “And I see you expected me, typical.” He accuses.

“We enjoy surprising each other.” Caesar says cheerily. She’s like a sweet little grandmother, a sweet little omnipotent shrewd grandmother.

“Miss Russell.” Carl addresses me. “It is my understanding that your biologically Mr. Russell’s niece.”

“That’s correct.” Doesn’t he have current details on people he didn’t expect to meet?

“So your mother is Amanda Russell.”

“Yes.” I don’t bother to mention we haven’t seen her in years. It’s way personal and painful. Amanda is more elusive than Bigfoot.

“I met her.” He smirks. “Amazing woman. The only Martian I ever had the pleasure of knowing that completely characterizes the opposite of our stereotype.”

“She’s unique.”

“You look every bit like her. It’s like I’m seeing my old friend again. If it’s possible, you’re even prettier than her.”

I glance at Dad, who is taken aback by Carl. “I didn’t know that you met my sister.”

“We knew each other in school. You hadn’t started yet. I was her Major. She was a handful. Had to talk her out of resigning once a semester at least.” He blushes. I don’t have to wonder how far he went to persuade her from leaving.

“Do you keep in contact with Amanda?” Artie asks hiding his hope.

“I hear from her now and again.”

I stare at Artie and Dad. We all want to ask for his help but we feel awkward admitting she doesn’t keep us posted of her whereabouts.

“This is uncomfortable.” Dad says realizing his pride has to come second for once. “We haven’t heard from her for a while. Do you know where she is?”

Carl huffs out a small laugh. “I’ll give you the last information I have. She is a stealthy traveler.”

“Thank you.” We all say relatively in sync.

Caesar has a silly grin. “Suzette, Blake MacGinnis is in your Troop. You were with him in the horrific altercation with his lover.”

“Ex-lover.” I automatically correct. “I was there. He’s a good friend.” I’m still reeling from our discussion on Amanda and the new topic is almost as disorientating. Then again, Blake is famous.

“I’d like to meet him.”

“Would you like me to see if he could come to visit?” Dad suggests.

Caesar sits up. “Are you that familiar with his family?” Off campus, Martians are hard to find. It’s always been that way.

“His mother and I correspond.” He pulls out his blackberry.

She's as giddy as any Martian coed at the prospect. "I'll be at the Fall Conference, if he doesn't want to come to Scotland. Don't make it sound mandatory but we'll cover the travel expenses."

"I'll mention that." Dad types on his smart phone gleefully.

Caesar is charming and for some reason, adores me. "Suzette, how is it being the only female Major?"

"My age hampers me more than my gender. Luckily I have a Captain, Blake actually. He keeps our Troop in line."

"Your age isn't a constant."

"True."

"And your gender can be an asset as much as a deficit."

I flush. If I were a coquet, I'd work it. There are moments but I'm reserved. Or timid as the guys like to tell me.

"How are you at man to man combat?"

"She's undefeated." Dad brags tucking his phone away.

"Interesting." Caesar's eyes glance at Carl. "You were the same."

He barely holds off a scowl. "You are correct."

"You both know that is exceptionally rare."

"What have you seen so far?" Carl asks Dad.

Oblivious that Carl's changing the subject, Dad starts to run down the information. Artie takes the narrative adding accurate dates and places. Caesar and Carl interject after each day to get my reaction. That clues Dad in and he's suspicious of their intrigue. Artie's eyes are shuttering like crazy, so he's picked up on it as well. Since I'm the center of attention, neither of our hosts notice their reactions. All they see is my awkward smile.

Loch Ness

After we eat Caesar shows us around the grounds in a stretch golf cart. I'm given the honor of riding shotgun. She's a scary driver and we bounce around without seatbelts. Parking on the pebbly beach, she pulls off her shoes and stockings. Caesar looks at us, me longest. "Aren't you going to wade into the water with me?" Then she unties her long gray hair. It goes down to her rump.

"Sure." I toe off my sandals. Tan and shaved, I skipped hose, so I'm good to go.

Caesar takes my hand. "You can't come to Loch Ness and not touch it."

Glancing back I giggle to see Dad and Artie frowning. They are barefoot and rolling up their pant legs. This is out of their comfort zone.

"Hurry." I holler from a yard out into the Loch. The water is ice cold, even with my cooler core temperature.

"Don't worry. There's no monster." Caesar tells us as if we're asked.

"What makes the water so dark?"

"Peat. It's the largest loch by water volume."

"Too bad."

"You're delightful. When you graduate, contact us. We'll put you to work."

"Okay." I'm sure there's more to it but it's a kind gesture.

Dad beams his rarely used cheesy grin. All is forgiven for their unexplained fascination. Artie isn't. His robot eyes are on the water and a powerboat. My moment of niceness changes in a blink of the eye.

Artie shouts. "Suzette, do it now!" He has only done this once before and he means for me to freeze time, so I do. Not knowing how far to halt things, I'm holding a bigger area than ever, bigger than the beach or the quad at school. Moving helps me hold it since I get more air to breath. The boat looks harmless except for a bright flash.

I take a Tootsie Roll to boost my energy. As I approach Artie movement catches in the corner of my vision. Can't be, or it hasn't happened before. Doug and Carl are motionless mannequins with their heads turning to see why Artie had abruptly yelled. I pivot and the others are the same. Touching Artie's arm he joins me in the time freeze.

“Assassins on the boat. Move Caesar a yard to the right.” He tells me quickly knowing my energy is limited. I stare at the weapon he retrieves. “I’ve been armed since you were shot. The others are safe. Move.” Artie turns back into a statue when I release him only now, he’s packing heat. I’m not as shocked as I could have been if I hadn’t known that Blake had taken up the same gun toting habit for the same reason.

Wading back, I relocate Caesar. She’s a tiny woman so it’s easy. Then I unfreeze time and immediately jerk Caesar’s arm to conceal the fact that she’s moved mysteriously. We tumble into the foot deep water. The tough old lady takes it like a pro. The bullet whizzes by where Caesar stood and flattens the tire of her golf cart.

Artie returns fire. The gunman is thrown off the boat, the driver slumps on the dash. Not a second later other shots ring out behind us at the boat. The boat doesn’t stop.

“On the lake, get the chopper and follow the powerboat. Send a recovery team for the man in the water.” Carl rattles off directives into his phone. Almost instantaneously the whirling sound of a helicopter is heard. It chases the boat still jetting along.

A dozen armed Martians are on the beach. Four escort Caesar to an armored car. The others tend to us.

“You.” one points at me. “Come with us.”

“She will not.” Artie defies. The gun is in his hand but not aimed.

“It’s okay.” Dad tells Artie and darts his eyes to the pistol. Artie reads the clue and puts it away.

“We’ll have to confiscate the weapon.” Another man walks up to Artie. “How did you get this past security?”

“Leave it Winston.” Carl commands. “He saved Caesar.”

“But sir...”

“Winston, drive Caesar. We’ll discuss it later.”

I climb into the backseat next to Caesar. She rolls up the partition. “We have complete privacy. Tell me, what happened.”

“There was a shot and...”

“And then I was standing safely in a different spot.”

Gulping, I resort to my usual tactics, over explaining. “It’s bright and we were in the water. Maybe your eyes are playing tricks on you. Everything happened so quickly...”

Caesar’s bony hands cup my cheeks. “I understand if you’d rather not say anything but don’t tell me it didn’t happen.”

She’s onto me. She didn’t call Artie into her car and he saved her. Since I arrived this morning, she has been onto me. “I stopped time.” I whisper too intimidated to keep up the ruse.

The aged Martian smiles genially and not at all shocked. “Then how did you get shot at school?”

“I didn’t have the energy to stop it again. We were shot at more than once and I had worn myself out from stopping it a few times earlier.”

“Carl is half-Martian.”

A rather violent change of topic. “Oh. I didn’t know.”

“No one knows, dear. He’s the Successor and it would not be received well.” She brushes back my hair. “I think he’s your biological father.”

If that’s true, I’m three-quarter Martian, which is thought to almost never happen. If you’re wondering how I’m taking it so well, it’s my Martian side doing the calculations. My human side is exploding with emotions, which are at bay but won’t be for long.

“He can tinker with time, but not like that. Did you stop all the way to the boat?”

I nod. “Please, can we not talk about this?”

“That’s best. Never tell anyone.”

Sage advice, which would have been more welcomed if she hadn’t forced me into confessing. “Okay.” I bite my lip to keep it from quivering. Revealing my secret, even to Caesar, is frightening. Finding my biological father is earth shattering.

Caesar hugs me. “Carl’s a wonderful man.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you. I’m not sure. It’s the time control and the fact that he has never been so chatty about his former love.”

We walk through the house to her grandiose office.

“Madam Caesar,” Helen walks in, “One man was killed but the other lives. We’ll question him when he can talk.”

“Thank you.” Caesar points to a chair for me to sit.

The others rush in. Dad is relieved to see me. Artie’s eyes are going to blow a circuit if they don’t stop shuttering. I wonder if the soundproof car was impervious to his ears. Carl’s anxious eyes are on me. What I wouldn’t give to hear his mind?

“If you’d like to continue your stay in Scotland here, we’ll make the arrangements.” Caesar offers.

“That is very generous.” Dad bows. “We accept.” I’m not sure if Dad trusts Caesar or if he feels he isn’t in a position to express hesitation.

“Helen, send some men to fetch their belongings. Carl, see our guests to rooms.”

They spring into action.

“This way.” Carl leads us upstairs. He drops Dad off, then Artie, Doug, Hilary and finally me. He follows me in and closes the door. “What did Caesar tell you?”

“I’ve just been shot for the second time in three months, do we have to do this now?” My arms are wrapped around me because I’m unsteady.

“You stopped time. You saved Caesar.” He hangs his head as he makes the same deductions as Caesar. “When is your birthday?”

“Would you need that to be sure?” I’m crying.

“Amanda adamantly denied that I was your father, so yes. If I’m to assume she lied, I need more information.”

“I turned twenty-one last week.”

He’s stone solid. Did he freeze only himself? Eventually he runs a hand over his face and holds his chin. “Amanda lied. I was offered a high level position under Caesar. She didn’t want you raised in such a sterile Martian world. I suspected that at the time, but now I’m sure of it.”

“Did you love her?”

“I still do.” He rolls his eyes that I would ask such a ridiculous question. “I begged her to marry every chance I got. Long before you came along and even when I thought you weren’t mine.”

I can't stop weeping and I feel idiotic. "This is too much and I'm exhausted." He hugs me and offers me a hard candy. "Thanks." Yep, if anyone were my biological half Martian father, he'd know I'd need a candy when I'm spent from stopping time.

He lets go of me. "Caesar knew. Before you came here she had the same assumptions I had. That's why she didn't tell me about your visit before today. She didn't mean for it to come out like this."

"It's okay. She said not to tell anyone."

"I'd appreciate that."

"What about Dad and Artie?"

Carl nods absent-mindedly. "I'll talk to Stanley. Artie isn't human?"

I shake my head.

"He isn't on our roster of Martians either."

"And Dad can explain that to you."

"Fair enough. I need to find out how Artie got that gun past security before I chew the men out for their incompetence." He goes to the door. "You are so exquisite and so gifted. I wish I hadn't stayed away."

I smirk. "That's in the past."

"Too bad we can't turn back time." He winks at me and opens the door.

"You didn't freeze, did you? On the Loch, you could move."

He nods his head and goes.

I'm glad he'll talk to Dad and telling Artie won't matter. He heard us, no doubt.

Too Many Men

Carl tells Dad that he believes he's my biological father. Dad tells Carl Artie is a robot. Artie takes samples of our blood and confirms it. Certainly I'm not the first mix to be more Martian than human but I am the first to be known for a fact.

All our secrets are intertwined. Carl can't be known as a halfer, nor can I. Neither of us can let people know we can stop time.

Doug and Hilary go home since we've done all the big tourist attractions. Hilary tells me she can't wait to hang out at Martian U together. The idea once worried me but now it's a happy thought.

"I've never had a close girl friend." I embrace her.

"You halfers are so touchy feely." She squeezes tighter. "I like that about you." Hilary skips out the door to her waiting limo.

Doug kisses me. "I'll come back before you leave for good."

I smile.

For the next two weeks, we have a lot of fun but don't leave Caesar's palace. Since I was involved with another close call, Dad isn't letting me stray. So even when he isn't around, Artie is and it's grating on me, Carl and the robot. Carl hasn't said anything but I see it brewing. He wants to get to know me and not my manny. Artie's not saying anything either, he's barely speaking. Artie has always been a fan of Caesar and Carl but he shuts down, and not in the reenergizing way, when Carl is in the room.

Finally Carl candidly states that he wants to spend time with me alone. This becomes a power play between him and Dad. Dad won't have me away from Artie and Carl argues that we're safe in Caesar's palace. Artie comes to the rescue. He convinces Dad to return to the States without me. Artie will go with him and come back for me before the weekend. That's four days. As a concession, Carl agrees to keep me on the compound. Just when they started relaxing some Preservationist idiot had to go and ruin it.

The first day is hard. It's raining, again. We haven't a clue where to start. Carl began to tell me his life story, skipping over the interesting parts. That was until Caesar

interrupts and takes over. She's subtle. Pretends it's only for lunch, but she spends the day with us. Caesar plies me with questions.

The next day, we do better. Carl brings visual aids. Pictures from his life. I'd like to meet his Martian parents. He even knows where to find his human father but he hasn't been involved other than a sperm donor. His Martian father couldn't have children and the older Daniels chose an unorthodox resolution.

When we get to his Martian U days, it's remarkably unchanged. Amanda looked even more like me when she was young than she does now. They were a happy couple. Carl fills half the day telling me stories from this time in his life. Caesar tells him to show me the extensive compound. Not sure what this means.

Day three starts off with some sort of Grand Council emergency meeting. This means Carl isn't available for the morning. I curl up with a book when Doug calls to see if I have any free time today. Hearing I'm free until lunch, he comes right over.

Still confined to the compound and the rain, we play cards and chat. Mostly, he asks about Martian U. He'll love it and I tell him so. When the clock strikes noon, our time is up.

"We'll have so much fun at Martian U." I've walked him to the entrance to see him off. I'll miss him.

He smiles at me, reading too much into my comment. Giving me a big bear hug he remarks, "We could have been good together."

I snicker. "Maybe two halfers is a horrible combination. We don't know."

He kisses me once, then again. "We know." Doug gives me his all on the next kiss.

"Ahem?" A familiar voice echoes in the foyer.

"Blake MacGinnis? You sorry son of a bitch. Why haven't you written?"

Realizing I'm still in Doug's arms I kiss his cheek. "I'll see you soon."

"Take care, Suzette." Doug steps back and nods his head.

"Blake, this is Doug. Doug, this is Blake."

The two shake hands. "We've heard a lot about you." Doug tells him.

Blake stares at me.

"Not so much from Suzette. You're a trailblazer."

“It’s nice to meet you.” Blake says coldly.

“I’m sure we’ll get to know each other better.” Doug leaves.

Blake and I stand miles apart. You’d think we were strangers or enemies. Confused or jealous, he asks, “Why was he kissing you like that?”

“Why haven’t you kept in touch?” Why are we bickering? It’s great to see him. He looks better than I remember. I’ve missed him so much and we’re arguing like children over a toy.

Blake marches up to me and plants one on me that puts Doug’s to shame. Tiptoeing to reach, I hold him, never ceasing our lip lock. I’m surprised to enjoy the feeling when his thoughts rush into my mind. They aren’t scandalous or mean or any of his dumb jokes. It’s not even words. It’s like a stream of ecstasy.

“It is so nice to be inside you again.” It sounds like a bad pick-up line out of context. “You know what I mean.” Blake blushes having heard.

I push him back gently with my arm. “You’re really here.”

“Mom didn’t want me to come. She doesn’t like that I’m so visible.” He bobs his head insinuating that parents are parents.

“I’m glad you came.” He’s here to see me. Suddenly incommunicado doesn’t seem so unforgiveable.

“I talked her into it.” Blake gives me a long look. “You look great. Better than the last time I saw you.” The last time he saw me, I had just woken up after almost a full day of surgery and rest.

I smile. “Too bad Jason couldn’t come. We’d have so much fun.”

He tenses. “Next time. So what’s the deal with Doug?”

“He’s super nice. If I wasn’t dating Jason…”

“You’d be dating me. I meant he’s half human.”

“Yes.”

“His brain feels like yours.”

“Is it a roller coaster?”

“Not the speed, but I understand that now.” He winks. “Doug’s feels like yours but slower.” Shaking his head he rethinks his comment. “Not yours, but familiar.”

“Suzette, is this Blake MacGinnis?” Carl walks in from the direction of Caesar’s office.

“Blake, this is Carl Daniels.”

Carl extends a friendly hand. “Nice to meet you. I met your father once. He was very young but his genius was already apparent.”

“I hear that a lot.” Blake shies up a bit. He lost his father when he was three. Once, he admitted to not remembering him much and that going to Martian U was a way to connect to his lost parent.

“He’d be proud of you.” Carl assures him and then smiles at me. “Suzette and I have plans. Let me show you to your room. Would you like to meet Caesar first or wait until dinner?”

“Which would be best?” It reminds me of his first day at Martian U. Blake is reserved and uncertain of his role.

“Dinner. She’ll be distracted with work.”

“Great. I could use a nap.”

“Of course.”

We take Blake to his room. Then Carl and I eat lunch.

Missing my lost parent, I ask, “Do you think Amanda is all right?”

“I gave Artie my information on your mother. She’s been quiet for too long but I’m sure she is well.”

“Thanks.” I say.

“She loves you.”

“I know. She left me with Dad and Artie.”

“Do you ever resent her for it?”

I shake my head. “She loves me. I would love to be closer to her but I don’t resent her.”

“I can’t believe how smart you are.”

I roll my eyes.

“You are smart. You’re the most perfect person ever.”

I laugh. “I’m very lucky. Good genes, lots of love, it was easy to be smart with those things in my favor.”

“Do you want to go to Inverness?”

“You promised not to take me off the premises.” It’d be more tempting if it weren’t raining.

“It’s probably better that we don’t.” He frowns.

“Weren’t you going to show me more of the grounds?”

“You’re right.” Carl’s relieved. “Stanley was charitable to let you stay.”

“He’s a good at being overly rationale. I’m surprised Artie allowed it.”

Carl blows a low whistle. “He’s a good guardian.”

“See how lucky I am?”

“I’ve never seen artificial life at his level. He’s twenty years old and more advanced than our scanners.” Carl is referring to the weapon. Artie interfered with the security equipment not only to conceal his pistol but also to conceal his synthetic makeup.

We take a walk in the garden when the sun breaks through the clouds. “Caesar is a better guide, but I’ll do my best. We have some transplants from home.” There’s a hothouse with exclusive plant life from our home planet. Some are more bizarre. These require unique climate control. That room is cool, dry and the air is thin, like the Mother Ship.

They also have a menagerie of animals that couldn’t survive on earth without the same kind of adjustments. “Cats are from our planet.” Carl proudly educates as we look at a black lion like creature. The name Shadow is scrolled on the back wall of his confinement.

“Cats were worshipped by the Egyptians.”

“Some twelve thousand years ago scientists were sent to explore this world. What it is about cats that draw those nerdy types to them, I don’t know but they had all kinds, small and large. Letting the cats go wild was not sanctioned but cats aren’t easy to wrangle.” He points to Shadow, “This one was too violent and not on that mission. His ancestors came on the Mother Ship.”

“He’s dangerous?” It’s hard to believe with the great cat rolling on his back and letting Carl rub his belly, more like a canine than a feline.

“Shadow is a mix with an earth lion. He’s an oversized pussycat. Plus, they only seem to like human flesh. I’m too Martian to entice him to bite.”

Braving the beast, which is easy now that he’s purring, I scratch under his chin. The purring amps up. It’s the softest fur I’ve ever felt.

“You’ve made a powerful friend.” Carl promises me.

After getting some unique samples of a home long lost, we end our father-daughter afternoon with a game of tennis. Carl is excellent, so it’s more like a lesson than a match. I can beat Dad and Artie but not Carl. Resorting to cheating, I try to speed up but he’s immune. So odd.

Blake Gets Protective

Showering and changing into one of my many new outfits, I find Blake when it's dinnertime. "Did you get your handsome rest?"

"Do I look any better?" He strikes a pose like some drama queen model. "I am not a drama queen."

"You know, it doesn't even bother me that you're reading my mind."

"It doesn't bother me either. What about your new father? Will it bother him?"

My mouth drops open. "Don't tell anyone that you know."

"Geez, what can we admit to?" He grumbles as we go to meet Caesar.

"Madam Caesar, this is Blake MacGinnis." I announce.

Blake takes her hand and kisses it.

"This has been an eventful summer." Caesar coos. "Please sit."

Carl and Blake flank Caesar and I sit next to Blake, which I didn't expect. They probably did this to help Blake feel at ease.

"What exactly happened last year when you two were ambushed?" Carl keeps his voice level.

Blake pales. He hates to remember this day. "It was my fault. A girl was sent to seduce information out of me. I allowed the seduction but gave up no information. Unfortunately she became obsessive and stalked me. When I didn't return the interest, she targeted women that were close to me. We don't even know if it was jealousy or revenge."

Carl glances at me. "Are you two involved?"

"I wish." Blake jokes knowing it is a sore point for fathers and that he can pretend to be unaware. "No, some other man has Suzette's heart."

"Who?" Carl asks me.

"Jason Struthers." I answer. If Carl is like Dad and Artie, and he has a lot in common with them, he'll Google Jason as soon as he's alone with his computer. Actually, if he is like Dad, he already has the 411.

"He's a great guy. Would have been Major if Suzette weren't. They were neck and neck for the position." Blake brags.

“What happened to the shooter?” Caesar asks.

I don’t know and hadn’t thought to ask myself.

“She’s alive. Her brain was damaged though. I hear she doesn’t remember much of anything.”

“You shot her.” Carl states.

“I did but the gun was in Suzette’s hand. My aim was off. I meant to kill her.”

Blake sounds so callous, so unlike himself.

“How were you hit?” Carl wonders looking at me.

“Um, I was low on energy.”

Blake reaches for my hand under the table. *They know you can stop time?*

I recall the day in the Loch when another shooter took aim at Caesar.

Blake’s head snaps to me. *You were shot again?*

Caesar was. I was not.

“Anything wrong?” Caesar asks.

“No.” I smile and mentally warn Blake that they are sharp and to be more cautious not to expose anything.

They’ve heard.

When dinner and dessert are nothing but dirty plates, Caesar excuses us with a suggestion for me to show Blake the garden. They want to discuss our talents without the mind reader in the room. Or that is what Blake tells me when we’re alone.

We start in the hot house and then move outside near the fountain. “Isn’t it amazing?” I say and see that he is shuffling his feet yards behind me.

“It’s wonderful.” His shoulders shrug.

“Are you okay?”

“Jet lagged.”

I reach for his hand and he pulls away. He doesn’t want me listening.

“You were shot.” Blake says accusingly, like I had something to do with ever being in or near the line of fire.

“Blake, I wasn’t the target. It wasn’t the same situation.” I take in his deep blue eyes. It’s so nice to have him with me.

“Don’t think things like that?”

“Why not?”

He takes my hand and I see his fantasies about us being happy and intimate.

“I can’t help what I think.”

“I can’t help what I feel.” He tows me in and rubs his cheek against mine. I can hear him, sense his feelings. Then he dives deeper into my mind. “Doug got close.”

I drop his hand. “I told you about that.”

“You were tempted.”

“Some. Being in Europe, I got swept up in the romance. We shouldn’t have kissed.”

“You stayed true.”

“Mostly. Jason and I are in love.”

“Are you?”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Good because it isn’t your place to question my actions or my feelings or my relationships.”

He backs me up to a bench and my butt falls on the seat. He runs his hand in my hair, which is down. “You’re dressing differently.”

“Hilary’s influence.”

“It’s nice.” His blue eyes drift candidly over me from head to toe. He kneels in the gravel and puts a hand on each side of me. “Very nice.” Gently he pulls me forward and kisses me.

All I can think about is how marvelous it feels, how much he means to me, how glad I am to see him. He stands up and offers his hand. I take it and he leads me to his room.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” I stay in the hall still in a semi-trance.

He shakes his head and with a tug he walks me to his bed, closing the door with his foot. I sit. He leans down and kisses, a strong arm on each side. Blake lowers and I lean back. “Are we going to do this?” He stops before we go too far.

I reach behind him and pull him down. Kissing him, I start to unbutton his shirt. His fingers dance down my sides and slowly untuck my shirttails from my skirt. He lifts it and I arch my back so he can remove it. I slide to the middle of the mattress.

Blake gets an eyeful. He bows to kiss my bellybutton. Kissing his way, he crawls up and finds my willing mouth. One set of fingers plays with my hair and the other with my right bra-covered breast.

Closing my eyes, the shared mind space materializes; memories, imagination, virtues and secrets. We're naked and as he fantasizes a move, I fantasize a countermove and so on. Our mental images lay the blueprints. I glance up to the dark area and it's bigger than before.

"Don't." He says.

My eyes pop open. "What?"

Blake strokes my neck. "Not tonight. Don't go there tonight."

I wasn't planning to but now it's hard to resist.

With a mighty sigh, Blake stops what he's doing. "Suzette, why are you doing this?"

"I'm curious, I won't go to the dark area."

"Not that, why are you here?"

I don't know. I shouldn't be.

Someone knocks at his door. "Blake, have you seen Suzette?" It's Carl.

Grabbing my shirt, I start to put it on until Blake tells me it's inside out. I fix it and he buttons up.

"Suzette's in here. We're catching up on old times." He opens the door.

"Did I interrupt something?"

"No. Did you need me?" I smile innocently.

"Wanted to say good night." Carl is blushing. Of course, he knows we were up to something. We're panting like dogs in heat.

Blake glares at me.

How do I get out of this? If I follow Carl, Blake will be upset. If I stay, Carl will be. I want to stay. I shouldn't stay.

"We'll catch up in the morning." Blake says with a sorrowful expression.

“Okay.” Now I feel rejected.

In my room, I take a quick very cold shower. My phone rings. It’s Jason. It’s the first time he’s called me in weeks. “Hi Jason.”

“Honey, I haven’t heard from you in days.”

“It’s been a crazy week.”

“Tell me about it.” He requests.

“We met Caesar.”

“No way.”

“I’m staying with her now. Dad and Artie left yesterday.”

“Are you alone with Doug?”

“No. He left this morning.”

“How did you end up at Caesar’s palace?”

“Well, Artie and I saved Caesar’s life and then I found a distant relative.” Lost relative in truth but I don’t want to get into the minutiae over the phone. “He works here. And Caesar wanted to meet Blake, so he’s here.”

“Blake’s there?”

Oops. “He got here a few hours ago.”

“He’s staying there too?”

“In a different room.” Why am I defensive? I almost did what he’s worried about and now I’m pretending to be offended that it even crosses his mind. If I hadn’t been on a sex free diet for almost four months and if Doug hadn’t been hitting on me and if Blake wasn’t thinking such loving thoughts. *Stop it.* I reminded me that I’m responsible for my actions and no one else.

“That’s nice, to have a friend nearby.”

“It is.” I say. “And I can’t wait to see you. You’re still coming?”

“Sure.” He says breezily. It concerns me for some reason. “Has Blake said anything?”

Too much. “We haven’t had a lot of time to talk.” Sort of honest. “I’ll be home on Saturday.”

“Great. We’ll talk then. I’ll let you go to sleep.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” He says and hangs up.

I feel horrible. I fall back on my bed. I have Dad and Artie and Carl competing for role of father. And I have lustful thoughts of Doug and Blake and I don't seem to miss Jason as much as I think I should.

To make things more complex, I dream about Blake and midway through, I know it's because we're in each other's minds. In our dreamscape we are able to consummate our raw feelings in a way we didn't physically. It's the best dream I've ever had. Not only because of its content but also the vivid accuracy.

It's for the Best

Blake is on the stone bench in the garden. His eyes are closed and facing up into the morning sun. Without opening his lids, he says, "Sweetie, did you sleep well?"

That question is fully loaded, so I skip answering it. I'm not blocking and he can hear whatever he wants. He opens his eyes and winks at me. Scooting over, he makes room.

"Blake, you weren't at breakfast?" I sit.

"My internal clock is all messed up. I ate before you got up. Finally I've adjusted to that crack of dawn garbage."

"Then I failed you. All your humanity is lost."

He nudges me gently. "There's something we can do to restore it."

I slide my arm around his. "It's probably good we didn't finish what we started."

"We did later." He smiles mischievously. "That was a very erotic dream."

My brows furrow and I fight off a similar dumb grin. The dream was incredible and so were the moments of carelessness that led up to it, starting with that amazing kiss in the foyer when he was jealous to see me with Doug.

Blake's lips stretch further out. "Our history starts farther back than that."

I have access to him, he's limiting it but I can feel he has regrets.

"Not about anything we've done, more about what we didn't do. Do you?"

"Maybe a small part of me regrets that we didn't do you know, but it's nothing in comparison to the regrets we would have if we had."

"If we had made love," His eyes dare mine to return his gaze, "I most certainly would not regret that."

"You would, if not now back home. Jason is your best friend."

"And we would sort it out and cope."

"You don't mean that."

He rolls his eyes.

"How long are you staying?"

"Until Monday."

“I’m leaving this afternoon.” I tell him. “I wish we had more time together but then again, it’s...”

“...for the best. Yeah, yeah. Good thing we didn’t screw the night away.”

“Are you ever going to stop reading me all the time?”

“When you stop carrying about me.” He guides my chin to him and he kisses me. “We’re going to have to stop doing that.” And then he kisses me some more.

“I’m sure once we have our regular supply of affection, we’ll get tired of it.”

With a cute confused look, he kisses me again. “You’re going to get tired of that?”

“It was so nothing.”

Taking my snide lie as a challenge, Blake really tests my resolve.

“Beautiful morning isn’t it?” Caesar walks up with a cup of coffee in her hands.

We pull away like that’s going to make her think we hadn’t crossed a line.

Doesn’t help that I’m pink in the face.

“Good morning.” I stand up and hug her. “Thank you for having me.”

“It’s been a pleasure getting to know you. I’m sure you’ll be back.”

“I will. And take good care of Blake.”

“As long as he doesn’t try his flirtations on me.” She winks at me and I turn redder. “I’ve never kissed a halfer before.”

Blake stands up and kisses Caesar on the cheek.

“Mars Stars, I can see how you fall for his captivating charisma.” Caesar teases.

“Yes. He’s irresistible.” And half of campus knows it.

“Watch it.” Blake waves a finger at me. “Have a good trip home.”

“If I don’t see you later, I’ll see you at Martian U.” When Blake hugs me our minds meld. We’ve missed each other and we didn’t get much time to regroup. Again, it’s for the best and I hear a resounding *no it isn’t*.

“Come on Blake, I’ll show you the grounds.” Caesar takes his arm and leads him to her supped-up golf cart.

I head back into the house. I hope he’s ready for the ride of his life. She’s a crazy driver.

Thanks for the warning.

I can't even see him and I heard his thought.

We were in different beds when we dreamed.

That'll give me something to think about on the plane. Right now, I have another man to tend to.

Urquhart Castle

Carl's door is ajar because he expects me. His agitated voice floats into the hallway. He's giving someone a verbal lashing and he is pissed with a capital P. "Seymour, you listen to me and you listen good. That is the second close call and the tenth attempt this year. This jackass isn't going to talk freely, so you can either A, torture the truth out of him or B, give him truth serum. Frankly I don't care as long as we get results. I want names!"

I poke my head into his office and wave.

He flushes. "I have a visitor. Call me back after you have new information and he still isn't talking does not qualify as new information." Carl doesn't slam the receiver down but he holds it like a free weight as he quickly replaces it in its cradle. "The man that shot at Caesar claims he can't remember a thing. I'm not usually so cantankerous."

"I once tossed this jerk in my Troop on his butt and into the tide because he got someone hurt when he tried to overthrow me as Major. I totally understand."

"You're a firecracker, aren't you?"

"We knew he'd try something, what got me riled up was that someone was shot."

"There's a lot of shooting in the States."

"Same shooter. It's a long story. Let Blake tell you."

"I'll do that." He says. "It's our last day, would you like to take a spin on the Loch?"

"It's against the rules."

"We won't be in the city. The loch is like an extension of the compound."

Nothing like redefining terms to find loopholes. We take a boat, with a cadre of Martian soldiers, and sail famous Loch Ness.

"I love it here. What a beautiful place to live."

"It's a lot colder in the winter." Carl's elbows rest on the railing with his hands clasped over the edge. Indicating to the landscape he tells me, "Those are tree farms. It's a slow harvest cycle."

The hill looks like a quilt pattern of various shades of green. This is from the plots of trees at different height levels. It can't be haphazard but it isn't grid perfect like San Joaquin Valley.

Taking me to the other side of the boat he points to a rustic reddish brown building with a green roof. "That's the Clansman Hotel and those purple bits to the right are the humps of their tribute to Nessie."

"The mythical monster?"

"If there can be aliens living on Earth, why not a monster in the Loch?"

"Okay, but is she really purple?"

"She's better at hiding than we are, so I can't be sure."

"Uh-huh." He's new to having a daughter so I let it slide. If he plans to tell me that Santa is real, we'll have to have a heart-to-heart that he missed my gullible years by a decade.

"There's something out there. Not a monster and not one." He's not joking.

"Let me guess. From our home planet."

He nods. "They don't like humans. Maybe not us either but they respond to some frequencies on our sonar."

We've affected earth more than I estimated, more than we're taught in school. Following that tangent, my mind wanders. Martians did their homework. We found many planets with life, sixteen to be exact and two of those that could sustain us. All that makes sense, what doesn't make sense is that the dominant life would be so like us that we can interbreed.

"Let's stop by Urquhart Castle." Carl calls me from my reverie.

The day is too pretty to argue and since we are not really on an extension of the grounds, why bother?

Urquhart is a blocky castle in ruins. The weather is perfect and we arrive as a boatload of tourist leave, so we are the few roaming around. By we, I mean Carl, myself and three soldiers. The guards aren't much older than me and Carl looks like a teacher with some students, except that the three male students are dressed in identical dark clothing. And the lone girl student is in shorts and a white tank top.

“Sir, a black sedan pulled into the parking lot.” One of the soldiers, Winston I think, tells us as he talks to the ship’s captain on the phone. “Four more men are coming.”

“Is it Luke Francis?”

My eyes dart up. Is that the same Preservationist I met in the mall?

“And son. They’re alone.”

The extra guards arrive ready for the worst. Our weapons are typically smaller and less obvious than human guns but if you know what you’re looking for, you’d see each is well armed. Our weapons are also meant to incapacitate and perhaps erase your mind. We don’t kill as a general rule of thumb. Then again, in the last year I know of three in the Martian world that have wielded lethal human-made guns; Karen, Blake and Artie.

“Winston, take Suzette to the boat. She doesn’t need to be here for this.” Carl’s hand is on my arm.

“Suzette and I go way back.” The same jerk from the Inverness Mall crosses the bridge. Ahead of him is an older version, also with a gold studded earring in his right ear. Like father, like son.

“We aren’t.” I tell Carl quietly. “I kind of told him off. He knew all about me, my name, my father, that I saved Blake.”

Why is Luke researching Suzette? Carl wonders. Or was it Fredrick’s idea?

First, I shouldn’t be hearing him. Second, is Fredrick Francis’ first name? Why go with Francis? Both sound equally pansy for a guy in my opinion.

“Carl Daniels, I’m alone and unarmed.” Luke is icy cold.

“Arrest him?” Carl barks and two soldiers hold up guns.

“Tourists are coming.” Luke says, “And you have no charges for grounds to hold me.”

I glance to the dock and sure enough, a guide boat is approaching.

“Another attempt was made on Caesar’s life. If you weren’t involved, Preservationists were.”

“I heard and I wasn’t involved. Of course, the person who would benefit most from Caesar’s death is you.”

Carl swings at Luke but Luke hops back. Three soldiers back Luke away while two more gently urge Carl to relax. For being rational creatures, Martians do like to hit when they're offended.

"I may have some information, a lead really. Nothing solid." Luke dangles a tidbit to entice Carl to listen soberly.

Carl stares at him in dubiously and absolutely no trust.

"Carl, old friend, you know I do not approve of diluting our race with humans but I am firmly opposed to violence. The last thing I want is a Martian Civil War. It does not serve my purpose to kill Martians or even half-breeds. If I cooperate, I'd like a favor in return, protection for Fredrick."

We all look at Fredrick who is shocked.

Luke clarifies the situation for his son. "The Preservationists are ready to fight for what they believe in. I am not. If I align with Caesar to keep the peace, we will be seen as turncoats. I don't want you at Bermuda U in that volatile environment."

"Don't send him back." I say.

"He would be safe at your school. Young Mr. MacGinnis is. Why, it's my understanding that is largely thanks to you, Miss Russell. Interesting that you're being given a special tour guided by the Successor himself."

I jeer at him. Carl strains to not react.

"Fredrick is an excellent student and an asset to any university."

A derisive huff escapes Carl's lips. "Then you'll be close to Caesar and Fredrick close to the first accepted halfer, convenient for you to strike a fatal blow."

Luke flares up in indignation. "I have never resorted to violence."

"I remember a time when you did."

"I was twenty and we fought over a woman. What vital Martian male hasn't at one time or another? And it was my collar bone that was broken, or have you forgotten the outcome?"

So Carl is or was a badass.

"Can you come to Caesar's palace? This deal is for her to consider." Carl is being smart. Caesar can look at the situation with an unbiased perspective.

Luke thinks about it.

“Dad, I don’t want to go to Martian U.” Fredrick whines.

“Hush.” Luke scolds and then had addresses Carl. “It will look bad.”

Carl steps forward. “If war is coming, you’re either on their side or ours. The Preservationists will learn one day if you do not agree with their actions. One visit isn’t going to expose you, not completely. You’re diplomatic. You can explain you requested an audience to plead your case before things take a deadly path. It’s true. You aren’t treasonous for that. Nor does it make you trustworthy in our sight.”

“I’ll need to consider this.”

“Don’t take too long.” Carl warns with a get-out-of-here gesture.

The Preservationists leave for their car and we leave for the boat. A few tourists speculate on our large, mostly uniformly dressed group, but the majority enters the castle without a second glance.

“Are we all here?” Carl asks as we get on the boat.

“No sir. Two men went to see to a suspicious car that arrived shortly after the sedan. It parked but no one exited for a while. Then a man walked over to the sedan. They called for backup and four more left.” The ship’s captain tells him.

“You’re father is going to kill me.” Carl tells me and sits me in the cabin with two guards. Then he leaves with another six men.

“What do you think is happening?” I ask Winston the stony faced soldier.

“Car bomb.”

Chatty fellow. “Is Carl safe?”

“He took six men.”

This macho Martian junk is getting old. He freezes mid-grimace. I walk off the boat and up to the parking lot. I eat four Tootsie Rolls on my way. If I remain calm and move to get fresh air in my lungs, I can hold time very long but the size of the space is trying. Soldiers are located in several vantage points. The parking lot has six vehicles, two tour buses, two cars in the back corner, the sedan in the third closest slot and on the other side of the lot a coupe driving to the exit. It must have taken off in a hurry judging by the tire marks it’s leaving. Whoever’s inside, won’t get far. Several bullets are on a direct course to blow out their tires.

When I’m closer, I notice a bright orange flash under the sedan.

“Suzette, help me.” Carl shouts. His arms are under Luke’s armpits as he pulls him away from the sedan behind a stone balustrade.

“How are you not frozen?” I grab Mr. Francis’ feet and we move faster. Fredrick is flat on his back but his legs are in mid stride.

“I haven’t a clue. Must be immune.” He looks around. “We won’t be able to explain this. Can you get back to the boat?”

“If I don’t run. I’m not too tired yet.” I stick two candies in my mouth at once because that is a tall order if not an outright lie.

“Okay.” Carl walks to the coupe with a gun drawn. “Suzette, can you give a signal before restoring time? Maybe a quick release and hold?”

“Will do.” I walk taking deep breaths as I go. The trick to holding it is getting air. It’s the lack of air that tires you out. Of course there is only so much you can prolong it and my head starts to get dizzy. On the dock I let go and then hold again. I run up the ramp and pass out face down in my original seat. Close but no cigar.

Artie Blows a Gasket

“Suzette, are you okay?” Carl asks. We’re in the cabin and the boat is moving.

“Passed out.” I’m lying on the bench cushion.

He gives me some water and a candy.

“She doesn’t need candy, she needs rest. What happened in the parking lot?”

Luke shouts.

“Shut up.” Carl orders.

I sit up and take in my surroundings. Luke’s hand is wrapped in gauze. Fredrick is watching Carl, intimidated or frightened. There are only two soldiers. The two that were with me when I froze time.

Luke is stunned silent but only for a moment. “I most certainly will not shut up. Look at my hand. I was opening the car door when I heard an explosion and the next thing I know I’m behind the stone wall and flames blazed over our heads.”

“I froze time and saved your sorry ass so next time I tell you someone tampered with your car, you’ll listen.” Carl really puts it out there and to someone he doesn’t trust. He’s covering for me. Even so, if the news leaks that Carl can alter time it could be disastrous.

Winston pulls a gun. It isn’t the lethal kind. It’s a mind eraser.

Luke still doesn’t shut his pie hole. “You’re going to erase my memory?”

Carl shakes his head at Winston. “We can’t. He needs to remember why he’s helping us.”

“So it’s true. Halfers sometimes revive old skills.” Fredrick looks at his father. “They tried to kill you.”

I freeze, not time, just me. They know Carl isn’t full Martian.

“Us.” Luke corrects and has a new respect for Carl. “You saved Madam Caesar the same way?”

“I don’t have a lot of control over it. It only happens when something threatens my life and it’s hardly reliable. I’m lucky I could hold it long enough to pull you to safety and if either of you ever tell another living soul, your protection will be revoked.”

Carl is keeping me out of it and making his skill sound sporadic. Smart move but I don't care for them knowing about him. Since Winston was ready to erase memories, he knows about Carl and since I most definitely moved from sitting to the floor hunched over, he knows about me. Carl must trust him.

Experimentally, I touch Carl's hand and at first I hear a hum but it grows to full blown thoughts. He does trust Winston and Xavier, the other guard. He doesn't trust Luke but thinks he could in time, given more information and assuming he cooperates. If the worst should happen, he has preparations ready to refute the claim and/or protect himself if he cannot.

We dock at the compound. When I'm on the deck I see Blake and Caesar are wading in the water. When Caesar sees Luke Francis with us, she gets out and Blake follows sensing her urgency or reading any of a number of minds, mine included.

"Take them to the waiting room." Carl orders the guards and pulls Caesar to one side to update her of our predicament.

Blake pulls me into a hug. *A car bomb? You're exhausted. How long did you hold it?*

"Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty. I'll tell you about it later."

Mr. Impatient probes into my memory. "No need."

I shove him back playfully and sway on my feet.

"Those Preservationists know who I am." Blake's eyes the Francis men as they are led up the path. Blake sits me in the golf cart.

"Blake, would you be willing to help us?" Carl asks.

"Yes, I can read minds and I'll listen in on Luke and Fredrick." He says reading Carl's intentions and proving his accuracy.

Caesar takes off like a bullet to the house. It's a quiet ride. Blake keeps me from tumbling out from inertia when she takes turns hard and fast. When we park he asks Caesar and Carl for a minute with me. "Are you okay? You shouldn't hold so much so far. Did you really hear your father? Why would that be? You were touching and he was thinking about you. But how if you can't read minds? Maybe you're receptive because I'm always in your mind and I've sent to you so much."

My supposedly fast brain can't process his questions as fast as they are flying. I put my hand over his mouth. "I have to get ready. Artie is due any minute."

He takes my hand from his lips and kisses me. Then he goes with Caesar and Carl walks me to my room.

We don't quite get to the landing when Artie swoops down on us. "You weren't to take her off the compound. What did I hear about a car bomb?"

"We were safe." Carl tries to remove Artie's iron grip from his arm. When that fails he makes a request. "Please release me."

Artie obliges. "Suzette, how are you?"

I embrace my dear robot. "I'm ready to go home. Let me get my things."

"Already in the car." He glares at Carl.

"Suzette saved lives today. We weren't in harm."

I elaborate since Artie isn't relaxing. "Artie, we took a boat ride and walked around Urquhart ruins. We ran into that Preservationist from the mall and his dad. There was a bomb placed in *their* car. We think other Preservationists who know they don't want to start a Martian War put it there."

Artie's eyes shutter rapidly. Carl's startled by the eerie image. "No harm was done."

"Other than to the car and a need to remove evidence, no. If the Preservationists start a war, this is going to be nothing to what is coming." Carl says miserably. He gives me a big hug. "It was too short. I'll volunteer for all State trips and swing by Martian U to see you."

"I'd like that." I tear up.

"When you do, try not to bring snipers or bombs." Artie pulls me from Carl and marches me to our car.

"Artie, he's my biological father and we were safe."

We're speeding down a one lane each way road. Some Martian cows lounge in a yard. They have peculiar long bangs that hang down their face. Good thing they walk slow because they can't see a thing through that mop top. Artie hasn't spoken.

"Please don't be mad. We didn't mean anything by it." I can't take the silent treatment.

“He’s your father.” Artie pats my hand. “Did you enjoy spending time with him?”

I nod. “He’s super nice. It’s weird to think of him as my dad. I mean, I have a dad, two actually.”

At the next stop sign Artie puts the car in park, leans over and hugs me.

“Dad needs to recalibrate your emotions.”

“He does. I am quite envious of Carl.” Artie resumes the car. “Your friend Blake is going to be sorry that he missed you in Scotland. His mother wrote Stanley saying he’d be here within the week.”

“He caught me. Got here last night.”

Artie flips the car around like a stuntman from the set of the *Fast and the Furious*. I’m being dramatic but believe me, cars are toys in Artie’s skilled hands. “Why didn’t you introduce us?”

“I forgot. Artie, we don’t have time to go back. Even if we did he’s busy helping Caesar and Carl. They asked him to listen to the Preservationists.”

Artie does a second instant u-turn. Luckily the roads aren’t crowded in Northern Scotland. To whittle away the time to the airport, he grumbles. “You know I want to meet him.”

“Yes, it was my well laid plan to have you blow up at Carl and throw a mechanical man’s tantrum. And you my friend walked right into it.”

“And you say I’m a sassy robot.” At least he’s smiling. “How come every time something goes wrong with you, Blake is there? Oh yeah, because he’s always there.”

“Not always. When you’re around he isn’t. Like when Caesar was shot. And Blake was at the compound when the bomb exploded.”

“Like you should have been.”

“Artie, if you bring that up one more time so help me, I’ll freeze time and get out of this car and walk to the airport.”

“Do it if you think you have the energy for it.”

I slap his shoulder softly because hard would only hurt me. “Something weird happened. I heard Carl’s thoughts.”

Artie eyes shutter. “You read his mind? Did Blake teach you to read minds?”

“No, but he can send messages to me. First only if we touched but now even if we’re not in the same room.”

“Amazing. Do you think you could read my mind?”

“You’re a robot.”

“Maybe I can find a frequency that works. My workings are derived from organic Martians.”

“Artie, I’m not a fluent mind reader. Blake thinks I read Carl’s because he’s half. He thinks halfers are easier for him. And he thinks I’m receptive because I’m familiar with it.”

“What did you hear, from Carl?”

“When I told him the Preservationists knew me by sight, he wondered why they would investigate me. Then later on the boat, he claimed to have stopped time to save them and I listened to see if he trusted the guards. That time I focused on hearing him.”

“So he’s half, blood related and thinking thoughts directly concerned about you.”

“Excellent summation as always. And I had to touch him.”

“Let’s see if you hear your father, Stanley.” He thinks on that for a second and adds, “If you can, never tell him.”

“Why would I?” Oh, but wouldn’t it be grand?

“Can Blake send to anyone?”

“Some. But I’m the only who knows it’s him even if he pretends to be me.”

“Does he put ideas into people’s minds to make them do things?”

“He has.”

“The more you tell me about him, the more I wonder how you see him as trustworthy. When did he first send to you?”

“The day we met. He held my hand.”

“When was the first time without touching you, since clearly he’d hate that.”

Ignoring the snide commentary, I clear my throat. “We were at the Cove, we took a couple of shots of tequila. He meant for me to hear him then. Without his permission, I can’t hear like he can. Well, once when he was sleeping. And then a couple of times we ended up in this mental world of our shared minds. He can push me out though. I don’t

think I can if he's touching me, some but the longer he knows me the less likely I'll be successful."

"Hmm." He seems to understand why Blake is trustworthy, in my opinion anyway. "Tell me what the shared mind was like."

"Well, it developed over time. Once we fell asleep on the couch together and we saw each other's dreams." I skip over the mutual fantasy when I was with Jason and he was with Nancy. "Then after I was shot, he came by to see me and we ended up in this space that had memories, fantasies, virtues and secrets."

"You can see his secrets?"

"That corner is dark. We never tried to approach it but I think if we did, we'd be able to see some, that aren't super deep. And that shared space thing happened again last night."

"Were you touching him?" Artie's worries that I'm too close to Blake. I am, but I'm not worried.

"At first, then we recreated it as we fell asleep in our *separate* rooms."

"And today you heard someone without him around. I think this mind bonding is behind it. Did you have sex with Blake last night?"

"Not ever." I try not to sound insulted because Artie will read into it and it wasn't my decision that we didn't do just that.

"Do you love Blake?"

I don't answer. The answer is yes but I can't say that. "He confuses me."

"Because he isn't who you want him to be."

"Why do you say that? He's a good friend."

"And a womanizer who would bed you despite the fact you are dating his best friend."

"That isn't fair."

"It is fair and the likeliest assumption. I hate to be cruel but I don't want to see you getting hurt by a scoundrel and a cad."

"You're being redundant and you do that when you're too emotional."

"I'm not the only emotional entity in this car."

No Cal

Airports make me feel like cattle. On the plane to the States, I don't get any rest and I toss around all kinds of things; Carl is my biological father, he gave us a lead to my biological mother, Blake and I have taken his mind reading to a new level, Artie thinks I'm dumb enough to be another name on Blake's roster of done women. On the plane to California, I map poorly.

My time is off sync now. We get back late afternoon the next day and it feels like I've been up for twenty-four hours. Not quite true but close. I should have saved a couple of painkillers for the flight. When Artie pulls into our drive, all I'm thinking about is my big comfy bed.

"Stanley, we're back." Artie hollers.

Jason bounds down the stairs and hugs me.

It's the best coming home ever. "Jason, what are you doing here?"

"He miscalculated your arrival." Dad says. "He came to steal you away for a weekend in Napa. You haven't even been home an hour and you're running off."

I hug Dad. "Not without asking. May I?"

"Hmm? Would you be asking permission if I didn't know?"

"Of course." I bat my eyes and frown.

"What do you think Artie? Can we spare her?"

"She's an adult, although she hardly looks it with that childish expression. We had her all summer."

"Is it safe?"

"Dad, I'm in California. The Preservationists in the States have never been interested in me and are far from organized."

"We'll be at a Bed & Breakfast under a false name." Jason adds.

"That was so we wouldn't find you." Artie states unhappily.

"You can go." Dad decides. "If they can hide from us, they can hide."

"Thanks." I hug him again. Jason helps me take my things up to my room to get fresh clothes for Napa. He shuts the door and tosses me on the bed. I'm pinned down. "If you go anywhere next summer, I'm following you." He kisses me.

“It would be better to wait until Napa, where Artie can’t hear us.”

“You show up in that barely there skirt and expect me to wait?” He slides his hands up my thigh and finds silk panties. “Nice panties...”

I clamp my palm over his mouth. “Let’s hurry up.”

He purposely grinds into me as he climbs off. Oh yeah, he’s in a randy mood, as the British say. In the last day, I have spent close to 90% of my time traveling. This hour to Napa, I have to discourage Jason from panty inspecting me.

As he signs us in, I tell him, “We need to eat dinner first.”

“No.” He takes the key and we find our room. The bags haven’t hit the floor when he sweeps me up into his arms and lays be on the bed. Then he kisses me and climbs on top. I’m hungry and tired but his starvation out paces mine.

Jason kisses the base of my neck, “Did you kiss that Doug guy?”

Not a turn-on for me. “He kissed me but I told him I was involved.”

“For the record, I don’t want people kissing you.” He kisses the skin in the dip of my bra. “And for the record, I like the silk undies.”

“You must, they’re still on.”

Looking up with a lustful smile he nods his head to one side. “Did Blake kiss you?”

I’m caught. It’s an easy question but too much time has passed.

“I know he kissed you at school, after the Field Games.”

“You were at the hospital with Tara.”

He goes stiff and not in the right way. “Wyatt saw you. Are you denying it?”

“It wasn’t like that. I don’t want to explain what happened but it wasn’t like we were going to get together.” Did he ask Blake this question?

“And in Scotland, did he kiss you?”

I nod.

He rolls off me and lies on his back staring at the ceiling.

“Jason, I was lonely, he was lonely, we were glad to see each other but nothing happened. I’m so sorry.” I curl up on his naked shoulder. “Jason I love you, please give me another chance.”

“Why Blake? Why isn’t he satisfied with the scores of women throwing themselves at him?”

“Blame me.”

“Did you start it? Was it unreciprocated?”

“He put an end to it. He kicked me out of his room.”

Jason takes a deep, deep breath. “You were in his room?”

I fear he won’t trust me again. He’s passively lying in bed, not holding me, not comforting. And why should he? I’ve hurt him. I sit up wiping away tears. Because of my rash actions, not only am I losing my boyfriend, I’m also ruining a friendship between my two closest friends. Leaning over Jason, I reach for my shirt.

He seizes my arm. “Don’t.”

I drop my shirt.

“Take off your bra.”

Reaching behind me I do.

“Undress, and then undress me.”

I get up and slide my skirt and panties off. Then I unbutton his jeans, remove them and lastly his boxers. He’s more glorious than I remember. Extending his arms he wiggles his finger that I should join him. I snuggle back into my spot and he holds me to him. “I can’t have you kissing every halfer you find attractive. You’re my halfer.”

“I won’t do it again.”

His right hand glides along my back sending shivers up and down my spine, then he slaps my bottom. “You’ve been a bad girl.”

Okay, another non-turn-on. Hoping to discourage the behavior but in no position to make demands, I kiss his chest. His left arm pulls me closer. My plan seems to work until I feel another, harder slap on my derriere. “Jason, don’t do that, please.”

“Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time.” He smacks my lower cheek again.

Before his arm gets another chance, I grab it. We’re wrestling. I speed up and straddle him. I hold his hands at the sides of his head. We’re sweating and our chests heave up and down. Roughly, he kisses me.

I roll off and he rolls on. He runs his hands down my arms and holds my hands down. Yes, it was raw and it had been a long time for both of us. However, it is not how I envisioned our reunion, starting with the confession and ending with the wild sex.

My wrist hurt from his fingers. “That was different.”

“Didn’t you like it?”

“I always like being with you.”

“Did I take it too far? I heard women like to be dominated.”

“Where did you hear that?” And I blush before I can finish the question. “Oh, I get it. Those publications do have articles. I assumed men didn’t read them.”

He doesn’t meet my eyes. “Does that bother you?”

I snicker and shake my head no. “I didn’t expect one to be cited as a reference and for the record, not all women are created the equal.”

“So you didn’t enjoy. It seemed like you enjoyed it, a few times.” He kisses me softly. “Would you like me to try again?”

“After dinner. Jason, I haven’t had a decent meal since Scotland.”

We sort of compromise. That means shower sex. Napa is wine country and the food is gourmet. I overeat again but this time I burn it off quickly.

Martian U, Sweet Martian U

Jason and I have more mending to do. He doesn't bring it up but things are different. I miss his old frisky self. When we spend time, it's normal but in the sack, he never loses that edginess completely. Thankfully he tones it down.

On the ride to Martian U, I'm actually most excited to see Hilary again. She was right about a lot of things, even though I wish she weren't. One major flaw in her gender wisdom was that I needed to prepare to forgive Jason for straying. In reality, it was I that needed the forgiveness.

Artie can't simply drop me off at the pier. He thinks I'm feeble and prepares to tote my luggage. And would you believe that he blames my old wound? It's been four months since my lead poisoning and he thinks I'm still recuperating.

"Go. I don't want to look like I had to be dropped at school by my mom."

"You're almost as manipulative as your father." We hug. "I'll be in ear shot until the boat sails."

Asserting my autonomy doesn't seem so brilliant as I struggle with my two large suitcases. They roll but they are just large enough to make it awkward. Then I doubt my wisdom further when someone seizes me from behind. Immediately I freeze time only to see that it's Doug.

"Hello Suzette." Doug spins me around and really squeezes the air out of me.

My side hurts, so maybe I am feeble. "Doug McBride, you've made it. So glad to have you in my Troop. And where is Hilary?"

"She came to travel a bit first. She's probably on the Island by now."

I'm hurt she didn't call but the girl is independent and we'll have time at school.

"Hi Suzette." Fredrick has two cups of coffee. "Do you want one, I can go get another."

"I'm good thanks. Nice to see you Fredrick." This is uncomfortable. Let's face it, I wasn't kind to him in Scotland and now we're in the same school and Troop.

"Everyone calls me Francis."

"Then I will too. I heard a rumor that your name is on the short list for a Captain in another Troop."

“Mr. Russell called me this morning. I’m not interested. Maybe after I get my bearings.”

“Feeling like your whole perspective has undergone major shifting?” And I’m not talking about switching colleges.

When Fredrick smiles, he’s actually pretty endearing. “I was an ass in the mall. Still, you acted too swiftly.”

I shrug. “It was shellshock.” This is the polite social way we put the past in the past.

We embark on our shuttle to the Island. The two Scots, who were definitely foes in June, are chummy. I’ll have to ask Blake to keep a mental ear on Fredrick. Reformed Preservationist or not, his sudden benevolence could be reactionary and therefore temporary.

Hilary meets us at the Martian U dock and helps with my luggage. I have twice as much thanks to her fashion guidance. Doug has a large animal carrier on wheels. Inside is a tall shaggy sheepdog.

“That’s Merlin.” He introduces. “Mr. Russell made the arrangements for him. They put up a yard by the dorms.”

“Hi Merlin.” I wiggle my fingers through the cage. He licks them and starts getting rambunctious.

“Easy Merlin. Just a little further.” Doug and Francis roll Merlin and their luggage behind us. The boys go to find their room and Hilary closes my door as soon as we’re in mine.

“It is so eerie that Fredrick is all nice now. He won’t tell us what happened. Doug’s mom told us Carl had a come to Jesus meeting with both Francis’ men.”

“What’s a come to Jesus meeting?”

She takes one suitcase and starts hanging clothes with me. “Er, a day of reckoning. Carl set them on the straight and narrow after calling them on the error of their ways.”

“You drop a lot of religious lingo for a Martian.”

“I dated a Catholic human in my wilder days.”

“Wilder?” I scoff. “Do you know Carl very well?”

“Doug does. Carl is like a second dad and his idol.”

We stow the empty bags on the top shelf of my closet.

“Suzette, why are you wearing that?” Her finger points up and down me in disgust.

“I have to go to the office. Dad likes me to look professional.”

“A professional nun?” Hilary jibes. “Let’s go for professional and alluring.” Flipping lip-gloss my way, I get to work on my mouth and Hilary on the rest of me. She tucks in the tails of my pink blouse, which were tucked when I started the day but not as tightly as Hilary’s standards. Unbuttoning one more down, she flares out my collar to show some skin. Then she reaches behind my head and pulls out my scrunchie and runs her fingers through my hair to give it body. “These pants are atrociously austere and conservative.”

I sadly look down at my navy slacks. Two large hands grab the sides of my blouse and pull out the tails. I try to turn but Blake forces my head still. His fingers run through my hair and gather it into a ponytail. He snatches the scrunchie from Hilary. Then he reaches forward and buttons my blouse as it was.

Hilary is still and quiet, which I only saw when she met Dad. I smile. Blake is an effective man hunk.

“That’s Blake.” I say and she snaps out of it.

“And why is he undoing my fine work?” She darts daggers over my shoulder at Blake. “Do you prefer her like this?”

“Hey!” I warn.

His hands alit on my shoulders. “No, you’re way is much better. I want you to do it again. Not so fast this time.” He sits on the couch, elbows on his knees, fists holding his chin up. “Improvise if you must.”

Hilary resets me, slowly and spicing it up. I roll my eyes. Then she adds lip-gloss. Our audience of one is agog, jaw hanging for the flies to pass through his cavernous mouth. Blake is too cute observing like this is interesting.

“Sweetie, it is extremely fascinating. Better than Dancing with the Lost Stars of Survivor.”

Hilary glances at him, and then me. “And you’re not hitting that one because?” I’m aghast, so she goes for the kill. “Girlfriend, does your boyfriend have two dicks or something?”

Blake laughs. “Jason does and I only got the one and a half, so he wins.”

I scowl, at each of them.

She sashays over to Blake and plants a big smooch on his mouth. “Nice meeting you Blake. See you later, Suzette.”

“Ta-ta.” I wave before the door closes.

We’re just the Major and the Captain, alone in my quarters.

“You’re description of Hilary was sorely lacking.” He observes needlessly.

“She’s beyond words. Do you like her?” I’m hopeful. If he dated her, I could live with that. She’s more fun than the average Martian.

“Not like that.”

“You lie. Your eyes didn’t leave her when she gave you your requested performance.”

“I was watching you squirm and loving it.”

“She thinks you’re the bee’s knees.”

“Actually she was thinking her halfer kisses better than yours.”

I’m about to suggest that she’s playing him, but she doesn’t know Blake reads minds. “Hilary must like you some or she wouldn’t kiss you.”

“That was to see how you would react. You disappointed her. She couldn’t see that you’re jealous and feels gyped.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Sure sweetie. Is she right? Does her halfer kiss better than yours? You have kissed both of us as well.”

“Doug ranks really high.” Oops. That’s the sort of line that opens me up to being proven wrong.

Blake gets up. “Prepare to be proven wrong.” He kisses me and I am so very ultimately incredibly wrong.

Fudge! Our minds open up to each other. It’s wonderful, the kissing and the minds, but I keep it proper and short – more proper and shorter than our last anyway.

That didn't count as betrayal since I hadn't had a chance to tell Blake my promise. Unless you count the fact that we shouldn't be doing it regardless of an unstated rule.

"Blake, I had a talk with Jason and I can't kiss you anymore." My brain hurts when I feel a brick wall shut his mind closed.

He lets go of me in revulsion. "You're still dating Jason?"

"He almost dumped me but he's giving me another chance."

"*You're* getting another chance?"

"Yes! Is that why you kissed me? Thinking it would break us up?"

He gets right in my face and I back up. "You know full well why I kiss you."

I look away in shame. "I told Jason everything and he forgave me." I bump into the door.

"How can you stay with Jason when you're in love with me?" Blake is appalled.

"I love Jason." Notice I didn't deny my love for him. Yeah, I noticed that too. Dollar for donuts, Blake didn't miss it either. "And we've been dating for nearly a year. That's a big investment. I can't discard it only to be in the same position next year."

Blake turns red. "Isn't that your MO? Lead a guy on for a year, date him, all the while leading on next year's fling. Isn't Doug set up for your third triumph?"

I raise my hand but before I can slap him, Blake has it trapped against the door. "Let me go." I stop time but Blake isn't affected. He's too focused to notice. I release.

His lips barely touch mine as he tells me, "We both know we're going to kiss again. If I don't initiate it, you will."

I shake my head that I can't do that anymore.

He pokes the next button on my blouse. "Even now, you wouldn't stop me if I took off your top." Running that hand up my back, he adds, "And then your bra..." Feeling the strap, he glides along the bottom till his fingers enter the best opening to feel the clasp. "...that hooks in the front." After tantalizing my bare skin between my breasts, his hand caresses down and around my torso to the small of my back. "The next item to be removed would be your conservative black slacks."

"Navy."

“Navy slacks.” Blake’s hand slides under the waistband. “Then you’re...” His palm is on top of my underwear, “Lace panties?” His brows are arched pleased to find seductive undergarments.

I nod.

“Are they black?” His mouth flutters over mine.

“No.”

“Red?” Brilliant blue eyes dart back and forth as they focus on me. One curious brow remains lifted in enjoyment.

“Pink.” And I kiss him. I’m back in his mind.

His hand goes to my blouse and opens up my collar. He massages downward, his lips right behind nipping down my neck. “Pink lace bra to match.” Suddenly he shoves off the door and away from me. “You aren’t wearing matching undies for me.”

I’m wearing them to feel pretty under my power suit. It’s a girl thing. Jason isn’t due back until the next day. Oh no, I’ve already messed up with Jason. Will it come down to avoiding Blake? Is that fair? We’re friends.

He’s watching me think things through. I still want to have sex and he’s cooled down. How can he turn it off that fast? Blake rolls his eyes and I look down. Oops, he hasn’t cooled down. He pivots away and adjusts.

“Come with me.” Blake takes me outside.

We see Merlin’s fenced off yard, and the large black and white dog sniffs around, marking his turf periodically. When he sees us, he lopez over for attention.

“That’s Merlin. Doug brought him over from Scotland.”

“Perfect.” Blake decides. We slip inside without letting the dog out. Blake scratches Merlin’s head. Merlin rolls over to get a belly rub as well.

“What?” I wonder.

“Watch.” He says. Merlin’s back leg shakes feverishly. Then it stops. The dog is petrified.

“How did you do that?”

“How did you read Carl’s mind?”

“Can you stop time?”

“Just things if I touch them. Can you freeze him without freezing anything else and without touching him?”

Merlin stirs and rolls to his feet. He jumps up for more. Blake stares at him and the dog heals.

“Can you control his mind?”

He squints as he tries to explain it. “I can sooth animals. Try freezing him.”

I make an effort but the whole yard freezes, except Blake. I zoom in and eventually only Merlin is frozen. “I doubt I could freeze him and not something between us.”

“Why don’t I freeze?”

“You didn’t inside either.”

“You tried to freeze me?”

“When you had me against the door. You didn’t notice when I did or that I failed. Weren’t you listening?”

“I was too busy telling you off.” He looks at Merlin. “We need to spend more time with these things. We can’t do that if you’re dating Jason.”

“Are you telling me to break up?”

“No.” He rethinks his answer. “I’d like that for my own reasons, but if we’re around each other, things are going to keep happening. You’re in love with me.”

“Stop telling me that.”

“Well, what do we do Major sweetie? Stop hanging out?”

“I don’t know.”

Persuasion

My first meeting of the new school year and day is with Nicolas and Dad. Nicolas gives me a hug, a first. He hadn't seen me after I was shot, at least not after I woke up from surgery. "Suzette, you look well. How do you feel?"

"Healthy as ever, thanks." We sit at the conference table.

"I'm afraid we have to start off with another request that you may feel is personal and only given because we care about you."

I flash back to last year when father and Nicolas told me that Blake was off limits. The exact threat was if I slept with Blake I would be removed as Major, probably from the Troop and possibly even expelled. Not that I believed they do more than demote me but I didn't care for it then and I don't like the idea of it now. "Mr. Rafferty, I'd rather if you didn't treat me differently than the other Majors." No doubt they intend to reiterate that same ultimatum.

"I can't indulge you. This isn't a direct order so much as a goal. We would like you to stay out of dangerous situations where you could be shot, exploded or otherwise harmed."

Oh, so he's trying to be clever. I respond in kind. "In all fairness Mr. Rafferty, I think that is a goal you can set for all your Majors."

"Good point. Still, we'll hold you accountable to it."

Dad sits up and takes over. "I heard you met Fredrick Francis in Inverness."

"A couple of times, but the first wasn't a good impression and the second we didn't really get to talk. He was on my shuttle to Martian U and he was friendly."

"We want him to move to Mason's Troop as Captain. Could you discuss it with him?"

"I can. Why not Doug McBride or Hilary Addams? Or Jason Struthers for that matter."

Dad frowns. "Would you be willing to lose Jason?"

"I would hate it but he was only overlooked because we are involved. That doesn't seem fair. Are you trying to keep the best in my Troop or have the best as Majors and Captains?"

“How would your answer differ?” Nicolas inquires.

“Well, I already requested that Wyatt, Tim and Tara be transferred. Is that request being denied?”

“It’s on the back burner. We need to either dissolve or reinforce Mason’s team, which is down to three. Wyatt and the Millers are too much trouble to give to Mason on top of that. Blake and Jason have Wyatt under control and we’ll get to that transfer down the road but right now, they stay.”

Darn, I really want to lose those losers. “Setting personal favoritism aside, I hate to choose from any of our three transfers. I’ve read their specs and they are all outstanding. Having gotten to know Doug and Hilary, I’d like to keep them but that’s selfishness. And since Fredrick was a self-proclaimed Preservationist, I think we should keep him near Blake.”

“You don’t trust him.”

I think about it. “He has a lot on his mind but my instinct is he can be trusted. Once he gets to know Blake and Doug more, I think he will see that halfers are Martians too.”

“And if we were to select the best for Captain.” Nicolas wants a definitive answer.

“Jason Struthers. He was only denied Captain because he’s dating me.”

“We don’t want to transfer Jason. He is capable but he isn’t willing.” Dad tells me.

Good. I’m relieved. I want to keep Jason but I don’t want to hold him back. “Of the three new recruits, in order, Hilary, Francis and then Doug. None would disappoint you.”

“So you will talk to Francis?”

“I will.”

Nicolas sits back. “There is another option. We can move Blake to Mason’s Troop and move up Francis to his position.”

“No.” I shake my head. “If my opinion counts, Blake should not be transferred. I’d rather you make him Major and me Captain than lose him.”

“He is very familiar with two of Mason’s team; Belinda and Genna.”

“He is.” I agree. The reason I want to keep Blake close is because we want to explore our skills and without an excuse to have private meetings, that will be difficult. If he’s in a different Troop, Jason will go bonkers thinking we’re having an affair. I can’t tell Dad and Nicolas that and yet I need an argument that leads them away from thinking I’m involved with Blake. “I’ve come to rely on his mind reading for our Field Games.”

“So selfish for a Major that claims to put her personal feelings aside.”

“It is.” Poop! I’ve painted myself into a corner. “I’ll talk to Francis about being Captain under Mason. If he doesn’t accept, you can move Blake and promote Francis to his rank on my team.”

“Very well. Bring Francis to the Majors dinner. If he hasn’t accepted by then, perhaps it will sway him. Would you be opposed to escorting him if he is still considering his options?”

“Of course.” Jason won’t like it but right now, I’m saving my Troop.

“We’ll see you Friday.”

Falling Out

I go directly to Blake's office and tell him the news.

"They are going to move me to Mason's group if Francis rejects this offer?"

"I'm not sure. We can't let that happen."

"Sweetie, you still love me."

"Hush with the you-love-me crap. How will we experiment in two different Troops? Any time together will look suspicious to Jason. Hell even the others will be anxious about it. Leaders don't intermingle."

We don't need to meet to discuss our skills.

"I'll get Francis to accept. I feel like a jerk. Welcome to Martian U, now go play with other people." I wrap my arms around me.

Blake gets up and hugs me. "Sweetie, it's just school."

"Hi guys." Jason is back a day early.

"Jason." I move from Blake and give Jason a big kiss. "We were discussing some Troop stuff."

"How was your summer?" Blake's asks coolly.

"Wonderful. Napa was mind blowing." Jason responds equally frigid with a glaring hint of our reunion. "And yours?"

"Scotland was everything I ever imagined." Blake plays his fears.

I want to throw up or at least get away from them. "Jason, I have to talk with Francis. I'll come by after dinner with him."

"Francis, the Preservationist snot?"

"He's not a Preservationist any longer." Blake defends. "He wasn't much of one to begin with. When he tried to approach Suzette in Inverness, he wanted to ask about me. His father had all the specs on us after the shooting. Like his father, he thinks the Preservationist movement is extreme. They were both moving to moderate ground when their car was bombed."

"How did he plan to talk to me with his goons around?" I ask.

“He told them to keep Doug and Hilary occupied so he could get you alone. But *you* apparently slapped him and then Artie showed up pretending to be security.” Blake punches the right word to emphasis it was my error to make.

“I screwed that up.”

“You didn’t know and Francis is here now. I like him.” Blake tells me. “We had a good time in Scotland after you left. It wasn’t as good a time as we had.” To add fuel to the fire, he winks.

Stop it Blake.

“I can’t wait to meet these new friends of yours.” Jason’s hand grips my arm so strongly that it leaves a mark.

I pry his fingers off and go to my office. Let the men talk without me there. It’s not going well. I can hear raised voices. As I lock my door on my way out, I hear a loud crash. *Blake, what was that?*

Nothing. Good luck with Francis. Jason and I had a falling out this summer. We’ll get through it.

Well, nice of them not to tell me. Let them sort it out. I have pressing business with Francis. I take Francis to the Officer’s Room for dinner. Dad provided the reservation as added leverage.

“Wow! You Martian U kids know how to flaunt what you got.” Francis says as the waiter pours our beers.

I’m not focused. Stupid Jason and Blake acting like prehistoric men. I clear my head and raise my glass to toast. “Not all Majors have fathers on the administration. I don’t usually play the nepotism card but since he requested that I talk to you about being Captain under Mason, I figured no harm done.”

Francis drinks. “You’re American beer is flavorless.”

“Would you prefer wine? We have great wine.”

“I’ll get use to it.” He puts down his mediocre beverage. “Let me weigh the pros and cons of going to Mason’s Troop. Pro, I’d be a Captain. Con, he can’t take me to swanky dinners at the Officer’s Room. Pro, I’ll have an office and bigger room. Con, I won’t know anyone on his team. Too bad I can’t have both.”

“You can. If you don’t take this offer, they will move Blake and you can be Captain under me.”

My honesty surprises him. “You’d hate me.”

“I don’t want to lose Blake, it’s true. However, I have not made up my mind about you and I wouldn’t fault you for your choice. Blake actually spoke very highly of you this afternoon. You couldn’t have a finer reference than Blake, especially since he’s a halfer and you’re a former Preservationist.”

“Blake’s a good guy. We snuck off the compound and went to a pub, a human pub where we wouldn’t run into Preservationists.” He chuckles. “He has a very good talent of slipping past the guards.”

“Blake is a genius mastermind.”

“Except with women.”

I almost choke on my food. “Actually Blake does very well with women.”

“He’s too indifferent to them. Sure that will drive the curious aggressive Martian chick mad with passion, but Earth girls aren’t that easy. A guy needs to act interested, be attentive. Blake wasn’t. I do great with human chicks.” He blushes. “Excuse me. That was really boastful. I meant I do better with humans. Please don’t spread that around. Dad doesn’t care for humans.”

“It wasn’t terribly boastful and your secret is safe.” I’m too amused at the thought of the mouth-watering Blake MacGinnis striking out in an abundant playing field.

“What if I don’t care to be a Captain under Mason or you?”

“You’ll hit resistance, which is unfortunate. Jason, Hilary or Doug could easily serve well as a Captain. They shouldn’t have to force it on you but they’ll try.”

“Administration was a load of schemers at Bermuda U as well.”

“You don’t have to decide this week. There is a dinner party for the Captains and Majors on Friday. I’ll take you and you can meet more of the other Majors and the schemers.”

“What is Mason’s team like?”

“Really small. Only three since two of his team were killed and then several graduated at year-end. Administration is looking to beef it up.”

“Why were people on his team murdered?”

I tell Francis about Karen and her obsession with Blake, which leads to my infamous rescue of Blake. He'd heard of it but not the details. "So first Blake saved me on the quad, then I saved him in the stairs. Since I'm a girl and he couldn't have it ending even Steven, he saved me one more time by shooting Karen in the head."

"I thought the whole incensed ditched ex was folklore. Blake has swarms of women falling at his feet?"

"The numbers are only limited by the size of the student body."

"Good to know. I half wondered if he was gay the way he seemed bored at the bar."

"He's not gay."

Francis looks me over, probably wondering if I have firsthand knowledge of Blake's heterosexuality. "I'll think about being Captain."

"Talk to Blake. He'll be as unbiased as possible."

I point out some of the buildings on our way back to the dorms. It's not yet dark and they are visible even in the dense fog. A group of students stumbles ahead of us on the road. From the sounds of their drunken laughter, they are coming back from the Cove.

"I like you a lot better when you don't tell me to piss off." Francis tells me frankly.

"First impressions aren't important."

"Hah!" He bellyaches and the group glances at us.

"Francis? Is that you?" A girl in a tam turns around. It's Hilary. I didn't see her red hair under her cap and jacket. "And Suzette!"

"Hilary, Doug. Where have you been off to?" Francis hurries us up to chat with familiar faces.

"The Cove. You'll love it. They brew their own beer and it's fab, for American." Doug half-praises. "This is Jason and Tim and Tara."

Sure enough, Jason is there with the traitors and the Scots. He walks up to me. "How was your dinner?"

"Nice." I'd say more but not in front of the Troops and not with Tara glaring at me. "Hi Tim. Hi Tara."

“Suzette.” Tara says flatly.

“Hey.” Tim says, nicer by a hair.

“They heard of your transfer request.” Jason whispers like the icy reception is a shock.

“And that surprises you?” I state firmly for all to hear. “No, it couldn’t be. Not after you tried to undermine our Troop during Field Games.”

“Is the air fresher up there on your pedestal?” Tara asks with a threatening step forward.

“Fresher than the stench of mutiny.”

She punches for my gut but I’m faster and she’s inebriated. Seizing her wrist, I swipe my foot and she falls on her butt. “Bitch!” Tara shouts as Tim helps her up.

“Tara, we didn’t want to be in her Troop anymore than they wanted us.”

“Shut up, Tim. You’re just another admirer taken in by her power and charm. Suzette gets whatever she wants and then some.”

“Watch it, girlie.” Hilary says as Doug keeps her back. Martians love a physical conflict and drinking only increases the desire.

“They tried to ambush the games in favor of the other team?” Francis asks trying to fit clues together.

“No they tried to take both flags and declare sovereignty.”

“And when Tara was shot, Suzette stopped the games and got my sister help. The professor in charge wanted us to finish. Tara seems to have forgotten that pertinent part.” Tim reminds his sister who couldn’t care less.

Tara yanks away from her brother and charges down the path mumbling profanities on her way back to the dorm. Tim runs after her.

“Girlfriend, you are one polarizing personality. No one’s uncertain about how they feel about you.” Hilary tells me.

I snort – classy huh?

“She’s undefeated in hand-to-hand.” Jason brags.

“Roawr.” Hilary claws the air like a mad kitty.

We go back to our rooms. I think about going to see Blake to warn him that Francis may want to stay in my Troop but Jason is still at his door watching me.

I'm in your room now. Blake tells me mentally.

“Ugh!” I enter. “We are going to talk business and nothing else.” I drop my bag on the counter.

“As long as you keep your hands off me.” He jokes in the dark. “Don’t turn on the light.”

“Why not?” I flip the switch. “Francis is going to talk to you...” I look up and there’s a bright red swell on Blake’s left cheek. “Did Jason do that?” I’m not even mad. There’s too much on my mind and I don’t have all the details. I don’t want them.

“I got him worse.” He says. “At least I had the decency not to hit him in the face.”

I touch the spot and he winces. “You got him worse?”

“He won’t be doing sit-ups for a week.”

“Are you proud of yourself?” I gently run a finger over the welt.

“That feels nice. Maybe a kiss would make it better.”

I drop my hand. “What happened?” Taking sides isn’t an option but I have to know.

“After you left in May we had a difference of opinion.”

“Vague.”

“That’s all you need to know.” He won’t budge.

“Blake, you two can’t be fighting. It isn’t good for the Troop.”

“He can stop it.”

“And you can’t.”

“I will after he apologizes.”

“For what?”

“He knows.”

“Oh, really Blake. This is like talking to a child. I’m going to settle this right now.”

Blake stops me from standing up and going to Jason. “Don’t.”

It strikes me like a flash of lightning. Blake has been more forward emboldened by the fact that he doesn’t respect Jason. He respected our relationship as long as he respected Jason.

“You need ice. That looks painful.”

“I iced it.”

Regardless I put ice in a dishtowel. He flinches when it meets his skin.

“I regret that we didn’t make love in Scotland.” Blake closes his eyes and rubs into my hand. He’s recalling our short time in his bedroom and I can see it.

“Why did you kick me out that night?”

“Carl knew I wasn’t your boyfriend. That’s why he came looking for you.”

Blake pulls me to him.

“We can’t.” I say before he can kiss. “Francis is thinking about his options. I told him that if he didn’t want to go to Mason’s troop, you’d have to.”

He rolls his baby blues, sort of. “You are a horrible negotiator. Never put all your cards on the table. You’re so human.”

I mock glower at him. “He wants to talk to you about it.”

“I’ll go do that now.” Blake tugs my hand down and kisses the back. “Is that allowed?”

It is not nearly as satisfying but it’s allowed.

More to the Story

Jason answers the door in his pajamas, which are baggy drawstring pants and a t-shirt. “Honey, come in.”

He kisses me and I run my hands to his abs. With little pressure, I find the soft spots where he was hit.

“You’ve seen Blake.” He accuses.

“I saw the shiner you gave him.”

“What did he tell you?”

“That you had a disagreement and to keep out of it.”

He relaxes. “Anything else.”

“That he’ll stop fighting when you apologize. What does that mean?”

“It means Blake’s got a big mouth.”

“It’ll match his swollen eye. Jason Struthers, tell me what is going on.”

“Fine.” He paces, so I sit on the bed waiting. “Blake is mad that I slept with Tara.”

“Is that why she’s so rude to me?”

“Yeah. She thinks you keep all the good men to yourself.”

“Like either of you meant to have a relationship with someone subverting our group.”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re taking this well.”

I shrug. “So you slept with Tara. You told me I wasn’t your first. And it isn’t like Blake thinks all the Martians he’s screwed were virgins. He should know. Fact is, I’m surprised he didn’t know after their first tryst. Please tell me he doesn’t care for Tara. I couldn’t bare that. She’s so vile.”

“Suzette, you’re missing something here.”

“I’m not saying that because I’m jealous she slept with you. I never trusted her.”

“Honey, I slept with her after you were shot.”

Okay, I’m an idiot. “After you said we were exclusive?” The bitterness is setting in and clumping together to form a hugely hostile reaction.

Nodding he sits and holds me.

I shove him back and start pounding his chest. “You let me feel like a whore because I kissed someone and you fucked Tara.”

Pinning my arms he holds me until I still. I stop time and get out of his arms. At the door, I remember he doesn't know about my skill and now I don't want to tell him. I move back and cry in his arms, releasing time.

“Suzette, I missed you and I was drunk. She's nothing to me.”

“Oh, well if she's nothing that makes it all right. Let me go.” He does and I start to leave.

“It isn't like you didn't have the same urges with Doug and Blake.”

“I didn't have sex and you made me feel like it was a favor that you forgave me.”

“So it's okay that you're attracted to Doug? That you lust after Blake? And he wants to screw you so bad everyone sees it and I'm this dumbass that has to pretend it doesn't bug the hell out of me.”

“He was always careful. And if he's changed it's because he knows you screwed Tara. How much of a dumbass does that make me?” I slam the door.

Hilary answers the door cheerily until she sees me. “Girlfriend.” She sits me on the bed and holds me while I cry myself out. Then I tell her the awful truth about Jason accusing me of infidelity over some kisses and how he had slept with Tara before I even met Doug.

“You were right. Martians have sex without emotions and not to take it personally. But I can't. How can I trust him again?”

“Suzette, he loves you.”

I nod.

“You'll trust him again but it may not ever be the same.”

“It's already changed. Even in bed, he's got rough.”

“Did he hit you?” She's ready to pound him for me, bless her heart.

“No. He playfully spanked me but I didn't care for it especially since he was scolding me for kissing Doug and Blake at the time.” An odd snort blasts when I laugh and sniffle at once.

“You've been kissing Blake too?”

I wiggle free and curl up like a ball on her bed. She mirrors me and looks in my face. “Blake and Jason both liked me but Blake stayed away because my father told him dating a halfer would ruin my entire future.”

“Only if you want to be Caesar.”

“I know, right?” I whimper.

Hilary turns over and back with a tissue in her hand. “And he kissed you in Scotland?”

I dab my eyes and wipe my nose. “I almost slept with him in Scotland.”

“But you stopped before it was too late?”

“We were interrupted. So, I’m not really better than Jason, am I?”

“It’s still a bigger crime to take the money over just breaking into the bank to show that you can.”

“But sex with Tara was just sex.”

“Probably. She did dote on him but he kept her at arm’s length. When you’re use to steak all the time, and then you have to go a long time without it, even a tofu burger is going to look appetizing.”

“Hilary, one minute you’re making a case that Jason has done me wrong. The next you’re saying it wasn’t so bad.”

“It’s both.” Hilary crawls over me and hugs me from behind. “Does Jason want to break up?”

“I think the ball’s in my court.”

“Do you want to be free to date Blake?”

“I’m not going to break up with someone based on external potentials.”

“Right answer.” She hugs tight. “I’ve only met Blake today but he’s a huge flirt.”

“He’s got a lot of practice.”

“A real player? Well, then stay away. You can’t change a cheetah’s spots. Even if he seems sincerely smitten, it’s only because he hasn’t had you. Once you have sex, he’ll lose interest. Mark my words.”

“Blake is turning over a new leaf. He wants a steady girlfriend.”

“Sure he does. I’m not saying it’s impossible, just improbable.”

“What about Jason?”

“Do you think you can marry him someday?”

I shrug my shoulder.

“Make a dead line. Say yearend. If you can’t know by then, you have to release him into the wild.”

“Maybe. After all, he forgave me.”

“Of a weaker sin after he committed a bigger one.”

I move over and roll to face her again. “Do you love Doug?”

“He isn’t right for me.”

“That doesn’t answer the question. Blake has a theory about you.”

“He doesn’t know us.”

“He thinks he knows everything. Says you’re too feral and Doug is too tame but the longer you are bed buddies, you’ll come closer together.”

“Unlikely. Blake sees me as him and Doug as you and hopes we find each other because he hopes you two get your day in bed.”

“So you’ll find a new love, in a Martian.”

Hilary rolls on her back. “Don’t say that. Martians are cold. We both know that the sex will lack.” She blows a raspberry.

“How would I know?”

“Oh. I guess you would know if you had slept with Blake.” She giggles. “Next time.”

I grimace at her. That would level the playing field. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

In my room, I clean up and put on cute pajamas, shorts and a lacey top. I poke my head out my door and see Francis’ closing. Perfect timing, Blake is alone and the coast is clear. Fate is with me. I knock on Blake’s door.

“Sweetie?” His eyes drop to my cleavage.

I push him back and close the door. “Tell me again what you were going to do to me?”

“Why are you blocking me?”

I kiss him, but it’s missing the pizzazz.

“Geez sweetie, we can’t do this now. Jason told you.” He got in or just figured this explained my sudden attempt at fornication.

“And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’d hate me.”

“And I shouldn’t for you keeping something so important from me? Now let’s stop arguing.” I kiss him again, it’s getting better. “Take me, Blake. Do whatever you want. No strings attached.”

He walks backwards to his bed. I untie my top and grab the hem.

“Stop.” He says and kisses me as he reties my bow. “Tomorrow, no Friday. If you want to do this on Friday, I’ll comply.”

“I’m your Major!” I threaten, half jokingly, totally desperate.

“You won’t be if we do this.” He gets into bed and pulls me beside him. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you respect my virtue.” Tapping my nose with his finger he lays down the law. “No sex, sweetie.”

I cry.

“Yeah, I didn’t think you were really in the mood.”

In our mind space, we sit arm in arm. We don’t talk. We don’t move. He embraces me and I try not to cry.

He holds me all night. At four he wakes me. “These crazy Martians are going to wake up in an hour. Do you want to go back to your room?” He gives me a robe. It’s a scant nightie.

Another Dinner, Another Line Drawn

The bad news is Francis takes the position with Mason's Troop. It could have been wretched news if I lost Blake. Worse news is that the administration chose to keep the Scots together and Doug and Hilary move to Mason's Troop. Wyatt, Tim and the slut are still in my Troop.

Jason has bought me a bouquet of flowers every day since Monday night, so when the delivery guy brings a fourth, I knew who was at the door. I haven't seen Jason or Blake since that dreadful night. Hilary tells me they are talking again. She doesn't get it and neither do I. It's stifled but they are friends again.

Today's bouquet is blue irises. Tuesday it was red roses signifying love, per the card. Wednesday white and yellow daisies because they're cheery and hopeful. Wednesday a mix of pinks, because it reminds him of me. Today's card reads that he's sad without me. I'm not made of stone.

I open the door to a second knock. Jason is there. "I couldn't stay away. Suzette, can we talk?"

"Sure. I didn't mean to postpone this for so long."

"If you need more time, I'll come back."

I step aside and he sits on the couch. He's rigid with his hands clasped in his lap like he's in Sunday school. Jason is so attractive. Since the day I first met him I thought so. And he loves me, regardless what he did.

"Let's give it some time." I start.

"We're breaking up?"

"No, I mean, let's decide that we have until yearend to make this work and if we can't see marriage in our future then, we'll be friends."

He leaps up and kisses me. "I love you. We'll make this work."

I hold him, hoping that we can. "Fresh start, right now. No more infidelity and no more secrets."

"Do you want to go to California tonight? I promised Doug and he invited the other Scots." At least he likes Doug. Hilary and Francis will take more time.

"I wish I could but I have the Majors Dinner."

“Can’t you skip it?”

“No. Can you wait until tomorrow?”

“We’ll go again. Tonight will be a practice run.”

That’s the old Jason. Things are back to normal. “Keep enough energy that we can go again tomorrow.”

“Well, as long as we both have energy now...” We go to my room and have that famous make-up sex I’ve read so much about. It is rewarding and then some. Jason slips out while I take a post-coital nap.

My phone rings and it’s a good thing. I have about an hour to get ready.

“Hello?”

It’s Francis. “Suzette, is the Majors dinner tonight?”

“Yes. In an hour.”

“And Captains are invited?”

“Mandatory is more like it. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow to go out and party with Jason.” I rub my eyes wishing I could stay in bed. When I wasn’t talking to Jason, I didn’t sleep well.

“That’s fine but then why did Blake go with the others today?”

Poop! “Did he? Mars Stars. How long have they been gone?”

“Three hours, maybe. I just found his note telling me to join them if I can.”

As soon as I hang up I dial Blake’s school number and hope it forwards to his cell. It does. “Sweetie, missing me?”

“Blake, we have the Majors dinner tonight.”

“That’s Friday.”

“It is Friday.”

“Jason, is it Thursday or Friday?”

“Blake MacGinnis, you get your drunk butt back to Martian U ASAP.”

“Major sweetie, right away, ma’am.” He hangs up.

Please have listened.

Francis comes to get me an hour later. “Blake isn’t back yet.”

I call again. It goes to voice mail. Did he shut it off or is he in route? The reception on the boat is horrible. If he's on Pete's small boat, it probably doesn't get service.

"Will he be in trouble?"

"Medium trouble, I'm guessing. You go ahead to the dinner. Don't mention any of this. I'll wait at the dock."

I circle the pier impatiently. Geez, am I the only one who can read a calendar when classes aren't in session. Blake MacGinnis, how can you get your days mixed up?

I don't know. Jason told me it was Thursday.

He's close enough to listen to me.

Fifteen minutes. He sends.

Great, we're already ten minutes late.

Can you speed up time? Speed up the boat.

Never tried speeding up an area, so I do. It works. Tossing candy after candy, I wait. I don't need the energy. It's more like a nervous habit. All the air is moving swiftly and I can hold this for a long time. The boat appears about five minutes later. It looks like fast-forward on a video.

"That was so fun!" Blake wobbles up the pier. He's drunk as a skunk. "I am not drunk. I'm high."

Perfect, a stoned Martian. At least he's dressed nice. No tie but nice.

"Do I need a tie?"

"Don't worry about it." I stop time on Martian U and we hurry as fast as we can.

"Are you getting tired?"

"Not very." I release once we're close to the hall.

"Did you get tired speedy it up?"

"No, I could breath. You're an inquisitive stoner."

"You're prettiful when you're mad."

Inside Dad and Nicolas chat with Francis. They aren't pleased to see me walk in on Blake's arm for the second year in a row. If only they knew I'm keeping him steady, they'd still be mad but not at me. Blake's mind is open to me, more than ever under the

influence. His buzz infects my brain. Perhaps my sobriety will do likewise for him. The first thing we do is get him coffee.

“Hey buddy,” Blake greets the bartender with his elbows on the countertop. “Do you remember how to make a chocolate martini?”

“You again? Doesn’t look like you need one.” He slides a coffee in front of Blake.

“She needs one.”

“I’m fine. Drink your coffee.”

“I’m not drinking until you do.” Blake counters petulantly.

The bartender is already mixing my drink. I pick it up and it’s as tasty as last year. I hold up the coffee to Blake’s lips and he sips.

“You got back fast.” Francis compliments.

Blake winks at me. “I would never miss something as important at this sycophant gala.”

“Can’t be too important if you’re high.” Francis reads the signs better than I did.

“Doug has connections.”

“Good connections.”

“Suzette, Blake, you’re late.” Dad says.

Figuring it’s best not to let Blake answer, I tell him, “Time slipped away from us.”

“Bwah.” Blake blurts out. “That’s funny.”

“Not really.” Dad glares at him and walks off. After saving Caesar, he knew I did something to expose myself. Still, he’s never asked Artie or me for confirmation. Considering his strong reaction to Blake’s comment, he understood the time reference.

Food stabilizes Blake and me. The martini and his high had my brain buzzing. I’m ready to bail as soon as President Nathaniel dismisses us. Blake is not.

“Mr. Russell, wait up.” Blake follows Dad and I follow Blake with a bad feeling in my gut. We go to a corner and watch the procession of attendees file home for the evening. “Last year you pulled me aside and told me that I would ruin your daughter’s life. I don’t agree and I retract my compliance. You can expel me now, if you’d like but remember, I will be your future son-in-law once Suzette admits she loves me too.”

“Blake’s had too much to drink.” I excuse. “Ignore him. We’ll see you later.”

“He isn’t telling me this because he’s three sheets to the wind.” Dad correctly assesses. “As for your threat, I’ll wait. Suzette is dating Jason, why would she sleep with you.”

“Because we’re in love and I could have slept with her in Scotland if her other father hadn’t meddled. Is that how all Martian dads are? Was mine?”

“No.” Dad’s eyes sadden. “Your father was unlike any Martian or man I ever met. And despite your rudeness this evening, you are a shining example of him. You may be right that my daughter has foolishly fallen in love with you, however, she loves Jason and isn’t going to walk away from a sure thing for something fraught with uncertainty.”

“She’s broken up with Jason.” Blake snaps and looks at me.

“Suzette, did you and Jason break up?” Dad asks assertively.

“No Dad.” It kills me to see Blake’s painful and confused expression.

“Well, then, I won’t expel you today, Blake. I appreciate the heads up.” Dad walks off confident he shook Blake as much as he was shaken.

And like last year, Blake walks well ahead of me as we go back to the dorms. When I get to my door, he leans over and punches in the code. “After you.”

Lovely, another serious conversation. “Blake can we do this when you’re not stoned?” I jump when he slams the door hard behind us.

“How the devil can you still be with Jason?” He yells. “He cheated on you? He even told you since you missed the obvious clues; the rough sex, the paranoia that you were screwing around, the times you couldn’t get him on the phone. What is wrong with you?”

“What business is my sex life to you?”

“Aside from being in love with you like a fricking idiot?”

“Stop saying that. I’m with Jason and how do you know that things are strange in bed?”

“I heard Jason worrying about it. Apparently you commented about his change in demeanor. He got weird in bed because Tara likes it rough and wild.”

“All those clues aren’t easy for non-mind readers to see.”

He holds my face and looks into my eyes. He's in me and can see anything he wants. "You love me. You still love him? How? You love me more."

"I never said that." I smack his hands away.

"I can feel it."

"What do you want me to say Blake? Am I supposed to dump Jason over a stupid mistake?"

"A stupid mistake he did repeatedly over the summer. Dammit Suzette, he screwed Tara after you were back."

Instantly my eyes water. I'm not going to cry again. I've cried too much over this. Blake is pale white. He's too high to stop himself from saying too much but sober enough to know he went too far.

Gathering my resolve I tell him, "It is not your place to tell me these things."

"Monday I got scolded for withholding information and today I'm scolded for revealing too much. Do you know how hard it was to not let you go into the darkness when I hated that secret? When I wished it wasn't true and yet I wanted it to free you." Blake picks up the roses and throws them at the wall.

I freeze time and nab them from mid air.

"Stop it." He tries to take them from me. I will him to freeze. Wasn't sure if I could do that but he's an angry stone statue.

I release Blake and time. "Are we done here?"

"Why Jason? Why are you still with him?"

"Because things go wrong and you work through them. That's why."

"What about us? We could have been together."

"For how long Blake? How long after I yield to you before you add me to your list of conquered women and look for the next conquest?"

He's stunned silent at my question.

"You want me to hate Jason for sleeping with one woman when you've slept with every Martian on the Island."

"I wasn't dating you. Every one of those women wasn't you. It never satisfied me."

"I won't satisfy you. You've built us up in your head. I can't live up to it."

Blake relaxes. "You already have."

"If you're talking about our fantasies, those are exactly what scare me."

"No. I'm talking about the night you comforted me when I thought Yvonne ditched me."

That's an odd moment to reference. We didn't even kiss.

"Exactly. You loved me so much you let me sleep in your arms, no pressure. It was the purest thing I ever felt from anyone."

I'm astonished. My friend was hurting and needed me. It wasn't a burden.

"I haven't slept with anyone since then except Nancy to get her to do her effing job and find who was hunting you. And only then because you were in my head at the time. Can Jason say that? No he can't."

"This isn't a competition."

"It shouldn't be. You love me."

I block him. I don't want him to hear that I don't think it will work with Jason either. I don't want him to know I think in December we can be together. If he waits and I change my mind, he'll be hurt worse than now. And I'm in no state of mind to even evaluate our potential. I rub my arms nervously. "Can you please go?"

"That's it. Thanks and don't read my mind again."

"I'd appreciate that. You can't read me now?"

"I cannot." Blake walks to the door. "Maybe this is for the best. You weakened me. You killed my ambition."

I freeze time and Blake, shove him out the door and close him out. I release and cry alone all night.

Mother May I

Blake is constantly absent when I'm present. He doesn't bother to explain and he even misses meetings for the whole team. Wyatt is enraptured at the dissent. And worse yet, I can't be sure what he is planning about it because Blake won't tell me what he hears. Our friendship is over, I suppose, but I believe he would warn me if anything were brewing.

Jason apologizes for telling Blake it was Thursday and that it didn't even cross his mind that Captains were expected to go to the dinner. He says he got confused. I'm too emotionally exhausted to care if it's a lie or not. My gut says he's being honest. Blake doesn't blame him, that's for sure. The two of them are wreaking havoc, which means they are back to being friends. Meanwhile I'm left covering their tails when things get questioned. Jason sees more of Blake than me. He doesn't mind as long as I see more of him than Blake, which I do infinitely since I see zero of Blake.

My time with Doug the Scot is a little touchier for Jason. Doug hasn't made a move but Jason is a Martian and they have good memories and bad emotional coping skills.

Four weeks pass like this and it's taking it toll on me. When the announcement for the Fall Conference arrives, I forward the email to Blake emphasizing that he is to attend. I get the usual automatic reply, "You weaken me and I'm better off without you." What a prat? Hilary taught me that word. Blake taught me it's true meaning.

Artie never calls middle of the weekday, so I'm happy to answer. I used to tell him everything but I never tell him about Jason cheating on me or Blake's anger.

"How's my favorite robot?"

"I can't be your favorite."

"Why not?"

"Because that implies that I've reached maximum favoritism and I'm sure I'm about to make you love me even more."

"You found Amanda?" How I knew he was calling about my biological mother, I don't know. Maybe I'm desperate for good news. Even better, I'm right.

"I found a recent address. It's in San Diego. She always loved the coast."

“Where can you pick me up?”

“We’ll wait for this weekend.”

“No need. Blake can cover for me.” I think he will. He owes me for covering for Jason and him running to the mainland more than once since school started.

“If my calculations are correct on Martian U’s path, we can meet in Long Beach. I’ll be there by six at the latest if I can’t find a good flight.”

“Thanks Artie.” I hang up. I freeze time and go into Blake’s office before he can read my mind or sense me coming or whatever he does these days to know where I am so he isn’t. “I have to go away for a couple of days. Please cover for me until I get back.”

“Is that an order?” His blue eyes are cold and hard.

“No. A favor for a friend.” Just seeing him makes me cry.

He glances up and is pained to see I’m upset. Quickly he looks away. “Don’t do that.”

I sniffle and wipe my face dry.

“God, I’m so weak. How can I still care?”

“Please cover for me. If it weren’t important, I wouldn’t ask.”

“Will you be safe?”

“I’ll be with Artie.”

“Does your father know?”

I shake my head.

“Can you tell me why?”

“I can but I don’t want to.”

“I’ll cover. Be careful.” He scribbles on a piece of paper. “Here’s my personal contact information. If you need me, call.”

My hand shakes as I take the paper. “Thanks. I’ll send you my information in an email.”

“Is this a happy mission?” Blake asks before I open the door.

“Very, if it’s successful.” I leave and call Pete for a pick up.

Artie and I rendezvous in Long Beach mid-afternoon.

“What’s wrong?” He asks immediately.

“I’m nervous. Where are we going?” That’s true but I’m still shaken by seeing Blake and our impersonal interaction.

“Old Town San Diego. Amanda was there as of a month ago.”

“Would she have moved on?”

“My opinion is no. Amanda roams until she finds a nice spot to ensconce. Then she stays put assuming nothing scares her off. On the other hand, she scares easier than an alley cat.”

“She’s been gone for five years, so no need to keep looking. Good. She’ll be there.” My phone rings. “Jason.”

“Where are you?”

“With Artie. I can’t talk about it.”

“When will you be back?”

That’s a good question. “Three days.” That’s more than enough time to find Amanda or think of a reason if we need more. If we succeed, it may not even be a day. It should be at least a day. Hopefully we can spend some time together. “I’ll come by when I’m back.”

“Love ya.”

“Me too.” I put my phone away. “I can’t believe we may see Amanda soon.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” Artie frowns as we near congestion. “We’ll be lucky to get through this traffic in time for dinner. How are things on campus?”

“Jason and I were going through hard times but we’re better.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“How’s Blake?”

“We aren’t talking, much. He’s covering for me, which is super considerate considering. Basically he says I’m an energy and time waste.”

Artie shifts in his seat. Could be road rage but I think it’s Blake.

It takes four hours to drive a hundred miles. By seven o’clock, we’re outside a little house at the end of a cul-de-sac. We park and go to the door. There are no lights and no car in the driveway. Artie picks the lock to garage, no car in there either.

“Looks like she has a scooter.” He says as he examines the floor. My organic eyes take longer to adjust to the dark and I see a spot where a motorbike of some kind comes and goes. Artie is connected to the world wide web. So if he says scooter, it’s a scooter.

“Do we wait?” I ask as we go back to the front.

“Hello. Who are you?” A pudgy Mexican woman asks from the next drive over.

“We’re friends of Amanda.” Artie tells her. Amanda changes only her last name. She has trouble remembering aliases and since most people use first names, she keeps Amanda consistently.

“She’ll be back soon. It’s Tuesday and she has a book club meeting until eight.”

“I know the one. It’s at the Borders in the mall.”

“Nope. The Barnes & Noble across the street from the mall.”

“Thanks.” Artie tells her and then faces me. “Let’s go get a coffee and come back.”

“You’re good.” I extol inside our rental.

“I know.”

We drive to the Barnes & Noble and there are three mopeds in the parking lot. Casually we go to the Starbuck’s within. We see a group of ladies with the same book, a new romantic novel. Yep, Amanda loves romance.

Part of the group is hidden by bookshelves. I pick up my hot chocolate and browse the travel books nearest the club. Turning the pivotal corner, Amanda eyes are aimed right at me. She’s in a chair on the far edge of the group.

Amanda is five eight and in her mid-fifties. I look a lot like her. Now that I met Carl, I can see him where I don’t look exactly match Amanda. I didn’t have a chance at blond or blue eyes. Both have dark hair and eyes. Her face is angular, as is mine. Carl has sharper bone structure and his nose is very narrow like mine but his is bigger.

“Pardon me.” She tells her club and goes the other direction but Artie is down that aisle. “Artie, it’s been a few years.” She pretends we haven’t ensnared her.

“Hello Amanda.” He responds.

Admitting defeat is never easy for Martian and even less so for Russells. The irritated Amanda joins us at a table in the café inside the store. She jumps right to her biggest fears. “I really like it here. You tell Stanley to leave me this time.”

“No hello Suzette. It’s good to see you. Nice that you didn’t die last May.” Artie criticizes. Did I ever mention that they kind of clash?

“Artie, be nice.” I glower at him. Maybe she doesn’t know. Or more likely, since I’m obviously not dead, she doesn’t think it needs to be brought up. It doesn’t.

“Hi Suz. It’s good to see you. Nice that you didn’t die last May.” Amanda repeats her given lines.

“Hi Amanda.” I say. I don’t hug her. She gets a little freaked. “I met Carl Daniels.”

“Really? He’s a good man. He’s your father. Of course, you know that by now if you bring him up so quickly and found me so easily.”

“He’s great. I really liked him.”

“Carl is perfect. His job is shit.” She talks like a fussy old woman with a potty mouth and not a vibrant Martian woman in the prime of her life.

I laugh. “Amanda, I don’t mind you running off, but can you keep in touch with me?”

She looks sad. “You won’t tell Stanley where I am?”

“Not my job.”

“I hear you’re a Major.” She says it with distaste. Dad thinks it’s the greatest accomplishment in the history of time and Amanda thinks it’s a demerit.

I hear the understatement. She thinks Dad is pushing me into an equally repulsive career path as Carl. “Dad wasn’t behind it.”

“Don’t ever underestimate that brother of mine. He’s a wily dog. And if he didn’t do this, he surely could have stopped it. In his position, he would only need a little doubt with those admin types.” She mimics his voice. “Suzette’s too young. Let’s pass her over this time.”

“I’m a good Major.”

“But you don’t like it.”

“Some of it is bad.”

“It doesn’t suit you. You’re my daughter not Stanley’s.”

“Stanley is in every way Suzette’s father.” Artie rebukes. “And he is actively present in her life.”

“Ha! Then why did he build a synthetic Tommy to raise her? Neither of us are natural parents but my genes are in her. Humph, if something has more claim on how she turned out than me, it’d be you, not Stanley.”

“It’s easy to have more impact than a absentee parent.”

“Five minutes in and we’re already bickering. Artie relax.” I glare at him.

He pouts. Robot pouting is funny but I don’t laugh. Some more complicated feelings look unnatural.

“You haven’t perfected your emotional reactions, Artie. You look like you need to take a dump.”

So much for not making fun of the robot.

Warning

I decide we need to eat. Amanda sounds cranky. Could be we trapped her but I think she likes to get caught. It proves we miss her. Regardless of the source of her grumpy, Martians are always friendlier when fed. “Amanda, have you had dinner yet? Any good Mexican restaurants in these parts?”

“Suz, San Diego has better Mexican food than Mexico. Only place better is your house when plastic man makes it.”

“Thank you.” Artie says.

Amanda has always mocked Artie. I’m not sure if that was how she treated the infamous Tommy.

We follow her home to park her scooter and then go to a lovely Mexican place with outdoor tables.

“Do you hear that?” Amanda asks pointing up to the ceiling fan.

“What?”

“That song. It’s that annoyingly rousing song by Punk.”

“Pink. It’s *Raise Your Glass* by Pink.” I correct.

“It was playing at the bookstore as well.”

“Pop music is like that. Redundant and repetitive.” It is a strange selection for a themed restaurant.

“Whatever, there are other songs you know. Everywhere I go I hear it and it sticks in my head.”

Artie flags down the waiter. Amanda needs some food and fast before he strangles her.

The last time I saw my biological mother I was fifteen. Now I’m twenty-one and much more experienced at putting people at ease. So I order a pitcher of margaritas. If food will calm her, margaritas will open her up. Artie even takes a small glass to sample the flavor. He’ll be able to duplicate it later and the restaurant has a reward for best margaritas in San Diego. He even orders their house special for the same reason.

“Wow! He’s eating. Must like my choice of dinning establishments.” Half way down her second glass, Amanda is less guarded and more spirited. “How is Carl?”

“He misses you.”

“I only stopped writing because he wants to come see me. How do I hide if the number two banana flies in whenever the bug bites him? Geez, the sex isn’t that great.” She giggles. “Actually, he’s pretty darn good.”

“Okay, ew.” I hint that I’m her daughter and to clean it up.

“And the best of it all was when we made you. I should have taken extra precautions. Since I was hiding I had to use human birth control, which is unreliable for us, and he was insatiable; morning, day and night. Nothing is a hundred percent and we were too active. Oh, but it was worth it – not just the sex, you turned out to be the best mistake I ever made. Carl almost got me to marry him after that and before I clued in there was a bun in my oven. Multiple climaxes, if you know what I mean.”

“How’s that not abundantly clear?” My face twists as I try to let my pragmatic side rule over my urge to hurl.

“You’re so like Carl. Always so proper. Humans are so funny that way. I miss him. I’ll write. He never gave up my location, until now.” Her eyes narrow on me. She gets that I’d be an exception.

“And neither will I.”

“What about Mr. Metal Pants? He’s loyal to Stanley.”

“I have free will. You know that.” Artie’s eyes start shuttering. “And I’m not actually metal so much as a combination...”

“Stop that silly twitch. It’s unnerving and I don’t care what you’re made of.”

How am I the most mature in our party? “Why have you been gone for so long?” Even when Dad didn’t hunt her down, she use to come back on her own from time to time. Occasionally without letting anyone see her but me.

She gets quiet and pushes her half eaten burrito away. “A war is coming. The Preservationists are going to start killing. First those in power protecting halfers and then halfers. You be careful. You protect yourself. You trust no one that isn’t trustworthy. Do you hear me little girl? I may be the worst mother in history but I love you. I don’t want to have to come out of hiding to avenge your death.”

The hyper paranoia about coming wars and Preservationists is typical Amanda. The Martian sense of revenge isn’t but she means it. If I were killed, she’d never rest

until those behind it were slaughtered. “I hear you. You keep in touch. I’ll come hide with you when it starts.”

“It’s started. Carl and you are both in danger. That car bomb may not have been intended for either of you but you’ll be next. If any knew of your skills, you’ll be top of that list and you shouldn’t be spending so much time with open halfers that read minds. What are you thinking?”

My face falls flat. She knows I have skills. How? And how did she learn of the car bomb? It wasn’t in the news. Nor was the fact that Blake reads minds.

“Suzette loves the halfer.” Artie interjects unwelcomingly.

“We aren’t that close. But if they come for Blake, I won’t sit idly by and you both need to accept that. This war rubbish is hype and if it isn’t, I will fight like all Martians should.”

Amanda is taken aback. “Maybe there’s more Major and Martian in you than I thought. If you fight, I fight. Just so you know.”

I pretend to write a mental note on my hand. “Martian war inevitable. Check. I’ll fight for right. Check. Amanda has my back. Double check.”

Amanda isn’t content with miming, so she pulls out a little notepad and pen. “Write it with ink.”

For the sake of harmony and speed, I obey.

Artie leans over. “Add my name. And your Dad, even that biological one in Scotland. And we’ll discuss Jason and Blake later.”

“They’re on the list. And Doug and Hilary.” I scribble the final names underlining Blake MacGinnis for Artie to learn to accept I trust him, even if he hates me.

“She’s got one trait from you, Amanda. She’s stubborn as a mule.”

“But she doesn’t look like one.” Amanda doesn’t either but I think she means it as a joke. “How long can you stay before Stanley sends a search party?”

“I prepped for three days.”

“In the middle of the week? Must be nice having that kind of power so young.”

“Blake is covering for me.”

“Does this Blake love her back?” Amanda asks Artie.

“I haven’t met him. He’d like to see her naked. Doesn’t mean he doesn’t have true feelings as well.”

“Artie!” Why do I scold them? They don’t listen.

“If she has half the chemical attraction that her father has, I’m sure there is a long line of love-struck boys.” Amanda ignores me and the adults chat. At least they aren’t squabbling.

“There are more than I care for.” Artie tells her.

“I’m not happy that you came without an invitation.” Amanda declares as if we made the biggest social gaffe ever. “However, it pleases me that Carl has met you.”

“It pleases me too.”

Artie rolls his eyes and Amanda cackles like an old hag. “Hah! The robot is jealous of Carl. Don’t be, she adores you more than all of us put together. How can mere mortals compete when you’re part father, part mother, part toy, part doll, part friend, part teacher, part cook, part this, part that?”

San Diego

“Blake, it’s Suzette.” I’m taking advantage of his kindness to promote our friendship anew. I don’t have anything to say that can’t wait.

“Sweetie, when are you coming back?”

I smile thinking he misses me. “Don’t know.”

“You’re Dad is looking for you and he wants my hide if I don’t produce you fast.”

Deflated I fight back tears, “Sorry. Can I have two more days?”

He groans. “I’ll cover as long as you want but it’s already too late.”

“He hasn’t called me or Artie.”

“You’re mistaken to think Mr. Russell isn’t surveying you more closely. Look, we have some trouble. Wyatt knows you’re gone too.”

“What has he done?”

“Nothing yet. I haven’t heard him thinking of a plan but I heard him wanting to expose this.”

“I can’t believe they’re still in our Troop.”

“The longer you’re gone, the more chances he has to divulge your truancy.”

“Okay, I’ll come back tomorrow. Thanks for your help.”

“Suzette?”

“I’m still here.”

“Did you succeed? You sounded happy at first. I didn’t mean to ruin that.”

“I am. I’ll tell you about it later. If you want.”

“Maybe not. I have to get you out of my system.”

“Cool. I get it. I was a bitch.”

“Yeah.” He agrees. “I was a bigger one but...”

I cover the phone so he won’t hear me sniffle. “I understand.” Then we hang up. Amanda practically tucks me in. She even has a bed for Artie. He can sit on the couch and go dormant but he likes to feel human.

“Suz, I’m sorry I disappear all the time.”

“Why do you do that?”

She shrugs. “I love you. Remember that.”

“I know. I love you and would like to see you every now and again.”

“You watch yourself. I don’t want to read about you getting shot anymore.”

“I gave it up.”

“Promise me to write down your list every night.” After I nod that I will, she hugs me goodnight and goes to her room.

I roll on my side. I miss Amanda. I could use some mom advice. We probably won’t get to it this visit since we’ll have to leave so soon. Maybe she’ll call or better yet, we can have occasional meets. Mars Stars, I’d settle for pen pals.

I fall into a deep slumber. My dreams are vivid and clear. Amanda and I are chatting and when we discuss Carl, he appears. He disappears when we bring up Dad. And so it goes as I tell her about my life. Then I ask her about hers and it ends. I have no details to fill in that piece and I’m stirring. Remembering dreams is rare for me. I should write this down to help cement it.

“Suzette, wake up.” Artie is shaking my shoulder. “Amanda is gone.”

My mind is fuzzy. I can’t think straight. “I need coffee.”

“You need food too. She gassed us.”

“What? How can she gas you?”

“She magnetized me, had a device hidden under the floor board. She used a frequency that tampers with my circuits. So no, I wasn’t gassed but yes it was effectual.”

My mind struggles through the fog and the reality of his words hit me. “Amanda left? Again?”

“That’s what she does. At least she wrote you a note.” Artie gives me a closed envelope.

The hand written note says:

Dearest Suz,

Know that I love you very much. I trust you but even if Artie’s free will is reliable, Stanley has already locked onto this location. You’re very special to me and staying away kills me but I can’t live in the Martian world and you can’t live in mine.

Remember the war is coming. I won't promise to write. We both know that won't happen. Rewrite your list every night. If you talk to Carl, tell him I love him and I'll look him up if I get near Scotland. Tell Stanley to stop hunting for me. He's a controlling bastard. I love my brother but it's true.

Love, Mom

PS. Tell Artie the side effects are temporary.

"Why does she do this?"

"Suzette, you got to see her. We know she's alive." Artie clears away a stray teardrop from my cheek. "If it helps, I have a direction that she headed. I downloaded her computer contents when she was talking to you. Amanda has another property under a different name in Santa Barbara. The game is afoot."

I clean up and we're off again. Artie has the roof down and after morning traffic thins, we cruise the coast like happy-go-lucky tourists. We should have smooth sailing until noon.

My cell buzzes. "Blake, what's up?" I'm so distracted by Amanda that I forget we're at odds and that I told him I'd return later today. I have time to go to Santa Barbara and catch a boat back to Martian U.

"Get back here now. Ray called a mandatory lunch meeting for all Majors and Captains."

"Mars Stars. Why?"

"This reeks of Wyatt. I can't cover for you on this one."

"Tell Ray I'm sick."

"Suzette, is what you're doing more important than this?"

"No. I guess not. I'll be there." I hang up. "I have to get back to campus."

"Call your contact and I'll search for Amanda." He pats my hand.

I pout. Stupid Blake. One day it's just school. Next day it's more important than family.

"Don't be upset. This was fun. We haven't done anything like this for years."

I grin. There was a time that Artie and I had mini-adventures all the time. Then I went away to Martian U. “We’ll plan a fun day soon.”

We meet up with Pete in Laguna Beach and he does his best to get the boat moving fast. I speed it up, as I did for Blake. Pete is sped up too. It looks funny, and perhaps if I weren’t trying to meet a hard deadline, I’d laugh. Then I stop time and run at top speed for the admin building. Five minutes after noon, I run to President Nathaniel’s office.

“He’s expecting you.” Ray’s assistant Mark tells me.

Inside, Ray sits alone at his massive desk. “Close the door.”

“Aren’t the other Majors coming?”

“I cancelled the meeting. Please sit.”

I’m worried now. This is fishy.

“Why didn’t you know it was cancelled?”

“She hasn’t been in her office all day. I’ve been looking for her.” Blake barges in.

“Blake, you can’t waltz into my office unannounced.”

“Sorry. I’ll come back.” He leaves.

“How did he get by Mark?”

“I don’t know.” But if I guess, it would be Blake planted an idea that Mark had to go to the bathroom or do something else away from his desk.

“Where have you been?”

“Today?”

“And yesterday?”

I called in sick for you.

“I’ve been fighting off...”

Flu.

“... the flu.”

“I have a report that you have been off the Island.”

He’s bluffing. Wyatt alerted him but doesn’t have a shred of evidence.

“You’ll have to call into question its accuracy. I’ve been in my dorm, mostly bed.” We do catch colds like humans. Start to finish is faster and harder, worse for me with my sped up metabolism. Even faking sick makes me go green from the memory.

Blake is a good guy to this for me when he’s mad. And it feels great to have him in my head. Egad, how can I say that?

Focus Suzette. You’re distracting me.

“I will check my sources.” Ray states as if my alibi will be null and void after he produces ironclad proof.

“Thank you.” I say aloud and send a huge thank you mentally to Blake.

“And Suzette, sorry for getting you out of bed. I hope you don’t relapse.”

I get up. “No problem. I was going stir crazy.”

“If you’ve been in your room all day, how did you miss the cancellation?”

Too many emails. We’ve gotten at least fifty, so he’ll buy it.

“I was midway through my inbox when I came here. I have tons since yesterday. If anything, it’s a shock I saw the first one.” I stop at the door. “Um, President Nathaniel?”

“Yes.” He still has that look of the cat that ate the canary.

“Why was the meeting cancelled?”

His eyes sharpen on me. “I can cancel meetings.”

“Certainly. It just strikes me odd that you called this one and cancelled within twelve hours. To call one with such short notice makes me think it was important and yet it was cancelled without any urgency to reschedule.” Looks like the canary ate the cat.

That took the smug right out of his expression. “That’s all Major Russell. Get better.”

Blake is in the hall waiting for me. When we get to our floor, he pulls me into his office. “Why did you challenge him on the meeting?”

“So he knows I’m on to him.”

“Suzette, he knew. That was reckless.”

He used to think I was ballsy.

“I used to think you loved me, too. Look, I don’t feel comfortable covering for you like this. Try to keep it from happening too often.”

I block him and leave for my dorm. If I'm in the office, I'll have to keep the wall up. Campus feels horrible. I want to be with Artie and find Amanda. I'm tired of being Major and under hawk like watch for my every move. And mostly, I want to stop fighting with Blake or get away from him. Geez, I'm really unhappy.

I wonder if I could ask to be transferred to a new Troop. How do I approach Dad so he can make it look innocuous? What am I thinking? It's to get space from Blake. All I have to do is hint around and let Dad find the solution. It is what he wants.

Oops, I did it Again

Opening the doors to the dorm, I feel too emotionally spent to deal with anyone or anything. Since I supposedly haven't been feeling well, working from my dorm won't seem peculiar. Passing Jason's door, I hear voices. He should be in class. I have a bad feeling as I knock.

"Who is it?" Tara calls and I storm down to my room. How can he? Of course he thought I was out for another day at least. I'm an idiot.

Jason is there in seconds pounding on my door. "Suzette, please let me in."

I open it and stand with my arms cross. This is going to be a doozy of an explanation. He better be careful, I'm already in a fighting mood.

"I thought you weren't back until tomorrow."

"Plans changed as did yours not to screw Tara apparently."

"I didn't. She came up to me in tears, saying we needed to talk. Then she was all over me. Why are you back?" He thinks something is fishy. He thinks he's been set up.

Because Blake called me but I'm not going to say that now. I'll deal with Blake later. He may have set this up or not. Someone set us up if Tara approached Jason. Then again, not sure I believe that. "And you didn't sleep with her – this time."

"No."

"So it was the once?"

He's stone solid.

"Did you have sex with her after I got back from Scotland?"

Jason turns away. He's doing the math. "That effing a-hole. I should teach Blake another lesson."

"We said no more lies. Don't blame Blake. He was drunk at the time. I told him you came clean and he dropped that detail not knowing how I overlooked it."

Jason steadies his resolve. "Yes. Once. I went to tell her it was over and she got me drunk and yes."

She got him drunk. He can't even own up to his part of it. That's something I should have known before we agreed to try again. Does it change it now? That is the question. "You didn't sleep with her since we talked?"

“No.”

I nod. Not sure why. I guess we go forward as planned. Honestly, I don't really care either way.

He sighs. “Suzette, by December, do you think you'll want to marry me?”

I shake my head. “At best, I think I will want more time but I'm willing to be wrong.”

“I'm not willing to wait.” Jason states callously. “We should end this thing before we keep hurting each other.”

For the hundredth time, I cry. I look at all the flowers he sent that are wilting but I hated to throw them out. What a waste of money and effort? Sums up our romance. How foolish that I tried to keep Blake from destroying them. And that sums up my relationship with Blake. I pick up the pink arrangement to toss them. I can't do it. I find a shoebox and put them in my closet. Then I get the others. Jason helps. Putting them on the top shelf and closing the door I weep.

Jason could never stand to see me cry. He hugs me. And then he kisses me. We still have strong feelings for each other. Maybe we can rekindle our romance. Maybe forever is obtainable. Maybe we can start fresh. But not when he smells like perfume.

“I can't kiss you when you reek like Tara.”

“If I hadn't messed up, do you think we would have made it?”

“I think so.” Blake would have stayed back and that was my biggest chance of messing it up from my end.

He kisses my cheek and goes before the water works pour again. Hilary isn't in her dorm to seek comfort because it's the middle of the day. I send her a text message and she comes after her class is out.

“We broke up.” I say when I let her in and sob in her arms.

Amazingly, she doesn't say a word. When I'm cried out, we drink beers and still we say nothing. Opening a second round for both of us, I finally tell her, “And Blake hates me.”

“No. He's hurt. Not as bad as you but hurt. You'll both feel better and maybe it will work out. Or maybe Jason and you will find your way back. Or maybe it will be a whole new guy. You know Doug thinks you're really cute.”

I laugh. “What would I do without a friend like you?”

“You’re tough. You’d cope.”

“Tough girls don’t cry as much as me.”

“They do if they go through as much as you do. Jason was your first serious relationship. Of course it’s going to be hard when it ends.” Hilary says the last word softly for my sake.

“It’s more than guy trouble.” My head falls back on the couch. “I found my mother and then she ran away again.”

“Damn, you’re having a bad week.”

I close my eyes wishing to turn back time before everything went wrong or speed it up to when it doesn’t hurt anymore. “And then Wyatt tried to get me caught and President Nathaniel almost had me. I don’t want to be a Major. I don’t want to be at Martian U. And I wish I were gay.”

“Girlfriend, I don’t swing that way BUT if I did, I’d do you.”

I laugh softly, more a snicker but it feels good. “But I’m a halfer.”

“You are?” She kids. “I couldn’t tell. You keep your emotions so bottled up.”

I click my beer to hers and say, “Men suck.”

And she adds. “The good ones do. Fuck ‘em all.”

“So tell me more about Doug.” I joke and she gets a little solemn. “Oh my goodness, you do love him.”

“Oh.” She huffs. “That is so unfair. I kiss Blake in front of you and no reaction. You make an obvious and bad joke and I give it all up.”

“So tell me why you love Doug.” I hug her arm eager to hear someone’s happy story over my tired sadness.

“Don’t you go there! I am not going to let myself romanticize it.”

I lean on her shoulder. “If you can’t do that, you have it bad.”

“Sometimes you halfers are a real pain in the arse.” She emotes then she gets a dreamy far away look. “Suzette, he’s so smart he drones on about the dumbest things. That asinine job at the museum and guiding tourists makes him a thousand times worse. He wouldn’t know humor if it bit him on the nose and yet he delivers bad line after bad

line. He so sweet that he forgets his own needs. And when we're together, I feel like I'm the only girl in the world."

"Sounds wonderful."

"And the sex is indescribable."

When I see her off, Dad is standing in the hall about to knock. "Honey, can we talk?"

Hilary slides past. "Nice to see you Mr. Russell."

"Liking Martian U?"

"Love it. I wish I was in Suzette's Troop."

"I do too."

I wave at Hilary and Dad closes the door. "Ray is in a snit. You were off campus."

"He thinks I was but he doesn't have any proof."

"And you were. At least Artie was in San Diego for no apparent reason."

So Amanda was right. Dad does have Artie bugged. "Dad, I didn't get caught."

"But you did insinuate that Ray was trying to frame you."

"He was. Wyatt set me up." And it hits me. He set up for me to find Tara and Jason as well. Blake couldn't talk Tara into faking tears and then jumping Jason – well he could but he wouldn't.

Dad examines me with an unreadable face. Then he smiles. "Nice. Get a video or at least audio next time. Ray could use a good scare."

"You aren't mad?"

"What's the point? Whatever you do, I'll love you. You can't stop me."

"At least someone feels that way."

"Men problems." He worries.

"Nothing I can't handle." I'll cry more when he's gone but I won't let him know I'm upset. Maybe he's fishing. He has spies. The news is so new about Jason, he couldn't have heard yet.

"You look tired. Get some sleep."

"I'm going to bed now."

When he leaves I type up my resignation. They'll deny it but I'll bargain for a year off. I need to plan. If I mean to quit, I'll have to run. Can't even tell Artie since Dad has a tracker planted on him. Maybe he'll find Amanda again and I can run away with her for a while.

That's a horrible idea. She doesn't want me around. If Artie found me his bug will get her caught. Dad will act fast next time.

When I quit, I'll go back to Scotland. Carl will hide me and I can spend more time with him and Caesar. In a few years, I'll reach out to Jason and Blake. They'll have intendeds by then, but that's fair. They shouldn't wait around for a mess like me, not that either of them would even if I begged. I hurt them both. They both hurt me. I guess friends do that. They may not see me as a friend anymore, but I will never see them as anything but.

As for Doug and Hilary, I'll see them in the summer and when they finish school, we can hang out all the time. I'll even get to know Francis better.

Yep, I need to get away from Martian U.

Blake wasn't kidding. There are tons of emails. I sort through them. Mostly class notes and another reminder about the Fall Conference. Perfect. I'll run after that. It's in Missouri this year. I'll simply sneak off on a different plane and send Blake my resignation.

For the next few weeks, I'll have to conserve my cash. A couple of five hundred dollar withdrawals won't raise an alarm until I'm gone.

I'll find a small town in the south and make my living off the land until I have a new identity. It'll be like one of those movies where the girl ends up waiting tables for a gruff but heart of gold owner of a greasy spoon. Artie could set me up fast with fake IDs but I can't ask him without a reason. Wouldn't work. He'd know my new name and track me down. If I could ensure at least a year of not being found, I would ask him but that robot would come down on me faster than I can say *just kidding*.

The conference is a month away. That's a long wait. Patience is a virtue. I wonder if it's in that bright spot in my mind.

Fly Away Little Birdie

Turns out, I don't have to wait for the conference. I've stashed four thousand dollars in cash and one duffel packed in case an opportunity arises. And it does a week earlier than plan.

The Wednesday before our conference a big storm hits the Island. Martian U watches the weather and floats away when we have the time. Islands aren't fast moving. This storm is a whopper and too large to circumnavigate. By lunch, the students are ordered to get two meals from the commissary and go directly to their dorms. My first fall at Martian U, we had a similar situation. It was a lot of hullabaloo about nothing.

When I fetch my meals, I see Pete in the cafeteria talking to the cashier. I wave him over thinking fate is indeed in my favor. I used his services to get off to find Amanda and now I innocently run into him.

Since he bootlegs all kinds of contraband and I'm a trusted friend of Jason's, as far as he knows, he comes my way. "What can I do for you Suzette?"

"When are you sailing back to the mainland?"

"As soon as I get the green light. Right now, they expect that to be around six."

"I have another need to go to California. Can you get me to Los Angeles?"

"Sure. Meet me on the docks. Everyone will be quarantined, so no one will see you well." Usually we find a remote spot but he's right, no need tonight.

"See you then."

To bide the time, I search for a hotel near Los Angeles. I find a great one near Hermosa Beach, which is pretty much a town of bars. It's pricey and I shouldn't waste so much in one blow but it's half price and really nice. Ocean view.

At five o'clock, I randomly register Blake's email on several news bulletins. Each one will send him a confirmation and maybe more. If his inbox is full of spam it'll stall him from seeing my resignation. When you resign, you have to write your Captain or Major. Admin was shortsighted and didn't bother to note that a Major should resign up and therefore directly to Nicolas. I'm sure they see it as understood but they know better than to assume with Martians. I'll send mine to Blake. He can deal with the ensuing drama. It'll be good practice since he'll be my replacement.

Lightning strikes, followed by a boom and the lights flicker. I don't have time to waver. My heart stops when I see the "sent" confirmation. If Blake is on line, I may not have time to get to the dock. Then a peel of thunder bangs at the same time the sky flashes. Must be directly overhead. Our lights shut off and on again. Martians don't stay blacked out. However, my laptop rebooted from the surge. "Excellent." Assuming the same happened to Blake's.

I stop time and walk past a frozen Jason going to Blake's room. Good, he'll have to deal with Jason before he can read my email. I release time when I'm far enough that none of the dorms can see me. Given the torrential downpour, that isn't far.

"Wondering if you'd make it." Pete says as he helps me on his boat. "We have to wait. The storm is passing. Probably another hour."

"No problem." I say but it is. I shake the rain off my umbrella and close it. Pete stows my suitcase in a storage closet.

"Hell of a storm." He dangles his coffee pot to see if I'm interested.

"Please." Even I get chilly when wet. I'm not big on coffee. The caffeine sends my heart rate into hyper drive and if I'm not careful, I'll crash hard. Pete gives me a cup and toes his space heater to face me.

The ship's radio crackles. "The lightning is stopping. You're advised to wait but I told them you have a return to make this evening."

"Roger that." Pete answers. "I'll go. The ocean is calm enough for us. Lightning won't strike me." He sees my puzzled look and he explains, "Martian technology. Only choppy waters are a problem and I don't even see why they are. We go too fast."

The boat is rocking, Martian technology or not, and we're tied to the dock on the east side of the Island. This is going to be a bumpy ride.

Pete kicks into high gear faster than normal since he's the only boat on the move in the harbor. I'm getting flashbacks to my wipe out.

To distract me from the stormy water, Pete talks to me. "I didn't want to stay. There's a bigger storm three hours behind that is even worse. I need to pick up a delivery and get back before it comes in."

"Can you drop me off near Hermosa Beach?"

“I can drop you off at the pier maybe a mile away. I have to go to Los Angeles harbor, so that’s barely out of the way.”

I give him his money and then resume holding on for dear life. As long as I have the caffeine rush, I speed us along. On the mainland the storm is merely a drizzle. I walk down the strand to my hotel and check in. Eight o’clock and I’m free at last.

The room is better than the photos on line. It’s decorated in a marine motif, very apropos. There’s a fireplace and a balcony overlooking the beach. My cell rings and I shut it off. It was Blake. Well, he knows. I have to stay hidden for a week at least for the resignation to stick. Two to three days for my absence to be beyond justification and then a few more days before the administration gives up. Maybe more for me since Dad is on staff.

There’s a television, as any rental would have. I’m not a big TV person and after surfing the channels, I know why. I go on the balcony and the sky is cloudy but dry. Good enough to stroll along the beach. I put on a denim skirt, cute blouse and sneakers.

First I go out to the water. It’s low tide but the water is choppy. When I get near the pier, there is enough light to see sand dollars and seashells in the surf. Less than a block from my hotel is a pedestrian only block with two-dozen bars. Being Wednesday, they aren’t crowded. I walk upstairs to a quintessential pub-ish joint; wood panels, dark mahogany bar and tables, red vinyl covers. Have they remodeled since the eighties?

I take a stool and look over the drink menu.

“What’ll you have?” A burly bartender asks wiping down the counter as he does.

“What do you recommend?”

“Ladies like rum and Coke, cosmopolitans, mojitos, margaritas, sangrias...”

“The first one is fine.”

He looks down his nose at me. “Rum and Coke it is. Got any ID?” Glancing at my license he teases, “Were you sick when you took this?”

“I don’t take good pictures.” He nods at the truth of it and hands me my order. The drink doesn’t last long and he brings me another without me asking, on the house.

“Hello.” A cute red headed man sits next to me. “Are you here alone?”

“Waiting for a friend.” I lie. I’m on a man diet for the rest of my twenties. His red hair reminds of Hilary and guilt sets in for a second. I’ll write her when I can.

The man waves at the bartender, "I'll have another and another for the lady."

"Thanks." I smile. *Now go away.*

"What's your name?"

"Suzette."

"Pretty name. Hello Suzette, I'm Craig." We shake.

"Hi."

"I'm waiting for a friend too. Mind if I join you for a spell?"

"Sure." I may as well enjoy his company. He's cute. I've never been with a human before. Maybe I'll revise my man diet to pure humans only. "Do you live around here?"

He sits on the stool next to mine, close enough that our legs touch. "In Manhattan Beach. You?"

"I'm passing through."

"Going somewhere special?"

I shrug. "No where in particular. I ran away." Oh no, the booze is making me honest. Maybe it'll give me a hole in the head as well. I need it about as much as honesty.

"I've been there. If I may make a suggestion, Vegas. Tons of people. You can get lost in a crowd that size. And you'll have lots of things to do if you don't want to think."

"Good idea."

"No, it isn't." Blake says from behind me and I jump.

"Hi, I'm Craig. You must be Suzette's friend."

"I am. Blake." Blake puts his arm around me and kisses my cheek. "Sorry for keeping you waiting sweetie."

"I haven't been here long." I could kill him. How did he find me that fast? Since we're touching, I hear the answer. He asked Pete if he saw me and read his mind. Mars Stars. I'm the only Martian who has to resign to a mind reader.

Blake laughs in my ear. "How many have you had?"

"This is my first."

“No it isn’t.” He turns back to Craig. “We can’t stay. We have dinner reservations.”

“It’s ten thirty at night?” Craig slurs and waves at some guys coming into the bar.

“We’re late eaters.” Blake pays the bartender and escorts me outside. It’s raining cats and dogs again. “No jacket?” He takes off his and puts it on me. His arms are freakishly long. “Where are we going?”

“You’re going back to Martian U. I resigned.” I walk away from my hotel, which is visible from our location.

With a simple embrace of my hand in his, he stops me before we’re drenched by the heavy rainfall. “We both know how that will play out. I’ll escalate to Nicolas and he’ll force you to stay.”

“I’ll escalate over him. Ray would love to see me leave.”

“I’ll go over his head to Caesar. She says she owes me and she outranks everyone so I win.”

“You’re a jerk. Why are you doing this? You hate me.”

“I wish.” He reaches into my pockets.

“Hey!” I wiggle to get him off me but he gets my hotel card.

“The Beach House and look, it even has the address. He looks at the street sign and sees that we are right on top of it. “I’m disenchanted that you are this easy to find.”

I freeze time but Blake still moves.

“That was your first mistake. I felt you stop earlier and I didn’t freeze. Took me too damn long to figure out why. And you gave your real name to that leech in the bar.”

“Craig was a nice guy. Nicer than you.” I release since it’s hard when I’m drunk anyway. “Aren’t you the smartest Martian in the whole darn world? I’m not going with you. Now give me back my keycard.”

Blake picks me up by the waist and carries me to the hotel.

“I can walk.”

He sets me down and holds out his arm.

I push it away and stomp in the puddles all the way to the hotel. I’ll scream for help once we’re inside.

“Don’t try it.” He warns sensibly.

Hustling to keep my time in the rain short, I walk into my hotel. There isn't a soul around. We go to the elevator. A bellhop comes off and I'm about to scream when Blake snatches me into his arms and kisses me. Our minds unite faster than ever and I love it and his lips. He smiles and leads me on to the elevator. What a kiss to stop me from yelling. Now I can barely think.

Making It Up as We Go

“You run away in style.” Blake gives a low whistle. He walks on the balcony.
“Sweetie, you got finesse, some nerve but finesse.”

“Blake, please accept it. If you accept it they can’t stop me from resigning.”
He laughs. “Yeah, Mr. Russell will be fine with that. And if I did, he’d be sure they never found my corpse. Now stop being silly and come back to Martian U.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I explained that I don’t fit in since I’m partial Martian...”

He cuts me off. “And you want that going on the record?”

“That wasn’t in the text of the letter. And why not? You and Doug are out.”

“Sweetie, how many people are you trying to hurt at once?”

“Don’t call me sweetie.”

“Why are you really doing this?”

“That is why. You hate me. Jason hates me. I hate being controlled by the administration. I hate that Wyatt tries to foil every plan I make. I’m tired of it all.” I start crying.

Blake picks me up and sits us on the couch, my legs over his lap. “You’re taking it too personally. I don’t hate you, quite the contrary. And same goes for Jason, who just told me today that three of us should hang out for old time’s sake. Admin is admin and Wyatt is lower than dirt. He couldn’t foil you if he had three extra brains. You’re too smart – usually.”

I hide behind my hands. “And my mother doesn’t want to be near me.”

“What? I thought your mother passed away.”

I shake my head and grab a Kleenex. I cry way too much for a Major. “Artie and I found her and she said she’d keep in touch. Gave me the slip the next day.”

He puts his cheek on the top of my head. “Is that where you were when you snuck off?”

I nod.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It’s my fault I wasn’t there for you. You were there when I needed you.”

“You’re here now.” I kiss him and start unbuttoning his shirt. No reason not to.

He halts my progress as I rake my fingers across his collarbone. He tries to stop kissing but keeps pecking me. “You’re upset.”

“Sex will relax me.” I sit on his lap, a leg on each side of his hips and nibble his neck. “You too. All wound up after hunting me down in the middle of a big scary storm.”

“Suzette, please.”

“Please what?” I hold his wrists. I stop time and him and unbutton his shirt. I release when I slump forward from the effort.

He rearranges me to be sitting next to him not even fazed that I nearly blacked out. Blake digs into my pockets again and retrieves a Tootsie Roll for me. “We can’t just hop into bed?”

“Why not? We’re not involved with anyone else. When I was dating Jason, you were ready to jump my bones.”

“I thought you were going to break up with him.”

“And I did. You were right.” I run my finger down his open shirt over his tee.

“You’re upset and we have some things to talk about.”

I suckle his earlobe. “We can talk afterwards.” This is his big turn on. He isn’t thinking about talking or words. He holds my waist as I rise and fall subtly, seductively, teasingly. Having him right where I want him, I begin to undo his belt.

“We have to go back to Martian U?” He says meekly.

“Is Pete waiting?” I go back to the earlobe and I will every time he says anything about returning to Martian U.

“I have a boat.”

“It’s raining.” I taste his Adam’s apple.

“Mmmm.” Blake can’t think. I love it. “I don’t want you quitting – school.” He adds as an afterthought.

I place my fingertip over his lips. He kisses it. “Only because it will make you look bad? That will pass.”

“No.” He’s indigent and sits me upright. “Because you’re reacting to a lot of unrelated things that came down on you at once.”

I pout. I guess tonight isn’t the night we finally sleep together. “I want to quit.”

“No you don’t.”

“You don’t know everything about me!”

He covers my eyes and I see our special mind space. “I know a lot about you.”

“Why is it brighter?”

“Because you know most of the big secrets I was hiding and your virtues are more pronounced.”

“What secrets?”

“I was hiding that Jason cheated from you.”

“Why? You wanted us to break up.”

“I hoped you would but I didn’t want to tell you. It was Jason’s place. Plus I was afraid you’d stay with him. And I saw them in bed and you didn’t need to see that image.”

“Where did it go?”

“It’s in that collage of memories somewhere.”

“Why would my virtue get brighter?”

“You’ve been standing up for what you believe in. With me and what you believe wasn’t my place to challenge you. With Jason and what you deserve in a relationship. With Nathaniel when he tried to trap you. With your father to find your mother. Probably with your mother when you saw her.”

“Do your virtues change?”

He lifts my chin. “It’s getting brighter too. I love you and no matter how hard I try to erase it, I can’t.”

“You don’t want to love me. I make you weak.”

Blake kisses me. Why is he allowed to kiss me when he wants? “Because I’m not drunk or upset or thrashing back at the world crashing down on me.” He squeezes me gently. “I lied when I said you make me weak.”

“I take you away from your work. I made you cover for me. You’re here right now trying to stop me from running away.”

“Because only chickens run away and a lot of that brightness is due to your insurmountable courage.”

“I’ll try again.” If I’m so insurmountably brave, why do I always cave in with him?

“Because I’m always right.” Blake brushes back my hair. He likes it down. “It’ll be different. We’ll work on testing your time stopping; longer stretches, changing up the size, speeding up, slowing down, reversing. And see why you’re hearing and I’m stopping in small doses. I think we swapped a bit. I’m able to do everything I could before but it feels diminished in some way. Maybe not, we’ll see.”

“You’re really clever.”

“You inspire me and for the record, loving you makes me happier than I’ve ever felt. So if you don’t quit, I won’t be a jerk anymore.”

“I don’t think you’re a jerk.”

“I am but you love me so you don’t even see it.” Blake stands up and pulls me into his arms like a baby. He places me on the bed. “We’re done talking.”

He takes off his shirt and tee, then his pants, finally his boxer briefs. I bite my lip. He’s flawless. Then he removes my useless garbs starting with my top and ending with my silk bottoms. He tucks me under the covers and shimmies by my side.

It’s strange. I’m not horny or desperate or lustful. It’s like this has been coming and I can’t believe we’ve arrived at last. Will the phone ring with an emergency right before we can start or worse before we finish? “Blake, are we really going to do this?”

“I think we’ve waited long enough.” He starts off with holding me and we’re in our mind space. Eventually he progresses to kissing first my lips and then every square inch of my body. When the big moment arrives, he tenderly positions his manhood, to coin a phrase, and takes his sweet ass time. “I can hear you.” He reminds me as he doesn’t increase his pace. The anticipation is horrible and magnificent at once.

It’s amazing that anything is on my mind at all but more of the same. As we lay in post-sex bliss I decide to walk around our minds and see what happens when I get near the memories. Childhood to adult scenes from both of our lives swirl together in a mish-mash. Our younger memories are harder to distinguish unless I see a familiar face like Dad or Artie. His mother is very pretty. I see one with my father and his mother and a

small boy and I touch it. It fills my vision. It isn't my memory but it impacts as if it were. Blake is very sad. It's his father's funeral. Only his mother and my father are there. Faintly in the back, I see Artie's face. I retract my hand and the memories circles with the others.

"Amazing." Blake says having tried the same thing to my memory of the day Dad came to my room to tell me I was made a Major.

On the other side, where things stem from our imaginations and hopes, are our goals. There aren't nearly so many pieces in this eddy and they aren't as clear and detailed. They are vibrantly colored. Blake has dreams of marrying me. Or is that my dream?

"Can't be sure on that one." He's embarrassed.

I smile at him. The darkness is very small now. Our secrets and fears are here. I'm not interested in those today or ever.

Blake walks over and touches a spot. It's my fear that he only escalated my worth because he hadn't slept with me. With a sly smile he looks back at me and shakes his head. It shrinks.

I go to our virtues. If I were looking with physical eyes, I'd have to shield them from the light but in our shared mind space I can see clearly without strain. The items here are more substantial than even the memories. I touch a smooth crystal orb. They all look alike but once I have this in my hand I know it's Blake's ability to read minds.

"I think I'll hold on to this and maybe I'll be the mind reader." I like the idea of turning the tables on the know it all.

Blake touches a few until he finds my time stopping skill. He tosses it in his hands like it's a heavy basketball. He gets a mischievous look and I open my eyes on the bed.

The sphere isn't in my hands, which makes sense. It was only a mental representation. I look quizzically at Blake and then he's gone. Disappeared in thin air. "Eek!" I squeak when he taps me on my shoulder.

I could get use to this. He thinks and I hear.

We swapped. "Blake MacGinnis, you give that back."

He crawls into bed and we put things back as nature intended and then we continue to adhere to nature's more primitive ways. Blake doesn't have PJs but I do. I take a quick shower that ends up lasting thirty minutes thanks to Mr. I'll-scrub-your-back.

I wake up at the crack of dawn. Blake looks so peaceful. I watch him. When a persistent sunbeam hits his face, he blinks awake. "What a glorious way to wake up." He takes my hand and kisses my fingertips.

"Do we have to go back already?" I ask as he gets dressed, a sorry sight. Most egregious is when he covers his rear.

"Are you checking me out?"

I pull the covers over my head embarrassed. Why couldn't he be psychic or telekinetic, anything but a mind reader?

He crawls over me and yanks the sheet down enough to see my eyes. "We have to go back."

"I know."

Blake's boat looks like a cute little speedboat, nothing formidable.

"Will it make it all the way to Martian U?" Did he really sail that last night in a storm?

"Don't let its meager appearance fool you. Mom likes to take benign looking things and supe them up with Martian tech and some homemade gadgets. It has the ability to find the Island and go undetected by their radar. I've had it hidden for an emergency."

"And I thought Artie took things too far."

"He does. I bet he'd like my mom."

Dad vs. Dad

Blake wasn't bragging when he said his boat was more than it appears. We stow it in a cove and he takes my things. I stop time so we don't need to be stealthy. We pass a few frozen students on our way but not many. At this hour, they're eating breakfast or going to a class.

"First thing I'm going to do is delete the stupid email you sent." Blake tells me as he kisses me before going to his room. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"I know. I've been telling you that."

For weeks I felt the walls closing in and darkness all around me. Today everything is dazzling. We run into Hilary on our way to breakfast.

She eyes us critically. "Girlfriend, can you come here for a second?" Blake warns me but I couldn't have missed it if I were blind. As soon as Hilary is free to accuse me she says. "You and Blake did it. How was it?"

I flush. I hope we don't have this experience with everyone we run into. "It was adequate."

Adequate? You're lucky she knows your joking.

I brush by ear hinting for Blake to hush.

"I want to know everything." Hilary demands and taps her foot impatiently.

"Well, Hilary, when two people care for each other they often have sex. That's when the male takes his..."

"Suzette, I'll beat it out of you if I have to."

"I'm starved."

"I get like that after a night of ecstasy. We'll eat together."

Blake gets his meal to go. The rest of our Troops aren't in the cafeteria so I give her the scope only editing out the super intimate details.

"You tried to resign?"

"Blake talked me out of it. He never turned it in."

"Good for him. I'll buy him a present. Why didn't you talk to me about it before you did something so irresponsible?"

“I misjudged you. I feared you’d be bias and unreasonable.” I say sarcastically and she sticks her tongue at me.

Doug and Francis join us at the table and I shake my head to Hilary that I don’t want to tell the whole campus about Blake or my failed attempt at quitting school. Begrudgingly she sits on the juicy news.

I missed my first class because we were late, but I make my second and then go to my office. Since the campus was shut down most of the previous day there is nothing new to work on and I’m top of my work. That means I have my presentation ready for the Fall Conference next week and all my assignments. I’d kept on top as to not raise suspicions before I left.

I get out my personal laptop, which can receive school or personal email. I don’t open personal emails on the school’s computer. Artie’s rule and it’s a good one. Amanda wrote. My heart stops. It’s been over three weeks since she left Artie and I knocked out at her San Diego hideout.

It is depressing, both in content and length. It simply reads, “Brace yourself” and then lists my checklist from the restaurant and that isn’t the strangest part. Short as it is, she had to put time in it. First it flashes between standard white background and black words to its negative and then back again. It’s a strain to look at. The absolute most peculiar thing about the email is it plays the song *Raise Your Glass* by Pink. Not only that, but it won’t close until it plays the full three plus minutes.

I toss it into the trash folder. Thinking the better of it, I move it back to my inbox. I start to reply, delete that one and start again. Finally I write back asking for what should I brace for and saying it was good to see her even if it was too short.

“We have modifications to do on our presentation for the conference. I don’t like what you’ve done so far.” Blake loudly misleads any nosy eavesdroppers as he walks in and shuts my door. Picking me up from my chair he sits me on my desk and kisses me.

“Blake, we can’t do this here.”

“Sweetie, do you remember the first day we met?”

“Sure, we met in my office to talk about Martian U.”

“And now I can finally do what I wanted to then.” He pushes me down and lies on top of me.

“You were not thinking about this that day.”

“It crossed my mind, frequently the more time I spent in your pink office. Why did you paint it pink?”

“It matches her room at home.” We are no longer alone.

Do you want to guess who it is? You’re only half right if you say Dad. Carl is with him. It could have been worse. Artie has the ability to digitize anything he sees. I guess somehow that makes me lucky. Upside-down I look up to see my fathers, legal and biological, standing in the doorway.

I locked the door. Blake thinks.

He has a key.

We scramble up. Blake stares Dad down. Neither blink. When kids have staring contests, this is what they are preparing for in life. Face offs. Carl is rather unshocked, but then this is his second time catching me in the throes of Blake’s arms.

What can I say? We clearly weren’t working on our presentation, not one for public viewing anyway. “Carl, I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Urgent business. You look, uh, content.”

“Harrumph.” Daddy number one huffs.

I hug angry Dad first and then Carl. “Um, you remember Blake.”

“Very well.” Carl shakes his hand.

“When did this start?” Stanley asks me but shoots daggers at Blake.

“It’s recent. Jason and I broke up last month.”

“I knew that. And I was told that Blake and you were also on the outs. If I assume that your jaunt to the mainland last night, in the middle of a storm, was the start of whatever you think this is,” he waves his hands over us as if trying to erase the image away, “Can I also assume that it has been only one indiscretion.”

“Two if you’d be so kind as to leave.” Blake snarls.

“Please excuse them. We were told this wasn’t sanctioned.” I update Carl and then address Stanley. “If you want to remove me as Major, I understand that was a stipulation.”

“He-heh.” Carl laughs but abruptly stops when he sees Dad isn’t joining him. “What Major hasn’t had a fling with a member of their Troop? Suzette, you shouldn’t be so melodramatic. Of course you won’t be demoted over this.”

It hits me like a ton of feathers. Carl outranks Dad, Nicolas and even Ray Nathaniel, who hopefully wasn’t involved but if he was he just got punked. If Blake doesn’t stop smiling, it won’t matter. Dad will kill him or rip off his vital appendages and that will end our tryst.

“It seems you have your choice of lunch dates. Since Stanley and Blake have you all the time, I hope I can persuade you to choose me.” Carl pleads.

“I was about to offer myself.” And I mentally ask Blake not to fight Dad physically. Dad isn’t in shape but he is Martian. Even middle aged Martians fight. Sure it takes a lot more to provoke an old timer but let’s face it, we couldn’t have provoked him much further.

“It was nice seeing you again Mr. Daniels and Mr. Russell.” Blake inches to the door but can’t escape until Dad steps aside.

“Before you go, can we talk?” Carl asks. Dad closes the door and we sit at my conference table. “I don’t know if you keep up on the latest Martian news but there have been a string of murders. We have no evidence but seven victims have been half-Martian and three others full Martians that married humans.”

We all pale and I look at Blake. Ten may not seem like a suspicious number to humans but when you think about our small population, that is a big deal. Think of a small town of ten thousand suddenly losing ten people mysteriously.

“Blake,” and when Carl says this, his eyes dart my way as well, “You’re safe on campus. How about off campus? You’re mother should be warned.”

“Thanks for your concern. I’m sure Mom isn’t in danger. We are well hidden. I’ll tell her but you don’t need to send men. She won’t have it.”

Carl glances to Dad who nods. “She was married to Thomas Castle. Let’s face it. She’s safer than all of us.”

“Of course. Well, there’s only one Martian better at hiding than Tom.” No doubt he means Amanda. “Call your mother and let her know. Nine look innocent, one was

too gruesome to be mistaken as an accident. Four other halfers have gone into protection after unexplained near calamities.”

“Is that why you’re in the States?” Blake asks.

“It is. Caesar has agreed to go into hiding, after much finagling by the council and me. I’ll make an address this evening regarding the matter.”

What can he say? Please stop it, you’re all a bunch of poo-poo heads.

“I wanted you kids to be aware that although Martian News has not connected these deaths, we have and we will act accordingly.”

“If we can do anything to help, let us know.” I add and get equally dirty looks from Dad and Blake.

“Shall we eat lunch?” Carl holds my chair for me. “I appreciate you gentlemen letting me steal Suzette for an hour.”

I hope they don’t fight in my office. They both have offices and can yell or worse there.

“You spoke to Amanda.” Carl tells me as we walk to the stairs.

“Did she contact you?”

“She did. She’s seen the signs for years now.”

“She mentioned a war was coming.” Like a hundred times. And her short cryptic email, which I don’t bring up.

We eat at the Officer’s Room. They may as well let me make my own reservations I eat here so often.

“Are you safe walking around without bodyguards?”

“They’re here. The campus is secured.” Carl tells me. “So tell me about Blake.”

I give him the short version, skipping over the uncouth details of why I’m not dating Jason any longer and the fact that Blake came after me to stop me from resigning.

“He was very helpful in Scotland with Luke Francis and his son.”

I beam with pride. At least one family member approves.

“We kept Blake out of the room but he could hear them. They had no idea that we had a mind reader verifying their words.”

“How much danger is Blake in? And Doug? He’s made it known that he is half as well.”

“We are ensuring Doug and his family are safe. Caesar has ordered guards to Martian U for their safekeeping.”

A dreadful thought pops up and I can't ignore it. “Are you sure there aren't any traitors in the ranks?”

“Blake will be meeting them later this week. We've chosen proven men, but I'm not taking any chances since you like to jump in front of bullets meant for him.”

It was worth it.

“Amanda didn't care that we met and discovered her ruse. She yelled at me for ten minutes and then hung up.”

“Why did she hang up?”

“She knew we were tracking her. Amanda was long gone.”

“Do you think we're going to war?”

“We are on the brink. I think we can postpone it, whether long enough to find peaceful resolution is anyone's guess. Stanley didn't give me the details but apparently he feels you can go underground safely if things come to conflict.”

“No one knows I'm part, am I in danger?”

“You are a sympathizer.”

Oh yeah – that. “How long will you be here?”

“I'm attending the conference in Missouri and return home directly from there.”

That means I should get a couple more meals out of his stay, if he isn't too busy.

“Sir, Caesar is expecting your call before the press conference.” Winston informs Carl. He's dressed in the standard black non-descript uniform they wore in Scotland.

“Of course. I'm sorry my dear.”

“Give Caesar my regards. Wish she could come to the conference.”

“I will relay your greeting but not about the conference. It was hard enough to talk her out of it the third time.”

Carl's Big Speech

My first task is seeing how bad it was with Blake and Dad. Blake looks bleak at his desk. No bruised eye this time but then, he'd be able to read Dad's mind while fist fighting.

"Close the door and let me finish." He orders in an authoritative voice. Then I hear in my head, *Play along*.

I scowl. This isn't going to be pleasant.

"Your resignation was denied. Effective immediately on Mr. Russell and President Nathaniel's direction, you will assume charge of Mason's Troop. He's resigned and asked to finish his semester from home. Francis will remain Captain. I have been promoted to Major and Wyatt has been promoted to Captain."

"What?" I gasp unsure what repulsive thing to address first.

"Do you question the President's directive?" Again he tells me to play along and adds to get mad. He needn't bother with advising me to get mad – that was going to happen no matter.

"Of course I do." I stop time since clearly his office is bugged. "You said you deleted that resignation."

"Sweetie, you need to be away from me. We can't be seen together. We've been fighting for a month, people will believe it. Only Hilary knows the truth and you need to tell her I dumped you after we slept together."

"Hilary is too smart to fall for that."

"Actually I got the idea from her."

"And who is behind this?" I get up and walk to get fresh air in my lungs to hold the freeze longer.

"Aren't you glad to know your dad and I are working out our differences?" Seeing that I'm about to blow he quickly says, "Easy? The longer we can have open dialogue the better."

"Why would you agree to this? It's another attempt to keep us apart. What difference does it matter if we want to be together or not, the end result is Dad is running the show."

“Check your daddy issues at the door, this is serious shit going down.” He walks over to me and tries to kiss me.

I shove him off. “I have to pack.”

“No, the Major never moves. What a stupid rule? The rest of us will leave and the others will move in this evening.” He wraps an arm around me and kisses my neck from behind. “How long can you hold this?”

“I’m tiring.” It’s true. If I can be calm, I could hold it over thirty minutes maybe longer if I walk around for more air. That isn’t possible if we kiss.

Spinning me around he kisses me. “I love you. Play along.”

We go to our original spots and I release time. “If that’s all, I’ll leave you to your business Major MacGinnis.” And I storm to Dad’s office.

Before I can say a word he preempts me. “Don’t start with me. It was Blake’s idea. He heard what Carl’s going to say tonight. Yell at him but not in his office.”

“You’re using him as bait. Why not kill the bugs?”

“Because he wants to reel in traitors.”

“We’re at war.”

“If Blake is right about Carl’s speech, it will take the war below the surface but it will not stop it.”

Madder than hell, I leave. At my desk I open the Martian Nation News website. An hour later, breaking news flashes. I click the streaming video and listen.

“Fellow Martians.” Carl begins. “We are in treacherous times. In the last week, there have been ten suspicious deaths. All the victims have been either half-Martian or Martians who married humans. This is intolerable. The majority of Martians are against outlawing human marriages and as a society, we are moving to accepting mixes as equals.”

“In addition to these deaths there have been numerous attempts on Madam Caesar’s life this year. The Grand Council has determined for her safety, she will remain in an undisclosed remote location. All matters of the State will come directly to me and I will convey them to Madam Caesar.”

“To the Preservationists that will hear this message, your aggressive action will stop. If either I or Madam Caesar should come to an untimely death, I have arranged for

documents explaining our existence and technology to be found by human heads of states in the US and the UK. If the illegal killings do not stop, the Grand Council is prepared to reach out to these same human governments for help. We will not be subjugated by fear.”

Holy fricking great balls of fire! Ninety percent of Martians live in either the US or the UK. If we extend open dialogue with any countries, it would be those two.

“I’m honored to serve in this role even in perilous circumstances. Half-Martians are more like us than humans and not only should they be accepted openly, we should admit that they are already in our world. For too long halfers have been forced to live in solely the human or Martian world. Yes, halfers live among us. Our laws forbidding physical examinations on students at Martian U and Bermuda U or civil servants were designed to allow this and prevent prejudice. We have an unstated don’t ask, don’t tell policy.”

“The time has come for us to be strong and stand proud. The Grand Council is unanimously supportive of Caesar, as am I. This next statement has not been forced upon me and it is my choice to tell you that I am half-Martian and half-human. The Grand Council has known, approves of my service record and will not unseat me as Successor.”

Geez Carl, why not paint a bull’s-eye on your chest?

“We will not tolerate fanaticism. If the Preservationists were the popular mindset, we would have laws and traditions in accordance with their beliefs. We do not. Taking innocent lives is an act of war. The numbers and righteousness is in our favor. I beseech all who hear my words to remember that we are what remains of our great race and we are united by our roots. In the words of another famous halfer and perhaps the greatest civil servant, a house divided against itself cannot stand.”

“We did not fly two hundred light-years to die at our own hands. I pray this turmoil passes quickly and without further lives but rest assured, it will pass and we will be stronger for it. Thank you for listening.”

It ends with an email address for concerns or questions.

“Well, damn!” I say. Carl went all out. We’ll either win or the humans will learn of us. The Preservationists can’t risk that. Heck, it even scares me.

I shouldn’t have let Blake bring me back.



This is a legally distributed free edition from
www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.