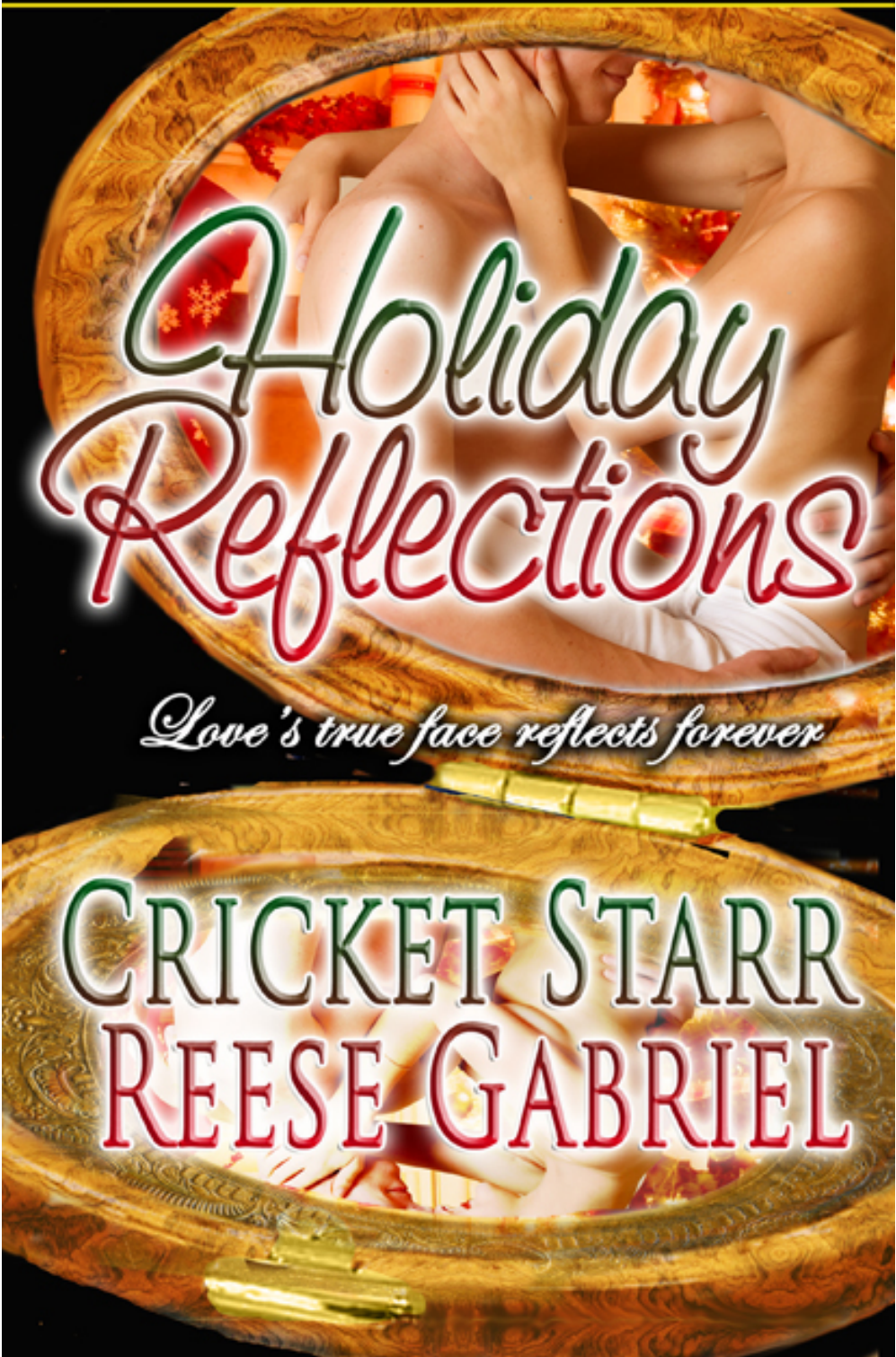


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Holiday Reflections

Love's true face reflects forever

CRICKET STARR
REESE GABRIEL

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Holiday Reflections

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HOLIDAY REFLECTIONS

REFLECTING JESYCA

by Reese Gabriel

REFLECTING THE FUTURE

by Cricket Starr

REFLECTING JESYCA

Reese Gabriel

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Chapter One

Mark Bristol was back in town. On Jesyca's doorstep a week before Christmas. And she didn't stand a chance.

"Mark you can't just waltz back into my life like this," she protested as the tawny-haired hunk of a rodeo man sought to pick up where he'd left off on his last roll through town five months ago.

He flashed a handsome cowboy grin, his large hand moving to that little spot he favored just above the waistband of her denim cutoffs and below the hem of her midriff shirt. "Why not?" he rasped, his touch making her naked skin burn with pure lust. "Last time I checked, I was a perfect fit."

Oh god, was he ever...

No man could make love like the chisel-featured, blue-eyed Mark, his cock lightning-charged, his kisses smooth as honey, yet hot and searing as a branding iron. She just ached for those rodeo muscles under his T-shirt, that washboard abdomen, the sculpted pecs and biceps.

"It's not about the sex," she attempted lamely. "And you know it."

His fingers trailed across her cheek...so very gentle...and so very suggestive. A paradox, really, those intense, soulful eyes, that hard and hungry cock under his jeans and that complicated, never satisfied spirit. "All I know is a man would have to be blind or wrong in the head not to want to touch you, Jes," he declared. "You're an incredibly beautiful and desirable woman, even if you're too stubborn to see it."

The compliment seemed to go straight to her nipples instead of her head. They were telltale points now, a pair of go signals poking against her braless top for the convenience of her unwanted guest.

"Us next," they throbbed like greedy little traitors. *"Pick us next."*

What did they know about long nights of misery, waiting for phone calls that never came, or scanning far-off rodeo newspapers for some dread word about a fall or worse? They only remembered the good times, the long hours of attention from his tongue, the endless suckling, ever contributing to that dangerous illusion that she was the only one and that this—what they had—would last forever.

"That's really sweet, Mark," she sought to head him off with scathing wit. "And maybe if you were around more to tell me things like that on an actual date or two, we might have the basis for a —"

Mark stole a kiss, short and sweet—if you could call it stealing when she was about to empty out the whole damned register for him, anyway.

She wasn't ready for him to stop.

"Bastard," she hissed, her lips numb and buzzing, dying of thirst in a thousand-year-old desert when just a few minutes ago they had been happily sampling double rocky road ice cream right out of the container.

"Chocolate," he dabbed a little tiny drop from the corner of his horrifically sexy mouth with his equally sexy tongue. "How about some for me?"

"There's a Dairy Town right up the street. You can ask directions if you've forgotten the way."

"The only thing I want to remember is the smell of your sex, baby, as we lie beside each other naked. I want to relearn your every curve with my tongue, I want to come home, hearing you scream while I suck on your sweet little clit."

Oh, fuck, now she was screwed. He'd gone ahead and cut out the middleman, making his direct appeal to her libido.

The reaction was typical. Panties flooding under her cutoff shorts. Bare toes curling under on the doormat.

"Let him in," shouted her body. *"Swallow your stupid pride. Forget common sense. Just let him work his magic..."*

She'd almost forgotten how well this man could use his tongue in and out of bed. It was no wonder he'd been nicknamed the Silver Tongued Silver Spur by his buddies on the rodeo circuit.

"Mark," she sighed. "I—"

Mark put a finger to her lips. "Shh, it's okay, baby. Let it go."

Jes blinked. "Let it...go?"

"You're not ready right now," he said, sounding like one of those psychology types on TV. "It's been too long. There are things to work through. Trust issues. I shouldn't have pushed so hard, but damn it, Jes, I just missed you so much. I think about you every minute. Don't you worry, though, I'm gonna be patient this time. I'm gonna do it right. I'm gonna prove I'm worthy...at least as worthy as any man can be to love a woman like you."

He took her hand and kissed it.

Her hand.

"I'll be seeing you, Jes, real soon."

And just like that she was standing on her doorstep in the Texas heat watching his fine tight ass walk away down the sidewalk in his faded denims and favorite black boots, the ones he'd worn on the day he'd taken home a first in both bulls and broncs.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he snapped his fingers, turning back. "I got you a little something. Don't ask me where, you wouldn't believe it. I didn't wrap it—I know how you feel about Christmas presents."

He took the object out of his back pocket. It was a thin, four-inch oval, two pieces of dark polished wood held together by a hinge on one end and a clasp on the other. He handed it to her and headed off again.

She gave it a look. It struck her as being very old, though when she held it there was a life and an energy to it that made it feel brand new.

How strange. Mark had never gotten her a gift like this before. He was more into flowers and candy, the sort of things a guy got a girl he wanted to get lucky with—and stay that way.

“Look at it later,” he advised, with just a hint of gravity in his voice. “When you’re ready, you can tell me what you saw.”

There was no way Jes was going to wait. The minute she was back inside with the door closed, she opened the tiny clasp. Her fingers trembled, as though some great destiny was about to be decided.

She had no clue why she should feel this way except that something in Mark was different and she had this weird sense it had to do with the pocket mirror. She’d never seen him that way, so calm and secure. What had gotten into him? Why hadn’t he just gone ahead and pushed through her pathetic defenses and bedded her the way he always did?

The wood was delicate. She separated the two pieces slowly, as eager as any child on Christmas morning. How long had it been since she’d accepted anything close to a holiday gift? Not since her mom had died, even before she’d lost Charlie.

The first thing she saw was the inscription on the bottom piece.

Love’s true face reflects forever.

The top held a piece of glass, very cloudy. She moved it about at various angles. It was catching light rays and reflecting them. Was it some kind of mirror? *It must be very old*, she thought. The silver piece on which the words were inscribed was old, too.

A hundred years, easily, maybe more.

Intrigued, she decided to try to clean it up a bit. Padding on bare feet, her arousal forgotten for the moment, she went to the kitchen of her creaky old house, searching for a rag.

Very delicately, she began to wipe the glass with the corner of a piece of one of her brother’s ratty old T-shirts, which she’d finally ripped up into strips and stashed under the sink. She’d hung onto the shirts, along with all the rest of his clothes, after the motorcycle accident two years ago.

A lot of people had told her she should have gotten rid of the stuff, that it was unhealthy to hold onto it, but it made her feel closer to him to keep it. Of course these were the same people who chastised her for not crying at his funeral or visiting his grave.

The way Jes saw it, she and Charlie had their own relationship and she didn’t need to justify her love or act a certain way to make other people happy. She knew Charlie would understand. It always had been the two of them against the world while he was alive, so why not after death, too.

In so many ways they'd been more than a normal brother and sister. After their dad died and their mom had gotten sick, she'd had to fill in, helping to raise him. Scarcely more than a child herself, she'd grown with him. Half parent, half best friend. They were peas in a pod, supporting each other in the oddest ways.

Eventually they'd lost their mother and that's when Jes had stopped wanting anything to do with Christmas.

Funny, she thought, continuing to work on the surface of the glass, nothing's coming off. But the surface was somehow getting clearer anyway. She could start to see the reflection. Yes, there it was...

Jes gasped. She nearly dropped the mirror.

Correction, not a mirror, but a...picture frame.

With Mark's picture in it!

She stared in disbelief. It was so lifelike. He had a white western-style dress shirt on with a string tie and a black jacket. He was smiling broadly, looking happier than she had ever seen him. Almost like a snapshot out of some fairy tale or happy ending.

She rubbed her eyes. This was crazy.

Nope, he was still there, blue eyes dancing.

Jesyca closed it quickly and opened it again.

Incredible.

Just what kind of game was the man playing? Whatever it was, she didn't appreciate it very much. There was a time when she would have willingly gone along with any kind of shenanigans because he was so damned charming and kind—at least when he was around—but she was twenty-five now and he was thirty-two and it was a little late in life to be playing games.

True love, indeed.

Mark couldn't begin to know the meaning of love. How dare he throw the word in her face like that? Presumptive and arrogant, that's what he was. He took for granted she'd always be there to welcome him and nurse his wounds, to laugh with him and share with him—on his terms, whenever *he* felt like it. Never mind any needs she might have.

Oh, for Pete's sake, someone was knocking at the door again.

It had better not be him again.

She took another look at the mirror.

Mark—with chiseled features, a perfect jawline and neatly trimmed and combed brown hair.

Neatly trimmed and combed hair...now there was a fantasy if ever she'd seen one.

The knocking was getting louder.

"Coming!" She marched through the living room, still holding her so-called gift. Jes flung the door open, ready to do battle. "If you think this is funny, Mark Bristol—"

Crissy Hamilton, fellow waitress and best friend, stood on the doorstep. In full Last Mile Honky Tonk uniform regalia, including white cowgirl skirt, shirt and fringe vest, along with matching boots, hat and red bandana.

As jokes went, the getup would be a whole lot funnier if Jes didn't have to wear it, too.

"Oh...Cris...sorry. I thought it was...someone else."

"So he's been here already?" the petite blonde looked up anxiously, her green eyes peering out from under her hat.

Jesyca flipped back her auburn curls. At five-foot-six she was an Amazon in comparison, though both were pretty and shapely enough to get jobs working for Smiley at the Last Mile. "Who? Mark? How'd you know he was back? Oh, wait," she slapped her forehead dramatically. "Silly me, how could I forget? He'd stop and see his true love first...the inside of a whiskey bottle!"

Okay, so maybe he didn't drink that much, but Jes wasn't interested in being fair right now.

Crissy had an ashen look on her face. "Um, actually, he did more than stop by. Can we sit down and talk?"

Jesyca was beginning to wonder if the whole world was going crazy. "Sure, are you going to tell me you saw him on *America's Most Wanted* or something?"

"No. I haven't watched any TV today," Crissy deadpanned. "Say, what's with the mirror?"

"See for yourself." She handed it to her friend.

Crissy held it up to her face. "Oh, wow. I didn't realize my eyeliner was so thick today. Do you think it makes me look fat?"

"Stop playing around, Cris. Look at that inscription," Jes directed. "He just waltzed over here with that thing. Can you believe him foisting his picture on me, trying to pass himself off as my true love?"

Crissy squinted, wrinkling her button nose. "Picture? You lost me, Jes. This is a mirror."

"A mirror?" Jes snatched it back. "Good lord, are you on drugs?"

Sure enough, there was Mark, still tormenting her in celluloid or whatever this picture was made of. "Never mind," she sighed, collapsing on the couch in defeat. The fact was, Crissy had some definite issues with reality. "Just tell me what you came to say."

Crissy perched herself contentedly on the sofa next to Jes, taking a little peek as her little uniform cowgirl skirt rode well up her golden thighs. Of all the waitresses, Crissy was the only one who liked these silly little outfits Smiley made them wear. She'd been a cheerleader in high school and had aspired at one point to be a model. Jes remembered the time they were driving and Crissy saw a sign for model homes. She

thought that they should try and buy one so people would think they were already models and give them both jobs posing in magazines.

Jesyca had to explain there was more than one meaning to the word. Crissy drove her crazy a lot with stuff like that, but somehow they had stayed really good friends, ever since the tenth grade.

"What I came to say," Crissy pronounced the words carefully, no doubt in a bid to keep them straight. "Is that Mark was just at the Honky Tonk, but he wasn't drinking. At least that's not *all* he was doing."

Jesyca waited for her to elaborate. When she realized Crissy wasn't going to, on account of doing that thing she sometimes did where she thought she was saying things but only thinking them, Jes gave her a helpful prompt. "Cris, honey, if you want me to know what more he was doing, you have to tell me."

"Oh. Yeah." She blinked. "Well, you're not going to believe this, but when Mark came in today, he went into Smiley's office. They were in there a half hour and when they came out they were laughing and joking. Smiley got a bottle of whiskey and poured shots. He had everybody toast the new owner."

Jes's heart seized in her chest. "Owner? Did you say owner?" Desperately, she hoped for some confusion on Crissy's part. "Are you sure it wasn't like a welcome home toast? Or maybe...a bet that Mark won, like Smiley *owed* him something? Owe sounds a little like owner, doesn't it?"

Crissy tilted her head, displacing her lush, golden curls as she sought to work through the problem. "They do sound alike," she agreed. "But they had this piece of paper...like a diploma."

"A deed," she cried. "They had a deed?"

So it was real. Mark Bristol had bought the Last Mile. But what on Earth for? What would a dyed-in-the-wool cowboy with less stability than your average tumbleweed want with a brick-and-mortar business?

"Yeah. A deed," Crissy nodded. "That was it." She blinked. "So does this mean Mark will be here all the time? Like a real boss?"

Jesyca was on her feet. "Oh, no," she shook her head. "Mark is not going to be the boss of anything in my life. If this whole thing is on the up-and-up—which I'm sure it isn't because no bank would ever front that man gas money let alone the cost of a bar—then I will be looking very seriously at a change of vocations."

Crissy looked distressed. "You mean we're not going to Aruba in the spring?"

Jesyca bent down, looking for her sneakers under the couch. "That's *vacation*, Cris. A whole different thing."

"Oh, whew. I really want to go to Aruba. Why are you putting your sneakers on?"

"I'm going down to the Last Mile."

"On your day off?"

"This is personal. I intend to pay a little social call on Smiley, to find out from the horse's mouth what's going on around here."

"I'll come with you. My break's just about over."

"Okay." Jes gave her a hug. "Thanks for coming by, Cris. You're a good friend."

"Sure thing. Just so long as we're still going to Aruba."

"Yes, we are. In fact, we may be heading there a whole lot sooner than I thought...if this whole thing is true."

"Do they have honky tonks there? We could get jobs."

Jes locked the front door. The weird mirror was inside on the couch. She had that to deal with, too. What a day...

It was sure a lot easier in the old days, she lamented. When the man breezed through town, made sweet love and rode off into the sunset. True love's face reflects forever.

That's what the inscription said.

And the picture... *Look at it later, you can tell me what you saw.* Those were his words.

She'd tell him all right. Just as soon as the man changed his stripes. Or hell froze over, both of which were equally likely.

* * * * *

Mark climbed the stepladder, still in shock as he reached over the bar to hammer up one of his silver horseshoes, won in competition. He still couldn't believe it. He'd actually done it. Bought the Last Mile from Smiley a week before Christmas – turned in his spurs for an apron and a broom. The bank had to be crazy, floating him this kind of loan, on the basis of zero experience running a honky tonk. Smiley had been a huge help, vouching for him based on their friendship over the years. The older man had also agreed to help keep an eye on things, giving Mark all the support and training he needed to learn the business.

Not that he hadn't picked up a thing or two, spending as much time as he had as a customer at the Last Mile.

He'd gotten the loan through just yesterday, managing to sneak into town in his new suit without Jes seeing him.

"I like the way you talk," the bank officer smiled, a balding gentleman in his fifties in a blue polyester suit. "And you have an honest face. That ought to count for something nowadays, right?"

Talk about astronomical, dumb luck. But that's how everything had gone since that fateful day a month ago when he'd won that mirror off an old medicine man in a poker game at a dust-covered old saloon a thousand miles from nowhere on Route 54.

The guy had walked in off the nearby Indian Rez, like some kind of shadow, dealt himself in for a couple of hands, lost twenty dollars and the mirror to Mark and then he was gone again, like so much smoke.

Mark had thought it was just some piece of junk and almost thrown it out. At the last second, as he was about to toss it into the street, something had grabbed hold of him. A cold, clear sense of destiny. He'd been doing nothing but running his whole life, gambling and losing. His body was hitting thirty-three this year and the falls were a lot harder to bounce back from. The bones cracked louder and stayed broken longer. It was a matter of time.

He'd have to retire and then what. Nothing. Loneliness. Following the circuit, maybe working as a clown or a pick-up man. Until he was too old to see straight. He would die alone, no one to remember his name, nothing for a legacy but a few trophies and some gold buckles. Trivia in the end.

So he'd opened the mirror, and lo and behold it wasn't a mirror at all. At least not once the haze cleared. More like a telescope into the future. That's what he'd seen it as. A window to happiness.

Jesyca had never looked as lovely as she did in that picture. Cheeks glowing, white lace surrounding her pretty face. She'd had a wedding gown on. He'd wanted to kiss her so badly. He'd wanted to be in that picture. Then he'd seen the inscription. True love's face reflects forever. That was no accident, no coincidence. There was magic there, some kind of medicine as the natives put it. Who knew where the old man had gotten the thing. Mark's hunch was that it had changed hands many times over the years, changing many lives.

He'd showed it to some other people, and they'd seen only their own reflections. It had scared him pretty good at first, but eventually he'd come around. His idea was that the medicine man had intended for him to win the mirror and that he'd joined the game just for that purpose. Mark's theory was that maybe it would work on Jes, too, and that if he showed it to Jes, she would see him in it and then they could get down to business.

The business of building a life together.

Mark plucked a second nail from his mouth, put it in place and gave it a few good hits, securing the horseshoe. He had to admit, seeing Jes today had put a real kink in his plans to play things cool and bide his time. One of the advantages of choosing the honky tonk as his new occupation was that he'd get to work with Jesyca day in, day out, giving her a chance to see he wasn't the same guy.

That he had goals in mind and that he could control his libido long enough to actually accomplish them. He had never, ever meant to hurt Jes, it was just that all he knew was lovemaking. He understood her body and he could please her. And then, when he got restless like he always did, he'd move on.

Today he was supposed to show her the new and improved, chaste Mark Bristol. Damn it, did she have to wear those shorts? And that top? He had never needed a woman like he'd needed her just now. Not any other female, only her, with her lean

body, full, firm breasts, flat belly and suckable nipples. He wanted to be everywhere at once, touching, fondling. He wanted between her legs, tasting, probing. He wanted her shapely legs rubbing against him, her ass cheeks quivering in his hands, her lips captured between his teeth, her moans plucking his ears, the sound forming words in a secret lover's language—asking for everything. Specifically, giving in to his will, whatever he wanted, trusting that he would take her to those places no one else could.

Ever since the first time, when he had met her at the diner—a bright-eyed eighteen-year-old, sharp as a whip and more than a match for a twenty-five-year-old cowboy. The thing that had impressed him most was how she'd looked out for her waitress friend Crissy the whole time, making sure that neither he nor any of the other horny desperados took advantage of her combined good looks and gullibility.

All Mark had to do was make a point of helping her out on that score, hooking Crissy up with a real stand-up guy he knew from Abilene and just like that they were a foursome heading out after closing time for coffee. Three more times he'd dragged Jake along with him to the Last Mile so he could get to know Jes better.

It had finally paid off one Saturday night. They'd had a double date, fries, burgers and malts down at Fat Joe's followed by a movie and midnight drive over to Lake Grissam for a little naked, moonlight swim. The girls had been relaxed and ready and Mark was having an unbelievably good time, just laughing and joking with Jesyca. Even without the sex, it would have been a success. But there had been no fighting the magic in the air that night. Mark was pretty sure the girls had made some kind of pact, double-dog-daring each other to go all the way.

They had split up as soon as they'd gotten in the water. Jake had ended up showing Crissy a real good time, loving her sweet little body right in the shimmering waist-high water while Mark took Jes to the far side, laying her out on the dew covered grass.

Her next words floored him...

"I've never had a man," she whispered.

His confidence never wavered. It wasn't arrogance—he just knew somehow this was destiny. "And I've never had an angel," he replied, stretching out beside her.

She smiled, with that mixture of shyness and defiance he would grow to love so well. "I'm not so special."

"You are to me."

She took his hand, placing it over her pulsing vulva. "Will you be my first?"

"I don't deserve you, but I'd be crazy to say no," he declared, his voice electric in the damp air.

"Me, too," she whispered.

Mark let his fingers rest where she'd put them, on her moist labia, just at the line of her slit. He'd take things slow, at her pace, building the anticipation. It didn't take long, a couple of kisses to the side of her neck, their skin barely touching. Lacking the sophistication to try for a

seduction of her own, Jes commenced squirming. "Oh, god, put your fingers in me." She reached for him.

He blocked her gently. "Put your hands over your head, baby. Let me take over."

Jes gritted her teeth, stretching her body luxuriantly. He'd never seen such a sensual creature, such a completely natural and wicked angel. "Like this?" she asked.

"Yes." He ran his hand over her bare belly, making her shiver. "Exactly like that. Don't move, pretend you're tied up."

Jesyca groaned, straining against invisible ropes. Her fists clenching and unclenching. "Mark...don't make me wait."

"It's all about waiting." He shifted his fingers expertly, finding her clitoris. It swelled instantly, liquid oozing from her opening onto her wet, moon-kissed thighs. "You've waited your whole life for this. We both have."

"Oh...Mark," she groaned. "It's...so..."

Jes was writhing for him, a wet, chestnut haired nymph, like some kind of gift from heaven splayed on a carpet of rich green. He ached so much, but he didn't want to rush this moment, this reality.

"Your cock," she breathed heavily. "Is it...hard? For me?"

"It's like steel, sweetheart. Feel?" He poked her thigh with his throbbing cock.

She grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Yeah, I feel it. You want to know something Mark?"

"What?"

"I've thought about this a lot. I've even, you know, touched myself. From the minute I saw you I wondered what you'd feel like inside me."

He stroked her cheek. "You sure this is what you want? There's no going back."

"I can't go back." She was moist-eyed. "You've already taken me in my dreams."

"Damn," he muttered. "Was I any good?"

"The best...not that I have anyone to compare you to."

"Good," he nodded. "I plan to keep it that way."

It was a funny thing to say, awful possessive for a man like Mark who preferred to have his women free and footloose. No harm, no foul, no strings.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, downright awestruck as she continued to respond to his touch.

"I'm just a waitress, Mark."

He cupped her breast and lowered his head to kiss her nipple. She sure seemed like more to him.

Her soft moan filled the air. Everything was so still and quiet...almost holy. He could taste the sex in the air, pure and perfect, fully charged, every fiber of his being focused on sweet girl flesh, his to suck, her nipple pliant and totally responsive. He sucked and teased and sucked again. And then he moved to the other nipple, all the while making her keep her hands over her head.

She was so wet he could smell her fragrance, thick as the jasper flowers and painted silk stalks. She was beckoning him, open and ready...trusting. He was nearly overcome with the meaningfulness of what she was offering. This was not a girl who slept around, obviously.

Was he making a mistake – taking something under false pretenses?

At the last second, he made a prayer. God, if you're out there, and I'm not the one to do this...

A breeze blew over them and her fingers rose from the grass, wrapping around his neck. "Take me, Mark."

His cock was there, between her parted legs. Go slow he told himself, she's a virgin. But she was so slick and warm and welcoming. With a gasp he plunged, all the way in a single thrust. Hand in glove. "Baby, does it...hurt?"

She answered with her lips pressed to his, hungry, curious, reassuring.

There was only the tiniest trickle of blood, a small tear. And after that, pure ecstasy, rolling on the grass, surrendering to one another's deepest needs. Unless she was the world's greatest actress, she got every bit the pleasure out of it he did.

And to make sure of that, he introduced her to oral sex.

He'd never forget that look on her face as he put his tongue down on her vulva. "Baby, what are you – oh, god, oh...god."

She came and came, biting down on her hand to keep from drawing too much attention from Jake and Crissy.

It brought a smile to his face.

"Mark Bristol," called a sharp female voice, all too familiar. "Are you going to ignore me all day?"

Mark snapped out of his reverie. How long had he been standing up here staring at this silver horseshoe, holding this silly hammer? "Jes, I didn't even hear you." He climbed back down the ladder to the worn, wooden floor of the honky tonk. His honky tonk.

"Yeah, I'm sure you didn't," she retorted, in a tone of voice that indicated she was damn certain he had. "Well seeing as how you can hear me now, how about you telling me what the hell is going on around here? I just talked to Smiley and he says he sold the place. To you."

He set the hammer down on the bar, the metal clinking on the lacquered oak. A beat-up wreath was hanging down in front of it, halfway to the floor. "He did, Jes. I was going to surprise you."

"Oh, really? And when did you plan to do that? When I reported for my next shift? 'Hi, Jesyca, by the way, I'm the boss now.' Is that your idea of a surprise?" She had her hands on her hips, the left thrust out just a tiny bit, the way she always did when she was spoiling for a fight. God, he wanted her bad. He was like a volcano, ready to blow. It had been building up ever since the night he'd seen her picture in the magic mirror.

He'd been so very terrified at first, out there on the plains in that lonely tumbleweed town. He hadn't wanted to believe it could be true. He hadn't thought he could have it in him to love Jes, even if he wanted to. For two days he'd tried to drink her out of his system. But he'd only gotten achier, even as his cock had gotten harder. Finally, it had gotten to be too much to fight.

He had to admit it. The reason he kept coming back to her and not to any of the others was because he loved her. Was it a shitty way to show it? Yeah. A woman needed more than a horny, occasional lover.

Which is why he was here now, hammering up horseshoes.

Just a couple of feet away from her, closer than ever to winning her, and yet farther than he'd ever been in his life.

Damn, she really looked mad this time.

He opted for the soothing approach. "I know it's something you weren't expecting, Jes, but in time you'll understand. I'm doing this for our future."

"*Our future?*" She glared, her eyes turning from pretty emerald drops to spitting green fire. "What the hell future is that?"

A lesser man would have withered on the spot. Mark had stared down full grown Brahma bulls that looked like pussycats in comparison. His every instinct told him to hold on, though, to ride it out. "I told you, Jes, I'm here to win your love.

"We are gonna run this place together, we're gonna get a little house on the edge of town and we're gonna make babies. Lots of 'em."

He got a response with the baby-making part. "You're deluded, Mark Bristol." She wagged her finger furiously. "I will never, ever, ever get near a bed with you again, much less make a baby in one. Is that clear?"

"We don't need a bed, sweetheart. We can always go back to the lake."

Mark had frozen her, finger mid-wag. He drank in the sight of her, scantily clad, mouth open in a tiny oval, face molded into the classic deer-in-headlights look.

"I know you're fighting it," he rasped. "I did, too. But it's going to happen. There's too much history, too much chemistry. And fate, too. I see that now. I should never have let you go when I had you. You gave everything you had, you were mine and I let it slip away."

Her lower lip trembled. She was coming back to her senses. "You never had me, you arrogant son of a bitch. I'm a woman, not one of your horses to break and brand. You don't own me and you sure as hell don't have the right to come storming into my life trying to take me over like I don't even have feelings, especially since you've never shared a single feeling of your own."

Mark didn't really have an answer for that. Frankly, in all his fantasies and plans, Jesyca had never actually talked back.

"Stay the hell out of my personal life," she concluded. "It's a closed door."

He watched her denim ass recede across the floor. His cock had never been so swollen, not even when he was eighteen years old, masturbating on sweltering west Texas summer nights to images of Mary Jean Cotton, the homecoming queen.

"Does this mean you're quitting?" he called out, sounding far more pathetic than he had intended.

She whipped her head around, smiling.

Not a friendly smile, though. Unless you considered the anticipation of excruciating revenge on one's enemy to be happy-go-lucky.

"Oh, no, honey. You're not getting off that easy," she crooned. "Not by a long shot."

Mark went behind the bar as soon as she was gone. He reached for the closest bottle and poured himself a shot, dazed.

He downed it without looking.

Peach liqueur.

Who the hell kept peach liqueur at a honky tonk?

Clearly he was going to have his work cut out for him.

Most especially with the staff. Because he had a sneaking suspicion Jesyca wasn't going to be alone in trying to make his life a living hell. She was going to recruit allies, beginning with Crissy.

She would make him want to turn tail and run. But he wasn't going to. This was a battle he would not lose. Even if he had to resort to his standby weapon—seduction.

Sure, getting her underneath him and naked again would be as sneaky as it was easy, but it's where she belonged.

Anyway, if his cock didn't get some satisfaction soon, he wasn't going to be much good to anyone. He could get another woman quick enough, but he didn't want that. Not even masturbation felt right. His semen, like his love, belonged to her, and sooner or later she'd have to take it, before it blew both their minds.

The mirror, he remembered suddenly. She hadn't said a word. Had she looked at it? What had she seen? Was it him in the glass...or someone else?

He clenched his fists. This suspense was killing him. So was not having Jes, her sweet kisses and her eager body.

Mark picked up the hammer and another horseshoe.

Time to work out his tensions, he told himself, on some defenseless metal.

Chapter Two

Jes had the three of them in the staff room. Crissy, Wanda and Lu Ellen all sat in folding chairs, ready to hear her plan. Their shift was due to start in ten minutes. They were working six to closing. It was exactly one day since Mark had come back into town upending her life like a tornado, but it might as well have been a year.

That's how much thinking she'd been doing.

Her scheme was devilishly simple. And she was quite sure it would catch Mark off guard. He would never expect her to use the others against him like this. Jes' idea, in a nutshell, was to make running the honky tonk such a miserable situation for him that he would up and sell it as fast as he'd bought it.

"What we're going to do," Jes tried to sum it up in terms the women could understand, "is to come up with a list of things that are wrong around here. A list we can bring to the new owner with all our names signed on it. That way he'll have to listen to us. Any questions so far?"

Crissy's palm shot up.

"Crissy, you don't have to raise your hand, just ask your question."

"Oh." She pulled her hand back down before starting. "Well, I was just wondering, what if he gets mad and fires us?"

Jes nodded. "That's a good question."

Actually, it was a damn good question. Every once in a while Crissy would do that—cut to the heart of the matter in her own hit-and-miss manner.

"The thing of it is, he can't afford to lose us all, right? Who would serve the customers? That's why we have to be in agreement. Like a union."

"But he could just get new waitresses," Crissy pointed out.

Dark-haired Wanda shifted nervously. "Jes, I can't lose my job, especially at Christmas. I got kids."

"I need to work, too," added the well-preserved redhead Lu Ellen, who at age forty-five was the senior staff member. "Maybe this ain't such a good idea."

"It is a good idea," Jes insisted, taking a moment to flash an annoyed glance at Crissy, who was supposed to be her ally. "And I have a list already started to prove it."

She quickly passed out the papers she'd printed up at the library computer before coming in to work today. The three women began reading—Lu Ellen putting on her rhinestone glasses first.

"What does 'appropriate attire' mean?" asked Wanda, who had left school after the eighth grade.

"It means we shouldn't have to wear these ridiculous costumes anymore." Jes held up her tiny skirt. "Honestly, aren't you all embarrassed having to walk around like this?"

Crissy, naturally, had to say her piece. "Oh, but I kind of like the —"

Jes cut her off with a second, even more withering glance. "Let's move on to other questions, shall we?"

"What's profit sharing?" Lu Ellen asked.

"That means we, the employees, should be entitled to a certain percentage of what the owner makes."

Lu Ellen squinted through her rhinestone frames, which at one point were probably fashionable. "You mean like tips? But we already get those."

"Not tips, that's chump change," Jes explained. "Profit means the whole shooting match, everything the place takes in, minus the operating expenses."

Jes was pretty pleased with herself on this score. She had been studying up on the library Internet all today and yesterday, just so she could have a go at this business stuff, beating Mark at his own game.

"So what do y'all think?"

Lu Ellen looked at Wanda who looked at Crissy who was looking at her nails.

Jes drew a deep breath.

"Hey, don't you ladies need to be out there serving?" called a male voice from the front.

They all jumped to their feet. "Yes, sir," they chimed to Mark in chorus, quickly handing back the lists of demands like they were on fire.

So much for unionizing, she thought glumly.

Mark was right behind her as she walked out onto the floor area. She could feel his eyes on her barely covered bottom. "Do you mind?"

He sidestepped into the bar area. "Not at all."

She frowned and moved on. It was bad enough she had to have him as a boss, she didn't need him ogling her flesh as well. Her body wasn't for him. From now on, it was ice water in the veins for Mark Bristol.

Yeah, right. Like she hadn't just gotten all hot and bothered just seeing him in fresh jeans and a white western shirt with pearl buttons. He was clean-shaven, too, his usual day's growth of beard vanished in favor of smooth, ruddy skin. The kind a woman could run her hand over and feel it right down to the pussy.

He had on his fancy belt buckle, too, the one from Cheyenne with the longhorn on it. The damned thing always attracted her eye. He teased her about being like a cat, fascinated by glittering things, but really it was his crotch she would be homing in on.

The times he had taken her out on dates, she'd been so shameless, forever itching to open his fly and get at his long, smooth shaft—outlined with pulsing purple veins and topped with a smooth, circumcised dome.

One time at the movies he'd played a delightful trick on her. While she was in the bathroom, halfway through the film, he'd used his pocketknife to cut a hole in the bottom of the popcorn container. He'd placed his cock through it, burying it with the buttery, yellow kernels.

"Want some popcorn, baby?" he had murmured when she'd gotten back to the seat.

She'd reached over to his lap, fumbling for a handful. She'd gotten one all right. His erection had throbbed like a living thing as she'd stroked it with her small hand. Jes had felt so wicked doing that in a public place. What a turn-on. "Let me suck you," she'd begged.

They'd been in the back corner anyway so he'd taken the bucket off and let her dip her head down. He'd tasted delicious, salty and tangy. She'd licked the butter off, swirling her tongue all along his warm shaft. He'd made wonderful sounds, happy man noises. She had felt so good all over, knowing she was doing that, bringing him joy.

He hadn't wanted to come in her mouth, but she wouldn't let him pull her off. She vacuum sucked him to climax, drinking down every last drop of his thick, warm semen. He'd wanted to do something back, but she had said no. It was a gift and she'd wanted to give it. Afterwards he'd just kept saying "Thank you" as he'd leaned back in the seat and finished watching the movie.

She had missed most of it herself, spending far more time watching his face, totally at peace. It was one of the few times she had ever felt able to bring him contentment in his soul and not just his body.

That was the hell of it—if the man only knew how hard she'd tried to please him over the years, how much she'd sought to be what he needed.

So he was back and he had the hots for her. There was a news flash. Oh, wait, he'd bought a bar. Silly her. That should have sent her running to the altar.

What it had done was cost her a night's sleep. It had been a very long time since she'd ended up that agitated, covered in perspiration, twisting naked in her sheets until they held her down like thick ropes.

At one point she'd had a half-waking dream. Mark had come to her door, lasso in hand, and told her to strip...

"It's time, angel," he grinned seductively. "You're going to take my semen inside you," he said. "You're going to have my baby."

She wanted to protest, but he just pulled her against him, grasping her ass and flattening her breasts. "We both know it has to happen," he said, his voice thick with desire.

He moved her backward inside the house and slammed the door. He was breathing hard, his cock straining the material of his jeans. "Your clothes, Jes," he reminded. "You can take them off yourself, or I can do it for you."

Jes felt so weak all over. "Please, Mark, I can't –"

"Suit yourself," he growled, tearing her shirt open with his hands.

She gasped trying to cover herself.

"Hands down," he said fiercely. "Your body belongs to me now."

Her pussy went into spasms. "Yes, Mark."

He opened her shorts roughly, aiming to make her naked as quickly as possible. "My cock is so full of semen, baby. I'm going to explode inside you so deep," he said huskily. "I'm going to show you that you're mine, forever..."

Jes's ass tingled with electric heat as he made her step out of her shorts and panties. Next thing she knew she was down on her knees, taking out his cock, feeding it between her starvoing lips. Jes had never wanted anything so badly in her life.

He was silky smooth and rock-hard at the same time. She took him deep, all the way to the back of her throat, looking up often to see if he was pleased.

Finally, he could take no more stimulation. "This is it." He ordered her to her hands and knees.

She trembled all over, her pussy gaping and dripping, wanting so badly to be filled. To be possessed. He didn't make her wait. He came into her, thrusting deep, grasping from behind. "Mine," he said over and over. "My woman...forever."

She had orgasmed over and over, in the fantasy as well as in reality, her hand moving furiously between her legs in the dead of night, simulating the sensations of that cock that fit her so perfectly – the one that had first made her a woman and spoiled her for any other.

The whole thing was so real she'd had to get up afterwards to check the entire house to make sure he wasn't there. Crazy. She'd never had a fantasy as vivid as that. It was almost as if he had been there somehow, taking possession of her.

What was going on with her? Of all times to get even more helpless where Mark was concerned, this was the absolute worst. If anything she needed twice the strength, twice the resistance.

Jes brought herself back to the present, noting the movement out of the corner of her eye. Oh, fuck, Wanda was going up to talk to Mark, looking in her direction, guilt written all over her face. A moment later they disappeared into his office. Jes' heart pounded like a rabbit's, waiting. Was Wanda going to rat her out over her union idea?

She tried not to think about it. Anyway, she'd just quit if he gave her trouble. He might hold the Last Mile, but she was still a free woman.

"What'll it be, gentlemen?" she asked the two men in the Stetson hats who'd just sat down near the door.

"Depends what you're offering." One of them grinned, looking her up and down.

"I'm offering drinks." She gave it right back. "And a one-way trip out that door if you give me any shit."

The second man elbowed him. "She sure showed you, Hal," he drawled. "How about a pair of your fine local beers little lady? You pick the brand."

"Wise choice. Coming right up, sir."

Wanda scooted past, avoiding eye contact, as Jes made her way back to the bar. Mark was standing there, waiting for her. "Let Crissy fill this order. You and I need to have a talk. In my office."

She turned up her nose. "If you think you have something new to say to me, fine."

He looked at her, calm but stern. "Oh, I do, Jes. I do."

Jes felt a little churning in her stomach. A mix of pure anxiety and total desire. Something was going to happen in there, and she had only herself to blame.

Whatever it was, she had a weird feeling it was going to tip the scales between them, and it was not going to be in her favor.

* * * * *

So Jes's revolt was already in full swing. It certainly hadn't taken her long, Mark thought, taking his seat behind the desk. Oh, well, so much for having an easy start of it as owner. No playing Santa Claus and handing out candy canes. He was going to have to be tough. Unless he could figure out how to seduce the ringleader in a hurry.

"I hope this won't take long," Jes announced, presenting herself with a defiant flip of her sexy curls. "I can't afford to lose tips."

"I'll make them up," he said.

Really, he had to admire her. This was not a woman to take things lying down. Ouch. There was an unfortunate analogy. Seemed like all he had been able to think of since yesterday was Jes lying down. In bed, on the grass by the lake, or some place more creative, like a barn filled with hay or on a raft drifting down a lazy river, her limbs entangled with his, making lazy love all the way to sunset.

"I don't want charity," she folded her arms. "I want to work."

Mark leaned back. The chair creaked. This whole business of being in an office was a little hard to get used to.

So was seeing a lot of strange men lusting after the woman he intended to marry. He was pretty darned tempted to cover her over with a blanket to keep those hot stares off her, or better yet to get her a different job.

"Seems to me you could get a lot more work done in here with me, comanaging the place," he pointed out.

"I'd rather be in an office full of scorpions."

He hid a smile. You had to love a woman this spunky.

"Jes, we're going to have to face this sooner or later," he said. "Once we're married, you're not going around dressed like that. You think I want everyone knowing I married the most beautiful woman in Texas? They would all be after my hide."

He could see she was blushing a little, even as she looked at him in total exasperation. "Mark, would you please stop deluding yourself? I am not marrying you."

"Fine, we'll talk employer to employee, shall we? What's this I hear about you organizing the waitresses?"

"We're forming a union," she declared. "It's perfectly legal."

Mark raised an eyebrow over that one. "Who exactly is we, Missy? Doesn't seem like you've got a whole lot of agreement out there."

"We're going to agree just fine," she folded her arms across her chest. "You'll see."

Mark frowned. He didn't like being denied a view of her breasts under the tight shirt, any more than he liked sharing it with a bunch of other men. He decided it was time to kill two birds with one stone. "Close the door," he instructed, "and lock it."

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you up to?"

"I'm your boss, Jes, and I just gave you an order. Are you giving me a reason to fire you already?"

Mark knew she'd go for the bait. "I told you once, I wasn't going to let you off that easy. You're gonna deal with me head-on and you're gonna lose."

His pulse quickened at the sound of the lock engaging. No one could come in now. They had total privacy. "I understand you don't care for your uniform," he said when she'd resumed her place in front of his desk.

"Did Wanda tell you that?" She stiffened. "It doesn't matter. And no, I don't like it one bit as a matter of fact."

He licked his lips, horny as hell. "Why don't you take it off then?"

She looked at him defiantly. "Why don't you take a flying leap?"

Mark held his ground, his cock pounding. "Take off the uniform, Jes."

"Absolutely not," she exclaimed. "Are you crazy?"

"You said you don't like it," he reasoned. "Besides, it's mine, right? I own it along with the place."

"Fine," she turned up her button nose in disgust. "I'll change in the locker room."

"You'll change here."

"But...I have nothing to change into," she declared.

"That's not my concern, Jesyca. You're the one who's so all-fired unhappy around here."

A light came on in her eyes. "Oh, I get it. This is punishment. Intimidation, right? Well it won't work, I can sue for harassment, you know."

Mark didn't know what it was anymore, except that his cock had been too long in his pants, too long without being inside this woman's body. "Sue me later, Jes. Undress now."

She whipped off the bandana and the little vest and flung them at him. "You win, but you'll be sorry. If you think you can win my love this way, you couldn't be more wrong."

He unzipped his pants, reaching inside his boxers for his cock. It sprang out hot and fully prepared for action. "This is all part of proving myself to you, Jes," he told her, keeping his eyes on her the whole time.

She laughed contemptuously. "How? By getting off in front of me? Forcing me to play a role in your sick fantasy? Don't think I can't figure out what you're doing behind that desk, Mark Bristol."

"Is that so bad?" He stroked himself, nice and slow, the motions of his hand hidden by the desk. "A man masturbating at the sight of his gorgeous, sexy fiancée? I can't do this with anyone else anymore, you know. You're the only thing that turns me on. I can see a woman now and it does nothing for me, unless I can picture you. I see you all the time in my dreams. I get so fucking hard I want to explode, but I can't masturbate, I can't let myself come, not knowing I'm your man, that everything I have should be yours."

Her eyes were moist. Her lips were trembling. "Stop mixing things all up, Mark, I'm warning you."

"What am I mixing up? The only thing I care about in this whole world is you. This place, my life, none of it means anything without you."

"You're not my fiancé for one thing, and you don't care about me. You couldn't possibly."

Damn it, she was beautiful when she was stubborn...

"No more arguing." Mark stood, his cock appearing above the top of Smiley's old desk. "I want the uniform."

Jes' demeanor changed as soon as she saw his straining shaft. Her eyes spellbound, her body stiffening, breasts subtly thrust outward in an act of self-offering, she offered a fresh, though half-hearted objection. "But you'll see me," she said, her voice distinctly softened, "in my underwear."

Mark felt a counterbalance of testosterone—male power to match her feminine weakness. "When we're married I will see you in or out of underwear any time I like, Jesyca, so get used to it."

All resistance drained from her. It was as if he had reached out and touched her, staking a claim.

Sighing, almost imperceptibly, she went into motion, autopilot style. His heart thudded in his chest from the pleasure of watching her do his bidding. Her fingers

unbuttoning, parting the halves of the cowgirl shirt, preparing to shrug it over bare, creamy shoulders.

Mark wondered if all spoken-for females reacted this way in the presence of their mate's cock. So subdued, almost submissive. Jesyca had always replied to his masculine attentions with soft, feminine yielding, but never before had she been so completely pliant. The fact that this was occurring despite her obvious unhappiness with him was definitely heightening his arousal. His mind was already thinking ahead to climax, how it would happen and in what position.

Jes' breasts strained against the white bra as she removed the shirt. His heart melted at the sight of that tight little belly, completely exposed. One day it would swell with the life of their unborn child inside her. He would give her a son to love and raise.

They would call him Charlie, not to replace her amazing brother, which no one could ever do, but to honor his memory, and help keep his spirit alive. The poor kid was just seventeen when he'd crashed his bike. Mark hadn't found out for six months. Jes had never tried to contact him. Not that he was an easy man to reach.

She set the shirt down rather than tossing it. She kept her head lowered, trying not to look at his erection. The skirt was next. She unfastened it and stepped out gracefully, her feet still clad in the boots. His cock swelled, begging attention, and he gave it, grasping it tightly, his palm pressing the vein on the underside. He was doing this all wrong now, pushing for sex, but damn it felt right.

Jes put the skirt on the little pile. She had to bend over to take the boots off. Her breasts hung down, firm and delicious, wrapped enticingly in the bra cups. Her buttocks were tight against the back of her panties. He could see the outline of her brown thatch through the front panel as she straightened herself again. If she only knew how she was driving him out of his mind. There was no turning back. He would have her on his desk, moaning, penetrated, as soon as humanly possible.

If he knew Jes, though, she would resist, valiant and futile, and arousing as hell.

Noting with disapproval her current stance, arms crossed over her chest, he said, "When you're mine, Jes, you won't hide your body from me. I'll have you in plain sight, naked as often as I can get you."

He could see the desire etched in her features. His words were getting to her, but she was going to put up one last fight because it was her nature. "I am not interested in your fantasies, Mark. I just want to get out of here."

"The door is right there," Mark pointed out, innocently enough.

Jes raised both eyebrows. "You can't expect me to walk through a bar full of cowboys dressed like this," she exclaimed.

Mark remained nonchalant. "You're the one who wouldn't wear your uniform."

"I don't care. You have to get me my street clothes," she insisted.

Mark shook his head. "That's an out you don't get right now. Sorry."

She tossed her pretty curls. "Fine, then I will parade in my underwear."

"Suit yourself." Mark had every intention of calling her bluff, just as he did of having his way with her. It was a win-win proposition for him. With every passing moment of banter, the steam only increased between them. At this rate the sex would be incredible.

"You wouldn't let me do that," Jes countered. "You'll get me my clothes. I know you."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because you're so protective of me. You'd never let other men see me half-naked."

"And you'd never go half-naked, either."

She looked at the blanket on the couch, an old Navaho weave. "Nope. But I'd wear that in a pinch."

Mark licked his lips. It was time to spring the final trap. "I'll tell you what, Jes, I will get your clothes. On one condition."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Just one little kiss," he held up his finger. "Give me that, then I will get your clothes."

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. "I know you, Mark, there is no such thing as one little kiss with you."

Mark tried to suppress a grin. "You know I would never do anything you don't want me to, darling."

"That's what has me worried," she grumbled.

"Just trust your body. It will know what to do."

"My body lost the right to vote. It gets me in too much trouble."

"You're fighting me. That's your trouble. When you agree to set the wedding date it will be different."

"Damn it, Mark, why are you being this way?"

"What way?"

"Making the stakes so high all of a sudden. We both know it's never been a fair fight between us. Our whole relationship's been like this—one big old game of strip poker with Jesyca on the short end of the stick every time."

"Seems to me you hold your own," he countered. "Or do I remember it wrong? Who asked who for sex at the lake? Besides, what are you really saying—that you want me to go back to being superficial, banging you a day or two and sprinting over the horizon?"

"Maybe that's all a woman can handle from a man like you."

Mark swept his arm impulsively across the top of the desk, scattering the pencils in the pencil holder, the stack of invoices and her teeny little uniform, too. His action left the gray metal surface perfectly free and clear.

"I assume this is your coy way of saying we're going to do it on Smiley's desk?" she quipped, proving she was no longer that awestruck eighteen-year-old under the moonlight.

"Damn it, woman," he growled, "can't you see I'm trying to ravish you here?"

"What's the world coming to," she sighed, "when a fine upstanding ravisher such as yourself can't even get a little respect from one of his victims."

Mark came around the desk, attempting to look menacing. Jes was laughing, which only furthered the indignity of the whole thing. She took a few steps backward in her white socks and tried to fend him off, but her general state of hilarity left her pretty defenseless.

All he had to do was gather her in his arms. Oh, she felt good, her nearly naked body squirming against him. His eyes watered with thankfulness. Nothing compared to hearing her happy like this. The way she used to laugh a long time ago, before losing Charlie.

"Unhand me, you brute," she exclaimed melodramatically.

"Not until you give me the rest of your clothes."

"These are mine, you already got yours."

"I'll buy them off you."

"You can't afford them."

"Why not? I just bought out Smiley."

"The Last Mile isn't worth the cost of a good bra and panties, and you know it."

"Now you asked for it." Mark reached behind and gave her ass a friendly tap.

"Don't you be doing that unless you mean it," she teased.

He yanked her panties down and spanked her again bare-assed. "Satisfied?"

She didn't look satisfied as much as she did ready for more. Was he opening some kind of floodgate here?

"No, do it again," she said, throatily.

"Say please." Mark laid his hand on her buttock, rubbing lightly. She was radiating pure heat back into his hand, right straight down to his cock. They'd never done this before, but he sure as hell was enjoying himself.

Clearly Jesyca was, too, judging by the press of her body against him, hot and eager. "Nnn," she moaned, teeth gritted. "Pretty please with sugar on top..."

His hand cracked against naked woman flesh. She was driven against him even more tightly, her lips on his chest, her pelvis pressing his cock.

"That's enough," he said, fearing she would exceed her limits. "Where did that come from, anyway?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "I just dreamed it. Mark, give me an order, tell me to do something, please?"

"An order, are you kidding?"

"No," she reached for his shirt buttons. "I want to feel...controlled."

He took both her wrists in his hands. Her pulse was strong, vibrant. "Be careful what you wish for."

"I can handle it. You won't hurt me, Mark, we both know that."

"But things will change." He ran his hands through his hair, conveying the energy and power of his feelings. He could feel her, melting, dissolving in response. "I want you Jes. Completely, totally, forever. I'm not the same man. It's more than the sex. I intend to make you my woman. Want you to love and cherish...me alone, no other man. Ever."

Her eyes were limpid pools. Pure love and need radiated from her core. "Mark..." She whispered his name.

Mark's lips moved to within a hair's breath of hers. "Open," he commanded.

"Yes," she sighed. Jes' lips parted for the kiss, the one that was supposed to win her clothes back. Mark took advantage, sliding in his tongue, moving it about her mouth, even as he molded his muscles against her. She moaned, begging with her body to have him on top of her, inside her.

Her fingers spaced themselves across his back. His cock throbbing, he reached behind her, unclasping her bra. They had to separate, just long enough for him to help her let the straps down over her shoulders and shed the cups, like flower petals falling from her firm, full breasts.

"Oh, god," he groaned, taking the flesh in his hands. "I've been waiting for this for so long. Your breasts are so amazing."

"Do you really like them, Mark?" Jes asked in a rare show of insecurity. "Do they please you?"

"More than anything. How could you think otherwise?" he exclaimed, running his fingers over her cheeks.

"I don't know," she said self-consciously. "It's just they're not as big as some of the other women you've had. Showgirls and such."

"Jesyca, you listen to me," he said sternly. "They're perfect. They're all I ever dreamt of and I will never touch another pair in my life again."

Jes blushed. "I didn't ask you to pledge eternal fidelity."

"Well it's too late," he said firmly. "We're partners now."

Her expression was complex, too hard to unravel. Way too many conflicting emotions. "Do you have another command for me?" she asked, sounding almost shy.

"Take off your panties," he said, fully prepared to exercise the power she was giving him over her body. "I want you naked."

"Yes, Mark," she whispered, barely audible.

He clenched his fists. She looked so soft and vulnerable obeying him, her fingers hooked under the waistband. "Slowly," he said, taking a step back. "Take them off slowly."

Jesyca slipped the panties over her thighs and down her legs. Bending her calf muscles, one by one, toes pointed, she removed them.

"Are they wet?" Mark asked, though he knew full well the answer.

She nodded in the affirmative.

"Say it," he coaxed. "Say the words."

"My panties are wet...for you."

He took her chin, gently but firmly between his thumb and forefinger. "Only for me," he said.

Her mouth hung open, as if she wished to reply but could not.

His moment had arrived...

Wasting no time, Mark took the blanket off the couch and spread it on the desk. "Up you go," he told her. "It's time to show you just how much I love you."

Giving her no time to think, he grasped her by the waist, lifting her up onto the edge of the desk. "Baby, spread your legs for me," he told her, his voice choking just a little at the sight of her, so incredibly lovely and desirable.

His, all his.

Jes did as she was told, though her expression held questions. Mark's intention was to give her pleasure. It would mean the postponing of his immediate fulfillment, but that was the price he was going to have to pay right now to share the full depth of his feelings for her.

"I want you to relax," he instructed, putting his hands on her thighs.

"What are you going to..." Her question trailed off as he took his place, getting down on one knee, putting his head between her legs. "Oh, Mark," she gasped in sudden recognition of what he intended. "Oh...god."

He found her clitoris, teasing it to life with the tip of his tongue. He was rewarded with deep female sighs and a fresh pouring out of female liquids from her slit. It was clear how ready she was. It wouldn't take much to make her come.

"Mark, honey..." She grabbed at his head, drawing him close. He could sense the built-up passion in her, the tension. She needed release, she needed a man. She needed him.

Mark applied his tongue, boldly parting her labia. The scent of her made his nostrils flare. Everything about Jes turned him on. Greedily, he pushed her onward, toward the orgasm they both wanted her to feel.

Jes put her legs over his shoulders. She was leaning back, moaning, saying his name over and over. "Yes, Mark" she cried. "Oh, yes, Mark..."

He was relentless, giving no quarter. She exploded around his mouth, her sex a hot fountain of releasing pleasure. He kept hold of her waist, gently keeping her in place, preventing her from bucking off the desk.

Her back arched, her body tensed and let go and tensed again. One orgasm blending into the next, and still she wanted more.

"Fuck me," she said, her voice a plea of lustful desperation. "Oh, darling, I need your cock inside me. I have to have it. Oh, please," she tugged at his head, trying to pull him up. "Take me, you have to take me."

He came up for air. She was grabbing at his hair, she sucked him in for a kiss, tasting his heat and her own liquid lust. "I can't help myself," she said breathlessly, between kisses. "I need it so bad. I can't help myself around you. I wanted you the minute I saw you on my doorstep. I wanted to rip the clothes off your body and throw myself at you."

"I don't want you to help yourself. I want you to be my wet and willing princess."

"And your horny cowgirl?"

"You know it."

Jes' fingers moved to his buttons, trying to get to his bare chest. "So do I get lucky with you or not?" She grinned.

He told her how it was going to happen, how he wanted her. Ass up over his desk, ready for him to take his pleasure – and hers – from behind.

"Yes, sir," Jes grinned, practically falling over the desk, arms spread. He moved in behind her, running his fingers down her back, along her spine all the way to her tailbone. She shivered, curling her toes.

"Your ass is red, girl."

"You made it that way."

He pushed the tip of his cock against her slit, letting it rest there. "I'm not holding back," he served notice. "This is going to be fast and furious."

"It better be," she taunted. "Or I want a refund."

Mark grunted, plunging his cock all the way to the hilt. "Oh, baby. That's what I needed. That's...the real thing."

"Is it like you remembered, Mark? Is it as good?"

"Better." He adjusted himself, moving up and down. Damn, but she was built perfectly for him. Even physically, the angle of her bone structure, the exact positioning of her canal, it was perfect for him. Of course he knew it had to do with comfort, too, and trust. This particular pussy was home. It was where he belonged. He should have figured that out a long time ago.

"Get ready, angel." Mark withdrew, nearly to the tip. Her ass followed him up as far as it would go. She was a randy little thing today, that was for sure.

"Oh, yes, Mark, give it to me fucking hard."

He plunged a second time, grasping her hips. He felt her muscles contracting around him, responding in perfect accord. The fuck was on for real. In and out, quick short breaths, stabs to her core, wet hot neediness meeting iron solid resolve. A connection bound to end in explosion, mutual meltdown.

She groaned, writhing in place, shimmying against the desk, belly pressed flat. "Oh, god, oh god..."

"Yes, yes," he encouraged, fingers intertwined with hers. "Come for me again, fucking come, my angel..."

Mark gave it right back, meeting her crashing waves with his own roaring cyclone, spurts of white-hot semen shooting up into her. Cataclysm—cock swollen beyond all proportion, fused to her pussy, milking out every last drop.

Soaring as high as two bodies could go and then descending, back to Earth, back to the reality of beating hearts and flesh and blood. And ticking clocks, which reminded him that he still had a business to run. How had he let himself get this carried away? Talk about an irresistible attraction.

Here comes the hard part, he thought. Letting this woman up from underneath him and away from his loving caresses for even a moment.

Mark delivered a few kisses to her neck before gently removing his flagging shaft. He was still red-hot. His cock did not want to leave her. "Are you okay?" he asked, hoping he hadn't gone at her too hard.

Jes straightened herself and stretched. "I'm wonderful. Just thirsty as a desert, that's all."

That he could handle.

"I've got just the thing." He made his way to the front of the desk. "Smiley keeps the good stuff right here."

"Scotch?" She raised a brow as he presented the dusty old bottle. "During work time?"

Mark pulled a couple of mismatched mugs from the same drawer. "You didn't seem too worried about your work ethic just now when you were squealing for me to fuck you," he teased.

"I wasn't squealing," she insisted. "And I do so have a work ethic. You ordered me to submit, and I did. It's on your head."

"Shit," he grumbled, pouring out a couple of shots. "I knew you'd hold that against me."

Jes took one of the mugs. She downed it in silence.

"What, no toast?"

She winced slightly from the burning alcohol. "I'm not giving you any chances to start making more speeches," she said.

He laughed, tousling her hair. "You really are impossible, you know that?"

"What I am is cold and poor," she accused. "I have no clothes and not a single tip to my name tonight."

"There's your uniform," he reminded her, trying hard not to laugh. "We both know how much you love it."

"Thanks," she eyed the skimpy garments with feminine disdain. "But I'd rather freeze to death."

Mark took off his shirt. "Take this."

She put it right on. It came all the way down to her thighs. Mark felt fresh stirrings between his legs at the sight of her. What was it about a woman in a man's shirt? Especially when she was naked, freshly loved, hair in wonderful disarray.

"Damn, I wish we were home in bed," he said, feeling his cock stirring all over again.

"What we are is fucked," she tapped the rim of her empty mug. "How about a refill while I think of a way out of this mess."

Mark didn't follow. "What mess? Everything's clear now."

"It is?"

"Sure. Isn't it?"

She blinked. "Define clear."

"You and I just made love, right?"

"Yeah. And..."

"And...that's my point."

She shook her head. "Honestly, I feel like I'm talking to Crissy. What possible point could you be making except that we just had sex in your office, totally ruining any chance we had of a working relationship. Not that I wanted one in the first place."

Mark's soaring heart took a nosedive. Her train of thought couldn't have been further removed from his. "But none of that matters. We settled things, right? We're going to get married."

Jes blinked. "Married? I already told you that would never happen."

He tried to process what she was saying. "But...the sex. You were so...different."

Had he imagined the whole thing—her wanting him to take control of things? Didn't that mean she was ready to follow his plans?

She laughed without humor. "I may have gotten a little carried away, but you can't hold that against me. Jeezus, so I asked you to spank me. That doesn't mean I'm ready to be Mrs. Mark Out-To-Lunch-No-Concept-Of-Reality Bristol. I swear to god, Mark, how a man could make a woman feel so good when he's fucking her and so sleazy when he's proposing is beyond me."

Mark frowned. "Jes, I think it would be best if I didn't continue this conversation right now. I need a little time to regroup. Alone."

"Take all the time you like," she said icily. "Just get me my own clothes and I will be out of your hair."

Mark fought back his emotions. "Wait here, I'll get your things."

Things went by in a blur. He returned a couple of minutes later with a stack of clothes. People had asked him things while he was out of the office and he'd given answers, but he didn't really remember what he'd said. Basically he was just thinking how he was the biggest idiot on the face of the planet. Not only wasn't he winning her over, he was making Jes flat-out hate him. He'd have done better to stay away and just explain the whole mirror thing in a letter.

The story of his life...always trying too hard, overshooting the mark and ending up flat on his face. It was the same in rodeo. He did all right, but he had never equaled his potential. There was a sweet spot, so the old timers said, a place you found on the saddle where you stop trying to ride and just sit back.

"Them animals don't ever buck you," said Shorty Warner, his mentor. "A man bucks himself. He freezes up, loses the rhythm and down he goes. You're strong so you'll hang on an extra second or two, but until you get that freeze out of you, you'll never ride free."

"And how does a man stop freezing up?" Mark had asked.

"He stares down his fear. He looks his demon in the eye and spits whiskey."

Somehow he was freezing up with Jes. Spooking her, riling her, causing her to buck him instead of trusting.

"Jes," he offered, handing over her street clothes. "I just want to say —"

"Don't, please." She pulled her T-shirt over her head, stepped into her jeans and stuffed her underwear into her purse. "I think you've said enough for one night. And, by the way," she stepped into her sneakers. "As far as I'm concerned, your little gift was a cheap shot, too. Giving me your own picture doesn't prove anything except that you're still as self-centered as you've ever been. You don't want a wife, Mark, you want someone to stroke your ego constantly. Assuming you feel like showing up on a given day."

Mark's mouth hung open in total, utter astonishment. Had it actually worked? Was the magic mirror for real?

"Now what?" she snapped. "You look like you just saw Santa and the Easter Bunny in a three-way with the Tooth Fairy."

"The...the picture. You saw it?"

"Well of course I saw it. You gave it to me, didn't you?"

"I did, yes, I did."

"Yes you did, and there's no point in smiling about it. I don't like cheap-ass parlor tricks and I never did. I don't how it works, trick glass or whatever, but I'm not impressed."

"Trick glass? Explain..."

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Just a trick, that's all. I looked in it and saw your face, but Crissy didn't. Trust me I'm not losing sleep figuring out how it works. I have bigger fish to fry. Like getting you the hell out of this town."

"Yes...but you did see my picture. What was I wearing?"

She cocked her head. "Give me a break, Mark. You gave it to me."

"Was I wearing white? Or what?"

"Yeah, a white strait jacket," she quipped on her way out. "By the way, don't look for me tomorrow. I quit."

"Okay," he called out, delirious. "That's great!"

She must have thought he'd gone around the bend, but he didn't care. She had seen his picture. That was better than saying yes to any marriage proposal because it meant this wasn't really just human love after all. It was fate. She was meant for him as he was meant for her.

Mark called for Curly, one of the regulars he'd known from way back. "Bud, I need you to make sure Miss Jesyca gets home all right. She had to leave early."

"Sure thing," said the sixty-something rail-thin man with the stubbly beard and plaid shirt. He loved Jes as an honorary niece almost as much as Mark did as a potential wife. "She okay, Mark?"

"She's, um, having a little trouble with the ownership change. If I were you I wouldn't let her know you are following."

"Not a problem." He winked.

"Thanks, Curly." Mark was beside himself.

It was just a matter of time.

At least he hoped that was all it would take.

If he could ask that old medicine man a single question now, it would be whether the mirror showed what had to be or merely what might be. Was it possible for him to screw up their chance at happiness the way he'd screwed up everything else in life?

Certainly his father would weigh in on the side of his failing. The old man never had believed in a damn thing he had done. Which is why Mark had run away when he was sixteen. Big and strong for his age, he had ended up signing on at the Double H Ranch, working with Shorty. For the first time in his life he had someone who behaved like a real father.

But he never did get over the aloneness, the sense of abandonment. Jes had spent a lot of time alone, too. Her own father died of alcohol poisoning when she was eight. Her mother, worn to the bone and abused, got cancer two years later. Her little brother Charlie had been her only friend.

And now that he was out of the picture she had no one. Crissy was there, sure, but she didn't have family or a true love.

The picture. That was it.

Why hadn't he thought of it before? Jesyca didn't believe in their destiny because all she could see was a picture of him. She thought it was a parlor trick, a cheap attempt to puff himself up in her eyes. But what if she could see something else?

If the mirror really reflected both their destinies, with him seeing her and her seeing him, than what would happen if they both looked in it at the same time? Shouldn't they see the two of them together? And if the pictures were wedding shots, like hers was and like he suspected his was, than what they would see would be an image of their marriage day, a snapshot of their destined happiness.

How could she deny something like that or call it a parlor trick? If he could just get her to look in the mirror at the same time as him, it would all fall into place. He'd fill in the cracks with a heartfelt apology for going about this the wrong way, like a bull in a china shop, and they would be home free.

Ready to start their lives together.

Except for one problem. He had about as much chance of getting Jesyca to stand cheek to cheek with him and gaze lovingly into that little mirror as he did of making a wild bull do the two-step in a Laredo cantina.

This was definitely a job for a go-between. And there was no one better suited for that than Crissy. She was Jes' closest friend and she had never had any problems with Mark. All he had to do was explain the situation so she could go and talk to Jes.

Explain the situation. That would be fun.

Well you see, Crissy, I got this magic mirror off a spooky old medicine man, and when I looked in it I saw that I'm supposed to marry Jes and now I have to convince her of that.

Mark sighed, making a mental note never again to take anything but cash in a poker game. Especially on a lonely moonlit night with too many shots of whiskey down your gullet.

Chapter Three

Jes sat at her kitchen table the next morning with Crissy. Outside the window, the sun was just peeking over the horizon. Crissy had insisted on inviting herself over, despite having worked so late. In her own words, she just knew something was wrong with her best friend.

Rather than get into the details of her emotions, Jes cut to the chase, sharing the results of some deep thinking she had been doing. "Crissy, I'm going to be leaving town for a few days."

Crissy blinked. "How many days?"

"Well it might be a week."

"So...seven days?"

"A week more or less, yes. The point is I won't be here and I want you to know it has nothing to do with you."

"I know that, silly. It's Mark. He's the reason."

Jes bristled. "I prefer to think I'm taking time for myself," she countered, hating it that her friend had cut to the chase like that.

Crissy sipped her coffee, wrapping her tiny fingers around the colorful cup, one of two she had brought for them from their favorite coffeehouse. She always did have the most wonderful little hands, like a china doll. "I talked to him last night, you know."

Alarm bells went off. "Who? To Mark? What about? What did he tell you?"

She could only hope he hadn't revealed any of the details of their tryst. It was bad enough everyone already knew what had happened on account of having been in there so long and then coming out with different clothes on.

"I wanted to know where you went. It was during my break and I couldn't get you on the phone."

"I know. I couldn't answer, I'm sorry." She'd been in the shower for about an hour, crying, scrubbing and crying some more—confused, scared...and horny.

Finally she'd put the soap between her legs and given in, trying like hell not to think of him inside her. Making his babies, cementing his wedding plans, and generally making a joke out of her freedom.

She hadn't meant what she'd said to him, about it not meaning anything. Of course there was a change. She had opened up to him, asked him to spank and dominate her. There was rapport. She hadn't even come the same way.

Damn it, she was weakening and that scared the hell out of her. Because there was just too much at stake, too much inside of her and probably him, too.

"It's okay, Jes." Crissy smiled. "I knew you were all right. So I just went back to work and then I went home and waited for you to call this morning, which I knew you would."

"I should have waited, though, to let you sleep. Thanks for understanding. I should have called you, too, by the way. That was selfish of me. You're my best friend. Why wouldn't you worry? Luckily, we have like a wavelength going, huh, so you'll know if I'm ever in real trouble or not."

"I guess." She shrugged. "Actually, Mark told me you got home fine after you left work."

Jes stiffened. "How the hell did Mark know that?"

"He had Curly follow you home."

Her blood pressure soared. "For what purpose? To spy on me?"

"Curly's not the peeping type, Jes. I'm sure he just watched from across the street to make sure you went inside safely, that's all."

Jes sighed. "You're right. I think I'm getting paranoid or something."

Crissy studied her half-empty cup of coffee. Most people would say it could also be a half-full cup, but Crissy had always been adamant about the difference. If a cup started out full, in her view, it could get half-empty. But if you wanted it half-full, then you had to make it that way in the first place.

"Jes, you know Mark really loves you, right?"

"He has damned funny ways of showing it."

"So do you, Jes."

Jes stared at her. "What...what does that mean? I'm always there for him. Who does he come running to when he's horny or sick, leaving me alone for months at a time?"

"He comes to you, Jes. But are you sure you've ever really wanted him to stay?"

Jes was all ready to spit out an answer, none too pleasant. The fact that this was coming from Crissy made her hesitate, however. Crissy was the one person in the world she'd ever really been able to trust besides Charlie. And Charlie, well, he was dead. "What are you saying, Crissy? That I...I forced him away?"

She wrinkled her brow. "You can't force a man like Mark, I don't think. He's stubborn, like you. Maybe it's just worked out all along how you both wanted it."

Out of the mouths of babes.

"Jes, can I tell you something?"

"What, Crissy?"

"If you get married, you know I'll be fine, right?"

"Why wouldn't you be? Not that I have any interest in marrying anyone."

"I don't know. I guess you just worry about me sometimes."

Jes' eyes watered. Crissy was raised in foster care. When she'd moved to town their sophomore year of high school she was a little bit of a thing, scared of her own shadow.

They had labeled her slow and all the kids had picked up on it, hounding her savagely. Jes had taken up her cause and they'd become fast friends. Crissy's transformation had been astounding. By senior year she'd been a varsity cheerleader, wanted by all the boys. After graduation she'd planned to make it big in the city, but things had fallen through and she'd ended up back here, in a little apartment, working with Jes at the Last Mile.

"We're best friends, Cris. We have to worry about each other, right?"

"I worry about you, too, Jes. Me, I like being on my own, you know? Dating anyone I like or just waking up alone in my big bed. But you, I don't think you're so good at being alone."

Jes laughed. "I've been that way most of my life. What are you talking about?"

"You need people to take care of, for one thing. You had Charlie...and me."

"So what are you saying? I should marry Mark and take care of him?"

"No. You should let him take care of you."

Jes considered for a moment. It was sometimes hard to tell if the things Crissy was saying were really deep and profound or totally off the mark.

"I don't need anything." Jes shook her head at last. "From that man least of all." The words were ringing hollow in her ears, but she was too far along in her established course. "Cris, I need to get away a little," she reiterated. "Obviously I have the money."

Scads of it, actually. Though she hadn't changed her life one bit, not the house or her job, the fact was she had over a million in the bank from the settlement three months ago. She'd never even wanted to go to court, but a lawyer had convinced her, saying that other people might die, too, if the motorcycle company wasn't forced to change the way it was making the bikes.

A stupid little part. That's all it was. Worth a dollar ninety-eight. That's what had cost Charlie his life.

Everyone in town knew she was rich, except for Mark, who'd been out of state the last several months and out of the picture until his surprise appearance yesterday. She didn't want him to know. She wasn't even sure why. She'd even lied to him last night about being poor and needing tips. Maybe she wasn't as open and honest and ready for a relationship as she thought.

"Jes?" Crissy had that look on her face, the one that meant there was something else she wasn't saying.

Jesyca braced herself, wondering what more her friend could come up with today to rock her safe little world. "What?"

"Mark told me about the mirror."

"The mirror? What mirror?"

She meant the picture. Mark must have told her about it. The stupid thing was killing her. She had it by her bedside and first thing this morning when she woke up she'd looked at it and wept. Mark was so happy. Why couldn't he find that happiness

with someone else? That would make things so much simpler. Then he would leave her be and she could go on with her own life, alone.

Would she miss him? Hell, yes. Did she love him? Of course, but feelings weren't enough in this world. She had learned that the hard way. "Crissy, please don't bring that up, okay?"

"But I have to tell you this. Mark probably doesn't want you to know, but he didn't tell me not to say anything, so I have a whatchamacallit, a foxhole?"

"You mean a loophole."

"Exactly," she enthused. "You see, that thing is a mirror, but it's magic. Well, kind of magic, anyway. He got it from a medicine man and it showed him his true love, which was you. You look in it and you see him, right? Well I don't see anything and nobody else can, cause right now it's just working on you two, you see?"

Jes sighed. "No, Cris, I don't. Except it's obvious the man is taking you for a ride. One more thing to love about him. Just do me a favor and tell him his whole scheme has fallen flat on its face. As a matter of fact I think I will let you take the mirror back to him."

"There's a way to prove it, you know. I bet you saw him dressed for a wedding, right? Well Mark says that he thinks if you both look at the mirror together, you should see the two of you in the same picture."

"Crissy, this is silly."

"It's not silly," she insisted. "It's magic."

"Honestly," Jes sighed. "I am so irritated with him for taking advantage of you like this."

Crissy's lip was trembling. Jes hadn't seen her like this since sophomore year, when she was still being picked on by the others. "Jesyca, don't say that to me. It hurts my feelings. I'm not stupid. Maybe I never scored real high on tests like you did, but I know a couple of things. For one thing I know you. A lot better than you know yourself sometimes."

"Crissy, I didn't mean it like that," she exclaimed. "I'm just saying we have to be practical."

"You mean we have to see things the way you do?"

"Well, obviously if I know what I'm talking about—"

Crissy stood up. "Which is always, right? I think maybe it would be a good idea for you to go away for a little while."

"Cris, don't." Jes followed her to the door, trying to take her hand.

"Let me go, Jes. You have to let me go."

Tears streamed down Jesyca's face as she watched her friend, her only friend, walk down the sidewalk.

"Don't call me while you're gone, Jes," Crissy called out in lieu of goodbye. "I'm sorry, but it has to be that way."

"Fine." Jes' voice cracked, her mood shifting to that place where you say all the things you don't mean. "I won't. And don't worry about me coming back because I'm not going to ever."

She slammed the door and ran back upstairs to bed. Grabbing her pillow, she rolled herself into a ball and let loose the sobs, deep and painful. She cried until there was nothing left and then she got up and started packing.

* * * * *

Mark was on pins and needles waiting for Crissy to show up.

"Well?" he asked anxiously as soon as she arrived at the little diner across from the motel where he was staying until he could find himself a decent place to live. His hope was to get a new place with Jesyca, though he would happily renovate her old place to if it meant that much to her.

Crissy sat down across from him in the small booth. "You were right about one thing, she's sure mad at you this time. It's like every time you forgot her birthday rolled into one, and then some."

Mark had expected as much. "I know I really made a mess of it last night. But what did she say about the mirror?"

"Basically, she said you were making the whole thing up and I was a fool for believing you. We ended up in a fight. She said she's going away, I told her not to call. I'm sure she'll really go, I've never known her to back down."

Mark ignored his own terror for the moment. Jes was leaving? His world was crashing down around him. He'd pushed her too far, too fast. But Crissy was right here in front of him and she was hurting, too. Because of him.

"Oh, Crissy, I'm sorry. Damn, this is all my fault. I had no right to involve you. You two are way too close to lose each other over me."

"No, Mark, it's not anybody's fault. The truth is Jes has changed since the accident. She was always kind of set in her ways, but now she's just kind of...mean sometimes. I know she just misses Charlie real bad and she gets mad because none of us are him."

Charlie.

Maybe that was Mark's answer.

When he had met Jes, Charlie had been just thirteen years old but he was already more mature than a lot of full-grown men Mark knew, including himself.

"I've got my eye on you," he'd told Mark the night they'd gone out to the lake. "I may look like a kid, but if you hurt Jes, I swear I'll find me a way to kill you. Nothing personal, you understand."

"No offense taken," Mark had shaken hands with the gangly redhead.

He'd had a grip like steel and after that they'd become fast friends. It was Mark who'd taught him to ride a horse...and a motorcycle, too. Charlie had looked up to him a lot. He had defended him to Jes – excusing his absences, his lack of commitment.

“Mark's a man, Jes. We men gotta be what we are. But it don't mean that we don't care.”

Could it be Jes blamed Mark at some level for Charlie's death? More to the point, did she blame herself? She certainly didn't like to talk much about losing him and that made him wonder if she wasn't covering over emotional sore spots. That was pretty big thinking for a lowly cowboy, but Mark never was one to accept his limits.

Jes wasn't the only one who'd been smart enough for college. Teachers had told him that, too. When they weren't whipping his ass or tossing him out on his ear for some infraction or other. But Charlie was different. He'd paid attention. He'd gotten straight A's, but he was a regular person, too, the kind you knew would go places without rubbing anyone's nose in the dirt.

Mark smiled now at Crissy. “You know, Charlie was the most special kid I ever met? They say sometimes if a man dies young it's cause God means him to be a shooting star, burning all his energy in a few short years.”

“He lit everybody's sky,” Crissy agreed.

“A shooting star,” Mark repeated, and suddenly the way seemed clear.

Mark needed to do something to honor Charlie, something that would give him a chance to mourn and also to insure the young man's legacy, even as he built his own.

Yes, it was time to stop focusing so damned much on Jesyca and just keep doing his own thing. She'd see soon enough what he was doing and come around in time.

The same applied to wild mustangs. If they knew you were after them they'd bolt for the hills. But if you just kind of put yourself there, in plain view and went about your business, then they'd come right over.

Curious and perhaps even a little indignant at being ignored.

Mark smiled. That was Jes in a nutshell – wild, proud and free, but in deep need of the right man to bring out the best in her. If that was him, fine, if not, so be it. A man couldn't live his whole life based on magic. He had to seize his own destiny sometimes, too.

“Crissy, I have an idea. It's a real big one. And I need your help.”

“Sure, Mark. Anything.”

“I want to change the Last Mile. I want to remake it. Totally.”

Her eyes got wide. “Remake it into what?”

His smile was bittersweet as he replied, his voice catching, just a little. “Charlie's Place,” he said. “What else?”

Crissy's smile was just as sad. “Mark,” she laced her fingers on the table. “There's something you should know. Not even Jes knows this, but Charlie and I were in love.”

"You were?"

"Yes. He was only seventeen and I was twenty-two, like Jes. Crazy I know, but it was for real. We were keeping it a secret, until he turned eighteen. Then we were going to marry."

He grasped her hands. "Oh, Cris, I'm so sorry."

She squeezed back. "It's okay. I know he's in a better place. Things were...hard for him down here. People didn't understand him real easy. Hell," she laughed through her tears. "I sure didn't, he was a fricking genius, right?"

Mark thought about all the science projects, the crazy wires in the yard and how Jes was always yelling at him about trying to blow up the house. "He sure was," he chuckled.

"I couldn't tell Jes at the time, she was way too protective of Charlie, didn't think he was ready for a relationship, and afterwards, well, it just wasn't my place to bring it up. I wasn't family or anything."

"You poor thing, suffering all alone."

"Just like Jes. And you, too, right?"

Mark squeezed even tighter. "Not anymore. From now on, we let it show. We let the world know who Charlie was and how his life goes on."

Her smile said it all. Crissy was in. It was a done deal.

"What are we waiting for?" he exclaimed. "Let's get started."

* * * * *

He talked her ear off on the way over to the Last Mile, his mind brimming over with ideas. The whole time he had this tune in his head, too. An old cowboy song, about sleeping under the stars, dreaming of a lost and nameless love.

Except his love had a name.

Jesyca, with one Y and no I's, as she liked to tell people when they first met. She had something else, too. And that was him. Her silent hero, who was about to heal her wounds the only way he knew how – by healing his own first.

Meanwhile, she would have to work out some things for herself. He wouldn't stop her from leaving. He would have to trust in her to know where to go and what to do. He'd also have to hope – no, trust again – that she would come home.

What was the saying – if you love something set it free and if it belongs to you it will come back to you?

Supposedly that approach worked wonders, although he had to wonder if the author of that pretty-sounding verse had ever been out west.

Skies were pretty big out here. And little birds could get lost. Or distracted, ending up in the wrong nest. Drawing a deep breath he said a prayer the only way he knew how, lightning quick and right to the point.

God it's me. Watch over my angel. Let her be happy and safe...wherever she ends up.

Chapter Four

Jesyca laughed lightly at the young man's joke. He was trying very hard to impress her and she was giving it her best shot, too. After three days on the island she was finally taking advantage of the opportunity to go on a date. Frankly she'd been embarrassed by the number of offers. Sitting on the beach reading her books, she'd never dreamed she would attract so much male attention. And good-looking ones, too, wanting to buy her colorful umbrella drinks, rub suntan lotion on her body, teach her how to snorkel.

One of them had a condo for her, on a nearby cay.

The young man she finally chose was blond, an insurance salesman on vacation from Akron. His name was Kurt and he'd won some kind of award for selling the most policies and he was quite excited to tell her the difference between term life and whole life.

Honestly, she wanted to tell him to get a life, period.

He was cute as hell, with a washboard stomach and a dimpled chin and blue eyes, but he couldn't carry a conversation in a bucket. Not like Mark, now there was a man who could talk, and the less he knew about something the more entertaining he was. Not in a show-off way, either, but kind of poking fun at himself. Apparently he wasn't like that with everyone, though. She had been shocked when she'd heard from other people that he was the quiet type, a real silent cowboy.

Lord, she couldn't get him to shut up between his teasing, debating and otherwise annoying her.

Shit, she missed him. More now than when she was home all those months, waiting for him to show up. It didn't help that she had nothing to do but lie around and collect sunrises. She needed to be working, doing something productive.

"So...you wanna go up to my room?" Kurt asked.

Jes blinked. Dinner at the resort restaurant was over. The glazed ham and yellow fruit kabobs were done, the cream and fruit dessert and the mai tais, and now he was looking to cash in...on her.

"Um...sure."

She owed it to herself, right? To get some loving from an eager, available partner?

Kurt started things off in the elevator, trying to press his lips to hers. "You're so beautiful, Jessy."

"It's Jes." She turned away, letting him kiss her cheek. "Or Jesyca."

"You know how bad I want you, Jessica?" He tried to poke his cock right through his pants and her dress.

"I've got a pretty good idea." She could swear she could hear the man spelling her name wrong in his head. "By the way, I'm Jesyca with a Y not an I."

"What's the difference," Kurt tried to get her into the corner. "It's pronounced the same way."

"It makes all the difference in the world."

Just like having the right man try to seduce you versus the wrong one...

"Baby, I'll call you whatever you want." Kurt's hand cupped her breast. It felt wrong, all wrong. "Just so long as you call me daddy when you're coming for me."

Ewwww. Talk about a turn-off.

"Sorry." She squirmed. "I'm not your little girl."

"Damn, baby," he backed off, "why are you so frigid?"

She sure as hell wasn't for Mark.

"I'm just not into it now. It's not your fault...please, I'm sorry if I led you on." Jes fought tears.

"Hey, whoa, I'm the one who's sorry." Kurt put his arm on her shoulder. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

The next thing Jes knew she was burying herself in his arms. "It's just...that I don't...belong here," she sobbed, the words coming in short bursts. "There's...someone else."

Kurt stiffened, clearly not sure what to do next. "You're not single?"

"It's complicated. There's this guy, he thinks he's going to marry me but I don't want to."

"You don't love him?"

"I...I do, but it's not that easy."

The elevator chimed. They were at his floor. "Do you still want to come in my room? Just to talk? I hate to see you alone. I mean it's almost Christmas."

"You're alone, too," she sniffed.

Kurt's face reddened a little. "Well, um, actually, while you were in the bathroom, I kind of hooked up with this other girl. She said she'd wait for me in case..." He cleared his throat at this point, indicating just how embarrassed he felt.

Jesyca laughed. "It's okay, Kurt. You don't owe me anything." She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thank you for dinner. I'll see myself back to my room."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You go have fun."

"Thanks," he smiled on his way out. "I'm gonna go back and freshen up. You're a good sport. And I hope things work out with that other guy."

"Not likely," she laughed as the elevator doors closed, "but thanks."

Jes got a look at herself in the mirror on the elevator wall. What she saw was an okay-looking mid-twenties woman in a red dress, trying to act a whole lot sexier than she was. What exactly did Mark see in her, anyway? Other guys wanted her, but that didn't make her feel pretty. Only he could do that.

Tentatively, she touched her nipple through the silky fabric. The elevator was heading back down. Combined with the Mai Tais, the motion gave her a lightheaded feeling.

She touched the other nipple. Both were responding like good little soldiers. Naturally, they wanted Mark. He knew what to do with them, how to make them sing.

Feeling extra naughty, she hit the stop button. She wanted action and she wanted it here. Caressing her belly, she imagined Mark was there with her, standing behind her. She'd lean back against him, let him take over.

He would whisper in her ear.

Everything's okay...you're with me...just let go...

Jes wrapped her arms around herself, digging her fingernails lightly into her tingling, bare shoulders. Wouldn't it be amazing, him fucking her right here in this elevator?

Her hands moved down to her thighs, under the hem of her dress, drawing it up toward her crotch. She gasped at the feel of her panties, the front panel soaked through. Oh, god, her pussy needed Mark. His cock, his tongue and his touch. She slid her fingers under the waistband of the wispy underwear.

Fuck...her clit was so swollen. Her labia were so wet. She was dripping. A shudder passed through her as she parted her slit, opening her sex. Greedily, she stuffed herself, trying to make it feel like him.

She looked in the mirror again. She wanted it to be magic, like the little pocket mirror he'd given her, which she hadn't bothered to bring with her. She wanted him to be in the glass, stepping out of the glass, naked and hard, ready to take her. Jes clamped her thighs together. She was orgasming already, a compact, intense little blast that made her gasp again and again. She used her other hand on her breasts, trying to cup and caress and squeeze. Trying to hold herself together, just to make it feel even better as she inevitably fell apart, backed against the far side of the elevator, squeezing and releasing her vaginal muscles, clenching her teeth, and then sighing and drawing in more air just to do it all over again.

Yesss...

So much pent-up frustration. She closed her eyes at last, subsiding, licking parched lips and taking stock. It had been bittersweet, a small waterfall that plunged her into a dark valley of uncertainty.

She had not been able to please herself like this since she left home. Her last climax was with Mark. In his office. She remembered what he'd told her, how he couldn't be aroused by anyone else anymore.

Neither could she.

That had been made abundantly clear tonight.

Back in her room, Jes drew a bath. She gave her body a long and thorough soaking. She was tired, more tired than she'd ever felt in her life. Again, she wanted Mark. His sex, his strength, and his wild ways that somehow seemed to spark her and keep her going.

She'd been more dependent on him over the years than she had realized. And that scared her. With all the energy she spent complaining about his hit-and-miss approach to their relationship, she had never looked into herself – what she wanted, what she was projecting.

Suppose he had tried to hang around – asked her to marry him years ago? Crissy had a point, she didn't exactly radiate openness. She was like Mark – fierce, independent, not taking anything too seriously lest it eat her alive.

He liked it fly-by-night. She liked running her own life. She even liked him coming in and sweeping her off her feet when she least expected it. Hell, if he gave her time to think, she would just say no. Or mess it up saying something stupid like she did with the guy in the elevator.

Mark just treated her as a woman. His woman. It was a done deal, right there, to be read in his eyes. If he wanted her, he was going to have her. Damn, was that a turn-on, having a man want her that much. When he came to see her she knew he wanted to be there. It wasn't going through the motions like with some sorry, tired old married couple.

And once he set that pace, once he made it non-negotiable that they were going to make love, then she could be free to get it how she wanted. And he always provided it. He was so sensitive, so able to read her, and he listened, and he never had to prove his maleness.

Once when she went with him to a rodeo in Fort Tims they'd gotten a motel room outside of town afterwards. He was sore and twisted as always. She'd put him in the shower and then laid him out on the king-size bed. She'd had all these oils and creams and she had just spoiled herself by spoiling him, tending to every little part of his incredible body. What a story it told, with all its scars and hard muscles – a man who pushed himself, a man who lived to be his best and wasn't afraid of death. He'd put himself in her hands that night and she could have cried from the sweetness of it, massaging, from his toes all the way up his powerful calves to his muscular thighs, his flat stomach, fine arms and shoulders.

And his cock, already standing at attention with the lotion oozing down it, looking like a volcano of come as she squeezed the bottle. Ooh, that was naughty. Far too tempting to ignore. She climbed up on top of him at that point, doing a little cowgirl action of her own.

"Woman, that's not a massage," he'd grumbled, not sounding too terribly unhappy despite his protests.

"Yes, it is," she'd said impishly as she'd started to move.

They'd come together, a fantastic mutual orgasm that had rewritten an already pretty damn good book between them. She'd slept so soundly in his arms that night, surrounded by the pitch black, the cars on the highway outside lulling her into an almost magical peace.

Magic again...

Why did that word keep coming up?

Jes moved her hand between her thighs. The water was soapy, bubbles caressing her breasts, tickling her nipples, which were exposed to the air. Opening her legs as wide as she could, knees to the edge of the tub, she made another attempt at making sense of things. Sexual things. In some ways it sucked having choices. Why did Mark let her go? He didn't even try and stop her. He had known she was leaving town. He hadn't put up a fuss. Hadn't come to the door the way he always did.

She would have succumbed at any point. At her doorstep, his hand sweeping her toward him, a single kiss making her forget her own name, much less any plans to run off to Aruba. She pictured him scooping her up in his arms, taking her straight up to bed and tossing her onto it.

"Don't move," he'd point with his finger. She'd have no choice but to watch as he unpacked her suitcase, putting everything back in the drawers.

"There, that's more like it." And then he would deal with her. Flat on her back. Hard and decisive and possessing. "You're mine, Jes, and you're not going anywhere..."

Jesyca had another orgasm, though this one wasn't as spectacular. She was mad now. And maybe that was a good thing. Anger always focused her where Mark was concerned. Honestly, she'd been thinking of an excuse to go back home for the last hour and finally she had it.

She would go and tell Mark off.

For being a hypocrite. For talking this great game about commitment and then showing none himself. A man didn't tell a woman he was going to do anything to have her and then give up that easily.

Never mind that she'd run out on him. This wasn't the time for self-recrimination. It was a time to be tough and strong. Strong enough to get her little behind back home.

Then she'd have all the time in the world to fall apart.

* * * * *

Mark put the last piece of paneling up in the men's room and hammered it into place, singing yet another cowboy song. Things were going his way and he wanted to share it with the whole world.

It was incredible. The remodeling was nearly done.

After just three days.

As far as Mark was concerned it was a miracle. The outpouring had been tremendous, with people coming out of the woodwork to help.

The idea of turning The Last Mile into Charlie's Place, it seemed, had hit a chord with everyone in town. Some people wanted to help with the physical work, the painting and so on. Other people had pictures and mementos, or ideas for how to best reflect the unique life of the young citizen they had been deprived of.

The principal of the high school had all the teachers write letters to be framed. His classmates collected things, too. They even brought the science trophy he'd won for the school. The coach of the baseball team he was on brought signed balls and a bat and glove. A pro player came in with a donated uniform from his favorite team.

Crissy had things, too. A guitar he had stored at her place and a few poems he had written her. According to Crissy, Charlie never wanted Jes to know he was into music or poetry, because he was afraid she'd think he was being too sentimental.

Mark had also managed to get some flying memorabilia to honor the boy's dream of being a pilot one day. They had an honest-to-goodness World War II Japanese Zero propeller and a set of goggles.

The biggest thing was the motorcycle donated by a local dealer. Mark was really hesitant about this because he was afraid it would remind Jesyca of how Charlie died. There was no doubt it was a beautiful machine, painted silver with the penned autographs of all the mechanics and a couple of motorcycle racers Charlie used to root for, but he didn't want to do anything to cause Jes pain.

It was Crissy who convinced him.

"I think Charlie would really like it," she said in her typically straightforward but surprisingly profound way. "I bet he has one just like it in heaven."

"You're right, it's perfect. Thanks, Crissy." He gave her a hug. "I couldn't do this without you."

"Jes needs to see a nice motorcycle like this," Crissy confirmed. "It will give her a good picture in her mind to replace the bad."

"Have you heard from her at all?" he asked, knowing the answer up front.

"Nope. Have you?"

He shook his head. Jess had left a message the first day, calling the Last Mile way past closing when she knew no one would answer.

"This is Jesyca. I'm safe and happy...and alone."

Talk about sending off negative vibes. She didn't want people worrying about her, though. That was so much like her. Never wanting to be a burden. Never wanting to unfairly take out her problems on anyone else. If only he could change those times he'd taken advantage of that, allowing her to deal with all her own stresses while expecting her to deal with all his own aches and ills – physical and emotional.

It scared him to think of the pain she had suffered without him. The loneliness and grief. He could go to her whenever he wanted, but she had almost no access to him. He would give anything to go back, to take on her pain himself.

"Losing somebody ain't nothing like rodeo," the bearded, grizzly Shorty used to say. "Rodeo's a sweet little taste of hell—you put your hand in the fire a couple of seconds, pull it out just so you can say you did it. Grief's like being locked in the ring, every vicious critter you can think of going at you."

There was only one way Mark could think of to fight that kind of pain, and that was to meet it head on, like you did with anything else. In his case, he hammered and he nailed and he kept on accepting the gifts of the people, from the donated talents of the sign maker, bending the glass into shape for the new neon lights, to the town council, making sure the permits for every alteration got put through in a flash.

He couldn't believe how grateful they all felt to him. For giving them a chance to remember and celebrate. Even Smiley didn't mind the face-lift.

"Damned place was pretty sorry-looking," he grumbled. "I let it go all to hell."

Mark made sure to keep some special things from the Last Mile, too. Including the sign that he had installed over the bar.

At the rate they were going, they would be done before Christmas. Everybody was asking him about the grand reopening. He didn't want to make them wait, but he still had this pie in the sky idea that Jes would be there for it, that her eyes would be among the first to see the reborn honky tonk, converted into a lasting celebration of her brother's life.

There was no reason to think she would be back anytime soon. Especially since he had finally learned the truth about the accident settlement. Mark thought it was still in the courts, but apparently she had gotten it already. Some huge amount of money well over a million dollars.

Incredible. She didn't have to work at all, much less live in the same house she was born in. Mark had been out of town when the settlement had come through three months ago. Crissy was the one who had told him. He'd asked her why she thought Jes wasn't doing anything with the money and she'd said she wasn't sure, but that she thought it might have something to do with him.

Which made no sense to Mark. The woman obviously had no interest in a future with him. In any case, he had cast his lot with the town and he was here for the long haul, with or without Jesyca.

Would it hurt not to have her?

Worse than being locked in the rodeo with all the critters. But that was life he told himself, stepping back to admire his work. Not bad for a cowpoke. There was just one thing left to do. He felt a small lump in his throat as he lifted the mirror into place.

Yeah, mirrors would be a tough one. Definitely a harsh and painful reminder. If Jes didn't come back soon, in fact, he might have to get rid of them. Supposedly that was bad luck, but if he wasn't going to have Jes, it really wouldn't matter much anyway.

Mark made a decision.

The grand opening was going to be on Christmas Eve.

He had to do it, with or without her. This was Charlie's Place, not Jes' or even his.

Lord, I hope I'm doing the right thing. He sighed.

"Hey, Mark, we got the bike in, come take a look," Lu Ellen called out.

Mark did and saw it was perfect. They had it in the corner, behind a piece of Plexiglas. The way it gleamed in the light, it was like you were looking through into another world.

"Just like the one in heaven," Crissy said softly, standing beside him.

Mark put his arm around her. "He's riding it now."

She sighed happily.

There was his sign...

"We're reopening Christmas Eve," he said. "Come hell or high water."

"That's good, Mark, real good."

They stood for a while, looking at the machine. Silent and beautiful.

And healing...

Chapter Five

It was Christmas Eve by the time Jes pulled into town. The taxi had driven her the whole four hours from the airport. She was just too exhausted and heartsick to wait for another connecting flight.

Of all the stupid luck to end up trying to come home in the middle of an airline strike. In the middle of the Christmas rush no less. She had been stuck on the island an extra day and then ended up on a bizarre journey that had taken her through Puerto Rico and Boston before finally landing her safe and relatively sound in Texas.

All she wanted now was her big, soft bed and about a week's worth of solid sleep. Then she'd wake up and deal with Mark.

"Some kind of traffic jam ahead," said the driver.

"In Ralston? That's impossible." She looked out the front window. Sure enough, there was a line of red taillights up Main Street. Sheriff Collins was out trying to direct traffic. He was doing a bang-up law enforcement job as usual, having just nearly caused a three-car wreck.

"Can't make it to your street this way," he said, shaking his head.

"We can take the back way, down Cactus."

"Not anymore we can't. We just got blocked in."

Damn. There were cars right on their bumper.

"Well, pull around somebody," she said impatiently.

"Ma'am, what do you want me to do?" He put his hands in the air. "I can't make this thing fly."

"Put on your lights or something, you're a cab. Doesn't that give you right of way?" She knew it didn't, but she was refusing to accept the fact that there was yet another obstacle in the way of her getting home. "Oh, never mind," she sighed, "I'll walk."

"Thank you, ma'am...very much!" he exclaimed as she handed him the colossal fare in hundreds with one extra for him.

"Sure, as long as you're going to be stuck here you deserve something extra."

He hustled out to help her with the bags. "You sure you don't want to wait?"

"No, I've waited as much as I can stand." She grabbed her two suitcases, ready to brave the journey.

"Jes! Jes! You're here!"

Jesyca cringed a little as the enthusiastic Crissy came bounding down the street to embrace her.

"I knew you would make it. No one else did, but I knew it."

"Make what?" She looked her friend up and down in her blue denim shirt and jeans and matching waitress apron. There were words stitched onto the shirt she couldn't read. "Crissy, what on Earth are you wearing?"

"My uniform." She grabbed one of the suitcases and took Jes' hand. "Come on, you don't want to miss it."

The crowd parted as Crissy led them through. All eyes were on Jes. "She's here," people were saying. "She's back."

The whole town must have been there, even the minister and the mayor. And there was a whole new light display on the town hall to boot.

"Crissy, this is freaky. I feel like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*."

"Everybody back up. Jes, close your eyes." Crissy was sounding like some movie director. Jes decided the best thing to do was go along with it and get it over with.

Crissy made her stand in the middle of the street, her hand over her eyes. "Count to ten and then you can look."

Jes began the countdown. The entire crowd joined in. When they got down to three and two it was like New Year's Eve at Times Square.

"One, zero!" the whole population of Ralston, Texas proclaimed.

Jes let the light back in. She was looking straight up at the Last Mile.

No, not the Last Mile. There was a new sign that read "Charlie's Place".

Charlie's Place?

"It's time for your tour." Crissy took her arm. "You're going to see every inch of it."

Her heart stopped as she saw the photo on the inside of the door. Her Charlie, grinning ear to ear, holding the shark he had accidentally caught on their trip to Florida the year before he died. And more pictures on the walls and letters and notes and...all kinds of things that had to do with his life. A living scrapbook. Stamps, like he used to collect. Tin cans hanging from the ceiling, painted in gold, with stuck-on wires, like he used to make for his science projects.

She gripped Crissy's hand as she looked in the corner, past the tables and the dance floor.

"Isn't it perfect?" said Crissy.

People were filing in behind, talking about everything. The propeller, the fishing rod, the goggles...the motorcycle.

Silver and gleaming. Like any seventeen-year-old boy's dream.

All she could think of was how his eyes would have lit up to see it. How they should have been allowed to light up. So much, taken away...her own heart ripped out. And for what? It made no sense. It wasn't right and nothing would ever make it right.

This was all wrong. People should not be in here gawking over Charlie's things, over his hopes and dreams. This was horrible, didn't they understand? It was Mark's fault, all his fault. He shouldn't have bought this place.

"Jes, are you all right?" asked Crissy.

"No...I can't breathe. Let me out of here. I hate it, I hate it all. Stop looking at me, all of you."

People were trying to comfort her, people she had known since childhood, people who had been her teachers, her employers and the parents of schoolmates ever since their arrival here when she was four years old.

It didn't matter how much they seemed to care. They were strangers.

They had no right...

Jes was flailing, trying to keep them away. So many, coming closer. Packing tighter. She couldn't keep her footing – she was going in circles, lost in the neon, and lost in the light and glitz of Charlie's Place.

She was coming apart, breaking into pieces, along the lines of the cracks she had hidden for so long. Jes whimpered and screamed, but no one could hear over the roar.

I'm drowning.

Strong hands pulled her from the waters, the floods overwhelming her soul.

"Stand back, please, everyone," called the voice of authority. Mark, firm and in control.

Jes shivered in his arms like a leaf. He carried her from the honky tonk.

"Sheriff, can you help me get her home?"

She mumbled something about it not being necessary, but Mark was hearing none of it. He rode with her in the back of Sheriff Collins' SUV, the siren blaring the whole way to her house.

That's how it is in small towns, she thought. People still look out for each other in old-fashioned ways.

Mark took her straight up to bed. Stripping down the top sheet, he laid her out fully dressed, removing her shoes and leaving on her skirt and top. She felt like a rag doll in his hands.

"I'm so tired," she mumbled. "Such a long trip."

He covered her with the top sheet and told her to just close her eyes and sleep. She didn't want him to leave her. She was angry with him, but not ready to do anything about it yet. In the meantime, she didn't want to be alone.

"Stay with me, Mark."

"All right, angel." He pulled the chair from her desk and sat beside her.

"Not like that. I want you with me on the bed."

He laughed softly.

"What's so funny?"

"You sound like you did the first time, so willful and so totally inexperienced at the same time."

"Don't you laugh at me," she huffed. "I happen to be very upset with you."

"The honky tonk, you hate it."

"Honestly? It scared me. Did you really do all that...for me?"

"Honestly? It's for everyone, Jes, you, me, the whole town. But I hoped you would like it, yes."

"Take your clothes off," she decided. "I want to be under the covers with you, naked."

"You're such an impetuous little thing." He smiled.

His look made her melt. "Do you really love me?"

"More than life."

"Why?"

"Why not?" He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off, baring his chest. The boots and jeans followed and finally the underwear. His cock hung down enticingly. His balls were tight, promising one full load of semen at least.

Her body couldn't help but respond, her breath quick and eager in her throat. What would he do to her this time? Where would he take her? Wherever it was, she would go willingly.

I am his already, she thought, in so many ways.

"That mirror," said Jes. "Crissy said you told her if we both look at it we'll see some kind of wedding picture?"

"I'm not sure. I'm guessing."

She considered the matter. "And if you didn't have a mirror to tell you, would you still know? Would you still have come back here to marry me?"

"You can't ask a man to answer a 'what if' like that, Jes. All I know is that mirror isn't so much magic as it is a window to the soul. If you're ready to see, you do. It can't force anything. I'm a pretty thick-headed cowboy, Jes, I can't say as I'd have figured out my destiny all by my lonesome, but I ain't so stupid as to turn it away once I've seen it."

It was a good answer. An honest, cowboy answer. A Mark answer. "Honest to god," she sighed, "I never wanted anything but you—as much flitting around and sitting on the fence as you did."

"That's because you're my angel." He stretched out beside her, touching his hip to hers. Electricity passed all along her leg.

"Mark...I've been so..." The words escaped her. So many could fit—foolish, lonely, prideful. Lost.

"Shhh...you're home." He wrapped his arms around her, moving his lips to her neck. She began to weep for no reason she could understand.

"Baby, what is it?"

Emotions poured out, words and sentences not under her control, revealing her deepest heart.

"The...place. Charlie's Place. It's so beautiful...he would have...no he *does* like it. He's up there, he's smiling and proud...and free. I don't know how you did this, but you freed him. And me too. I know, it makes no sense."

"It makes all the sense in the world." He spread his fingers across her belly.

"Oh, Mark," she gasped, everything falling into place. "I want to have your baby. I want to be your wife. I've always wanted to, it's been my dream but I couldn't dare believe it. I'm still so scared, everything I love...everything I touch...dies."

His cock was hard against her, between her butt cheeks. "Everyone dies, pain is out there, and I can't imagine what you've suffered. But we're alive now. We can grab the horns of life and we can take our ride. Eight seconds...it's a thousand years to God, right?"

Eight seconds...the amount of time a man hopes for on a bull. He had taught her that. A whole world lives in those eight seconds. Just like a whole world can live inside a four-inch mirror.

"Make the magic," she sighed, pressing her ass against him. "Make me yours..."

Mark rolled Jes onto her stomach. His expression was hard-edged, but full of devotion. "No turning back," he rasped into her ear. "This is for keeps."

"Yes," she sighed. "For keeps..."

"My Jesyca," he said. Lacing his fingers with hers he entered her, possessing her and owning her with his cock.

"Oh, god. Yours." She cried out as he filled her, his cock straining her deliciously to her limits. Her breasts were pressed to the bed, her nipples rubbing, even as she lifted her ass up to him, to be penetrated deeper still. "Only yours."

Their motion stayed slow and snake-like, bodies intertwined, dripping sweat, heavy and tight for just a little while. Each of them knew what must follow, inevitably, as the tension built to the point of no return, hard masculine muscles and soft female flesh.

It was going to have to be hard. And fast. And soon. Jes was the one to say the words first. "Fuck me, Mark," she begged. "Oh, god, do it to me."

"Yes, Jes..." Mark was more than ready, breathing out his rhythm, already moving, already taking...and giving.

She gave her encouragement, undulating her body in time to his. His cock was hot and large, ready to explode and her insides were pulsing and primed. She quickly released her muscles, letting the tension go.

"Now," she cried. "Come inside me...now!"

"Yesss." He grunted, pushing down in full ejaculation mode. Just as the first spurt entered her, Jes orgasmed, the explosion making its way through every nerve ending in her body, head to toe. She moaned and moaned, eyes closed, lost in the bliss of being covered by Mark and loved by him.

His cock poured semen into her, thrust after thrust. Her heart and pulse raced. *We're making a baby, making a baby. Maybe this time, maybe next, but soon.*

Once they both settled back to reality, Mark turned to his side, but he did not let her go.

"Oh, honey," she whispered. "Is this a dream? What you did to the honky tonk? You being here with me? I've come so far now...if you left again...I...I don't know if I could go on."

"Never," he gripped her fiercely. "You hear me? I'm in this saddle for keeps, ain't nobody or nothing bucking me out."

Mark proved it by staying hard. Inside her, fully claiming her soft and well-loved sex. "I love you, Jesyca, I've been the biggest damn fool in the world not to have done this years ago."

She felt the flesh melt between them, as if their very souls were connecting. She had never been this close to another human being.

"I love you, too, baby," she exclaimed. "But it wasn't time. I needed to be free, I needed to grow and learn. You knew that. You always knew what I needed. You've always been there for me, honey. I wish I could have appreciated you more."

"Oh, Jes...you don't know how good that makes me feel."

"I hope it's as good as you've made me feel." She reached behind her and stroked his hip. "You've given me a new life."

"You already had all the life you needed."

"No...I needed you—this. Take me again, Mark, come inside my pussy another time, let me show you I'm your woman."

He took hold of her breast, cupping the full globe, securing it in his loving grip. "My pleasure. Now and always."

She felt so safe like this. But was it real or would she wake up and find herself once more alone?

"Is it really true?" She wanted to know. "Do I really give you what you need? You're such a handsome man—you could have any woman. Mark, I can't move like a showgirl, I'll never look like a movie star."

"You're all they are and more. You're everything to me. I only hope I can satisfy you, too."

She laughed throatily. "Oh, god, do you ever. You know how jealous the women here are of me when my cowboy rolls into town?"

"Well, it's gonna be a lot worse, because I'm here full-time."

"Good. I hope they turn positively green."

"Wench," he teased.

"I know," she giggled. "Don't you love it?"

"Yes...I do as a matter of fact."

"Just promise me you'll keep on seducing me."

"I don't know. Are you going to play hard to get?"

"Ooh..." She wiggled, squeezing tightly. "I'm going to be like a refrigerator."

"Then I'll have to play hardball, won't I?" His hand went to her ass, grasping it tightly.

She whimpered happily. "And what does that entail?" She feigned dismay.

"I might have to spank you, dear."

"I was afraid of that..."

"I'll bet you were." Mark withdrew his cock and repositioned her on her back.

"Why'd you do that?" she protested, suddenly empty.

He knelt between her legs, his shaft dripping with their combined come, glistening and hard, taunting her with its closeness. "Seems to me you are not yet appreciative enough of what I have to offer."

She reached for him. "I appreciate plenty."

Mark settled on her chest, pinning her arms. His cock was poised at her slit. "Let me hear you say it."

"I like how you fuck." She lifted her hips, trying to impale herself. "I like what you do with that nasty cowboy dick."

"That's not very ladylike." He shifted, denying her. "Let me hear you ask nice and proper."

"Okay...fuck me, tall-dark-and-handsome." She grinned.

"No, that's not it." He licked her nipples, making them burn with his devilish tongue.

"Oh, god." Her pussy was thrumming. She was so freaking close to coming again. "Baby, please, fuck me."

"That's more like it." His eyes were wild. Down he came, penetrating her to the core, deeper than he had ever been before. She pulled him tight against her, wrapping her legs, digging into his muscular behind with her heels. She bucked up against him, wanting the friction, the sheer combustion. Mark sank his teeth down into her breast, creating just the right amount of pressure, drawing out of her even more phenomenal energy. She was whimpering and crying and groaning and begging.

"Now!"

Time stopped. He roared into her like a freight train on collision, like a cyclone sucked inside of her and radiated outward in the form of her own sexual heat. The orgasm was silent, a cataclysm of two bodies, melted down and fused, holding so tightly, expressing all the years of need and all the possibilities of the future, riding high, soaring, never ending.

At last, at long last, as every bit of grappling and biting and sweating and sighing was done, they fell into a heap, their fingers interlocked.

Mark rolled onto his back, lying beside her. For a while, neither could speak. At last she got the words out. "The mirror. Let's look at it. Let's see it there's a picture of us together."

"Where is it?" he asked.

She told him where to find it, downstairs on the mantle. He rose from the bed, leaving her temporarily abandoned. "Hurry," she rasped.

His fine body moved with the surety of a tiger, full of predatory power, keen and under full control. He was a beautiful, powerful man, and by some gift of nature, he wanted her for a mate.

Correction—he had been fated to have her as a mate.

At least the mirror seemed to say that.

Mark returned with a smile on his face. "You still look beautiful as ever," he looked at the tiny glass oval. "You're going to make the most incredible bride."

He turned it around so she could see. It wasn't herself she saw, but him, smiling in his cowboy wedding suit, his eyes so alive. "And you are going to be one knockout of a groom."

Mark lay down beside her again, snuggling close. "Ready?" He put his arm around her.

"As ready as I'll ever be." She took a deep breath.

"Close your eyes."

Jes shut them tightly. "You, too. We'll see it together."

"Damn," she heard him say. "Look at this."

"You cheated," she protested. The breath left her lungs as she saw the image. Mark was holding the mirror above them, shining it down on both their faces. "Omigosh," she whispered. "It's..."

"Us," he completed the thought. "The way we're going to look."

Jes was in her white dress and Mark was in his suit. They were facing each other holding hands and kissing. It was *the* kiss, the one to seal the deal.

A tear trickled from her eye. "I'm going to be your wife, Mark."

"And I'm going to be your husband. Darling you don't know how happy that makes me."

"Not half as happy as it makes me."

Mark set the mirror down on the nightstand and took her head in his hands. "I think we should start practicing on that wedding kiss, don't you? It looks like a doozy."

"Yeah," she agreed, beaming. "We don't want to let anyone down."

Their lips fit perfectly, like everything else about them. Even their arguments, their stubbornness and their very strange relationship history, all of it was perfect...for them.

Naturally the kiss lasted and led to other things, also natural.

They had so much naturalness, in fact, that they were still awake at sunrise, to wish each other Merry Christmas.

At last Jes had a gift for the holiday she really wanted. And a home to enjoy it in. As for Mark, he had found the peace his lonely cowboy heart was looking for.

All with the help of just a little magic and a winning poker hand.

Epilogue

Little Charlie was eying the tree from his playpen. Ten healthy little fingers and ten equally healthy toes were all wiggling in the same direction, looking for a chance to get into all that splendid, colorful beauty. At this point, he was quite well contained, but Mark and Jes knew by next year it would be a whole different ball game. Their son would be fifteen months by then, steamrolling his way to the terrible twos.

He was the perfect combination of his parents with his mother's chestnut hair and his father's dramatic blue eyes. Jes knew he would be a lady-killer. Mark was hoping for another cowboy in the family, but Jes wasn't too keen on him putting little horsey toys in his playpen all the time.

Everyone said he was marvelously easy and good-tempered for a first child, but they weren't surprised. It was all part of the magic of his conception. As near as they could tell, his little life had begun in Jes' womb last Christmas Eve, the night she and Mark had pledged their eternal love for each other.

They were married a month later, their outfits duplicating exactly what they'd seen in the picture. The mirror served as a wonderful model. It was the funniest thing, though, as soon as the service was over, when they went to look in the mirror, they no longer saw anything but a regular reflection.

That's when Jes came up with the idea to give it to Crissy.

She saw a very handsome, mysterious young man who looked a bit like Jes' deceased brother. Crissy was a little taken aback, but Jes said it was all right, she had known about what was going on between Crissy and Charlie.

"I couldn't have imagined anyone better for him," she said, "even if I was scared for him to grow up."

The man in the picture wasn't anyone Crissy knew. She held onto it, though, not giving up hope.

Three days later he walked into Charlie's Place. A young man on a motorcycle, lost and looking for directions back to the highway. Crissy didn't seem surprised at all. They struck up a conversation and tonight she was bringing him to Mark and Jes' house for Christmas dinner.

Mark stood admiring the tree with Jes. "You did a beautiful job decorating," he told her. "You were hiding your talents far too long."

"So were you." She inhaled the thick, hickory aroma of the smoked turkey he'd been cooking in the backyard all day. "I think I'm going to let you do all the cooking from now on."

"Damn, I was hoping you'd keep on thinking I was all thumbs in the kitchen."

"Just as long as you keep up your skills in the bedroom," she teased.

Mark pulled her close and patted her denim-clad behind. "That's going to cost you, missy."

"I don't think so, mister," she rubbed his cock through his jeans. "We can't go back to bed. The baby's down here. Anyway company's coming and you have pies in the oven. I guess you'll have to suffer all afternoon, poor thing."

Mark lifted her shirt and unhooked her bra. "I don't think so, angel."

"Mark," she squealed, "what are you doing?"

"Getting my wife ready to make another baby, what does it look like?"

"But...I told you, we can't."

He whipped the shirt and bra over her head, baring her breasts. "Sure we can, in the kitchen. I can manage the pies and veggies and you at the same time. And the baby is fine out here."

"Crissy and her date could get here any time, though..."

"She can amuse herself with Charlie." He fingered her nipples, making agonizingly slow circles. "Besides, that isn't your concern is it?"

"No," she leaned her head back, feeling hot little tugs all the way to her pussy, "it's not."

"What is your concern?"

"My husband wants me..." she breathed.

"Why?"

It was a conversation they had often, something Mark insisted on to make sure Jes never lost sight of how he felt about her. She loved it, too, considering it to be wonderful foreplay.

"Because I'm the sexiest thing in the world to him. He can't...keep his hands off me."

Mark cupped her breasts, weighing them in his hands. "What's going to happen in the kitchen?" He kept the logic flowing.

"I'm going to get fucked."

"Does it matter if it's a good time or place?"

"Hell, no!" She grinned.

Mark scooped her up in his arms. "Let's make another one, woman, a little girl this time. "How about another Jesyca?"

"Clara," she countered. "For your mother."

"Clara Jesyca." He set Jes down on the linoleum of the newly remodeled house where she'd been born. He wasted no time pulling off her jeans and panties. Setting her bare-assed on the counter, across from the stove so he could watch the pies, he ordered her to spread her legs.

She did so eagerly. Bending down, he dove between her thighs, making a beeline for her clit. He had her crying out in orgasm just a few minutes after that. His tongue was so goddamn good on her ticklish clitoris. God, he could make her so wet and horny.

He lapped her female liquids, getting her worked up all over again. Then he brought her to the table, so he could fit his cock inside her. Mark sat her right on the edge so she could push herself eagerly onto him. He sunk inside her fast and hard.

"Oh, Jes," he groaned, looking like a man sweetly possessed. "I'm going to give it to you, we're gonna make a little girl."

"Yes, sweetie, that's it," she purred, resting her head against his shoulder. "Come inside me."

He shuddered, his entire body vibrating as the semen exploded from him. He wasn't even moving his cock, just standing there, immersed in her, his shaft bathed in her warm wetness. "Oh, god, so good," he groaned. "It feels so good. Thank you," he sighed falling against her.

"Thank you, honey," she replied.

Just then the doorbell rang.

"Oh, shit," said Jes.

"Uh-oh," said Mark.

"I told you." Jes couldn't help laughing. "Now we're in trouble."

Mark pulled out and tried to get his pants up.

"Careful," she cried. "You'll zip yourself."

"Never mind, just get your clothes on."

"I can't, half of them are in the living room."

"Fuck!" Mark groaned.

"Omigod...did you..."

The look on his face indicated that yes, he had nicked his cock with the zipper. "Just...get dressed," he grimaced.

"You poor thing." She kissed his cheek, trying not to laugh.

Jes quickly scooted back into her panties and jeans. She ran out to the living room and grabbed the shirt, tossing the bra into Charlie's playpen. Skidding to the door, having put the shirt on in record time, she opened it, all smiles.

There was Crissy and her new friend—a brown-eyed, chiseled-faced hottie.

"What was that noise?" Crissy creased her brow suspiciously.

"Mark burned himself on the stove."

"Ouch. That's gotta hurt. Bobby, why don't you put our presents under the tree."

"Sure, Crissy."

"What do you think?" Crissy whispered as soon as he was out of earshot.

"He's a perfect gentleman."

"I hope not too perfect." She winked.

Mark came out of the kitchen. "Hey, Crissy, hey Bobby, sorry I got held up in the kitchen, you guys. We had a little, um, flooding problem."

Crissy raised an eyebrow, looking at Jes. "Was this before or after the burning problem?"

Jes flushed red and looked at her husband, eyes speaking volumes. Mark shrugged, indicating innocence.

Crissy laughed. "It's okay, you guys are married, you're supposed to goof around, and I'd be worried if you didn't. Maybe by next year, we'll have two couples here, and two babies, huh?"

"Make that three," Mark chimed in.

They all laughed.

"What's so funny?" asked Bobby.

Crissy put her arm around him. "You'll understand better when you open your special present after dinner." Crissy pulled a little wrapped package from her purse. It was about four inches, oval. She winked at Jes and Mark, who grinned.

And so it continued...the magic of the mirror and its ongoing gifts of Christmas love and laughter.

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities; barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading of them as in the writing.

Reese welcomes mail from readers. You can write to him c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Avenue, Akron, OH 44310-3502.

Also by Reese Gabriel

Come and Get Me
Dance of Submission
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Prisoner of Shera-Sa
Roping His Filly
Temporary Slave

REFLECTING THE FUTURE

Cricket Starr

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So he did.

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

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

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

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

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

There wasn't a fourth stroke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She wanted him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I like the idea."

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

"Presents?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As if that were possible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Too good.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And you have none for me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No more Suzie at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's what I think it means."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What good does that do?" John asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. If you're willing."

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

"What's that?"

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

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

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

"And what?"

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

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

John had a very sexy smile.

"So tonight then," she said.

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rich and full-bodied, just like Suzie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Any way she would let him have her.

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

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

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

So much for not being interested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suzie moaned. "That feels so good."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A Santa suit? What is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean you aren't?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Merry Christmas to you, too."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Five

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As painful as that sounded.

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

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

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

No matter how she felt about it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I can't do that!"

"Why not?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A deal?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Like that?" Mary Jane purred.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The robe across his crotch bulged even more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, ready for her and Mary Jane. Unfortunately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"MJ?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I should undress you, then."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I get control."

"But I want to help..."

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

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

"There. That should hold you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Suzie!"

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

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

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

He grinned at her, but did as she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Seven

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is this?" the woman asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"To Suzie!" everyone said and drank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A sign from me?"

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

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

"John..."

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

"I do care for you," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Eight

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's a good station..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With reluctance John rose to collect his present.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This does seem to rate," John said.

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

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

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

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

"Wedding rings..." John said.

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

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

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

"What about MJ?"

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

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

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

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

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

Neither of them were surprised that it fit perfectly.

Epilogue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello, wife," John said.

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

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

"Well it is Christmas Eve."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The End

About the Author

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

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