



Martian U

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Major Russell

“Suzette?” Dad’s head pokes in my door. It was closed but you don’t think he’d knock, do you? “Suzette, are you here?” Dad is in his late forties and has dark brown hair that is graying at the temples, which does look distinguished but it’s a little premature considering our heritage. His eyes are a deep brown. The chub on him makes him seem warmer than he truly is and he stands out in our family because of it. We all have leaner features.

I close my book and sit up on my bed. “Weren’t you going to stay on the Island until school starts?”

“Change of plans. I have some good news that couldn’t wait. Artie’s whipping up a special meal as we speak.” He’s excited and it is a rare day that Stanley Russell lets his emotions show. Unlike me, Dad’s full Martian. I’d tell you to think Mr. Spock but that analogy is a very limited one. His ears aren’t pointed, his eyebrows are normal, and although he’s aloof he is hardly clinical twenty-four seven. However the Mr. Spock comparison is right on the money when it comes to Martian views on feelings. Emotions are determined to be weak and hence hidden. Martians pretend not to have any. Since they bottle them up, when they show, they show brightly. And Dad’s big smile is bright and shiny.

The term *Martian* was adopted by our people in the 1950’s when science fiction peaked in popularity. We use it tongue-in-cheek. Earthlings never discovered our home planet before it died and the first Martian settlers communicated via telepathy, so we never had a word for home or ourselves. *Other worldly being* sounded too dry and formal.

“What’s the occasion?” Why do I bite? He’s stringing me along for a big announcement. Dad wants the anticipation to last.

“At dinner. Artie will want to hear.” Told you he liked to play me and with that tantalizing teaser Dad leaves with a skip in his step.

Artie’s full name is Artie Mann. Dad isn’t the most creative person on the planet and since Artie is an artificial man, he named him just that. If anyone, human or Martian, could tell Artie is robot, I’d be impressed. He is six foot exactly and has light brown hair and blue eyes that never get red or bleary. Other than not blinking enough and this weird

pupil size fluctuation tick when he thinks, he's a perfect imitation of life. Artie isn't really a maid or a butler or a baby-sitter but he does what we need. An old friend of Dad's had made him for us since Dad got saddled with me. Fatherhood isn't a natural talent of Dad's, so he figured an unnatural substitute would fill in the gap.

Artie is an independent thinking being with synthetic emotions that are developed and balanced. His last programming was when I was five. He was given free will to use his best judgment. Somehow Dad didn't foresee that a robot and a wise-ass kid could find ways to bend the spirit of the rules without breaking the letter of the law. I wasn't that bad. Dad went off the deep end when he heard I had eaten Mac & Cheese for every meal in a week. So rather than having Artie contact him constantly, he choose to let the robot make the wise choice. By giving Artie self control, Dad pretty much made Artie alive. The three of us see it that way. Artie has more emotional range than dad and more emotional control than me.

As for how Dad got saddled with me, I'm his sister's child. She's a *free-spirit*. It happens with Martians occasionally. Amanda Russell is her name and I haven't seen her in years. She tends to run off and vanish for long spells. Once she was gone for three years and when Dad found her, she was pregnant with me. This current disappearance started four years ago. I'm worried. Artie tried to find her last spring while I was at school. Artie doesn't fail often.

Dad may not be a great Dad and since he has Artie around, he doesn't have to be. He loves me and treats me like a princess, which he called me until two years ago when I broke it to him I was too old for that. I only mention this because I don't want you thinking he's über arctic.

So dinner with my two favorite men in the world is a grand idea with or without a cause. Of course, I'm half Martian and we're curious beyond belief. Dad's hint is like painful torture by suspense. What would be too big to phone home? Could he be getting married? He never did, probably because of me and hiding my human roots. Maybe he wants kids of his own? He's getting kind of old but we live longer, so he's still in the safety zone. It's funny how Martians are all about perpetuating our race but a lot of us go down a solitary road. If you want to hear my two cents on the matter – it's our pro-apathy stance that takes the fun out of romance.

I can accept a wife in Dad's life. Especially if she's cool? Amanda is the only Martian woman I know personally and she is atypical with a capital A. If Dad was at work and therefore on campus, this new woman must be on staff at Martian U. Now the suspense is terrible and I can't take it any longer.

Hurriedly I give myself a check over in the mirror. No need to change if we're dining in.

The yummy smell of Chicken Cordon Bleu wafts up the stairs as I descend. Everything Artie makes is my favorite. Martian metabolism is high, mine even higher, and I'm lucky to eat all I want. If we over do it, we get the urge to burn it off. I'm a runner. In the kitchen Dad is preparing the salad. Wow! For him, food prep is robot work. Curiosity is now too weak a word to express my intrigue.

"Can you tell me now?" I take a carrot and nibble.

"You didn't want to change out of your jeans?" Dad hates that I wear jeans all the time. He thinks they are overtly human and grungy.

I ignore his question since he ignored mine. "Does this have anything to do with Martian U?"

Martian U is sometimes called the Island but if you're not in the Martian crowd, you might have heard it referred to as Island U. Humans assume it's a super elite college that extends admission only to legacies and that is the entirety of their knowledge on our school. It isn't true that you have to be a legacy. You must be Martian to attend, no exceptions. Technically your parents need not be alum but most still in Martian society went to Martian U or its sister school Bermuda U. Bermuda U is the older site and floats west of Bermuda in the infamous triangle. Technically they're the same school but they run independently of each other.

Martian U is more selective in admissions and broader minded than Bermuda U. I would have got in regardless of Dad's position. He's the Engineer of Education. It's his job to determine standards in students, teachers, class options and what those classes entail. Sure, if my scores were light, Dad would have pulled strings but I aced the entrance exam. How could I not pass? I was homeschooled by a high tech robot that loves me.

“Are you getting married?” I blurt out foolishly seeing as he hasn’t done anything but smiled for the last couple of minutes.

“Suzette, no. If I were going to get married, I would talk to you before proposing. Where do you come up with these ideas?” Dad gives Artie an odd look.

“She loves those funny love stories at the movies.” Artie explains. “Suzette has Amanda’s sense of romance.”

“But it has to do with Martian U, right?” I hide how annoyed it makes me that Artie speaks of me in third person when I’m in the same room as him.

“Yes, it is something I learned during our admin meetings this week. I am here to deliver the news in person. I have to go back in the morning.”

“And you couldn’t call?” I bob my head and finally theatrically flair out my hands to tell him I’m waiting. He knows and he loves it. I’m way more emotional than the normal Martian since I’m half human. That by the way is a big secret that no one knows outside of my Martian family, Artie included. I don’t know who my biological father is and I bet he is completely unaware of the fact that he has a daughter. It used to bother me but I got over it – ‘cause I didn’t have a choice. Dad doesn’t mind mostly that I’m mixed, although he insists on it being a concealed fact. When he can toy with my exposed human emotions, he sees it as a lot of fun provided it’s at home.

Dad laughs at me. It’s a nice sound from him. The scarcity of it makes it twice as nice. The fact that it’s at my expense doesn’t ruin it. “Okay, okay. I’ll tell you. You’ve been selected to be a Major.”

“What?” I gasp.

“A Major? That’s wonderful.” Artie shuts the oven and gives me a hug. Like I said, the robot is the touchy-feely one in our home.

I’m still too shocked to move but do manage to hug back, albeit timidly. “I’m so young.”

“I know.” Dad’s pride fills the house. “You’re the youngest in history not to forget to mention you’re the first woman Major at Martian U in over two hundred years.”

“Mars Stars!” That exclamation isn’t just for the records I’m breaking. Dad called me a woman. I let go of Artie. I can tell by the way Artie’s synthetic eyes shutter

open and close that he's processing and picking up on my hesitation. It has to be pushed aside for Dad. "That's wonderful."

"Your grades are excellent, you're a natural leader, and you've impressed every professor and the entire administration at Martian U. When you consider those facts, it makes a lot of sense. And before you accuse me of meddling, it was President Nathaniel who nominated you. I hadn't even considered it."

That is a big fat lie. Dad is a meddler even if he didn't meddle here. He had it on his goal list for my life to be a Major although I do believe he planned to wait another year or two.

Unlike earth universities, Martian U is an undetermined amount of time. Six years is usual. A few leave earlier but most go for six and some linger, those that do either enter into Martian hierarchy or become *institutionalized* and join the staff. It covers a lot of coursework you'd find at human colleges but it also covers our heritage and we have a lot of physical demands to meet. Graduation is based on your readiness as seen by the eyes of the administration. Majors are usually chosen from fourth year students, rarely a third year and never younger, until now.

Top students are elected to be part of Troops. These are Martians that show great potential. There are presently twelve Troops on campus, or there were when I left for the summer. Each Troop has a leader referred to as Major, also a student. Competition between the Troops is legendary and among the Majors, downright cutthroat.

Although Dad is on the staff, he hadn't gone directly into that job from student. He worked in the secular world for twelve years. He made his money selling inventions to the Martians and day trading in the world market. We have a comfortable life, like most Martians. Eventually Martian U asked him to join their staff. He had been a Major in his days. I learned later, his best friend Thomas had been offered the position first but declined not having the killer instinct.

And that is what has me worried. I'm a softy and not at all focused. Good grades come naturally because my brain runs faster than most. Majors, effectual Majors anyway, are focused individuals.

"Honey?" Dad beckons me to the here and now. He's allowed to call me *honey* but pet names are so patronizing in general.

“I didn’t expect it, that’s all.” I smile and in a second there is a part of me that means it. It isn’t his way, but it’s mine, so I hug him and hold extra tight and long. He doesn’t squirm, which proves that he is super proud. “Whose Troop will I take over?”

“It’ll be a new Troop. Two Troops had mostly resigned. Those that didn’t are merging into a Troop and yours will entail students new to Troops. A boy named Wyatt Vasser will take over the merged Troop.”

Unlike me, Wyatt is a perfect fit for the position. Pompous, arrogant and the epitome of ambition. He’s been in school for six years and he’s been in a Troop for four. Wyatt first campaigned for Major long before I started last year.

“There is more news. We’ve accepted our first halfer and he’ll be in your Troop. He’s attendance is ground breaking.”

Halfer is a term for people like me. It isn’t exactly derogatory but it does slant that way. “I’m half-Martian.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Dad frowns. “But no one knows. There have been others, no doubt. I don’t think any on campus currently. Blake MacGinnis is openly half-Martian. Your Troop will be high profile because he is. I think you’ll like him. It was my honor to extend an invitation to Martian U to this young man personally.”

“You don’t usually do that, do you?”

He shakes his head that he does not. “I’ve known him for years and his mother is the smartest woman I have ever met that wasn’t Martian. That isn’t fair. She’s smarter than most Martian men and women. There are few I would consider her intellectual superior and those were a handful of Martian men.” High praise from Dad, who, like most Martians, likes to rank things to death. Note the sexism. Yep, that’s my dad.

“Honestly, she is smarter than me.” He finalizes magnanimously.

“I find that hard to believe.” Artie interjects. He isn’t a kiss-ass. He’s sincere. Shrewd is a better word for Dad but smart works almost as well.

“Blake, the halfer, is due on campus tomorrow. I promised to bring you back if you were available. He’d like to talk to some students before accepting.”

Don’t let his phrasing make you think I have a choice. To be fair, he knows I’ve been enjoying a quiet summer. I was home schooled, common for Martians not raised in Martian communities. Since we live in an Earthling neighborhood I don’t have a lot of

friends in town. Kind of ironic that Dad chose to live with the humans if he didn't want us mingling but Martian communities are way sterile. And don't forget, we need to keep my half nature hidden.

I don't go to doctors. Artie is programmed for health care. A human doctor wouldn't notice much different about me other than my natural temperature is a cool 97.0, which is low enough to raise alarms, and my heart rate is over 100 at rest. Most Martians are in the mid 96 range for temperature and eighties for heart rate. So a Martian doctor would note that I run a little high and fast. They probably wouldn't read into that alone but my brain is mapped differently. It'd take a scan for them to detect that. Artie told me that.

Physically, Martians adapted to Earth long before I was born. Settlers landed in the North Sea in the first century AD. After that, there was a time of rapid evolution spurred on by the sudden change in our new environment. Those first to arrive were the survivors of a planet that died of natural causes. The sun had exploded of old-age and legend claims it to be the same guiding light the Magi followed when they sought the baby Jesus.

“Honey, why are you so quiet?”

“Lost in thought. What time do we leave?”

“Break of day.”

Another thing about Martians, they start their day with the sun. This does not come easy to me. Dad blames my human DNA.

My Office

We live in Marin County in the Bay Area. Dad arranged for a private craft to take us to the Island. This means we'll get there fast. Martian U is a Martian-made island that floats in the Pacific Ocean parallel to California. At any given time, it is within an hour from coastline if you use Martian ships and smaller faster boats under forty minutes. I can't tell you how long if you used a human boat since none ever come to the Island.

Another thing all those 50's movies set into our already paranoid minds is the idea that earthmen will experiment and cut us open if they knew we were here. Human stubbornness to let go of the legend surrounding Area 51 can be taken as supportive evidence. For the record, it wasn't a weather balloon and they never retrieved a body. Dad said it was some Martian not taking precautions. The underlying angst for us is that the US government has covered it up, which means they know something.

Artie once told me it was direr than that. Not only was there a cover-up story created for the masses, but whoever in the human world that knew enough to hide things away have also gone off our radar. Our advanced technology makes it easy for us to be discreet. The fact that it can't reveal who and what the humans have learned is uncanny. Suffice it to say, Artie and I only discuss these sort of things when Dad isn't around.

We slow to watch a pod of whales. I love whales and Dad is indulging me. Since school starts in a week, I'm packed for the long stay. Thankfully Artie had taken me shopping yesterday. I wonder if he knew. Scratch that. He didn't. Dad is manipulative but Artie isn't. Artie is more about me than Dad, as he was made to be.

"There's something I need to tell you about this Blake fellow." Dad gets kind of serious. "He can read minds. I wanted him to be in your Troop because of it. Few know of this. Beside us only the President and Nicolas have been updated. We think it's best to keep it under wraps."

My brain kicks into high gear and it gives me a headache. Dad wants Blake with me because he's different and he suspects I am too. I am. Only Artie knows exactly what I do and that's because he's a robot. I can stop time. When I do, if I make any noise, and it doesn't take much to be detected by Artie, it all rushes in on him at once when I unfreeze time. Organic creatures don't notice it at all.

This is the closest Dad has come to mentioning it to me. Artie and I had talked about telling Dad many times. Finally Artie took the matter into his own hands. Once Dad saw where Artie was headed, he stopped the conversation and told Artie it was best he didn't know unless it was mandatory. His sage advice, delivered to me via Artie, was to be more careful because others had wondered about me. I don't flaunt it. I do use it in one-on-one practice. All Martians are trained in diverse areas of protection. I can't help but tinker with time when I'm fighting. Instinct kicks in. I don't stop time so much as slow everything around me down, or maybe I speed me up, to give me more reaction time.

Nicolas Rafferty is the Assistant President. He's taken me under his wing. If I didn't already have two father figures, he'd be it. Nicolas is very progressive. President Nathaniel, not so much. But he acknowledges our changing times, must have if he allowed a known halfer to enroll.

"Remember that he can read minds." Dad is still speaking about Blake. "It's possible to close him out but I've never had to keep it up. Thinking 'no' works for a short time but it wears off. I've had more success imaging a brick wall as protection."

I nod. Dad doesn't want somebody nosing around my head and neither do I. If I couldn't stop time, I wouldn't believe it. Does that happen to Blake a lot? Does he tell people? Does he hear or see? Can he detect emotions? This is very curious indeed.

Growing up, before I understood what I was doing, I often froze time when I was upset or scared. Being emotional drains my energy fast and I faint. My terrible twos was hard on all of us. Artie discovered the cause of my frequent fainting spells when I was ten. With his help, I experimented with intent. Factoring out emotions gives me a lot more time. If I sit still and meditate, I can hold it for ten minutes. Moving around gives me fresh air and can quadruple that time. I can pull things and people into my time frame if I touch them and will it. Actually, if I'm touching Artie and freezing time, he automatically moves unless I will him to stop. One phase I went through was moving Artie. It always made me giggle and he was a good sport about it.

Soon I see the familiar fog that hides the island from satellite detection. Because of it, the terrain is tropical, lush and green. The bugs are healthier and more prominent

than suits me but that's neither here nor there. I firmly believe they prefer human blood because I get the worst of mosquito season.

When you're a Martian that doesn't grow up around Martian families you think of this place as a second home. You can let your hair down and be yourself. We maneuver into an inlet and Jason Struthers waves at us from the docks.

Dad smiles. He likes Jason and tells me so every chance he gets. I think he has spies reporting on me. Jason has always been sweet and I wouldn't have been surprised if he asked me out. He has not.

"Suzette! Mr. Russell!" Jason greets as he ties the boat to the dock and offers me a hand out. "I'm the first from our Troop to arrive. The others won't make it until tomorrow or Wednesday. Really, a day notice?"

Jason is good-looking by any standard. He has dark hair and green eyes. Even his nose is cute and he is so lean, you can see the muscles in his face. And like all Martians, his body is rock solid, all six foot two of it.

Dad puts his hand on Jason's shoulder. "I'm glad you made it."

I pull my brown hair back and put it in a scrunchie. At Martian U, it's best to be practical. I'm in a black pantsuit, which I hate. Dad wanted me to look professional and grown-up. This Major thing is going to be a major pain in the butt.

"You look intimidating." Jason tells me.

"Don't make me more nervous than I already am."

"Suzette has some business to attend to. She can meet you later for lunch." Nice. Dad is arranging dates for me.

"I'll be in our dorm." Jason takes off at a leisurely jog. If Dad weren't here, I'd enjoy the view longer.

"Dad, can you try not to set me up with every Martian man you see?"

"Not every. Jason is smart, from a good family, he'd be good for you." He eyes me. "Fine, I'll be more subtle in the future if this one doesn't take."

I sigh. He doesn't get it. He never will. Once a control freak, always a control freak. "So Jason is in my Troop?" I hadn't thought about the whole team.

"He is." Dad smirks.

"I'm just asking."

He rolls his eyes, which is too human for Mr. Russell's usual persona but he's in his happy place now that I'm a Major. "That is your dorm." Dad points to one of the smaller housing buildings designed for Troops. It's number four and painted pale yellow. It'll do nicely. "You'll have a suite since you're the Major." He loves saying that.

A large apartment does make being a Major more attractive.

"Blake is due in an hour to meet you. He hasn't confirmed."

"I don't blame him. Being the first half-Martian won't be fun."

"That may not even be on his mind. He didn't know he was part Martian until last week. I'm sure his mother has elaborated on the situation but he has no experience to reinforce the true depth of hardship."

"Mars Stars! How'd he take it?" I grew up knowing. I was eight when I learned that we are a tiny part of the population. We were in a grocery store and the mother in line before us was speaking Spanish. When I didn't understand her, my father said she was Mexican. Gladly I stated I was Martian. Dad went pale white. Later he gave me a lecture on what the word covert means.

"Blake took it well. He doesn't want to accept admission until he meets you. He's been attending a human college, USC maybe." Leave it to a Martian to forget the name of one of the top schools on the West Coast. "He doesn't see the advantages to attending Martian U."

"Doesn't he want to know his heritage? He isn't going to learn that at USC."

"Exactly."

"Of course, this is taking a step into a society that is prejudice to one side of his family."

"He wouldn't be invited if that wasn't passing away."

"I can't believe he was invited, or that you got involved." I wait for his denial but not long.

"I have nothing against humans." Dad really believes that.

"You have nothing for them either."

"I most certainly do. I love my daughter who happens to be," he drops his voice low enough that no one will hear, "half human."

"What?" I joke for him to speak up and to make my point.

“Suzette, do you doubt my love for you?”

“No. But I think you love me in spite of myself.”

“That skepticism is your Martian side talking.” He taps my forehead with his finger pleased to have his point made. Dad opens the door to the administration building. “After you Major Russell.”

I snicker. This will eventually get old for me faster than for him. Until then, I’ll enjoy it. He really tests my tolerance as he reintroduces me to everyone we pass as Major Suzette Russell. Once, he didn’t even mention my name. “This is my daughter the new Major.”

The offices for the Majors are on the second floor. Mine is at the end of the right corridor and etched in the smoky glass on the door it reads *Major Suzette Russell*. Dad hands me keys and lets me do the honors.

The entrance is only the first sign of the preparations he saw to since he heard the good news. The first big clue is the smell of paint emanating from inside. My office is freshly painted pink, like my room at home. Let me clarify, like the room that hasn’t been painted since I was five is painted at home. It looks girly and not at all authoritative. I suppose he was torn between what he thought I would like and what he thought would look like a leader. At least he chose his daughter over his Major.

The regal furniture is dark wood and there’s a bowl of Tootsie Rolls on my desk. In addition to my desk and two visitor chairs is a small conference table with six more chairs. A grandfather clock ticks loudly on one wall. On the other is a poster of Layla Ali looking menacingly fit that reads “Impossible is Nothing” followed by an inspirational quote. It’s from an old Nike ad and it’s one of my favorites. The door opens in one corner and in the other is a lovely potted tree. Behind my desk a window overlooks the quad.

Framed in silver and on the book shelf at eye level is a picture of us with Artie from my first day at Martian U; Artie is smiling, I have a decent attempt at one, Dad has his non-sour puss. There is another photo, on a lower shelf and framed in wood, of me and some friends when we snuck off the Island for a weekend. Since it was a candid, it’s one of my better pictures.

“How did you get this?” I ask picking it up.

“Artie.”

Snoopy robot. “That was from when I went AWOL last year.” Dad had been pissed at the time. He grounded me but never followed through on the punishment. Still, it was a first.

“I know.” He says as if it had never been an irritation to him. “That shows your tenacity to make your own rules.”

“All right.” I allow wondering if that line of reasoning will apply in the future.

He motions for me to sit at the desk and to my horror, he has his iPhone out to archive the moment in digital photo. I try to smile naturally which I have never succeeded in doing. Let me put it this way, I can’t complain that my ID photo is the worst picture taken of me. Candid pictures of me are fine but if I see the camera, I can’t relax.

“You’re beautiful.” He states brightly. Then he starts clicking, probably took two dozen. He’ll fill up his phone’s memory if he’s waiting for a good shot. “Artie wanted me to send this to him.”

While he finishes that, I open the one file in my inbox. Yes, he got an in and out box for me. It’s the specs on Blake MacGinnis as well as the rest of my team. The Martian U folk did some research. Blake’s photo is probably from the DMV. His sandy blond hair is out of control and covering his eyes, which are blue per the note since I can’t see them under the mess of tresses. There’s stubble on his chin, which drives home the scruffy look. He’s smart for a human. Graduated two years early from high school and already has his BA in business. Extraordinary and doubly so considering he’s only twenty-one.

“He’s real human.” I say seeing the notes on his taste in sports, music and movies.

“Yes, I know.” Dad says as if it is something we need to forgive. “It’s all he’s known.” He walks behind me and wakes up the dormant computer. “Artie will stop by this week to add his special touch. I did my best.”

He demonstrates the security precautions he’s taken; extra encryption, bug detecting scans for the entire office, even tracking software to trace any attempts to

breach my inner sanctum. Martians know these things because we're off the human radar but we don't drop our guard even among each other.

"Major Russell. Mr. Russell." Nicolas walks in with a handsome man. "I've brought Blake MacGinnis."

I glance up at Nicolas and my new cadet. Nicolas is ancient, seventy at least. He'll never retire and since he's the sharpest Martian in the shed, no one dares to bring it up. He's medium height and build with gray hair and brown eyes. I've seen him a hundred times.

Behind him is Blake. He's six one and his picture is a poor representation. It helps that his sandy hair is freshly trimmed and looks darker because of it. And his blue eyes are dazzling. No five o'clock shadow today. He has a long nose and his smile is dazzling accentuated by long dimples. Perfection except for his ears, which are big. I'm a lucky Major to have him in my Troop.

If his knowing grin isn't enough to remind me that he reads minds, the fact that he nervously runs his fingers around his ear is. I blush. I tell myself to stop it and everything freezes; Dad, Nicolas, the god of a halfer, even the grandfather clock is stifled mid-tick. Oops. I release them and act as if nothing happened, which is true. I grab a candy and think of a wall like Dad suggested. The sugar rush helps when my energy drops and it's a bad habit of mine not that I wore out from all of two seconds.

Blake glances downward. It may be my imagination but I think my mental wall keeps him out. Walking around my desk I formally welcome the newcomer. When I shake his hand I sense that he has more mental access to me. Not liking that.

"You're in good hands." Nicolas assures Blake. "And Suzette, congratulations."

"Thank you Mr. Rafferty."

"Let's leave the kids alone." Nicolas hints to Dad who leaves with him. If Nicolas didn't take Dad, I wonder if he'd have ever left.

The Mind Reader and the Time Stopper

Now I'm alone with Mr. Fabulous and I don't have a clue what to do. I fidget with my jacket front because it has bunched up. Blake looks uncomfortable in my office. He shouldn't, it's as new to me as him. His face lights up and I have a sneaky feeling that he's back inside of my head. *Out.*

Blake smiles awkwardly and bobs his head uncertain what to do. "May I sit?"

"Please." I stammer and move to my chair. "I'll be frank. This is my first day. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to talk to you about."

He relaxes. Even takes a Tootsie Roll to eat. "Good. I started feeling like everyone was in sync but me."

"Do you have questions? Dad, um, Mr. Russell, said you weren't sure if Martian U was right for you."

"It's so weird to think there are Martians living on earth and yet I believe it. Mom never told me. Other than your father visiting every now and then, I've had no contact with Martians and I didn't know he was one. Well, I heard my mother think he was Martian but I misinterpreted her to mean different, not actually Martian. Mom told me she never thought I'd be accepted to Martian U. Why is that?"

Still keeping him out, or at least trying to, I decide to be extra honest. It's only fair and his mother has doled out her opinion, if not by choice he's read it. If Blake means to take a step into Martian society, he should know what that entails. "Martians aren't friendly to half-humans. There are about ten thousand pure Martians living throughout the world. Even though we all interact with humans regularly if not daily, it is preferred that we couple with other Martians to maintain our race. Obviously, some end up finding companionship with humans and produce families. Once this happens, they tend to fall to the wayside since their spouses and children aren't Martian. Mixed children are as unlikely to know about Martians as humans, unless their families hide their human lineage and pass them off as full. Keeping our identity is paramount. You have that kind of backwoods thinking going on and some specism is bound to arise."

"Will this be a big problem for me?"

"With so many young Martians on campus, probably not so much."

“Are Martians dying out, pure Martians?”

“No. Our numbers haven’t moved much over the years. Martians are very loyal to their offspring but they don’t have big families, even less nowadays. It’s only been the last century that Martians moved out of their communes and blended into mainstream. There was some debate of making marriage to humans illegal but that was in the seventies when the sexual revolution was creating a larger number of halfers, er, half-Martians.”

“But it won’t be easy. Not everyone will accept me as equal.” It’s a statement but Blake wants me to denounce it.

I can’t in good faith. “Someone needs to be the first.” And I wonder if that should have been me.

“What do you think?”

I get up and close the door. Then I run the bug scan to make sure our private conversation remains private. We’re safe. Blake has been watching my every move carefully and I think he’s worming back in. I sigh and think of the wall again. “This is off the record but you’ll find websites and hear rumors later...”

“Websites? I didn’t find anything accurate.”

“Not on human sites.”

His eyes stray as something crosses his mind.

“You’re not reading my thoughts?”

He shook his head. “You’ve successfully blocked me.”

“Do you have to do that all the time?”

“No. If you want me to stop, you can let down your guard. You’re mind is complicated and swift. It’s hard to resist. It’s like I’ve been puttering around town on a moped all my life and finally I got in a racecar on an open track.”

“Aren’t all Martian minds faster?”

“Compared to humans, yes. Yours is about ten times faster than Martians’.”

Interesting. Might be from my time stopping ability. We think my heart rate and metabolism are affected by it. I’m not about to spill that secret to Dimples.

“You were saying. About these rumors.” Blake prods me.

“Well, when the first generations of Martians were born on this planet, there were huge leaps in evolution. As our bodies adjusted to the atmosphere, some natural talents diminished.”

“Like telepathy.”

“Exactly. There were others that weren’t universal but relatively prevalent in the people. Powers over matter, space, time. Even telepathy, which was widespread, has been lost.”

“Is it okay for you to tell me this?” He quickly checks the door.

“Your professors will tell you this although they downplay the losses by saying they are no longer needed and that they weren’t that useful. Needed, no, useful, definitely. Occasionally one of those dormant skills resurfaces. What they’ll omit is the commonly held belief that it takes human DNA to wake those old talents up. We have been here for two thousand years...”

“Two thousand years!” He interrupts shocked by that time span. This is going to be a slow conversation if he interrupts every minute.

I shoot him a glare and he sits back. “Human DNA roots back to the primeval ooze. Martian two thousand years is like an inch compared to a mile. So the untested theory is that the human half helps the Martian half adjust.” And as these words leave my lips I understand why Dad doesn’t want me to discuss stopping time. That is one of the more cherished lost skills and a dead giveaway that I’m hybrid.

“Shouldn’t the mix mute it out?”

“I’m not an expert. There’re a lot of different iterations on the net. The best person to ask is Jason. He’s in our Troop and is like the Martian Wikipedia. What he doesn’t know, he’ll find out.”

“So if I’m a known halfer why not let people know I can mind read.”

“That wasn’t my call. Probably because they don’t want to add credence to the rumor. Regardless, I’m happy to keep it. We’ll use it.”

“How?” He leans forward eager to hear. His eyes drop to my neckline, which is completely proper but men are men.

“The Troops like to compete. You’ll be great at hand-to-hand, field games, hell, you must test off the charts.”

“I don’t cheat to get good grades.”

“That came out wrong.”

After taking my foot out of my mouth we continue chatting about mundane things until I’m starved. Martians eat a lot more than humans. Since we have adjusted to a mere three meals a day, we get cranky when things run behind schedule. There are some things that two thousand years of evolving can’t correct. Blake agrees to join me with Jason. When I phone Dad to let him know, he’s pleased.

Mess Hall

“What are you? About six feet?” Blake asks me as he opens the door to the cafeteria.

“She’s in heels. She’s five nine and a half.” Jason answers.

I look at him. He’s right on the nose.

“Martian, remember.” He sasses. I think he’s jealous.

“And do you know my weight?”

“Probably.” Does he estimate that accurately or has he hacked into school network? Does he know I’m a 32C?

“I thought the Island was vacant.” I say quietly to Jason when I see Wyatt Vasser with three of his cronies grubbing down burgers.

“Who’s the thug?” Blake follows our glares. “Never mind.”

“Are you doing that thing again?” I delicately accuse him of reading minds.

He rolls his eyes. “Not yours.”

“What?” Jason asks.

“Never mind.” We both answer to Jason’s dismay. He feels left out of inside joke.

“Wyatt is like twenty-five and still here. Some people don’t get when they aren’t wanted anymore.” Jason explains as we get our food. The options are sparse since most students haven’t arrived. Salad isn’t a meal, it’s a prelude to a meal. We opt for burgers.

“Was he ever wanted?” I mutter and remember I’m a Major now and should act the part. “Excuse me, that was rude.”

“Don’t overplay the cordial card, sweetie.” Blake warns me.

“Sweetie? Did you just call me sweetie?”

“Major sweetie. Happy?” Jason teases. “As I was saying before I was rudely cut off, Wyatt is all Martian and in the worse way. If you want my two cents on why he’s here already, I’d say because he got word you were made a Major as well. Can’t let you one-up him.”

“She already has.” Blake surprises us. “I was offered to join any Troop, his wasn’t recommended. Suzette’s was top offer and the only that I saw fitting.”

“Because she’s hot.” Jason has never told me he thought I was *hot* before.

“Actually her picture is deceptively plain. I liked that she’s younger than the others and Mr. Russell said her whole Troop is made up of first and second year Martians. I thought it’d be easier to acclimate.”

“Does Wyatt know you’re so special that you chose your own Troop?” If Jason gets any more territorial, he may as well pee a circle around me to mark his turf.

“Jason, Blake is half-Martian. He is high profile. In fact, he hasn’t actually accepted the invitation to attend.” I clarify sternly as we take a table outside, away from Wyatt.

“He’s not the only one here.” Jason may be stabbing in the dark or he may have picked up on my differences.

“Blake is openly half.”

Finally Jason seems impressed with Blake. “Shit? Really?”

“Do you trust Jason?” Blake grabs my hand and holds. He’s prying deep. I think of the brick wall but it isn’t working. I can feel him delving against my will.

“Of course she does.” Jason barks shooting a nasty stare at us.

Blake looks at Jason as he continues reading me. “Can you keep a secret?”

“If you’re going to tell us you’re gay, I already assumed as much.”

“You wish. I’m a mind reader. Tell no one.” Blake releases me but catches my eye. “I’m trusting him because you do. As for that Wyatt, he’s a jerk all right. When he saw you his little group went off on your dad pulling strings to get you the position. I think he was saying that he was glad because you’ll be easy pickings and they will not rank the lowest with you around.”

“What do you mean you think he was saying?”

“He had two streams of consciousness. People do that when they talk. Say one thing, think another. The unsaid thoughts are he is unsettled by you. He’s envious of your smarts and talents and...”

“And...” Jason presses.

Blake hangs his head. “Just more nasty thoughts.”

“What?”

“He has lustful feelings and not the romantic kind.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning he’s an asshole who thinks Suzette could use a good screw.”

I turn red. Yes, we have red blood and not green. Star Trek had so many things wrong. “He’s irrelevant.”

“He is.” Blake states firmly. If he wanted to win us over, he accomplishes it.

“So, are you staying?” Jason may have a man-crush.

“I’m not sure. I hear getting out isn’t easy.”

“You have to resign. And dropping out isn’t guaranteed. They can deny your request for up to a year and it wouldn’t be a walk in the park kind of year.”

As Blake mulls it over, Wyatt and his buddies stroll up.

“Suzette, I hear you’ve been made a Major.”

“Thanks.” I say even though he didn’t really congratulate me. “And you as well.”

“It was overdue.” He says egoistically. “Hello, I don’t believe we met.”

“This is Blake. Blake this is Wyatt, Tim, Davie and Ed.”

Blake waves backwards, which is more a shoo-away gesture. He’s even more put off than Jason and I want to tell him to stop reading their minds. Then I remember he can read mine so I let him back in. Hearing my message, he shakes his head that he won’t step out of Wyatt’s spacious mind.

“Blake? The new recruit.” Wyatt announces to his followers. “He’s a halfer.”

They snicker like the sycophants they are.

“We’ll see you around campus later.” I subtly hint.

“Suzette, there’s a welcoming dinner for the Majors Friday night, would you like to be my date. We’ll be the talk of the town.”

“She’ll go without you.” Blake snarls.

Chillax. I think to him.

His eyes meet mine and I see he is doing his best but failing.

“Do you have a crush on our lovely Suzette already? Her charms grow more powerful each day.” Wyatt’s demonic grin needs to be smacked off his wicked face.

“Get use to cold showers. She’s as arctic as Martian women come.”

Blake's eyes snap to Jason and they are on the same page. Blake runs for Wyatt and Jason tackles Davie and Ed. Tim moves to help and I kick his feet from under him. Martian women aren't as strong as Martian men but we close the gender gap more than our human counterparts. Kind of funny when you think that Martian men are more sexist than human men.

Blake has Wyatt down in record time. Must be easy knowing what your opponent is planning before he acts. Blake moves to pull Davie off Jason, who in turn focuses on Ed. Tim lays on his back. Seeing his comrades are bested he holds his hands up in surrender. It's tempting to give him a swift kick but Tim isn't all bad.

Wyatt has a trickle of blood running out of his big beak nose. He reevaluates Blake. Wyatt is a greasy haired troll, no taller than five eight, which is short for a Martian but he doesn't go down easily. His three Troops are around six, give or take. You don't need to read minds to know he's trying to figure out what the hell just happened. He had us outnumbered and yet we out maneuvered him.

Blake and Jason shove their battlers to one side. "Go away." Jason orders and they get their two pals off the ground. The four are out of sight faster than you can say Martian chicken.

I breathe to regain myself. Jason is jazzed that we scuffled and won. Blake looks forlorn. Opening my mouth, I can't think of what I want to say.

"Sorry." Blake grimaces. "They were going to start something regardless. At least in *theory*." I wonder how often people think about taking action and don't.

"Sorry? Sorry!? Dude, you're my hero." Jason gives Blake a fist bump. "I was thinking, we should start this before they do and when you looked at me, I knew you knew or were thinking the same thing or whatever. That was fantastic. Can we do it again?"

"We'll have more chances in the future, I'm sure." I start to smile as the euphoria of victory cascades over me. "How does this make you feel about Martian U?"

"Better." Blake looks shamed-faced to admit it. "I'm not a fighter but there's a part of me that never gets unleashed."

"You have to accept." Jason pleads. "We'll show you the campus. You'll love it."

I grin. My feet are killing me in these heels and if we give Blake a thorough tour, it'll involve some rocky terrain. Maybe I can let the guys go off without me.

"We can find you for dinner. I'm scheduled to go back after dinner." Blake answers my unasked question.

"Great idea. Man time." Jason's exuberance is a nice change from his jealousy.

Sternly I glare at Blake and think as loud as I can that he needs to not read me all the time. "I'll be in the dorms unpacking. And Jason, keep him out of trouble."

"What trouble? He looks perfect."

I hide my appreciation as to how perfect they both look.

Officer's Room

By the time Jason brings Blake to my room, they are best buds. It's annoying. They even finish each other's sentences. That's acceptable for the mind reader but for Jason to do it is plain ole irritating. Coupled with the yucking it up, I feel like the odd man out, the lone girl at the men only club.

"I'll be staying." Blake tells me.

I beam. Yes, it'll make Nicolas and Dad happy, but it makes me happy to. I spent some of my man-free time reliving our escapade. He was kind of heroic not to forget to mention chivalrous.

"You changed?" Jason scowls. "I liked the power suit."

"It was awful." I correct feeling more myself in sneakers and jeans. "Let's feed our new friend. We have a special invitation to eat at the Officer's Room."

"And how did we earn such a high privilege? Do I thank you for making Major or Blake for being the first halfer?"

"Not sure but it's one of those things." I tilt my head and shrug.

Dad meets us at the table. "Evening Major Russell."

Okay, being called Major got old. I'm embarrassed and seeing Jason's shoulders jiggle from withheld laughter doesn't help.

Spreading his napkin in his lap, Dad nods a hello to Jason and then gives his full attention to Blake. "I hear you had some excitement earlier."

Blake confirms it. "I got an education that not all Martians are created equal, in their opened minded thinking or their fighting abilities."

"Yes, well, between us, I do not think Wyatt deserves to be a Major."

My eyebrow arches. Dad has current intelligence on the *excitement*.

"May I ask why you started the altercation?" Dad waits patiently for Blake's answer. He wants Blake to know that what goes on his campus is reported accurately to him.

Blake glances at me and then Jason and back to me before he begins. "Refraining from listening to someone that practically bellows hateful things is hard."

“I anticipated there was more below the surface. What exactly was Wyatt thinking, if you don’t mind me prying?”

“You don’t want to know, sir.” Blake stiffens.

“It was uncouth thoughts about my Suzette.” He didn’t call me Major that time because it’s his love of his daughter that triggers his contempt.

Blake’s kind eyes are on me as he nods. “I didn’t care for it.”

“Let’s take this down a notch.” I say soothingly. “We’re upset about things that he didn’t even deem worthy to speak let alone act on.”

“True.” Jason agrees. “And it isn’t like you couldn’t take him out one on one. You’re unbeatable.” With a soft nudge to me he adds, “She’s too fast for anyone to lay a hand on her in a fair fight.”

Dad’s lip draw tight. It’s touching that let’s-pretend-there’s-nothing-strange-about-my-daughter sore spot. Blake has a quizzical expression. I can’t make it out. Perhaps he finds it hard to believe I can hold my ground. He smiles. He’s listening to me, probably Dad and Jason as well.

Do you think I would have been in over my head without you there? I test him.

Still smiling, Blake’s chin tucks in to the left as he ever so mildly shakes his head no. Blue eyes look at me and the right one winks.

Is he flirting?

A chuckle escapes and he mouths “no.”

Oops. I’m off topic. And now I can’t remember what I thought of his expression. Blake’s having fun with this. Must be nice to be around people that know his skill.

“Yes.” He doesn’t say out loud.

Jason has been gabbing on with a blow-by-blow account. Fishermen may fabricate more, but not by much. Dad hasn’t gone unaware of Blake’s and my silent exchange. He can’t know the details but he’s cognizant something is being communicated on the sly.

“Oh, to be young again.” Dad states longingly when Jason finishes his grand reenactment. “Sounds like we didn’t scare you off.”

“It’d take more than Wyatt to frighten me.” Blake states confidently. “If anything, this feels like a good place for now.”

“We are going to have so much fun.” Jason envisions a glorious school year. “And wait until the ladies Martians, I like to refer to them as Venusians, hear about you. They are going to go ga-ga.”

Curiously Blake glances between Jason and I and it hits me. He thought we were a couple until Jason offered to go trolling for chicks. His face goes pink and his eyes avert mine when he asks, “Why would you say that? I don’t get much notice. My guess is you’re more a player than I’ll ever be.”

“But you’re human.” Jason leans over and motions Blake to close the distance. “Martians are too restrained, so emotions get amplified when they have the opportunity to shine, like during intimacy.”

“Jason, this isn’t supported by any research.” Dad is amused.

“Neither is the fact that halfers sometime flare up an old trait and yet we have Blake.” He holds his hands out like a model showing off the latest appliance on an infomercial. “Every Martian knows that humans are better in bed. Drives us mad with ecstasy. Martian women are all for sex but they are mechanical. It’s like doing sit-ups or running on the treadmill to them.”

Blake won’t look up at this point.

I’m feeling out of place myself. “I’ve never heard this.” I confess.

“Well, it works both ways but Suzette, you don’t hang with many Venusians to get the latest updates.” Jason condescends.

“I’d like to believe I have some prowess, or whatever, but even if it’s true, I’m only half. Who’s to say I got the right match up to be...” Blake wants to find something suitable for mixed company.

“...an exceptional bed mate.” I grin ear to ear. He’s adorable all flustered.

“For you, sex with Venusians will lack.” Jason makes a sad face for Blake’s benefit.

Blake glances at me and smiles.

Dad clears his throat. “I’m sure you’ll make up what you lack in quality with quantity. True or false, you’ll have a parade of women at your door wanting a firsthand sample of the truth. My advice is don’t let it get around if the rumors are unfounded.”

Of all the people to make the discussion too uncomfortable, it's Dad. Martians and sex is a weird combination. Some have tons and think nothing of it. Others are less active and think nothing of it. To compare it to exercise is right on the money. So Martians are not as sensitive to discuss sexual escapades as humans who make it more emotional and, in my hopes, more rewarding.

"Let's discuss the curriculum." I suggest knowing Dad's autopilot will kick in and it does. He drones on about general studies and options for areas of expertise. His speech is so rehearsed and dull, Jason hides a yawn. Don't think I'm as calculating as Dad. This is self-defense.

After our meal, I escort Blake back to the docks. The sun is low, almost setting. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Blake."

With a big dazzling smile he nods that he feels the same. "You made it compelling. The campus is fantastic, beats SC. Mom was hoping I would decline. She's kept us hidden for years and she doesn't like me stepping out."

"Will she be angry?"

"No. She was out argued. You were smart to sic Jason on me. He didn't stop the hard sell for a moment."

"Jason is great. He thinks the sun shines out of your ass."

"No. He thinks the sun shines out of you." Blake rephrases and returns the compliment. "You two aren't involved?"

"We're good friends." The automatic lights flicker on. "Do many people know you can read minds?"

He shakes his head. "Growing up I didn't understand that other people couldn't read minds. I was eleven when that realization hit home. Mom had told me. Dad was the first to recognize it. She told me to keep it under my hat."

I could relate in both my understanding of Martians and my time stopping. "And your dad?"

"He passed away when I was three." He closes his eyes and recalls his memories. "I feel guilty that I don't remember more than warm loving feelings. Maybe learning about Martians is a way for me to connect to him."

"Warm and loving are good memories to hold on to."

His eyes open. We stop and look at the boats. “It was fun with you and Jason. I’ve never had that kind of interaction. Jason doesn’t really believe I hear him but you accepted it quickly. Your comprehension is amazing.”

He’d proved it more than once. Who was I to doubt it? “Do you see pictures or hear words?”

“Both.”

“Is it work to not listen?”

“No. The opposite. I have to tune in to hear. Some people are hard to read, protective and guarded people. My Martian sampling is small but it’s the same. Some are easy like Wyatt and others are hard like the blond guy with him.”

“Tim is the blond guy. He’s a tough nut to crack.” I tell Blake. As for his claim that he has to turn it on, he seems pretty tuned in all the time to me.

“I do enjoy reading your mind. It’s fascinating.” He repeats. “Doesn’t hurt any that you’re very pretty.”

I blush. “Can you send your thoughts?”

“Never tried. Let’s see.” Blake picks up my hand. “Touching increases the connection.”

I smile. Slowly, my mind hears humming. It tickles and I try not to snicker like a teenager. Then I think I want to kiss him. No, it isn’t my thought. He planted it as if it were. I drop his hand with a sudden jerk.

“That was a mean.” I’d believe him if he wasn’t laughing and I bet he knew he could send before we tried.

“I’m a new Major. I can’t fraternize willy-nilly with my charges.”

“Is Jason excluded as well?”

“You’re boat is waiting.”

“Let it. Why were you recommended as my Major?”

“Because I’m young and open minded.”

“Did you have a say in it?”

“No, but I’m glad to have you.”

“Are there others on campus that have latent skills?”

I'm glad I have the wall up and we aren't touching. He's suspicious of me. Did he notice something in my office? "Not openly. I don't suspect anyone."

"And you? Can you read minds?" He's making a guess but thinks it's off. "If you do, you are better at not reacting than I am but at times, you are too aware of what is going on."

"I can't read minds."

"It must be your brain power. It's incredible."

"You keep saying that but I haven't noticed a huge advantage." Sure I test well despite being careless in my studies but this is the first I have heard that my brain works differently than others.

The impatient captain blows a horn for Blake to hurry.

"Blake, you need to go. We can talk about this later. And maybe after you read more Martians, my mind won't seem so unique."

He grins. "Doubtful."

I watch the handsome halfer board. Dad did not think this out well. Blake can read minds and I have a big secret, two if you count that I am only part Martian.

Mandate

Having Blake MacGinnis under my watch isn't easy. His notoriety attracts the attention of administrators and those above my head often summon him. This is infuriating when it interferes with my Troop. Since Monday, Blake has had at least two unscheduled meetings a day.

He doesn't care to be inundated with meetings either. Every lunch he has a meeting and he feels pulled out of our group. On the other hand, he's enjoying a lot of free gourmet lunches. The faculty is fed well.

Martian Nation News or MNN calls to interview me about being the youngest Major in Martian history. The reporter, Earl Bowler, asks for my thoughts on Blake and halfers in general. I give him save answers and warn Blake to expect a call.

My Troop is a novel experiment. I wasn't officially informed but it's clear. First, we are only six and second we are all first or second years. Blake is the oldest but a first year to Martian U. Matthew Struthers, Jason's little brother, is the other first year. Siblings usually get a free pass. Martians are big on nepotism. Karen Rehas is Ray Nathaniel's niece once removed. Her credentials are worthy, so I'm not complaining. Marty Field is our last man. Like Jason, he simply deserves to be in a Troop.

The other Troops are larger, up to twelve in a team. Wyatt's team is eight. Aside from Tim, they are all troublemakers by our estimation. Per Jason, Tim's on the troublemakers' roster and I erroneously think otherwise. Jason believes I have a sweet spot for Tim. Maybe some. All the *Venusians*, to use Jason's phrase, notice Tim. He's light blond with hazel eyes. With a mere smile, he could have any of us. If he weren't under Wyatt's command, even I would be tempted. Unfortunately, he is under Wyatt and although requests can be made to have a member removed, it is taboo to steal members. His older sister Tara is close to Wyatt, bed buddies, maybe more. She's another reason it would be hard to sway him away.

Being a Major means I get my fair share of summons from on high as well. Nicolas Rafferty sent me a memo this morning to see him after lunch. His office is on the fourth floor in the corner and is as grandiose as my father's.

“Suzette, please have a seat.” He closes the door and circumnavigates his desk to address me formally. “Are you ready for classes?”

“We’re ready, sir.”

“And how is Blake adjusting to your team? Have they all arrived?”

“Present and accounted for. Blake is the star. Everyone considers him an equal.” Frankly, he’s my best. Don’t tell Jason I think that.

“I’m glad he accepted. Your father tells me you persuaded him effortlessly.”

“The three of us, Jason included, hit it off famously.”

“Ah-huh.” He says vaguely. “You must be aware that you are a charming woman.”

“Thank you.” It’s eerie to hear a man old enough to be my grandfather say that. Worse than eerie when I wonder where he’s headed.

“I’m sure your charms have been noted by Blake MacGinnis as well.”

“Like I said, we’re close.”

“Not too close, I hope.” Nicolas looks glum. This talk is as awkward for him to deliver as it is for me to receive. “Suzette, you’re young and inexperienced in the ways of the world. I remember what it’s like to be your age and since Martians can have sex without the ties of emotion, I’m not so foolish to think the students here aren’t exploring their freedom. We did.”

I couldn’t possibly be anymore off balance. He’s like seventy. Ick! I can’t imagine a twenty-something Nicolas on the prowl. It would have been the sixties. Oh, I wish I didn’t do that math. The sixties were notoriously erotic. Add liberal drugs to that and Martian U was probably an orgy every night. Martians are very prone to chemical influences.

“Blake’s attendance as a halfer is avant-garde. What we can’t have is a scandal if you were to succumb to his fancy.”

“Who’s to say he even fancies me?”

“Stanley has expressed concern.” Nicolas admits. “I am going to give you a direct order that you are not to have intimate relations with Blake. If you do, you will be removed as Major and possibly from your Troop, potentially even expelled.”

He overplayed his hand. I don't believe any of it. Okay, maybe a demotion but if I'm coerced like this in my private life, I don't care to be Major. "My father has made this request?"

"It is my order and it isn't your place to question it in any terms."

The hell it isn't! The first thing that races through my mind is I should go directly to Blake and call their bluff, assuming he'd be receptive. That passes quickly and not because of proper pride, but rather improper pride that I wouldn't have a clue how to seduce him. Despite Nicolas' carnal opinion of the students, I haven't been exploring my freedom. His opinion of my naivety is shamefully accurate.

"Suzette, this is for your own good."

"Do other Majors get these kind of personal orders?"

"Not typically. This boy is half-human. Sex with him would create a longing in you that he would not share. You're authority would be compromised."

Nicolas doesn't know that I'm half as well. Wouldn't that negate this so called longing? "What if we grow to care for each other?"

"Worse still. Your future would be truncated if you coupled with a halfer. So forgive me for taking these actions but I will not retract the order. You are to keep a professional relationship with Blake MacGinnis. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir." With those words I get my first sampling of the hardship of leadership, unquestioned obedience. It feels horrible. "May I go now?"

"Suzette, you're like a daughter. It pains me to see how upset you are. Please tell me it isn't too late."

"I haven't slept with Blake." I snap. "And if I'm like a daughter, why don't you trust me to lead my life? You are the closest person to me outside of family and I trust you believe you are doing what is best. However it is you who should forgive me for thinking this is uncalled for and compromises my authority. Now, may I please be excused?"

My response hits him hard. "You're admirable. That retort was quickly constructed and delivered with razor-sharp exactness. You're a more capable Major than my already high estimations gauged. Please know, removing you from your position

would be the hardest punishment I would ever execute, but don't fool yourself that this is an idle threat."

"Your order, although inapt, is simple to comprehend. Sexual intercourse with Blake will cost me a demotion, likely removal from the Troop program and at its worst, expulsion."

"Very well, I'll see you tonight. I hope you simmer down for the evening. You'll be seated at my table with your father."

"Thank you." I stand and bow.

Drawing Lines

Once in my room I freeze time and scream. “This is impossible. It isn’t needed. I never intended any sort of misconduct. They are controlling Martian control-freaks.” When I’m mad, I’m not articulate. Feeling my energy wane, I release time and drop on my sofa. There’s a dish of Tootsie Rolls. They are the best candies when I wear myself out time stopping. If I’m emotional, time stopping is harder. Okay, so I’m emotional right now? How would you feel?

There’s a knock on the door and I run into Artie’s arms as soon as I see him.

“Who are controlling Martian control-freaks?” He was close enough to hear.

“Dad and Nicolas.” I shut the door and vent. “They ordered me not to mingle with the halfer.”

Artie laughs. “If it wasn’t needed, pretend they never gave the order. When did you listen to rules anyway? Are their consequences severe in your esteem?”

“No. If anything they are tempting. Makes me want to march down to Blake and rip his clothes off.” I go too far and my face flushes.

“I advise against that.” Artie answers cautiously. He doesn’t want to give me another directive to add to my frustration.

“I’m not going to.” I’m cooling down. Still Dad and Nicolas need to understand that this won’t fly. I pace as I think how to redraw the lines.

“I’m here to see that you have top level security. I’ll start in your room.” Artie opens a duffle bag of electronic equipment.

“Are all Martians this mistrustful?”

“No. Your father faults his old friend Thomas. It isn’t misdirected blame either. Thomas was used as my blueprint and I can sense his desires.”

“Aren’t your desires your own?”

Artie smiles. “They have evolved based on my experiences but they are rooted from Thomas. Stanley told me that Thomas had a convoluted system of safe houses. He lived happily in the dark and if need be, he could vanish and never be found.”

Reminds me of my biological mother Amanda. “Is that what happened to him? He vanished out of existence?”

“No, he passed away.” Artie has already put an alarm system on the doors and windows and is now working on my laptop.

“You’re fast.”

“Of course. I’ll go to your office next.”

I hand him the key. “I have to get ready for a dinner party.”

“All right. Have a nice time. I’ll be off in the morning. Let’s have breakfast before I go.” Artie leaves.

I had to lose him. I know what I have to do to show Dad and Nicolas that I don’t approve of their interference. Bravely, I walk down that hall.

Blake opens the door to his room when I knock. His dimples show prominently when he sees me. He’s in a sweaty shirt and shorts. “Suzette, I’m kind of a mess. I just got back from playing hoops.”

The wetness is yucky and he doesn’t smell good, but it isn’t offensive either. What is pleasant is seeing his muscles through his damp fabric. Oh yeah, I’m going to hell in a hand basket and without my Major title. “I can come back.” I swivel nervously on the spot unsure if he wants me to hurry up or return.

“Either way. I’ll be out in five.” He goes to his bathroom and I hear the shower.

I walk around the room. Blake is so human. One poster is of the USC Trojans winning the third straight Rose Bowl in a row in 2009. There is also a framed article of the Red Sox winning the World Series in 2004. I read it while I wait. They had gone 86 years without a win. Some claimed there was a curse from selling Babe Ruth to the Yankees. What kind of name is Babe for a grown man? “Bummer.”

“What is?” Blake says from right behind me and I jump.

“Reading about this team.”

“The curse is broken. We’re good now.” He pulls out his desk chair and offers it to me. He sits on the bed in clean sweats and tee. Unlike my quarters, which have a second room for sleeping, his is only the one large space.

“Do humans really believe in curses?”

“Some.” Blake chuckles.

“Maybe they aren’t a good team and winning was the anomaly?”

“They are a great team. And weird things happened when they got close. Ted Williams should have won a World Series.”

“What’s a world series? And doesn’t it take more than one man? Look, there are like twenty guys in this photo.”

“You wouldn’t understand because you’re a Martian and a Girl.”

Apparently I found a soft spot on Blake.

“Why did you stop by?” He’s annoyed and that scares me that he’ll tell me no.

I stutter for a couple of words and then barrel through without looking up. “I, I have that Major dinner tonight and I thought since you’re the big man on campus, you should come with me. If you want. It will be dull and boring and listless.”

“That’s so tempting. Would I be your date?”

“My guest.” He doesn’t need to know I want to let Dad and Nicolas think more. “If you aren’t interested...”

“I’m in.” Blake cuts me off. “What should I wear?”

“Dress nice, like the day we met.”

He does. In a crisp dark suit, he could be the cover of GQ. This is a really bad idea or a really good one.

“You look gorgeous.” He tells me. “If this were a date, I would be at your mercy. Of course it isn’t.”

I’m in big trouble if he plans to flirt like this all night. My hair is down and curly. My dress is sleeveless and black. I went with flashy flats. Easy to walk in and stylish.

We meander to the hall together. Everyone is dressed to the nines.

“Why did you really invite me?”

“You’re a cynical man Mr. MacGinnis.”

“Wouldn’t have to be if you weren’t keeping me out.” He smirks. “I don’t mind.”

Of course not. He loves the game.

Father spies us and frowns. He excuses himself from the President and makes a beeline our way. “Suzette, I can’t pretend that you’re my little girl anymore.” He hugs me. “And Blake, I didn’t know you were coming.” Oh, the edge in his voice is sharp and obvious.

“I invited him.” I suddenly doubt the value of my plan. It’s working too well. Dad’s reaction isn’t explosive but it is sudden. If something’s brewing, I won’t have long to wait. Martians can’t contain emotions well for long.

Blake holds my hand. It takes extra effort to keep him out, but I can, I think. Then I realize I can’t keep Dad or Nicolas from slipping a thought to him. He’ll know. Will he be mad? Will he expect me to sleep with him? I swallow air, uneasy and feeling like a sham. And I can pick up Blake’s confusion.

“Suzette.” Nicolas has found us and is equally displeased.

“Mr. Russell. Mr. Rafferty.” Blake shakes their hands and since he’s still holding mine, I can sense their thoughts being detected by him. He turns to me, “I’ll get us some drinks. What would you like?”

“Surprise me.” I say. He’s leaving because they were about to run him off. I can’t tell what he’s thinking. Or he’s irritated like them and I can’t distinguish him from them in his head.

“I’ll be right back.” He tells us before leaving me to face the firing squad.

“What is the meaning of this?” Nicolas bites out.

“He’s the prize of the campus. I thought he should be here since everyone is more interested in him than any other student.”

“Suzette, you’re willing to throw away your title for a fling?”

“He’s my dinner guest. That wasn’t part of your conditions. And for the record, I’m not willing to be ordered to conduct my private life in ways that are mine to determine. The results of permitting others to force my choices are more dissatisfying than anything you can do to me.”

They get stiff and Blake returns with two tan drinks in glasses with a stem and an inverted round pyramid. “These are fantastic. I had to show the bartender how to make them.”

I sip. It’s chocolaty and alcoholic. “Mmm. They have alcohol.”

“Is that bad? It’s a chocolate martini. It’s a chick drink but I thought you’d like it.” He says. “How old are you?”

“She’s only twenty.” Dad takes a step forward and Blake shifts back a bit. “And Martians keep their alcohol consumption to a minimal. We are quite susceptible to its affects. Why are you trying to get my daughter drunk?”

“I’ve drank before, Father.” I only say *father* when I’m upset at him. Alcohol isn’t as effective on me as a pure Martian. Mentioning that would be as unfavorable as thinking I can’t take my liquor to Dad, so I don’t.

“I didn’t know.” Blake pales. “I’ll get you something else.”

I pull my drink away before it can be extracted from my grip. “I like it.” It’s a cool drink but it warms my esophagus as it trickles down. Yes, I’m being impetuous but it’s better than fighting Dad or Nicolas, which is what most young Martians would do.

Nicolas and Dad glare at us but leave seeing that it isn’t the place to throw their weight around. I’ll be summoned and it will be very disagreeable.

“So, you invited me to upset them. Why do they care?” Blake whispers to me as we mingle.

I nod at familiar faces but we don’t stop to chat. “They think you’ll make a pass at me and I’ll succumb because you’re half-human. It’s not their place to order me to stay away.”

“And is it your place to use me as a pawn in your power games with your father?”

“Blake, it didn’t cross my mind that you’d feel that way.”

“Oh yes it did or you would have told me upfront what was on the agenda. Do you think I enjoy being used?”

“No, I’m not using you. I thought this was a big deal and you’d be glad to attend. It was symbiotic.”

“Well, I thought you asked me because you were interested. I see that I’m a steppingstone on your path to greatness.”

Dinner is announced and we take our seats. The evening is a stressful disaster. Blake ignores me and talks candidly with the buxom Tara Miller, Wyatt’s date. She is taken by his attention. Wyatt is ready to fight him again but the memory that Blake has his number is fresh.

Before I leave, Nicolas tells me he will carry out his threat if I sleep with Blake. Dad apologizes for my situation and hopes I think things through before I do something intractable.

Blake keeps three paces ahead of me as we return to our dorm.

“Blake, please stop. I’m sorry.” I’m begging and I don’t like it.

Three times must be the charm because he finally turns and marches up until we’re face to face. He cups my face in his palms and has free range of my mind. “Do you have any feelings for me?”

I do. I try to block him but can’t with him touching me. The martini had done enough damage to make that impossible regardless of contact. “We’ve just met.”

“Ugh!” He drops his hands. “The booze makes your brain even faster. It’s tangled. I can’t tell if you like me regardless that it upsets your father or if you like upsetting your father regardless of using me.”

He can’t tell, because I can’t. “I like you and I like standing up to Dad.”

“That’s a problem for me.”

“Fine. I should have told you. That was immature. But they can’t run my Troop. If we’re working together, they can’t delegate commands to tell me how to manage that.”

“Why did they do that?”

“Dad doesn’t want me involved with a half-Martian.”

He looks at me. “Mr. Russell recruited me, he’s known me all my life.”

“Liking you and liking you for his daughter are two different things.”

“So they convince me to join, put me in your Troop and then tell give you stipulations?”

“That’s the short of it.”

“Suzette, we need to be upfront. I assumed that didn’t need to be said and perhaps I’m more offended about this than it warrants. If this is how things are handled at Martian U, I don’t want to be outside of the scheming when it involves me.”

“We’ll go mad if we’re that exposed to each other. We’ll be fine. If you’re here to explore your gift as well as learn about Martian lore, I have a lot of ideas about it.”

“I heard them.” He blushes.

“Okay, well, can you not touch me whenever you want answers?”

He smiles. "I can promise to try but I'm sure there will be times of weakness."

We walk again, this time side by side. "What if I think a lie? Would you know?"

"If you know, I would. Maybe even if you didn't. Imagination is from one part of the brain and memories from another and therefore feel differently."

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to put you in the middle of this. I thought they would get the message without alerting you."

"Don't take this wrong, but I think we got off to a bad foot in the romantic sense."

"You're saying let's be friends?"

"For now. You have a lot to deal with being Major and I have enough with familiarizing myself with Martians."

"Deal." I shake his hand and I hear him think he should have kissed me first. He blushes.

He hears me hearing him and lets go. "That's odd. I didn't send that. You shouldn't hear me." It wasn't the first thing I picked up this evening, but I keep that tidbit to myself.

At my door I kiss his cheek. "Good night."

"Sweetie, you know I wasn't thinking a kiss on the cheek." He holds my neck and debates the wisdom of kissing properly. "In time." He decides and walks down the hall leaving me breathless.

Day Off

Blake called it well. We are both so busy we hardly see each other and only when we are in meetings and class. My office is large enough for our Troop but we prefer using my dorm room when we meet.

My only break from the Martian rat race is when I attend the uneventful Fall Conference for Majors and administration only. Blake doesn't even write. Jason does. Bermuda U representatives are there as well. The two schools segregate. There's some rivalry.

When I'm back on campus we're still too busy to have much fun. I'll never get a boyfriend with this schedule. Why did Nicolas even make the decree to keep my hands off Blake?

The nights come early in November. It's Thursday and we have a planned Field Game against Mason's Troop on Sunday. It'll be our third of the year. With Blake, it's been too easy. Other than Jason, no one knows his ability. Since Blake and I are still kind of funny around each other, Jason and him team up to lead the games.

The team is due in an hour to go over the basics. The objectives of the games change.

Jason arrives early looking a little cuter than normal, it could be the shirt but I think what makes the look work is it's tucked in and he's got a nice backside. "Hi Suzette." Since Blake isn't with him, he doesn't bother with a gooey term like honey, sweetie or cutie. Blake, who wants to make me understand his opposition to authority, has taken to calling me all kinds of undermining things. Jason follows his lead, when he's there to lead.

"Jason, you're early." Dad may not be a fan of jeans, but I'm all for them.

"Yeah, we haven't hung out much and I thought I would wedge my way into your cramped calendar."

I get him a beer, which is contraband. Jason has befriended one of the regular captains that deliver supplies to Martian U and we procure our private stock from him.

"Ah. It tastes better because it's forbidden. I bet booze was best during prohibition." His green eyes sparkle as the golden liquid slides down.

I get one myself and join him on the sofa. I'm adjusting to Major. The beer is a reminder that it's just school after all. "Cheers."

"You know you're my best friend," he starts, "and I couldn't be happier with anyone other than you as my Major but you kind of lost your fun side."

"I don't see why they picked me over you. And why Wyatt over you? That's even more perplexing."

"Because they consider the group dynamics. We were set to be together. And you are over me because you're a girl."

A little insulted by his remark, I pout.

"Honey, don't go there. I'm saying we're evenly matched but you are a girl and it has been a long time coming that they needed to get another woman in the game. I don't care. I'm as ill-suited to the formality as you. We're two of a kind." He tows me in, kisses my cheek and holds me.

"You know what? I need more me time."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Me time meaning time with friends. We need to spend more time not being Martians."

He puts his chin on my head. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"I can hear your voice echo in your chest. It's nice."

"This is nice." He squeezes. "Now remember how happy you are right now and your vow to set the Major aside once in a while."

"I will but the Troop will be here soon. Let me get some snacks and drinks ready." I really don't want to get back to business, so I don't move – yet.

"Actually, there isn't a need. No one is coming until Saturday. Blake and I postponed the meeting. We're kidnapping you for ourselves."

I sit up.

"Remember you're happy and you wanted this."

"Okay." I force a plastic smile. I have mixed feelings. "Where are we going?"

"The Cove to start."

The Cove is the only bar on the Island. Drinking is discouraged but not prohibited. Teachers avoid it because the students like to hang out there. They have a full bar but Martians stick to beer since hard booze goes to our heads.

I change into jeans and a long sleeve tee. It's chilly in the fog.

"Bring some clothes for the night and your swimsuit." He yells from my sofa.

"Why?"

"You're not my Major. I don't have to answer you."

"Jason, are we leaving the Island?"

"First the Cove."

A day trip would be restful. I obey. It's exciting, a bit irksome without details.

Blake waits by the wooded path with two duffels. "Did sweetie put up a fight?"

"I'm right here. You don't have to refer to me in third person." I detest it more than being called honey and sweetie. "And my name is Suzette."

"Did you hear something?" Jason jabs at me. "She complied. Her will has been broken."

"That was easy."

"I am not easy." I mutter following my two favorite teammates.

"Sweetie, we know that." Blake winks at me.

I stick my tongue at him and then mope.

"Major sweetie, ma'am." He clarifies like that will fix everything.

The Cove is packed. True to its name, it's built into a mountain. It's normal enough inside but the walls are solid rock. The décor is nautical mixed with Martian history. It's a bizarre combination. A photo of the Mother Ship at the bottom of the North Sea before the seabed covered it is the largest wall art made even grander by the elaborate hand carved wooden frame.

Wyatt and his miscreants drink in a corner and whoop it up when they see us walk in. We ignore them.

"Tim has a crush on you." Blake tells me. He likes to tell me when people like me. Not sure if it's credible. If you were to believe him, half the Martians on campus find me attractive. "More than half." He adds quietly towards me.

"Tim's a jerk." Jason contends.

“He’s all right. But he’s hard to hear. Some people are walled up naturally.”

“Tim needs new friends.” I say.

“You’re willing to be his friend?” Jason sings the last word, stretching it out.

“Suzette can’t have friends. It can lead to fun and she’s forbidden to do so. If *they* learn we’re trying to make her smile, we’ll be incarcerated in the brig with only water and bread rations to survive.” Blake toys with me about my orders.

Jason doesn’t need to know the extra underlying qualms to know there’s truth behind Blake’s statement and he snickers. He has a particular giggle when he’s drinking that is adorable.

“I’ll break you out if it comes to that.” I sass back feeling the relaxation of the evening win out over my more defensive reflexes.

“You’ll be in there with us.” Blake leans on the table, arm over arm daring me to deny it.

“Then we’ll have fun despite the authorities.” I wink and Blake blushes. Yeah, I turn into a flirt that fast one I’m uninhibited.

“I can’t wait until we have Field Games with Wyatt. He’s cheating. He has to be to win.” Jason squints towards Wyatt.

“Jason, we don’t know that.”

“We can find out.” Blake offers.

“Let’s.” Jason encourages. “Got a plan?”

“I do. We’ll see if they want to play some poker, get them loose, distracted and then I’ll listen in.”

“Blake, that isn’t a good idea.” I don’t like it.

“We can’t lose.”

“Which is what makes it a bad idea. They may pick up that you’re special.”

“He’s heard. He doesn’t believe it. Too stupid to recognize the truth even when it’s spelled out for him.”

“How would he hear that?”

“We may learn that as well. Wyatt blocks me at times but not when he’s drinking.” Blake’s smile has a creepy eagerness in it. “Jason, you want to throw down the gauntlet or shall I?”

“Allow me.” Jason sets off before I launch another counterargument.

I glower at Blake thinking we’re asking for trouble. He smirks at me. “Mr. Russell will throw away the key if he learns about tonight and he probably will. What kind of fun do you imagine we’ll be having in our cell?”

“Poker.” Which was about the last thing I meant when I made the comment earlier.

“You’re so wild.” He says indifferently. “By the way, you aren’t blocking me now so I heard what you were thinking.”

Blushing I think of a wall and as added cushion, I recall my homework. That should take the fun out of reading my mind.

Wyatt is too curious to refuse. Blake tells me he has concerns but accepts the challenge. Jason looks back our way and motions us to the back room. Blake holds my hand before I rise. He pushes his thoughts to my mind. *Do you think you could hear me without touching?*

I shrug and slide my hand out. There’s a faint humming if I focus.

“Wait.” Blake returns with two shots. “You’re too uptight. This will help both of us.” He downs one and waves the other under my nose.

I sniff and recoil.

“Drink it fast and then chase it with some beer.” He’s already on his second gulp.

“You are really pushing this giving me orders thing too far.”

“I want to be just like Mr. Russell.”

“Keep it up and we’ll see if you can’t be defeated in hand to hand.” I wink. I’m the only Troop member that he hasn’t battled, by my design. I’m not sure if I could block and fight. I tinker with time, he hears, I’m exposed.

He gets close enough to kiss me but doesn’t. “I’d love to be defeated by you in hand to hand.” His fingers lift the shot glass to my lips. “Drink Major sweetie.”

What a big fat flirt? I toss it back and grimace. “Gross.”

He feeds me beer. We get another round.

Can you hear me now?

I nod. *It kind of tickles.*

And you think I'm the big flirt. His thumb runs over my lips and we're both thinking it's time we kiss. "Jason's telling me to hurry."

I'm baffled. Why aren't we kissing?

"Sweetie, we're playing poker, remember?" He's pleased to vex me this way.

Crestfallen, I let him lead me to our challengers.

In or Out

The Cove has a few rooms reserved for private gatherings and we often use them for gambling, pool or darts. There are seven of us in one of the backrooms, Wyatt and his three loyalists and me and my two.

“Shall we?” Wyatt extends a hand for us to sit at a round table. “Davie, do you have cards?”

Davie pulls a deck out of his jacket.

Blake and Jason flank me like two sentries.

“Let me see those.” Jason takes the pack and gives a knowing glance to Blake, who returns a gentle shake of the head. They aren’t tampered with. While they have this clandestine moment I tuck at my collar to divert Wyatt. “They look all right to me.” Jason tosses the cards on the table.

“Twenty ante all right?” Wyatt stares at my chest. Yep, he’s that easy to distract. “But, let’s keep this Major to Major.”

Blake knew he would suggest that because he heard he’s a mind reader. This is why he wanted me to hear him.

“We all want to play.” Jason demands.

“Major to Major.” Wyatt stubbornly insists.

“Then we play for real money.” I demure, repeating what Blake is telling me mentally. “A hundred a hand.”

“The Majorette has balls. A hundred it is.” Wyatt shuffles the cards and, putting them between two fingers, he offers them to me. “Ladies first.”

I take them and reshuffle. I’m not nearly as skilled at it as he. I deal and as I’m about to give Wyatt a sixth card I hear Blake telling me *only five*. “Oops. It’s been a while.”

Wyatt laughs and grows cockier, if that’s possible. “I was starting to wonder if we were playing gin and not poker.”

My hand is a poor one; no pairs, no runs and only one repeating suit.

Keep the king and the ten. Wyatt has a pair of jacks.

“When will we see you in the Field Games?” Blake asks Tim. If he brings it up, they’ll think about it and hopefully we’ll learn something from one of them.

“February. Looking forward to it.” Tim answers. He’s blonder than Blake. Both are sexy men, as is Jason, and my buzzing mind enjoys the view.

“How’ve you been doing so far?” Blake says casually but tells me mentally to concentrate on the cards and not Tim. And I thought Jason got jealous.

“Hush you two.” Wyatt orders. He’s never fun and even if I’m no match in his esteem, we’re playing serious poker.

“We’ve won them all.” Tim whispers and gets a nasty look from his Major. He shakes his head and tends to his beer.

Wyatt bets another hundred and I call. We each trade in three cards. I get two more tens and now have three.

Don’t bet too high. You’re hand is better.

“Two hundred.” Wyatt slides in more cash.

“I see your two hundred and up it fifty.”

He snickers. “Ooo? Fifty. You must have a good hand.” His Troops ape his chuckles.

He thinks you’re a novice but that you have a better hand. He’s calling because it looks weak if he folds for fifty.

“I win.” I clap my hands like the rookie I am and rake in the pot.

Wyatt deals the next hand.

Bet fifty and keep the jack, queen and ace of hearts.

I have two queens. Blake wants a royal flush. That’s a long shot. Wyatt sees my fifty. I didn’t get the royal flush. I have a pair of queens.

He considers you a timid and lucky player. And distracting. He’s right on all accounts.

I giggle from the tickle and Wyatt looks at me.

Good girl. Bet two hundred and fifty.

“Four hundred.” I say not liking the term timid.

Gutsy Major sweetie. I like that in a woman.

I grin.

“I call.” Wyatt folds.

When I gather the cash Wyatt reaches for my cards but Blake slams his palm over them. “You have to pay to see.”

“Of course.” Wyatt sits back and I shuffle. I get two aces and two twos.

“Three hundred.” Wyatt bets.

See him. Keep the twos and lose the aces.

I add to the pot and look at my hand. Why wouldn't I go for the full house?

He has the other two aces and a pair of fours. Three of a kind is our best shot. Don't play with your hair if you we don't get the third two and don't smirk if you do.

Grumpy.

I heard that. If you're going to play badly, then let's play strip poker. I'll hear more from him if we do, if I don't get sidetracked.

I sneer. Crass son of a bitch.

Wyatt takes one new card and I take three. I don't look at my cards. It's clear Wyatt got his full house. He's too still.

Look. I can't help if you don't look. Blake reprimands.

Of course but I'm worried. I steady myself before pulling up a card. A two. Not enough now and I would have had a full house as well.

He has fours over aces so you would have still lost.

Mr. Know-It-All. The next card is a king and the last is the fourth two.

You'll listen to me for now on.

I roll my eyes and Wyatt actually smiles. “One thousand or does the Majorette only pretend to have the nuts to play real cards?”

“Don't do it. We're playing a friendly game. A thousand is too high.” Blake says so absolutely I almost forget we know I'll win. He's a good actor. “Fold.”

“Who's in charge?” Wyatt locks eyes with me taunting me to match his bet.

I pick my head up. “I see your thousand and raise you a thousand.”

Everyone gasps, even Blake, who told me to call.

“Did you leave your nuts at the office?” I say as I slide in the cash.

How much money do you carry on you?

Dad likes me to be prepared. I think back. All Martians carry a lot of cash.

“It’s too rich.” Wyatt’s head shakes reactively.

I shrug and reach for my third pot.

“No looking.” Jason reminds Wyatt before he even tries again.

“Hold on.” Wyatt grabs my hand before I can haul in the fat kitty. “I’ll call.” He pays up and turns his hand over. “Full house, fours over aces.”

“Two pairs of red twos, and two pairs of black twos.” It’s the kind of cheesy line that you can’t resist saying when the rare opportunity spring up in real life. I stack the bills in front of me.

He’s going to give the signal to fight.

Blake’s warning sends a chill up my spine and I freeze time, which is risky when you’re drinking. Luckily, it won’t be for long. The paralyzed Wyatt is reaching for a dagger. Since he hasn’t got his hand on it I take it from his sheath and pocket it. I sit down and release time.

Wyatt pats his shirt. His men are looking to his lead. “I dropped it.” He says softly.

“What?” Jason stands up ready.

“This.” I throw the knife on the table and it vibrates when it sticks. “I guess we should leave before things get inhospitable.”

We walk out leaving Wyatt’s group shocked and pissed.

“You’re a genius.” Blake kisses my forehead. “When did you get his knife and how did you hide it from me?”

“A girl needs to keep her secrets.”

Who to Kiss?

Captain Pete, Jason's buddy that supplies us contraband and hooks us up for lifts, is waiting for us. I feel remorse to sneak off. It's because I'm a Major. Last year I didn't think twice about it. What Dad doesn't know, can't upset him.

Blake and Jason hop on and drop our duffels. They each take a hand and help me in. We're off like a rocket. The guys have prepared well. Blake has a green retro VW Scirocco at a garage in the City. After a quick beer run, we arrive at a house in Half Moon Bay, CA.

Blake parks in the back and goes to the guesthouse. "This is our mailing address." He turns on the lights and we're in a lovely cottage. The kitchen and den are one big room. There are two bedrooms. Everything smells like pine and there isn't any dust. "I have to let Maria know we're here. Make yourselves at home." Blake leaves us.

"Get your suit on." Jason tells me as he puts the beers in the fridge.

I brought two, a one piece and a bikini. The wise choice is the practical one piece. I put on the bikini and cover up in an oversized shirt. Then I fuss in the mirror letting my hair down. When I return, Jason is gone and Blake is back.

"Nice legs." Blake takes his time looking me over.

"Nice place."

"Thanks. Jason's waiting for us."

Our friend is reclined in the hot tub with his head on a blow up pillow. "It's still warming up." Jason is topless and Blake pulls his shirt over his head. The two of them are better than Michelangelo's David. Both are fit as a fiddle, Jason leaner but Blake is equally as nice. My hormones shift into high gear and I look away so I won't succumb to the temptation to stare.

I dip a toe in. It's chilly but better than the air. My whole right foot stands on the top step followed by my left. I start to lower myself. Hesitantly I take off my shirt and drop in.

Jason leans out and opens two more beers for us. "To our poker success."

"That was fun." I chime in as we clink bottlenecks.

“Um, you do know I was forcing reactions out of you.” Blake doesn’t hide his giddiness.

“Whatever, it worked.”

Carefully to keep the contents dry, Jason opens a bag of chips and passes it around. “Did we learn how they’re cheating?”

“They’re rigging gear.” Blake says. “We’ll have to guard our equipment and check it before we start.”

“Easy enough.” Jason concludes.

“Suzette, how did I end up in your Troop?” Blake asks.

“I drew the short straw.” I tease. “And the question is why did you choose us?”

“I didn’t want to look like a chauvinist pig.”

I splash him and with elegance surprising in such a statuesque man, he leaps my way and tickles me. When we stop, I’m in his arms and poised for a kiss. I can hear his thoughts and he wants to do just that. Then I’m pushed out of his head and he sits me by my jet. Is that how it feels to him when I shut him out?

“I’m going to hit the sack.” Blake says after his second beer. He dries off and goes back to the guesthouse.

“He’s been all business as well. You both needed this.” Jason hands me a third. “You’re not mad that I didn’t stop him, are you?”

“Why would I be?” It isn’t Jason’s job to manage Blake and Blake has a right to do what he wants at his house. Anyhow it’s not like we could really kiss with Jason watching. All this is to placate my wounded libido. Why didn’t he kiss me anyway? Twice he could have and twice he didn’t.

“Do you like Blake?”

I roll my eyes. “If I didn’t have you two on my team, I’d go bonkers.”

Jason pins me to the side of the Jacuzzi. “Do you like me?”

I gulp.

His eyes drop. “I’ve waited too long to ask.” His mouth puckers and he presses against mine. Then it repositions and adds pressure. “Suzette, I’ve wanted to kiss you since the day we met.”

I'm confused. I like this and yet I wanted to kiss Blake only minutes earlier.
"Jason, I'm the Major."

"So tell me to stop or better yet, order me to your whim." He pulls me up and we hug. "Shall we move inside?" Getting out first, he helps me into a towel to dry off. There's a light on and a candle burning on the coffee table. No sign of Blake.

On the couch, we carry on with more vigorous making-out. "I can't read your mind. Are you okay with this?" Jason asks innocently enough.

I detect an underlying question. He wonders if I wish he were Blake. It's more like I wish I didn't have two men to myself. Since Blake high-tailed it out of there, that is a moot point. "You've always been special to me." I put my legs over his lap and nuzzle into his shoulder.

"What are we going to do about all your Major stress?"

"Well," I straighten up to look him in the eye. He's looking at my lips. "Dad said my rule breaking showed leadership. So, why fight it? For now on, we're all about the fun."

Jason's hand runs into my hair and guides my head to his. "We should get to sleep. We're going surfing in the morning."

He sees me to my room with a final and powerful kiss. I lay on the bed thinking. Blake isn't receptive. Jason is. I couldn't have made the choice if I had to. This is fate. Dad will be pleased. My nose crinkles. He'll think he makes the calls.

The delicious aroma of eggs and bacon fill the cottage when my lids pop open. Maria dropped breakfast off before she went to run errands. I'll have to mention this to Artie. Tell him there are organic creatures that are as good at taking care of their families as he is. It'll keep him humble.

Blake has a favorite reclusive spot that he likes on the coast. We have three boards. I haven't surfed before but I'm game. That's what I'm thinking as we carry our gear down to the sand. Then I see how big the waves are. I never thought about the size of the swells before, but these are tall.

"You'll be fine." Blake tells me and winks.

He needs to stop reading my mind and flirting. He winks again. His cute little way of saying he won't.

Jason drops his board on the sand and demonstrates the process. “We paddle out, wait for a good ride and then move with it. When it takes us, we stand.” In one graceful motion, he goes from kneeling to standing. “You’re Martian. It’ll be fine.”

I shrug. Can’t back down or won’t. Plus, it does look fun. The guys are trying not to go too far ahead. I’m holding them back. I see a large shadow pass below us, then two more.

“Are there any sharks out here?” I ask as we straddle the boards patiently.

“They’re dolphins.” Blake says.

“Can you be sure?”

“Yes.”

Does he feel their brains? Can he read them?

“Feel, yes. Read, no.”

“Ready?” Jason says watching a big swell form. He pushes his board forward. We do the same.

Once I feel the ocean propelling me I kneel on the board. Blake and Jason are on their feet. Show offs. I squat and balance. Slowly I rise.

“Good girl.” Blake shouts.

I smile at my momentary success – this is before I realize it’s fleeting.

“Watch out Suzette!” Jason yells.

The wave starts crashing to my left. I have no experience steering but I get the nose of the board pointed away. Too far, I climb up the shoulder wall. The white water breaks less than two yards behind me. I duck and I’m in the curl.

The guys are shouting instructions but I can’t hear. The wave closes over me and I’m down. Avoiding the board I swim to the light and my head pops out of the water only for a second as another wave topples down. An arm grabs my waist and pulls me up.

Jason has me in a fireman’s carry and water gushes out of my mouth. He puts me on my towel. “For whatever it’s worth, that was really impressive for a first time surfer.”

I sit up and cough out more salty liquid. “Tell me that later.”

His phone rings. “Hey Pete... Pete? Pete, I can’t hear you. I’ll call you back in a few minutes.” Jason kisses my cheek. “I have to arrange for our return. You okay?”

I nod and he leaves. It's not a complete lie. My pride's hurt but I'll live.

Turning the Tide

Blake sits by me after rescuing the boards. He's grinning like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*. "Jason's a good guy."

"You two are close."

"So are you two."

The blood rushes to my face. "We've known each other a long time and..."

"And you're good together. I think it's great."

I guess we didn't have a good chance at romance after my stunt the first week of school. He glances off and I wonder if he's listening. "What about you? Any Martian ladies catching your eye?"

"I've gone on a couple of dates."

"With who?" I sit up and hug my knees. Why do I ask if I really don't want to hear it?

"Tara."

"Tara Miller? Tim's sister."

He gives me an odd look. "Like you wouldn't enjoy Tim's company."

"He's cute and nice at times..."

"And so is she. Cute anyways. She's trying to get information from me. I'm taking advantage of it."

"Full advantage?"

"It's just sex." He says dismissively. "And Karen, who seems to be on a mission but I can't figure out what it is or for whom."

"Karen's in our Troop. Who would ask her to do that?"

"Maybe it's her idea. She's hard to hear and I'm not sure if that is by design or if she was warned."

"You know Jason has a crush on Karen."

"Not any more. She has gotten rather aggressive and we're both avoiding her."

Great. She'll ask to drop out of our Troop. I guess that's fine if she's a stalker but we're already so small.

"She won't drop out but would you request to transfer her?"

“Is it that bad?”

He rolls his eyes. “If it’s a problem, you don’t have to.”

“I’ll transfer her.” I stare at him in disbelief. He’s getting annoyed. “Blake, I don’t want to tell you what to do but you should think about the consequences to screwing around campus.”

“Then don’t tell me what to do.” He snaps and glares my way. “If you weren’t falling for Jason and you had the opportunity with Tim, you wouldn’t enjoy a little carnal fun.”

“I’m sure it’s a possibility for some but not for me. I want more than sex.”

“You sound human. Humans believe in courtship and romance. Martians see sex as an act and marriage is practically a business transaction.”

“And you’re half human.”

“And I’m half Martian.”

“So you adhere to Martian courting?”

He relaxes as he thinks about it. “Look, Suzette, you and Jason are the closest friends I’ve ever had probably because you know I can read minds.”

“And we know you’re half-Martian.”

“True. Even though it’s new to me, I never felt like I fit in. But when the time comes for me to marry, I want it to be more than business. I’ll marry a human.”

Before Jason kissed me, I’d have answered the same. “Did you ever date anyone seriously?”

“Once at SC. She broke my heart.”

“And you still want to take that risk?”

His head bobs in a weak yes gesture then he laughs. “She left me for a rich kid. Funny that the only human I ever cared about acted like a Martian. What about you? Any human skeletons in your closet?”

“One.” I smile. “No one knows but Artie.”

“Who’s Artie?”

“He’s our employee. Kind of like my hired-dad but he’s also a best friend.”

“What happened with this guy?” He asks and his eyebrows dance suggestively.

“Not that.” I know it’s vague but he understands. “And don’t tell Jason.”

“He doesn’t know?” It’s a shock to Blake.

“It was before I came to Martian U. When I got my license I had new freedom and I met Joe at a bookstore.”

“This is so cliché.”

“Are you going to interject after every sentence?”

“Every other.” He kids. “He picked you up in a bookstore? Was he in the self help section?”

“I picked him up.” I pretend but Blake sees through me.

“No you didn’t. You’re too timid. He picked you up.”

“I am not timid.”

“Sure. Then how did you approach your prey Joe?”

Quickly I weave a plausible scenario. “I asked him if he wanted to join me for coffee. It was super easy.”

Blake is roaring with laughter. “Hey, stranger, let’s chat over some lattes.”

I kick his foot and he zips his lips eager to hear the rest. “We went out a few times. It was a lot of fun. He really knew how to kiss.” I pause. Joe was the only guy I ever kissed before Jason. If the anticipation of kissing Jason hadn’t built up over the year, I suppose Joe was better but Jason is such a close friend and it meant more. “Joe was really sweet.”

“Why did it end?”

“It’s stupid.”

He motions for me to get to the point.

“We saw this movie about a monster alien attacking New York City and afterwards he got all righteous on me that the universe is too large and we’ll never meet beings from other planets if any exist.”

“That’s why you dumped him?”

“Well, it bugged me.”

“He was right. Our ancestors took decades to travel here and unless there are societies more advanced in technology than ours, there are no visitors.”

“Whatever. Joe wasn’t the right guy for me.”

“You’re better off with Jason. We went to his house a couple of weekends ago. His mom got a little peculiar that I’m a halfer and he told them to get over it.”

“That’s Jason.”

“All Martian in the right ways and not in the right places.”

We laugh. “Blake, I’m sorry about the Majors Dinner.”

“We’re good.”

“Are we?” I think he keeps me at arm’s length and that is the one reason I can’t rationalize away.

“That’s not why I didn’t kiss you last night.” He says bluntly. “The way I see it, we’re going to be friends for a long time. You’ve been confused by both of us. You can’t have both of us.”

“I wasn’t intending to have both of you.”

“I know. Jason is better for you and if it doesn’t work, maybe we’ll have a chance later.”

“As long as you don’t marry me.”

I expected a frown but he smirks. “You’re not all Martian.”

I block immediately.

“Don’t bother. I haven’t read it in your mind. You do something, which according to you means you’re part. And for the record, I would never want you to be my ex-girlfriend.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?”

“It means if I get close to a creature as lovely and complicated as you, I don’t see a simple woman every being enough again. So get Jason out of your system, or find true love with him. Either way, I’m not making a move.”

That is the most bizarre monologue ever. “I’m not complicated.”

“Sure you’re not.” Blake winks at me. “I’m going to get one more ride in before we go. Jason is getting the signal that we have to head back fast.” He stands up and dusts the sand from his lean legs. I shelter my eyes and look up at him. He’s glorious. “You’re feeling okay, right?” He checks before leaving me.

“Go surf big kahooley.”

“Kahuna.” He corrects. Without having a novice at his side, he goes far out and waits.

I pop in a Tootsie Roll. I wonder what would happen if I had stopped time when I was in the curl? The board was touching me and that means it might have stayed out of the freeze with me unless I focused on it specifically. I could have sunk. But even if the water was still, I should be able to swim. Without a current it might have been easier. I’ll test that next time I’m swimming at home. Artie will be there in case I pass out. Blacking out in water would be deadly.

Blake catches a big wave, bigger than the one that ate me. He’s above the breaking point, so he’s safe. Experience is useful. But the waves are at an angle and he’s being pushed to the rocky edge of the beach. I stand and walk to the shore, worried.

Tara? He slept with Tara? Ew! She’s a dutiful devotee of Wyatt. Does he realize that he slept with someone that slept with Wyatt? What was he thinking? I’m glad he didn’t kiss me last night. I was bewildered about Jason and Blake, secretly falling for both of them. In the end, I could only have one and I’m glad it was the one smart enough not to sleep with Tara. And what was that crazy narrative about me not being ex-girlfriend material. Who thinks like that? If anything, Blake is more Martian than I am screwing around recklessly.

He’s getting closer to the rocks. I gulp and unwrap another Tootsie Roll. I have a bad feeling about this. He does too. Blake can’t move away from the rocks without wiping out. So he does.

Everything stops. I have to hold it farther than normal. When I freeze time, I keep it to a bubble to save my strength but we’re outside and the ocean is big. I’m holding a size of a football field. What tires me out is the lack of flowing air. Moving improves my stamina as long as I remain calm. I’m trying to remain very calm. I run to the water and wade out. Blake is frozen at the point of impact. I see a gouge when I pull him to me. The ocean is up to my neck. It’s hard to move in the water with him and I’m running out of energy. I get to the beach and pass out.

Caught

“What happened?” Jason asks as he sits me up. Blake is in the sand out cold.

“He fell on the rocks.”

Jason turns to Blake and rolls him on his back. Thick blood seeps out above his hairline but his head is in tack. “Put pressure on it. I’ll get a towel.” He runs up to our things.

I hold my hand to his wound and Blake moans.

“Be careful. You hit your head.”

His hand covers mine. “Let me feel.”

Jason is back with a towel. “Put this on it.”

“Doesn’t feel too bad.” Of course Blake can’t simply sit up and evaluate himself. He stands and almost falls.

Jason anchors him. “Careful.”

“Stop telling me that.” He feels stupid. “I thought I was going to split my skull open. What happened?”

“You split your skull open and Suzette got you out of the water.”

“In that undertow?”

“She’s a good swimmer.”

“Olympian.” Blake eyes are on me. He sees major missing pieces in this mystery starting with the fact that it’s a superficial cut.

“We have to get back. Pete thinks they’re on to us.” Jason says as we walk slowly back to the car.

“Blake needs stitches.” I say.

“I do not need stitches.” We get our things in the car and Blake sags into the passenger seat. “Jason, you drive.”

“You need stitches.” Ignoring his argument, I call Artie. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Where are you?”

“Shoot. I’m at the beach. Does Dad know?”

“Would I start without a hello if he didn’t?”

Wise-ass robot. “One of us got hit on the head.”

“Not you?”

“Not me.” The guys are staring at me. “His head is cut open.”

Blake’s eyelids are at half-mast. He’s listening to me and it’s a lot of effort with a pounding head.

“Can you see bone?”

“Yuck.” I say as Blake leans forward and removes the towel for me to see. “No bone.”

“Are his eyes dilated?”

“A little.”

“Does he like you?”

I’m glad Jason can’t hear Artie.

“A little.” Blake says loud enough to be heard.

“His hearing is in check.” Artie sasses unaware that Blake heard him through my mind. “Then they aren’t dilated from the concussion.” Artie riddles off random questions that Blake answers before I can repeat. Who is the president? What year is it? Has he slept with me?

“No.” Blake laughs and then moans.

“I assume you are trying to avoid a hospital since he’s Martian.”

“Half.” Blake says.

I hand him the phone. “I’m not needed.”

“Hi, this is Blake.” His blue eyes ice up at me. We only hear Blake’s side of the conversation, which is more listening than talking. “I feel fine... No... Yes but... You want to come here and stitch me up. Are you a doctor?”

“Let him.”

“Stitches will show... I’ll see the nurse when I’m back at Martian U.” He hands me back the phone. “That’s one bossy man. And I thought you learned it from your daddy.”

Artie’s muffled voice trails out of the phone. “Tell your ill-mannered friend that I heard that.”

“He knows.” I say. “Where’s Dad?”

“About to pounce on me.”

“Suzette, where the hell are you?” It’s Dad and he’s irate.

“Dad, I’m on my way to Martian U.” I buckle up and Jason starts the car. The radio blasts and Blake shuts it off.

“Who are you with?”

“Dad, I’m fine. I’ll see you at Martian U.”

“She’s with Blake!” Dad’s anger hits a new high. Artie must have told him Blake was with me. “I’ll see you in my office when I get back.” He hangs up.

“That was fun.” I mutter.

“You shouldn’t have called.” Jason scolds.

“That isn’t what gave me away. He’s home because he already knew.”

We get back before Dad. I clean up and trudge forth to meet my doom.

“Suzette.” Dad doesn’t look up from his desk. “Close the door.”

I do and sit. He lets me wait as the generous and cruel Martian that he is.

“Did you engage in a poker game with Wyatt’s team last night?”

“Yes.” Wow! He knows everything.

“And did Blake help you win?”

“Yes.”

“And were you alone with Blake this morning?”

“No.”

“Who were you with?”

“I take full responsibility.”

He looks up. “You’re covering.”

“Sure.”

“Fine.”

“Is that all?”

“For now.” He lets me walk to the door before he adds, “Jason was also missing from campus.”

“I take full responsibility.”

“Good.” Dad smiles and waves me off. He lets me off easy because I was with Jason as well. He’s betting on his winning horse.

I meet Jason and Blake at the cafeteria for dinner and give them the update. We're relieved it wasn't worse but we're apprehensive. On our way back to our dorm, Karen walks up.

"Blake, we need to talk." She demands with watery eyes.

Blake stays to deal with his personal demon.

"Are you going to transfer Karen?" Jason asks.

"If Blake wants me to."

"He does."

"Then I will."

I type up the email but wait for Blake to give me the affirmative. Jason must have told him to give me the go ahead because Blake's at my dorm at eight that night. In my PJs, I open the door and he comes in without an invitation.

"I want it." He says as if we are in the middle of the conversation.

I sit at my desk and hit send. "Done."

"How did you get me out of the water?"

"With much effort." I evade.

"I'll see you later."

I slam the door. He doesn't care about the truth. He wants me to know he's on to me. Stupid half-human pain in the butt.

I slump on the sofa worn out from a long day of bad surfing, time stopping and dealing with Dad. When there's another knock on the door, I'm delighted not to see Blake. "Jason?"

He backs me in and shuts the door. Then he kisses me. I'm too spent to meet his enthusiasm. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"I'm tired."

He looks sad. "Tired?"

"It's been a long day."

"Okay." He's moving from sad to mildly peeved. "Are you having second thoughts about what happened last night?"

"We kissed and it was nice. Let's not make a mountain out of a mole hill."

Jason looks down at me. "It was more than nice."

I smile. “Yes, but I’m scared.”

“And tired.”

“Jason, please don’t read too much into this.”

“Or last night.”

I pull his hand to the couch and sit him down. Then I snuggle up into his arms.

“Is this okay?”

“It’s nice.” He holds me. We’re content.

President Ray

Since our escapade, Jason has taken me out every weekend. Blake has doubled his scholastic efforts and been limited. Twice the three of us hung out in my room and watched movies. Both were guy films. Not only am I outnumbered, I'm a wuss.

During break, I have two big plans. Jason is coming to my house for Christmas dinner. Sounds like a big step. That would be true if I had asked him and not Dad, who had found out we were seeing each other and is probably planning the seating arrangement for our eminent wedding. For New Year's, the three of us are going to sneak out and go to Vegas. Blake is taking care of the room.

Martians are methodical and patient when their curiosity isn't pushing them to hurry. President Ray Nathaniel is mature enough to play the waiting game well. The week before Christmas break, I'm summoned to his office.

"He'll see you now." His assistant Mark instructs me. Mark's a Martian in his late twenties and adorable. He's one of those institutionalized Martians destined to work at Martian U for eternity. I think he's gay and that is rare for us. We're all about promoting the species and not about personal desires. I suppose there's ways to do both.

I stop short when I see Dad and Nicolas with the President.

President Ray is very tall and thin. He's younger than Nicolas, I guess mid-fifties. He has brown hair and eyes and looks nice when he smiles. Not so much when he doesn't. Thankfully, he's smiling. He walks up to me and guides me to a chair at a conference table. Dad and Nicolas stand and greet me.

Since I haven't broken their carnal rule, it has to be a positive meeting. This conclusion doesn't put me at ease.

"You look very professional." The president tells me.

I'm in my blue suit and pink blouse. "Thank you."

"The students grow up before our eyes." He holds a chair and I sit.

"Suzette, we've been reviewing our new Troops. I understand you played a little trick on Wyatt last month."

"We weren't trying to scam money out of him." I over-share before the formal accusation is lodged.

“But you won thirty-four hundred.”

I gulp. “Thirty-three fifty.” Because that extra fifty dollars would make it obscene, right? “We weren’t against taking it from him either. It sounds bad when you add it up. Martians like to have lots of disposable cash. We were helping dispose of it.” I’m a rank amateur under pressure.

“It was a mistake to make Wyatt a Major. He’s ambitious and that’s admirable but he’s blinded by it.”

Dad smirks.

“We got your request to transfer Karen. You’re reasons were vague.”

“She isn’t fitting in well.”

“Does this have to do with her tryst with Blake?”

They know everything. Why are they asking me so many questions?

“I’ll take your silence as confirmation. We had expected Wyatt to make the first move and play a dirty trick on you. You’ve surprised me by proactively out-pranking him.”

“Thank you.” I try to keep the wrinkles out of my nose. This is fishy.

“Karen will be reassigned to Mason’s Troop. Wyatt’s Troop will be absorbed by yours. We’re dropping three of his people, two by request, the last has transferred to Bermuda U to be closer to his family. That will make your team ten people. Since that is a lot for a young Major, we’re elevating one of your men to Captain. We’ve debated adding a layer for years. We see the Captain as a second Major but you will have the ultimate word. Who would you recommend?”

“Jason Struthers or Blake MacGinnis.”

“We expected you’d feel that way. Since Blake is more mature and you’re involved with Jason, it’ll be Blake. Wyatt’s team has a week to move to your dorm. He’ll be trouble. Watch him closely.”

“Yes sir.”

“Major Russell, you’re doing a good job.”

I take that as my cue to leave. I rise out of my chair back. “Thank you, sirs.”

“No, thank you and please, be sure that if you take any more unscheduled leaves, that you go undetected.” Ray glances at me.

“Yes sir.” I leave and exhale once I’m in the foggy air.

I text the guys to meet me at my room. They are thrilled at the news except that we’ll be infected with Wyatt into our clan.

“And Jason,” I save the hardest part for last, “they promoted Blake to Captain. It was a tossup but since we’re involved, they thought it would be better for Blake to help with the Troop.”

Jason kisses me. “Like it matters which of us is ranked where. We’re a team.”

Blake looks guilty, no upset.

“Let’s celebrate.” Jason never misses an opportunity to party.

“What’s wrong?” I ask Blake as Jason’s busy in the kitchenette getting brews.

“They picked me because I can’t stand up to them like you two do.”

“Blake, that’s silliness.”

“Is it?”

Jason hands me a beer and kisses my cheek. Then he does the same to Blake who shoves him off.

“Jason, I told you that all that human sex is better than Martian sex is nonsense.” Blake jokes.

“Prove it.” Jason runs a finger down Blake’s arm seductively. Why straight men kid like this is beyond me.

“Reel in your Martian.” Blake begs me.

I pull Jason to me. “You have to listen to both of us now.”

“Order me to kiss you some more.”

“Kiss her more.” Blake winks at me. He’s still thinking that he’s a weak link somehow.

“It’s thanks to Blake that this happened. And I think they intended to merge our Troops all along. We were being tested.”

“How did I help?”

“They heard about the poker game. It’s why they think I’m conniving enough to be a Major.”

“You’re not. You’re too kind. That’s why we’ve got your back.” Jason’s hand slides under my shirt onto my belly. It’s personal but he won’t push things further with Blake there. We don’t want him feeling like a third wheel.

I recline on Jason. “Shall we watch a movie or something?”

“I have work. You two have a romantic celebration.” Blake downs his beer and leaves.

Jason and I haven’t gotten to the big first time together. Blake knows and since they tell each other everything, he didn’t have to hear it.

“Shall we continue this in your bedroom?” Jason plays with my hair.

“Let’s savor this moment.” I fade but stay awake. “Why does Blake think Karen was ordered to seduce him?”

“She was hard to hear but he got a few glimpses when they touch.”

“What do you make of it?”

“Wyatt. He’s obsessed with you.”

“Us and now that our Troop is merging with his, it will be worse.”

“You. Blake says he thinks about upping you all the time and when he’s not, he has some fantasies.”

“Ew.”

“I wonder how he’s taking the news?”

We laugh. Yes, it’s a mean thought but it’s so ironic we can’t help giggling.

“Do me a favor, let Blake handle Wyatt.” Jason pleads.

“Sure.” That’s an easy answer. “How do you think Wyatt heard of Blake’s mind reading?”

“Who knows, besides us?”

“Dad, Nicolas and President Ray.”

“Nicolas or Ray.”

I look up. “Not Dad?”

“He wouldn’t do that to you. Any of them would do it for the fun of it. The administration likes to toy with their Troops. Your dad wants you to be the best Major ever. He’s too upstanding to feed you intel but he definitely wouldn’t give out intel against you.”

“True.”

“So tell me about Artie. Is he going to like me?”

I shrug. “Artie makes up his own mind.”

“What’s he like?”

“Really neat and efficient. He’s sense of humor is a little dry.”

“Makes you wonder what his parents were like.”

“Um, Jason, Artie is a robot.”

“What?” He pushes me up.

“He’s an artificial man. Artie Mann.”

“No? You’re joking. I’ve seen his picture.”

“He looks very human.”

“Have you told him about me?”

“Yes. We talk once a week.”

“But he isn’t real?”

I scowl. “Artie is real. He isn’t organic.”

“Okay!” He holds his hands up in surrender.

Happy Holidays

I haven't seen Dad this happy since he announced that I was a Major. Stanley Russell is in his best cardigan sweater, which is an abomination to good fashion sense. It's dark gray with white diamonds and burgundy reindeer across the belly. I think they are reindeer. In the fuzzy pixilation, they could be elephants.

Artie is in the spirit as well but he opted with a solid dark green sweater. His red tie is too shiny but otherwise, he's decent. Compared to Dad, he's a fashion star.

I sit in the kitchen and pick at the salad only to get a light slap from Artie's spatula. "Hey, it's hot." I protest.

"Don't ruin your appetite."

"On lettuce?" I roll my eyes. Trust me, it takes more than salad to ruin a Martian appetite.

"I forgot to plug in the lights." Dad rushes out to make sure our house is spectacular for our special guest and his potential son-in-law. Would my biological father act this way? Probably.

"Why isn't Blake coming?" Artie eyes me.

"Dad didn't invite him."

"And you're a deaf mute?" Artie's sass circuit needs tweaking.

"I hinted but he changed the topic and ran off to class. Anyway, it's Christmas. I'm surprised Jason didn't have to stay with his family."

"Has Blake learned manners?" Artie's memory is one hundred percent and he never got over his terse phone conversation with the wounded Blake.

"He has manners. They are the first thing to go when he's in pain."

"So, why didn't you invite him?"

"Are you shorting? He's gotten aloof since the changes, before that even."

"I'd like to meet all your friends." Artie's irises fluctuate. "Drop it. Stanley is coming back, with Jason."

I jump up. I'm in a black skirt and white blouse. Dad insisted we look festive, so I have a red bow tying back my ponytail. Quickly I pat down to make sure I'm wrinkle free.

“You look perfect.” Artie whispers just before the kitchen is invaded. It’s almost like he can read my mind. If he were Blake, I would have assumed.

Jason is in dark pants and a gray sweater. He looks wonderful. How did I ever get so lucky?

“Artie, this is Jason Struthers, Suzette’s boyfriend.” Dad introduces using the same tone he used my first day on campus when he told everyone I was a Major.

“Nice to meet you.” Jason shakes his hand. Now, Artie does look perfect but he doesn’t feel that way. His hands don’t really have bone structure. His temperature is close to normal Martian, which was helpful to keep his core from overheating as well as protecting his true mechanics but his infrastructure is a flexible alloy. “You’re a genuine robot.”

“I am.” Artie admits and looks at me. He knows I spilled the beans. No one guesses that fast and only a few Martian acquaintances of Dad know.

“Let’s eat. I’m starved.” I peck Jason chastely on the cheek and grab the salad.

“That’s a bold sweater, Mr. Russell.” Jason compliments, or at least slants the observation to be perceived as praise.

“In my home, you can forgo the formality. Please, call me Stanley.” Dad allows. His face will freeze in an ear-to-ear grin. It’s not use to being so expressive.

“I don’t know if I can do that.” Jason holds my chair. “Suzette, you look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I sit.

Dinner is uncomfortable. Dad spends most of his lines setting Jason up for bragging rights. Artie occasionally tries to get information about Martian U and other members of our Troop, Wyatt and Blake mostly. Dad doesn’t let either of those men be a topic for long.

I’ve never been so anxious in my home before or around Jason for that matter. Even when we first kissed, there was less tension. After dinner we sit by the tree and Dad makes us take some photos. First, we take a group shot. Then Dad, Artie and Me. Then Dad and me. Then Artie and me. Then a dozen of Jason and me.

“Closer.” Dad says as he looks over Artie’s shoulder. “Suzette, why not kiss Jason on the cheek.”

We're standing in front of the tree. Jason snickers. Sometimes it's easier to give in than fight it.

Once Ansel Adams puts down the camera, we exchange gifts.

"What is your family doing tonight?" Dad asks Jason.

"We don't celebrate Christmas. Mom deems it's a human holiday."

"It's fun."

"It is. Kind of bummed we've been skipping it all these years." Jason hands me his gift. It's store wrapped and I hate to ruin it. Plus, it's small.

Inside are two of the prettiest ruby earrings I've ever seen. They are flowers that dangle. Perfect since I don't care for studs. "Jason, these are gorgeous." We keep our gifts small at home since we're pretty spoiled every day.

"Mom picked them out for me." He confesses. "I wanted something nice."

Kissing him thanks I feel all warm and gooey inside, my human side. I almost tear up.

Artie is behind me taking out my little gold hoops and replacing them with my new fantastic ruby flowers. "They're exquisite." He finishes.

The rest of the presents are modest except for one Dad got for Jason. It's a new iPhone. "Artie and I thought you should have a phone that is undetectable. We added Martian apps and a few of our own."

"Undetectable even from Artie?" I ask skeptically.

"Yes." Artie says. "We wanted to put a tracer but we knew you'd object."

"Good." I have to take his word on it. I'll check for myself but he's smarter than me, speedy brain be damned.

"This is great." Jason whips out his old phone and moves his chip to the new one. "Look, it scans the area for bugs and even warm bodies." He gasps and snaps a picture. "And a high res camera."

"I wasn't smiling."

"Better. You look cute befuddled."

"I hate to open gifts and run, but Artie and I have to leave. We were invited to a party at Nicolas' house. No students allowed." Dad jerks his head towards the door for Artie to come with him.

“You’re leaving on Christmas?” I ask.

“It’s political. I need to make an appearance.”

“Why does Artie need to go with you?”

“I’m the designated driver.” I can hear his distaste. Dad’s clearing out for us.

How embarrassing? Martians are very open-minded about sex. A human parent would never allow it and Artie is closer to human than Dad. I bet my biological father wouldn’t be so helpful to abet in sex opportunities.

“Well, that was subtle.” I frown when we’re alone in the house.

“Suzette, it’s fine. So they left us alone. Is that so awful?” And to prove how not-awful it is, he lays a big smooch on me, open mouth and tongue. “Suzette, I love you.”

“I love you too.” I admit.

“Then let’s use this time well.”

We do. I don’t know how Blake does it, having sex without emotions. I guess I am too human. With Jason, someone I care deeply for, it’s wonderful, after the first few moments have passed. Being my first time, there is some pain.

Jason’s caresses my back as we cuddle under the sheets of my bed. “You’re not full Martian.”

I shake my head. “Half.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“You can tell?”

“Venusians are notorious for being silent.”

I hide behind my hair. I couldn’t help but be vocal.

He laughs. It echoes in his chest and into my ear.

“Have you had a lot of sex?”

“No.” Jason slides down and we’re face to face on my pillow. “Two others. Both Martians and both very boring.”

“What does that mean?”

He smiles as he thinks of the right words. “You’re interactive. And I didn’t even have to ask you to...” He glances down his torso.

If I hadn’t hit full redness, I do now. “I thought that was expected.”

“Venusians have to be bribed into oral sex, giving or receiving.”

“Venusians are idiots.”

“Suzette, I love you.”

“I love you, Jason.”

New Year’s we meet Blake in a condo on the strip. He doesn’t tell us how he got it. We have a good time as friends. Jason and I are aware of Blake and keep public displays of affection to a bare minimum.

We toss back the drinks and party like humans, which is dumb for Martians and halfers. We have thirty minutes to midnight and I’m wondering if Jason will make it that long. I’m already tipsy but he passed tipsy three drinks ago.

“Jason, I think we should stick to beer.” I fruitlessly suggest.

He hangs his arm on me. “I like Scotch. I want to go to Scotland and see the Mother Ship Museum. Mom says when I graduate.” Most Martians go either as a family trip or a graduation present. “Maybe I can meet Caesar.”

He’s wasted. Caesar is our president, the most politically powerful Martian on Earth. Like all Popes are called Pope, all Caesars are called Caesar. Our current Caesar happens to be the first woman Caesar and she’s great. She’s also impossible to see without connections.

We’re sitting in the casino listening to live music. We’ve been there for three hours and even then, we had to wait an hour for a table. I frown at Blake wondering if we need to have an intervention.

“We’re staying at the hotel.” Blake shrugs. “So, how was Christmas?”

“Great.” Jason blurts out. “We did it.”

“Jason!” I’m embarrassed.

“Honey, it was great. You’ll get better.” He leans his head on my shoulders and closes his eyes.

“Jason?” I nudge him but he’s dead weight. Good for him because I could strangle him for his backhanded compliment.

Blake stands up. “Let’s go back to the room.” We haven’t even left the table when a couple hovers over us eagerly. “It’s all yours.” He tells them as he hoists Jason up.

The elevator is packed when the doors open. The crowd exits and we get a private ride up. Blake is doing the bulk of managing the semiconscious Jason.

“Do you mind missing the big countdown?” Blake asks softly.

“No.” I smile. “I wish Jason had taken it easy but I guess he’s having fun.”

“You’re going soft on him.” Blake accuses.

“You both walk all over me.”

“But only one of us sleeps with you.”

Okay, that hurt a little. What did he expect?

The doors open and we get Jason in bed.

Fireworks shoot off at midnight and Blake and I watch from our window.

“Happy New Year.” I hug him.

“Happy New Year.” He repeats and kisses me. It is perfectly friendly and appropriate if it we had kept it short. We don’t.

Finally I come to my senses and push gently back. I want him and this doesn’t make sense. I’m happy with Jason.

“It’s possible to care about more than one person at a time.” He keeps his distance.

“I know, but I thought this door was shut.”

“It is. We kissed.”

The kissing isn’t a problem. The longing is.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” He says and goes to his room.

I crawl in next to Jason and kiss him in his sleep. “I’m sorry.”

Re-Org

“Got a minute?” Blake asks coming up behind me in the hall to my office.

“Sure.”

We go to his office. It’s as large as mine since he’s the first Captain level and all offices were created equal. They seem to be trying a lot of new things this year. I like that but I haven’t forgotten that Martians don’t change things without high expectations. Unlike mine, it’s painted beige and looks like the office of a future Martian leader.

Blake closes the door and does a scan for bugs. I had Artie stop by over the holidays and give his office the full treatment. It was my Christmas present to him. He gave me a pink unicorn statuette. He claimed he wanted something girly, powerful and mythical. He’s nuts. At least the odd little curio matches my office.

I haven’t seen him alone since Vegas but I’m not thinking about our kiss other than to think that it isn’t on my mind. Hopefully that isn’t what’s on his mind.

“It’s not that.” He’s so casual about mind reading with me. “I listen to you because you understand and no, I’m not that way with Jason.”

“What did you want?” I ask happy to gloss right over our kiss for good. Sure it was great and if I wasn’t...

He sighs. “Suzette, focus.”

“I’m focused.” Geez! Grouch. Maybe he didn’t like it.

“Suzette!” He snaps. “Have you thought about how we’re going to deal with Wyatt?”

“A little. For sure we don’t tell anyone you read minds. I know it’s gotten around but we keep it uncertain.”

“Agreed.”

“And they made you Captain because I don’t have the muscle to keep Wyatt and his loyal followers in line.”

“Agreed.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t want you dealing with Wyatt or our inherited teammates.”

Blake is protective.

“I am protective. He’s twisted and fixated on you.”

I sigh this time. “Blake, can you stay out some?”

“It’s hard with you.”

“Because I have some kind of amusement park ride of a brain.”

He rolls his eyes. “You do. Trust me. But since that poker game, it’s even harder. Half the time I think you can hear me too.”

“I can’t.”

“I wonder.” Blake looks out the window. “You don’t like being Major.”

“I like some of it. You like it all.”

“I’m only Captain.”

“We’re meant to be equals. The way it was presented, they see the three of us as a trifecta. So let’s can the bull. You take charge, we’ll have your back.”

He reclines. “You didn’t know me before.”

“Have you changed?”

“Yes. There’s this deep urge to compete. It’s like I have this determination I never felt before.”

That’s his Martian side all right. Humans have it but Martians thrive on it. They’re insatiable at times. And Blake has it all, looks, strength, smarts, a little something extra.

He blushes.

“Stop listening.”

“Thanks for your critique. It’s the insatiable that concerns me. I’m afraid to get lost to it.”

“We got your back.” I repeat to make sure he understands in all areas of his life.

“I want the Troops to report to me. I don’t want you near Wyatt and never alone. He’s angry and desperate.”

“Done.” I lean in, “Blake, what do you want?”

His blue eyes drop to my lips.

“Focus!”

“Oops!” He teases. “I don’t know. It’s like two sides of me are competing for control. One side, wants me to embrace the Martian U way. Be all I can be and more.”

Do well and get a job in the hierarchy, which is dumb because they'll never accept a halfer in job of authority. The other side, tells me to run." Blake leans in. "Is it like that with you?"

"Not exactly." I tell him. "I've always known and Artie did a good job raising me to keep a level head. He's why I'm so human as you put it."

"You are human."

"Half." Now two men know for sure.

"And does Jason know what you can do?"

I'm block before he can read me. "What is that?"

"I don't know, I just know."

I exaggerate a roll of my eyes.

"You trust me, I'd bet my life on it. Why can't you tell me?"

How did we get here? We were discussing Blake's inner dichotomy and now he's grilling me for information. "When you feel Martian, ambitious and powerful that is, do you like it?"

"At times it's okay." He shakes his head. "But it's intoxicating."

"That's how it is with me too." I look around as I think about what I do to fight it. "Your father was a Martian?"

He nods.

"Maybe it's easier for me because my Martian side is from my mother and she isn't ruthless."

"Dad wasn't." He says.

"Oh." I toss around some personal experiences that may be applicable. "When I feel my Martian side dominating, my human side fights back. Like when I took you to the dinner. There were other ways to draw the line. Hell, I could have just called their bluff, I mean assuming you'd sleep with me."

"I would have. Would now if you weren't dating Jason."

Flattering, except it'd just be for sex.

He shakes his head.

Dang, he's back in already. What was my point? "If I were all Martian, I would have done it for the sex."

“When I sleep with Tara, I barely feel human.”

How often is he sleeping with her?

“Like four times.”

Ew! Too much information. “When do you feel most human?”

“With you and Jason.”

“Anyone else?”

“Not at Martian U.”

“Is there anything that makes you feel most human with us?”

“Drinking and laughing.”

“Then we make sure to keep that up.” I nudge his shoulder. “You’re self aware. You’ll find more ways and your human side will get better. You’ve been saturated since you came here with Martian people and culture.”

“I felt most human on New Year’s Eve.”

Now who’s bringing up the kiss? “We can’t do that.”

He turns pink. “I meant, maybe I need a real relationship.”

That’s a good idea. I don’t like it but it’s a good idea. Then again, it’s better than sleeping around carelessly. “She won’t be good enough.”

“I know.”

“Do you have any prospects?”

“For sex, yes. For companionship, no.” He thinks about it. “There is this one girl, she’s blond, blue eyes and has dimples.”

Just like him. “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know but she’s in Mason’s Troop. She’s friends with Karen.”

“Has Karen left you alone?”

“For a while. Then I got this long letter explaining how it’s best that we aren’t friends anymore and we shouldn’t talk again.”

“If you weren’t talking, why send the letter?”

“That wasn’t the end of it. She cornered me after math to see that I got it. I didn’t know she would get clingy.” With both palms he rubs his eyes and face. “What was I thinking?”

He wasn’t, if you ask me.

“Hey, come on.” Blake begs me.

“We’ll have to work around Karen. I’ll find out about this blond and we’ll set you guys up.”

“Suzette, you don’t have to put yourself out there for me.”

“Okay but if she knows your reputation, she may be gun shy. I can be your representative, letting her know you have honorable intentions.”

He gives me a doubtful glance. “Would you be okay with that?”

“Blake, I’ll do anything for you. And our little whatever, it can’t go anywhere.”

“You aren’t going to get hypercritical?”

“Probably, but I’ll keep it to myself so just stay out of my head and no one else will know.”

“I’ll live with knowing.”

“Okay, so you’ll deal with Wyatt and the mutants. I’ll work on Miss X. Anything else you wanted to cover?”

There’s something but he shakes his head. “Unless you want to tell me what you do?”

“I do anything I want.” I wink at him and stand up. “See you at dinner.”

By dinner, I have an update. Miss X is Yvonne White. She’s twenty-three and from what I hear, pretty nice. Karen and Yvonne aren’t close, even though they are in the same Troop. Mason’s Troop is eight people and except for him and one other, they are all women. It’s kind of the reverse situation as mine. It’s a reminder that the administration is experimenting.

“Yvonne’s older and she’s finicky.” Jason says to me as we get our trays of food.

“Don’t even think those things. Blake is a great guy. She’d be a fool to not give him a chance.”

“He’s interested in someone else.” Jason stares at me and it’s as uncomfortable as sleeping in a bed of cacti.

“He’s interested in Yvonne and you are to be one hundred percent supportive.”

Jason holds my arm before I can turn my back on him, “Look, I want it to work more than you two, so I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“She told me that she’ll be at the Cove tonight. That’s means she’s considering it. I didn’t have to tell her who Blake was, so she’s spotted him.”

“Of course not. He’s the only halfer and every Venusians is dying to get their grubby hands on his hard steamy man meat.”

“Not every Venusian.” I kiss Jason as proof.

Too convincing because Jason wants to be alone. “Blake can go without us. We can have a quiet night at the dorm.”

Blake winks at me when we sit. “I heard and I do not want to go alone.”

“You have to stop that. It’s invasive.” And no more winking.

After dinner, we help Blake dress the part. He’s nervous. It’s been a while that he’s let himself feel human.

I straighten his collar. “You’re irresistible.”

He smiles at me. “Stop flirting, I have to focus on Yvonne.”

I scowl. “I need to change. I’ll be back.”

Jason comes with me. “I didn’t think you were flirting.”

“He likes to tease.” I say and go to change. As I finish up, I realize we really haven’t discussed our convoluted dynamics.

Jason whistles when I enter the living area. I have a wrap around dress that has a dipping neckline. I take his hand and bring him to me. With all my passion and power, I kiss him. “Jason, I love you.”

“I love you.” He’s puzzled.

“I’ve liked you for a year.”

He blushes.

“Maybe I didn’t always know but I did when we had that party on the mainland last year.”

“Why didn’t you accept when I offered to share a room?”

“I was scared. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Like I cared.” He runs his hand down my dress and massages. “And I lucked out. You’re a tiger.”

“Blake is great and maybe that could have been another path for me but I’m on this path with you and I’m not looking to get off.”

“Ah huh.” His head falls back as he gets why I started this talk. “I trust you and I trust Blake. I’m not unaware that things could have been different but I am very pleased they are this way.” He advances and starts to undo my belt.

“After.”

Double Date

I'd like to say I'm mature and can accept another woman in Blake's life. That is what I am working towards but I don't like Yvonne. She's so very Martian and Blake needs someone that can remind him to be human.

On the other hand, he does seem softer. Perhaps anyone would next to the steely cold personality of Yvonne. Judging by looks, they go together nicely. Yvonne and Blake are too beautiful. They are two prized stallions destined to breed champions. Jason is definitely in favor of Yvonne.

Keeping quiet and blocking Blake is my plan. I'm not going to be the sour apple.

Yvonne is cautious. The three of us are close and she's an outsider. We do our best to welcome her but she's wary.

"How do you like Martian U?" Yvonne asks Blake. "Is it weird being the only halfer?"

"Sort of. Sometimes I feel like I have to prove I deserve to be here. But those are rare, there are plenty who are intrigued by me and at times I feel like a celebrity. I'm lucky to have good friends." Blake nods his head knowingly to Jason.

Yvonne glances at me.

"And I'm meeting new friends all the time." Blake adds.

I wonder what he's picking up from her.

"It's easier for us." Jason admits. "We were born to be here."

"I think my time is up at Martian U." Yvonne takes a drink and let's that set in. Then she smiles at Blake, "Or maybe not quite yet."

"What do you want to do after Martian U?" I ask. I haven't contributed a ton, so every looks at me. I smile, it's forced.

"I want to join the hierarchy. It will be hard. There's no way to start midway up. I'm willing to put in my time."

Well, it's over. Blake is a deal breaker if she wants to be involved with designing our laws and working with our government. Jason is thinking the same thing and Blake has a worried look. A halfer isn't going to be accepted easily into Martian politics.

The long pregnant pause creates more anxiety by the minute. Yvonne finally picks up on the tension. “Oh, don’t think that means I’ve written you off.” She puts her hand on Blake’s arm. “You’re high profile more than compensates for your human roots.”

His face is flat. He doesn’t care to be seen as an accessory but that’s Martian romance. If he means to find a human when it’s time to settle down, he’s already written off a long-term future with Yvonne. “I’m not looking for forever, yet.” Blake hints for Yvonne to slow things down.

She smiles. “I’ve had my fun. I’m tired of sleeping around for the calorie burn.”

“Can’t you have a relationship and decide its future when you know how you feel?”

It’s like watching the Senate discuss a bill on CNN. I try not to let my disinterest show.

“You’re so human.” She condescends.

I shift in my seat.

Jason puts his arm over me and pecks my cheek. “Suzette and I don’t talk about the future.” He tells the dating game participants. “For now, we’re having fun and building on that.”

I rest my head on his shoulder and glance up with dotting eyes. “You’re so Martian.”

Yvonne giggles awkwardly, “You are much younger. See how easy that is when the end is near.”

We’re three years younger and Blake is only one year younger than her. Of course, he just got to Martian U. He probably won’t leave until his mid-twenties.

Karen materializes as if from thin air. “Hello Blake.”

“Karen.” He’s stunned. “Um, you know everyone.”

“Sure.” She glares at me but it’s softer than the nasty look she shoots to Yvonne next. “Are you two a couple?”

“We’re getting to know each other.” Yvonne doesn’t let Karen scare her. Good.

“Best of luck with that.” Karen says spitefully. “He’s everything he promises to be in bed but he’s lousy after that.”

This is too much. I've tolerated Yvonne for Blake. I do not have to tolerate Karen. Rising I grab her elbow.

"Let go of me." Karen tries to break free but I have a firm hold as I lead her away.

"Not if you're going to be cruel."

"I'm done with Blake. He's good for one thing but I need a whole man."

I twist her arm behind her back. She wiggles free, swings a balled up fist and misses by a mile. Tim Miller pops up and intercedes.

"I've got it." He tells me. "Karen, why don't you let me buy you a drink?"

With a final look at me, Karen retracts in her claws. "That would be sweet." She coos and follows the gorgeous Martian away from the scene she made.

No one misses a thing. All eyes are on us. I sit back down and stare down a few gawking fools until we're not the center of attention.

"Impressive." Yvonne commends me. "I heard you weren't ready to be a Major but you have some gonads."

True. Except for my two Achilles' heels seated on either side of me, I carry my authority well enough.

"Don't believe everything you hear." Jason warns. "Suzette is an unforgiving tyrant."

"I see that." Yvonne lets go of Blake's arm. "You're a lot nicer than I thought."

"Thanks." I say thinking it was as much a slur as an accolade.

"Karen isn't over you, Blake." She states as if we didn't realize that. "You must be something."

Blake blushes. "When we got together, I thought we were on the same page. If anything I was sure she wanted one thing. I was sorely mistaken."

"She's spoiled. She always gets what she wants. We all do, sort of. Karen has a harder time when things don't work out."

"I'm sorry about that commotion." Blake apologizes.

"It's old news." She says diplomatically. "You've been active."

Two does not sound that active. Blake averts me. My block is down. I dropped it when Karen barged in on us. He heard that. *More than two?*

He nods four times, then adds a fifth.

Five? Slut. I joke.

Blake shirks and hides behind his beer bottle.

I kiss Jason.

“What was that for?”

Blake kicks him under the table and shakes his head.

“This has been nice.” Yvonne groans feeling left out. “Blake, would you walk me home?”

“I’d like that.” Blake escorts her from the bar.

“She’s cool.” Jason says eagerly and then he gets insightful, “You don’t agree.”

“I don’t know her yet.”

Jason grins thinking he knows me better than I know myself. It’s plausible.

“Let’s blow this popsicle stand.” He throws down some bills and takes my hand.

The night is foggy and cool. At my door, I don’t get a chance to invite him in. He’s in the mood for affection and I wholeheartedly comply. We don’t bother with lights and get right to disrobing each other like we’re gold medalists trying to break the quickest time on record. Panting like puppies, I pull him to the sofa. He’s working my shoulders out of the dress with some trouble.

“Losing your touch.” I sass as I sit on what I expect to be a cushion but is, in fact, Blake’s legs. “Whoa!”

“Don’t stop on my account.” Blake chuckles to catch us off guard.

“Aren’t you suppose to be seducing Yvonne?” Jason asks with as much dignity as he can muster in his tighy-whiteys and yanking up his jeans.

“Not on the first date.” Blake gasps as if we are assuming he’s sleazy.

“Since when did you abide to that standard?”

“Jason, he’s looking for a relationship not a one-night stand.” I explain to my dense boyfriend. I have my dress in place and turn on the lights. “Are you going to see Yvonne again?”

“We’re doing lunch later this week.” Blake gets up. “I just wanted to let you guys know.”

“Um, Blake, how did you get in my room?”

He looks like a child caught red-handed in the cookie jar. "I know the code."

The mind reader moved into the room next to mine when he was promoted to Captain. Martian U maintenance converted two dorms into a new suite for the new rank. He's close enough to read me all the time. How irritating! I check my computer and it notes a questionable entry.

Blake leaves and Jason and I try to restart. We do but the temperature is cooler. Stupid Blake.

Easy Come, Easy Go

“We’re going out again on Saturday.” Blake tells me as soon as he returns from his lunch date with the Martian Yvonne. He takes a chair and waits for me to break from my work.

“That’s great.” I lie but I’m blocking him, so he won’t hear the truth.

He reaches across my desk for my hand and I pull it away. He wants to hear what I really think. With a scowl, he continues. “I confuse Yvonne.”

“How so?”

“She likes me but I don’t fit in her path for world domination. She laid down some ultimatums.”

“Already? Doesn’t that usually happen after more time?”

“You’re thinking like a human.”

“Half and so are you.”

He smirks. “When I’m with her, I almost forget.”

This troubles me because it wasn’t that long ago that he didn’t want to forget. The whole point of finding him a girlfriend was to be more human. I promised to watch his back but what if he changes his staunch position? How will I know what to do?

“You’ll know.”

Damn, I dropped my guard.

“Leave it down.” He requests. “Anyway, Yvonne wants me to seriously think about a future in the hierarchy, if not for myself, as a spouse.”

“That isn’t surprising.”

“And she wants me to stop spending so much time with you.”

Bitch!

“I didn’t think you’d like that.”

“If that’s why you wanted my mind readable, it was wasted effort.” I frown and block. It isn’t like we have that much free time anyway and now I’ll be forced to compartmentalize Blake to only Troop business. Could Dad be behind this request? Even he can’t be that omnipresent.

“So?” Blake asks. “Either talk or stop blocking.”

I gulp. Letting his girlfriend dictate my part in his life is actually more repulsive than allowing Dad. But then, I don't have a personal stake on Blake. She's threatened. I can understand that in theory. "Why don't you oblige for a while and see if she let's up."

"And if she doesn't?"

"You may not miss me."

His blue eyes sparkle. "Stop blocking."

I do.

"I'll never be happy staying away from you." He hyperbolizes. "I am not exaggerating."

"Then you either object now or later. Later gives you more options."

"Perhaps but I told her no way. You're my Major and friend and we've never had sex, so she doesn't have a rational reason to make that demand. She wanted to erupt but since I loaded my argument with the premise that Martians are to be sane and not erratic, she couldn't. Then she said the illusion that I'm involved with you is scandalous and therefore she won't be seeing me again."

"Wonderful. Then why did you even mention all this drama? Didn't you say you have a date this weekend?"

Blake smiles. "Suzette, how can you be so understanding of my skill one moment and then forget all about it the next? She'll be there."

"Does Yvonne know you can read minds?"

"She's heard a rumor that I am perceptive but hasn't asked, so I haven't offered up the facts."

Deception by omission. "She has a couple of days to change her mind. Maybe after sleeping on it, she'll decide you aren't worth the trouble."

"Of course I'm worth it. And she won't change her mind. She's dying to sleep with me and I'm not doing that until she complies."

"This sounds more like a business deal than love."

"Human." He teases.

"I've been thinking about how you hate to lose your human side. Do you like being a Martian?"

Blake looks up to give it his full attention. "When it isn't dominating I do."

“Then you’re better off marrying a Martian in the long run. Martians can live and work with humans but humans aren’t welcome in Martian society.”

“You’re on to something with that but then you’ve had to consider this for yourself.”

“Do you have a lot of human friends?” I didn’t.

“Not really. The only human in my life is Mom but she’s the only permanent person in my life. She won’t like Yvonne.”

I shuffle my feet nervously on the floor. “If your mother married a Martian, she’d accept a Martian daughter-in-law in a heartbeat.”

“You don’t know my mother.” He disparages. It’s a first in regards to his sainted mother.

Maybe he’s a momma’s boy. Maybe she’s witchy.

“Hey!” He scolds. “She’s great but I’ve never met anyone as secretive as Mom. She’s always looking over her shoulder and unless she’s in witness relocation, I’m pretty sure she thinks the Martians are going to attack. Mom doesn’t care for Martians. The only one she’ll talk to is your father.” The he laughs hard, which irks me. “When Mr. Russell was angling that I should come to Martian U, he was laying on the charm and Mom...” Tears form and drop down his hysterical face, “...thought he was so manipulative that she wondered how his daughter handled it.”

That was rude but then again, she only thought it. “I’d hate it if my kid could read my mind all the time.”

“She thinks she can stop me. It hasn’t work for years, not if I’m on my game. That day, I wouldn’t allow her to keep me out. I knew Mr. Russell had something about my future to discuss. It had been coming for a few visits. Your dad’s a sly dog. He never thought the word or idea Martian. How do you handle being his daughter?”

I harrumph at his reinforcement to his mother’s rude thought. Dad isn’t a linear character with only one dimension. Conniving isn’t his entirety and I’m fortunate to have him as my guardian. He told me I was half human when I was old enough to understand. That’s more than Blake’s mother did for him.

“Watch it sweetie! You may be pretty but you can’t dis my mother like that.”

“Get out of my head. You stay out so I don’t have to keep up a block. Mars Stars, Blake it isn’t right.” I snap. If his mother can’t keep him out, someday I may not be able to and he needs to be courteous and control his bad habit. I wonder how fast before my blocking is rendered useless.

“Don’t sweat it. Maybe if we lived together after a few years. I was fourteen when Mom lost it.” He answers having not listened to my words and still listening to my thoughts. “Anyway, Mom is prepared if this didn’t work out.”

This I understand too well since Dad and Artie are the same way. We’ve taken precautions as well. “If you ever disengaged from Martian U, I’d help you guys.”

He smirks. “Because you’d want to be able to find me.”

“I would but I would respect your wishes if you washed all Martians out of your life, even me.”

Blake didn’t tell me I will always be an exception but he shook his head that it wouldn’t come to that.

“Didn’t you have friends at USC?”

“Not close. Everyone was so shallow and reading minds kind of turns you off of people.”

“Will you get tired of Jason? Or me?”

“If it hasn’t happened yet, I don’t think so. You guys are solid.”

“What about your girlfriend?”

“Barbara Jean was really pretty, so I gave her too much leeway. When she cheated on me, she planned it. I knew it was coming. Still, people don’t always follow through on their intentions and you can’t break up with someone for something they hadn’t done yet. I caught her in the act.”

“How awful?”

“Yeah, but if I hadn’t actually seen it, I might of taken her back.”

“I thought she left you for that guy.”

“She wanted to get back together after he dumped her.”

“Barbara Jean has to be the dimmest wit ever.” How could she hurt him like that? He’s wonderful.

He walks around the desk, spins my chair around and pulls me into his tight embrace. “You’re wonderful. Thanks for being such a good friend. I know you don’t like Yvonne but you’re helping me, even though a part of you is jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

He kisses me, lightly, quickly. “You care about me a great deal more than just as a friend.” Blake walks out.

Our conversation haunts me. I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt that Yvonne will show and if she does, she will continue to build a fence between Blake and I. The best plan is to be busy on Saturday night so I won’t wonder how he’s doing with Yvonne. There’s a major obstacle in my way. Jason is taking his brother Matthew and friends on an unsanctioned trip to the shore as a birthday present. Guy time and I’ll be alone with nothing to do but fret.

Saturday, I accept my fate and decide to pamper myself. I fill the tub with bubble bath and light scented candles. When I shut of the water, I hear a loud pounding on the door. It’s Blake.

“I’m nervous.” He pushes me aside and paces.

“If she doesn’t show, at least you know before you got attached. Sticking to your guns is an admirable thing.” And we can be friends forever.

“Not that.” He shakes his head in disbelief that I doubt his foresight. “She’ll be there but that means I’m kind of stuck.”

“The walls are closing in.” I joke.

“Don’t. I need you to tell me I’m being ridiculous.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” I answer but he wants more. “If Yvonne is there, she understands that she is taking a step down an uncertain path of potential. No hard rules. No unchangeable conditions. Equals walking together and seeing where it leads.”

He huffs. “Right. I’m a jerk. I should have found a compromise rather than take a nonnegotiable hard line.”

“Blake, you are not a jerk. Don’t talk like that in front of me or I’ll kick you to the curb. No one, not even you, badmouths you in my presence. Besides, Yvonne made the ultimatum and you called her on it. She’ll never admit it but that makes you more appealing than accepting a henpecked existence.”

He gives me a hug and for the first time realizes I'm only in a robe. "Hey, what's this? Want to get frisky while I'm still a free man?"

"I'm about to take a bath and the water is getting cold." I push him to the door but he dodges.

Blake goes to the bathroom and takes in the serene atmosphere. "Enjoy yourself. I'll come by afterwards if you want the update."

"You know the code."

He leaves in a hopeful spirit and I finally get to soak. I add more hot water because it's tepid. After an hour, I get out with pruned digits. I curl up on the couch with a book and dose off.

Blake wakes me. "She didn't show."

"Yvonne?" That's dumb. Of course he means Yvonne.

"I waited an hour. Then I went to her dorm. Mason said he received her resignation and she left before he had a chance to submit it or talk to her about it."

"A lot of Martians run off when they resign because they don't want to be ordered to wait." Technically, Martian U could make a student wait a year before formally accepting their resignation. Usually those that flee get caught. Sneaking off isn't easy if you don't do it regularly. I pat the cushion and he sits. I hold him and he leans on my shoulder.

I have full access to him. Blake is sad. He's pride is shot. He doubts his worth as a man, a Martian and a viable partner. He even second-guesses his mind reading. Yvonne represented optimism in his mind. He was willing to see if a Martian woman could be the answer for him. And he was hoping that if things had progressed enough on their date, he would have slept with her.

"Blake, she's an idiot."

"She isn't. She knows what she wants and I'm not wanted."

"So she's an idiot. You were open to reconsider your views. She is too stubborn. You're better off without her."

He doesn't respond. The Martian in him concurs with my statement. The human in him wishes he had a chance to find out if potential could have been transformed to kinetic energy.

Sleeping Together

I hold Blake until he sleeps. Gently I move him to lie on the couch with his head on my lap. I run my fingers through his thick hair. He's so hurt. His mind had been still but I sense activity again. He's dreaming about Yvonne. In his dream, she shows up and tells him what he feared. His imagination is creating the closure his reality denied him.

Then he dreams of coming to see me and I'm still in the tub. I listen as he tells me what Yvonne told him. As he does, he undresses and joins me in the bath, which magically expands to fit us. Then we confess to the attraction between us that has been there from the first day and he kisses me, to start.

I can't turn it off, or I don't want to. So after it plays out, his mind settles again. I rest my cheek on his shoulder and sleep in a half sitting position.

A sunbeam wakes us. My back is stiff and sore.

"Suzette?" He turns to look up at me. "Thanks for being a good friend."

"I get a lot from it, so it isn't an inconvenience paying some dues once in a while."

"You dreamed of me." He tells me.

I don't remember my dreams.

"It wasn't like mine." Blake says hearing my mind replay his fantasy from before I faded. "We were walking on the beach. It was strange. We didn't do anything other than hold hands."

"What did we talk about?"

"Nothing." He tells me. "We were happy to be there and that was it. You're very simple."

"Thanks." I push him up and stretch. Simple? I thought I was a complicated high-speed mind.

"Do you often dream about me?"

"I don't remember my dreams." And I'm glad because before I dated Jason, I'm sure we would have done more than hold hands.

"They say if you keep a notebook by your bed, you can log your dreams and it helps you remember them."

“I’m okay not remembering. What’s the point?”

He shrugs. “Thanks for letting me crash here. I was depressed. I thought I knew what was going to happen. I’m not usually wrong.”

“How can you be when you see inside?” I tap my temple.

“I was positive Yvonne would be there.” He shakes his head. Even in the light of the facts, he can’t believe he erred.

Oh no! There’s a note taped to my computer screen.

Didn't want to wake you.

We'll talk tomorrow.

J

Blake reads over my shoulder. “I’ll talk to him. Don’t worry. Nothing happened.”

I’m swimming in guilt, more like drowning. Blake leaves and I wait for Jason. He comes by for lunch.

“Have you seen Blake?” I ask desperate for the matter to be dealt with so I don’t have to explain. Explaining will make it seem more substantial than it was.

“Not since last night.” He says flatly. “It looked innocent, close but innocent.”

“It was completely uneventful. Yvonne blew him off and resigned. He was in a bad place. I’m sure if you were here, he would have gone to you.”

Jason warms a little to hear that he needed a friend and wasn’t trying to move in on his turf. “I’m glad he came to you. You’re better equipped for that stuff than me, my little human lover.”

I’m glad he hasn’t started a fight but that’s not like Martian men. They are very possessive. I give him a sideway look. “You’re taking this very well.”

He kisses me and rolls his eyes as he scrutinizes me. “You aren’t acting guilty.”

“We didn’t do anything.”

“Suzette, my two best friends are half human and you guys can be unpredictable, by my standards. I don’t like that you guys slept together but if something more happened, I’m pretty sure you’d be remorseful. You’re not.”

“You’re a little scary.”

“Remember this.” He gives me a feigned mean look. “How’s our jilted hero?”

“Better this morning. Last night he was despondent.”

Jason laughs. “I thought he wasn’t that into Yvonne yet.”

“I think it was what ‘might have been’ that got to him.”

“I’ll take care of it. That means man time tonight, no hanky panky for us.” He takes me to my room so we can have our fun before he has to fulfill his best buddy duties.

I lay naked in bed as Jason slips on his clothes. He pulls out his iPhone and snaps a picture. I only have time to lift the sheet and hide behind a hand.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You’re a goddess.”

I pat my hair back into control. “Hardly.”

“I could sell it for a lot of money on line if you’d drop the covers.”

“Jason Struthers! You will not do anything of the sort.”

His green eyes narrow on me, then he snaps another. Nature calls and he goes to take care of business.

I check my emails for the first time that day and see that there was another breach in security. “Jason!”

“What?” He’s behind me.

“Did you use the code?”

“Yeah.” He kisses my cheek. “Leave your lights on if you’re up. I’ll stop by if we aren’t late.”

I nod and he leaves. That’s the second time the system noted a breach at the door after people used my code to enter. It’s a code. How would it know if I typed it or someone else? Did Artie put in a heat detector? Surely it isn’t fancy enough to detect fingerprints and there isn’t an eye scan.

“Hi Artie.” I say when he picks up.

“Suzette? Two calls in one weekend?” He cheerfully answers the phone.

“This is business about your software. If someone uses my code on my dorm door, would the system know it wasn’t me?”

“Only you should have the code but in theory, no.”

“Jason and Blake know it.”

“Why would Blake have your personal code?” At least Artie allows that my boyfriend would be an exception.

“He’s a mind reader.”

“Really?” Artie didn’t expect that and he usually covers all possibilities.

“Doesn’t excuse it.”

“Blake is untrainable.”

“You’re a big girl, draw the line and tell him to stay on his side.”

“Yes sir.”

“Don’t sass me Suzette.” He scolds. “I didn’t put that system in for you to give out to all your Troops.”

“Blake is second in command. He’s my Captain.”

“Are you saying you gave him the code or did he steal it from your thoughts?”

“I’m saying it’s okay that he knows even if I didn’t give it to him verbally.”

Artie sighs, which is robot drama. He doesn’t breath. This is to express his outrage. “I’ll come by tomorrow and update the code. You will not pass it out.”

“Only if you make sure to have lunch with me.”

“Deal.” He softens. He’s that easy to manipulate. Yeah, as a kid I kind of got away with murder.

Field Games

I have a bone to pick with Yvonne if I ever see her again. Blake throws himself into work. He's getting dangerously close to unbearable. So what if it isn't fair to blame her? She ran away like a coward and now Blake is becoming more Martian everyday.

"Who was your lunch date?" Blake asks as he unrolls the map of the north side of the island.

"Artie."

"The rude guy on the phone when we were surfing?"

"You were ruder than him." I defend. "He came to reset my code." This was the third time he'd come out. He installed a remote alert so he'd get direct notice. Each breach he insists on switching it even though no one got inside.

"Won't work. I'll learn it again."

"Please don't, or don't tell me if you do. Artie wasn't happy."

"Why?"

"It denotes breaches when you and Jason use it. It's not supposed to do that. Artie has an overdeveloped sense of paranoia. He'll know when it's compromised, so if you know it, don't tell me and don't use it."

"Whatever. Tell Artie that you trust me and he can stuff it."

I point to the map. It's time to talk about our field games and not my family.

"He's family? I thought he was your nanny?"

"Manny?"

"Male nanny."

Grunting isn't cool, but I'm annoyed. "Blake, you wanted to discuss the games."

"Can't we talk about anything that comes to mind?" He waits.

"Artie isn't a blood relative but I consider him family."

Blake is pleased that I cave, as always. Having accomplished that, he gets to work. "If I'm going to feel for the minds of people on the other team, we have to keep Wyatt occupied."

I nod. Field games are set up at the discretion of Nicolas. I'm sure Dad gets too much of a say in it. Sometimes we have a tournament, other times we try to kidnap each

other, this current game is along the lines of capture the flag. We split the grounds equally and plant our flag on our side. Once it's placed, we are not allowed to move our flag unless we are returning it before the other team secures it. To win, you have to bring their flag to yours on your side of the grounds. If your flag is still planted, then you bring theirs to its base. If your flag is in the process of being stolen, you have to cross to your side of the field and halt their capture. Only once had each team captured the other flag and the game was declared a draw. There are no rules on moving a captured flag, so both teams refused to plant the flags in the open.

“We send Wyatt, Tim and Tara to scout out the other flag and report back.”

Blake continues. “Or should we split them up?”

“Do you trust them?”

“No. And all of them are hard to hear. Tim and Tara naturally so, Wyatt keeps up a wall having heard the rumors about me. After the poker game, he thinks you can too. Don't worry, he can't keep it up if he's fighting.”

I snicker. None in our Troop can beat Blake in hand-to-hand. He hears them and it's too easy. We've never faced off and that is by my choice. I can win if I alter the time line that I am on compared to the time line of who I am fighting, which isn't hard but Blake would read me. I could stop him and get the upper hand but he would know my secret. I don't really care, but I'm waiting for the right time to spring it on him.

Wyatt is beefy. He wins a lot because he's short and stout and hard to pin down. Blake is the only team member that gets him every time. Jason can beat Wyatt except for once when Wyatt played dirty and hit below the belt, literally. Jason versus Blake is interesting. Blake can beat everyone but Jason who can bloke him too easily from practice. Blake is too reliant on mind reading and he gets sloppy. Jason usually wins but it isn't by much.

“We keep the equipment locked up and Jason and I will check it in the morning. I don't think Wyatt would tamper with our equipment since we're on the same team, but I'm not confident. He may see this as a chance to show he can out Major you.” Blake's Martian side is at full distrust.

“We should tell Wyatt our plans before hand. Leak enough anyway.”

“Why?” Blake stares at me.

“Give him some rope.”

He smiles. “Okay. It’s a needless risk but where’s the fun in playing it safe.” Blake’s Martian side may dominate but it enjoys frivolity. “You and I will stay and guard the flag.”

“Why me and not Jason?” Which is how we had done it that last few times.

“One of us needs to follow Wyatt and I have to be at the base.” All communication comes back to the base and Blake’s insight to where the other team is on the field is instrumental.

“I can tail...”

“No.” He cuts me off. “You stay away from Wyatt and Jason is better at stealth.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I can smell you a mile away.”

“And what does that mean?”

He closes his eyes. “You used strawberry shampoo this morning.”

“Kiwi.”

“Strawberry.” He insists and rightly so.

Our game is scheduled for evening. We start at dusk. As for Blake’s paranoia, it was right on the nose. Someone had tried to break into our supply shed but failed. We had no way of knowing who it was. Wyatt is top of our list but it could have been someone from Mason’s Troop.

It’s a bad game to tamper with gear anyway. We are to use limited communication and the flag; no guns (stun/paint), no bombs (stun/paint), not even flashlights. We also get a couple of lengths of rope and cuffs, but that’s standard. If you nab someone and cuff them they are out. The ropes are used to scale cliffs or some Troops use the rope for traps.

Wyatt’s trio takes off and Jason slyly sneaks behind them. Blake reads Mason’s team. Since he’s sensing so many at once, he doesn’t listen to all. He zooms into Mason. He’s guarding his flag at base, like I am.

“Wyatt,” Blake speaks into his earpiece, “Go to the right.”

“Why?” Wyatt challenges.

“Do it.” Blake bellows. He nods to me that Wyatt is obeying.

“I wish I had grounds to request a transfer.”

“If he betrays you, you will.” Blake sounds like he hopes that will happen.

Even though it’s likely that Wyatt will pull something, it’d be foolish. If Wyatt fails, he could be asked to leave Martian U. He’s been here too long and a record of insubordination won’t be tolerated if he’s repeatedly unsuccessful. The administration will see it as a sign of ineptitude.

“Matthew and Marty are at the other flag.” Blake whispers. “They’re waiting for an opportunity to move.”

“Anyone here?”

“Doubt it.” He says louder and darts his eyes to the right. “I’ll be back. I need to take a whiz.”

Being bait is the worst. I pretend to be unaware.

There are two. Coming from the left now.

Blake hadn’t sent messages since the poker game, not without touching me but I heard that. It tickles. I turn to the right and wait for a cue.

Duck.

I stoop to tie my shoe and Genna flies over my body. Reeling around I kick out the legs from under Belinda. Blake already has Genna cuffed. Belinda leaps up from a lying position. Martians are flexible and resilient. She makes a run for it. I catch her easily and hold her until Blake restrains her as well. We sit them off to the side and confiscate their earpieces.

As we shut them off, we hear Mason calling for Genna. It’s against the rules to communicate after you’re taken prisoner or for us to taunt the other team on their equipment. No answer is telling enough.

“That was easy.” I say barely winded. Belinda glares at me and I smirk. I am half Martian and even my human side likes to gloat when it’s well earned.

“Something’s wrong? I’m picking up some hostile vibes. A lone person near Wyatt.” Blake closes his eyes and tries to listen in.

“I heard a gun.” Jason radios to us.

“Wyatt? Wyatt, report in.” Blake hollers.

“Blake, someone shot at us.” Wyatt says scared.

We stare at each other. “Screw the game.” I say and we rush to our Troop, even if it’s Wyatt and friends.

“Could be a trick.” Blake warns.

“You sensed hostility. Could it have been Wyatt?”

“No. I didn’t lose sight of Wyatt.” He wheezes. I am not.

Wyatt rattles off their coordinates as we approach but Blake doesn’t need them. We find Wyatt and Tim down a cliff. In the dark, we’d never have detected them without Blake’s mind reading. We scale the steep cliff with a rope rather than go the long way down the path. They’re on the beach and not where they were told to go. Then I see Tara leaning against a rock. She’s bleeding from the shoulder.

“Tara.” I scramble to her. “Who shot you?”

“I didn’t see.” Her back is to the rock and she nudges her head over her shoulder.

“He shot from that bluff.”

I peek up. There’re trees to the edge that are merely shadowy forms in the foggy night. Perfect for an ambush.

Martians Love Rules

“Professor Richard.” I call the faculty sponsor of field games while using the rock as cover. I look at Blake wondering if he senses the sniper. He shakes his head. Whoever shot is gone now.

“Suzette, you are to have radio silence unless there is a matter of life and death.” Professor Richard is a belligerent man with a nasally voice.

“How about a gun shot? Tara is hurt. We’re stopping the games. Send a chopper.”

“Is she mortally wounded?” Professor Richard is not only out of touch with reality because he’s a Martian but also because he’s been at Martian U all his long life. He takes the field games enormously seriously. The official guidelines state that only death or threat of death can halt an unfinished game.

“Mars Stars! You listen to me you callous Martian bastard, you send a chopper. We forfeit.”

“Forfeit isn’t an option.” He cites another standard field game rule unfazed by my outburst. “I’m recording this conversation and it will be heard by President Nathaniel.”

“Why don’t you take your recording device and ram it where the...”

“Easy there sweetie.” Blake wisely takes my earpiece and turns his back on me while my fuming passes. “Jason, are you here?”

“Here!” Jason waves down at us. “All’s clear. I tried to find the shooter but no luck.”

“How do you feel about stealing a chopper and getting Tara? She’s been shot.”

“On it.” He runs off.

Suddenly Blake’s head snaps hard to the right. I’m shocked to see Tim had landed the blow on the untouchable halfer. Was Blake distracted or passive? “I deserve that.” Blake checks the blood dripping from his mouth.

Still raging, Tim jumps Wyatt, who is ready and scuttles out of range. They round each other looking for a weak spot to strike. I pull Wyatt by the collar and throw him to the beach. “Tim! We don’t have time for this. What’s wrong with you?”

“They don’t even care. She’s slept with them and they don’t even have an ounce of remorse.” Tim is Tara’s brother. He’s not making much sense. I think he needs to be mad at someone and the sniper isn’t available. Oh yeah, we Martians are emotionless.

“They care. We’ll get her safe and then we’ll find out who shot.” I stare him in the eye. He breathes heavily, not from his fighting, he’s soothing himself. “Jason will get Tara help soon. If anyone can, it’s Jason. You know that.” They may not like us but our reputations are rock solid and Jason is the go to man for anything.

Acknowledging I’m right Tim sits by his sister and tends to her. She’s taking it like a trooper. She’s tough. Tara keeps Tim serene more than he comforts her pain.

“Why did you come down here?” Blake holds his anger not wanting to trigger Tim again but he wants to hear what Wyatt has to say.

“You told us to go right.” Wyatt is wiping the wet sand from his bottom.

“I never told you to go down a cliff. Why were you here?” Blake is seething. He already knows.

“We were trying to capture our flag and theirs and claim independent victory.” Tara answers. She’s lost a lot of blood but she’s coherent.

“Shut up!” Wyatt orders her.

I pivot and kick him in the torso. He flies back into the tide. “I’m the Major! Deal with it. We’ll get this sniper but don’t forget for one minute that you’re act of sedition aided in Tara’s injury. Say another word and I’ll kick your teeth in.” I clench my jaw so tight it barely moves as I deliver my threat.

Wyatt has the most conflicted face I’ve ever seen. He can’t attack. I’m standing and the better fighter. I’ve never struck first before although I feel justified considering he provoked me.

A powerboat pulls in as close as possible. Wyatt scrambles out of the surf and away from me. I recognize Captain Pete with Jason.

“Can we move her?” Jason wades to us.

“I’m good.” Tara stands up and Tim slings his arm under hers for support.

Jason takes her other side. “Hold your shoulder.” He warns and hauls Tara up. Cradling her, he eases her into the craft.

“Call if you need us.” Blake tells him and we climb up the rope.

Tim goes with his sister and Jason. Wyatt shadows us. He hasn't said a word. If kicking his butt was the trick, I should have done it a year ago.

Professor Richard is at our camp. Matthew and Marty are there with both flags. "See, no need to cancel the games. Congratulations on your win. I'm sure President Nathaniel will call you later this week to discuss your insubordination and disrespect for faculty and rules." His jeep can't fit all of us.

"We'll walk." Blake looks at me. He needs to tell me something and I need to cool off.

The five students squeeze in and they go bouncing down the road in the dark fog. Blake is lost in thought. I'm glad he's here. I wish Jason were too.

"I'm sorry." I say to Blake. "I shouldn't have blown up."

Blake's mouth falls open. "Sweetie, you can pound Wyatt every day and only increase my admiration of you."

I smile and move for a needed hug. He steps away. "What's wrong?"

"About that overdue discipline you administered on Wyatt, it, um, er," Blake bites his lip and looks up abashed by what he's trying to tell me, "It aroused him – a lot."

"Yuck!" And of course Blake likes me to keep away from Wyatt anyway. "So he's imagining throwing me to the ground and having his way with me?"

Blake looks concerned. He's being way too careful. "He wants you to throw him to the ground and have your way with him."

"Sorry I asked." I move for a hug again and he steps back. "What?"

"For the record, I'm not enjoying the imagery like Wyatt but I may be suffering from the same bizarre desires." He spaces out his words. Then he switches to high gear and everything spills out like one long word. "It's something Martian. I'm sure of it. I've never thought of any woman like that but it's like a subverted fetish."

"Perverted."

"That too but... Oh hell." He steps up to touch me and I pull away.

"I don't think I should see that." I lead the way to our dorms. We're quiet. It's awkward. I see the brighter fog lit by the campus lamps. I'm going to take a long bath until Jason gets back and then I'm going to sleep in his arms without sex, violent or

docile. Hopefully whatever was plaguing Blake has left. He's been quiet. Really? What are they thinking?

Blake grabs my hand and pulls me to him. He kisses me. We're touching in a very personal way and his fantasies force their way in. It's disturbing to see what he fancies me to do to him. I wouldn't be so cruel to a lover. Then his masochistic dream morphs to mutual passion. We're still kissing on the path. I put my arm on his chest and pry him off me.

I'm angry. Angry at him for ambushing me. Angry at him for having those ideas regardless if it's instinct or natural or whatever he was trying to explain. And I'm angry at him for not kissing me like that back in the Jacuzzi. I should slap him. Would that turn him on?

"No. It's passed." He's panting and staring at me. He wants more, knows I do too but he's in control again. Good. I'm not sure I have the willpower to pry him loose a second time. I hurry ahead. In my rush I mistype the code, twice. Artie will be here in the morning now. Blake shoos me aside and keys it in. "I'm okay now." He doesn't apologize for the kiss. No mea culpa from Mr. I-Know-What's-Best.

The Millers

In my room, I pace. Jason hasn't returned. Realizing that Professor Richard didn't bother with any follow up investigation, I call my father.

"Suzette, it's almost midnight." He's groggy. I woke him.

I tell him everything that's pertinent. He sifts through my raw emotions to the nuts and bolts of the real dilemma.

"Professor Richard is too old and lazy to be in charge of the games. He knows veering from the designated rules requires an exhaustive investigation."

I keep my temper from boiling over. It's like they are more concerned with their sacred rules than Tara being shot. "Can you help?"

"Suzette," he says like I'm two and not twenty, "Martians can take their rivalries pretty far. We'll find out but don't take this personally."

"How dumb of me? I'd wager that Tara thinks it's pretty damn personal. You act as if shooting is reasonable."

"Shooting without killing, yes. Well, it wouldn't be the first." He sighs. "I'll get a man on this in the morning. Can someone from your Troop take him to the locations?"

"Blake." I volunteer.

"Someone will meet him at the break of dawn."

My phone rings as soon as I end that call. It's Blake.

"Why did you volunteer me?" He's irritable.

"If you heard that you know why. Jason isn't back and I'm going to see Tara in the morning. And I don't trust anyone more than you guys."

"I can go see Tara."

"We can do that." Like it really matters.

He must see that he's the better choice. "You go see Tara. If we're talking break of day, neither sounds appealing to me."

"Thanks Blake."

He hangs up. Men!

If only my day was over. Jason calls. There is some problem at the infirmary, so I traverse campus once again at the wee hour of one o'clock. I find Tim and Jason arguing with a nurse in the waiting area.

"I'm not leaving her alone!" Tim demands.

"That is against hospital policy and please use your indoor voice. We have sick people trying to rest." The young woman explains, probably not for the first time. Her nametag reads *Laura RN*.

"Can I help?" I step up and flash my ID. Being Major isn't that important but everyone knows we have the ears of the administration. Our IDs are colored silver for quick recognition.

"Yes." Laura tries to reason with me. "We have a strict rule stating no overnight visitors allowed in the infirmary. If you come back in the morning, we'll be happy to let Mr. Miller or anyone visit with Tara Miller so long as there are no more than three guests in her room at a time."

If another Martian bloviates about the important of unbendable rules, I'll scream at the top of my lungs. "What other option do we have?"

"None." She defies.

I flip out my phone. "I'm Suzette Russell by the way." I hold out my hand to shake. "Stanley Russell's daughter. Laura, what is your last name?"

My threat is implicit. "Let me have the doctor speak with you."

"I'd appreciate that." I close the phone and cross my arms over my chest to look determined.

She leaves and a handsome man, no older than late twenties, appears. He's the doctor in charge for the evening. The name on his tag is Harry Simon.

"Let me handle this." I warn Tim and smile broadly as I meet the doctor. "I'm Suzette Russell. Tara is in my Troop."

"I've heard about you. Only twenty and already a Major." He's impressed. "What can I do for you?"

"You could allow us to keep a twenty-four hour watch on Tara until she's released."

"That could be a couple of days and it isn't protocol."

“I don’t care about protocol. Either you let us see to her safety or we’ll take her back to the dorm to recuperate there.”

He scoffs at me. “That would not be in her best interest.”

“Nor would leaving her unprotected.”

“The shot couldn’t have killed her.”

“That doesn’t mean the shot wasn’t intended to kill. We both know how this will go down. I’ll call my father or Nicolas and make the request and they’ll back me up. So if you could cooperate, that would facilitate this ordeal.”

“Call.” He dares.

I dial but he closes my phone before I can start the connection.

“If you keep the night watch to one person, I can make the exception without disturbing anyone at this late hour.”

I smile. “Thank you. We’d appreciate that.” I’m laying the charm on too thickly.

“Perhaps we can talk over a cup of coffee.”

“That would be great, but Tim will be staying this evening.” Jason quickly steps in. “Suzette will back in the morning.”

“Excellent. I’m off at six if you’d like to have breakfast.”

“We’ll love that.” Jason accepts.

Doctor Simon frowns. He’s getting the picture. I’m not available to have dates.

“Is Tara awake? Can I see her before we leave?”

The dejected doctor leads us to her room. Tara is doped up. Her shoulder is elaborately wrapped in gauze.

“Hey sis.” Tim says.

“Little brother.” Tara grins. “You should have some of this.” She points to her IV drip. “It’s fantastic.”

In general, drugs are more mind-altering on Martians than on humans. It can be grand. Tara is feeling good but she is also buzzing like an amateur on St. Patrick’s Day.

“Next time.” Tim defers.

“How are you doing?” I ask.

“I won’t have any long term affects other than a scar. I can live with that.” Like any Martian, she sees it as a badge of courage. “Suzette thanks.”

I glance her way.

“Thanks for stopping the games, stopping the guys from fighting and I’m guessing you got permission to let Tim see me tonight.”

“Better than that. I’m staying the night.”

“Nurse Laura said that wouldn’t happen.”

“Someone encouraged us to see the error of our clinical ways.” Doctor Simon isn’t mad.

“Just because you’re a pretty good Major doesn’t mean we’ll be friends.” She’s loopy and speaking pure truth.

“It wouldn’t be right if we were friends because you felt obliged.” I agree.

“We were going to undermine you and capture both flags.”

“I know.” I sit on the bed. “And you’ll try again.”

“Probably.”

“Well, if you want to do that, you have to get better.”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am.” Tara gives a feeble salute with her left arm.

We leave the Millers and walk back to our dorm.

“You were flirting with the doctor.” Jason accuses.

“Some.” I admit.

He shrugs. “Use whatever you got.”

I laugh. Jason sees me to bed. We don’t make love but he holds me until I fade. In the morning, I’m alone with only a note telling me that he loves me. He’s so thoughtful.

It’s already eight by the time I’m out in the real world. The first thing I see is a lady running her fingers down Blake’s chest to his pants. She slides her body down. Clearly she means to gratify him orally regardless of the lack of privacy.

Blake pulls her up. “Not now.”

She frowns. “When?”

“After you find who did this.”

I’m out the door before I hear anymore. At breakfast Blake finds me.

“Please tell me that isn’t the investigator you were about to have sex with.” I implore before he sits next to me.

He grimaces. "I declined."
"Whatever."
"Aren't jealous, are you?"
I glare at him. "You're a big boy. You can do whatever you want with whoever you want."
"No, I can't."
"What does she think?"
"Nancy thinks it isn't important." He picks at his meal. "How can these Martians be so cold hearted?"
"Sssh." I hush. He implies we aren't Martians.
"No one heard." He tells me. "Anyway, I told her that I want a name and she promised to get that to me."
"If you put out."
"Suzette, is that a problem?"
"No. If we find out who, it's worth it."
He doesn't look up. "You don't have to put out."
"I'm not in a position to do that."
"You wouldn't either way."
I toss my fork dramatically on my plate. "Don't if you don't like her." I'm surprised. She's attractive, long jet black hair, thin, big boobs. Isn't that appealing?
"I'm..." He stutters. "I'm not enjoying it."
"You're not enjoying having sex with the entire female population at Martian U."
He leans forward. "It isn't satisfying. I don't know if it's that they are so robotic or that I want more than a sex toy."
I smile. It's nice to hear even if I don't believe it. Being a dog doesn't suit the image I have of Blake. "The sex toys are giving you rave reviews."
He blushes. "How's Tara?"
A frequent sex toy of his. "She'll pull through good as new. I'm going to see her this morning to let Tim go home and clean up."
"What are you going to do about Wyatt?"
"Request that he's transferred. It's the lame move we needed."

His dimples show nicely with his cheesy satisfied grin. “Finally. I’m tired of his disgusting thoughts.”

“You shouldn’t listen on everything.”

“Oh, I don’t. I listen in when I think I should. He’s trying to overthrow you, I’m going to listen.”

“Back on the field, you sent me thoughts without touching me again and we weren’t buzzed. Can you do that with anyone?”

“Not exactly and not without touching or being very near. If they hear me, they think it’s their thoughts. You are the only one that can tell it’s me right off.” He says. “I have a theory but I can’t be sure.”

“What?”

“We’re both half and we complement each other. That’s why your mind is so much fun for me.”

“It’s annoying to me that you’re always listening.”

“I know.” He looks at me. “Why is your brain so quick?”

I shrug.

“I think you have an idea and I’m going to figure it out.”

“You do that.” I pick up my tray of dirty dishes. “I’ll see you later.”

Beefing Up Security

Artie is in my room when I return from seeing Tara. I'm in a good mood because she's doing better. Jason and Tim were playing cards with her when I left. Doctor Simon said she can go home the next day if she continues to do so well.

Artie's mood isn't good. He's irked that this is the fourth time this year that he's come to change my code. "If you give it out to everyone in your Troop, what's the point in having a code?"

"Only Jason and Blake have the code."

"Do you give it to Blake?"

"No but it's fine. He's trustworthy."

"Not if he's reading your mind for your code." Artie has reprogrammed it with a seven-digit combination. It'll be hard to remember. "Isn't Blake the halfer that's sleeping with everyone?"

"Yes."

"In the room next to yours?"

"Yes." I wait for it.

"I saw a dark haired woman at his door when I arrived."

"That's the investigator."

"Investigator?"

"We had a mishap during our games last night. Someone was hurt."

"He's sleeping with the investigator assigned to this incident and you think he's trustworthy?"

"He's uncontrollable and he's trustworthy."

"Suzette, either he is uncontrollable or he is trustworthy."

"He's both." I stare at Artie who is impervious to pouting, glares and temper tantrums on a whole. Being sweet, works like magic but not negative reinforcement.

"Does he have to read your mind all the time?"

"No."

"Why does he?"

"He says my mind if fun."

“Hmm. Something tells me he sees more than your mind. Does he explain what’s so diverting about it?”

I debate dodging but Artie will keep it to himself. “He thinks because I’m half...”

“He knows you’re half human?”

“Yes. So he says we’re compatible. That and he says it’s really fast.”

“Suzette, it’s fast because you can stop time.”

“I know. He doesn’t.”

“He’s dangerous. You complain about him all the time.”

“Artie, I don’t complain.”

Since he isn’t going to accept my stance, I tell him the incidentals about the shooting. This doesn’t distract him but it does get us talking about other things. I implore him to add alarms to Jason and Blake’s rooms as well.

Artie adds security to the main dorm entrance as well, with much ado about nothing when he works on Blake’s door. Then we go to the garage to get a jeep so I can show him where we were when Tara got ambushed. Artie waits outside while I go to finagle a vehicle. Nancy and Blake pull in fresh from another exploratory journey, not sure if that means for Tara’s attacker or for Blake’s manhood.

“Did you find anything useful?” I ask.

“Who are you?” Nancy asks but she knows.

“I’m Suzette Russell.”

“I’m gathering information. When I’ve formed a theory, I’ll get back to Blake.”

Blake frowns. *She’s jealous of you.*

No duh? “We appreciate your help.” I don’t mean it. She isn’t being helpful. She’s catty. He better not sleep with her unless she does her job.

“Blake, let’s go discuss this case – alone?” Nancy holds his arm in her hands.

“Can I take this jeep?” I ask. It’d be nice to have it without a paper trail or the hassle of getting permission. Dad is already biting at the bit that I’m taking this too emotionally for a Martian.

“No.” Nancy tells me.

“Yes.” Blake gives me the keys. “Nancy, would you like to join me for lunch?”

She beams and I hear Blake, *I’m doing this for you.*

I laugh and think back, *don't go out of your way on my account.*

Artie immediately pesters me as to who I got the jeep from. His super ears caught our short chat, the spoken part.

“Blake had the car. He was showing Nancy, our investigator the locations again. She’s more interested in him than finding the shooter.”

“And what is his priority?”

“Tara.” I state firmly. We bump along the rugged terrain. It’s misty and drizzly. I point out where we were on the beach and where we think the shooter stood.

“Then we go there.” Artie indicates the ridge.

Once I stop the car, he is out. Faster than a bloodhound he finds the spot. He holds up his hand for me to stay back and he crouches to see the ground. “These tracks are hard to read. Four people walked in the same steps. They didn’t want to be found.”

“How can you tell it was four?”

“Here.” He’s at the edge of the cliff. “Three went down this path. The first step was too large for two others. And the third is skewed more than usual.”

“The three were probably Wyatt, Tim and Tara. They were trying to take both flags and declare independence from my Troop.”

Artie freezes except for his eyes that shutter open and close as he thinks. “There’s dissention in your ranks? And you’re helping find who shot someone that was trying to unseat you?”

I nod.

“Keep that guarded. It isn’t Martian.” He manages not to go off on another tirade. We’ve passed our limit. “My estimation is that two were men and two were women. If you can account for two men and one woman, I believe the sniper was a woman.”

It hadn’t crossed my mind that the sniper might be female. Raised by sexist, even a woman will pick up the inclination to think that way. “Okay.”

“Where does this beach lead?” He looks up at me. “Does it lead to your position?”

“Yes. They would need both flags to declare independence, so that makes sense. The shooter was following them.”

“Perhaps to find you.”

“Or Blake. We were together.”

“Do you have any enemies?”

“Only Wyatt and he was with Tara when she was shot.”

“And does Blake?”

“Not really?”

“Suzette.” He sounds patronizing, which I hate.

“He’s a halfer so there are some who might want to hurt him.”

“Top of that list?”

“Wyatt and again, he was with Tara when she was shot.”

“That is a good alibi but keep Wyatt in mind.”

I nod. “Always do when things go wrong.”

“Suzette, be careful. If Tara wasn’t the prime target, I believe you were. Perhaps Blake but I don’t care what happens to him.” Artie rarely sounds more Martian than human.

“I’ll be careful but your love for me may be limiting your perspective.”

“I hope so.” He says.

After seeing Artie off, I stop by Blake’s room. He answers the door, tucking in his shirt.

“Did I get you at a bad time?” I wonder.

“Blake? I’m waiting.” Nancy sings out from inside his room. She wants me to know she’s with him.

My eyes bug out.

“She’s stonewalling me.”

“Hmm?” I turn to go to my room and he follows me.

“Suzette, I don’t want to do this but she’s not budging.”

“Artie says there were four tracks, and if we eliminate Wyatt and the Millers, he believes the sniper was a woman.”

“Really?” Blake absorbs the information. “Nancy hasn’t even pinpointed the location.”

“Of course not. Can you read her mind?”

“Some. She’s blocking. What I get isn’t about Tara.”

“Why is she blocking?”

“You’re father warned her about me, a vague warning but enough to matter.”

I hold back a gasp. Dad will be dealt with later. My finger hovers over the keypad as I recall the new longer code.

“Jason’s waiting for you.” He tells me. “He’s planned a romantic evening.”

I grin. It’s been a week since we’ve had quality time as a couple. Does Jason have fantasies of domination?

“No.” Blake tells me. “Or he’s never thought them around me.”

“Stop reading my mind.” I snap and open the door.

There’re a dozen roses on the desk, a chilled bottle of champagne and a decadent slice of chocolate cake. Jason is dressed in slacks and a button up, not fancy but nicer. He walks up to me and takes both of my hands in his. “Tonight, you are not Major Russell. You’re my lover.”

I kiss him and my mind races through all the things we’ll do. Then I imagine what he wants. My sexual imagination is using a tight camera technique zooming in to body parts and subtle movements. Inspired, I sit him on the couch and undo his pants. It’s not the first time I have indulged him in this way. And this is only the beginning.

It is hands down the best sex of our relationship and therefore, of my life. We snuggle on the couch under a blanket and catch up on the news of the day.

It isn’t a complete shock that Blake decides to stop over after he rids himself of his company. He has a peculiar look on his face. It’s my fears getting the better of me. So what if he was listening to us while we were in the moment? I’m sure it wasn’t the first time and I’d be a fool to think it will never happen again. Doubt I could enjoy Jason while blocking Blake at the same time.

With nothing more than I hunch, I simmer as the two guys gab about the theories we’ve learned. Since Mason’s team is mostly women, we start dissecting if any of them have a vendetta against Wyatt, Blake, me or anyone else on our team.

“We can’t dismiss Tara as the target. Martians don’t panic and they don’t miss by much. She was hit. We know that.” Jason says.

“I sensed someone lurking but I couldn’t hear them.” Blake shakes his head in disappointment. “I wasn’t trying to listen. I didn’t expect anything like that.”

“We need the map.” Jason decides out of the blue and hops up to get one from his room.

“Suzette, I’m sorry.” Blake says immediately after the door shuts behind Jason.

“Did you send him to get a map?”

He doesn’t answer so I’ll assume that’s a yes. Blake gets right to apologizing. “I didn’t plan that. Nancy was coming on to me and I heard you and Jason and next thing I know we were fantasizing together and having sex apart.”

I get up and pace. Did I really not see any faces in my fantasy? Was I having mind sex with Blake while I was with Jason? “This is going too far.”

“Suzette, please sit down.” When I don’t he jumps up and grabs me. “Let me explain.”

“Let me go.” I screech and stop time. Maybe I stopped time first. I get out of his hold and slap him.

Wrong move. For starters, I’m inexplicably out of his arms. Then he feels his cheek. It reddens now. I had hit him hard. “What happened?” He challenges.

“You went too far.” I run to my bedroom and shut the door. And to think I defended him with Artie?

Jason comes back. “Suzette, hurry up.”

I skulk to the living room.

They continue their discussion. I’m too angry to focus but I struggle because it’s important.

“We need to find out who has a grudge against Tara.” Jason decides. He pulls me to the floor between his knees and starts massaging my shoulders. “Honey, you’re so tense.”

“Could it be Karen?” I ask.

Jason shakes his head. “She was at the hospital today. Tara and her are tight. They joked about sleeping with you, Blake.”

“Oh.” He says red in the face. Or maybe it’s still red from my slap and his temper tantrum.

“Karen is over it – now. They said it was great but you aren’t looking for a girlfriend.” Jason glances down at me. “They think you’re in love with Suzette.”

“That’s absurd.” I blurt out. If he loved me, he wouldn’t do stupid crap like invading my mind.

Blake doesn’t deny it. “Not being in love with them doesn’t mean I’m in love with Suzette.”

“Exactly. They’d rather be dumped for someone rather than no one. Karen said Yvonne left because you refused to put distance between you and Suzette.”

Blake is wounded. He already felt he was to blame. Adding the complication that he wouldn’t stop being close to me brought back that depressed evening when he was rejected.

Mad as I am, I can’t help but feel bad for Blake. Yvonne is an idiot. So am I for going all squishy on him as soon as he’s feeling bad. “What about Michelle? Could she be out for revenge against Blake?” I ask. She was another of Mason’s Troop that Blake had the pleasure of pleasuring. He probably slept with all of them for all I know.

“Nope. Michelle quit last week.” Jason informs us. “Resigned and ran off, like Yvonne.”

“Really?” I sit up. “Has anyone heard from Yvonne since she left? Maybe she didn’t go? Maybe she’s behind this.”

“You know how it is. We’re all secretive off the Island. I’ll ask Mason tomorrow. We should at least find out where his team was in relation to the games to see if anyone would be in that area of the field.”

“I’ll go with you. See if I can hear anything.” Blake offers.

“Me too.” I say.

Everyone's a Suspect

Mason is extremely cooperative. He gives us his battle plan for the game and tells us he'll do whatever he can to help find the sniper. Jason and Blake pour over the map as they note where everyone was to the best of our knowledge.

"Sorry to hear about Michelle resigning." I tell Mason.

"I'm losing my team, first Yvonne and now Michelle. We're all past four years, except Karen, and it's expected. I wish they gave me a chance to talk to them first. Hell, their resignations were sparse and by email." Mason's insulted. "Practically the same wording. They probably planned it together."

"Where they close?"

"Not particularly. Genna is really hurt. She considered Michelle a good friend until she upped and left without a warning."

"You know how the administration likes to prolong these things." Jason says without looking up from the map. "When I quit, I won't stick around long enough to give them a chance to tell me I have to wait a year." Easier said than done.

"They only do that if you're under four years." Mason says wisely.

"Belinda would have been the closest." Blake examines their notes. "But what could be her motive?"

"Being the closest isn't equivalent to guilt." Mason cautions.

"True." I say. "Did you know that Yvonne and Michelle were thinking of quitting?"

"Yvonne yes. Michelle was a completely unexpected. She had asked if I could recommend her to be my Captain, like Blake is to you. Doesn't make sense she would do that if she wanted to leave."

"Have you heard from either of them?"

Blake's intensity has shifted from the map to Mason.

"No." Mason answers vaguely.

I hope Blake is picking things up. He smirks and nods that he's listening. *You like me when it benefits you.*

Jerk.

You don't mean that.

I block him. Of course I don't mean it. I hate that I don't mean it. It's been a couple of days and I've simmered down after that weird business where he was in my head while I was with Jason. Still, it's unsettling. Mostly because I'm not wholly sure how much of it was in my control to begin with.

"Do you think either of them could be connected to this?" Mason is losing his temper. It isn't like he didn't know we were sussing out prospective snipers but he expected us to quickly dismiss his Troops as benign.

"I'd like to talk to them." I say truthfully. "We don't know where they are."

Mason gets up. "Let me know if you have any concrete leads."

"Mason, we're considering all options. It sucks that we're considering friends. Still, someone shot Tara and I'm not going to rest until we find out who and why."

"Well, how's this for an option? What if something foul happened to Yvonne and Michelle?" He slams the door on his way out.

"What do you think? You knew them both?" Jason asks Blake.

"Not well. Yvonne was serious about quitting but she planned to wait until after we spent more time together. I didn't read Michelle's mind."

"Why not?" I don't mean to raise my voice but I'm irked.

"Reading minds is dull. During sex, it's annoying." His voice goes falsetto.

"Why is he spending so much time on my tits? Oh, to the left, harder, faster. Maybe he could tie me up? Maybe I can tie him up? Why do men like this better than sex? Does he really think I want to kiss him after he just..."

"We get it." I stop him and I'll stop time if he doesn't shut up.

Jason is completely enthralled. "I don't mind a few more examples. Suzette, do you think those things?"

Thankfully Jason gaze is on me or he would have seen Blake shaking his head and grinning. I should slap him again. Too fuel my ire, he winks. I freeze time and I slam my fists on my desk. "Blake MacGinnis, you stay out of my head or so help me, I'll request to have you transferred." I'm panting and with all my emotions, I can already feel a drain. Time speeds up and I reach for a candy.

Both men looked confused. I must have moved slightly. Mars Stars! Jason peruses the map. Blake's eyes narrow, then he smirks. Casually he glances down and up at me and then down to my mouse pad. The mouse is dangling off the edge of my desk. Did it fall during my spat?

Pretending I don't understand him, I sit down and write Artie. I ask him if he can hack into Dad's computer and get information on Yvonne and Michelle's home. Maybe he can track them down. Lord knows he has the practice trying to find Amanda. As a last request, I ask if he can find their email resignations. Impatiently, I click receive a couple of times until I get his response. Robots rapidly reply. He's on it.

Blake scoffs, "We're dummies. It couldn't be Belinda. Belinda was at the flag with us."

He's right. How did I miss that?

"I'll find out why she changed positions and who with." He volunteers.

Another woman to bed in the name of solving the crime. Wouldn't want his talent drying up from disuse. I look up and Blake is furious. Is he in or not? Hell, I can't keep anything straight anymore. Fast thinking and smart are not the same thing.

I'm sorry. I think and hope to hear a response from him. He doesn't. Well, fine, he can be mad at me because I'm not done being mad at him for invading my intimate moment with Jason.

"Wyatt came to my office this morning." Blake says distantly.

"To see if he can go to the Spring Conference?" I guess. The administration has a Fall and Spring Conference and Majors are required to attend. Nicolas has already approached Blake telling him that he was expected. Now that Wyatt isn't a Major, he isn't invited unless his Major requests his presence and the administration approves. That isn't going to happen since I've already submitted Wyatt to be reassigned.

"No." Blake tells me cantankerously. "He thinks we are responsible for Tara. Verbally, he accused me of shooting her. Mentally, he thinks they were hit in a step closer to me. In his opinion pure Martians don't like a halfer on campus."

"He's as dumb as he is ugly." Jason accurately surmises oblivious or apathetic to the signs of a brewing quarrel between Blake and me.

Wyatt is dumb and ugly but unfortunately that doesn't mean someone doesn't think the world would be a better place without halfers walking among Martians as equals.

Too mad to look directly at him, I ask Blake, "Are there Martians that have antagonistic thoughts toward you?"

"Nothing severe." He says unconvincingly. "No one with a plan." He clarifies, so he's listening in. "But I don't read every mind every moment."

No, just mine. "If we're done here, I have to get to class." I grab my books. There's plenty of time, I need air.

"I'll walk you." Blake offers.

"Thanks but I know where I'm going."

Blake looks at Jason. "We shouldn't leave her alone."

"You think she's the target?"

"I'm in the room." I remind them to no avail.

"I think if Yvonne and Michelle are missing and Tara was shot that someone may be targeting Martian women."

"Whoa! I'm more concerned that Yvonne or Michelle is behind this." I wait for them to hear me.

"I'll walk you to class." Jason isn't going to negotiate on that. Blake has him frightened.

Out of Time

After that, I have a brooding bodyguard everywhere I go. Usually it's Jason but occasionally it's Blake, which is particularly exasperating. A week later, Blake is biding his time watching me in my office.

"Did you ask Belinda why she wasn't at her original post for the games?" I ask.

"She said the order was given to her by Mason via email. So someone isn't telling me the truth." He answers and then adds, "And I didn't have to sleep with her to learn this."

I ignore him and thankfully the phone rings. He gets up and stands behind me to see who it is. It's Artie.

I press the speaker button. "Hi Artie."

"Suzette. I found Yvonne's home but not Michelle's." He tells me. "She hasn't been there since she left for Martian U after the holidays."

"You think she could be behind the shooting?" Blake asks.

"Blake? So nice to chat with you again." Artie sasses. "Been listening in on any secret codes without permission lately?"

"Artie!" I scold.

At the same time Blake rebukes me. "You told him?"

"He wanted to know who knew the code, so yes." I hold my ground, which is difficult with his condemning blue eyes piercing through me for my betrayal. I scoot back the chair and stand not liking the feeling of him lording over me.

"Don't worry about it mind reader." Artie's voice floats up from the speaker. "Did sleeping with Nancy get better results from the official investigation?"

"Artie, stop this." I turn to Blake with my hands up in surrender.

Blake backs me up against my desk. "What haven't you told him?"

"You weren't discreet. I saw you two at the garage." Artie explains to get me off the hook. It doesn't calm Blake.

"You know all my secrets. Tell me what does Suzette do." Blake leans down and I bow backwards trying to keep some space between us.

“Suzette doesn’t sleep around with dogs. Does that count as a secret?” Artie says and now I know Blake’s anger hadn’t reached critical mass because it spikes higher.

I push Blake back but he doesn’t move. “Freeze me again.” He whispers thinking Artie won’t hear.

“Suzette, are you okay?” The robot beseeches.

I shove Blake hard and he steps back. Spinning to the phone I answer, “I’m fine.”

“No you are not. Blake, you watch yourself or you’ll have me to answer to.”

Before Blake can keep the fight going, I break in. “Artie, can you find Yvonne?”

“I’m working on that but she’s vanished. I can’t even find a likely exit route from Martian U. Someone had to provide her passage unless she’s a really good swimmer.”

That’s a joke. Even Martians can’t swim that far.

“Did you find one for Michelle?” Blake wonders as he tries to compose himself.

“No. And I have the exact time they sent their resignations.”

“You have the emails?” I ask.

“Yes. They are identical. Dear Mason, effective immediately I resign from Martian U. Best regards.”

“That’s it? No wonder Mason was hurt.” No one has resigned to me yet, but even if Karen had it would have felt like rejection. If Jason or Blake ever... I can’t even imagine it.

“That’s it and I find it very unlikely that two ladies would write the exact same resignation over five weeks apart.”

“Let me know if you find Yvonne. And thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Blake, I look forward to meeting you some day.” Artie hangs up.

“He’s protective.” I shut off the phone.

Blake seizes me from behind and I fling him over my head and desk. He didn’t see it coming because I’m blocking him. Leaping up he cuts me off before I can get to the door. “Stop time.” He orders me. “Stop time and get away.”

I punch him in the gut and he buckles over. As soon as I’m out the door, I rush for the ladies room and cry. I stop time and take the stairs until I’m in the quad. My phone rings. Ready to power it off, I see it’s from Jason.

“Hello.” I say and sit on the fountain. I try to calm. Worn out, I eat a candy.

“Suzette, we found Yvonne. She’s dead. Her body was hidden on the southwest side of the Island in the brush. She was shot.”

I yelp. “Freshly dead?”

“No. Decay has set in. She’s been dead for weeks. They’re going to run tests to verify it’s her but Suzette, it’s her.”

“What about Michelle?”

“Nancy called a search party. They have dogs. If she’s met the same fate, they’ll find her.” Is this procedure or do they suppose that Michelle was shot as well?

“They had the same resignation. I don’t think Michelle quit, or she used the same email she wrote to cover Yvonne’s disappearance.”

“Understood. Let me talk to Blake.” He requests.

“He isn’t here. Call his office.”

“Suzette, you’re not to be alone.”

“I’m in the crowded quad. Blake got mad at me when he found out Artie knew about his talent,” I say evasively in case anyone is eavesdropping, “and his carousing ways.”

“Stay put.” He hangs up, no doubt to call Blake to get over it and come fetch me.

I pace. I don’t want to see Blake. He knows about me and he’s livid. I’m fuming too.

If Yvonne is dead, that means she wasn’t the shooter. Was Michelle or was she another victim? If she’s the shooter, why? Maybe she was jealous of Yvonne and Blake. That would make Tara a prime target since she had been with Blake on numerous occasions. Jason said Tara is Blake’s stand-by or was.

Then it hits me, figuratively and literally. As the epiphany that Karen is the prime suspect if jealousy is the motive enlightens my dull brain, Blake tackles me. With his body, he shields me from a shower of stone fragments from the fountain that was hit by a bullet meant for me. Every Martian in the quad reacts. Chaos breaks out.

“Get inside!” Blake yells to the frenetic crowd and then orders in my ear, “Stop time.”

I do but I'm exhausted. Since I'm touching Blake I bring him into my time. Slowly he starts to move.

Blake looks around intrigued by my gift but too scared to enjoy it. The whole courtyard is still. Water is frozen in mid-stream spraying out the fountain. "How long do we have?" His eyes shoot up to rooftops looking for the killer.

I pull out a Tootsie Roll. "Not long. We shouldn't move much. People will notice."

Blake moves us about a foot and readies to move faster. "Let it go."

I do and a shot hits the spot we recently vacated. Blake yanks me up and we run into the administration building, missing another shot on our way.

"It's Karen." I tell him.

"She's moving down the back stairs. She knows I'm close." He says pulling out a gun. I stare at it and he explains, "Been packing since the games."

"Okay." I can't fault him for it, not now. I call my father. "Dad, the shooter is Karen. She just shot at us in the quad. She's coming down the back stairs of the admin building." I sag against the wall.

"Where are you?" Dad asks sounding detached even though I know he is panicking.

"In pursuit."

"Don't you dare. I'll handle this." He hangs up to notify security but Martian U doesn't have much of a security force. Why?

I take the gun and turn to Blake. "Does she know where I am?"

"I think she assumes you're with me but it's me that she senses. How is that?"

"Don't know. Stay here." I freeze time and take off. In the stairway I almost faint so I release. Immediately I hear footsteps coming my way. I aim and wait for Karen to make the last turn.

Karen stops in her steps, her gun aimed at me. We're in a Martian standoff. I calculate my energy. I can't freeze long enough to shoot. Blake bursts in. The startled Karen shoots but not me. I dive to protect him. He's safe. I get hit in the lower ribs. Holding my armed hand, Blake points his gun and fires.

Everything is dark. In my torpor I can feel warm liquid seeping from the wound.

“Hold on Suzette.” Blake tells me.

I can feel his love for me. He’s frightened that I’ll die. My eyes flutter open and I realize the darkness was due to the fact they were closed. I see Karen’s feet at odd angles a few steps up. “Blake...” Without enough energy, I never finish my apology.

School's Out for Me

Whatever happened next, I don't know. I wake up in the infirmary. Doctor Simon is tugging down my eyelids and flashing a light. I bat his hand away.

"Suzette, can you hear me?"

"Yes." My voice is faint.

"Do you remember what happened?"

I shake my head but it's coming back. "I was shot."

"You were. We operated to remove the bullet and stopped the internal bleeding. That was eighteen hours ago."

Maybe I would have bolted up, but my side pains. I slide a hand down my body and find I'm in a hospital gown. I pull it up and feel a taut bandage around my waist.

"Where is she?"

"Karen? She may not make it. She's under high security watch. If she lives, she'll spend her life in jail." He tells me. "I'd like to let you rest but..."

"We won't allow it." Blake says. *I heard you waking up.*

"I'm here too." Jason adds and steps close enough for me to see him. He's so scared. He kisses me gently.

"I'm better, right? I'm going to live?"

"You are." The doctor tells me. "You're tough as steal."

"I feel like marshmallow."

"Russells are extremely hard to kill." It's my father. "Everyone leave us or be dismissed from Martian U."

"We'll be back." They guys say and leave with Doctor Simon.

"You know how to clear a room." I tell Dad.

"Doctor Simon almost learned you were human."

"Almost?"

"He thinks you have an infection. You don't. Artie was ready to clear his memory but since he thinks you're fever is fighting an infection, we can let it slide."

Martians can erase minds. If they erase a small piece of your memory, they can suggest alternative realities. There are two ways to do this. Chemically which isn't

consistent, and electrically, which isn't as precise and can erase too much. A robot would be able to generate enough of a charge if they found the precise spot on the brain. Artie's capable at scanning brains and administering shockwaves. Like I said, electrically isn't precise and can not only erase more than the short day or so intended but also random spots from the past. You don't want to damage a doctor's mind.

"That and he had a hard time getting the bleeding to stop because your heart rate is so rapid. Of course, that made it easier for your body to purge the bad once things were closed up." Dad runs his fingers along my hairline. "I've never been so frightened or so proud of you."

"What for? Getting shot?"

"You found the killer. Blake shot Karen. She may not make it. He hit her right lobe."

"Can I go home?" I mean the dorm but he thinks I mean Marin County.

"Artie is on his way. He'll take you home and care for you. You'll miss the conference. Jason can take your place." He kisses my forehead. "Stay home for the rest of the year. It's only a month. You can finish assignments via email."

I nod.

"I'll tell the boys to come back later when you have more energy."

"Dad, I want to see them now."

In any other circumstance, I don't think he would have permitted it but he does.

"Not long."

I smile.

Jason comes in first. He kisses me. "I love you so much."

"I love you too."

"We won't see each other until end of summer."

"You can't visit sooner?"

"Mr. Russell says he's taking you to Europe."

"Oh." I hadn't heard. Will Jason wait for me? We've been dating for six months. It doesn't seem fair to make him celibate for the next four.

"I'll call you every week, every day if you want." He'll promise anything but that is too much.

“Every week is good. I won’t have much to tell you if we talk every day.”

He kisses me again. “I’ll send Blake in. Call me when Artie comes and I’ll meet you at the dock to see you off.”

“Will do.”

He leaves and Blake replaces him. “Why didn’t you freeze time?”

“I couldn’t. It wears me out and I’ll faint.”

“We should test that. Maybe you can build up your stamina.”

I start crying. “Blake, I’m sorry I got mad at you.”

“Don’t cry.” His fingers brush my cheeks dry.

“But what if I died and the last memory you had of me was us fighting?”

“Don’t talk like that or I’ll beat you up. My last memory would’ve been of us working together. That and me failing to save you.”

“You saved me from the first shot.” I smile at him. “You’re my hero. And I wanted to tell you and Jason about stopping time. I should have. Let me tell Jason. Can you play like you didn’t know first?”

He laughs. “Anything you want. I was an asshole.”

I shake my head.

He picks up my hand and his thoughts rush into my head.

I close my eyes. Darkness changes to lights and colors. Blake is there and we’re holding hands. On our right side is a vibrant collage of colors and images. To the left are images, some familiar, some foreign. In front of us is brightness, behind us darkness.

“Where are we?”

“In our brains, I think.” He spins around. “To the left is our memories. To the right, our imagination. The light is our fundamental values. The dark is our secrets.”

“Secrets from ourselves?”

“And each other.”

“Do you know what’s in there?”

“Some.” He holds me back.

“I won’t go there. You don’t want me to.”

“I don’t. Aren’t you curious?”

“I am but I know there’s nothing in there that will change anything.”

He's dubious. "You're better than me. I can't help but want to see everything inside you. You're giving me grace I don't deserve."

"This is amazing. How did you do this?"

He shrugs. "This hasn't happened before."

"It's exhilarating."

"Suzette, why didn't you let Karen shoot me?"

"Could you have done that to me?"

"I couldn't move. She didn't think when she shot. For a split second, I thought she had aimed at you but you shoved me back and took the bullet."

I give him a friendly kiss, in our dream state. "If she killed you, I would never be able to tell you I'm sorry."

The desire is apparent in his expression but he vanishes. I open my eyes and my father is there.

"Suzette, you need your rest." He tells me gently.

"Write me when you feel up to it." Blake says and ducks out the door.

When Dad leaves, I try to sleep again but I can't stop musing about whatever Blake and I did. It was so personal and intimate and yet completely innocent. I'm in no condition to roll up on my side and I hate sleeping on my back. It's too soon for more medicine but I take it anyway.

Artie arrives with a wheel chair. "Suzette, you look well."

Best reaction of the day. "I'm so glad to see you and go home."

He packs my things. "We'll have the flowers sent home."

I look around the room. There are dozens of arrangements and bunch of balloons. One balloon is a pink unicorn. I don't need to read the card to know who sent those.

When Artie sees the antibiotics he rolls his robot eyes. "You do not need this. Infection? How are the Martians taking Blake?"

I wrinkle my face wondering where he's going. "Most like him but some won't give him a chance."

"I wish you could announce that you're half."

"Why?"

“You are what you are and you are wonderful. If they accept Blake, they’ll accept you.”

“I am half and I can stop time.”

“That should remain covert.”

“Aye, aye.”

He gently places me in the chair.

“We have to swing by Jason’s room on our way out.”

“Sure. And Blake’s I suppose.”

“We can. He didn’t ask.”

Artie pushes me down the hall and out the building. “Maybe he’s having celebratory fornication with the investigator.”

“Artie, be nice.”

“No.” He’s surprisingly obstinate. “You shouldn’t have taken the bullet for him.”

“That was my choice.”

“He’s a mind reader and didn’t know what you were doing?”

“It was instinct.”

Artie leaves me with Jason while he collects my things and takes them to the dock.

“I can’t believe we’ll be apart for so long.” Jason says between kisses.

“We never discussed our relationship.” I say cautiously. “Um, so, I know we’ve been exclusive here on campus...”

“Are you breaking up with me?” He goes from warm to frosty in a nanosecond.

“No, I just don’t know if I have the right to tell you not to see other people.”

“You have the right and I damn well expect you not to.”

“Won’t be a problem. I don’t see many Martians outside of the Island.”

“Suzette, I love you. Why would you even bring this up and why now?”

“I blame the drugs.” I grin to hint he can laugh.

Instead he frowns. “It’s not the drugs. Martians don’t date for long. They either breakup or declare their intentions. We’ve done neither.”

And I don’t want to do either.

“I want to marry you.” It’s like he’s telling me his name. It’s that simple for him.

I freeze time so I can freak out in peace but with the drugs and having barely come to, I only manage to pass out.

“Suzette? Are you okay?” Artie is saying. Jason lurks behind him looking like a scolded child. Artie probably laid into him for wearing me out.

“Yeah, I just lost my energy.”

Artie doesn’t contradict me even though he knows that I’m too lethargic to do anything as complicated as time stopping. “We’re ready to go.” He unlocks the wheels of the chair.

“Can I have a minute?”

“I advise against it.”

“Please.” Jason asks him.

“Five minutes.” Artie holds out his hand to denote five and no more. “And we can forgo seeing Blake.”

“Blake isn’t here. He had a meeting with Mr. Russell.” Jason tells us.

Artie’s irises shutter open and closed as he thinks it over. “Very well. I’ll be in your room.”

Jason closes the door and turns to me. “Overbearing, isn’t he.”

I nod. “I’m sorry I fainted.”

“It was a bad time to have a heavy discussion. We’ll see each other in August.”

“And we’ll talk on the phone every week, remember?”

He kisses me softly, scared to wear me out again. “As often as you want.”

Homeward Bound

On the boat, Artie rolls me to the bow so we can enjoy the sea air. “Is this too much for you? Are you warm enough?”

“It feels great.” I motion for him to take a load off.

“Am I hovering?”

“Yes.”

He takes a load off. “Why do you think your father wanted to see Blake?”

I shrug.

“Tell me about Blake?” If he were Venusian, I’d say he had a crush. But he isn’t and Artie doesn’t obsess without reason. Artie feels like more and more of my life is kept away from him and Blake is the personification of this. It’s the empty nest syndrome.

“I’ve told you everything. He’s half human and can read minds.”

“And he likes you. Was this before you and Jason started dating?”

“I don’t know what he thinks. I guess there was some attraction. Why are you asking?”

“When I first visited this year, you told me that your father and Nicolas ordered you not to fraternize with the halfer.”

I forgot. Of course he wouldn’t. “So? I put my foot down but in doing so, I killed our chances. Blake didn’t like being used.”

Artie huffs out a laugh. “Doesn’t sound like that would have stopped him.” He looks away. “According to you, your father and Nicolas backed off?”

“It never amounted to anything and I started dating Jason.”

“Suzette, if I know your father, and I know him very well, he doesn’t respond well to confrontation but he never backs down. Either Nicolas or Stanley pulled Blake aside and threatened him.”

That’s absurd but sadly probable. “The nerve.”

“How would Blake react?”

“I don’t know. He made a comment about being a pushover once, but that’s not him. A threat would be received as poorly by him as by me.”

“Are you sure? What if the threat was about you? What if your father told him that a relationship with you would ruin your future?”

That might work. Martian men pander to Martian women. “You’re scarring me.”

“We know I’m right or close. The next most likely scenario is a promise for promotion. Would that entice Blake?”

“That might. He got kind of weird the longer he was at Martian U. He’s conflicted by his Martian urges and his human ethics.”

“It’s best to not think about it. You’re happy with Jason.”

If that is best, why did Artie bring it up? “But I’m not happy with Dad meddling in my love life. He can’t be so officious with me.”

“Are you happy with Jason?”

I nod. “He’s wonderful but he wants to marry me.”

“I heard him tell you that before you passed out. You panicked and froze time.”

“Yes. So I’m a wimp.”

“You are not a wimp. You are half human. Relationships are more than paperwork to you. Even Stanley and Amanda never married.”

“I get why Dad didn’t. He’s so cold and distant.”

“And he didn’t want a mother like that for you.”

I look at Artie. Never thought of that but like all his deductions, it’s dead on. “And Amanda is so nutty.” Maybe I am too. She is my biological mother.

He smiles. “She isn’t nutty. She was drawn to the humans, at first out of curiosity but then she romanticized their lifestyles. After that, Martian society never felt like home again.”

I wipe my eyes before a tear can fall. “Do you think she’s alive?”

“She’s never been gone so long. I’d like to think she found a place to be herself and we’ll hear from her again. I’m losing hope.”

“Me too. I wish she kept in contact. A mother figure would be nice sometimes.”

“Like when you’re in love with two boys.”

“I do not love Blake.” I state immediately to put that rest. “But what am I to tell Jason when he brings marriage up again?”

“I’m here. You can talk to me about boys.”

I lean over and hug him. “What do you think?”

“Do you want to marry him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it yet.”

“Do you want to break up?”

“No.”

“Then tell him you can’t answer him and you want to stay together. If he presses you, which he won’t, you’ll have to either agree or let go.”

I bite my lip.

“He won’t force it. That boy is head over heels.”

We don’t speak again until we’re in the car. “Artie, do you ever look for Amanda?”

He’s driving too fast and we’re getting some unpleasant reactions from other drivers. His super computer brain can detect law enforcement and radar guns miles away. “I haven’t lately. I will when we return from the North Sea.”

“Dad’s taking us to the North Sea?”

“He wants to show you the Mother Ship.”

The Mother Ship is at the bottom of the North Sea about twenty miles from Edinburgh. Our ancestors landed undetected and after stripping anything useful from the craft, they buried it where humans wouldn’t find it. If Earth had the technology or the population of today, it would have been impossible but it was two thousand years ago. By the time sonar and submarines were common the mother ship was hidden under layers of sand and sea life. Martians can get in via a hidden opening. Today it houses a memorial museum.

“I can’t wait.” Dad took me when I was seven but I couldn’t appreciate it. It was boring for a kid that had too much energy. What I wouldn’t give to get some of that excess energy back right now.

Once we’re home, I sleep pretty much for the next week. Artie keeps me up on my meds and treatment, which includes some basic yoga to ensure I heal correctly and maintain flexibility.

After a week, I'm pretty antsy in my room and I decide to risk a solo mission on the stairs. Using all my stealth, I creep to the kitchen and find Artie's posterior pointed at me as he checks his current masterpiece in the oven. It's Italian for sure.

"Suzette, you are too slow and loud to sneak up on me." Artie doesn't turn around but does stand to prepare a plate.

"I would have froze time but it isn't worth a haranguing."

"I do not harangue." He turns around with a ready plate of lasagna and two thick slices of garlic bread.

My eyes open wide, my mouth salivates and my stomach begs for input. "Artie, you are the best."

He watches me eat while he drinks his concoction, some liquid fuel that keeps him running. The only time he eats or drinks is to sample things we wish him to duplicate. Nothing is too complicated for him. We're spoiled and negligent in appreciating his culinary wizardry.

"It's been like a week and no one has called." I dip a piece of bread into the sauce.

"They've called. I turned off the ringer to not disturb your rest. I've taken messages."

"Even from Dad?"

"I don't want you yelling at him for interfering."

"I won't but I should. What's the point? He won't learn."

"No, he will not." Artie pulls out a notebook that has two pages full of times, names and occasional notes. Dad and Jason are the only names listed. "I'm sure you have some emails waiting for you as well."

"I haven't been on the computer all week. By now the guys are back from the conference. Hopefully Wyatt will be removed from our Troop." Inspired, I eat faster.

"The emails aren't going anywhere. If you continue to eat like that, you'll get sick. Slow down."

"Yeah, you don't harangue." I sass.

"If I do, it's because I love you." He kisses my hand.

After eating I hurry up stairs until my side pangs. It doesn't stop me but I take the last rises gingerly. There're a dozen emails from Jason.

Luckily Jason's messages are short. Mostly checking up on me. One tells me the conference was monotonous and another tells me they are back at Martian U. I write him that I'm better and I miss him. After a moment's hesitation, I add a note to tell Blake hi. I don't have his personal email and I don't want to send it to his school one. They are monitored. Martians are weird about sharing their private information liberally.

"I'm home!" Dad hollers from the foyer. "Suzette, Artie?"

Hurrying downstairs is a little harder. I hug Dad who warily puts his hand on my ribs.

"It's better. Artie says I have to keep wearing a bandage but I can take it off if I want to go in the pool."

"Can you swim?"

I shrug. "We'll see."

"Don't push yourself."

I will do just that. I'm in no lethal danger and I want to get back to normal fast. "Why are you here? Are you home for the summer?" Artie comes out with another plate of pasta and more bread for Dad.

"I wrapped up loose ends and delegated duties so we could start our vacation early. How long before our Major can travel?"

"If you want her to have enough strength to sightsee, give it a couple of weeks."

Dad holds his lasagna under his nose to get a good whiff. "Artie, you don't know how much better your food is than Martian U."

"Can't be that much better, you aren't any lighter."

"There are times that I wish you weren't a robot." Dad smirks. "You two want to catch a movie tomorrow? Anything is fine with me?"

"There's a new sci-fi movie..." My deadpan delivery is truncated.

"Anything but sci-fi." He corrects.

"The aliens are the good guys."

"They are never the good guys."

"There's a new comedy."

“Better.”

“A romantic comedy.”

“Worse, but I’ll take it over sci-fi.”



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