



Double Take (Cosmic Mates #5)

Author: *Cara Bristol*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The second time around is double or nothing...

Getting over the death of her husband has been a long, slow process for pottery artist Faith Hammond. But five years have passed, and she's making a new life for herself, moving from Earth to planet Terra Nova and opening up a pottery shop. She's finally finding the calm and focus she's been seeking.

Until there's a knock at her cottage door.

Standing there is her very-much-alive husband, Mark.

John Bragg is Mark Hammond's clone. After the Dark Ops agent dies, Bragg takes his place, assuming all aspects of his life, except for one—his marriage. Faith is deemed off-limits. But in studying his progenitor to impersonate him, Bragg has fallen for the man's widow.

He resigns himself to unrequited love until he hears Faith is looking to remarry—she has joined the interplanetary matchmaking service, Cosmic Mates.

He can't bear to lose her again. He goes AWOL from Dark Ops in a last-ditch effort to claim the woman he desperately loves.

But can Bragg convince Faith he's a clone? And if he can, will she be able to see him as a unique individual—or will he never be more than a dead ringer for her late husband?

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Fluffy clouds floated across an azure sky on a warm, sunny spring day. Bright-green new growth sprouted from the trees, and flowers nodded their colorful heads in time to a gentle breeze. There couldn't have been a more perfect setting for a garden wedding.

In a simple white gown accentuating her slender figure, her face aglow with happiness, the bride put the day to shame. There had never been a more beautiful bride.

“Do you, Faith Connor, take Mark Hammond to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward until death do you part?”

“I do.” Her voice trembled with emotion, and her soft, loving gaze didn't waver.

Bragg's heart clenched. He loved her so much it hurt.

“And do you, Mark Hammond, take Faith Connor to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward until death do you part?”

“I do.” His deep voice rang out strong, steady, and sure.

Lying rat bastard.

“Then I now pronounce you husband and wife—”

“You're still watching that vid?”

Bragg nonchalantly shut off the viewer and swiveled in his chair to face his commanding officer. “Just keeping in practice,” he drawled in his predecessor’s lazy, arrogant manner of speaking.

“Are you sure that’s all it is?” Marshall Clark arched a skeptical eyebrow.

He didn’t reply. Anything said would raise suspicion.

“You need to forget her.”

“Is that an order?”

“Friendly advice.”

His CO was no friend. “There’s nothing to forget,” Bragg said.

“In that case, you need to deliver a cache of weapons to Hammond’s RCA contact.” Marshall tossed a computer chip into a low bowl on the utilitarian metal desk.

After his predecessor got killed in the line of duty five years ago, Bragg had stepped into his life, claiming his identity and livelihood—everything the man had, except for his wife, in deviation from standard protocol. Normally, clone agents assumed all aspects of the deceased’s life. However, in this case, Dark Ops had decided it would be advantageous for Hammond to remain legally dead.

Bragg’s gaze drifted to the bowl holding the computer chip with the deets of his assignment.

Colors swirled in the hand-thrown, kiln-fired pottery piece, an anachronism in a world preferring mass-produced, cheap, disposable goods. The bowl represented what he was not. Unique. One of a kind. Priceless.

He was a disposable replica.

Like with Hammond, if Bragg perished, Dark Ops would crank out another who looked, talked, walked, acted just like him. The organization maintained a huge database of DNA collected from citizens around the world. They could replicate anyone. Due to the agency's top-secret cloning and growth-acceleration techniques, an adult human could be produced in less than a year.

Education and training took a bit longer. Acting coaches helped with that, as did one-on-ones between progenitor and clone. To ensure operation-readiness, clones were produced before the progenitor died.

Bragg had been his progenitor's understudy for a year before he'd passed.

"I deliver the arms, then what happens?" There was always more to the story. Nothing was ever what it seemed, truth concealed among layers of deception. He wasn't even sure what team he played for. The good guys and the bad guys were indistinguishable.

"Then the Russian-Chinese Axis releases the prisoners."

"How many?"

"We're hoping for ten."

"We're operating on a hope?"

Marshall said nothing. But what could he say? The RCA superpower had the rest of Earth over a barrel. The axis broke treaties and other agreements, and nobody could do anything about it. Occasionally, small concessions could be gained from individuals within the RCA, hence the importance of Dark Ops, which operated

outside official government and diplomatic channels.

“Who are we hoping to get released?” he probed.

“Three of our agents, plus a group of college kids, one of whom is Senator Janson’s daughter.”

He wondered what the students had done. Notoriously stupid, college kids were oblivious to possible consequences of their hijinks. Alcohol-soaked adolescent brains didn’t comprehend that freedoms enjoyed at home didn’t exist in other parts of the world, and what might be a minor offense—or no offense—in their homeland often carried Draconian penalties elsewhere.

On the other hand, considering a senator’s daughter was among the abducted group, the kids might have been innocent of any wrongdoing. The students might have been targeted because of her so that an exchange could occur.

“How much in weapons are we giving away?”

“Everything you need to know is on the chip. Be ready to go on Tuesday.” Marshall turned to leave.

“We hung her out to dry.” The words burst out of him.

“Hung who out to dry?”

“Faith Hammond. Does she have any protection at all?”

Although Mark Hammond had been fatally wounded in an operation gone south, he’d been extracted before succumbing, which had enabled Bragg to replace him. Physically and officially, accountant Mark Hammond, husband of Faith, had passed

away. But Dark Ops spread disinformation to the criminal underworld that he'd survived the attack. As Hammond's stand-in, Bragg continued the wheeling and dealing with criminals and terrorists, all the while the vulnerable widow resided alone in a Maryland, USA suburb.

"Protection?" Marshall scoffed. "She's damn lucky to be the widow and not the deceased. HQ was on the verge of neutralizing her when Hammond died."

What? Jesus! He stared at his CO.

"Before he died, he'd reported to HQ she started questioning his out-of-town trips."

What kind of man ratted out his own wife? A conscienceless asshole fucker. Not a day went by that he didn't discover another reason to despise his progenitor. Bragg had suspected, but couldn't prove, that Hammond had been a double agent, working for both Dark Ops and the RCA. Regardless, the man had been an asshole. He'd never loved his wife; he'd married her to complete his cover as a boring married accountant.

"She probably found out about his affairs," he supplied, trying to cover for her in case HQ hadn't given up the idea of neutralizing her. Among the least of his flaws, Hammond had been a notorious womanizer.

"She discovered he didn't work for Underwood, Herr, and McCullough, Accountancy LLC."

UH & M "employed" quite a few Dark Ops agents. Accounting, like truck driving, insurance, and data analysis drew little public curiosity or scrutiny. Nobody cared what an insurance salesman or data analyst did all day. Safely boring, those occupations provided good covers.

“We didn’t plant an insider?”

“Of course we did! But she’d called in sick with the flu, so the firm had brought in a temp, who transferred Mrs. Hammond to HR, who reported no one named Hammond worked at the firm.”

“Is that why I didn’t assume his role as her husband?”

“HQ took a chance she would cease asking questions if she believed her husband was dead.” Marshall’s mouth adopted a wry twist. “We do try to avoid killing innocent people.”

Since when? Dark Ops accepted collateral damage as the cost of doing business. They avoided large-scale carnage that could draw attention to their activities, but they didn’t hesitate to sacrifice innocent civilians to achieve an objective.

“It seems to have worked,” Marshall said. “She’s moved on. She relocated to Terra Nova.” He paused. “And she applied to Cosmic Mates for a husband.”

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Spinning on the potter's wheel, the mud felt smooth and slick as Faith funneled the clay into the tall vase she'd envisioned, humming as she worked. She found working with clay relaxing, almost meditative. Worries and concerns melted away as a lump of wet mud transformed into an object of beauty.

Sometimes she had something specific in mind, but she preferred to let the magic of inspiration guide her hands. Not all of her inspired pottery pieces sold, but she loved them the best. Her husband had mocked those the most. However, her favorite, unique creation had garnered a pretty penny from an anonymous buyer on the HyperSphere. Sometimes she regretted letting it go, but that single sale had paid a good portion of the bills she'd been saddled with after Mark's death. Still, making ends meet hadn't been easy.

Hopefully finances and life would improve.

Soon. Soon.

For years, she'd sensed something momentous awaited her on the horizon, and with the move to Terra Nova, the anticipation had grown, like she would finally meet her destiny. Practical-minded, she didn't grant that feeling serious credence, but she couldn't completely discount it, since it never went away.

Maybe I'll become famous. Maybe my pottery will become an interplanetary sensation. Maybe the love of my life is going to walk through that door.

The odds of the latter were slim. She had a better chance of becoming famous. Once, she'd believed the man she'd married had been her soul mate, but that hadn't turned

out to be the case. Her rational mind told her she wouldn't meet him here, either.

The village of Willow Wood on planet Terra Nova was not the place to meet marriage-minded bachelors. The Earth settlement drew couples and families. Very few people came here alone. She hadn't. Her friend Amity had accompanied her.

Besides, once bitten, twice shy. She wasn't quite ready to get involved with a man. She had enough to handle without adding a relationship to the mix.

Relocating to another planet had been a scary decision, but that intuitive inner wisdom that said something big would happen in her life had encouraged the leap. She had to admit that the agrarian, slow-paced lifestyle of Willow Wood suited her much more than the frenetic, overpopulated, congested Earth where one city of high-rises merged into the next, forming an endless metropolis. Even the national parks, which promised green space and serenity, couldn't deliver. So many people crowded into the parks that they'd become as populated as the cities.

She needed space to relax and create. Meet my destiny.

Hello, Terra Nova.

Through the window, she spied Amity hurrying toward the shop. It had been her friend's idea to place the pottery wheel by the window so people could see her work and be drawn inside. Faith created; her longtime friend provided the business brain. Amity's suggestion seemed to be working because sales at All Fired Up boomed. They had sold more crockery in the two months in Willow Wood than they had in the previous year on Earth. Of course, the Terra Novan culture probably factored in, too. People valued pottery because they used it in their everyday life.

"Hey," Amity greeted her as she entered the shop.

“Hey.” She looked up, expecting a smile, but her best friend’s forehead crinkled into a worried frown. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to tell you something.” Amity bit her lip. “You may not like it. You might hate me.”

“I doubt that,” she replied. Amity was the older sister she’d never had, a port in the storm. Her friend had stood by her through thick and thin, lending a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on. Amity had insisted on accompanying her to Terra Nova, even though she loved big-city hustle and bustle. If she could sometimes be overzealous in her caring and concern, well, Faith forgave her. Wasn’t that what “big sisters” were like?

Amity scrunched up her face. “I, uh, submitted applications to Cosmic Mates.”

“The interplanetary matchmaking service?” She’d heard about the service that matched Earth women with aliens. Cosmic Mates was quite the talk! “I think that’s great! You deserve to meet your Mr. Right.”

“It’s not that—”

“If you’re worried about leaving me alone here, don’t be. Focus on you.” Marrying an alien might require moving to his planet, in which case, Faith would have to buy Amity out of the business. However, they’d cross that bridge if they came to it.

In her early forties, Amity was a decade older than Faith and had never been married—but not for lack of trying. Her friend had done everything she could to put herself out there, but after a person reached a certain age, the eligible pool of available, decent men shrank to a puddle. And that was on Earth.

Honestly, Cosmic Mates probably offered the best shot at meeting a man. Neither of

them would meet one on Terra Nova. Faith felt guilty at how much Amity had sacrificed by accompanying her there. So, she was glad she'd signed up with Cosmic Mates.

She tilted her head, studying the spinning vase. The neck needs to be a little higher. She smoothed her hands upward. "Wait a minute—what do you mean you submitted applications? "

"I put in one for you, too." Amity said.

The vase collapsed.

No, no, no. Her inner voice and practical sensibilities were in complete agreement. "Absolutely not." She grabbed a damp rag and wiped her hands. How could Amity have done such a thing without consulting her?

"You were open to it a second ago."

"When I thought it was for you!"

"You got a hit. An alien man is interested in meeting you."

"No."

"Why is it okay for me and not for you?"

"Because it's my decision to make, not yours. And because I'm not interested in getting married right now. You are."

"It's been five years since he died."

“So?”

“Everyone grieves differently, but you’re too young to give up, to never fall in love again, to never be happy again.”

“I haven’t given up.” She never shared the reality of her marriage. Unpredictable. Mental. Demoralizing. His mind games had been subtle at first, and on his frequent “business trips,” she’d convinced herself she’d imagined everything. Soon, she discovered the loving, dependable, supportive husband had hidden a mean streak. Nothing physical, but in many ways his psychological campaign to break down her self-worth had been worse, because it gave her no proof. He’d been a master at gaslighting. In public, he played the role of the loving husband too well.

When he’d died, she’d cried tears of relief, not grief. But she’d never shared the truth of her marriage with her best friend. Pride, she supposed. Shame at having tolerated his mistreatment.

“I’m happy!” She waved clay-streaked hands. “I love living on Terra Nova, I love making pottery, I love you— even though you sometimes interfere . Life is good.”

“It could be a better life.”

“No.” She stood up. Although she’d regained her self-esteem, she remained cautious, doubtful about her ability to judge character. How could she have been so wrong about Mark? Had love blinded her to red flags, or had he just been that skilled at subterfuge?

“You’re not curious? You won’t take a look? He’s cute for an alien.”

Look. Kick the tires. No commitment. Relationships always started out innocuously, didn’t they? A chance encounter at a coffee counter. A little flirty banter. A no-

expectations drink after work. And then you woke up married to a psychological bully.

“No. I assume he’s waiting for an answer—tell him I’m not interested. Explain an overzealous friend overstepped.”

“All right. I’ll decline on your behalf.”

“And delete my profile.”

“Okay.” Amity’s shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“I’m not ready to meet somebody. I need to wait a while longer,” she said.

“Wait for what?”

At first, she’d assumed it was Mark she’d been waiting for until she married him. Amity waited now—for an answer. Faith shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Soon. Soon.

“Maybe it’s a Cosmic Mates match you’ve been waiting for,” Amity suggested.

Her friend acted like a bulldog with the whole Cosmic Mates thing. “If you’re so keen on the program, why don’t you sign up?”

“Actually, I did, but you’re the one who got a hit.”

“I hope it works out for you, but it’s not for me. Moving to Terra Nova is all the risk I can handle right now.” While her creative, artistic side manifested through her pottery, she preferred life overall to be predictable, conventional, conservative,

traditional. Her parents, both passed away now, had been flamboyant dreamers, volatile personalities who flitted from one wild, ill-considered venture to another. Her childhood had been chaotic, itinerant. She'd attended eleven schools in twelve years. There'd been hugs and kisses and laughter at home, but also shouts, tears, and flying objects, and moods that turned on a dime.

Accountants had a rep for being steady, dependable. Mark had seemed to be all that as well as warm and amusing. Normal. Exactly the kind of man one could build a stable life with.

And then he'd revealed his true character.

Among friends, he'd maintained the facade, his personality affable, his behavior doting. A good guy. A nice guy. People liked him. "You're so lucky to have married such a great catch," people used to say.

In private, he'd chipped away at her confidence through criticism masked as humor, smirks hidden behind smiles, pseudo "concern" crafted to exacerbate her self-doubt. When she created a commercial piece, she heard, "That vase is nice, but it's not quite up to your usual artistic standard, is it?" An avant-garde piece would elicit, "I admire your courage to follow your creative passion and ignore marketability." Or, said with a grin, "No one can accuse you of being crassly commercial."

He'd lobbed digs behind Amity's back. "She's such a sweetheart, but is she really the best business manager?"

When she called out the behavior, he'd flipped it back on her. "What are you upset about? I'm trying to help you." Classic gaslighting.

When she accepted the problem wasn't her, it was him —she'd married a narcissist—she'd sought to extricate herself. She'd consulted with an attorney about

dissolving the marriage. The next day, the lawyer contacted her and said he wouldn't be able to take her case after all. Attorney number two was also overbooked. Same with the third. This couldn't be a coincidence, could it? They couldn't all be too busy. Dread and doom had seeped into her bones. Could her husband have put the kibosh on the divorce? What kind of power did he have that he could scare off a lawyer?

At that point, she decided to find out who the hell she'd married. The first shocking discovery was that he didn't work at the accountancy firm. Never had. Next, she checked with some of the hotels where he'd supposedly stayed during his out-of-town business trips, but they had no record of his visits. She'd planned to hire a professional investigator to dig deeper when Mark died.

"I'm sorry. I overstepped. I'd had a little wine, and I signed us both up. Can you forgive me?" Amity looked so contrite, Faith forgave her. How could she not? Her intentions had been good, and her best friend had always been there for her.

She wished she'd been able to confide in her the true state of her marriage. But she'd been too embarrassed. And what if Amity didn't believe her? She had no proof except Mark hadn't worked where he'd said he did. Maybe he'd lost his job and been too humiliated to tell her. But if that were true, where had their money come from? They always had money and, as he had jokingly pointed out, it wasn't because her pottery earned big bucks.

"Of course I forgive you." Faith wiped her hands and hugged her. "Just don't do anything like that again."

"I won't. I promise." Amity crossed her heart.

"I'm not ready to date again, let alone marry—and certainly not to a stranger," Faith said.

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One month later

As long as she doesn't see me, no harm done. I'm not going to approach her.

Ensconced in the café across the street from All Fired Up, Bragg watched Faith at work. Seeing a lump of clay take shape into a bowl or a vase fascinated him, but everything she did enthralled him. The better to emulate his progenitor, he had studied every vid of the two of them: their wedding, vacations, charity and art galas.

Hammond acted the loving husband, but, schooled in reading body language, Bragg couldn't help but notice his indifference and how his eyes had strayed to other women. Hammond had used her with Dark Ops' blessing.

She deserved better.

Better than me, too. Love wasn't enough. He had no future to offer her. He'd been forbidden from contacting her in any way. If HQ found out he'd followed her to Terra Nova, his ass would be grass on principle alone. That didn't take into account the potential damage if someone recognized him.

Bragg impersonated a dead man who'd adopted the disguise of a mild-mannered accountant as cover for being a Dark Ops spook pretending to be a criminal to hide that he probably was a criminal. One misstep could topple the precariously placed dominos and set off a cascade of trouble.

The widow had built a new life on Terra Nova. Bragg needed to accept the situation and move on.

Except he had to see her one last time before letting her go. A farewell visit.

He'd seen her in person once before. How bittersweet it had been. Torture—because he'd realized he wasn't infatuated—he'd fallen in love.

Alive then, Hammond had needed to be in opposite parts of the world simultaneously. He had a deal going down in Russia but an opportunity to meet with a Chinese spy on a senator's payroll had arisen. Although risky to send operative and clone into the field at the same time, both meetings were critical, so HQ dispatched Hammond to Moscow and sent Bragg to a Washington charity gala with Faith to rendezvous with the spy.

Did she remember that night? He'd never forgotten the best moment of his life. He squeezed his eyes shut, recalling with vivid detail how he'd held her hand, embraced her as they slow-danced, and stolen a kiss in a vacant moonlit corridor.

Other than a quick meeting with the spy, he'd spent the entire glorious evening with her until he'd been forced to catch a red-eye for a "business trip." HQ had forbidden him to go home with her. And, despite his numerous affairs, Hammond probably would have objected to his stand-in sleeping with his wife.

Not that Bragg would have done so. While Dark Ops blurred moral lines, he liked to think he maintained some integrity.

Or so he told himself.

Inside the shop, Faith paused, removing her hands from the clay to scan the street. He held his breath, even though he'd concealed his appearance with dark glasses and a growth of scruff. If she noticed him, he would appear to be a stranger enjoying an alfresco snack at a café.

He bit into his tasteless sandwich, and she returned to her pottery.

After Marshall had mentioned Cosmic Mates, he'd checked her profile. Seeing her status marked "pending," an indication she had an open match request, had given him heart palpitations. When her profile had disappeared altogether, he'd nearly had a full-on heart attack, fearing she'd accepted the match.

She deserved happiness. It couldn't be with him, so why not with somebody else? Would he condemn her to a life of loneliness because that's what he faced? No.

But he had to see her in person one more time.

Kicking himself every which way to Wednesday, he'd submitted a furlough request. Regulations allotted clones one month of leave per year, and he had five months of unused time on the books. However, since he'd had to replace a dead man; he couldn't venture just anywhere. HQ had held up his leave until he'd presented an acceptable, i.e. secure, itinerary—a trip to Patagonia, Argentina. South America was far from Hammond's normal milieu, so it was unlikely anyone would recognize him.

With the agency's own regulations on his side, HQ approved the furlough but granted him only five weeks instead of the five months he'd requested.

He'd bided his time in Patagonia until he was reasonably sure no one had followed him and then caught a jumper to Buenos Aires, where he'd booked a space flight to Terra Nova.

He'd spent a week in Willow Wood, becoming a regular at the café where he could watch her from a safe distance. It made him feel like a creepy stalker, but he couldn't openly approach her.

It wasn't just the rules forbidding contact. Bragg wasn't long for the world.

Impersonating a man with few friends but a long list of bitter enemies, he was a dead man walking. It was only a matter of time before one of the many people who would see Hammond dead succeeded in killing his body double.

One day, Bragg would bite the big one. Depending on the situation, HQ might substitute a replacement clone or retire the Hammond persona. But it wouldn't matter to him because he would be dead.

He finished his snack just as she finished her project.

She cut the vase from the potter's wheel and carried it into the back room, where it would probably dry on a shelf awaiting bisque-firing. His obsession with the pottery artist had led him to learn quite a bit about pottery. A customer entered the shop, and Faith emerged. She showed the woman different styles of pottery. The indecisive buyer took her sweet time making a choice. Finally, she settled on what appeared to be a soup tureen. A practical choice.

All Faith's pottery was beautiful—he'd perused her wares on the HyperSphere—but Bragg liked his purchase the most. The uniqueness of the uneven shape of the colorful low bowl had appealed to him from the moment he'd spotted it in her virtual store. Nothing else she'd ever created looked like it. As a carbon copy of another human being, he valued unique design. He'd brought the bowl with him, unwilling to leave it behind at HQ. He set it out on the dresser in the room he'd booked at the Happy Night Inn.

The customer left with her bagged purchase, and Amity breezed into the shop. The two women greeted each other with a hug, and then Amity made shooing motions. Faith shook her head. Amity shooed more vigorously.

Then Faith gave a shrug and a capitulating headshake. Collecting her purse and a cloth bag, she left the shop. Despite her seeming reluctance to leave, she had a smile

on her face and a spring in her step as she strolled down the narrow main street of the village.

Keeping his distance, Bragg followed. At a stand outside a tiny market, she purchased vegetables and a loaf of bread, which she stowed in her bag.

Leaving the grocer's, she seemed to sense him, pausing to scan the street behind her. Quickly, he bent to pet a dog tied to a tree. He held his breath until she resumed walking. Cursing his stupidity, his lack of willpower, he followed at a safer distance.

He could see her relax as she came to her residence, a storybook stone cottage with a thatched roof, fronted by a garden of flowers in springtime bloom. A ginger cat in the window leaped down as she strode up the flagstone path to the arched wooden door.

The animal curled around her legs as she entered the cottage. He caught a glimpse of a cozy, comfortable parlor.

“Did you miss me, Rusty?” She picked up the cat and closed the door.

Bragg wondered if she'd brought the cat from Earth or had acquired it here. Hammond hadn't liked animals; in particular, he'd hated cats. Bragg got a tiny zing of satisfaction at the notion she had acquired something her late husband would have objected to.

He applauded how she'd opened her own shop and pursued the art Hammond had dismissed as “folly.” Had she any inkling how disparaging he'd been? Bragg did. Hammond had often mocked his wife's efforts.

She had the freedom to create. But, was she happy? Faith lived a solitary life, friend and cat notwithstanding. Government edict kept Terra Nova agrarian, purposefully undeveloped and low-tech. The village of Willow Wood, while quaint and charming,

offered little in the way of excitement, attractions, or amenities. Terra Nova was the place you fled to when you wanted to go off the grid.

It killed him to contemplate her remarrying, but she deserved a full, happy life with a good man who loved her. Her solitary single state seemed to indicate she still grieved. The bastard wasn't worth it. A single tear shed was one tear too many.

But she joined Cosmic Mates.

Didn't that signify an interest in dating?

Except Cosmic Mates didn't hook people up with dates but with spouses , generally aliens. The program had been started on Caradonia, a planet in dire need of women after a nano-virus decimated the female population. After the matchmaking program's tremendous success, Caradonian Governor-General Krogan had franchised it.

Faith had signed up and gotten a match.

Then she'd deleted her profile. Had she gotten cold feet, or had she accepted the match? In the week he'd been in Willow Wood, he'd observed no evidence of a man in her life, but what if Mr. Pending had become Mr. Confirmed and was enroute to Terra Nova? His heart stuttered with renewed despair. She has a right to be happy with someone else. She deserves it. He loved her to the depths of his being. Shouldn't her happiness satisfy him?

I never should have come. Seeing her emphasized the bleakness of his existence. He should leave Terra Nova, return to work, and forget her. There was a ship going to Earth in the morning. If he hurried, he could book a passage.

Be happy, Faith. Be happy.

He turned and strode away.

Halfway down the tree-lined cobblestone lane, his feet did a pivot.

Don't do it. Don't do it.

Instead, his feet increased the pace, marching up the flagstone path to the cottage, whereupon he rapped on the arched door.

It opened, and she stood there in the flesh.

“Mark?” Color drained from her face, and she collapsed in a faint.

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Faith came to stretched out on her settee. In the chair across from her sat her very-much-alive husband, his brows drawn into an uncharacteristic, worried frown.

It's him. It's really him. How is this possible? Where has he been? How did he find me?

She'd identified his body at the morgue! There'd been a funeral.

"You—you—" With dread, she sprang upright to stare at the husband she'd once loved and then grown to fear and hate.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "You passed out."

He's the one. He's the one you've been waiting for, whispered that inner voice to her shock and dismay.

Mark was not the one.

If he assumed he could waltz in and resume their marriage, he could crawl back under the rock where he'd been hiding. She had a death certificate, and he could stay dead! "What the hell is going on?"

A muscle ticked in his cheek, and his lying brown eyes looked tormented.

Up to his old tricks. Well, I won't be fooled this time.

"Where have you been? Who was that at the morgue?" she said and then dropped her

jaw when Rusty, the cat who'd come with the cottage, jumped up and settled on his lap. Instead of flinging it off, he let the cat stay and stroked his striped ginger fur. Mark hated cats. He was the type of monster who'd drown kittens for kicks.

"That was Mark Hammond. Your husband is dead."

"Then who does that make you?"

"His clone. My name is John Bragg."

"His clone?" She snorted. "Oh, that's a good one." He must really have a low opinion of her intelligence. She supposed he had reason to think her stupid, considering how long it took her to realize what a cold, manipulative, lying SOB he was.

"Cloning has been occurring for decades," he said.

"Yes, it has." But for animals, not humans, although one company advertised it would extract and store your child's DNA, so you could grow a replacement in the tragic event the first one died. Commercialism at its crassest.

She curled her lip. "First of all—who would bother to replicate you?" One man like him was more than enough. "Second, for the sake of argument, let's assume you are a copy—you'd still be a child. My husband would be forty-one. Excuse me, but you look way older than five years old, older than forty-one even."

Haggard. Heavy scruff darkened his jaw. Red rimmed his brown eyes. His full lips had yet to crack a smile. After she'd had the misfortune to get to know him, she'd discovered her husband never smiled out of genuine goodwill or friendliness. But mocking, plastic grins? Those were his trademark.

"The government has developed an accelerated cloning process. I became a mature

adult a year before your husband died.”

She jumped when the tea kettle shrieked. “I was going to have a cup of tea. I’d offer you one, but I know you don’t drink it.” Who wants to drink dirty water? he used to say.

“I’d take a cup.”

Like drinking tea would convince her of anything. She knew her own husband. Oh, how she wished she didn’t.

“Especially if you add a shot of whiskey,” he added.

Whiskey didn’t sound like a bad idea under the circumstances. “Do you take anything else in your tea?”

“Just tea.”

She fixed two cups then carried them into the parlor, along with a bottle of scotch. She plunked the bottle on the low table in front of him, and he added a shot. She poured a measure into her own cup.

She raised the fortified tea to her mouth. “This proves nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“You drinking tea.”

He took a sip. “What would it take to convince you I’m telling you the truth?”

“A DNA test?”

He shook his head. “Our DNA are the same. I’m a genetic replica.” He stroked the cat, who closed his eyes and basked in the attention. Rusty’s behavior seemed to support the outrageous contention. Animals had avoided Mark, instinctively recognizing a threat. They were a lot smarter than she had been.

“So, you have no proof.” Nerves jangling, she took another sip of tea. Enjoying a cup in her cozy cottage at the end of the day relaxed her. Unfortunately, her late husband’s return from the dead was a problem neither whiskey nor tea could fix. “Why are you here? It’s been five years.”

“At the risk of being repetitive, I’m not Mark Hammond.”

“Right,” she said sarcastically. He did relish his mind games. Love bombing, backhanded compliments, guilt-tripping, gaslighting—she’d fallen prey to them all until she wised up. “For the sake of argument, let’s say you are John Bragg. Why seek me out at all?”

He glanced away. A muscle ticked in his cheek. He met her eyes again. “I needed to see you...to know that you’re okay.”

“Why?”

“Why did you take down your Cosmic Mates profile?”

She blinked. “You know about that?”

Rusty vacated his lap and sauntered away. Mark-John finished his tea in a single gulp. His gaze shifted to the scotch. He set the cup in the saucer with a finality. “Dark Ops kept tabs on you.”

“Dark Ops?” She arched her brows.

“The branch of government Hammond worked for, that I work for. The branch that cloned him.”

“He was an accountant.”

Although he’d lied about working for UH & M, his university diploma with his bachelor’s in accounting had hung on the wall in his home office. He had a couple of T-shirts he occasionally wore at home. One had said, “Accountants work their assets off,” and the other had read, “Accountants never die. They just lose their balance.” How prophetic the latter had been.

The times she’d called him at Underwood, Herr, and McCullough, the receptionist had put her through to him, until that last day when she’d been told nobody by the name of Mark Hammond had ever worked for the firm. In hindsight, she realized that although he’d shared anecdotes about his colleagues, she’d never met any of them. If he didn’t work for UH & M, where had he gone every day? What were his business trips?

“I’ve never heard of Dark Ops,” she said.

“You aren’t supposed to. Only those with a need-to-know are aware of its existence. Even the president doesn’t know.”

That got her attention. “The president doesn’t know?”

“It allows for plausible deniability. Dark Ops can work outside the law, and the chief executive can claim ignorance and deny involvement.”

“Then who provides oversight of the agency?”

He spread his hands. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

This tall tale was the kind of bullshit a man looking to get laid would tell a girl at a bar . I'd tell you what I do— wink, wink, but then I'd have to kill you. Of course, he'd be a brain surgeon-spaceship pilot-movie producer.

She folded her arms. “So, this top-secret government agency that the president isn't aware of cloned my husband, and you're him.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Hammond was a skilled operative with critical connections in the underworld. People hated him, but they feared him.”

Had he ever realized that was how she felt?

“Dark Ops planned for a backup in case something happened to him.”

“And you're telling me this because...”

“I need you to know that I am not Mark Hammond.”

“Why?”

“Because your late husband was a bastard.”

That was something they could agree on, but she'd heard enough bullshit. She stood up. “You need to go now.”

“Please...”

“Please, nothing. Get out.”

His face seemed to sag. “Can I see you again...another time?”

“No.” She strode to the door and flung it open, waited until he got up, and stepped onto the porch.

He’s the one. He’s the one.

Had she considered her inner voice wise? She was a moron.

“Seeing how you’re not dead, I intend to initiate divorce proceedings,” she said and then winced at her stupid admission. Never show your hand to the enemy. The last time she’d tried to divorce him, he’d blocked her.

Maybe the previous time had been a coincidence. She’d only tried three attorneys. And this was Terra Nova, not Earth. She might have a better chance of getting an attorney here. She was pretty sure she could get a no-fault dissolution of marriage, but if she needed a reason, she had plenty to choose from—abandonment, adultery, mental cruelty. Being a lying sack of shit probably wasn’t grounds, but it should be.

“You can’t do that.”

“Watch me.”

“Your husband is physically and legally dead, and you have no idea the heap of trouble you’d unleash.”

“You’re threatening me? You asshole!” She slammed the door in his face.

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What the hell had he been thinking approaching her like that?

He hadn't been thinking at all. He'd been feeling . After traveling halfway across the galaxy to get a glimpse of her, he hadn't been able to resist talking to her. Now he'd fucked things up worse.

She'd misunderstood his intentions. He would never threaten her; he'd meant to warn her. Divorces were public record. Filing for a dissolution of marriage would announce to the world Mark Hammond was alive. Exposing one agent could expose the entire agency. Dark Ops would take swift action to keep its secrets. When they discovered he'd been the cause of her filing, they'd permanently retire him.

He never should have mentioned the organization—that alone could result in his and her disappearance—but she'd looked at him with such incredulous disdain. Cover stories, disguises, his identity—his whole life was false. For once in his miserable existence, he wanted to tell the truth and tell it to somebody who mattered.

Look at me. See me.

She hadn't believed him, and he had no way to prove his real identity. As he'd said, DNA wouldn't do it. Hammond had been cremated, so there was no body to exhume. Ironically, the only person who could prove he wasn't her husband was Faith herself. She had identified the body at the morgue.

He didn't know how to prevent her from filing for divorce. Terra Nova was a long way from Earth. It was unlikely she could file this late on a Friday afternoon, and hopefully distance and bureaucracy would hinder her efforts.

The only option now was to give her time to process what he'd said and then approach her again.

He'd never considered that she might not believe him—he hadn't planned to speak to her! Impulse and longing had overridden his good sense. If he had thought about it, he would have expected shock—although not so much that she'd keel over in a faint. Fortunately, he'd caught her before she hit the stone floor.

He trudged toward the Happy Night Inn. Low-key, laid-back, low-tech Terra Nova would have been the perfect spot to rest and unwind.

He would snap before he unwound.

He greeted the innkeeper at the front desk with a passing wave and went straight to his room. It was tiny but homey and quaint. A patchwork quilt covered the queen bed, and a rag rug lay on the wooden floor. Fresh flowers had been placed in a vase on the dresser. He sank into the easy chair in the corner.

Despite his unease at the turn of events, he felt rejuvenated at having seen Faith. Brown eyes had sparked with ire and disdain, but she looked good. Shorter brunette hair dusted her shoulders and framed her pretty face. She was no longer the dewy-eyed bride she'd been at her wedding; however, the pinched expression in later vids had vanished, making her look younger than her thirty-two years.

In her pottery studio, she had appeared happy doing what she loved. He eyed the bowl on the dresser. His most prized possession reminded him of her—unique. In different light and turned at different angles, the colors changed, reminding him to look beyond the first glance to see what was really there. Faith was as colorful as her pottery. He'd only spent that one evening with her at the gala, but he'd soaked up every second, storing away the flashes of humor, her wry observations, her quick wit. He'd developed a crush through the vids, but once he'd met the real, live woman,

he'd fallen in love.

However, he'd failed to peer behind the facade of her marriage. She'd become suspicious near Hammond's untimely end, but he'd assumed she'd loved him. So, the animosity had come as a surprise, although, in retrospect, it shouldn't have. She was a sharp, smart lady. It stood to reason she'd see through her late husband's pretense.

If only she could see him and not Hammond. He'd anticipated her love for her husband to be the roadblock—that he wouldn't measure up to her one true love. Now he realized he faced the opposite problem. He would always remind her of the man she despised.

The notion he could have any relationship with her was pie in the sky. He might as well wish for a magic genie to appear and send them flying into the sunset on a winged unicorn. She would never love him, nor would Dark Ops permit contact, let alone a relationship. Normally, clones inherited the rights and privileges of the citizen they replaced. However, in his case, he'd replaced a man physically and legally dead. Dark Ops intended for him to stay that way; ergo, Bragg was stuck in no man's land.

As if his thoughts had shot straight to HQ, his multipurpose device jangled, two short pings followed by a longer ping, the signal he'd assigned to his CO. He did a quick visual sweep to ensure his hotel room was unidentifiable before opening a channel.

"Where the hell are you?" Scowling, Marshall appeared on the screen.

"Patagonia."

"No, you're not. You checked out of your hotel a week ago."

"I wasn't aware I had to stay at that particular location for the duration of my vacation."

“You’re supposed to adhere to your approved itinerary.”

“You were checking up on me?”

“You’re lucky it was me and not someone else.”

“I decided to visit a sheep ranch.”

“What the fuck are you doing at a sheep ranch?”

“Shearing sheep. When in Patagonia, do as the Patagonians.”

Marshall swore. “I had a hunch you would do something stupid.”

“I’m shearing sheep!”

“I figured you were up to something when you put in for a furlough.”

“I’m entitled to leave.”

“You’ve never taken any.”

“I am now.”

“I pinged you a half dozen times.”

He hadn’t answered to avoid this conversation because he was, in fact, doing something very stupid. “I’ve been shearing sheep.”

A roar drowned out Marshall’s reply.

Bragg waited until the noise dissipated. “Where the hell are you ?” He noticed that Marshall appeared to be in a parking lot.

“Jetport.”

“Why?”

“The usual reason.”

There were two reasons to go to a jetport—to catch a flight or to speak confidentially.

You couldn’t go anywhere on Earth without being captured on vid—not even Patagonia. Government monitored movement and conversations, but the deafening racket of jetports and spaceports drowned out any audio they could record.

“Listen.” Marshall glanced around. “I have a pretty good idea where you are. I’m advising you to quit while you’re still ahead.”

His CO could guess, but he couldn’t prove it. “There’s still sheep to shear.”

“If you compromise Hammond, you compromise Dark Ops.”

“Speaking on general principle, I’m aware of that.”

“Speaking to your specific situation, you’re fucking lucky I’m your CO.” He paused.

“Don’t make me haul you in.”

Marshall’s revelation Faith had joined Cosmic Mates had been the impetus for his flight. He’d suffered unrequited love while Hammond was alive, but the prospect that she might remarry had been a hundred times worse.

“I understand more than you know, and I don’t foresee a good ending,” Marshall said.

Neither did he. A good ending could only involve Faith, which would never occur. He’d be fortunate to escape with just a broken heart. He didn’t trust Marshall or anyone in Dark Ops.

Why risk his limited freedom for a woman who would never love him? Who despised him? Was seeing her in the flesh worth the repercussions?

Yes, yes, it was. “The sheep aren’t going to shear themselves. I have to get back to work.” He closed the communication channel.

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“Mark might not be dead,” Faith said as soon as she got to work in the morning.

“What do you mean?” Amity drew her brows together in confusion.

“He might still be alive,” she repeated.

“Mark... your husband ?”

“Do we know any other Marks?”

“What makes you think he’s alive?”

“He came to see me at the cottage last night.”

“Get out!” Amity exclaimed.

“Actually, that’s what I told him.” Faith’s lips quirked.

“How is that possible? That’s wonderful! Isn’t it? What happened? Where has he been all this time? Who got cremated, then?” Amity peppered her with questions.

“Are you okay? Where is he now?”

Not so wonderful, and she wasn’t okay, but the cremation question had bedeviled her all night long. If not her husband, whose body had she seen at the morgue? How could she have mistaken a stranger for him? Besides, the funeral director had given her his engraved wedding ring.

Could the crazy clone story be true?

Amity cocked her head. “Wait a minute. You saw him in person, but you said he might be alive. You’re not sure?”

She bit her lip. “It might have been his clone. He calls himself John Bragg.”

“His clone ?”

“He’s a dead ringer.” Certainty the man had been her husband had eroded as the evening wore on and the particulars reeled through her mind. The body at the morgue. The personalized wedding ring. The funeral. His five-year absence. Her cat’s reaction.

The idea of a body double seemed preposterous—except, it would explain a few things. “Rusty liked him. He liked Rusty.”

“So?”

“Mark wasn’t kind to animals, and they knew it. They avoided him.”

Amity scowled. “He was mean to animals?”

He’d once kicked a stray cat outside of a restaurant—and laughed. His actions had so horrified her, it had flipped the script of their marriage, killing her love for him and opening her eyes to other red flags she’d ignored. She’d said something to him, and he’d claimed it had been an accident—the cat had darted in front of his feet. But no. He’d approached the cat with deliberate intent.

After the incident, she’d noticed how dogs and cats would slink away from him.

What kind of person went out of his way to hurt an animal? If there had been any indication he would do that, she never would have married him. She wouldn't have married him if she'd known a lot of things. Another late-breaking realization—she hadn't been unobservant; he'd deliberately misled her.

"I never knew that." Amity's mouth turned downward in disapproval.

"But John liked Rusty."

"If he's John. Why would Mark have himself cloned?"

"He didn't. Dark Ops did. It's some sort of secret government agency he supposedly worked for."

"Again, why?"

"We didn't get into it."

Amity pursed her lips. "You weren't happy together, were you?"

Faith had maintained a facade of being a happy couple, first assuming she had imagined the flashes of meanness then naively hoping with love and patience, he would change. She'd wised up but had been too embarrassed to admit what a huge mistake she'd made. And he still had everyone else snowed. Who would believe such a mild-mannered, nice guy was a nasty human being? How could she admit to her friends she'd lied to them, her marriage was a sham, and she'd been pretending to be happy? And then he'd died—well, maybe—and etiquette said you didn't speak ill of the dead.

She wearied of the pretense, of lying to her best friend, to everyone. "Mark turned out to be a different person than I thought."

“You two seemed so loving, but I had doubts.” Amity surprised her.

“You did?”

She nodded. “The PDA seemed over the top. Couples confident of their relationship are too busy living their lives to engage in showy public displays. He seemed to need people to notice his affection—and yours sometimes looked forced.”

“I guess I wasn’t as good an actress as I thought.”

“No, you were. I doubt anyone but me noticed. We’ve been friends a long time. I could tell when your affection shifted from genuine to”—her mouth twisted ruefully—“fake.”

The bell over the door tinkled, and they both turned as the subject of the conversation entered.

He’s the one. He’s the one you’ve been waiting for.

Her inner wisdom had gone nuts.

“Wow,” Amity whispered. “I’ll be a two-headed alien dog.”

In rough canvas pants and a relaxed brown pullover, “John” dressed more casually than her ex/late husband, but then he had been pretending to be an accountant. Another day’s worth of beard darkened his jaw, and his hair was combed differently, but he was still the spitting image of her late husband.

“You remember Amity Landers, don’t you?” She gestured to her friend. Her eyes had narrowed, and she seemed to be giving him a thorough scan.

“Remember, no. But I know of her.” He stepped forward to extend his hand. “I’m John Bragg.”

“The body double.” Doubt laden her tone, but she shook his hand.

“Faith filled you in.”

“It’s a pretty tall tale.”

“I guess it is,” he agreed before turning to Faith. “I don’t want to interrupt your work, but I hope maybe we can talk.” Interrupting her work had never bothered him before. He’d had little respect for her time or her art, considering it a self-indulgent, frivolous hobby.

As it happened, she had no new pottery pieces in the works, and it would take weeks for the new pieces to dry before they could be fired. No customers arrived yet. “No time like the present...I suppose.”

“Have you had breakfast? We could go to the café across the street.” His mouth quirked into a grin. “Your friend can keep an eye on me.”

Her stomach fluttered in an unexpected, unwelcome way.

His smile seemed self-deprecating, genuine. His voice held a deeper, warmer intonation than she recalled. Part of the act? Or was he really a clone?

Gah! I’m not starting to believe him, am I? If this was a stunt, and she fell for his bullshit, she’d never forgive herself. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

She’d moved on with her life but hadn’t gotten closure. She desired to find out what

her husband had been doing during their marriage.

Faith glanced at Amity.

“I’ll watch the shop.” I’ll keep an eye on him , was what she meant.

They left the studio, crossing the street to the café.

The morning air held a chill, and overnight dew coated tables and chairs outside, so, on tacit agreement, they entered the tiny restaurant and seated themselves by the window—in view of Amity, watching from across the street.

“She takes her role as protector seriously,” John commented.

“Yes, she’s a great friend.”

A waitress took their order for coffee and two banana nut muffins. A niggle of significance flashed, but it vanished into the mental ether before she could latch onto it. “So,” she said.

“I shocked you.”

“To say the least.”

“Thank you for agreeing to talk with me.”

“You’re going to do most of the talking,” she said.

“You have questions.” He nodded.

The waitress set two coffees on the table. Faith added a spoonful of sugar and a dash

of cream to hers. John did the same. Did he model her behavior to try to build a rapport and convince her he wasn't Mark? Her husband drank his coffee black.

She glanced across the street. Amity was still glued to the window. Faith sipped her coffee. "Hypothetically, let's say you are a clone. Why did you come to see me? You don't know me."

"To impersonate Hammond, I had to study his habits, and that included getting to know the people in his life."

"Having a few biographical facts about a person isn't the same as knowing him or her," she pointed out. "We'd never met before last night."

He dropped his gaze and raised his cup to his lips. An electrified portent sizzled. The hair on her nape stood up. Her breath caught in her throat. "We haven't...have we?"

"Once."

"When?" But she knew. "The art gala."

"Yes."

Mark had acted differently that night—sweet, caring—his affection and warmth seeming genuine instead of performative. He'd looked at her like she was the sun, the moon, and the stars all rolled up into one. The gala had come before the cat incident, but she'd already begun having doubts about their marriage. Those doubts had melted away under his heated gaze and loving touch. She'd fallen in love with him all over again.

She would have slept with him, if he hadn't departed on another "business trip." When he'd returned, he'd been the same old asshole. The change had been so severe,

she'd been left reeling. So, maybe it hadn't been Mark at the gala, but John. But why would a body double have been so warm and attentive? If he'd truly wished to imitate Mark, he would have acted the opposite.

What kind of mind-fuck games was Dark Ops playing? What gave them the right to substitute another man for her husband?

She pressed her lips together.

"I'd say I'm sorry, except I'm not. I...enjoyed spending that evening with you."

"It wasn't right!"

"You're angry," he said.

"You think?" She glowered.

The waitress set muffins on the table, refilled their cups, and departed. The café had been generous with the nuts. Large chunks of walnut poked out of the muffins. Faith couldn't eat. She watched as he took a big bite. Chewed. Swallowed...the banana nut muffin.

"The muffin has nuts!" Deathly allergic to nuts, Mark had gone into anaphylactic shock once after inadvertently eating some. He would never order a banana nut muffin. "You are a clone!"

He flinched as if she'd hurled an epithet. "You believe me now."

She sat in silent contemplation for a moment. "He really is dead, and I don't need to file for a divorce."

“No, you don’t.” He sounded relieved.

“The gala—why were you there?”

“Hammond needed to be in Russia, and he had to meet with a Chinese spy at the gala.”

“I should have known he wouldn’t have gone just to accompany me.”

“I would have gone to the gala just for you.” His gaze heated.

Her stomach fluttered. She looked away for a moment then focused on him. “When you left for the business trip”—she made air quotes—“where did you go?”

“Back to base. Going home with you wasn’t allowed.”

Apparently, Dark Ops had a modicum of ethics. She remembered the heavy, sexual tension, the mutual arousal. There had been too many people around, but they’d stolen a few searing kisses and copped a feel in the hallway. Her face heated in remembrance, and she had to check herself from touching her lips. I kissed this man.

She took a big gulp of cold coffee.

“Why did you take down your Cosmic Mates profile?” he asked.

“Because I wasn’t the one who put it up.”

He arched his eyebrows.

“Amity did. She thought it was time for me to move on. I made her take it down.”

“You’re not over him?” he asked roughly.

“I got over him while we were still married,” she said. “That doesn’t mean I want to marry a stranger.” Been there, done that, didn’t like it much.

“What do you want?” John asked.

To meet what’s on the horizon waiting for me. That would sound stupid. “To make pottery. To live my life. To be happy.” To love and be loved in return.

“Your pottery is beautiful. You have a good balance of creativity and function. People can appreciate the beauty and use it in their everyday life.”

She blinked, wariness returning.

“You don’t believe me?” he said.

“Mark made a lot of flattering comments about my art before we married. Afterward, he was far less complimentary.”

“I mean what I say. I bought one of your pieces.”

“Which one?”

He made a flowing gesture with his hands. “A blue-green oval bowl that curls up at one end like a wave. It reminds me of the ocean.”

She dropped her jaw. “You bought that?” He was the anonymous buyer who’d purchased her favorite piece? A funny lump formed in her throat.

He nodded. “It’s sitting on the dresser at the inn.”

“You brought it with you?”

“I brought everything important with me.”

“That was my favorite piece,” she said.

“Mine, too. I like all your stuff, but I love that particular piece.”

The rush of pleasure left her feeling awkward. She took a tiny nibble of her muffin, and he finished off his. The waitress warmed up their coffee with a refill. “Thank you,” she said and then narrowed her eyes. “You said Dark Ops kept tabs on me. They knew about my Cosmic Mates profile.” It hadn’t even been up for very long. “Why?”

He hesitated. “Because of the precariousness of the situation.”

“What situation is that? I’m no threat. I’m a nobody.” Why would they be monitoring me?

“Hammond was like Schrodinger’s cat. They needed him dead and alive, but you looked in the box.”

“That’s as clear as mud.”

“Sorry, physics analogy. It takes years to cultivate the kind of contacts he had. If Dark Ops lost Hammond, they would lose his informants, too. Normally, when an operative dies, his replicant assumes all aspects of his life. But you had started digging into Hammond’s background. Learning he wasn’t an accountant, you were on the verge of blowing his cover.

“If I had taken his place as your husband, you would have kept digging, raising

questions, possibly exposing Dark Ops and Operation Double Take, the cloning program.”

True. She wouldn’t have stopped. She’d only begun investigating when he’d died.

“So, they allowed Mark Hammond, accountant , to be dead so you would cease your investigation. But operative Mark Hammond—aka John Bragg—still exists. The underworld believes the execution failed, but that he retired his alter ego as the accountant.

“However, that puts me in a dicey position. I need to stay out of the public light.”

She glanced around the café, filled with customers. “You’re in public now.”

“And Dark Ops would not be happy about it, although the risk of exposure on Terra Nova is practically nil. Even lower than in Patagonia. Only you and Amity would recognize me.”

“Patagonia?”

“When I applied for furlough, I told them I was going to the Patagonia region of Argentina.”

“How long are you staying?”

“That depends on you. I got approved for five weeks’ leave. I have three weeks left.”

“How does it depend on me?”

“Because I came to see you.” His gaze smoldered with a heat she felt clear down to her toes, and his meaning became clear. Her stomach fluttered, and her nipples

tightened. Electricity of sexual attraction buzzed in the air. Her passion for Mark had died when her respect and love for him did. This man looked and sounded like him. How could she be reacting to her husband's body double? Hadn't she had enough punishment? But like people could tell identical twins apart, now she could see the differences in micro-expressions, gestures, posture, language, tone.

Her face suffused with heat, and air suddenly seemed in short supply. She drew in a ragged breath. After what Mark put me through, I must be crazy to contemplate...

Contemplate what? He hadn't made any advances or proposals. She wet her lips. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'd like to see you again."

"Like...a date?" She glanced across the street at the shop. Amity had finally vacated her post.

"You can call it that. I would like to spend time with you."

She'd be insane to consider it. John had been created to be Mark. What if the self-effacing, accommodating Mr. Nice Guy's congeniality was an act? Mark had fooled her for a while, too.

Except, the circumstantial evidence looked conclusive. Rusty liked him. His behavior and personality had been different the night of the gala. He could eat nuts. He'd purchased her favorite piece of pottery.

"You're only here for three weeks. Then what happens?"

"Then I return to Earth and...my job."

Could he really flip a switch, John today, Mark tomorrow? Did she dare risk spending time with someone who changed personalities as easily as he changed his clothes?

Some women repeatedly hooked up with the same type of man and wondered why the relationships didn't work out. Could she find anyone more like her ex than an exact genetic match? Besides, she wasn't interested in a relationship right now. Nor did she wish to date.

She'd put her disastrous marriage behind her. She had a new life and a growing pottery business. Why complicate a good thing?

Except, his open, honest, vulnerable face urged her to give him a chance. And it would be short-term. He'd be gone soon anyway. However, she needed to be smart, logical. Use her head. Don't rush to a decision.

He's the one.

"Let me think about it," she said.

* * * *

"How did it go?" Amity grinned smugly when Faith returned to the shop.

"You should know. You pretty much watched the whole thing."

"You seemed chummy."

"We talked, that's all." But hadn't it seemed like more than that? Like they were establishing a connection?

"Was it weird being with someone who looks like Mark?"

“At first. His personality is totally different. It was like being with Mark’s twin brother.”

“How are clones different from identical twins anyway?”

“Twins share the same DNA from two parents. A clone is formed from the DNA of a single individual.”

“Are you going to see him again?”

“He’s leaving in three weeks,” she replied.

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“The answer is, I don’t know. I need to think about it.”

“What is there to think about?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “They say insanity is doing the same thing but expecting different results.”

“You said he’s not the same.”

“How do I know that for sure?” She’d been fooled once. How much of Mark’s personality had he inherited?

“By going out with him again!” Amity sounded exasperated.

He’s the one.

“Aren’t you curious to find out how different he is? Think of it as scientific

observation.”

She shot her friend a speculative glance. “Maybe you’re the one who’s curious.”

“Well, yeah. But Mark was your husband. You knew him far better than I did. And John is interested in you—not me.”

She remembered the warmth of his gaze, his undivided attention. He’d sought her out. It wasn’t like he’d been in the neighborhood, or they’d run into each other by happenstance. They’d been on different planets.

“I think it might be a violation of the girl code for me to date a dead ringer of your husband,” Amity continued. “ Besides... ” She paused dramatically and then broke into a huge grin. “I got a match through Cosmic Mates!”

“You did? When? You didn’t tell me that!”

“It just happened. My tech-tab dinged while you were at the café. A man is interested in meeting me.”

“What does he look like?” Most of the men who joined Cosmic Mates were aliens.

“He’s really good-looking. Dark-brown hair. Brooding eyes.”

“When will you get to meet him?”

“He’ll be here in four days.”

“That’s soon. That’s”—she did a calculation in her head—“during the craft fair.” There was an annual arts-and-crafts fair in Glen Lea. She’d paid for a booth in hopes of introducing the shop and her pottery to a new clientele.

“Oh, shoot! I forgot about that! He said he’d take the next space flight to Terra Nova, and I didn’t connect the dates. I’ll try to contact him and reschedule.”

“No, no.” Faith waved her hands. “Meeting your Cosmic Mates match is important. He’s coming from another planet! I can handle the craft fair on my own.”

Manning a craft booth solo was a bit of a challenge because she had no one to spell her if she needed to eat or use the bathroom. However, other vendors were usually good about keeping an eye on your booth for a few minutes. “It will all work out,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Amity asked hopefully.

“Absolutely! Love before business.”

“Well, it may not be love. I’m only meeting him for the first time. But, since I’ll be in town, I’ll keep the shop open. We won’t lose business here while you’re away.”

“Perfect!” Faith said. “So, let me see him. Show me his picture!”

Amity’s eyes lit up, and she leaped to the counter to get her tech-tab.

I hope this works out for her, that this man turns out to be everything she desires. Her friend had begun to despair of ever meeting Mr. Right.

“Here he is!” Amity presented her tech-tab.

Her mystery man had three profile photos. He looked exactly as she’d described him: dark, handsome—and brooding. He wasn’t smiling in any of the three photos. But he was undeniably attractive. “He doesn’t look alien at all!” Faith said.

“That’s because he’s human!” Amity gestured to his profile stats.

“I’m so excited!” She hugged her friend. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

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Three days later

“Are you sure this vehicle is safe?” Bragg shifted on the seat to avoid the spring popping through the torn upholstery. The ancient metal contraption rolled on bald rubber wheels over the wet road.

It had been sunny when they left Willow Wood, but clouds soon rolled in and darkened and then released a steady rainfall.

“Safest vehicle on the road,” she said cheerfully.

“It’s the only vehicle on the road.” They’d passed very few transports, and none for the past hour.

She glanced at him. “Nervous?”

“As long as I’m with you, I’m sure I’ll be safe,” he joked. As long as he was with her, he’d be happy. This was the best day of his life. “Terra Nova is quite...rural.” Between villages lay open countryside, with just a few scattered rustic cottages.

“That’s what I like about it.” Faith gripped the steering apparatus and squinted through the rain-splattered screen. Two little arms swished at the water, but they streaked more than they cleared.

“You didn’t find the desolation an adjustment?” How did one survive in the country? What did one do ? Earth was technologically advanced, fast-paced, high-energy. Even Patagonia had been urbanized, skyscrapers boxing in the pastoral sheep

ranches. Terra Nova was quiet, sleepy, slow, primitive—like the vehicle. Had Earth emptied its museums of mechanical artifacts and shipped them to Terra Nova?

“A good adjustment,” she said. “There’s something to be said for having room to stretch, time to reflect.”

Reflection had worked in his favor. After meeting in the café, he’d given her a day to mull over his request before contacting her again. He’d been thrilled when she’d invited him to accompany her to a craft fair.

He wished to spend as much time with her as he could because when he left in three weeks, that would be the end. He couldn’t risk seeing her again or applying for more leave. After never taking a day of leave in five years, suddenly he started taking it? Dark Ops was already suspicious—hence, Marshall’s call. For her sake, he shouldn’t have come to Terra Nova at all.

However, leaving now wouldn’t prevent or solve anything, so he may as well finish his furlough. “I was surprised you asked me to come along with you.”

“I surprised myself,” she said.

“Do you regret asking me?”

“Not so far.” She grinned. A man could live and die for one of those smiles. “I’m not usually so impulsive,” she said.

I’m glad you were. “I’m not impulsive either.” Every assignment was meticulously and strategically planned. Situations could and did go awry, but not for a lack of forethought.

She arched her brows, humor glinting in her eyes.

“Except for coming here,” he admitted. But was that true? Faith had never been far from his mind. Hadn’t the idea of seeking her out been growing? Hadn’t he envisioned seeing her hundreds of times in dozens of ways? Marshall’s pronouncement about her joining Cosmic Mates had been a catalyst that motivated him to act.

“There’s always that exception,” she said wryly.

“Of course.” He paused. “So, why did you make an exception for me?”

“Maybe I needed the muscle,” she said flippantly. “You did load up all the heavy crates.” Eight wooden boxes of pottery filled the rear of the vehicle. It appeared there’d once been a second row of seats, but they’d been removed a long time ago, judging from the rusted bolts in the floor.

He’d lug any number of crates if it bought time with her.

“Or maybe for closure, to get answers to the questions I have about Mark.”

He’s gone. I’m here. He’d been nursing the fantasy she’d invited him along to get to know him . Stupid. He’d spent five years pining for another man’s wife who didn’t know he existed. He cared too much when he shouldn’t care at all. But if love was rational, most people might make different choices.

Spending time with her would be a torturous exercise in futility.

“But mainly because you intrigue me,” she said.

Intrigued was a start. He’d take it. His spirits soared.

“The differences between you are subtle, but there are so many of them, it’s hard to

believe I mistook you for him.”

He tried not to show how strongly her words affected him, but inside, he grinned like an idiot.

“Besides, your references were impeccable.”

“My references?”

“Rusty likes you.”

“Seeing me again depended on a cat?” He’s always liked animals but never had the pleasure of owning a pet.

“Not really.” She grinned. “But he is a great judge of character.”

He loved how they could joke around and how she seemed comfortable with him. He should stop stressing and go with the flow, let her set the pace, be there to be whatever she needed. Stop worrying about the future and enjoy the present, focus on her pretty eyes, her fragrance, her sensual voice.

Her long, delicate fingers gripped the steering apparatus surely and capably. Personal transports on Earth operated on autopilot. A manual override allowed people to fly or drive the vehicle—if they knew how, which few did anymore. “You’re a good pilot,” he said. “Driver, I guess, since the wheels are on the ground.”

“First time!”

“You haven’t done this before?” Alarm shot through him.

She laughed, a sound of such gaiety and lightness, he’d gladly risk his life to hear it.

“Just kidding. I took a crash course in driving when I got here.”

“No pun intended.”

“No pun intended. Amity and I needed transportation. A neighbor offered us this vehicle for a good price.”

He hoped they’d gotten a steal. Rust appeared to be the glue holding the contraption together.

“Having a vehicle gives us flexibility to promote All Fired Up. This planet has been a great boon to the business. Pottery sales are much better here than on Earth.”

“I’m happy for you,” he said. “Your art deserves recognition.”

“Again, thanks for coming with me. It’s hard to man a booth solo.”

“Happy to help.” Wild horses couldn’t have kept him away.

As she drove, level terrain became rolling hills, the narrow road winding up and over, down and around. Rain continued to fall, beating a tattoo on the metal roof. The rhythmic drumming and vehicle’s sway was soothing, almost mesmerizing.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” she said.

“Can’t promise an answer, but go ahead,” he replied flippantly.

“What is it like being a clone? Did you always know what you were?”

Did I know I was created to be a copy? He stifled the ever-present bitterness and replied, “Yes. My future was predetermined. As soon as I could function, they trained

me to step in. You could say I have a master's degree in Hammond. It started before I was born. Recordings of his voice—speaking, shouting, laughing—were piped into the gestation tank. Then, afterward, I watched endless vids. Acting coaches tutored me. I had to memorize factoids, dates, names relevant to him, and they tested me on the material. I got judged on how well I walked, talked, sneezed, ate, laughed like him.

“While he still lived, I spoke with him at length, sometimes shadowing him at HQ. There was a practicum, a final exam, in which separately we interacted with other operatives in a skit observed by a jury of fellow operatives. They had to decide who was the original and who was the copy.”

He let out a bark of ironic laughter. “I did Hammond better than Hammond. Seven out of the twelve chose me as the real deal.” Until that time, his progenitor had been mockingly accepting, referring to Bragg as “mini-Mark,” and treating Operation Double Take as a lark. After the practicum, Hammond changed his behavior and manner of speaking to undermine the impersonation. However, Bragg knew him too well to be fooled.

He was not without empathy. Having an understudy waiting offstage served as a constant reminder Dark Ops did not expect you to survive. They didn't expect Bragg to live. Hammond 3.0 already floated in the gestation tank. Nobody was indispensable.

She shot him a sideways glance. “You do Mark better than Mark? Show me.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Please.”

“It's not a good idea.”

The vehicle labored up a hill.

“Please.” Her gaze turned pleading.

He could deny her nothing.

He spread his legs wider, claiming more of the seat, his posture assuming an arrogant confidence. He curled his lips into a smirk and lobbed a dismissive glance in her direction. “Hey, babe. Been a long time,” he drawled in a bored tone.

Her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped. “Jesus!”

A deer bounded up from the draw and sprinted across the road.

“Watch out!” he yelled.

She slammed on the brakes and jerked the steering apparatus hard.

The vehicle fishtailed on the wet road and careened over the embankment.

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Her entire body ached. Her head hurt, too, and somebody kept jostling her—and spraying water in her face. She turned her head away from the annoyance—to press against a warm, damp, hard...shoulder? Faith's eyes flew open to dusky light. Strong, hard male arms held her against a broad chest covered by heavy fabric.

She raised her head to catch a glimpse of her husband's scruffy square jaw. Mark? Wh-what?

"Thank goodness." The arms around her tightened. "How are you feeling?"

John. Fogginess dissipated. "Like I crashed into a tree." She remembered the deer, the skid, the roll. And the precipitating transformation that diverted her attention. An insidious little thought slipped out of the shadows. If John could transform himself into Mark, couldn't Mark transform himself into John? What if he had been messing with her all along?

"No tree," he said. "But we did quite a roll."

He couldn't fool Rusty. And he ate the nuts.

But Rusty had never met Mark. And what if he'd dosed himself with epinephrine?

That's elaborate, even for Mark.

More than the clone story?

The water sprinkling her face was rain. He was carrying her uphill through the rain.

Crazy ideas faded away, and she got a wild urge—to just relax against him.

“I can walk,” she said.

“Not yet. You hit your head when the vehicle flipped.”

“Which doesn’t affect my legs.” Although it explained the knot. She touched the sore spot on her head.

“It can affect your balance. You were unconscious for a bit. You might have a concussion.”

“Is the vehicle all right?” The beater was all she and Amity could afford.

“I’m more concerned about you than the transport,” he said.

“I’m fine.”

“The roof is crushed. The hood, doors, and fenders are caved in. I had trouble getting the door open and getting us out.”

If the vehicle had sustained such damage, the pottery must have been reduced to dust. Faith moaned.

“You are hurt!”

“No, my pottery! It’s all smashed, isn’t it?”

“I heard breakage,” he admitted. “But some of it might be all right.”

So much for the craft fair—and the next one. And the one after that. She could make

more pottery, but it would take a while to save up for another vehicle.

A temperamental spring stubbornly clung to winter's chill. The only warmth came from his steamy body heat. She shivered. It was cold—and dark. She could barely see his face. “Where are we going? We aren't anywhere close to a village.”

“Before we went off the road, I spotted a cottage. We're almost there. Just a few more steps, to be exact.”

She craned her neck. “I don't see any lights.”

“No,” he agreed.

“How do you know we're headed the right way?”

“I have an excellent sense of direction,” he said with a slight boast, arriving at a metal gate. It squeaked as he pushed through and moved toward the dark shape of a cottage.

“I don't think anybody's home. The place looks deserted.” She eyed shapeless, gnarled forms that were probably shrubs. The garden appeared overgrown.

“Doesn't look promising,” he agreed and stomped up rickety steps to a porch. “I'm going to set you down,” he said.

“Okay.” She needed to move under her own steam anyway. It was disturbing how much she liked being held in his arms.

He eased her to her feet.

A bit dizzy, she swayed. Instantly, he gripped her elbow.

“I’m all right.”

He rapped the heavy door knocker. No lights came on. No one called out.

“Deserted,” she said.

“Yeah.” He rapped the knocker again and pounded his fist on the door. “Hello? Anybody home?”

“Somebody would have answered by now—if only to tell us to go away.” Her shoulders slumped.

He twisted the knob. The door opened. A musty odor wafted out.

“Hello?” he called. “Nobody’s here. Let’s go in.”

“We can’t break in! This is somebody’s property!”

“You said yourself it’s deserted. Nobody has lived here in a very long time. We can go in, or we can spend the night outside in the rain.”

“I guess you’re right.” She followed him in. The interior smelled dusty and stale, and she thought she heard a skittering of rodents. But they were out of the rain. Shivering, she hugged herself. It was still cold.

He moved behind her. She heard the flip of a switch. “No lights. Not that I expected there to be.” He bumped into a table. He chuckled. “Of course,” he murmured.

There was a snap, then a tiny flash of light as he struck a match, and a second later, soft illumination lit the cottage. “No electricity,” he said. “But there are candles and matches.” He lit another from the first one, and the cabin brightened.

Candlelight caressed the angles of his face and warmed his gaze. In the shadows, he appeared even larger, fit and virile. He has to be in great shape to carry me all that way. He wasn't even out of breath.

Stomach fluttering, she tore her gaze away to inventory their accommodations.

The stone cottage consisted of a single room furnished with a hand-hewn table, two sturdy wooden chairs, and a rope bed pushed against the wall. A mattress roll lay atop the rope lattice platform. The only other furniture was a large wooden chest. Even in the dim light provided by the candles, she could see a thick layer of dust coated flat surfaces, and she spied cobwebs in the corners.

There was a fireplace. However, the small stack of logs atop the raised hearth wouldn't last long. She blew on her frozen hands. Fortunately, they'd only be stuck here for one night. Tomorrow, help would come.

She risked a glance at him. He'd removed his shirt and draped it over a chair back to dry. The sight of all that smooth bronzed skin further disturbed her shaky equilibrium. The whole situation felt weird. How could she be attracted to a stranger who looked like the late husband she despised? "You called for help, right?" she said, wiggling out of her wet jacket and hanging it over the other chair.

He pulled a shattered comm device from his pocket. "Tried to. My MCD didn't survive the tuck, duck, and roll down the embankment."

"My tech-tab was in my overnight bag." Protected by her clothes, it might have survived the impact.

"I never thought to check your bag. I saw the house. I assumed we could call for help from here."

“Well, crap.” She hugged herself. She wished she had her bag because it contained a change of clothes. She was soaked through.

“I’ll hike to the vehicle in the morning.”

“We can both go then.” She shivered. “I’ll get a fire started. I wish we had more wood.”

She knelt beside the fireplace and peered into the flue. Hopefully no bird or rodent had built a nest. She opened the damper to allow for airflow. The previous tenant had left some kindling, which she piled on the grate and lit with a candle. It caught quickly, and she nursed the flame with a gentle breath. When the fire built, she added a couple of the smaller logs.

“Excellent work! You’re like a pioneer.” He applauded.

“Necessity. I have a fireplace in my cottage. I have solar heating panels, but I supplement solar with wood. I’ve had to learn a lot of new skills since coming here.”

Mark would have made a crack like driving obviously wasn’t one of those skills, but John didn’t. He hadn’t said anything about her crashing the vehicle. “Let me check on something.” He grabbed a lit candle and stepped outside.

Peeking into the wooden chest, she was relieved to find bedding. They wouldn’t freeze tonight.

He reentered with a couple of logs under his arm. “We’re in luck! There’s wood stacked against the cottage at the end of the porch” He set his load on the hearth.

“Excellent!” She checked out the wood. It wasn’t rotted, which indicated it hadn’t been that long since the cabin’s resident had vacated—a couple of years, maybe?

However, the firewood would be well seasoned and burn easily. They'd have heat!

"How's your head?" he asked.

She touched the knot. "Sore, but I don't have a headache, if that's what you mean." Her hip and shoulder ached, no doubt from the impact. In the light of day, she'd probably discover many bruises.

"If you can hold the candle, I can bring in more wood," he said.

"Let's do it."

After he brought in a couple of armloads, they decided they had enough to last the night. He brushed dirt and leaves from his chest, and she tried not to stare. She'd always thought Mark handsome, but she'd never reacted so viscerally to him.

"Um, there are blankets in the trunk, I found." She pointed.

"Great. Heat. Bed. Blankets—this is almost like staying at the Happy Night Inn."

She chuckled.

"What's this?" He strode to a sliding panel against the back wall.

"Storage closet maybe?"

He pushed the panel to the side.

"What is it?" She couldn't see around him.

"A lavatory...of sorts."

“Oh, thank goodness. We won’t have to use an outhouse.” Or squat outside. She hadn’t thought that far ahead, but she was immensely grateful for indoor facilities.

“They don’t really use outhouses, do they?” he asked.

“In some of the remote areas, they do.”

Bringing a candle, she peered into the lavatory.

There was a commode. A metal tub on a wooden stand under a hand pump served as a sink. A large bladder with a nozzle hung over a bigger metal tub on the floor.

“It has a shower.”

“A cold shower—unless you heat up the water first.” She pumped the sink faucet. With a groan, it spit out rusty-brown water. A person would emerge dirtier after bathing. She wrinkled her nose. “Maybe if we run it for a while it will turn clear.” She wasn’t going to bathe in or drink rusty water.

She surveyed the cabin amenities. A cabinet stood against the side wall, along with a short counter atop upon which sat another corrugated metal sink-bucket and hand pump. In the fireplace, she noticed a metal swing arm with a hook and a cast-iron pot on the hearth. “I guess they heated water over the fire.”

“Looks that way.” He strode to the water pump in the main part of the cabin and cranked the handle.

Taking a candle, she moved closer. Brown. Ugh. No thanks.

Her stomach let out a growl of hunger. If they hadn’t crashed, they would have been at their destination, enjoying dinner in a bistro or café. There were snacks in her bag,

but it was in the vehicle. “I wonder if there’s anything to eat in here.”

She opened the cabinet door. Rodents had gotten into a sack of legumes on the lower shelf, but on the upper shelf, she spied several sealed jars. “Bonanza!” she cried.

“What did you find?” He continued to pump. The water didn’t look nearly as brown.

“Peaches.” She plunked a jar on the counter. She blew off the dust and squinted at another. “And...potatoes.”

“Do you think they’re safe to eat?” he asked dubiously.

“As long as they’re sealed, they’ll last for years.”

“Well, good because it looks like that’s how long it’s been here.”

“You can sample them first,” she joked.

“Gee, thanks.”

“We can heat up the potatoes in the fireplace.” She snagged the cast-iron pot from the hearth. “Let’s wash this out.”

The water ran clear now, so he rinsed out the pot, and Faith opened the potatoes and emptied them into the pan. Using a fireplace poker, she adjusted the swivel arm over the fire and hung the pot.

John rinsed the empty jar. “Now we have a drinking glass.” He filled the container and took a sip and then handed it to her. “Water tastes fine. Better than fine, actually.”

“Well water. I didn’t realize water didn’t need to taste like chemicals until I came to Terra Nova.” She took a drink. “We’ll have to eat with our fingers.”

He bent the jar lid into a crescent. “A spoon, madam.”

“That will work.”

“I’m assuming we’ll eat the peaches tonight, too?” he asked.

Her stomach growled. “My stomach says yes.”

He opened the peach jar and then bent that lid into another scoop. “Another spoon. Let’s move closer to the fire, where it’s warmer.”

“Good idea.” The fire was throwing heat, but the tiny cabin wasn’t warm yet.

After setting the jar of peaches on the hearth, he dragged the rope bed near the fire, unrolled the thin mattress, and spread it out.

“When you said move closer to the fire, I didn’t know you meant the furniture.”

“Beats sitting on the floor or standing up in front of the fire. We need the chairs to dry our clothes. I’m hoping by morning my shirt will be dry.”

He hadn’t worn a coat, so he’d gotten far wetter than her. But while her jacket and his body had shielded her from much of the rain, her shirt and pants felt clammy, and she didn’t relish sleeping in them. “We ought to drape the rest of our clothes over the chairs.”

“Much as I’d love to see you naked, I don’t think you’d feel comfortable.”

He desired to see her naked? Awareness and arousal hummed beneath the surface of their casual conversation and cooperation. Her nipples tightened, and not because of the cabin's chill. She already had a good idea what he looked like naked, having seen her late husband many times. But as her gaze took in his muscular chest and biceps, she realized he was more toned and defined than Mark had been. Were there...other differences? She resisted dropping her gaze.

The chilly cabin suddenly felt very warm.

Maybe I am concussed. The knock on the head rattled my brain. "We're adults; these are exigent circumstances." Faking nonchalant confidence, she met his gaze, only to go weak at the knees at the longing in his eyes. Mark had never looked at her with such naked yearning. "We can...uh...wrap ourselves in the blankets I found."

"We'd both be warm," he agreed.

"Yes." She already felt like she had a fever. "I'll get the blankets."

"I'll get the potatoes. Looks like they're hot." Using a fireplace poker, he removed the pot of bubbling potatoes from the hook and set it on the hearth. A bland meal, but it would be filling.

There were three blankets in the chest; she removed and shook out all three, noting a few holes eaten by moths or rodents. They were barely large enough to cover the mattress, but they would serve their purpose.

She handed one to John, spread another over the mattress, and kept a third for herself.

Okay, this is awkward. Modesty wasn't the issue—not exactly. She could duck into the lavatory to undress, but somehow that seemed more awkward, like making much ado about nothing.

But this didn't seem like nothing. To shed her clothes would be to let her guard down, to be vulnerable. That felt momentous.

Act natural. She didn't know what natural was anymore. Normalcy had gotten entangled with a false sense of familiarity and unexpected attraction. John didn't act or talk like Mark—except for that frightening transformation in the vehicle—but the comfort and connection in his presence had to be an illusion due to his resemblance to her late husband whom she'd once loved. Didn't it?

He's the one.

Could she trust her judgment? Did she dare allow herself to be vulnerable? Did she dare to care?

Overthinking, much?

Ducking her head, Faith unbuttoned her shirt.

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Bragg sensed Faith's discomfort, so he turned his back to give her privacy. Clothing rustled as she disrobed. Taking his blanket, he sat in a chair to remove his shoes.

Shoes off, he tugged his wet, clingy pants down his hips and hung them over the chair with his shirt, leaving the other chair for her. Listening to her progress, he wrapped the blanket around himself and secured it. He hesitated but then slipped his briefs off and set them out to dry. Covered by the blanket, his hard-on wasn't that noticeable, and the candlelight and fire left the cottage more dark than illuminated.

Fabric rustled and whispered, and then she said, "Okay, I'm decent."

Her blanket covered her from armpit to ankle but left her shoulders and neck exposed. Heat sizzled into his groin.

She hooked her slacks over the left side of the chair's top rail, and her shirt and a camisole bralette over the right. He swallowed, trying not to think about naked breasts.

I'm acting like a horny high school student. Or what he'd imagined one would act like. He'd never been a teenager, nor attended school; his education, such as it was, had been accelerated tutoring. And he'd become somewhat of an autodidact.

There was nothing he could study to help with this situation. He flew by the seat of his pants, making it up as he went along, unwilling to squander a second of this serendipitous opportunity. Hammond had enjoyed years with her; Bragg had less than three weeks. He never would have wished for a vehicle accident, and he regretted she'd miss the craft fair she'd counted on, but a selfish part of him celebrated the turn

of events. He had her all to himself for a night.

“Let’s eat,” he said.

They sat on the edge of the bed and faced the fireplace, Bragg positioning himself to conceal his hard-on. They ate directly from the pot, using jar lids to cut the potatoes into bite-sized chunks and then scooping them out. He couldn’t remember a more enjoyable meal than this candlelight dinner getaway in a romantic cabin with the woman he loved. The potatoes were starchy and bland, the cabin musty, dusty, and cold, and his attire itched and scratched, but none of that mattered. He was with Faith.

He ached to touch her. At times, he sensed a reciprocal awareness, spied a glint of arousal in her eyes, but wariness and distance remained in evidence, too. While he had loved her for years, she hadn’t known he existed. And when she met him—she’d mistaken him for her late husband. She wasn’t pining away, nor had she been fooled by Hammond’s glib patois, but she had loved him once. She might still harbor vestiges of tender feelings—or, perhaps worse, residual animosity. He didn’t want her to hate or love him because he reminded her of Hammond.

Bragg tried to be his natural, authentic self around her. But that was the problem with trying—it automatically turned natural into artificial. Wishing to convince her of his unique personhood, he preferred to distance himself as much as he could from his rival. Then she asked to see his impersonation—the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

She’d insisted. He’d caved, unable to refuse her anything, even if it was to his detriment.

In shock, she’d crashed the vehicle.

But now, here they were.

He snuck a glance at her. Firelight becomes you. She was so damn beautiful—large, expressive eyes, smooth skin, soft and full pink lips. A stubborn little chin and a pert nose. But dark smudges marred her shoulders and upper arms—the formation of bruises. Her safety harness had broken mid-tumble. She'd gotten knocked around; he'd heard the smack of her head hitting the doorframe.

I'm such an ass! He'd been so preoccupied by her nearness, reveling in his good fortune to be alone with her, he'd completely forgotten she could be concussed! She could have been seriously hurt or even killed.

“How do you feel—” he said.

“This is rather rom—” she said at the same time.

They laughed.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“No, you first.”

“How's your head? Any dizziness? Headache?”

“Minor.” She rolled her shoulders. “I expect to have aches and pains in the morning—as well as some colorful spots.”

“You could have been badly hurt.”

“But I wasn't. And it would have been my own fault for not paying attention.”

“I distracted you.”

“I insisted. I asked you to show...him to me.”

But she really hadn't understood what she was asking. He had. “It was my fault.”

“In that case—you take the last potato,” she said nonsensically.

“We can split it,” he said.

They bumped hands as each reached for the potato with their scoops. His heart thudded. “What were you going to say?”

She drew her brows together. “When—oh.” She averted her gaze for a moment then looked at him again. “I was going to say that all of this”—her wave encompassed the cottage, the fire, the candlelight, their proximity—“is rather, uh, romantic.”

His mouth dried. “Is that good or bad?”

“Depends on whether or not you're going to kiss me.”

Everything stopped. His heart. His breathing. Time. He'd swear the fire stopped flickering and froze in place. “Kiss you?”

“Forget it. I'm sorry. I misread the situation.” Her face flushed, and she averted her head.

“No. No, you didn't. God, no, you didn't.” He cupped her cheek and turned her face. “I was afraid to hope. I know how confusing this must be. I don't want you to have regrets—”

She planted her lips on his. Noble resistance caved to longing and desire. He kissed her, tempering need with softness. She sighed against his mouth and melted against

him. Her lips parted, and he sought entry, his tongue twining with hers. She tasted like potatoes and hope, sunshine and promises.

He pulled her closer, and she curled her arms around his neck.

For years, he'd dreamed of her kissing him, the real him. The previous time they'd kissed, she'd believed him to be her husband. No pretense this time. She's kissing me, not him. He reeled from the glory of it all.

Light and slow became deep and hard, fantasy becoming reality. He paused, and her eyelids fluttered open. She smiled against his mouth and nibbled at his lower lip, her tongue teasing.

He brought her hand to his chest where his heart thumped. "This is what you do to me." You always have. Such a confession might scare her. The depth of his emotion was too great, their acquaintanceship too brief.

"You do the same to me." She pressed his hand to her chest. Her heart raced as strongly.

A thrill rushed through him, but an insidious little voice tempered the joy. But can she love me? Sexual desire isn't love. No one knew that better than him. He hadn't been celibate. Just the opposite—he'd tried to forget her with other women. It had failed miserably, the sexual congress causing him to ache all the more for her.

Her eyes glowed with arousal—or was that the firelight? Did he dare trust that she desired him as much as he wanted her? And if she did, what did that mean? What was he to her? She'd asked him to imitate Hammond. Did she wish to compare the two of them in bed? Insecurity paraded that horrible thought.

She wouldn't do that. She's not crass. He gave his insecurity a hard shove and sent it

tumbling away.

She leaned in and kissed him, and he was powerless to resist her invitation and the urgency of his own longing. He covered her breast with his palm. Through the blanket, he touched her hard nipple. His cock throbbed. If she hadn't been aware of his erection before, she couldn't not notice how the blanket tented.

Sensation stormed his body, but his operative mind remained calculating, cognizant of the clock tick, tick, ticking away the moments, the possibilities. He had to report to HQ in less than three weeks. Unless he could extend his leave...

An extension only postponed the inevitable. He had to return to Earth. If he didn't go to Dark Ops, they would come for him. That could not happen! If they learned about him reaching out to Faith, they would eliminate the problem by eliminating her. The organization did not leave loose ends.

He had tonight, plus almost three weeks, and would make the most of it. But, however fast time flew by, he didn't wish to rush her into something she would regret.

"Maybe we should...finish our dinner. Eat some peaches." His breath sounded ragged in his ears. His pulse raced. His cock ached.

She tilted her head and pursed her lips. "Maybe after"—she leaned in—"I kiss you again."

He gave her the kiss she asked for then summoned his willpower and reached for the jar of peaches on the hearth.

"Okay." She mock-pouted and took the jar, scooping out a slice then chewing it slowly.

He riveted on a bead of peach juice on her lip. He stifled a groan. “How is it?”

“See for yourself.” She licked the juice off her lip and passed him the jar. Firelight danced in her eyes, and her lips curved with a sly smile that left no doubt what was on her mind.

“I would hate for you to have regrets,” he said.

“Until you came, I didn’t think I was ready to...see anybody. You’ve made me realize five years of solitude is enough.” She shrugged. “I feel a connection to you. Maybe it’s because you look like Mark—”

He felt like she’d kicked him in the nuts.

“But I honestly don’t think that’s it. First, that would be a turn-off, not a turn-on, and second, you are your own person. You are you, not somebody else.”

He could breathe again.

“I know you can’t stay, but I’m hoping that while you’re here we can make the most of the time.”

Her words echoed his thoughts, but she’d gone from fainting when she saw him to reluctantly agreeing to coffee to desiring his company? Could he trust that? “What do you think we should do?” he asked. His cock had a rock-hard suggestion, but he tried to think with his rational brain.

She lifted a shoulder in a casual shrug. “I’ll tell you what I don’t want.”

“What’s that?”

“Peaches.” She took the jar and set it back on the hearth.

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He probably had no idea how much his face expressed his longing, desire, and fear. His vulnerability called to her, stirring her own yearning for a deep, binding connection—a soul mate. When she'd married, she assumed she'd found everlasting love, but her husband hadn't loved her. She suspected he didn't even like her.

More than an artist and an entrepreneur, she was a passionate woman with a need to be held, hugged, kissed, loved. She desired a man's touch, company, warmth, strength, devotion.

Not any man's— this man's. Sometime between departing Willow Wood, crashing, and reaching the cabin, inner turbulence and ambivalence had calmed. You're the one I've been waiting for.

John was a good person. Honorable and honest. Logic might question how she could be certain when she'd been wrong before, but her prescient, intuitive inner wisdom had no doubts.

He's the one.

Her inner wisdom had recognized him when she opened her cottage door and found him standing there. Her eyes had deceived her, mistaking him for Mark. But her inner wisdom wouldn't let her turn away. It urged her to take her pleasure, make lasting memories.

They should have had forever, but it couldn't be so. His imminent departure would bring sorrow and tears, but that motivated her to capture and savor every precious second.

He stared at her, wary, uncertain, hopeful.

She felt bold, seductive, powerful. Mostly.

She palmed his smooth, heated chest. His heart was racing.

“Wh-what are you doing?” he asked.

“Trying to seduce you.”

For an instant, his face contorted, almost with pain, and her face flooded with heat. Misread this one. She started to drop her hands and back off, find a dark corner to slink into, but then he said with a heart-stopping grin, “Let me help you with that,” and planted his mouth on hers.

She melded into his embrace, craving his attention, his touch, sighing with blissful satisfaction as his soft lips coaxed and caressed while he massaged her bare shoulders.

Then a dam broke. His mouth sought entry, his tongue wrangling with hers. Firm hands gripped her hair as he crushed her against his chest. A rough, raw groan emanated from his throat. She all but swooned in his arms, going pliant, clinging to him.

Her nipples tightened, and her pussy let down a surge of wetness, his desire intensifying her own.

The sarong of the blanket came undone and slipped to her hips, or maybe he’d released it. She tugged at his, and then she pressed her nude body against hot, naked male flesh. His erection throbbed against her abdomen.

He kissed her throat, and she moaned with pleasure, arching her neck. Hot tingles sizzled through her, her pussy drenching as he nuzzled sensitive skin.

They stretched out on the mattress. Firelight danced across his muscular chest and his face, the heated fervor and vulnerable longing causing her breath to catch. Her ex had never, ever looked at her with such desire and devotion. A hot thrill ran through her.

Didn't every woman wish to be loved, desired by the man in her life? Thinking of him as the man in her life would bring bitter heartbreak. He'd been clear and honest why and when he had to leave. They had tonight, and maybe a few weeks. It would have to be enough.

She stifled the insidious hunger for more before it undermined the pleasure. They could enjoy passion, caring, respect, and friendship, but not a long-term relationship. Loving him would lead to heartbreak. She did not need her heart broken again.

Pulling her close, John kissed her and caressed her breast, stroking the nipple to greater hardness. She arched under his touch, disturbing worries evaporating into the ether. She trailed a hand over his shoulder, biceps, and torso. Smooth skin stretched taut over firm muscle. Her fingers lightly probed a puckered scar under his rib cage, and a wispy memory crept in from the shadows, but vanished into the ether as she continued her journey for the holy grail.

His cock. The long, thick shaft was hot in her hand. Copious precum pearled at the meatus of the soft crown. He sucked in his breath as she pumped then jerked as she took him in her mouth. "Oh god," he groaned, tangling his hands in her hair.

He submitted to the pleasurable torment but then pulled her away and retaliated, kissing his way down her body then spreading her legs and burying his face in her pussy.

“Oh lord. Good. So good,” she groaned as he unerringly found the exact spot and rhythm to drive her insane with pleasure. Again, an unbidden, unwanted comparison snaked into consciousness. Mark had disliked oral sex. Correction: he’d relished receiving. Giving, not at all. The few times he’d acquiesced, he’d acted like he was under great duress, and he hadn’t been very good at it, so she’d stopped asking—which had probably been the point.

But John? He was good . Tension coiled, her pussy began to flutter, stars exploded behind her eyes, and she came with a shuddering cry. He didn’t pull away then but scooted up and pulled her into his arms, caressing her back, shoulders, hips in long soothing yet arousing strokes.

Tongues mated, and his hands explored again. The way he laved and sucked on her nipples sent curls of sensation straight to her still-fluttering womb and pussy. She raced toward the peak again, and, this time, she urged him to mount her. “Now, please now.”

He slid between her legs, and she hooked her heels around his thighs. His cock found her entrance. Facial muscles tensed, and his eyes glowed fever-bright as he rocked inside, “So long, so long, so long,” he murmured. He seated himself, and corded muscles in his throat strained. He swallowed.

She moved her hips in encouragement, and he began to thrust, each plunge and withdrawal tightening the spiral of desire. He ducked his head and found her mouth in a wet, intimate kiss pantomiming the dance of their lower bodies. Together, they moved in perfect sync, friction, and rhythm.

Her body suffused with heat. “I’m going to come again,” she gasped against his neck.

“Yes, yes.” He jerked, his hips pounding faster, harder.

She climaxed on a wave of sensation, her womb contracting, her pussy squeezing his cock. He emitted a shuddering groan as he orgasmed, thrusting hard and fast, his body convulsing.

When his tremors ceased, he rolled to the side and wrapped arms and legs around her in a full-body hug. He kissed her temple, making her aware of the dampness of her hair.

“I’m a bit sweaty,” she said self-consciously.

His arms tightened. “You’re a bit perfect.”

“Just a bit?” she teased.

She felt him smile against her head. “More than a bit.”

She snuggled closer. He was a bit sweaty, too. And a bit perfect. She couldn’t remember the last time sex had left her feeling so connected and relaxed. She sighed. “That’s a happy sigh,” she said, in case he misunderstood.

“The best kind.”

A log popped, spraying sparks. “The fire will need more wood to last the night,” she murmured.

“I can make some wood,” he whispered against her ear.

She giggled.

“How about I toss a log on the fire—and then show you my wood?” He slipped out of bed, and she rolled up onto her side to watch him. Taut buttocks and back muscles

shifted as he tossed a couple of logs on the fire. She caught a glimpse of his front. He was making more wood!

“If you’re ready for dessert, we can have the peaches now.” He picked up the jar on the hearth.

“I’m ready for dessert, but not peaches.” She waggled her eyebrows.

With a grin, he set the jar on the table away from the heat. Scooping up a fallen blanket, he approached the bed. She ogled him, sweeping her gaze from his broad shoulders, down his washboard abs, to his hard-on—then upward to rivet on the white, puckered skin below his ribs.

Mark had that scar. He’d come home from a business trip with stitches and a prescription for antibiotics, but no good explanation for the injury, just a muttered, impatient mention of a window grate.

An icy shiver skittered up her spine. “That scar.” Scars resulted from injury after birth. They weren’t genetic or congenital.

He dropped his smile and his gaze, fingering the area. Then he met her eyes. “After Hammond got himself knifed, Dark Ops stabbed me so I’d match.”

“They stabbed you?”

“More or less surgically, but they cut me to make a scar. I got a topical anesthetic, anyway,” he explained, providing more information than Mark had.

“That’s—that’s...barbaric.”

“I had to match him physically in order to be him. When I assumed his place,

someone could have noticed the absence of a scar.” His mouth quirked. “I’m lucky he didn’t lose a kidney.”

“That’s not funny!” How could he be so nonchalant? The more she heard about the organization, the less she respected them, and her opinion hadn’t started out high. She shouldn’t have doubted his authenticity. But after the lies and betrayals, trust didn’t come easy anymore. Pressure built in her cheeks with an urge to cry.

He crawled into bed and cradled her against his chest. “Hey, it’s okay. Bad joke. They wouldn’t remove my kidney. Kidneys aren’t visible.”

“What if he’d lost an eye? Would they have blinded you, too?”

His silence chilled her to the bone.

“What is wrong with those people? How can they do that?”

“There’s no one to stop them. No one is aware of the agency other than those in it, so they operate unchecked.”

Mark’s enlistment in Dark Ops made sense. He would enjoy the power, the secret, feeling superior to those not in the know. But John was a gentle soul with a caring heart. He hadn’t chosen to enlist—the organization had created him. He’d been born into it. “Do clones ever leave?”

“After they’ve served their time.”

“Sounds like a prison sentence.”

“Not quite. You do get paid, and you get vacations.”

“So when can you quit?”

“After I’ve served out Hammond’s term—plus or minus.”

“How long is that?”

“As long as Dark Ops says it is. The rules are a little different for me than most.”

“But you didn’t choose it. You didn’t enlist.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You don’t have any recourse?”

“It is what it is,” he said.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:06 am

Bragg awakened to a dead arm and a cold cabin. The fire had gone out, and a sleeping Faith pillowed her head on his shoulder and arm. His entire body could go numb before he'd disturb her.

He still couldn't believe what had happened last night; making love with her had been heaven, but, having sampled paradise, the future seemed bleaker. How could he bear to walk away? How would he live without her? He wished they never had to leave this cabin, wished they could stay here eating potatoes for the rest of their lives.

She hadn't been wrong to compare Dark Ops to prison. Hammond had enlisted for five years, reupping for another stint prior to his death. If he'd still been alive, he'd have been free and clear about now. Not so his clone.

Clones served for as long as Dark Ops deemed them useful, and Hammond's public death complicated Bragg's situation. When allowed to part ways, he would still have to clear where he could live and who he could associate with. It would be more like parole than retirement.

And that's if they released him. If he didn't get killed first.

This time on Terra Nova was all he would ever have with Faith. Further leave would be very closely monitored.

She stirred. "Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Yes."

“How long have you been up?”

“Not long. How’s your head this morning? No headache?”

“My head is good. My body aches like I tumbled down an embankment.” She chuckled. “Is it morning?” She squinted at gray light filtering through dirty windows.

“Morning,” he confirmed with a sigh.

“We leave today. If we can get the vehicle running.”

“I’m no mechanic, but I doubt that’s possible. We can call for help with your tech-tab.”

“Oh, yeah. Good idea.” The reluctance in her tone buoyed his spirits a little. She doesn’t wish to leave this cabin either.

“We have peaches for breakfast.” Her gaze alighted on the fruit they’d never gotten around to eating.

“We do,” he agreed. “Would you like a shower this morning?”

“I would love one—but not with cold water. I’ll wait until we return to civilization.”

“I can heat water in the fireplace,” he explained. “No sense hiking to the vehicle until it’s light.”

“In that case, I’d love a hot shower.”

“Your wish is my command.” He pressed a kiss to her mouth before slipping out of bed into air cold enough to shrivel his nuts. His blanket from the night before puddled

on the floor. He snagged it and wrapped it around himself then eyed the fireplace. He'd never built a fire. On Earth, if you needed heat, you flipped a switch. He would hate to embarrass himself by appearing inept.

But he'd watched her do it. Live and learn.

Sitting on the hearth, he poked at the ash with a metal hook and discovered a few sizable embers. He added kindling then blew on the embers until the sticks caught fire. When the blaze seemed steady, he placed a couple of small logs atop the burning kindling. They caught fire.

"Good job!" She clapped.

He grinned at her. "I'm a quick study."

Grabbing the metal pot, he headed to the water pump, stopping along the way to feel their clothing.

"Are they dry?"

"Dryer than last night, anyway. There are a few damp spots." He set the pot on the table and rearranged the clothing to expose the damp spots to air, although they probably wouldn't be here long enough to make a difference.

He peeked into the pantry and discovered several jars pushed all the way to the back. "Two more jars of potatoes and three more peaches!" he announced.

"Whoever lived here must have liked potatoes and peaches," she said.

"Or disliked potatoes and peaches and left them behind," he suggested.

“What’s not to like?”

“Nothing, but I could sure go for bacon this morning. Or sausage. Or a sweet-roll. Hot coffee—”

“Stop! Stop! You’re killing me.”

He laughed. “Sorry.” His stomach rumbled for the foods he couldn’t have, but if he had to choose between bacon and Faith, she’d win every time.

After hanging the pot on the swivel arm in the fireplace, he added a large log to get the fire burning hotter, spread his blanket atop the one on the mattress, and crawled under the covers to wait for the water to heat. He pulled her close.

“Your feet are like ice!” she exclaimed.

“The floor is cold. I recommend we stay in bed until the place warms up.”

“Good idea.”

In companionable silence, they held each other, listening to the fire pop. Her breasts were soft against his ribs, and he could feel the beat of her heart. He reveled in being stranded—thanking the deer that darted across the road—yet couldn’t forget how fleeting time was.

Her stomach growled.

“Sounds like somebody’s ready for breakfast.” He grinned.

She eyed the jar on the table across the room. “Somebody’s going to have to get those peaches.”

“I get the hint. That means me.” He started to fling off the covers.

“I’ll do it. I need to use the bathroom anyway.” She slipped out of bed. “Holy beejeezus, it’s cold!”

Not as cold as it had been. The fire had already taken the edge off. He tossed her the second blanket from the bed. “Wrap yourself in this.”

She draped the blanket around her shoulders. “Have some p-p-peaches.” She handed him the jar and a scoop and then darted into the water closet. He got out of bed and checked the pot of water. Getting warm! She emerged a minute or two later with the shower bladder, set it by the hearth, and dove into bed.

“Now, who has cold feet?” he asked.

“You didn’t eat,” she said.

“I waited for you.”

They passed the jar and scoop between them, finishing off the peaches. “You want more?” he asked. “Or some potatoes? There are those extra jars.”

“Let’s save them for the next guests,” she said. “I wonder how many pots of hot water we’ll need.”

“Two.”

“You sound sure.”

“I estimate the bag holds three pots. One pot of boiling water would be enough to heat two pots of cold, but pouring boiling water into the bladder without scalding

myself will be tricky. So, two pots of hot-not-boiling plus one of cold should give you a decent shower.”

“What about you?”

“While you’re cleaning up, I’ll heat the next batch. The first batch is probably hot enough now.”

Pouring the water from the pot into the narrow neck of the bladder proved tricky until Bragg figured out he could use a jar to scoop and pour. He set the bladder on the hearth, refilled the pot with cold, and hung it over the fire to heat up. The fireplace threw good heat, so he moved the chairs closer in to hasten the drying of their clothing.

“You take good care of me,” she said when he was back in bed.

He would take care of her for the rest of his life if he could. “Anything for you.”

She scanned his face. “You mean that.”

“I do.”

“Why me?” she asked.

“From the moment I saw you, there was never anybody else for me.” It had been love at first sight. He would die for her. He just couldn’t stay with her.

Dark Ops would hunt him down like a dog and euthanize him. And her, too; otherwise, he would have taken his chances and gone AWOL.

“You’re an incredible man.”

“Yeah, I’m unbelievable, all right.” A replica of a human being, he loved a woman he couldn’t have.

“I meant it as a compliment,” she said.

“Thank you, then.”

“I mean it!” She straddled his lap and palmed his face. “Listen to me! Don’t you know how special I think you are?”

His breath caught in his throat as he read the sincerity in her face, saw the warmth and tenderness in her eyes. She means it!

“If I didn’t think you were special and unique, I wouldn’t be here with you. I wouldn’t have asked you to attend the craft fair with me, and I damn sure wouldn’t have slept with you or be sitting on your lap stark naked.”

“We’re not moving too fast? You don’t have reservations?”

“Yes and yes. This is all very unexpected and unlike me, but maybe I don’t want to be me anymore. I want to be the woman who met an intriguing man who turns her on and has the courage to act on it.”

“I turn you on?”

“You know you do.” She wiggled. “As soon as that water heats up, I’ll take a shower, and then I’ll show you how much—again.”

* * * *

While she showered, he heated water for himself. When she emerged with a

seductive curve to her lips and a promise in her eyes, he rushed through his shower, making do with lukewarm water. Who needed hot water when he had a hot woman waiting for him?

Hot indeed. One bout of lovemaking led to a second and then a brief nap before they awakened and did it again.

Curled in each other's arms, relaxed and sated, he reveled in the closeness. He hated having to leave the cabin, Terra Nova, Faith.

So, don't. Stay here.

Her head moved on his shoulder. She sighed and stretched. "We're either going to have to eat potatoes for lunch or go to the vehicle and get help."

Staying here to eat potatoes sounded wonderful, but he said, "You're right. I'm not sure of the time, but I'm guessing it's almost noon." Midday sun streamed through the windows to spotlight dancing dust motes. In the light of day, the cabin appeared even more dusty and dingy, but there was no place he'd rather be.

She kissed him and then got up to dress. He ogled her, seeing her nude for the first time in bright light. Damn, she was beautiful and sexy. Despite the passionate workout, his cock readied for another round.

He'd started to grab her wrist, pull her back into bed, when she said, "I'm hoping enough pottery is intact to enable me to do one day of the craft show—if I can get somebody to take us there. Amity and I will need the money, seeing how I crashed our sole mode of transportation."

"Let's go see," he said.

She pulled on her underwear.

He donned his clothes. They were mostly dry.

When they were both dressed, they set about restoring the cabin to its previous state, pushing the bed against the wall, rolling up the mattress, and returning the blankets to the chest. They rinsed the empty jars and set them on the counter.

“Should we lock the door?” she asked as they stepped onto the porch.

“It wasn’t locked when we found it.”

“Right. And maybe we’re not the only ones to use this as a way station.”

“It came in handy for us.” He surveyed the landscape. Weeds cluttered the overgrown garden, the shrubs in need of pruning. Beyond the gate, the countryside appeared lush and green, the freshness of rain tinging the air. Hills, daunting in the dark, appeared much more manageable.

“The vehicle is...thataway?” She pointed in the wrong direction.

“If memory serves, it’s this way.” He pointed to the opposite rise.

She grinned. “You must have been a Boy Scout,” she teased and then sobered. “You weren’t, were you? You couldn’t have been.”

“No.” Scouting was for kids. He’d never been a child. Again, the reminder that he was a 3-D copy stuck like a knife in his gut. “But I received ranger training so I could navigate through unfamiliar terrain. I have a better sense of direction than Hammond.” He paused then attempted a joke. “And I’m better looking, too.”

“You’re better than Mark in all respects,” she said. “Your expressions are different, transformative. He was an asshole, and it showed on his face.”

Yet she’d mistaken him for Hammond when he’d shown up at her cottage. But how could he blame her? He was the man’s genetic double. He shoved his insecurity into a dark closet and slammed the door.

They set out, tromping across wet, spongy ground. Reaching the crest of the hill, they peered down into the draw at the vehicle on its roof.

Faith winced. “It took a beating.”

“Maybe it’s not as bad as it looks. We can’t know for sure until we get closer. Careful, it’s slippery going down,” he warned and took her hand.

At the bottom of the hill, it wasn’t any more reassuring. Roof, fenders, and hood had crumpled like paper. The windshield had been shattered, the doors dented—and that was just the body damage.

“Dammit!” She kicked the vehicle.

The door on the far side hung open—he’d forced his way out after the crash. Everything inside appeared topsy-turvy. “You wait here. There’s broken glass. I’ll find the tech-tab.”

“In a brown tote.”

He squeezed inside. It took a while to find the bag, which had gotten wedged between the other door and the seat. “Got it!” He passed her the purse. “I’ll check on your pottery.”

He squeezed halfway under the seats to take a look. Wooden crates lay every which way, tops off, contents scattered, broken pottery everywhere.

“Well?” she called.

“It doesn’t look good.”

“I’m coming in,” she said. “I want to see.”

He’d prefer she remain outside, but this was her livelihood. “Okay. Be careful.”

Moments later, she wiggled in beside him. “Oh no.” She picked up a broken plate.

“Some pieces are still good.” He pointed to a couple of intact coffee cups. “Let’s separate the good from the broken, assess what we have. Maybe it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“I left my bag outside. I haven’t checked the tech-tab. This vehicle isn’t going anywhere without a tow. Let me get a rescue in the works, and then I’ll sort.”

“I’ll start while you do that,” he said.

“Back in a few.” She scooted out of the vehicle.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:06 am

Faith had to hike halfway up the hill before she could get a weak signal on the tech-tab. Much as she preferred Terra Nova's slower, relaxed, bucolic environment to Earth's frenetic metropolis, she did miss the communication system.

After several tries, she got the tech-tab to connect to Terra Com and searched for a repair shop willing to retrieve the vehicle and pick them up and drop them off in Willow Wood. There were only three shops within striking distance. The first two only did repairs; they didn't tow. She crossed her fingers as she contacted the third.

"Yeah, we can do that," said the mechanic.

"Oh, thank goodness!"

"Provided you don't need it right away."

"When can you come?"

"Tomorrow sometime."

"Tomorrow!"

"We're swamped. Lotta folks had accidents due to the wet roads."

"All right. Tomorrow will work." What other option did they have? "Can you lock onto my device for the geo-location? I'm not in a village."

"Got you right here."

“Any idea when you’ll arrive tomorrow?”

“Some...be...sun...do...” The connection started to cut out. The Terra Nova Communication Network was often spotty.

“What was that?” She scooted higher up the hill, hoping to improve the connection.

“Sometime between sunup and sundown.”

They’d have to sit out by the wrecked vehicle all day. “All right. Thank you.” At least she’d gotten somebody. And they could spend another night in their love nest!

While she still had a decent connection, she pinged Amity at the shop to give her the news.

“How’s the craft fair?” Amity asked right away.

“That’s why I called. We never got there. A deer ran across the road, and I, um, crashed the vehicle.”

“Oh my gosh? Were you hurt? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. But I’m afraid the vehicle may be totaled. I’m sorry,” she said. Her friend had put up half the money. Now Amity didn’t have transportation either.

“Vehicles can be replaced. You can’t. I’m glad you’re all right. John is fine?”

“He’s fine.”

Faith heard a bell ring. Someone had entered the shop.

“Welcome to All Fired Up. Can I help you find something?” Amity beamed a bright smile at a customer Faith couldn’t see.

“Just browsing. Thought I’d pop in and take a look around,” a smooth baritone voice said.

“Let me know if you need help.” Amity smiled again, tucked her hair behind her ear, and then addressed Faith. “How are you two getting along? Is it weird?”

“Surprisingly...unweird.” Amazing. “I’ll fill you in when I get home. The earliest I could get a retrieval and a ride is tomorrow. I won’t get into Willow Wood until late.”

“The craft fair is a total no-go?”

“Yeah. No way to get there, and a lot of pottery got broken. Not sure how much yet.”

“Well, shit.”

The loss would cost them financially, but she wasn’t as upset about it as she might have been. We get to spend another night together. Just us. No interruptions.

“You’re smiling?” Amity frowned.

“I’m enjoying the time with John.” Verity glanced at the vehicle. “I need to go,” she said, “but tell me about your Cosmic Mates match. Did you meet him yet?”

Her friend looked like she’d tasted spoiled food.

“It didn’t go well?”

“He...a...ake.” Her words broke up as the screen filled with snow.

Stupid Terra Com! “What did you say?”

“He’s a snake!”

“He was a jerk? I’m sorry.”

“Not...his pers...lity...his sp...”

Dammit. “What was that?”

“He’s Nagarian.”

Faith’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were.” Amity shuddered. “His torso and face looked humanoid—but his bottom half was scaly, slithery snake! He crawled into the café and hissed at me, and I honestly don’t remember what I said, but I think I knocked over a table when I ran out. I may have screamed.”

Amity was a kind, accepting, open-minded person with a major snake phobia. Even on vid, the reptiles freaked her out.

“I feel bad. He ventured all this way. I did say I was willing to meet an alien,” she said, her expression a mix of guilt and horror.

“It’s not your fault. That was a bad match. You and a snake-man are not compatible.” She frowned. “Hey, wait a minute—didn’t his profile say human ? Am I remembering it right?”

“Yes! And all his photos were from the waist up.”

“He lied,” Faith said.

“Probably he has a hard time meeting women because he is half snake and hoped when I met him, it wouldn’t matter.”

Her friend would give him the benefit of the doubt, but Faith wasn’t going to. “You can’t misrepresent yourself and pretend to be someone you’re not. It’s wrong, and Cosmic Mates can’t make compatible matches if clients aren’t truthful.”

John’s honesty had impressed her. After her painful past, she insisted on complete transparency.

“That makes...feel...little better. I hate...hurt...eelings.” The connection started breaking up again. Then: “Can I help you? Do you have a question?” Amity turned her head, addressing the customer in the shop.

“We’re breaking up, and you need to take care of business,” Faith said. “Don’t expect me in town before tomorrow night. I’ll try to contact you if there are further glitches.”

“Okay.” Amity grinned. “Don’t...anything...wouldn’t do.” Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do , was probably what she’d said.

She waved goodbye, disconnected, and tucked her tech-tab into her bag, doing a quick count of the snack bars. Ten. With peaches and potatoes, they would enjoy a fine feast. With a spring in her step, she returned to the vehicle.

* * * *

“How much is this vase?” The drop-dead gorgeous man held up a red-and-brown vessel.

“Five hundred cred,” Amity said. “It’s a wine carafe, but it works as a vase, too.”

“Reasonably priced and dual purpose. I’ll take it.” His sexy grin went all the way up to his soulful brown eyes. He was tall, broad in shoulder and slim in hip, with a head of thick, near-black hair gone silver at the temples. So, forties, maybe?

“Excellent! Good choice,” she said. It was one of their most expensive pieces.

He gestured to the pottery wheel by the window. “Are you the pottery maker?”

“No, I’m the business manager. My friend Faith is the potter. She signs all her pieces—see?” She turned the carafe over to show him the signature.

He barely glanced at it. His attention focused on her. A warm glint in his eyes seemed to indicate he liked what he saw. Amity resisted the urge to pat her hair. She wished she’d worn a prettier outfit than her comfy, faded-black slacks with a long white tunic.

“I’ll...uh...wrap this up for you.” Conscious of his scrutiny, she seemed to be all thumbs as she packed the carafe in protective paper and bagged it.

“Here you go.” She passed him the sack, noting he had strong, masculine hands, long fingers. She was a sucker for manly hands. She also noted the absence of a wedding ring, but some men didn’t wear them. “You’re not from around here. Do you live in another village, or are you visiting Terra Nova for the first time?” The planet did have a small but growing tourist trade of rich elites who could afford to vacation on another planet. However, he didn’t have that snooty look about him.

“How did you know I’m not from around here?”

“Small town. I’ve only been on Terra Nova and in Willow Wood a few months, but I

think I've met or seen everybody who lives in the village."

"Good deduction! I am just visiting your planet. What brought you here?"

"I came with my friend. After her husband died, she needed to make a life change. I couldn't let her move to another planet alone." Neither of them had close family anymore, and she had no ties to Earth. She never imagined she'd still be single at forty-two.

"You two must be very close."

"She's my best friend, my sister from another mister."

"Must be nice to have a friend that close." The big, strong—she assumed he was strong; he certainly looked it—man sounded wistful, and the glimpse of vulnerability tugged at her heart.

"Everybody needs somebody in their corner."

"How do you like it on Terra Nova? Must be different from Earth."

She laughed. "Like night and day. It was a bit of a shocker at first." She still missed the vibrancy, energy, and technology. Like the obsolete tech-tab that had kept cutting out. That wouldn't have happened on Earth. However, she didn't regret coming. Not most of the time, anyway. "I'm a city girl at heart. Here, the whole planet is rural—except for the villages. And they're tiny. About the only similarity between Terra Nova and Earth is that the denizens are humans. I've only met a few aliens passing through Willow Wood." She recalled the Nagarian.

"Like your date?" he asked with a sheepish expression. "I'm sorry—I overheard your half of the conversation."

“Yes.” Encountering the snake-man had been like her worst nightmare.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a Nagarian,” he said.

“You’d know if you had,” she said.

He laughed. “I suppose so. And you met him through Cosmic Mates. Isn’t that the interplanetary matchmaking service?”

Was that a glint of interest in his eyes? Her heart raced. Wouldn’t it be ironic if, after joining Cosmic Mates, she then met the love of her life by happenstance? Don’t get carried away.

The odds of finding her Mr. Right and getting married dwindled with every passing day. Joining Cosmic Mates had seemed like an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—find mates for herself and her best friend. Normally, she was not so impetuous, but passing forty still unmarried had upped the urgency. “I wasn’t meeting anybody here or on Earth. Nobody single, I mean.”

He smiled. “Well, now you have.”

Did that mean what it sounded like?

“Would you care to have dinner with me tonight?” he asked.

Her stomach fluttered with excitement, but she kept her voice calm and level. “I would like that.”

“You’ll have to suggest a restaurant. The only one I’ve seen is the café across the street.”

“There’s a nice little bistro with good food and live music. It’s walkable from here.”
Everything in the tiny town was walkable.

“Pick you up here at 7 p.m.?”

“Sounds perfect.” After closing, she could run home, shower, put on some makeup, and try on a half dozen outfits before picking the first one.

“There’s one last thing I need to know,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Your name.” He winked.

“Amity! Amity Landers.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Amity Landers. I’m Marshall Clark.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:06 am

The sun was setting, a fire snapped and cracked in the fireplace, and a warm, soft woman—the love of his life—pillowed her head on his shoulder after a bout of mind-blowing sex. They'd sorted out the pottery—discovering more than half of it unbroken—and then returned to the cabin. After a power-bar meal, they'd pulled the bed closer to the fireplace, let simmering passion take over.

Faith sighed. "Life doesn't get any better than this."

Truth. "No, it doesn't." Bragg pressed his lips to her temple. If he could have moments like this for the rest of his life, that would make it better. He'd give anything to just live a normal life. "Being with you is a dream come true," he said, inching as close to a full confession as he dared.

"That's so sweet." She kissed his shoulder.

Tell her. Sentiments denied expression burgeoned inside, seeking release, encouraged by a prescient whisper insisting he share his true feelings now, before it was too late.

However, revealing the depth of his emotion might be too much for her to handle. It might scare her rather than please her. And it wouldn't change the outcome. What purpose would it serve to share his love and leave? Wouldn't that be cruel?

Tell her.

It doesn't need to be tonight.

Except, once they left the cabin, there would be distractions and interruptions—work,

other people, vehicle repairs, daily life. They could squirrel away a few hours, go on dates, hump like bunnies, but it wouldn't be like this. Just her and him, alone together.

"I first saw you on video," he said. "Years ago." Recently born from the gestation tank, Bragg had begun studying Hammond. The honesty and purity of her love for her husband had radiated from the vids like a blinding light. He longed for a woman who would love him like that. But soon, it wasn't just any woman he longed for, but her .

Hammond hadn't deserved her. That hadn't been jealousy speaking—well, maybe a little—but more the knowledge her feelings weren't returned. Just as apparent as Faith's devotion was the fakeness of Hammond's. His affection had been manufactured for show. He only acted the part of the doting husband.

Bragg suspected his progenitor didn't have the capacity to care. It wasn't in his psychological makeup.

"You saw me on video?"

"It was part of my tutoring. That's when I fell in love with you." The words spilled out of him in equal parts relief and consternation. He'd finally spoken the truth, but how would she receive it?

She rose up on an elbow to look at him. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. I don't expect reciprocity. I wish I had more time, more options, but I don't. However, being together isn't a lark for me, a passing fling.

"Until this trip, I'd never taken leave time. Where would I go? What would I do? Then Marshall, my commanding officer, mentioned in passing you'd joined Cosmic

Mates and had moved to Terra Nova, and I needed to see you before...before you did anything...drastic.”

She sat up and pressed a hand to her throat. “I remember you said Dark Ops kept tabs on me.” She sounded worried.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.” She needed to be cautious, not afraid. “I’m sure you’re ranked low-priority.” He needed to keep it that way. “Moving here put you out of sight, out of mind.”

Yet, Marshall had known about the move. Had he taken it upon himself to check up on her, or had he just received some routine report?

“I felt a strong connection to you right from the start,” she said. “It didn’t take long before I realized you are nothing like Mark. I feel like...we are meant to be together.”

It wasn’t a declaration of love, but her words made his heart swell with bittersweet joy.

“I wish you didn’t have to leave,” she said.

His whole chest ached. “I do, too.”

“Are you sure you have to? What if you didn’t?”

He’d asked himself many times if and how he could break the ties and elude the microscopic scrutiny. Created by and born into Dark Ops, he’d never known any other existence, but field missions had offered a glimpse of life on the outside—uncertain, imperfect, precarious, but free. Provided one remained anonymous and stayed off the agency’s radar screen—to use an archaic technological analogy.

He was not anonymous but shackled to Dark Ops. They only had to yank the chain and reel him in.

If he ran, he would forever be running. There would be no peace, no refuge. The agency would always be on his heels. He wouldn't condemn the woman he loved to that kind of life. The perils were too great. They would target her, too. Target anyone who assisted him.

"Dark Ops would come for me," he said. For her, too. He loved her enough to leave her. "Clones don't come cheap. They didn't invest the money and time in cloning to lose their product after a few years."

He'd been told clones were allowed to retire, but was that true? The organization could write the manual on spreading disinformation and propaganda. He had no idea how many replicants had been created, the information kept classified to prevent talk and/or rebellion.

"Your furlough is really all we have?" she asked.

Heart heavy, he nodded. "Yes."

"Then let's not waste a second of it." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

* * * *

The next day

Faith entered her cottage and tossed her bag onto the hall tree. "Coming in?" she asked John.

“If you’re not tired of me yet.”

“Never.” Being with him felt right , comfortable, in a way it never had with Mark or any other man she’d been with. They clicked. We belong together.

That didn’t mean she wasn’t keeping a clear head. Once burned, twice shy. Had this been a “normal” situation, she would have dated John for a long time.

But having an expiration date changed the nature of their “courtship.” I must enjoy what we have and not worry about him leaving. Spend every moment with him that I can. She’d clear her schedule while he was here. When she saw Amity, she would ask her to man the shop for the next few weeks.

Although glad to be home where they could have heat, hot water, and real food, she would always remember the abandoned cabin, the place where she’d taken a leap of faith and listened to her inner wisdom. She almost hated to leave.

They’d gotten lucky. The mechanic had arrived sooner than expected—early afternoon—and diagnosed the damage as more cosmetic than mechanical. “We can hammer out the dents. She won’t be pretty, but she’ll be pilotable,” he’d said.

“Well, she wasn’t much of a looker to start with,” she’d said. “If you can get her running, that’s all I need. Thank you!” The shop had acquired a customer for life.

The repairman couldn’t have been more accommodating. Not only had he towed the vehicle and given them a lift, but he’d also delivered the pottery crates to All Fired Up. Amity had closed the shop by then. Faith had expected John to retire to the inn, but instead, as it was getting dark, he’d insisted on walking her to the cottage to ensure she got home. Willow Wood was safe, but she let him escort her, appreciating the caring gesture and reluctant to part company.

Rusty appeared, but instead of winding around her ankles, he made a beeline for John.

“Ungrateful traitor. I’m the one who feeds you and keeps your potty box clean,” she joke-complained.

“Sorry.” His mouth quirked as he bent and stroked the cat. “Nice kitty. Who’s a nice kitty?” He picked him up. “Who took care of him while you were gone?”

“Amity,” she replied. “She has a key.”

Rusty basked in the attention, purring and rubbing his face against John’s chest.

We both enjoy his attention. “You belong to the cat now,” she said. “He’s claiming you. Marking you with his scent.”

“I’d take that trade any day,” he said, cryptically.

She arched her eyebrows.

“Better to be owned by a cat than Dark Ops.”

It must be horrible to be locked in. It was like indentured servitude or slavery. How could that occur in this day and age?

Because the government was involved. The government could do anything. Violate its own laws. Imprison people without cause. Kill people.

“Can I offer you a glass of wine or a cup of tea? Dinner, perhaps?” she asked, not wanting him to leave.

“I’d like all of that,” he said.

“Maybe some canned potatoes and peaches?” Her lips twitched.

His eyes twinkled. “My favorite.”

She took a breath, twisted her hands. “Um...I have another suggestion. What if you stayed with me while you’re here? Checked out of the inn?” She could spend every second with him, wake up and see his face, fall asleep in his arms.

He stopped petting the cat. “That’s a lot of togetherness. Maybe more than you want.” He scanned her face.

“No. The time at the cabin showed me I’d like to spend more time with you, not less.” She avoided thinking about the inevitable, painful parting. Sometimes living in the moment was the only way to live. When you couldn’t change the future, why worry about it?

“Well, then.” His face wreathed in a wide grin. “I’ll go grab my stuff, check out, and meet you here?”

“While you’re gone, I’ll get dinner ready. I think I can produce a meal more exciting than potatoes and peaches.”

He put the cat down and kissed her, his soft lips lingering. She stood on tiptoe and hugged him. She could get used to this. The domesticity. The partnership. The coupling, the concern, the caring. She wished she could get used to this. A sharp pang of loss shot through her. Don’t think about the future.

They separated. “See you soon,” he said.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Whistling under his breath, he left.

She sprang into action, rushing into the kitchen. She estimated she had about forty-five minutes to shower and throw a dinner together. Maybe steaks, herbed rice—no potatoes tonight!—and some buttery honeyed root vegetables native to Terra Nova.

Rice would go on in about forty minutes. She’d wait until he got back to grill the steaks and cook the vegetables. She’d freshen up then start the prep work. If she had the time, she’d throw together a quick cobbler from canned fruit.

Gotta hurry, but first things first. She hugged and kissed a squirming Rusty. This had been her first time away overnight since moving into the cottage. “More cuddles later, promise.” She set the wiggling cat on his feet.

She hurried to the bath. Shower, I love you, she thought as hot water cascaded down. She shampooed and washed then dried and styled her hair quickly, applied a light touch of cosmetics, and slipped into a pair of silky caramel-color slacks and an asymmetrical matching blouse that left one shoulder sexily bare. At least, she hoped he would find it sexy. A pair of flats and dangling gold earrings completed the ensemble. Then she dashed to the kitchen to begin prepping dinner.

The cat had vanished. After putting down fresh water and food for him, she started on their meal. She flash-thawed and seasoned the meat, set out the dried herbs she’d need for the rice, and peeled the vegetables. Next, she gathered the ingredients for a red-fruit cobbler. Red-fruit, boringly, if aptly named, originated from another native Terra Novan plant and tasted like a cross between a strawberry and an apple.

She’d popped the cobbler into the hot oven and had set the table, when the front door knocker banged. He’s here! She broke into a smile and hurried to let him in. Out of

the corner of her eye, she spied Rusty ambling to the door. They were both eager to see John.

She flung open the door. “That was quick—”

Two strange men in dark uniforms stood on the lighted porch. “Faith Hammond?” The taller of the two spoke.

“Yes...”

“May we come in?”

“That depends. Who are you?”

“I’m Agent Rogers. This is Agent Glenn.”

“Agents with whom?” She gripped the door tighter. Who were these guys? She couldn’t see their eyes or expressions through their tinted glasses. She wished she’d never opened the door. Behind her, Rusty hissed and growled.

“We’re not at liberty to share that information.”

“Then I’m not at liberty to let you in.” She started to shut the door.

Rogers stuck out his foot. “We’re aware you’ve been in contact with your husband.”

“My husband is dead.

“No, he’s not. He’s here on Terra Nova,” Glenn said. “You two spent the last couple of days together.”

“I spent a couple of days with my late husband’s clone .” Shit! Why did I say that? Belatedly, it hit her these men were Dark Ops. John had warned they might come if he overstayed his leave, but he hadn’t! Stay away, John. Stay away. Surreptitiously, she surveyed the street.

“Is that what he told you?” Rogers removed his glasses to reveal a sympathetic gaze. “I’m afraid, Mrs. Hammond, that your husband lied to you. We don’t replicate human beings. While lower primates have been replicated, it is not ethical or even possible to clone humans.

“John Bragg is Mark Hammond. You’re going to need to come with us.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:06 am

Stars in the night sky sparkled like diamonds. The air smelled sweet, and the cobblestone streets felt like air beneath his feet as Bragg strode toward the Happy Night Inn. He'd connected with the woman he loved, and she'd invited him into her home.

He'd heard of soul mates, the rare individual with whom you developed a natural, deep, lifelong bond. He and Faith had that. In her presence, he was complete and whole.

She hadn't said she loved him, but she felt their connection and responded to it. If they had time to let nature take its course, she might fall in love with him. But they didn't, so he'd have to settle for a few stolen weeks.

Unless he didn't settle. Unless he grabbed what he wanted with both hands and hung on.

What if I stay? He came to a sudden stop on the street.

What if I stay? He'd assumed he had to return, but what if he didn't? What if the restraints were only in his mind? The sheep in Patagonia stayed within enclosures they could easily jump over. Born and raised in captivity, they perceived the fencing as a greater barrier than it was.

What if the insurmountable tie to Dark Ops was a conditioned perception? If he'd been brainwashed to think they had total control? They had approved his vacation. If they'd intended to keep him on a short leash, why allow him furlough at all?

No, the agency is a threat. It's not just in my mind. People who cross them vanish.

Or maybe they allowed people to believe that to control them. Spread that rumor themselves. What if Dark Ops had no real power over enlistees and clones?

Shouldn't he test the restraints before accepting them?

If I go AWOL and stay here, and they are serious, I'm screwed. Faith is screwed. No one would be able to protect them. A century ago, the government relocated people and gave them new identities to protect them from the bad guys.

Unfortunately, in their case, Dark Ops was the bad guy. He would need to proceed with caution.

He didn't have a solution yet, but he still had a few weeks. If they put their heads together, perhaps they could come up with something. I won't surrender without a fight. He wouldn't give up the woman he loved.

He entered the Happy Night Inn lobby. Chin on chest, mouth open, the gray-haired, grizzled clerk snored behind the check-in desk. There was a half-empty cup of coffee next to him. Apparently he needs more than coffee to keep him awake. Bragg tiptoed past. The clerk could snooze while Bragg showered, changed clothes, and collected his stuff.

He let himself into his darkened room, feeling his way to the desk lamp. Before he reached it, light flooded the room.

"I knew you weren't in Patagonia." Marshall sat in the corner, a weapon resting on his knee.

* * * *

I'm so stupid. Stupid. Stupid. I can't believe I fell for Mark's bullshit again! Wrapped in self-recrimination, Faith marched alongside Rogers and Glenn. She hadn't wanted to go with them, but they'd hustled her out of the cottage before she could protest.

John wasn't a clone at all—but her dearly non-departed husband who'd gone AWOL from Dark Ops. Or maybe Mark fabricated that part, too. Maybe these men worked for an ordinary policing agency, and her husband was a common criminal. The men hadn't identified the organization they represented.

He's the one, her inner wisdom insisted.

Inner moron . Why did I believe him? Why did I abandon my caution?

Why hadn't she listened to her common sense? Cloning a human being would be a huge scientific feat, but to produce an adult ? Preposterous. But she'd bought it. She turned a blind eye to the evidence proving he'd lied—the scar , his dead-on “impersonation.” Of course he could act like him—he was him! She'd accepted every ridiculous explanation. Why? Because she liked him? Out of loneliness? An ersatz familiarity? Because her inner idiot said he was the one? Because he seemed to like Rusty? It couldn't be hard to pretend to like a cat. He'd faked feelings for her for years.

I can't believe I fell for the same asshole twice. I slept with him!

“I'm such an idiot,” she muttered.

“You shouldn't blame yourself. Hammond is very good at what he does,” Rogers said.

He'd been uncharacteristically good in bed. She remembered her husband as a selfish lover, uncaring about her needs. As John, he'd focused on her pleasure. Another way

to snow her?

“That’s why we need your help to locate him,” Glenn said.

“I told you. He went to the inn.” It should have been the first place they looked. Willow Wood only had one inn. Where else would a visitor stay? Unless he hooked up with a stupid woman who invited him to stay in her cottage.

“The Happy Night Inn. Another agent is there now,” Rogers said.

“Only one?” Why send two agents to bring her in for questioning and one to apprehend Mark? That seemed odd.

“Marshall can be very... persuasive .”

Persuasive as in threatening? Mark could get hurt? She didn’t want to see him killed or shot! Her heart hammered. The men escorting her were armed. Under the porch light, the bulge under their jackets had been unmistakable. I never should have left the cottage. She was getting a bad feeling. They hadn’t given her a good feeling, but the foreboding and dread had worsened.

“If you know where he is and can take him into custody, why do you need me?”

“We have questions that need answers.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“You know more than you think.” Rogers shot her a sideways glance. “We offered to talk at the cottage.”

She disliked the way he tried to make this her fault. Yes, she’d resisted letting them in

at first, but as soon as they'd dropped the bombshell, there'd been no more talk of talking. They'd rushed her out of the cottage so fast, she'd forgotten to turn off the oven.

The cobbler would be a charred, blackened mess. The steaks were on the counter. Rusty would find them and enjoy a feast fit for a king. She wasn't the only one Mark had fooled. The cat had loved him, and he had genuinely seemed to like him, too. For a man who disliked animals in general, and hated cats in particular, he'd hidden his feelings well.

She eyed her escorts. Their caginess, the lack of transparency, and weapons unnerved her. An aura of danger surrounded them. Despite his many lies and faults, Mark, past and present, had never, ever laid a hand on her. She'd never felt physically threatened by him, but these men exuded menace. How did she know that they had told her the truth? Had she been too quick to believe them?

The change in personality. His affection for the cat. The way he made love. The nuts—he'd eaten nuts. All circumstantial, but, added together, it made a strong case for John being a clone.

"I identified my husband's body at the morgue," she said, watching them for a reaction.

The men said nothing.

"Did you hear me?"

Glenn glanced at Rogers. "That wasn't him."

"Who was it, then?" I know my own husband. I know who he is. I know who he's not.

That's why she'd accepted John's story, because deep in her gut, she recognized that he wasn't Mark.

He really is a clone.

John is walking into a trap. I have to warn him. She eyed the deserted street. Dammit, where the hell is everybody? Willow Wood was a pedestrian village. Why was no one walking tonight?

"I've heard enough. You don't need me. I'm going home." She spun around.

"Not so fast." Rogers grabbed her arm.

"Let go of me!"

"Not until we're done."

"I'm done now." She tried to wrench out of his grasp. Glenn grabbed her other arm. "I told you I don't know anything!"

"We think you do, and you're insurance," Roger said.

They need me for bait. They're going to use me to lure him in. Did that mean the agent named Marshall hadn't managed to apprehend him?

"Help! Help me!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "Help! I'm being kidnapped!"

Rogers swore, and then she felt a sharp sting in her neck.

* * * *

Faith came to on a cold, hard, gray-speckled floor, her mind fuzzy, her vision slightly blurry. Where the hell am I? Seconds later, she remembered. The men. The sting. The bastards drugged me! She rubbed her neck and scrambled to her feet.

The exit didn't open. The solid-steel sliding panel had no handles, knobs, or levers. A tiny red eye glowed on an electronic pad. Did that open the door? She waved. The red eye blinked. She pressed her hand to the pad and got an electrical shock. "Ow!"

Rubbing her arm, she surveyed the room, noticing now how the table and chairs around it were molded to the floor.

A sensor-controlled sliding door. Furniture affixed to the floor. Dull-gray floor and walls.

I'm on a spaceship. Has it launched? How long have I been here? She listened for the high-pitched squeal of an engine. Planting palms on the wall, she felt for a vibration. No noise, no vibration. Still grounded. But for how long?

I have to get off this ship! I have to find John.

Unless they'd captured him? Was he on this ship, too? She wished she'd never told Rogers and Glenn she knew John was a clone. The agents had blindsided her. In hindsight, she realized she should have sent them on a wild goose chase to find their quarry.

"Anybody out there? Let me out!" She pounded on the door. "Rogers! Glenn! I'll tell you everything I know!" she lied. Could anyone hear her? Maybe the room was soundproofed—or bugged. Were they watching her on vid? She scanned the room from floor to ceiling but saw no recording or transmitter devices.

She would tell them nothing. She'd tear a page from Mark's book and feed them a

line of crap. Let them continue to believe they'd convinced her her husband was alive. Hopefully, she could get them to drop a clue to John's whereabouts. Maybe she could still send them on that wild goose chase.

Yelling, she pounded on the door again to no avail.

She had no choice but to wait for the agents.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:07 am

“What are you doing here?” Bragg demanded.

“I came to save your ass. You don’t make it easy.” Marshall stood up and holstered the weapon under his jacket.

“Save me from what?”

“Mainly yourself, but also from Dark Ops throwing you and your girlfriend into the brig. I didn’t come alone.”

Fear for Faith knifed into his gut, but he forced himself to play it cool. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“You came to Terra Nova for the hell of it?”

“I’m entitled to a vacation.”

“You deviated from your approved itinerary.”

Bragg shrugged. “Patagonia wasn’t what I thought it would be.”

“Faith Hammond is in custody.”

If Faith got hurt, nothing would matter. Not his freedom, not his life. “Where is she?” He charged at Marshall. He’d beat the truth out of him.

His CO dropped him with a punch. Pain splinted through his face, but he rolled to his

feet, clenching his fists, readying for another go.

Marshall flexed his fingers and shook his hand. “You dipshit! Why did you make me do that? I’m on your side, you fucking moron. We don’t have a lot of time. If you want to see her again, you need to come with me.”

“To do what?” If anything happened to her, he’d never forgive himself.

“Rescue her.”

“You’re going to help me? Why should I believe you?”

“For one, because you don’t have a choice. Unless you can figure out where she is, you need me. Believe it or not, I have empathy for you.”

“The fuck you do.”

“I’ve been where you are.”

“What does that mean?”

Marshall sighed. “I’m a clone, too.”

“What!”

“I’m a clone.”

“Prove it.”

“You know I can’t. You’ll have to accept my word that I’m the third iteration of Marshall Clark. You’re the third Mark Hammond.”

“Third—Hammond isn’t an original?”

“No. Look, I can waste time explaining—or we can get Faith. Which would you prefer?”

Trust didn’t come easy—even when he had all the information, and he had none in this case. This could be a trap. They could be using Faith as bait. Dark Ops might not even have her. But, if he didn’t cooperate, and Marshall was telling the truth, Faith would suffer the consequences. Marshall’s dubious assistance presented the only possible chance for rescue. He hated that he needed him to find Faith, but he had no idea where to begin to look for her.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Marshall pulled a finger-sized cylinder from a pocket. “First, we need to remove our chips.”

“Chips?”

“Everyone in the organization is embedded with a tracking device. That’s how they followed you to this sector from Patagonia. You’re lucky the atmosphere on this planet interferes with electronic signals, or they would have picked you up already.” He patted the chair. “Sit. The device is embedded at the base of your skull along your hairline.”

Bragg fingered the bump on his nape. It had been there for as long as he could remember. He’d assumed it was a mole or a wart. It would be just like Dark Ops to chip him.

“Sit down. Let me get it.” Marshall motioned impatiently.

Reluctantly, he took the chair. That Marshall would reveal and remove the tracking device added weight to his assertion he'd come to help. But that was if there was a tracking device, and if he intended to remove it. He could be intending to inject him with a knock-out drug or a truth serum.

Nerve endings went on high alert as Marshall stepped behind him. He didn't like this one bit. Marshall pressed the device to Bragg's neck. A second later, he felt a sharp sting and then a burning sensation.

"Done." Marshall showed him a blood-smeared silver disk three to four millimeters in diameter. He deposited the disk into a tiny black-capped vial.

Why was he saving it? "Shouldn't we destroy it?" he asked.

"We're going to plant it," he replied. "Now me." He handed Bragg the extractor and took his seat. "Press it against the nodule for three seconds. It will extract the chip and then seal the exit wound."

Bragg pressed the cylinder to the bump on Marshall's neck as instructed. That his CO had been tagged provided some reassurance he wasn't being lied to—unless this was all part of the plot to gain his compliance. Dark Ops had conducted some pretty elaborate ruses. He should know—he'd orchestrated some of them.

His CO slipped his tracker into a red-capped vial and pocketed both tiny bottles. "Let's go."

Bragg grabbed a duffel and shoved his bowl into it.

"What are you taking that for? Leave it!"

"No." He slung the bag over his shoulder.

In the lobby, the clerk slept in the same position, head thrown back, mouth open, dead to the world. The half cup of coffee untouched. The pieces clicked into place. “You drugged him.”

“He’ll be fine.”

But would he and Faith be fine?

* * * *

Marshall led him to a hovercar parked inconspicuously on the edge of the village.

“Where did you get this?” Bragg asked. Vehicles were few and far between on Terra Nova, and the ones that existed were relics like Faith’s. He hadn’t seen any hovercars. Terra Nova was Earth’s poor relation—receiving its hand-me-down tech-tabs, vehicles, and ancient farm equipment.

“Brought them with us. Transportation here sucks.”

The hovercar whisked them to the spaceport, landing in an area reserved for private craft. A large, nondescript ship crouched on the tarmac. Dark Ops.

“She’s on that ship?”

“Yes.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Grab and go.”

“That’s the plan? That’s not a plan—unless the plan is to surrender! It will never

work.”

“It might if you do what I tell you to. Act like my prisoner,” Marshall said. “Follow my lead. Keep your mouth shut.”

“Am I a prisoner?” Distrust reared up again.

“Only if this fails. If that happens, we’ll both be prisoners. I have as much at stake as you do.”

Says him. “Not quite. I’m responsible for Faith.”

“That’s why we’re here. We’re going to walk her off the vessel. But for that to work, they must think I’m bringing you in. They trust me, but we won’t have more than a couple of minutes. And the longer we spend chitchatting, the less time we have.”

“Once she’s off the ship, then what happens?”

“Then we haul ass to the commercial charter. Put these on.” Marshall tossed electronic cuffs into Bragg’s lap.

“Fuck you!” He threw the cuffs at Marshall and shoved the door open.

“They’ve been deactivated. Look!” Marshall snapped them around his own wrists and then removed them. He dangled them out. “You have to trust me.”

He didn’t trust him. But he couldn’t rescue Faith without help.

Reluctantly, he cuffed himself.

“Leave your pottery here. Hopefully, we’ll be coming back,” Marshall said.

They exited the hovercar and proceeded to the ship. Upon boarding, they were met by an agent he recognized by sight but had never worked with. “Looks like he gave you a bit of trouble.” His gaze shifted from Bragg’s face to Marshall’s bruised knuckles.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle. Rogers and Glenn with Mrs. Hammond?”

“She’s in the interrogation room. They went back to town for cleanup.”

“What kind of cleanup?” Marshall asked.

“Nothing they didn’t anticipate. In trying to locate the Hammond woman, they interviewed the business partner. Now they have to prevent her from yapping.”

Fuck. Faith’s best friend would be killed because of him. His presence on Terra Nova had set this in motion. “You’re all fucking assholes.”

“I’d better secure the prisoner. He’s getting mouthy.” Marshall grabbed Bragg’s arm and dragged him down the corridor. Out of earshot of the agent, Marshall said in a low voice, “We caught a break.”

“How? By having an innocent woman die? Faith will be devastated.”

“With Rogers and Glenn gone, we have a better chance of getting off this ship. We can’t help Amity now anyway.”

“You know her name?”

An expression almost like pain flashed across Marshall’s face but then vanished. “It’s my job to know.” He stopped beside a steel door. He palmed the entry pad, and it slid open.

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Faith paced the interrogation room. She could kick herself for falling for Rogers' and Glenn's lies. The men had capitalized on vestiges of doubt and used it against her.

If a silver lining existed in any of this, it was that she'd wholeheartedly, 100 percent believed John had told her the truth and that they were meant to be together. I love him.

She'd never put much credence in claims of love at first sight, but then she'd never believed it was possible to create an adult clone. As soon as she met John, intuition had insisted he was the one she'd been waiting for .

However, a happy ending did not seem to be in their future. If the agents only meant to apprehend him, they could have waited for him to return to the cottage. Or had their other agent pick him up at the inn. They wouldn't have arrested her.

They wanted both of us. Why? I don't know anything! And if I do, I don't know that I know it!

What would Amity do when she vanished? And poor Rusty. Hopefully, Amity would adopt him.

She guessed they intended to take her to Earth, or they wouldn't have brought her to a spaceship. Any second, she expected the ship to blast off.

She wondered again how long she'd been "out" and how much time had passed since she'd been abducted. Had they apprehended John? Was he aboard the ship? Would they allow her to see him? Or had he managed to escape?

Hopelessness swept over her. She didn't foresee a good outcome. Two lone individuals couldn't fight a clandestine, powerful organization willing to go to any lengths to achieve their aims.

She whirled around as the door slid open. Hands bound, John stepped into the interrogation room. A man followed him in.

She flung herself at him, hugging him tight. "Your face! What did they do to you?"

"I ran into a fist, but I'm okay. Are you all right?" he asked.

"They drugged me, but yeah."

His face darkened, and he scowled at the other man. Then, to her shock, he released himself from the cuffs.

"What...how?" she stuttered.

"Marshall, my commanding officer, is helping us—I think." Hands free, he enfolded her in his arms.

"Former CO." Marshall removed two vials and a small folding knife from his pocket. He cut a tiny slit on the side of a chair, uncapped the vials, extracted two tiny silvery objects and shoved them into the slit.

John nodded. "They'll think we're on the ship."

"They'll figure out soon enough we're not, but we have to leave the trackers someplace. Might as well be here."

"I don't understand," she said.

“I was chipped. That’s how they found me,” John explained.

“Let’s get out of here while Rogers and Glenn are still gone. Hopefully, we won’t run into anyone else on the way out. In case we do, put the cuffs on.” He pulled another set from his pocket. “You, too, Mrs. Hammond.”

She glanced at John for confirmation.

He nodded. “We need to make a show of it.”

“You trust him?” She jutted her chin at Marshall.

“Not completely, but he’s our best bet to get out of here.” He snapped the cuffs on her wrists then released them. “See?” He snapped them shut again and donned his own.

“You need to behave as if you’re detainees,” Marshall instructed. “If we encounter anybody, let me do the talking. Do you understand, Mrs. Hammond?”

“Yes. Call me Faith.” She offered her given name not out of friendliness but to distance herself from the Hammond name.

Palming the electronic pad that had shocked her, Marshall opened the door. He peered into the corridor. “Clear.”

They stepped into the corridor. The door slid shut behind them. “Where are we going?” she asked. Where could they go? The agents would come after them, wouldn’t they?

“Another ship,” John whispered.

“Let’s get off this one, and I’ll answer your questions.” Marshall grasped John’s arm as if to control him.

She bowed her head and stuck to John’s side, shuffling along, but she didn’t need to fake fear. It clawed through her veins. Her heart pounded with anxiety someone would stop them, that Rogers and Glenn would appear, that Marshall wasn’t really helping them.

Getting on a ship meant they were leaving Terra Nova. Were they going back to Earth? You’d think you could lose yourself—or elude a pursuer—in the endless metropolis, except for the ubiquitous cameras, monitors, and trackers. You couldn’t go anywhere on Earth without leaving a footprint. Everything you did was recorded somewhere. If you farted, the government knew it before anyone smelled it.

If she left, what would happen to Amity and the pottery business? Her cottage! It had a thatch roof. She’d left the oven on. The cottage could burn down, catch the whole neighborhood on fire.

Marshall moved them along at a steady but unurgent stride, and then, to her relief, they were walking down the gangway into crisp night air. He picked up the pace then, rushing them to a hovercar hidden in the shadows. There weren’t any hovercars on Terra Nova!

John pulled off his cuffs, she removed hers, and they piled into the vehicle.

They zoomed away, landing moments later at the commercial terminal. But instead of going inside, Marshall rushed them through a locked gate to a private spacecraft.

“We’re leaving Terra Nova...for good?” she confirmed.

“Yes.”

“I can’t leave without Amity and Rusty.”

“Who’s Rusty?” Marshall asked.

“Her cat,” John supplied.

Marshall shook his head. “We have to leave now.”

“The hovercar could be at the cottage in less than sixty seconds,” John said. “We could grab the cat—”

“And risk getting caught by Rogers and Glenn? For a fucking cat? There won’t be a second escape. The only reason we succeeded is that we got shit-ass lucky.”

“But...my friend! Amity!” she protested.

Marshall hustled them aboard, the gangway retracted into the belly of the ship, and the door sealed.

“I’m sorry.” John hugged her. She wrapped her arms around his waist, relieved they were both alive and safe, but sadness and regret still weighed on her heart. How could she leave without saying goodbye? Worse, what if her leaving put Amity in danger? Wouldn’t Rogers and Glenn seek out everyone she knew to try to find her?

While she loved Rusty, she could understand why Marshall wouldn’t go back for an animal. The cat would be okay. Amity would take him in. But wasn’t her friend worth the risk?

She shivered, touched by an icy prescience. When she’d asked about Rusty and Amity, both men had only addressed the cat. She pulled back to study John’s face. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“After the ship launches, I’ll fill you both in on the plan,” Marshall said.

“No,” she said. “What aren’t you telling me about Amity?”

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Where are you? For the umpteenth time, Amity pinged her friend's tech-tab. Faith wasn't responding, and Amity was getting worried.

Those men. She shuddered.

She'd spotted them skulking around Willow Wood. Strangers and newcomers always stood out, but it was more than that. They'd come by the shop just before she'd locked up for the day. They'd been too friendly, too curious, their ingratiating smiles as fake as cheese on the moon. When they started asking about Faith, her wariness upped to a five-alarm alert. Amity had parried their questions, telling them little other than the pottery artist was out-of-town indefinitely.

As soon as they left, she'd messaged Faith.

Nibbling on a fingernail, she paced her tiny living room. She didn't know for a fact that those men were responsible for Faith's failure to respond, but she couldn't shake the awful suspicion they were. Now it was dark. Faith should have responded by now!

She told herself not to worry. Any number of reasons could explain why Faith hadn't contacted her—she hadn't checked her tech-tab, she was too busy or occupied to answer, or the message failed to go through. Comm service sucked on Terra Nova.

Or the men had found her.

I can't take this anymore. She grabbed a coat and left. She'd wait for Faith at her cottage.

She doubted her friend would be at All Fired Up, but since the shop was on the way, she stopped in. Upon entering, she spied crates of pottery that hadn't been there when she closed up. She did get back!

Was this a good sign or a bad one? Was her friend not checking messages? Or was she in trouble?

Her stomach in knots, Amity speed-walked the rest of the way.

The lights were on in her friend's cottage, and Amity let out a sigh of relief. She's home safe. She didn't get my message. Or she's busy with John. She turned to go—heaven forbid she interrupt an intimate moment. That would be embarrassing. I'll see her tomorrow.

But shouldn't I check? To be sure? I'm already here.

She marched up to the porch. Using the knocker, she rapped on the heavy wooden door.

Meow. Meow. Meow.

She could hear Rusty . A scratching noise drew her attention to the window. The cat's ginger face peeked over the sill. Meow! He pawed at the glass.

Weird. He's never done that before. Her gaze drifted beyond the cat into the parlor . A cloud of dark smoke hovered beneath the ceiling. "Fire! There's a fire!"

"Faith! Faith!" Amity slammed the knocker and banged on the door with her fist then, not waiting for a reply, tried the knob. She'd brought her key, but she didn't need it. The door opened.

“Meow! Meow! Meow!” Rusty wound around her ankles.

“Where’s your mama, Rusty? Faith! Faith! It’s Amity! Are you okay?”

No fire in the parlor. In the open adjacent dining area, the table had been set for two. Beyond it, smoke seeped through the bottom crack of the kitchen door.

“Faith! Faith! Answer me!” Amity approached the kitchen. She palmed the door. Not hot, so she eased it open a crack. Smoke streamed out but no burst of heat. She entered the smoke-filled kitchen. The door swung shut behind her.

Coughing a little, she rushed to raise the kitchen window to clear out the smoke and then turned off the oven. With a potholder, she opened the oven and removed a charred pan, tossed it in the sink, and turned on the faucet. Steam shot upward.

Two steaks prepped for the grill sat on the counter. Dinner had been in the works when she left. What happened? Where is she?

The knots in her stomach tightened. This wasn’t like Faith. She wouldn’t have gone off and left the oven on. If they’d gotten frisky and forgotten about dinner, the smoke would have alerted them.

Exiting the kitchen, she noticed Faith’s handbag on the hall tree by the door. She wouldn’t have left the cottage without her bag.

“What happened, Rusty?” she asked the cat.

He wound around her ankles but had no answers for her.

Amity moved to the bedroom and knocked loudly. “I’m coming in!” she shouted and peeked inside. Vacant.

Something happened. Those men!

Constable. I need to call the constable. She should have brought her tech-tab, but she could use Faith's; it was probably in her bag. If not, she'd run to the lawman's office.

Amity retreated down the hall.

The cat's body lay on the parlor floor.

"Oh, my god! Rusty!" Before she could take a step, someone grabbed her from behind. There was a sharp jab in her neck, and then the world faded away.

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Come on, Marshall, come on! Bragg prayed his CO would get back in time. They watched the monitor showing the feed around the spacecraft. Neither friend nor foe had approached the ship he'd left. Come on, Marshall, come on.

"How much time is left?" Faith asked.

"Five minutes," he replied.

Tears of worry and fear slipped down her face. She'd insisted on hearing the truth about Amity, and he'd been unable to lie to her. He and Marshall had informed her Amity was probably dead, that Dark Ops would seek to eliminate witnesses.

"I need to know for sure," she had insisted. "If she's alive, I can't leave her. I won't leave her to be killed by those men!"

"It's too late. She's gone," Marshall stated bluntly and looked at Bragg for support.

"Most likely," he had replied. He didn't doubt it, but they didn't have actual proof.

"Most likely? Then she could still be alive! We have to get her!"

Marshall had scowled at Bragg. "She's gone, and we need to go." He had stalked toward the bridge.

"I'm not leaving without Amity!" She ran for the gangway. "I'll find her myself."

Bragg intercepted her. "Faith, wait. Marshall is right."

“I am not leaving my friend behind—or my cat.” Her eyes blazed with pain and anger. Don’t you understand? her look seemed to say.

His poor choice of words had given her false hope. If he’d been told she was “most likely” dead, no way would he have left. As long as he believed there was a chance she was alive, he wouldn’t leave. Amity was like a sister to Faith, and she loved her cat.

“You stay. I’ll check on her and get Rusty,” he said.

“You both stay! Are you insane? Don’t you realize they’re looking for you?” Marshall glared. “I’ll go. I’ll check her cottage and the shop and then I’ll get the damn cat, okay?”

“But...what if she’s not there—” Faith started to protest.

“Okay!” Bragg hurriedly agreed to the compromise. They couldn’t scour the entire planet, conduct an exhaustive search for someone who was dead. If Marshall found anything, it would be Amity’s body. Would Faith accept his word? “If you find, uh, her, you’ll need to bring...” Proof of death.

“I understand.” Marshall caught the gist right away. “Keep the gangway up. If I don’t return in half an hour, launch the ship, and get the hell out of here,” he’d instructed. “Rogers and Glenn will start searching the spaceport, if they haven’t already. The AI can provide you with my notes. It will give you instructions on where to go and what to do.” He stalked down the gangway, muttering, “This is what I get for trying to save his fucking ass.”

Bragg closed the gangway and led Faith to a ready room to watch and wait.

A movement on the monitor caught his attention. He peered closer and sucked in a

breath as a hovercar zoomed in and landed next to the spacecraft. Was that Marshall or Rogers and Glenn?

He got to his feet. A man bounded out of the hovercar. “Marshall’s back!”

“Is Amity with him?”

He watched Marshall stride around the vehicle. Bragg couldn’t see through the tinted windows. His CO bent into the passenger side of the vehicle and pulled out a duffel, which he slung over his shoulder. No Amity. No cat.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He bent in again, and, this time, lugged out Amity’s limp body.

Fuck. When he’d suggested Marshall bring proof, he’d been thinking of a vid, not the body! This is going to kill Faith.

“Let me see!” She pushed forward to peer at the screen. “Oh, my god, that’s not—that’s not—Amity!” She let out a keening wail and bolted for the gangway.

Bragg ran after her. They lowered the gangway to admit Marshall.

He stomped aboard, his burden slung over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“Amity!” Faith started to cry. “Oh my god. She’s dead!”

“Not dead. Unconscious. I had to tranquilize her. I didn’t have time for a long discussion.” He shifted his gaze to Bragg. “I’ll put her in a stateroom. You launch the ship and get us the fuck out of here.”

Faith followed Marshall, and Bragg sprinted to the bridge. The AI already had the coordinates, so he issued the order, and the ship rolled to the launch pad and blasted off. We made it!

But where are we going? What's the plan, now?

He found Marshall and Faith in a small stateroom, Amity unconscious on the bunk, and Faith stroking her friend's hair. "How long will she be out?" she asked.

Marshall shrugged. "An hour maybe. Long enough for us to talk." He shrugged off the duffel and handed it to her. "Here."

"What's this?"

"Your cat."

She unzipped the bag and let out a cry. "Rusty! Oh god!" She lifted out the limp cat, eyes open, tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"I tranqed him, too. The fucker scratched me." Marshall shoved up his sleeve to reveal an angry, red claw mark.

"You deserved it." She glowered at him while rocking Rusty.

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John's commanding officer was a cold, abrupt, emotionless asshole. She easily pictured him working for Dark Ops; he'd been cut from the same cloth as Rogers and Glenn. However, Marshall had gone back for Amity and Rusty—reluctantly, but he'd done it. She supposed she ought to be grateful—he'd risked his life and freedom to get them—but she couldn't forget how he'd brought them aboard, her friend slung over his shoulder like a sack of grain, her cat shoved into a duffel bag like dirty laundry.

She stroked poor Rusty. He was still unconscious.

Seated next to her in a ready room, John squeezed her shoulder in sympathy, and she smiled at him. He made everything all right. He's the man I've been waiting for all my life. Their future remained uncertain, undefined, but they would face it together. Along with Amity and Rusty. She fretted about Amity's reaction when she awakened. Her best friend had elected to come to Terra Nova, but that didn't mean she'd be happy about moving to another planet. Not when she hadn't had a choice. Faith hadn't anticipated Amity wouldn't be conscious. Marshall had basically kidnapped her.

He had a lot to answer for—as soon as he got here.

“I need to check on some stuff. I'll meet you in the ready room,” he'd told them.

“Do you have any idea where we're going?” she asked in a low voice.

“No, he didn't tell me.”

“We can’t go back to Earth,” she said.

“No.” He leaned his forehead against hers in a brief caress. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess. I turned your life topsy-turvy.”

“I’d rather be with you in a topsy-turvy mess than not with you.” She cupped his cheek. He’d only recently come into her life, but she couldn’t imagine living without him.

He smiled then, love shining from his eyes.

The door slid open to admit Marshall. He took a seat across from them at the table. Closedmouthed throughout the whole ordeal, he wasted no time on preamble. “We’re headed to Planet Refuge.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” She glanced at John.

He shook his head. “Me neither.”

“Not surprising. The powers that be don’t want you to know about it. Refuge grants asylum to persecuted and endangered peoples. A wealthy philanthropist who ran afoul of his government set it up. He had the means to flee, but he recognized that those of modest means did not.”

“Refuge will take all of us?” John asked.

“You and I have already been accepted,” Marshall said. “Faith, your and Amity’s requests are pending—I just submitted them. That’s what I was doing.”

“How were our requests accepted so fast?” John said.

“My exit plan has been in the works for a while. I was going to leave when Dark Ops learned you’d gone AWOL—”

“Not AWOL. On vacation. Approved leave,” John cut in.

Marshall arched an eyebrow. “Were you coming back?”

A moment of silence followed his question. “No, but Dark Ops didn’t know that. I had every intention of returning when I submitted my leave request. Then I met Faith, and I changed my mind.”

“Getting back to what I was saying—my asylum application had been approved, and I was ready to jump ship, when I learned agents were headed here. Against my better judgment, I came to save your sorry ass. I submitted an emergency application to Refuge on your behalf before I left Earth. Dark Ops has no authority on Refuge. It’s the only place where we’ll be completely safe.”

How altruistic of him. She didn’t buy it. “Why risk your exit plan by helping John?”

“I empathize with his situation. I’m a clone, too,” he said.

She widened her eyes. In the space of a week, she’d met two clones tied to Dark Ops. How many did the agency employ? Don’t get distracted. She glanced at John and then turned her attention to Marshall. “The Refuge application you submitted for me and Amity—is there a chance it won’t be approved? What if it’s not?” She envisioned a worst-case scenario.

“There’s a chance,” he admitted. “Your situations aren’t as dire as ours. If you’re not approved, you won’t be permitted to disembark the ship. They’ll return you to your planet of embarkation—Terra Nova.”

She and John would be parted.

“Then, I won’t go either.” John covered her hand, which rested on the still-unconscious Rusty.

“One way you can be assured of getting in is to go as his fiancée. He’s allowed to bring along a spouse or his betrothed. Cosmic Mates can perform the ceremony as soon as we land.”

“I—uh—” She’d concluded she loved him, and she felt like she’d known him all her life—but in reality, it had been a little more than a week. So, marry ? They hadn’t discussed anything beyond a three-week fling.

“I would marry you in an instant,” John said. “For any reason.”

“Cosmic Mates marriages are provisional for the first year,” Marshall continued as if sensing her ambivalence. “It’s a trial marriage that becomes binding if you stay together for a year. But if you should separate before the end of the trial, you’ll lose your sanctuary.”

Common sense and emotion synchronized. Trial marriage. That she could do. “That sounds like a good solution.” She linked her fingers with John’s and smiled. He smiled back. Her heart liked the idea very much. Then another problem intruded.

“Where does that leave Amity?”

Marshall pressed his lips together. “Her best bet, if asylum is rejected, is to find a match through Cosmic Mates. She’ll then move to her husband’s planet.”

“Won’t Dark Ops get to her there?” she asked.

“It’s possible, but I doubt they’ll try. She was never the target—unlike you two.”

She would have to cross her fingers and wait it out.

“I’m sorry I got you both involved,” John said to her. “I dragged you into this. I disrupted your life. You came to Terra Nova for a fresh start, and now I’ve uprooted you again.”

She shook her head. “Meeting you was the best thing to happen to me.” She squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back. “You are my fresh start.” A fresh start with a new man. A man who loved her, whom she’d fallen for in a big way. They could be together. No deadline drove their actions now; they could get to know each other like a normal couple.

If normal meant you met and wed a man you’d known for a week. The doppelgänger of your departed husband. There was nothing normal about this situation. Normal is overrated. Who cared if they were normal if they were happy?

They would be married.

Provisionally.

Forever, whispered inner wisdom. He’s the one.

“A dream come true,” he said.

Dreams could ferry you places you didn’t know you wanted to go until you got there. This wasn’t how she envisioned her life, but she looked forward to the year ahead. Life should be adventurous, not settled.

“Meow?” A groggy Rusty lifted his head.

“It’s okay, Rusty.” She stroked him.

“Good kitty.” John petted him.

“If the cat is rousing, Amity must be, too,” Marshall said.

“I should be there when she wakes up,” she said. “She won’t have any idea where she is, what’s going on.”

“Give me a minute. Let me talk to her first,” Marshall said.

She shook her head and handed Rusty to John. “Amity should see a familiar face.” She stood up, but before she could move, Marshall slipped out the door.

“Does that seem odd to you?” She looked at John.

“Odder than anything else that’s happened?” His mouth quirked.

“You have a point.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but giving them a minute will give us one, too.” He settled the cat on the chair and turned toward her.

She went into his arms, sighing with contentment. “We were meant for each other.”

“Let’s do this right,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

He dropped down onto one knee. “Faith Hammond, will you do me the honor of becoming my provisional wife?” His eyes, those sexy eyes, twinkled.

“I love you.” It was important to say it. “Yes, I will marry you.”

He let out a joyful, surprised whoop, like there could have been any doubt. “I love you so much. I always have.” He kissed her then, his hungry mouth stirring satisfaction, resolution, and desire.

Marshall ended up with quite a few minutes to talk to Amity.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:07 am

One week later

They'd jostled and rolled for an hour across deserted tundra to a "village" of dusty buildings arranged in a half-moon around a courtyard of sorts. An outer ring of tiny cabins completed the town.

"It's smaller than Willow Wood," Faith murmured. "More primitive, too."

"Regrets?" Bragg asked.

"None where I'm sitting, husband," she said with a smile.

"I'm glad, wife ." They rode in a powered wagon with only a thin, transparent plasticene covering to protect them from the wind whistling across the plain. It had been a drafty, cold ride from the intake center.

"I have some." Amity glared at Marshall.

His former CO remained impassive, but Faith winced. "I'm sorry," she said.

Amity bumped her shoulder. "We're a team. If you weren't going to stay on Terra Nova, then I didn't want to either. None of this is your fault," she said and then scowled at Marshall to show whom she blamed. From the moment she had awakened, she'd been hostile toward Marshall.

Marshall had tranquilized her, but the intensity of the animosity almost seemed like she felt betrayed, like they had a history, but that couldn't be the case. They'd never met

until she'd come to on the ship.

The wagon rolled to a stop, and the alien driver ensconced in the cab bounded out of the vehicle. He unlatched the wagon's side gate enabling Bragg to slide out and then help the women disembark. Marshall followed. An alien, silver from head to toe, approached, beaming a glittery smile. "Welcome to Artisan's Loft! I'm Lucento . You must be Mr. and Mrs. Bragg, and Mr. and Mrs. Clark."

"We're the Braggs," he said proudly. It had taken nearly a week for Refuge to approve the ladies' asylum, which had been contingent upon marital status. As soon as they'd been allowed to disembark, they'd been led to an intake center, whereupon a Cosmic Mates officiant, a purple alien woman named JuJu, had united him and Faith and Amity and Marshall in provisional matrimony. It had taken another day to get final residency assignments.

"Yes." Faith linked her arm through his.

"Unfortunately, so," Amity muttered.

"Ungrateful much?" Marshall said.

"Don't do me any more favors," she snapped.

"No worries about that," he said.

Amity had balked at marrying Marshall but was forced to accept that if she wished to go to Refuge, it was the sole option. She'd gone ahead with the ceremony but glowered and sniped at Marshall at every opportunity. Although his former CO could be as warm as an icicle, Bragg privately thought Amity ought to cut him a little slack.

"Uh, well. I'm glad you've all arrived at Artisan's Loft, where sanctuary and craft combine to make beautiful lives."

He and Faith shared a grin of amusement. The sentiment was cheesy, but he embraced it with open arms. He and Faith were free from Dark Ops, safe from arrest and retaliation, and he'd married the woman he loved. Life was indeed beautiful.

"I suppose you're wondering what your work assignments will be," Lucento said. "I understand Mrs. Bragg is a pottery artist. She's been assigned to the pottery studio. Mrs. Clark will learn the weaving trade, and you gentlemen will work in the wood shop."

"I've never worked with wood," Bragg admitted.

"Me either," Marshall said.

"No problem, you'll learn everything you need to know. Tomorrow is a free day; the four of you start work the next. You've been given a card to buy meals until you get paid. You can eat in the mess hall or cook your own food you can buy at the mercantile. Our little store isn't as grand as what Haven Ranch has, but it fills our needs.

"Come along now, and I'll show you to your cabins. All the people here are married or are families, so everyone has a private domicile. No bunkhouse. Grab your luggage and follow me."

"Don't forget Rusty!" Faith said.

"Never." He snagged their two small bags and the cat carrier from the wagon bed. Marshall picked up his and Amity's duffels. They'd come to Refuge with just the shirts on their backs, so they'd been given a few changes of hand-me-down and donated clothes.

Lucento pointed out the mercantile, an infirmary, the pottery and loom studios. "The woodworking shed is over there." He pointed to a standalone away from the half-

moon of buildings. “That bigger building is the mess hall.”

Then he led them to the ring of tiny identical cabins, white cubes topped by sloped roofs bearing solar panels. “Units are heated with herb cakes. Don’t be fooled by the name. There’s nary an herb in them,” he said.

“What are they made of, then?” Faith asked.

“Horniger dung. Horniger is one of the native animals,” Lucento replied.

“Six legs, big antlers?” Bragg asked.

“Yes.”

“We saw herds of them as we rode out here.”

Lucento stopped at the nearest cabin. “This one is yours, Mr. and Mrs. Clark.”

“Let’s check it out.” Marshall went inside.

Amity shot a glance at Faith. “Meet up soon?”

“Dinner?” Faith suggested, looking at Bragg for agreement.

“Dinner,” he said. He hoped Marshall and Amity wouldn’t snipe at each other all through the meal.

Like a woman on death row, Amity shuffled up the three steps to her cabin. The door shut.

“Your cabin is over here.” Lucento took them to a unit four houses away.

“At least we won’t have to listen to them fight,” he whispered.

“Their neighbors won’t be so lucky.” Faith giggled then focused on their unit. “It reminds me of the cabin where we spent the night after we crashed,” she said.

A happy time. But it couldn’t compare to the joy of this moment, to every moment they would have for the rest of their lives. “This is our honeymoon.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“It is, isn’t it?” She leered back.

Lucento cleared his throat. “Should you need anything, you can find me in the admin office—shared space with the library. Again, welcome to Artisan’s Loft.” With a wave, he walked briskly away.

“Let’s check it out!” she said.

“Wait!” He pushed the door open, deposited the two bags and the cat inside. Then he picked her up.

“What are you doing?”

“Carrying you over the threshold.” He stepped inside and kicked the door shut.

It was indeed reminiscent of the Terra Nova cabin, a single room with the bare essentials. Perfect.

“Why look, Mr. Bragg, there’s a bed.”

“Why, so there is, Mrs. Bragg.” He deposited her on top of it, followed her down, and whispered in her ear. “Maybe later we can rustle up some potatoes and peaches.”

“My favorite.”

“Meow?”

Faith giggled. “We’d better let Rusty out.”

He leaped off the bed, unlatched the carrier door, and then jumped back into bed.

“Now, where were we?”

His wife wound her arms around his neck. “You were going to kiss me.”

* * * *

Thank you for reading Double Take (Cosmic Mates 5) . I hope you enjoyed Bragg and Faith’s story. Next up are Marshall and Amity in Double Bind (Cosmic Mates 6)

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