

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

"Six weeks."

Karen nodded and mulled.

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

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

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

"No."

"Come on!"

"No. It's too weird."

"Weird is my middle name."

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

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

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

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

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

"How is the little oddball?"

"Uncontainable."

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

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

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

Dove smiled. "Stop. So do you."

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

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

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

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

What was going on here?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silently, she wondered if he could possibly compare.

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Probabalist Anthros loped through darkened yards in a densely populated Seattle neighborhood. Behind, he still smelled the stench of irradiated metal and melted bird-shit where he'd landed his cruiser. The acrid odor seemed to trail out in a comet tail wake and although he owed it entirely to an overwrought imagination, he feared it would lead them to him.

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

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

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

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

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

And his people's last hope.

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

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

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

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

Sleepy lust nipped the edges of his body and he grimaced. There would be nothing fun to wake up to. After half a decade alone in his ship, he could use a nice piece of ass in the morning. Too bad a quick, hard fuck was totally

out of the question. His former comrades and brethren would find him if he indulged. The scent of sex pulled them like light to a black hole.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But it's Friday."

"Not if time doesn't exist."

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

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

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

"What was that?" Michael asked.

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

Friend or foe?

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

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

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

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

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

"Trash collection is on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, what do you know.

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

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

What about Dream Lover?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The swing-set.

It was *swinging*.

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

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

Laika trotted out of the shadows.

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

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

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

Silence.

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

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

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

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

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

Her spine undulated.

"C'mere, doggie. Nice doggie."

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

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

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

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

"You're home early."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of the many unsettling qualities they possessed, this one often gave Dove chills. They seemed to communicate on some wordless level. As if through telepathy. Or maybe through microscopic changes of expression too

small for an unfamiliar eye to detect. In the end, it didn't matter how they did it. It was the fact that they could that got to her.

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

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

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

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

"But the electricity –"

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

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

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

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

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

The two women stiffened and squinted into the shadows.

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

"You smell like a Markarian."

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

"Hush," Ava hissed.

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

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

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

Dove froze at the sight of the magnificent stranger. Wide, muscled shoulders and a broad expanse of sculpted chest topped a slightly leaner

waist. Her rapt gaze traveled over straight, agile hips and dragged endlessly south over a hard-boiled length of leg before returning to a head curtained in seal-sleek, straight black strands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Anthros!" Ava yelled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Un-freakin'-real.

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

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

"Coffee?" Mark looked perplexed.

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

"Starbucks?" Mark perked.

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

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

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

"No coffee in my world."

"No coffee at all?"

"Not this kind," Arnie said.

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

Arnie laughed. "Somewhat of a vacuum."

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

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

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

He hiccupped a nod.

"Are you an anthropologist?"

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

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

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

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

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

"To buy coffee at Starbucks."

"We have coffee right here. Free."

"Wouldn't water be better?" Dove asked. "You must be dehydrated."

Why she even cared was beyond her. He appeared no better than a bum. Still, if he was educated enough to pursue a professorship at the uni, he must have some redeeming qualities. Maybe she should reserve judgment for a while.

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

"H₂O," Ava put in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And yet...

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

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

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

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