

Chapter One

The unmistakable thunk of an unbalanced airplane propeller overhead didn't sit well with Arnie Simpson as he diddled under the hood of his Porsche.

He had no need to peel his eyes from the pistons to recognize Tom Littleton's Cessna, despite the troubling racket. He knew every aircraft in the region, who owned it and how it should sound on final approach.

"Genius Chrysler!" Arnie slammed the hood of the classic speedster, jammed the keys into the ignition, and took off down the dirt road to Flintlock Municipal Airport.

While he drove, he kept one eye on the plane—not that that would prevent it from tumbling out of the sky like Dorothy's house in *The Wizard of Oz*—but it seemed the right thing to do.

A hundred yards out and about to radio the firehouse, he realized Tom would make it. Barely.

Arnie let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, tucked the Porsche into a parking spot and jogged to the runway.

Tom clunked safely in.

"Bring her over here." Arnie semaphored the feverish plane to a scrap of shade on the tarmac. He trotted inside the hangar for his mechanic's tools and began combing over the engine.

"Saw you hop in your race car and had a feeling it was worse than I thought," Tom said, climbing out of the plane and ambling over with a grin.

Arnie didn't maintain a MENSA membership to suffer fools gladly. Particularly pilots moronic enough to overlook a notch in the prop during a preflight inspection. The forces at work had turned the notch into a fracture and Tom's prop had a chunk bitten out the size of a ping-pong ball. His engine was on the verge of breaking up from the strain. The nitwit was too lucky for his own knickers. "I suggest you go buy me some prop wash," Arnie said when Tom showed signs of settling in for a jaw. Prop wash didn't exist. Should keep the pinhead out of his hair.

"Sure thing." Tom trotted off.

While Arnie worked up a mental and physical lather under the ailing Cessna's nose, he pondered the human intellect, or lack thereof, and the existence of superior life forms. Or lack thereof.

It would be sweet, he thought, to talk to creatures who understood what he said. Too bad they were too few and too far in between.

His amateur cohorts at the E.T. Institute—where they listened for missives from the cosmos—made for some pretty entertaining company, most of the time. But they were

too geeky for words. Arnie had his feet firmly planted in both worlds. And found both to be ultimately lonely.

He'd had a great life, had been happy during most of it. The parents had given him a decent childhood, when they'd had the time. How their genes ever lined up to produce him was another story.

He had no idea why he'd been picked out of the passel to carry the brain load. Just some freak of nature, some quasi-funny joke played by the gods by tucking him in the middle of a family whose combined IQs were about half of his.

If that.

He loved them. Fiercely. But that didn't stop him from realizing they were dodo birds. What if he carried dimwit genes and passed them down to his kids? How would he cope? Mating with another species from outer space would certainly abolish that risk.

The discovery of other life in the universe had been a lifelong fantasy of his, but more than that, it'd been a lifelong *craving*. There simply had to be more out there. More intelligence, more weird people like him. Otherwise, his existence really would be a joke. And not a very funny one at that.

He wondered what it would be like when aliens finally made irrefutable contact. What the circumstances would be. How would the public react? There'd been some promising signals bleeping through the E.T. Institute's scanners the last few years, leading Arnie, his friends and other experts to believe they were on the cusp of a breakthrough. Many had concluded aliens were already here, and had been for years. Although Arnie wasn't so sure, occasionally he met someone who made him believe. But that hadn't happened in a while. Come to think of it, he hadn't gotten that hair-raising feeling of being watched lately, either. Maybe he'd finally reached a plateau of normalcy in his life, after all.

Right. As if that would ever happen.

Leaning back for a break from his work and his musings, he heard the familiar drone of Gage Archer's Mooney lining up with the runway.

Gage had been back and forth to Minneapolis all week, ferrying his fiancée's family in for their upcoming wedding. Since Arnie was best man, he wondered idly who today's passenger would be and he watched as the air taxi greased the concrete and hummed to a spot nearby.

What he saw emerging from the door made his mouth dry up.

It was a woman.

That in itself wasn't usually enough to drain the spit out of Arnie's mouth. Hell, he saw women every day of his life.

This one was incredibly...odd-looking.

Arnie never paid much attention to anyone's appearance, male or female. He cared less about what was shown than what was hidden – namely brains, or lack thereof.

But that hair.

It was white.

Not platinum blonde, or fake in any way—but downright, unmistakably, white. What's more, it looked soft. And long as a Martian winter.

She had an unusual aura surrounding her that he could plainly see. It seemed to undulate, and vibrate. Were those her emotions? Her thoughts?

Whatever the visible energy emanating from her was, it was doing outlandish things to his dick. Things no other woman had ever done at first sight.

He couldn't comprehend his body's fascination with this woman and he suddenly harbored some serious doubts that someone so instantly alluring could possibly be an Earthling. He didn't even know her IQ! Had Gage's plane taken a detour to Andromeda? Stranger things had happened according to the E.T. Institute. And wasn't a visitation not only possible but probable and imminent?

Her figure was slender and supple, with average-sized breasts jutting out from her pale green T-shirt. In that regard she appeared humanoid enough.

She was in terrific shape for her age—looked thirty when she had to be fifty, assuming she'd been spawned on this planet.

But fuck if he cared how many years she had under her belt or which nebula she blew in from. Those small details just didn't matter to Arnie. Brains were what interested him and now, white hair.

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Dr. Ava Ward grabbed her shoulder bag off the floor of the Mooney and paused to make sure nothing had tumbled out.

"Ready to go?" Gage asked from behind.

"Aye, aye, Captain," she grinned, spinning around and firing off a stiff, crisp salute.

He rolled his eyes and smiled. "Just give me a second to lock up."

"The flight was a blast, thanks!"

"Service is my motto."

Ava looked around with excitement. Gage had been a sensational tour guide, buzzing cow fields, pointing out Wisconsin's places of interest and making the flight a helluva lot of fun. And Flintlock had looked kind of cool from the air. What there was of it, anyway.

Most of the time Ava didn't take to small towns. Found the people either too nosy or too standoffish. There seemed to be no in betweens. And she would know. She'd been born and raised in Fairbanks, Alaska, and that was smaller than she could stand.

She'd come to Flintlock for two reasons, to stand as Lorna's maid of honor and try to have a hot hook-up with the best man. Lorna had been gabbing about him

incessantly, insisting he and Ava were soul mates and that the requisite happily-ever-after would be apparent with one glance.

Ava wasn't buying it. From Lorna's description he seemed uncannily intelligent but unwilling to use that intelligence for any worthwhile pursuits. If there was one thing she would never tolerate in a man, it was laziness. Her father had been well intentioned and loving, but lazy. He had died broke, leaving her and her mother to fend for themselves. That was no way to treat your family. So the jury was still out on forever with Arnie Simpson. But a wedding fling was eminently doable.

After all, wasn't that what normal, red-blooded single girls were supposed to do at weddings? Not that she'd ever been considered normal, or that when push came to shove she actually wanted to *be* normal. But she did want to fit in with the crowd for once in her life. This was a vacation. Her first in years. And she planned on living it to the hilt.

Her best friend was going to help. "Too bad Lorna couldn't come with you to pick me up." Gage had been in such a rush at Dane County Airport, and the ride had been so noisy, Ava'd barely had a chance to ask about her.

"Deadline," Gage said. "Had time to throw a hissy fit about it though."

Ava laughed. Back home in Minneapolis Lorna was known as Miss Behavior, the etiquette expert. Her newspaper column was an enormous success. So much so that she'd been able to write her own ticket. A one-way ticket to Flintlock to marry Gage.

"She's been having problems setting up the home office and getting online," Gage added as he bent to put chocks behind the Mooney's wheels. "Flintlock isn't known for having multiple providers."

"I bet," Ava grimaced. So far, Lorna hadn't had to commute back to Minneapolis too often, but when she did, Gage was right there to ferry her.

Ava sighed. Lorna had found the true love they'd always craved, while Ava was still stuck in an office with her fingers up old men's asses.

Ah well, it was a living.

"Let's go." Gage snagged her duffel.

Turning to follow him inside the small airport, she froze dead in her tracks. A man wearing an oily AirGage T-shirt, torn jeans and buckskin steel toes leaned against a neighboring airplane. With one elbow buttressing the fuselage and both hands fiddling with a pipe wrench, he struck a swoon-worthy pose—gawking at Ava as if she'd just beamed down from a spaceship.

Since her unusual coloring often elicited such a reaction, she didn't take offense. She simply stood transfixed, gawking right back. "He work for you?" she asked Gage sotto voce, staring at some totally astounding pecs.

"What? Oh. That's Arnie. My mechanic."

Ava's jaw dropped another notch. *That's Arnie Simpson? The best man. Hubbariffic!*

There he stood, the man who had such awesome genius he was constantly hounded with job offers from NASA – and constantly blowing them off. According to Lorna, he'd gotten stellar scores on every aptitude test known to mankind, attended MIT on full scholarship and yet he preferred to rot right here in Flintlock fixing crop dusters.

Apparently, you could take the man out of the country but not the country out of the man. The seventh of ten offspring of Wisconsin hog farmers, he held the seeds of greatness in his hands but had yet to sow them.

Still, he had brains. And beauty. Two-thirds of what she required in a mate, making him better suited to her than most.

Except...

She batted the soul mate carrot away from her nose. If she could rustle him out of the stockyards and into Mission Control where he belonged, she'd take a big, juicy bite. Until then he was purely fun in the sun. Nothing more.

If looks were anything to go on, what fun it could be.

"Hey, Arnie," Gage said. "Suck the drool back in your mouth and get over here. There's someone I want you to meet."

Blast! She hadn't checked her lipstick before landing. Now she'd look like Casper the Friendly Ghost.

In slow motion, Arnie set down his tool and pushed away from the plane. He advanced with measured steps, as if unsure of himself. Ava didn't like that. Confidence turned her on. His wariness gave her a sharper edge than she'd had a minute ago, when she'd felt the lick of his eyes against her skin.

The closer he got, the duller her edge grew. He had that sexy economy of movement only shorter men possessed. Her top teeth clamped down to chew some life into her lips and she saw him falter for a second.

His body, compact and muscular, had perfect athletic proportions. On top of that, he had a sun-bronzed brown mop of hair that cried out for a tango with feminine fingers.

Longish sideburns framed his way-cute face in the manner of a beatnik. All he needed was a black mock turtleneck, pencil pants and loafers and he could slide right into a Sixties' Parisian jazz club.

He stopped beside her, creeping into her personal space even though he stood a good four feet away. Ava slipped her brown Ray Bans with the bottle green lenses over her hair like a headband and extended a perfectly manicured hand. Well, almost perfect. The clipped nails were a concession to her profession.

"Best Man Arnie, meet Maid of Honor Ava." Gage said in a voice tinged with amusement.

She met his eyes as Gage made the introductions and found herself absorbed by scrumptious color. Deep brown with amber flecks, as if someone had sprinkled gold dust into a fondue pot of dark chocolate.

What, oh what would those large round eyes look like suspended above her, heavy with passion and need?

Her pussy got damp.

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“Pleasure,” Arnie said, wiping his hand on his ass and shaking hers.

He tried to stare at her left ear, half afraid of what he might find in her eyes. But like a dope, he overshot and his gaze hit hers. Bull’s-eye.

Green. That figured. The eyes were alien green to match all that Milky Way hair.

Crapola.

This was bad.

Scanning her face, his knees nearly buckled when he realized her satiny, succulent skin was as tensile as a trampoline, putting her well under fifty in people years.

He wanted to bounce all over her.

Did that hair color even exist in this galaxy? He noticed her brows and lashes were darker, almost smoky. They intrigued him enough to wonder what color the hair down under might be. And make him itch to find out. Soon.

Even if she was thick as a plank, dull as a dormouse, Arnie figured he’d have to investigate every inch of that pert, long-limbed body. After all, it was his duty to the legacy of Hangar Eighteen.

Before he could stop himself from a move so atypically bold even Gage drew back in surprise, he reached up and captured a few strands of that hair in his fingers, twirling them gently into a double helix.

“All the women in my family go white early,” Ava said, smiling. “I’ve had this color since med school.”

Arnie blinked and dropped his hand. “You’re a doctor?” *Sent down to perform experiments?*

She couldn’t be for real. There simply had to be something wrong with her. Maybe she’d gotten her degree from the back of a magazine or from some whacked-out third-world country. *Or Venus.*

“Yeah. Harvard class of ‘97.”

Crap.

“That so?” Arnie asked to hide his increasing fear. “I graduated MIT in ‘95.”

“We just missed each other,” Ava laughed.

“Imagine that,” he muttered and for the life of him, couldn’t think of another thing to say except a silent *Halleluiah* she hadn’t been orbiting Massachusetts during final exams. Not that he needed to study or anything, he wasn’t that lame, but she might’ve been a bit of a distraction—because of the white hair, of course.

"Listen," Gage said with a pointed glance at his watch. "I'd love to stand around discussing microphysics with you brainiacs all day, but Lorna is expecting us."

"I hate small talk," Ava quipped.

She and Arnie giggled like two nutty kids.

Because he wondered if anything living would shift inside when he lifted it, he bent down to retrieve Ava's luggage. Nope, no specimens that he could feel.

Yet.

He fell into line behind Gage as they headed to his taxicab.

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Ava brought up the rear, studying Arnie's assets with more than professional interest. Oh to have him bending *her* over on the examining table—armed with a French tickler and strawberry-flavored body lotion. Not something she'd ever had the opportunity to try. But there was still time.

"Here we go," Gage said.

"Nice cab." She ran a hand along a sleek, black fender. He'd imported a London taxicab as part of his complete livery service. She had to admire his initiative. Lorna said he had a corner on the transportation market in Flintlock and just about every borough all the way into Madison. A small-town magnate had captured the heart of her big-city friend.

That would never happen to Ava. No way would she ever live in Podunk again, even if it did give birth to a pocket-rocket scientist. Her gaze slid over Arnie once more.

With a breathtaking ripple of biceps, he hiked her bag into the trunk, slammed it and stepped over to open the passenger door.

"I suggest it's been a pleasure."

Ava suddenly wondered how it would be to see him smile. At her. Bet you have an awesome grin, she told him silently. "Nice meeting you too, Arnie. Guess I'll see you at the rehearsal."

"If not before." Gage smirked.

Arnie ducked his head, and, as if receiving her silent request, his lips parted over straight glistening teeth. A pleasure shock undulated through her body, turning her thoughts to the wedding night and a consummation with him. On a baby grand. With...handcuffs.

"Got a load of work to do on the Cessna." He backed away slowly, dark gaze slipping around hers and igniting the pheromone fumes between them. "See you at the Hangaround later?"

"Yup," Gage said, sliding behind the wheel.

With a small, regretful wave, Ava followed suit. At the last minute, Arnie lunged forward and closed the door for her. Rapping the roof with his knuckles in goodbye, he turned on his heel and jogged back to the hangar.

Ava had to remember to blink once he rounded the corner. His looks had her pussy throbbing and his manners had her heart aching. How long had it been since a man opened and closed a door for her? She couldn't remember. Most of the time, people let the door slam behind them, never looking to see who might be following. And forget about getting a thank you for holding a door. Ava's thoughts stalled. Arnie hadn't gotten one from her either.

That realization disappointed her.

"What's the Hangaround?" she asked in an attempt to gloss over sudden remorse.

"Airport bar and grill. We eat there once in a while."

"Arnie's going tonight?" Maybe she'd get a chance to be polite. And more.

"He's there every night."

Sounded like no girlfriend in the picture then. She'd have to quiz Lorna to make sure.

Six minutes later they arrived at the homestead. "Ava!" Lorna flew out the door when Gage honked the horn.

Before Ava could find the latch, Lorna was there, yanking the cab door open, and hauling her out over the curb into a tight embrace. Where had her restrained, excruciatingly polite friend gone?

"Welcome to the monkey house," Gage said.

"How was the flight? Did you get sick? Did you and Gage have any problems finding each other? How are you?"

"Everything went fine," Ava said, smiling. It was fantastic to see Lorna again. The last time they'd met in Minneapolis, she'd been so busy arranging things at the newspaper and planning her wedding they'd hardly had time to catch up.

Lorna hooked arms with her while Gage shouldered her suitcase. When he'd slammed the trunk lid, they ambled up the small, neat walkway to the small, not-so-neat house.

"Isn't it great?" Lorna gushed. "Finally. My own home."

"Unreal!" Ava hedged. Yick. That's what love did to a person.

"C'mon, I'll show you the guestroom."

They squeezed down a short, narrow hallway to one of the two bedrooms.

Feng shui's got nothing on Lorna. Ava surveyed the tiny room. White, bright and bare. A double bed with a brushed aluminum hospital-style headboard took up most of one wall. A battered dresser filled the other. Across the smattering of visible wood flooring lay a prim swath of coir.

"Incredible," Ava breathed.

"Put her suitcase on the floor, for now," Lorna instructed Gage.

Ava wondered where Lorna intended putting it later.

"Guess I'll head back to the airport to help Arnie," Gage said with a jingle of keys. "Leave you to your girl talk." He gave Ava's hair an affectionate ruffle. "Glad you're here."

Once he left, Lorna hustled Ava into the kitchen. Like the old days, she had a pot of tea already prepared. Sliding two steaming cups onto the table, she pulled out a chair for Ava and sat herself down on the other side. "Well, what did you think of Arnie?"

Ava stirred a teaspoon of sugar into her tea, tapped the spoon and set it on a napkin. "He's not what I expected."

"What?"

She grinned. "You didn't tell me he was so hot."

Lorna slumped in relief. "Like you'd have believed me. I mean. Come on! Beauty and brains?"

And Hot Grease-Monkey Sex stamped on his ass. "True. True." Arnie had it all. Except a city address and family-sized wages. More the better, actually, she reminded herself. Would make it easier to say goodbye after the hot sex.

"Any vibes from him?"

Ava winked. "Besides the fact he couldn't take his eyes off my body?"

Lorna whooped, hopping up and scooping Ava into another excited hug. "I did it. I did it."

"Calm down. We don't even know each other."

"Yes, you do. In here." Lorna tapped over her heart with a forefinger. "Besides, I know you both and I say since you're both attracted, it's a done deal."

Ava had to laugh. They were attracted all right but she knew better than to pin too many hopes on that alone. "There're several major hurdles. Including my job." *And this town, and Arnie's lack of ambition.*

"Well, you just won't tell him."

Ava sat back down and ran a hand through her hair. "Of course I'll tell him."

"No. You won't." Lorna set her chin.

"I have to."

Lorna crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the kitchen counter as if settling in for a fight. "No. You don't."

For a smart woman, Lorna could be pretty thick sometimes. Ava waved a hand and snorted a frustrated breath. "How could I get away with that? The first thing men ask on a date is 'what do you do?'"

"Tell him you're a doctor. It's the truth."

"He already knows that. The next thing he's bound to ask is my specialty."

“Make something up.”

“Right.” She sipped her tea. “He’s not dumb.”

“No, but he’s distractible.”

Ava nodded slowly and mulled Lorna’s argument. All these years she’d believed in being upfront about her profession. Believed in laying it all out on the table and letting the chips fall where they may.

Where had it gotten her?

An expense-paid trip to Nowhere and a mouthful of dirt when the men made tracks.

She never thought she’d resort to subterfuge to kindle a relationship but she’d been kicked in the shins too many times when men found out what she did. Most of them reacted as if she was a prostitute, for crying out loud.

But she wasn’t. She was, as Gage would say, a Prostate-tute.

Irony thinned her lips. She’d specialized in proctology to fulfill a promise to her dying father. Whodathunk that decision would brand her not only unfuckable, but unlovable to every other man on the planet.

“Okay.” Her shoulders slumped as she glanced at Lorna. “I won’t tell him.”

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The minute Arnie entered Harry’s Hangaround later that evening he knew he’d been set up. There she sat at the Archer table, in lunar-white glory, looking literally out of this world.

Arnie’s head started spinning. Whoa, Nellie! He seriously needed to get a grip. What were the odds of an alien invasion? Had to be astronomical. Right now, he needed to focus. He was being set up for breeding, er, romance. Best to squirm out of that frying pan first.

Although unsure about the outcome, he recalled the field test he often used to eliminate improbable mates, saving time and money. It usually took less than thirty seconds to unmask them as intellectual lightweights. Even Gage respected The Test.

Mentally tucking it away for later, he traversed the restaurant, trying not to make eye contact with *It*. Every time he met that unearthly gaze, he grew bewitched. Tonight he wanted a clear head.

Lorna stood up and kissed him. “You’ve already met Dr. Ava Ward,” she said. “My friend from Minneapolis.”

Yeah. Yeah. He didn’t need Lorna to remind him she was a doctor. He knew that already and that simply meant she worked hard and had good study habits – if she was dim enough to need them. Having a medical degree did not make her smart. “How you doing?” he asked. “Did you get settled?”

“I did. Gage and Lorna have a lovely home.”

It was a bald lie and everyone knew it, but Arnie let her get away with it since she was most likely trying to fit in with the humans.

"Join us," she invited.

Arnie had no choice but to sit next to her. It'd been carefully engineered that way. But he made sure his leg didn't brush hers for more than an instant and he made his best effort to stay clear of her misty perfume.

In a throwback to the encounter at the airport, he couldn't think of a word to say.

He sensed Ava turn in his direction. "So you're Gage's mechanic," she mentioned in a leading way.

Arnie nodded, reaching for the bread. "That's right."

"Lorna said you majored in aeronautics at MIT."

"Among other things. And you studied at Columbia," he said to trip her up. He knew very well it'd been Harvard.

Ava nodded.

Ah ha!

"That's where I got my MS in Astrophysics."

Arnie's spine fused. She studied the physical and chemical constitution of celestial matter. Was that considered "med school" where she came from?

"It's just a hobby." She shrugged and took a sip of beer. "I had some time to kill."

Kill what?

"Ava never had to waste a minute hitting the books like the rest of us dweebs," Lorna laughed, gazing fondly at The Entity.

Could the situation get any worse?

The hour for The Test drew nigh. "Oh yeah?" he asked in a tone of friendly challenge. "Let me ask your learned opinion on something then."

Across the table, Gage perked up. He'd heard that lead-in many times before and was obviously interested in what Ava's answer would be.

"Shoot," Ava said, catching the challenge with a strange glitter in her eyes.

Arnie half turned to face her. He felt a slow smirk begin around his lips. "Can you prove time exists?"

The glitter in her eyes went out and she got a bored expression on her face. "No."

Her answer wasn't what he expected. Gage raised his eyebrows. Arnie ignored him. "Why?"

Ava shrugged. "Because it doesn't. Everyone knows that. It's just a device to measure light," she continued, unasked. "We've assigned numbers that mean nothing to a lifecycle we scarcely understand."

The situation just got worse.

She giggled. "Time was invented by someone with too much light on his hands."

Arnie laughed his head off.

Much worse.

So far, he'd managed to skirt the love thing quite nicely. He didn't really believe in all that sap anyhow because he'd reached thirty-four years of age with his heart fully intact. The odds of that happening to the average American Male had to be through the roof. Therefore, love couldn't exist.

Simple logic.

But then, he'd never met anyone who possessed a heavenly body *and* a mind that moved at warp speed.

He could handle a close encounter with the pretty white-haired body snatcher, as long as she didn't try to eat him afterward. But could he see her back to the mother ship after the wedding knowing their combined IQs equaled the angle of a circle?

"What's your specialty?" he asked, more as a distraction from his misgivings than out of any particular interest. Ripping a bite of bread from the loaf and reaching for the butter, he tried to calm his frazzled nerves. *Probably In-Vitro Fertilization.*

Lorna and Ava exchanged glances. Arnie fired a look at Gage. His shoulders shook in silent laughter. Something sinister slithered up Arnie's back. What were they up to?

Before Ava could answer, Lorna cleared her throat. "I'm starved," she declared too perkily. "I think I'll order the BBQ. What're you getting, Ava?"

The waitress arrived and took their orders. The women immediately retired to the powder room, leaving Arnie in suspended animation with a Cheshire-faced Gage.

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Ava bolted the door to the tiny, dingy bathroom and turned to Lorna. "I can't do it."

"Yes, you can."

"I can't lie to him. He's too sweet."

Lorna folded her arms across her chest in the take-charge way commonly used by Judith, her overbearing mother. "You're not lying. You're withholding information."

"It's the same thing and you know it."

"I do not," Lorna said stubbornly. She pulled the ponytail elastic out of her long, sable hair and neatened it with a comb. "It makes you mysterious. Arnie'll eat that up. He loves puzzles."

Ava sighed at herself in the mirror. "I'm an open book."

"And that's part of your problem. You slam men with information about yourself. It's scary."

"So now the truth is scary?"

Lorna snorted. "The truth about you is. Besides the proctology factor, you're too smart for your own good."

“Arnie can handle smart.”

“But I doubt he can handle a proctologist.” Lorna shrugged. “Care to find out? Be my guest.”

Ava rested her hands on the countertop. No way. Not yet. Never mind the soul mate part, she wanted to at least get laid this week.

“Thought so. Just distract him whenever he broaches the topic.”

She came to life again. “It won’t work. He’s bound to find out even if this doesn’t go anywhere, which I seriously doubt it will.”

“What?” Lorna stared her down in the mirror. “You’re putting the kibosh on this thing before it’s even gotten off the ground? Please!”

“Face it, Lorna. I live in Minneapolis!”

“That’s what airplanes are for – if we can coax Arnie into one once in while.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lorna mumbled something under her breath. Ava gave her shoulder a push. “Spill.”

“He’s still scared of flying. Gage recently made him get his license but he won’t use it.”

Ava threw up her hands. “Oh wonderful. An airplane mechanic who’s scared to fly.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “These things could only happen to me. What’s the use?”

“Do you want a soul mate or not?”

Ava nodded. Heart-achingly so. More than anything, really. She’d been so lonely.

“You’ll never find him with that attitude. Arnie is it for you. I know it.”

“Well, he won’t be when he finds out I lied to him,” argued Ava. “I know I’d hate it if he lied to me.”

Lorna finished her ponytail and spun to clasp her friend’s shoulders in both hands. She gave her a little shake. “He won’t stick around long enough to hate you if you tell him what you do for a living. Arnie’s slightly, er, phobic.”

“About what besides flying?” Ava shrilled.

“Everything.”

“Now you tell me.”

“He’s getting better.”

“For heaven’s sake, Lorna. Proctology is a perfectly decent livelihood. I love my job! Why should I fib about it?”

“Because it’ll scare the pants off him the same way it has all your potential lovers.”

The two women locked eyes, hands flying up to their mouths as a gaggle of giggles erupted.

“Don’t,” Ava gasped. “Don’t start with Gage’s corny puns.”

They laughed harder.

"I'm just being practical, Ava..." Lorna's voice trailed off into hysterical laughter.

"Stop," Ava cried, hands gripping her aching sides. "I need a tissue." She felt around the counter, trying through a glaze of tears to find the complimentary tissue box Harry thoughtfully provided.

"You've turned his head..." Lorna coughed.

That did it. Ava flew into a stall and sat down on the cool porcelain bowl. When she saw Lorna approach the stall door, she slammed it shut and locked it, jamming her fingers in her ears. "I can't hear you, I can't hear you," she singsonged.

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Back at the table Gage appeared strangely subdued. Arnie's eagle eye spotted several lip twitches followed by a careful schooling of features. He knew better than to try to get Gage to fess up. The man could keep secrets safer than a bank vault when he wanted to.

The women returned to the booth suspiciously red-eyed and flushed. Arnie rose to let Ava slide in. The brush of her bare arm against his sent a chatter of Morse code into his crotch. It didn't take a rocket scientist to decipher the desperate SOS. Arnie forgot his original question.

"What do you think of Harry's?" Gage asked conversationally.

Her green gaze opened wide and spread its eerie light around the restaurant. "Can't beat the propeller ceiling fans," she said. "Are all those parts on the wall leftovers from crash scenes?"

Arnie almost snorted beer through his nose. "Yeah," he said, recovering. "Over there is what's left of the *Jenny Jones* – a bum tail rotor." He leaned closer, allowing her fresh, meadowy scent to envelope him. "To your left are the remains of Ron Gibson's poor Cessna. It took elbow grease, but we got most of Ron off."

Ava laughed out loud – a surprising sound coming from such a wraith. And she looked really pretty when she did, not in the least bit nitrogen-deprived with those flushed cheeks and lively eyes.

Arnie couldn't recall ever making a female laugh and was completely bowled over by how good it felt. His cock noticed too.

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat to give Saturn Five more room on the launch pad, his lower leg found hers under the table and flat out refused to exit the area.

The Space Invader responded by sliding her long appendage gently over his and wrapping it around slowly, like a tentacle.

Saturn Five's liquid hydrogen achieved flight pressure. Arnie let loose a lazy grin.

T-minus ten and counting.