

TO KISS THE STAR

MELODIE KICKED HER HEELS restlessly against her wheelchair footrests. At last he had come. The bare whiff of bitter smoke told her that John, her Friendly Visitor, had lit his usual pre-visit cigarette on the Mary-Le-Bow Center patio.

How Mel loved the smoke. It reminded her of the bonfire her younger brothers had set on a long-ago, lazy autumn afternoon while she watched from the caned rocker on Mum's porch. Before she had lost her sight.

The leaves, brown and yellow and orange, had fired up with a crackle as the boys laughed madly, the smoke billowing skyward, nearly the same color as the icy gray Midlands clouds.

John's cigarettes, like the burning leaves. He had told her the name of his brand. An elegant name, vaguely exciting. Mel wouldn't forget it, because it was like his name: John. Her voiceboard was ready. She hit the up arrow just as she heard his feet padding into the dayroom.

"John Player Special," the voiceboard said.

"Aw, Mel, you caught me at it again."

Mel laughed, honking like a lost gosling. Something was wet on her chin. Drool, she supposed. John's hand touched her chest, then something soft and antiseptic-smelling wiped her face. Her bib.

The damn nurses had bibbed her, and she'd told them no bib, please, because John was coming. Today was her Friendly Visit. Furious at the nurses' betrayal, she kicked at the floor with her feet, rolling her chair back a few inches. John followed.

"You'll get me to quit," John said. "Just keep at me."

"You're too handsome to die young," Mel pressed into the voiceboard.

"Did your Mum call?" John asked.

Mel shook her head. More drool on her chin. "Don't wipe me," she said through the droning voiceboard. No intonation, no fury, just the bland voice with vaguely elongated vowels and clipped consonants, because that was how it made words, from vowels and sounds put together, depending upon how she rolled the smooth plastic ball controller and which of the four arrows she pressed.

"You're twenty-three, you don't need your Mum's permission."

"Twenty-four," Mel corrected. "I know," she added, about the permission.

"This is the chance of a lifetime, Mel. I thought you would have done it by now."

Mel nodded. John was right. She should be getting her implants by now. It wasn't every spastic, blind twenty-four-year-old cripple who won the lottery to explore the stars. Her number, chosen for the chance to be a probe controller for the ISA, sent light-years away to Tau Ceti or Sirius or wherever they needed to send her.

"I thought today might be our last visit, so I brought you this. It's nothing much." John took her better hand, her left, and pressed something into it. Mel felt a delicate chain and small hard cubes that she rubbed between her fingers. A bracelet, with beads or stones, deliciously warm from being in John's pocket.

"For me?" Mel hadn't expected a gift. Especially not anything so personal, like a bracelet. Again, the wetness on her chin. Disgusting spit! Damn rebellious mouth! She heard herself making noises, but she couldn't reach for the voiceboard just then, because John was fastening the bracelet around her wrist.

"It's a W-W-J-D bracelet," he said. The cube-shaped beads had cooled because Mel hadn't any circulation in her hands. Cold hands, warm heart, her Mum had always said. The bracelet was loose. Mel was afraid that it would slip off as she jerked her arms around like a puppet, the way she did sometimes.

"Wuh, wuh, wuh," Mel said, with her mouth.

"What does it mean? Oh, sure--it means 'what would Jesus do?'"

