

Excerpt of ForEvver



**In the year 2102, the Fountain of Youth exists for only a select few.
But you can't cheat death ForEvver.**

Flavia Gracchus reluctantly agrees to deliver a special shipment from her home on the Moon to ForEvver Rehabilitation CEO, Reid Evver. What she doesn't know is that Evver, a man much older than he appears, intends to marry her and start a family. How can she escape Evver's clutches and wed the man of her dreams?

Ambitious Jason Maverick can't believe his new assignment: to babysit Reid Evver's future wife, a Moon native, by escorting her on a sightseeing tour. But the more time Jason spends in Flavia's company, the more she captivates him. How can he propose to the woman he's been waiting for all his life when she's all but bought and paid for by his mysterious, unscrupulous boss?

Prologue

Jason Maverick was a man on a mission. The mission wasn't altruistic however, it was egotistic. Jason Maverick wanted, no, he deserved the best. And by hell or high water, he made certain he was going to get it. The best housing, the best food, the best clothes, the best women--whatever the best was, Jason Maverick yearned for it, no matter the cost.

Jason Maverick was, to be succinct, self-absorbed. But, as he was so fond of saying, why the hell shouldn't he be? He'd shouldered the responsibility of providing for three siblings--one older, two younger--ever since his father vanished off the face of the Earth, twenty-four long years ago.

So when the opportunity presented itself to work for the wealthiest man on the planet, indeed, in the entire solar system--Dr. Reid Evver--Jason gladly stepped up to the plate.

Financial analysts had to admit the merger of Jason's high-powered business acumen with Dr. Evver's wildly successful corporation, ForEvver Rejuvenation, was a match made in heaven--if heaven existed in this cynical twenty-second century.

But even if there wasn't a heaven, selling one's soul could still send a man to hell, as Jason Maverick was about to find out...

Chapter One

"Ground-hugger alert! Fresh snails incoming at LL. Should be arriving here at Tychotown shortly. Prepare to reduce speed to accommodate one G-types."

The room intercom crackled once, then the rehabilitation cubicle fell silent.

Flavia Gracchus paused her massage of her client's left shoulder to look up at the communication box. She shook her head. "Claude will never learn."

"What was that?" Donald Helman, a striking man in his middle years with a nose as hooked as a parrot's beak, grumbled from the tabletop where he rested. "I never can understand that infernal box so I won't bother to ask you what the message was about. You folks have your own lingo, that's for sure."

Biting her lip, Flavia resumed the massage. What her brother, Claudius, had just announced was insulting to a significant number of the population listening to squawk boxes. Ground-huggers stood for natives of Earth. Snails also meant Earthers. LL was short for Luna Landing, the main spaceport on the Moon, and reducing speed meant newcomers had to relearn how to walk in the lesser gravity: one-sixth less in those areas where artificially enhanced gravity was absent. The natural flow of traffic always became snarled whenever fresh clients braved the trip to the Luna ForEvver Rejuvenation Facility.

She finished oiling Donald's shoulder, then flipped a switch to steam the air with a mixture of soothing and sedating scents--yarrow and sweet orange. "I was only commenting that Claude should stop using Luna lingo, as you call it, Donald. It's

confusing to visitors.”

When her client shrugged, she noted the right shoulder lifted higher than the left. The movement was an improvement though, considering that when he first arrived at the facility, he had extremely limited range of motion on the left side of his body.

Of course, he'd just had a complete shoulder replacement so that was to be expected.

“You can't pull the wool over my eyes, Doc. Your brother Claudius doesn't think much of us outsiders. Can't keep it out of his voice.” Donald yawned, then closed his eyes. The aromatherapy treatment was beginning to take effect.

She sniffed the air. The fragrant scent seemed stronger than usual. She had to squelch the urge to also yawn.

Maybe she was just tired.

She placed an insulated blanket over Donald's tanned body. “I'm your physical therapist, not a doctor. Not a medical one, anyway. Call me Flavia.”

He lifted his head up, shook it, then flopped back down.

Evidently he preferred to call her doc.

Smiling, she washed the oil from her hands, air-dried them, then reached into her lab coat pocket. She slipped her favorite ring--an ancient gold coin--back on the third finger of her right hand. “Well, never mind, Donald. You've just finished an extremely demanding workout. It's time for you to relax.”

“Relax! Hell's bells, that's all I've been doing here.”

“And look at the result. Your progress rate is phenomenal. I predict you'll be back at Yankee Stadium throwing no-hitters in no time at all.”

“I hope so, Doc. Miss the Bronx Bombers, though that nickname hasn't been used in ages and ages. Up here, I'm starting to reek like...rotting green cheese.”

She laughed, but truth be told, she'd heard that joke a least a million times before. Sure, the recycled air had a metallic smell to it, or so all newcomers said, but the oxygen-nitrogen mix maintained by the air purification system was the proper ratio.

Earthers. They had no admiration for their own world, so how could they appreciate hers?

“Doc.” The man yawned again. “I'm...itching to get back...on the mound.”

Snore. Her client was out--no baseball pun intended. She nodded as he entered the first stages of sleep.

Donald Helman was a Cy Young award winner for best National League pitcher three years ago, in 2099, so naturally he was eager to return to Earth and to his profession. She'd never seen a live baseball game so it was difficult to understand anyone's passion for it. Or, to be truthful, passion for any of the other Earth sports.

Once a moonie, always a moonie. She grinned at her preference for her home over planet Earth. She wouldn't have it any other way.

Flavia slid the door shut on the rehabilitation cubicle, then rushed to the pneumatic conveyor, to get to Level Two, Central Control--and her brother. She'd have to read him the riot act. Again. At the rate he was going, someone was bound to complain to the medical director.



Just as Flavia passed the medical director's office, Dr. Kendalo West stepped into the corridor. "Ms. Gracchus, may I have a word with you?" He gestured for her to come inside.

Drat. By the raised eyebrow on his unnaturally smooth forehead, it looked as if the director had a bone to pick with her rather than her brother.

She sighed, backtracked, and entered his spacious suite. "Certainly, Doctor."

In the five years Kendalo West had occupied this position, he used titles to address people at all times, no matter what, no matter whom. In that sense, and in many, many others, he didn't fit in. Folks were casual on the Moon. Why didn't Kendalo ever take a deep breath and let his hair down? Well, figuratively speaking. He had more under his nose on a pencil-thin mustache than on top of his shiny head.

He indicated for her to sit in a tubular chair arranged in a cozy grouping at the back of his office. "Have a seat." For once he didn't sit behind his massive tree-grown desk. Instead, he sat across from her.

Immediately her guard went up.

"Coffee?" he asked, arching his left eyebrow higher on his dark forehead.

She gulped down dismay. Hospitality on his part was definitely out of character. Had a client lodged a grievance against her? Was this his way to ease the pain before he

booted her out the door?

Relax. She evened her breathing. “No, thank you. I’m fine.”

She wasn’t, really, but Kendalo wasn’t, either. The way he twirled the end of his dark mustache was a sure sign of unease.

“How’s the treatment going with your latest, Donald Helman, isn’t it?” Kendalo stopped fussing with his facial hair. “Is he progressing on schedule?”

Kendalo knew the answer to that question, she’d filed her report as she watched Donald’s latest workout. No, the director’s question was a formality. She repeated what she’d just input into the system, folded her hands in her lap, and continued to wait. Kendalo would get around to the point of this meeting in his own good time.

He cleared his throat. “So Mr. Helman should be ready to depart on the shuttle in a couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks?” Flavia was flabbergasted. Why did Kendalo even think that was possible?

To gather her thoughts, she glanced around his office. Brilliant sunsets, sparkling oceans, and beige sandy beaches decorated the walls--all scenes from Earth. These panoramic views were supposed to be relaxing, soothing, calming.

They weren’t. Since she’d never personally experienced anything other than what the Moon had to offer, she regarded the magnificent sights surrounding her as alien as the rings of Saturn.

She considered her reply, then met his bureaucratic gaze. “That would be too soon, sir. As you know, Donald has had a complete shoulder replacement. He needs time to heal. Retraining muscles is a slow process. While the lower gravity at our facility aids in restoring mobility and function, it’s not a miracle cure.”

“His team needs him.” Kendalo shrugged as if a baseball manager’s needs could take precedence over what was realistically possible. Then he waved his sturdy, manicured hand. “But that’s not why I wanted to talk, Ms. Gracchus. I have a favor to ask of you.”

She tilted her head. “What do you need, Dr. West?” Experience had taught her never to agree to anything without hearing the details first.

He sighed.

Kendalo exhibiting human frailties? By the stars, what was going on?

He settled his chin in his hand and stared at her, his eyes as dark as a bottomless crater.

She hated when he stared at her. There was something very disturbing about his eyes.

“As you are aware, Ms. Gracchus, the Luna ForEver Rejuvenation Facility handles more than physical rehabilitation. We also are responsible for transporting valuable ores to our headquarters in the New Tri-Metropolis. My late assistant handled this part of our function, in addition to acting as courier, delivering the goods.”

He blinked his eyes once, in a very deliberate action. “Since Mr. Sigmund died in that unfortunate accident, I haven’t found a replacement for him.”

She shivered. Wilfred Sigmund, rather new to his job and to the Moon, had broken a number of safety rules. He’d gone topside without a buddy--disregarding rule number one. He hadn’t filed a destination report with Central Control--rule number two. He’d dressed in a pressure suit without checking all the equipment--rule number three. Wilfred was found four hours later at the bottom of one of Tycho’s satellite craters with his comm device on mute, his air tank empty, and his face mutilated from the fall.

Kendalo continued, “I need someone I trust to temporarily take over--just for this upcoming shipment. But it’s not only to headquarters, I need you to go all the way to the top to personally deliver it to Dr. Evver.”

Dr. Reid Evver? Flavia straightened in her chair and gazed at the large portrait of the facility’s founder hanging on the one wall unhampered by Earth locales. He was a handsome man with clear green eyes and brushed back dusky hair. She’d always admired Reid for funding this physical therapy facility. The Moon’s easier-on-the-limbs lower gravity had worked wonders on every client that ever walked...or bounced through the facility’s doors.

She’d also admired his grandfather, Forrest Evver, for his vision in creating this facility at Tychotown over seventy-five years ago. And father, Forrest, Jr., as well, for expanding the treatment center. If one family could be labeled legendary in this day and age, it was the Evver family.

Not to mention that Reid Evver was fabled to be the wealthiest man in creation.

But journey to Earth? Her?

She shook her head so hard, her hair, tired of being restrained in a simple bun, came tumbling down to her shoulders. “I’m not a good choice, sir. I’m not used to the higher gravity. Nor do I wish to travel. However there are several on staff originally from Earth.”

Kendalo knew that. Plus he knew how both she and her brother were moonies through and through. So why her?

She frowned, her concern growing. “Besides, my clients--”

“They will be taken care of.” Kendalo raised that infernal eyebrow of his. “Perhaps you’re wondering why I asked you?”

Those Earth scenes undulating on the walls now grated on her already jangled nerves. She covered her left hand over her right, then squeezed hard until the ring’s gold coin bit into her skin.

The pain steadied her. “Yes, I do wonder at you asking me, Doctor. I’m not the logical choice.”

“Actually, Ms. Gracchus, Dr. Evver’s suggested you. He’s read my recommendations and asked to meet you.”

She twisted her lips. *Then why doesn’t he get his bones on a transport and blast his way up to Tychotown?*

Claudius always said she had a temper, and by the blazing stars above, it was coming out in full force. “Sir, no matter who is asking, I didn’t get my degree at Jules Verne University to start a messenger service.”

Kendalo smiled, which lifted his thick lips and thin mustache unevenly on his face.

She shivered, again. In all of her time at the facility, she’d never seen him smile.

“Just this once, Ms. Gracchus. I promise any inconvenience on your part will be well compensated. During your visit, you will be treated like royalty. An afternoon in Greater Paris, a short stay under the Moroccan sun, sightseeing along the Panama Canal--you name it, you can do it.” His smile widened. “Who knows? You might never want to return here.”

Highly, highly doubtful. Tychotown was home.

Here was her dilemma: she didn’t want to travel to Earth. Although she’d never been there, it held unpleasant memories. Memories of Pryce. Pryce Pearson.

Drat. Her stomach still tied up in knots at the thought of him--even though he was dead

She could tell Kendalo no, but then he could reply, you’re fired. No matter what some philosophers might say about Humankind’s free will, she really had no choice--not with Dr. Reid Evver behind the assignment. She had to face facts; it was a done deal.

She clenched her hands into fists. Besides, the episode with Pryce happened years ago. Well, two, anyway. So he'd broken her heart, so what?

In any event, as soon as he'd returned to the big planet, he'd been struck down by a freak accident. Fate certainly worked in strange ways.

With dull eyes, she turned her gaze on Kendalo. "As soon as I deliver the shipment, I'm on the first transport back."

Kendalo shrugged. "If that's what you want."

"It is. What's the departure date?"

"Tomorrow, Ms. Gracchus, 0400."

The shock had already past. The only emotion she had left was indignation. "Do you think you could've given me even less notice?"

He didn't reply, which was just as well. The way she was feeling, she probably would've kickboxed his doughy abdomen into oblivion.

Flavia stood. "If you'll excuse me, I've got a lot to do." Not the least of which was informing her clients...and letting her brother know.

Claudius. She winced. If he found out she was coerced into this trip, he would pulverize Kendalo into moondust. She had to put on a happy face if only to fool her brother.

As she reached the door, she heard Kendalo say, "You'll thank me one day, Flavia. Mark my words."

I'd rather mark you. But that was unkind, wasn't it? Instead she spat, "It's Ms. Gracchus to you."

After the door slid shut, she sagged against the corridor wall. The fight had seeped out of her. But time was not on her side. It wouldn't be long before 0400.

Gritting her teeth, she attempted to smile. Hopefully, it didn't look too artificial.

As she hurried down the passage to Central Control, she prayed. *Please let Claudius accept what I have to say without digging deeper.*



“Can’t believe ya fell for that ol’ line. Mummyman Evver suggested you! Why you? What’s this all about? Flavia, babychick, were ya born yesterday?”

In between patching through a communication to the Moon’s surface and monitoring solar radiation, Claudius shook his finger at her as he continued his rant. “Don’t like the dude. Never did. That goes for his minion, Wasted West, too.”

Flavia glanced around at Central Control’s personnel. No one was stationed close enough to hear her brother’s latest tirade. Fortunately. Claudius was good at his job, but that was just barely enough to make up for his surly attitude.

She sat next to his console and lowered her voice. “In no way, shape, or form does Reid Evver resemble a mummy. Far from it, bucko. And, when you think about it, that he requested me to deliver the shipment, well, that’s quite an honor.”

Claudius shrugged, which caused his long, spiky brown hair to ripple. “Don’t like it. No good, no how. Having ya sucked down on that watery blue deathtrap, all on yer own, with no moonie to look out for ya. Don’t trust them Earthers. Look what happened last time ya got involved.”

Drat, he was going to mention Pryce.

“Prissy Pearson.” Claudius snickered. “Now there was a fine upstanding fella, wasn’t he?”

“Pryce,” she corrected. “So I made a mistake. That was two years ago, Claude. And Pryce was one Earther out of billions.” She eyed the wall clock, watching seconds add up to precious minutes. “Besides, this will be a short trip. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“It’s wrong, Flav. Don’t go.” His round face suddenly swam in front of her. “I can’t protect ya down there.”

“There’ll be no need for protection, bucko.” Giving him a swift kiss on the cheek, Flavia headed for the door. “I’ve got to say good-bye to my clients, then get packing. I’ll call you when I land, okay? I’m coming in at Newark Spaceport.”

He didn’t answer; he just glared.

With a wave of her head, she left Central Control and headed for her office. Brothers! She had two years on him, but he still acted as if he were the older sibling.

Claudius didn’t have to worry. She could take care of herself. Six days total travel time plus a couple of days on the surface, she’d be back here in about a week and a half. No problem.

Still, she wished it was over already.



While he waited for the televiewer connection to Tychotown and the Luna ForEver Rehabilitation Facility, Reid Evver sat in his headquarters office and munched on a handful of Brazil nuts. These nutritional nuts were high in selenium, an antioxidant that enhanced the immune system.

At his age, he needed all the help he could get.

Finally, Kendalo West's mocha complexion coalesced into view on the screen. "Good day, sir."

"Kendalo," Reid acknowledged. "What's the update on the shipment?"

"Right on schedule, sir. As we speak, Helman's undergoing surgery. The serum will be purified by the time the shuttle departs Luna Landing tomorrow."

"Good." Reid carefully scratched at his arm. His skin always grew itchy when it was time for another injection. "And the girl?"

West nodded. "It took some persuasion, but Flavia Gracchus agreed to deliver the cargo."

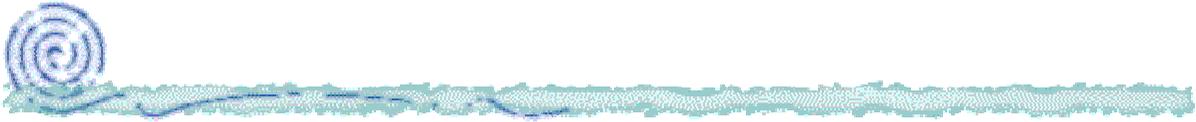
"Good. Very good. I shall expect her in three days then. Out." Reid had no need for pleasantries. He cut the comm link, and turned his attention to another screen.

This screen showed Flavia Gracchus' picture. He pressed a console button which projected a virtual reality image of his intended before him. Lighting a cigarette, he took a puff, and admired the view in front of him. From afar, he'd watched the woman grow, watched her mature into an intelligent, compassionate beauty.

Her russet hair billowed about her shoulders, her large dark eyes were fringed with even darker lashes, her high cheekbones and slightly pointed chin gave her a pixie appearance. She looked young, too young to even think of becoming a bride.

But appearances could be deceiving, as he knew from his own particular situation.

Ms. Gracchus was destined to be the one. Now that he was ready for fatherhood, he eagerly anticipated convincing the nubile Ms. Gracchus to become his wife.



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