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Steele

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STERLING FILES: STEELE

Sherri L. King

For D.

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Prologue

"Dad, I don't want to do this."

"Well, you're going to whether you like it or not, you little bastard."

"Please don't make me, Dad, *please*! I nearly killed the last guy. I can't do this again!"

"Boy, you'll do as you're told with no more backtalk." His father reached up and cuffed him on the side of the head.

Steele looked down at the tape covering his knuckles, head ringing, and felt a sinking sensation low in his belly. Here he was, the thirteen-year-old champion of an illegal boxing ring, and all he could think about was how not to throw up.

What would the other fighter think if he knew?

Steele's father ushered him out of the small utility room that served as Steele's gym locker and dressing room. It was a strange sight, this shuffling of feet, for Steele was so much bigger than his father. He was only thirteen but he was already six feet two inches tall. And not only was he tall, he was also very well built, with bulging muscles that should have and could have graced the form of someone much older.

The boy was exceptionally good at bare-knuckles boxing, no matter his handicap of youth. His father had been taking him to these matches since he was ten years old. Steele had climbed the ladder to a certain kind of stardom among the gamblers and trainers that flocked to the illegal boxing rings. He'd never once lost a match.

But the last match had been grueling. Steele had thought, at first, that it would be his first loss in the ring, the man had been that good. But Steele's reserves of strength had not surprisingly been limitless. After thirteen rounds he'd nearly killed his opponent, so badly did he beat him. Steele was done. He wanted no more of this world of fists and blood. He wanted out.

But how to convince his father, who was perfectly happy making money off of his boy, that it was time to quit? Steele didn't know the answer to that.

The cheers of the crowd reached his ears before he'd even made it to the ring in the center of the mass of gathered people. They had seen him coming and let out a roar of adulation as he passed through them.

Steele hated them all. It was because of them and their love of gambling that he was even here to begin with.

Steele stepped into the ring. His father eyed him stonily. "Try to make it to the tenth round before you throttle him. I've got my money on the tenth round and I sure don't want to lose it. And if you even think to end it sooner, remember my stick and stay the course. You got that boy?"

Steele nodded, putting a rubber bit in his mouth. His opponent, a large, darkskinned man named Oscar, also stepped into the ring. The two eyed one another, each sizing the other up as they prepared themselves for the fight ahead.

The crowd roared as the two opponents stepped to the center of the ring and touched fists. Steele looked Oscar in the eyes and saw fear. It made his stomach roll sickly to know his opponent already feared him, and before the first punch was thrown no less. The bell rang and the match was started before he could even think to walk away.

Oscar immediately pummeled the thirteen-year-old with his fists, wasting no time in attacking him. But Steele barely felt the blows, his body capable of withstanding far more damage. Oscar's blows merely bounced off him, without leaving a single mark behind. Oscar's knuckles split on Steele's stomach and first blood was drawn. The bloodthirsty crowd screamed its approval.

The smell of sweat and smoke was suffocating, even up in the ring where the two fighters battled. Steele punched his opponent square in the jaw and he watched silently,

resignedly as Oscar went down on one knee. Steele had remembered that he must make it to the tenth round or his father would use the stick on him, and he'd pulled his punch at the last second. But he'd still hit the man with enough force to make it look good for the crowd.

Steele had honed his showmanship to a fine art. He'd had to, to survive the fickleness of the crowd who would turn on him in a second if he dared to show weakness.

Oscar rallied and began dancing around the ring. Steele followed his every move, careful to never let his opponent out of his sight. A few moments of this and the bell rang, signaling that the round was over.

Steele looked into the crowd, searching for his father. What caught his attention first was the strong, steady gaze of a tall, gray-haired man. The man was quieter than those surrounding him, barely moving. His gaze caught Steele's and held it fast.

Steele looked away, feeling strangely ashamed. Then, unable to resist, he looked back and found the man's gaze still solid upon him. He looked away again and caught sight of his father, waving around a fistful of cash, drunk on beer and the victory he felt sure was imminent.

Steele realized that the only thing keeping him in this ring was love for his father. Steele was still a child, even if he did have an adult's body. It was his fondest wish to make his father proud. But he knew, deep in his tortured heart, that his father would never love him in return. He'd long ago accepted that, but Steele still wanted to please him. Why? Even Steele knew his father certainly didn't deserve his devotion.

Steele clenched his jaw. He'd never been one to think such disloyal thoughts of the man who had sired him. He felt the gaze of the quiet, gray-haired man in the audience and knew that this stranger had something to do with it. He didn't have to look to know the man still watched him in that strange, quiet way. But he looked anyway.

Why was he doing this? Did he really fear his father's stick so much? It only hurt because his father wanted it to, bruising Steele's heart more than his body.

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The second round began and Steele stepped into the center of the ring, suddenly resolute in what he was going to do. Oscar danced up to him and threw a wide punch that glanced off Steele's ear.

Steele took the dive and fell onto the mat with a crash. He stayed down, eyes closed, as the referee counted out the seconds to total knockout. As the man reached the count of ten, Steele opened his eyes a crack and saw the gray-haired man walking toward his father.

The match was over. A new victor had been named. Steele let himself be led off the stage, staggering and wincing for show. His father came up to him, yelling and sputtering in his rage. "Boy, you'd better explain why you threw that match."

"I didn't, Dad. He really beat me hard."

It was more than clear that his father didn't believe him. "When we get home I'll show you what a beating truly is."

Steele felt his stomach clench in fear and dread.

The gray-haired man reached them. "Mr. Steele, may I speak with you?"

"What do you want?" his father growled.

"I want your son."

Steele's father started, then laughed. "What, you want him for sex?"

The man never batted an eyelash. "No. I wish to train him for the big ring."

"Bullshit," his father spat.

"I want to take him off your hands for good. And I'm prepared to offer you a nice lump sum for the honor."

His father eyed the man warily. "How much? I wanna know how much you're offering."

"Fifty thousand dollars," the man replied flatly.

Steele's heart sank heavily.

"I'll take it," his father said. "The boy is useless to me now anyways."

"I don't want to go!" Steele pleaded with his father, already knowing the battle had been lost. Fifty thousand dollars was too good a price to turn down—even Steele knew that.

"Shut up boy," he said. "You better be glad this man-what's your name?"

"William Murdock."

"You'd better thank Mr. Murdock for saving you from the beating you so richly deserve."

"I can make a comeback," Steele swore. "Just give me one more chance Dad, please."

"Whether you can make a comeback or not doesn't matter to me anymore boy. You're soiled goods now. You've broken your winning streak. I don't have any use for you now."

Steele's eyes stung with tears as he watched his father and William Murdock talk over the particulars of his sale. He felt like an object, a slave to the cruel whims of fate. He didn't know what he would do with this William Murdock, this man who had no idea of his strange abilities. His dad knew of them, had always known.

Steele knew his new owner would have trouble believing him if he told him of his ability to withstand even a bullet at point-blank range without injury. He wasn't a normal boy by anyone's standards—especially when one took into account his incredible endurance and power. He had the strength of ten grown men—he could bench-press a Mini Cooper for goodness' sake. Steele was just a freak in a world populated with freaks, and what's more, he knew it.

A few minutes later, after the details had been worked out, his father left with a briefcase full of money, never once looking back at his son. Steele watched him go with a hopelessness that threatened to drown him. He felt Murdock move closer to him. "He would have taken half that much, you know," Steele murmured softly to his new owner.

"I know. But you're more than worth the money. Not to worry son, I'll take good care of you, you'll see. Your days of struggle are over."

"I threw that fight because I wanted out of boxing. And you want to train me for the 'big ring', as you called it? I don't want that, thank you very much, sir."

"That big ring I referred to is life," Murdock said gently. "I will train you to use your abilities to their fullest, and with training comes understanding. You'll know yourself at last, and you'll be safe in my care as you learn. I wish to prepare you for the world, my boy."

"What do you know of my abilities?"

"I've been watching you for some time now, Brian Steele. I know you're incredibly strong and capable of withstanding an enormous amount of damage with nary a qualm. You can deflect a barrage of blows without batting an eye, much less sustaining an injury. You can run for miles on end and never become winded. You could destroy a man with only one blow if you so choose. You're resilient in a way that I've never seen before, and I want to help you learn to use this to your advantage in every way."

Steele tried not to fall for Murdock's easy, gentle ways, but it was impossible. Steele's heart had already softened and his fear was fading.

"Come on. Let's leave this ruckus behind us forever," Murdock said, putting his arm about Steele's shoulders, taking him through the crowd. "Have you ever been to Cleveland?"

Steele shook his head and left in the care of his new guardian.

Chapter One

Many years later

Marla Rivers looked about her, recognizing all the familiar comforts of her home. The coma had lasted a little over a year. But her mother had kept up the payments on her house, never giving up the hope that Marla would come back to herself. That Marla would, eventually, wake up.

It had taken almost six grueling months of physical therapy to regain her ability to walk. And even now, Marla often walked with a cane. But at last she was home again, released from the hospital, safe and sound after her long absence.

She ignored the flickering of light as she passed by a lamp. She'd learned it was best to ignore such things.

Everything was as she'd left it. Nothing had been disturbed. She knew she had her mother to thank for that. The sense of familiarity was comforting to her after months spent in a strange, sterile hospital room.

She put her luggage away, weak with exertion when she was done but determined not to let it hold her back in any way. She felt like taking a bath but knew it was too soon to test herself in the large garden tub alone. She might slip beneath the surface of the water and never come back up. For awhile, at least, she would be taking showers.

She plopped down on her sitting room couch before the television. The set flickered and came to life. Marla frowned. She hadn't touched the remote.

She imagined the television turning to her favorite station, a cartoon station, and right on cue the TV changed channels for her.

Marla gritted her teeth. This was yet another new skill she'd developed in her year of coma-sleep. She blinked and the television turned off abruptly. So many things had changed. *She* had changed. The coma had opened a Pandora's box in her mind. This

trick with the television was only one of many odd quirks she'd discovered over the last six months.

There came a knock at her door. She wasn't expecting visitors, but she imagined her mother had come by to check up on her. She got up and went to open the door, startled to find two men, not her mother, standing on her porch. They were dressed professionally, in matching black suits and gray ties.

"Can I help you?" She frowned.

"Are you Marla Rivers?" one of them asked.

"I am."

"We're here to talk to you about your new...uh, abilities."

Marla sighed, leaning heavily on her cane. "Not more reporters."

"We're not reporters. We represent a party interested in your gifts. May we come in?"

Marla thought hard on it. Her first instinct was to tell them to go to hell, she was too tired to entertain them, but curiosity got the better of her and she nodded, stepping back to allow them into her house. She led them to her sitting room and plopped down on the couch, offering them two chairs opposite her. "What party do you represent then?" she asked.

"We work for an organization called Siren Corp. After learning about you in the papers and on the news, my employers have taken great interest in your abilities," the man told her, self importance lacing his words so that they grated over her ears.

"What sort of interest?" she asked.

"We are prepared to offer you a large sum of money for the privilege of studying your unique gifts."

Marla blinked. The lamplight flickered but she ignored it, conscious that the two men were carefully watching for just that sort of thing. "How much money?" she asked.

The man placed a briefcase on his lap and opened it, showing her the contents. "One hundred thousand dollars," he said.

Marla choked back a gasp as she saw all the money in the case. It was almost comical, the stereotypical case of money. She almost laughed but managed to control herself at the last second.

She could hardly believe her good fortune. She could really use that money. Her hospital bills were astronomical and she didn't want to rely on her mother so heavily now that she was home again, gracious though her mom had been in helping her. Marla no longer had a job, and this money would take a little of the pressure off while she looked for one.

She desperately needed the money. Marla feared that eventually the creditors would come harassing her and she might have to sell her beloved house just to get by.

But there was something about the two men's offer that bugged her. Something about *them* that made her uneasy. "What do you mean by 'studying' my gifts?" she asked at last.

The second man, quiet until now, spoke up. "We just mean to observe you, to see what triggers these gifts, what makes them work."

"Like a lab rat," she couldn't help pointing out.

"Don't make it sound so bad," he frowned. "It's a privilege, what we offer you. One many others would jump at the chance to accept."

Marla raised one eyebrow. "So go to these other people," she said, testing them.

It seemed that the two men wished to play good cop, bad cop with her and she didn't like it one bit. The first man spoke up again, playing the role of good cop. "Please don't dismiss this out of hand," he said evenly. "We will study you, it's true, but you'll be perfectly safe."

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Marla instinctively disbelieved him. "I don't think so," she said at last, mourning the loss of the chance to earn some fast cash. "I'm sorry but I'll have to decline your offer."

The second man, the bad cop, spoke again. "You would do well to reconsider that decision."

Marla frowned, anger boiling just below the surface. "Why don't you both just leave now?"

The men rose, towering over her as she sat on the couch, but she was determined not to feel intimidated. This was her home, damn it, her own private domain, one she felt she deserved after all the long months spent in the hospital. She didn't want her first day at home marred by these two men with their strange offer and high-handed behavior.

"You will accept our offer and be grateful for it," the bad cop said with a sneer.

Marla rose as quickly as she could from her position on the couch. The lightbulb in a lamp on the table next to the couch exploded. The two men started as the glass shattered, but Marla refused to budge. "Get out," she said again, nearly growling the words.

The bad cop pushed his suit jacket back to reveal a gun nestled in a shoulder holster beneath his arm.

Marla felt her eyes grow wide with surprise and fear. "Are you threatening me?" she fumed.

"You will accept our offer, one way or the other. If we have to use a little force to convince you, so be it."

Marla, furious now, bared her teeth at them. "If you don't get out, I'll call the police."

The man pulled his gun on her, and the other moved to close the drapes on the window of the sitting room. Marla felt a thrill of fear mix with her anger and stood

shocked as she watched them. She came to herself with a snap and dove for the phone sitting next to the sofa. She barely touched it when she felt the man press the muzzle of his gun to the side of her head.

"I don't think so," he said. "Put the phone down. Now, we're going to try this again. Will you come with us willingly or not? Either way you *are* coming with us."

There came a deafening crash as the door to her home slammed open.

A huge man stepped into the room. He was massive, at least six foot ten with three hundred pounds of pure muscle on him. His head was shaved bare and his cool gray eyes were piercing and bright. He looked like a giant in the confines of the room, an uncivilized brute in a slate gray suit.

He zeroed in on the man holding the gun to her head. "Let her go," came his gruff command.

"Steele," he sneered. "We were here first. She's ours."

"I think the lady has a different opinion. Let her go."

"Sterling scum! You and Ryan Murdock can go fuck yourselves."

"I won't tell you again. Let her go," said the giant.

The man hesitated, keeping the gun pressed to her temple. Marla took matters into her own hands. She knocked the hand holding the gun away with a hard swipe of her fist. She pushed the gunman back and rushed to stand by Steele.

"I think the lady has made her decision," Steele said, eyes never leaving the two men.

"This isn't over yet," the gunman growled. He and his colleague left with surly looks on their faces, passing close to Steele but not daring to touch him.

When they were gone, Marla discovered she'd been holding her breath and let out a huge sigh. She grabbed her forgotten cane from where it rested against the couch. She leaned on it for support as she felt her heart rate return to normal. "Now who are you and what made you think to break down my door?"

"I'm Brian Steele, but you can call me Steele. I work for a government project called Sterling. I came to meet you and noticed the Siren vehicle out front. I figured it was in both of our best interests to get in here and make sure you were all right."

His voice held such strength that Marla felt herself beginning to relax somewhat. Marla put a hand to her head, feeling a headache coming on as her ever-present fatigue pulled at her. She'd been prone to headaches recently as well as weakness. "Siren? What do you mean?"

"Those two men work for an outfit called Siren."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen them before. And because I make it a point to know most of Siren's employees. Siren is an opposing project funded by an entirely different consortium of investors. While we at Sterling study the untapped resources of the human brain, Siren seeks to augment them with technologies that have no business being employed on any human."

"What do they want with me?" she asked.

"They wish to exploit your gifts. Exploit and manipulate them to their own ends."

She had suspected as much. "And what are *you* doing here exactly?"

"I'm here to ask much the same, but my intentions are honest, I assure you. Sterling is very interested in your gifts. We wish to study them, catalogue them, and perhaps help you to understand and therefore control them in time."

Marla shook her head in disbelief. "What makes you think I'll accept your offer when I wouldn't accept theirs? They offered me quite a handsome sum, you know. You haven't offered me anything yet."

Steele smiled, revealing a row of very white teeth. "You haven't given me a chance."

Marla couldn't help but respond to his smile. He was quite handsome when he smiled. And despite his massive size, she felt no instinctive fear of him as she had with

the two men from Siren. "So make an offer," she grinned, feeling the last of her lingering panic disappear.

"We're prepared to take care of all your medical bills incurred during your coma and recuperation. We'll also have our own doctors on staff to ensure your continued safety and well-being."

She grew dizzy and faint, and when her head stopped spinning she realized she was practically in Steele's arms. He was keeping her from falling with gentle and patient hands. Her heart fluttered with an excitement she hadn't felt in almost two years, as she felt the burn of his skin seep into hers. She was overly aware of his male magnetism, of his sheer strength and size. She wondered if he was this large all over. She shook her head as if to clear it of her wanton thoughts and eased her body away from him.

"'Aren't you going to offer me money straight up, as they did?" she asked weakly.

"How much do you want?" he returned.

"Are you serious?" She laughed tiredly.

"Absolutely."

She eyed him for several seconds. "What, so I can ask for a hundred thousand dollars and you'd give it to me?"

"How does a solid five hundred thousand sound?" he asked, deadpan.

Marla reeled. "I don't believe this." She clutched her aching head and stepped completely out of Steele's supportive arms, determined to stand on her own. She immediately, keenly felt the loss of his touch. "This is just too much for me."

"I could come back later, to give you some time to think it over."

"Are you crazy? I don't have to think! Of course I'll take your offer. I'd be insane not to. My medical bills alone will set you back something like a million dollars. Maybe more. I'll take your offer gladly."

Steele smiled again and her stomach did a strange little somersault. "Good. I'll leave you today to get your rest, but I'll be by in the morning to pick you up. How does nine o'clock sound?"

"It sounds great," she said.

"Be sure to lock your door after me, and don't answer it for strangers."

Marla nodded. She didn't have to be told twice. Steele gave her a small bow, turned and left the way he came, closing the door softly behind him. Marla moved to engage all three locks on her door and leaned heavily against it when she was done.

She'd been having weird days ever since awakening from her coma. But this was, by far, one of the weirdest she'd ever experienced.

Chapter Two

Later that evening, after the sun had sunk in the sky, Steele walked into Ryan Murdock's office without knocking. "I put two guards on her," he said without preamble. "Siren got to her first and scared her pretty badly. But she's agreed to come in with us."

Ryan pursed his lips. "I knew Siren would want her, but I didn't think they'd act so fast."

"It's no wonder. She's as strong as we believed. Maybe stronger. That's why Siren wasted no time in contacting her. But they made a huge mistake in trying to bully her. She may still be weak on the outside, but she's strong as stone on the inside. She didn't stop fighting, even when they backed her into a corner."

Ryan mulled over this. "They must want her pretty badly to try and force her like that so soon."

"My sentiments exactly," Steele replied.

"Keep a guard on her at all times when she's away from the compound. I don't want anything else to happen to her while she's under our care. The less stress she has, the better we'll be able to work with her."

"Siren will try again to get her," Steele pointed out.

"I know. The persistent bastards. But we'll just have to deal with that when the time comes."

There came a knock at Ryan's door. "That'll be Vicious." He reached out to hand Steele a manila folder. "Here's tonight's assignment." Steele moved, file in hand, and opened the door. The dark-haired man on the other side gave Steele a nod as he passed out of the office, then took his place within. The door closed on the two men and Steele rubbed a hand over the top of his head.

It was time to shave again. He could feel persistent spikes of hair trying to grow. He hated his hair—a cross between red and blond, it curled like crazy and only served as a distraction when he was working. Enemies could easily grab one's hair and yank savagely. He couldn't—and wouldn't—have that.

He looked down at the file in his hand and opened it. Pictures of men stripping down stolen cars lay within, as well as a schematic of the building they were using to carry out their illegal activities. Steele clenched his jaw, shut the folder and went to prepare for the long night ahead of him, putting the last lingering thoughts of Marla aside.

* * * * *

Marla lay in bed, mind running furiously, keeping her from sleep. Night filled the room—she'd unplugged all of the electrical appliances—and a slight cool breeze came in from the open window. Oh how she'd missed the feel of fresh air washing over her skin!

She couldn't stop thinking about the events of the afternoon. Everything had changed for her within the space of a few minutes. If Steele was to be believed, and strangely enough she did believe him, then she needn't worry anymore about her hospital bills or her lack of a job. From near bankruptcy, she now had a fortune to look forward to.

All she had to do was allow Sterling to study her. And that couldn't be too bad, could it?

Her thoughts took a turn and, with a sliver of anxiety, she dwelled on the odd and dangerous behavior of the two men from Siren. They'd actually dared to pull a gun on her! She didn't know what to think about that. She'd been scared, of course she had, but

she'd also felt assured that she could gain the upper hand. Would they have fired on her had they known of her daring? How badly did they want to study her—if studying her was all they wished to do, which she doubted?

Marla admitted to herself that she wasn't entirely surprised by the offers from both parties. She'd suspected that, once the headlines in the papers had revealed her new quirks, something like this would happen sooner or later. She just hadn't expected it so shortly after her release from the hospital.

And what to think of the giant, Steele? He was a hulking brute of a man...but she'd sensed gentleness in his nature right away, and she sure as certain liked him better than the men from Siren. His eyes, nearly silver they were so gray, had spoken volumes to her. She knew instinctively that she could trust him.

She rolled over in bed and tried once more to find rest.

Seconds later she heard a faint sound coming from the front of her house and froze. The sound came again, a rattling sound like that of a doorknob. Marla crawled out of bed and went to her window. She looked down from her second-story room and saw the dark figure of a man by her front door.

Her heart thundered as a thrill of fear took her. She flew over to her closet and rifled within it. She came out holding a baseball bat and steeled herself for what she knew she must do next.

She crept down the stairs, careful not to make a sound, careful not to stumble on her still unsteady legs. She went to the side of the door, leaning against the wall for support as her knees suddenly went weak. With a click, the last lock turned and the door opened inward. Marla hardened herself, locking her traitorous knees in anticipation.

The dark, shadowy figure stepped into the room.

Marla raised the bat over her head and brought it down on the man's shoulder. He went down with a bellow of outrage, flailing out at her. Marla raised the bat again, swung and missed.

But it was just as well. Another man came through the door, moving so fast he was a blur, and she could barely follow him with her gaze. She staggered, fear choking her. But instead of coming for her, the newcomer zeroed in on the fallen man sprawled on her parlor floor.

"I'm sorry about this, Ms. Rivers," the new man apologized. "I looked away for a second and there he was."

Marla went weak against the wall. "Who are you?"

"They call me Vicious, but you can call me Johnny. I'm from Sterling. I was supposed to be guarding you while you slept."

Marla's eyes went wide with surprise. "You're from Sterling?" she asked, dazed.

"Yes," he answered, lifting the intruder to his feet. "Now to see who Mr. Sneaky is here."

The intruder was dressed all in black, with a stocking cap pulled down over his face. Vicious tore the cap from his head and Marla was surprised to see one of the men from Siren standing there. "What the hell?"

"You're a persistent son of a bitch, aren't you?" Vicious shook the man by the nape of the neck. "Didn't the lady already tell you no?"

"You can't win every time, you Sterling bastard," he snarled.

Vicious laughed and shook him again. "Didn't your mother teach you that breaking and entering is a crime? Or was it that your mother didn't like you enough to teach you anything important like that?"

The man twisted in Vicious' grasp, but Vicious held fast.

"I'm sorry you had to witness this, Ms. Rivers. Why don't you head back to bed? I'll take care of this asshole, pardon my French."

Dazed, Marla nodded and trudged over to the stairs. Then turned resolutely back. "What had you hoped to accomplish here?" she asked the intruder.

"We contacted you first. You're our project," he sneered. "You just haven't accepted that yet."

"Well, you can rest assured that after your behavior today and tonight, I'll do my very best not to ever have anything to do with Siren." Marla turned and went upstairs, content that Vicious would take care of things for her. She didn't know what to think about having a guard from Sterling watching over her, but in this instance she was grateful.

It was a long time, however, before she found sleep. It wasn't until the first faint pink streaks of dawn were showing through her curtains that she finally dozed off and found peace. And, strangely enough, her dreams were filled with images of Brian Steele.

Chapter Three

Steele waited patiently while Marla prepared herself for her first day at Sterling. He looked at the pictures on her mantel and marveled at how lovely Marla was. She had been heavier before the coma, full of breast and hip, and where before she looked much like a woman unafraid of a good time, she now looked fragile and breakable.

She had lovely red hair, long and curling down around the middle of her back. Her eyes, a startling cross between blue and green, were wide and large on her face. Her nose was a pert button, her lips a fullness that begged to be kissed. She had a small overbite that gave her a gamine look, one he had already started to appreciate despite himself.

Marla came down the stairs and walked over to him, her purse clutched tightly in her hands. "Should I bring anything else?" she asked, suddenly looking nervous, as if she didn't know how to proceed.

"No. Sterling will provide you with anything you might need." He led her out of the house. "Come on," he said, directing her to his idling Expedition outside. She had to crawl up into the seat and ordinarily Steele would have helped her into the cab of the vehicle, except that he was afraid to touch her. Afraid of what he might do. She was too beautiful, too fragile still, to get close to. And he was a brute at best.

She let out a huge sigh as she settled back against the plush seat. "So what exactly do you have to do with Sterling?" she asked softly, eyes closed.

"The same thing as you."

She started. "You can mess with electricity?"

"No. But I have an ability, the same as you do. Sterling acquired me when I was only thirteen. Back when my boss' father was in charge. I've been with them ever since."

"Acquired you?"

"Yes." He refused to elaborate.

"What's your ability then?"

"I'm generally the strong guy at Sterling. I take care of all the grunt work. I guess you could say I'm tough as steel." He smiled wryly at his own use of words.

Marla digested that. "That doesn't seem like an unusual ability. I mean, no offense, but aren't there a lot of people with the same gift? I once saw a guy take a cannonball to the stomach."

"I'm not at all like that," he said, keeping his eyes firmly focused on the road as he drove. "I'm something more."

"What?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Now," he said, changing the subject, "are you ready for your first day at our compound?"

"I don't know. Ask me that later."

Steele saw her smile out of the corner of his eye, her overbite evident, and he tensed. He realized his cock had grown hard and he tamped down on the rush of desire he felt. He didn't know this woman. She was lovely, yes, but that didn't account for his suddenly powerful hunger for her, not entirely. He needed to maintain control. She looked as if she might break under too much pressure.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, and hoped she didn't notice how hoarse his voice had become.

"Good," she said. "I feel a little better every day."

"Sterling will help you feel even better. The scientists working there are really...uh...nice. You won't feel awkward or weird around them. They'll accept you, extraordinary gifts and all, you'll see. It's a good place, Sterling."

"I hope so," she sighed. "I didn't thank you for putting a guard on me last night. I really appreciate that."

"I had a feeling Siren wasn't through trying to get to you."

"I don't know what I would have done without Johnny."

"He's a good man, if a little confused," he said enigmatically. "I knew he wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Steele felt compelled to say more. "Don't worry about Siren anymore. Everything will be okay. Trust me."

Marla looked at him and he stared resolutely at the road. She smiled. "I'll try."

"I couldn't ask for more," he said softly.

They drove on in silence, heading for the Sterling compound at a swift pace.

* * * * *

Steele accompanied her to Ryan Murdock's office and then turned to leave. "Will you come and see me later?" she asked hurriedly. She didn't exactly know why she asked it, but she'd been at ease in his presence and she wanted more of that feeling.

It also helped that he was absolutely gorgeous.

He was so tall, she felt dwarfed by him. And not only was he tall, he was heavily built, like a football player. He shaved his head and it looked good on him. His eyes were a cool, silvery gray that seemed to see more than what was on the surface. He had the squarest jaw she'd ever seen. And his neck, corded with muscle, drove her to distraction.

"If you want me to," Steele said. "Maybe we can have lunch together?"

"That would be nice," she said, feeling like an awkward teenager.

"I'll see you later then." He turned and left her there.

Marla leaned on her cane and knocked on Ryan's door. He called for her to enter and she did. "Hello there," he said. "You must be the lovely Marla Rivers."

"Hi." The lights flickered wildly and Marla sighed. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to keep from doing that."

"That, my dear, is why you're here with us today." Ryan smiled and rose from his seat behind the massive mahogany desk.

"My name is Ryan Murdock. My father started this project some fifty years ago. I'm now in charge of Sterling's affairs."

"Steele said you were funded by the government."

"Absolutely. We study and catalogue people like you. Gifted people, with talents not unlike your own."

"Sounds interesting." She tried not to fidget under Ryan's deep blue gaze. He looked as if he could see straight into the center of her, as if he could uncover all of her secrets with but a look.

"You've made the best decision in coming here to us, Marla. We'll have your gifts figured out in no time, you'll see. And you'll be able to learn about them yourself in the doing. Come with me and I'll introduce you to the team of scientists I've assigned to your case."

Marla followed him from the room. They walked down a long corridor, one that reminded her of the hospital that had been her home for nearly two years. People passed them by, each nodding a hello to her and Ryan. One man in particular caught her attention—Johnny. Or Vicious. Whatever his name was. He was tall and dark and handsome, with pale green eyes and chocolate brown hair, still dressed in the long coat he'd worn last night when he'd guarded her. He winked at her rakishly as he passed and Marla couldn't help but smile.

"Pay no attention to Vicious. He's a devil, that one," Ryan said after noticing her interest in the passing man.

Ryan led Marla to an elevator, which took them deep into the bowels of the massive compound. Four levels below the ground they stopped and exited into another labyrinth of corridors and offices. Marla tried not to be overwhelmed by it all, but she couldn't help feeling a little awe.

"How will I ever find my way out of here?" she had to ask.

Steele

Sherri L. King

"You'll have an escort until you're used to the surroundings. Don't worry, we won't let you get lost," Ryan assured her.

He led her to a room and ushered her in.

Three men and two women in white lab coats greeted them.

"Marla, this is your team. They'll be working nonstop to help you understand and control your new abilities. This is Jeff, Mark, Richard, Alice and Deirdre."

Marla shook each of their hands in turn.

"Well," Ryan clapped his hands together, "I'll leave you all to it then."

Marla watched him go and felt a moment of panic. But it subsided as Deirdre came and put her arm about Marla's shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll take good care of you. Come, let me show you a little of what we'll be doing today."

* * * * *

Lunchtime came quickly for Marla and her team. The entire morning had been spent going through test after test. A CAT scan, a brainwave monitor and a urine test had been the first steps on the agenda. Marla didn't know what these tests would reveal to her new colleagues that hadn't already been revealed to her many doctors back at the hospital. But Jeff had been certain that they were already making progress.

Time had flown and now Marla looked forward to seeing Steele once more.

She made her way to the cafeteria with the rest of her team, ignoring the flickering of the lights as she entered the room and grabbing a tray of lunch, realizing that she was quite famished. She turned, bumping into someone's chest, and was jolted out of her musings. "Sorry," she said, and raised her eyes to meet Steele's cool gray gaze.

He smiled gently. "It's all right. How have you been faring?"

"So far, so good." She led them to a vacant table and they sat opposite each other. "They've done quite a few small tests so far. Just hooking me up to machines and covering me with electrodes, stuff like that."

"Ugh. I hate the electrode cream they use," Steele said.

Marla chuckled. "Me too."

They ate their lunches in a companionable silence for several minutes.

Marla almost hated to break the soothing silence. "So what do you do here? I've been told that you live here in the compound."

Steele nodded. "You've asked about me?"

Marla blushed.

A small smile played at the corner of Steele's mouth. "I've lived here since I was thirteen. I like it here. It's safe for a person like me."

"What about your parents?"

Steele's smile disappeared. "My mom died giving birth to me and my father...well, let's just say I don't miss him much."

"Oh. I'm sorry," she apologized.

"Don't worry about it. What about you? How are your parents faring after these new developments?"

"My mom is all I have, and she's nothing but supportive of me. She and I don't talk much about my new quirks, but we both know they're there. Without her help I never would have made it out of the hospital."

"I understand that your coma lasted a year," he said.

"Yeah, it was a long time. I lost most of my motor skills and had to relearn how to walk. It was hard work, but I had very determined physical therapists and they assured me I was recovering with great speed."

"How did you end up in the coma?" Steele asked.

Marla blushed. "I was putting a lightbulb into the ceiling fan at my house and I fell. It's not glamorous but there it is. I don't remember much. For me, no time passed from that fall—heck, I hardly remember the fall itself—to when I woke up in the hospital over a year later." "That sounds frightening," he said.

"Only if I think about it." She shrugged with a grimace.

Her eyes drank in the sight of his delectable mouth as it twisted into a wry grin. "This place can help you heal," he said.

"I'm starting to believe you're right about that." She couldn't help a rush of desire as his beautiful eyes roved over her face, searching out the truth of her statement.

He cleared his throat and looked away, almost guiltily. "Uh, are you doing anything tonight?" he asked.

Marla's heart beat double time. "No."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"I'd love it." She would.

Steele rose, grabbing his now empty tray. "If you'll still be here around six, I can come fetch you and take you back to my apartment. I'll make a meal you'll never forget."

Marla grinned. "That sounds lovely."

Steele nodded and turned, leaving her there.

She focused on her lunch, mind in a quandary as she thought back over the day's events. Between each thought was an image of Steele, taking her off guard. He was certainly handsome enough for her to daydream about, but she was far too old for such frivolous musings. She tried valiantly to push him away and concentrate instead on what lay ahead of her in the lab.

Johnny Vicious plopped down into Steele's vacated seat a few minutes later. "Hey there," he said.

Marla started and dropped her fork. Before it could land, Vicious' hand struck out—so fast she couldn't follow the movement with her eyes—and caught it neatly. She smiled at him, amazed at his speed. "Hey yourself."

"Sorry about last night."

"Don't worry about it. I'm over it now." She grinned. "So why are you here? What do you do for Sterling besides guard people like me?"

"I'm the result of an experiment gone bad," he laughed.

Marla started. "What do you mean?"

"I was part of a sleep deprivation study here and it didn't work out. Now I just do odd jobs for Sterling."

"Sounds fun I guess."

"It is," he countered, and grinned. "So I hear you're recovering from a coma and there are...complications, shall we say, brought on by your big sleep."

"You act as though you hear about people like me all the time."

"Around here you do." He smiled slyly. "I also see you've taken a liking to our big guy Steele."

Marla growled. "You're not a very nice man, are you, Johnny Vicious?"

"Oh I can be very nice when I want to be," he laughed.

Marla rose, but Vicious stopped her by reaching across the table to grab her arm. "I didn't mean to rile you," he said. "I just wanted to tell you that Steele is a good man. He's a true gentleman."

"Whereas you aren't?"

"Guilty." He jumped from his seat so fast that if Marla had blinked she would have missed the move. "Well, I'm off. Take care of yourself and the big guy, would you Marla? I like to think of Steele as a friend and I can already tell just by looking at you both together that you two need each other. Be good to him." He walked jauntily away, leaving her dumbfounded in his wake.

Chapter Four

Steele came around to pick her up from the lab at precisely six o'clock. He watched as Deirdre removed the last of the electrodes from Marla's temples, a strong, silent support that Marla greatly appreciated.

"We'll see you tomorrow at the same time," Mark called out as she rose and went to Steele.

"Yeah, I'll see you then." She waved goodbye to her team members and allowed Steele to lead her out of the room.

"I hope you like spaghetti," Steele told her, taking her down the winding corridors of the Sterling compound. "I make it from scratch."

Marla was impressed. "I don't think I've ever had spaghetti that didn't come straight from a box before."

"I like to cook. It gives me time to think," he said.

"I'm lucky if I can make toast without burning it," she chuckled.

Steele led her through hallway after hallway until Marla was completely disoriented. Finally they came to a door, which Steele opened and allowed her to step through first.

Steele's apartment was a working contrast against its owner. Where Steele was large and strong, much of his décor was delicate and homey. Marla walked into the sitting room and looked around. It was done in soft hues of vanilla and neutral beiges. It was a soothing room. Comfortable. And already the delicious smells of his stillcooking food were filling the air.

Marla noticed right away the several bonsai trees placed here and there about the room. "You practice bonsai?" she asked, surprised.

"I try. My hands are sometimes too big for it though," he replied softly.

The trees, so small and delicate, were lovely and she told him so. "How many do you have?"

"I just acquired my seventeenth."

It spoke volumes about him, that he took such great care of things so much more delicate than he was. "Wow. You've got a lot more patience than I do, that's for certain."

"I just like to know that I'm taking care of something that needs me," he said with a slight blush.

Marla thought his words and sentiment were beautiful. She took a deep breath of the air to steady her suddenly fraying nerves and smelled the wonderful aroma of the spaghetti. "That smells great." She sniffed again and smiled.

"This way." He took her deeper into the apartment. His kitchen, off the left side of the sitting room, was large for such a small apartment, with enough room for a small breakfast table within. Marla looked at the table, already set with delicately fine china and tall candlesticks.

"How lovely." She came forward to run her finger down the curve of a plate decorated with tiny orchids.

"Have a seat. I'll serve."

Marla watched as he took their plates and filled them with spaghetti. Once he was seated across from her she poured them each wine from a waiting bottle.

"You didn't have to go through all this trouble for me," she told him.

"I like having the excuse to go all out," he said softly. "Please," he motioned toward her plate, "eat."

The first bite nearly made Marla swoon. It was the best spaghetti she'd ever tasted by far. The noodles were absolute perfection and the sauce was tangy and sweet and amazing. "This is delicious." "Thank you." He took a large bite himself.

The wine flowed freely as did the conversation. Before Marla knew it, it was going on nine o'clock. She'd been talking to him for almost three hours without feeling the time pass at all. Her head was fuzzy from the alcohol, but her senses were heightened. It was a lovely feeling.

She couldn't stop staring at Steele's lips. They kept distracting her. They looked soft and utterly kissable. She couldn't help but imagine how they would feel moving over hers. She looked away with a guilty start, only to be drawn back to looking seconds later.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked him suddenly, and nearly kicked herself for being so blatantly interested.

Steele smiled as if he knew what was on her mind. "No," he replied gently.

"Why not?"

"My life is completely wrapped up in Sterling. Most women wouldn't understand that."

"Well, I'm not most women," she said boldly, watching him closely.

Steele rose to his feet and took her hand. He pulled her up from her seat with gallant care. "This is happening so fast," he whispered, and rested his forehead against hers.

"I know. But I like it," she said honestly.

"I didn't bring you here to ravish you."

"I know. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't anyway."

"You're still weak."

"I'll always be weak from that damn coma if I don't try to overcome it." She smiled. "I'm willing to try with you."

"I don't want to hurt you," he whispered, his warm breath fanning over her mouth. "Then don't," she whispered back.

He brought his hands up to the sides of her temples. He gently ran his thumbs over her eyes, closing them. "I want to kiss you," he breathed.

"Yes," she gasped, in thrall to his touch and his nearness. "Yes."

He cradled her head in his hands and slowly, as if to give her time to turn away, he lowered his mouth to hers. The first contact of their lips touching made her heart thunder a tempestuous rhythm. His mouth was the softest she'd ever kissed. Marla put her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

His big hands were so gentle, holding her captive to his kiss. She sank into the embrace and felt heat pool low in her belly. She let her hands slide down over the bulging ridge of muscles that were his chest and opened her mouth to his questing tongue, gasping when he gave it to her.

The flavor of him blossomed on her tongue. He tasted of spice and wine and man. He put his arms around her and held her tight against him so that Marla could feel the enormous ridge of his erection.

Everything on his body was built on a surprisingly large scale.

His big, broad palm pressed into the small of her back, bringing her even closer against him. His tongue slid alongside hers, his lips moving over hers until she was mindless to anything else. She kneaded the muscles of his chest then moved her hands lower, over his belly.

Steele sucked in a deep breath and pulled her hands away. "Don't. I'm ticklish," he murmured against her mouth. Marla filed that information away for later inspection.

He lifted her easily up in his arms, holding her so that her feet dangled inches off the floor. "I can't stop," he breathed.

"Don't," she gasped into his kiss. "Whatever you do, don't stop."

She ran her hands over the stubble on his scalp and held him tight to her. Steele's mouth moved over her jaw and down to her throat. Marla let her head fall back as he kissed her, offering herself to him completely, holding nothing back.

Marla's hands found their way beneath his shirt and she was astonished at how tightly muscled he was. His clothes did him little justice, hiding all this wonderful flesh from view. She pushed his shirt up and he set her down and removed it the rest of the way himself. Marla pulled off her own shirt, leaving her bra between them. Steele then scooped her back up in his arms and let his mouth move over her collarbone with hot intensity.

Steele carried her out of the kitchen and into his bedroom. An enormous California king-sized bed waited for them in the center of the room. Steele laid her down upon it with gentle care and looked at her intently. "Do you want this, Marla?" he asked, giving her one more opportunity to back out.

"Yes," she gasped, reaching for him.

Steele caught one of her hands and pressed a hot kiss to the center of her palm. "Tell me if I'm going too fast for you."

Marla moaned and arched up to him as he came down upon her on the bed. He fanned her hair out on the pillow, positioning each lock just so until he was satisfied with it. He straddled her and his hands went to the front clasp of her bra and released it. Her breasts spilled free and he was there to catch them, cupping them tenderly in his hands, kneading and stroking them until she gasped.

Her nipples were hard and long, swollen with the need for his touch. He pulled at them teasingly with his fingertips, rubbing and stroking them like she suddenly longed to rub and stroke his cock. His mouth came down and covered her there, burning her with the heat of his kiss and she gasped, arching into his caress. His hand covered her other breast as he suckled her, kneading and plumping it over and over with his huge palm and strong fingertips.

His hand moved down over her body, onto the slight swell of her stomach, and he petted her there like he might a kitten. His fingers tangled on the fastening to her jeans and her breath caught behind her suddenly parched lips. The button gave way, then the zipper, and Steele slid his hand into the waistband of her panties.

He covered the mound of her sex with his hand. His long fingers curled down, cupping her fully, and he spread the lips of her pussy wide. The tips of his large fingers dipped into her wetness and spread it up to her clit. He rubbed the small nub of flesh and lightning seemed to arc through her at the touch.

The lights in the bedroom flickered then went out. The bulbs had blown, leaving them in total darkness.

Marla gasped for air. "Sorry," she apologized for the startling interruption.

"It's all right," he soothed, chuckling softly and still gently stroking that wicked finger over the swell of her clit. His mouth sucked hard upon her nipple then released it with a wet popping noise. He moved his lips over to her other breast and she forgot all about the lights.

Steele leaned back and stripped her pants from her legs. He spread her legs wide and lowered his body between them. His fingers wandered beneath the crotch of her panties and he was stroking her clit again, making her gasp.

"You're so wet," he growled.

And Steele was so hard he felt like a stone giant as he loomed over her in the bed. But Marla reveled in his obvious strength, her hands kneading the bulging muscles of his biceps, filling her hands with the intoxicating feel of his power.

He moved down her body, his lips trailing from her breast to her belly to her hip. His fingers pushed the crotch of her panties aside further and then his mouth covered her.

Marla cried out her surprise and it turned into a moan as his skillful tongue darted out to lap at her clit. As he gave her his most sensual kiss, he brought both of her legs up over his shoulders, opening her even more fully to his caress, making her feel vulnerable and small in the face of his sheer strength and overwhelming size.

His lips and tongue played with her, teasing her, tempting her. She grew impossibly wetter beneath his touch. He suckled the outer lips of her labia, making soft,

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wet noises with his mouth against her, and his fingers stroked her slit over and over until she was sobbing for breath.

Steele rose up over her and took her hands. He sat back on his feet and pulled her astride his hips. Marla's fingers caught the clasp of his jeans and made short work of undoing it. He was wearing briefs, which Marla pushed down, and his enormous cock fell like a weight into her hands.

He was incredibly well endowed, that much was obvious. Marla had never seen a cock so large, so thick, so long and wide. His skin was smooth and he was uncircumcised so that his foreskin was like a silken blanket around his sex. She stroked him from tip to base and back again, marveling at the beauty of him, and watched as a droplet of pre cum wept out of the opening in his penis.

Steele pushed her back gently and removed his pants and briefs. He then tore her panties from her and brought her back astride him. He leaned back and positioned his cock at the opening of her pussy.

He caught her gaze with his. "There's no turning back now," he said, and slid slowly into her.

Her body, unaccustomed to the invasion of his, tightened as he filled her. She felt stretched, burned by his cock, but it was a feeling she reveled in and welcomed more of as he entered her inch by thick, delicious inch. His body was so hot against hers that she was soon perspiring, as was he. Their bodies slid against each other, moist and smelling of spicy, sweet sex.

He was only halfway inside her when her body suddenly clamped down upon his. She came softly with a shudder as he held her gently against him. Her body milked his, trembling and squeezing around his cock until they were both gasping for air.

When it was over, Steele pressed further into her. He was so large and so strong, but he was gentle as a spring rain in the way he handled her. He demanded no more than her body was willing to give him, sliding to the heart of her with easy patience and care.

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He put his hands beneath her bottom and brought her closer against him. Her legs spread wider about his hips and she hooked her ankles behind his waist for leverage. She gasped and trembled, her body still in that post-coital world that she hadn't experienced in over two years, and he held her tenderly until she eased against him once more.

Steele lifted her easily with his hands and brought her back down. He did all the work, helping her to ride him with nothing but his incredible strength. She slid up and down on his cock, her body making soft, wet sucking noises with every movement they made together.

Her nipples scraped against his chest and he lifted her so that his mouth could suckle her there. His teeth scraped against her tender flesh and she cried out, clutching him to her. His lips drew on her like a babe, pulling at her nipples until they were long and hard as diamonds.

His hands were at her waist, lifting and lowering her on his dick, but they were gentle and light, as if he were still affording her the opportunity to pull back.

No way in hell was she stopping things now. She'd never felt so alive, so powerful and beautiful as she did in Steele's muscular arms. Her long hair cocooned them and Marla rested her forehead against Steele's, lips aching for his kiss. He took her mouth as he took her body, softly, gently and tenderly. His tongue slid in alongside hers, filling her with the wild and untamed flavor of him.

Marla's body drew tight on the wrack of pleasure. She fought to move faster on him, but Steele held her steady and sure in his arms. Marla gasped and tore her mouth away from his. "Please," she begged, not even knowing what she was begging for.

The lights beyond the room flickered wildly.

Steele's body surged up into hers, balls deep, and Marla cried out her surprise. He moved her faster upon him, harder and deeper, until she was sobbing for breath. His hands squeezed the cheeks of her ass and she moaned. One of his fingers traced the cleft of her bottom and she was lost.

Marla came again with a tiny scream that was silenced by Steele's mouth. She quivered in his arms, seeing bright pinpoints of light like stars behind her tightly shut eyelids. Her body unraveled, the wave of release too great to withstand. She screamed again and fell limply against his massive chest, gasping for air.

The lights beyond the room flickered wildly.

Steele pounded into her, hard, harder and then he too found the bright climax, groaning his satisfaction aloud like a mighty jungle cat. His cock swelled and pulsed inside her cunt, spurting his cum deep inside the heart of her until she was wet and burning with his juices.

When their breathing had calmed, Steele reached up and tucked an errant stand of hair behind her ear. "Did I hurt you?" he asked.

Marla smiled blissfully and nuzzled his neck. "Not at all."

"God you make me feel so good." He pressed a kiss to her temple and held her tight against him.

"Me too. I haven't felt this good in...well, I can't even remember," she admitted with a laugh.

From somewhere beyond the bedroom Marla heard a clock strike eleven. "I need to get home and get some sleep if I'm going to be worth anything tomorrow."

"You could always stay here," Steele offered hopefully.

Marla shook her head. "I have to go home. I need a change of clothes and my medication."

Steele grunted. "Let's get dressed then and I'll take you home."

Getting dressed was much harder to do with Steele's hands roaming over her body every other breath, but somehow Marla managed. Then it was her turn to stroke his body as he dressed, roving her hands all over him. It was fun to play and unwind after a hard day...and a hard ride.

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Marla gathered her things and followed Steele out of his quarters. She still wasn't used to all the winding corridors of the Sterling compound, but she was learning fast. They made it out to the parking lot where Steele's Expedition waited in less than five minutes. Steele gallantly helped her up into the cab of the vehicle, his hand lingering on her arm.

"I'm not a man who can tolerate a one-night stand."

"Me either. I mean," she amended quickly, "I'm not a *woman* who can tolerate a one-night stand either." She grinned.

He closed her door and walked around the vehicle to enter on the driver's side. His silvery gray gaze burned her, roving from her head to her toes, lingering on her lips, breasts and sex. Marla blushed and ate him up with her own eyes in return.

"Will you stay with me tomorrow night?" he asked softly. "I'll make us some steaks and baked potatoes. And after...we can do whatever you like."

Marla smiled. "Yes. I'd very much enjoy that."

Steele reached over and took her hand in his, not letting go until they pulled up in front of her house.

Chapter Five

Steele helped her down out of the vehicle. When she was on her feet, he held her close to his heart. Marla hugged him back, feeling safer now than she had ever since waking up with one year of her life lost forever.

She stirred against him. "Why didn't you help me into the truck this morning?"

Steele chuckled softly. "I was afraid of what I'd do if I touched you," he admitted.

Marla blushed. "I see. Well, I'm glad you feel more comfortable touching me now," she laughed.

"Comfort has nothing to do with it." His gaze burned and he rubbed his erection against her belly. "I do love to touch you though." He stroked his hand down her back, his hand so wide and large that it nearly spanned her entire back.

Steele walked her up to the front porch, lingering as they reached it. He bent down and kissed her, his tongue delving deep. He pulled her into his arms, lifting her feet off the ground, and held her tight, his lips demanding on hers, as if he would never let her go.

He set her back down on her feet and pressed one last lingering kiss to her lips. "If I don't leave now, you won't get any sleep tonight."

His wicked promise made her knees turn to water and she leaned against him to keep from falling. He steadied her then turned to go. Dazed, euphoric, Marla turned to go into the house.

The door opened with nothing more than a push. She must have forgotten to lock it, though she'd never forgotten it before. She hated having such a short memory for ordinary things like this. More than likely, she'd be feeling these aftereffects of her coma for the rest of her life. It was a depressing thought.

All this was happening just because she'd tried to change a lightbulb. It sickened her how easily she'd been brought low by a simple fall.

She turned on a light in her living room and gave a loud scream when she saw the man waiting there for her. Marla backed up, wanting to distance herself from the stranger standing in her home as though he owned it. The man watched her and slowly put his hand beneath the suit coat he wore. He pulled out an impressive-looking gun – big and silver, it glinted in the dim light – and pointed it at her.

"Have a seat, Ms. Rivers," he said softly, menacingly.

Marla plunked limply down on her couch, keeping her eyes focused on the gun at all times. "Who are you?"

"I'm Daniel Press, the acting junior director of Siren Corp."

Marla felt her eyes go wide. "I thought I'd seen the last of you people?"

"I decided to try and persuade you, personally, one more time to allow us to study you." His teeth glinted in the light. A razor blade smile. The smile of a predator.

"I've already told you no. My answer hasn't changed," she said bravely, feeling anything but. "A gun isn't going to make me change my mind, either."

"I could shoot you."

"Killing me isn't going to help you understand my quirks."

"Who said anything about killing you?" He fired the gun at her feet and she jumped up on the couch with a shriek, the explosion ringing in her ears. "The next bullet will be in your kneecap. You can count on it. I'm an excellent shot and we've doctors on standby in case it becomes necessary."

Marla's heart went cold with fear.

There came a sound at her door. "Marla? You forgot your purse in—" Steele halted mid-sentence as he saw Daniel. Daniel, surprised by the interruption, squeezed the trigger of the gun, pointing it squarely at Steele. Marla screamed at him to move, but it was too late. The gun went off with another mighty roar.

Steele didn't even flinch. He stood there and took the shot, unafraid of any damage it might cause. Miraculously, magically, it didn't cause him any harm at all. The bullet bounced off him, the slug falling uselessly to the floor at his feet.

Marla's jaw dropped in shock. The light in the ceiling blew with a loud popping noise in the sudden stillness, plunging the room into a shadowy darkness.

"Damn it, Steele. Don't interfere. This isn't any of your concern." Daniel growled from the shadows.

Steele ignored him and stepped further into the room, reaching Marla's side and stepping protectively in front of her. Daniel had the gun trained on them as they stood together united against him. "I beg to differ. She's working with us now. Leave her be. We both know you don't want blood on your hands over this."

"One day, Steele, I'm going to find a way to hurt you. And when I do..." He made a dramatic slicing motion across his throat.

Daniel kept the gun trained on them as he walked around them to the door. Steele reached out and snatched the gun from his hand, crunching it in his fists. Marla watched with disbelief.

Daniel suddenly screamed and clutched his head. He fell to the floor, writhing in agony. "Stop it," he shrieked. "Stop it Marla!"

Marla looked at Steele and shook her head. She had no idea what she was doing, if she was indeed doing anything at all.

Daniel choked out a scream, grasping his head in his fisted hands. Steele walked over to him, bent down and pried open one of Daniel's eyelids. "He's not faking," Steele said, looking back at Marla.

"Of course I'm not faking," Daniel spat unevenly, groaning.

Steele lifted him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him out onto the front lawn. Once there, Daniel seemed to ease, but the moment Marla stepped out onto her porch,

he clutched at his head again with another agonized scream. Steele took Daniel's head in his own hands and carefully looked through his hair.

Steele pinched something off Daniel's scalp and held it up to the moonlight. Immediately Daniel eased, shuddering quietly on the ground.

"What is it?" Marla had to ask.

"It looks like a microchip," Steele said. "You must have interfered with it somehow. No wonder Siren wants you so badly." He grabbed Daniel's collar again and put his face close to the weakened man's. "What is this thing for?"

Daniel spat in his face.

Steele shook him. "You'll tell me what this is for one way or another. Choose wisely."

Daniel sobbed for breath. "It's top secret. You can't have the technology."

"I don't want the technology. But you'll tell me what it's for and quit stalling."

"It's a cerebral enhancing chip," Daniel said at last. "It's meant to improve motor skills and brain power."

"How does it work? It's not surgically implanted – how can it work?"

"It doesn't need to be implanted surgically."

"So what do you do, just plant them on people willy-nilly?" Marla asked, incredulous.

"Absolutely. We can put them on anyone," Daniel said with a smug smile.

"And you're testing this thing on humans? On yourself? Do your financial backers in the White House know what you're up to?"

"We've gone beyond testing. We have outfitted over a dozen men and women with the chip. And as for the government, they're on a need-to-know basis only, you know that from your own work at Sterling," he said slyly. He turned to look at Marla. "Did you know that the big guy here is a vigilante? He goes out almost every night to find the so-called bad guys and dispose of them one way or another."

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Marla looked at Steele for confirmation of this shocking news.

"I've never killed anyone," Steele said softly. "And everyone I've helped to put behind bars richly deserved it, believe me. All I do is aid the police a little, whether they know it or not. I help them catch criminals red-handed."

Daniel smirked. "How noble you make it sound, when you're nothing more than hired muscle."

A car drove slowly down the road and Daniel leapt to his feet and bolted. Steele followed him easily, his long legs eating up the distance that Daniel's head start had given him. The car swerved as if the driver intended to run Steele down.

A split second before the car struck him, Steele brought his fist down on the hood. The car halted abruptly and nearly flipped over. Steele took his fist off the car, leaving an incredible dent behind. The driver got out of the car and ran down the street as fast as his legs would carry him. With one last murderous look at Steele, Daniel turned to follow his friend at a sprint.

Steele looked back at Marla. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Why?" she asked shakily.

"I didn't want you to ever have to see that."

"What, Siren?"

"No. My...uh..." He gestured to the smoking wreck of a car in the middle of the road. "My gifts. My curse."

Marla smiled and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. He lifted her and held her close. "I'm glad you were here. I'm glad you're gifted. It makes me feel less alone in this world."

"You'll never be alone," Steele said thickly. "Never as long as I'm here."

"That was pretty amazing stuff," she said, marveling at how incredibly strong Steele was. Stronger than steel he might be, but he'd been nothing but gentle with her from the start. He was her own gentle giant. Her mighty protector. Steele set her back down on the ground and looked at the microchip still held within his hand. "Ryan will want to see this."

"Let's take it to him."

Steele's gaze burned hers. "Not yet. It's late. And first I want to make sure you're okay."

Marla nodded. "I'm fine. Just a little shaken."

Steele swept her up in his arms like he would a babe and carried her back toward her house. "I need to see you naked, to make sure you're not injured in any way."

"Oh God, what will the neighbors think?" she giggled.

"I meant that I'll get you naked *inside* the house." Steele's mouth turned up at the corner in an endearing lopsided grin.

They crossed the threshold and Steele closed the door behind them.

* * * * *

The moment Steele set her down on her feet in the bedroom he began to strip her clothes from her body. Marla knew she wasn't injured but she let him have his way. He seemed determined to know for himself that she was all right.

Desire stirred in her blood and her breath caught.

Steele removed her bra and her breasts were bare to the cool night air. Her nipples were long and hard and aching for his touch. For his fingers and his mouth and anything else he wanted to put there.

When she was totally nude before him, Steele inspected her from head to toe. He found no injuries and let out a long, relieved breath. Then he seemed to realize that she was nude and his hands brought her closer to him.

Marla wanted him so badly her teeth ached. She went to her knees before him and reached for the fastening of his jeans. Her fingers fumbled. Steele growled and pushed her hands aside, making short work of the fastening himself and divesting himself of all his other clothes in record time.

His cock bobbed heavily between his legs, full and thick and hard with need for her. Marla pumped him, marveling at the way his foreskin moved over his beautiful penis. She pushed the skin back and laid her lips against the crown of him and he shuddered against her.

She let the head slip between her lips, opening wide to take him. Her tongue stroked him, tasting the tiny droplets of pre cum. She suckled softly, gently, and cupped his sac in one hand while the other masturbated him into her mouth. Her head bobbed over him and he pushed her hair back away from her face so he could watch her as she sucked him off.

Marla let one of her hands move down to her pussy, finding it moist and wet with desire. She found her clit and rubbed it the way she liked best. She put her fingers inside of her cunt, thrusting in and out the way she wanted his enormous cock to thrust in and out of her.

Steele pushed her away. "Not yet," he growled. He pushed her back onto the floor and came upon her, towering over her in the shadows. He spread her legs wide and brought his face down to her pussy. He let a long, silvery line of spit trail down onto her sex and Marla bucked beneath him, feeling the wetness sliding down her slit like the caress of a finger.

He positioned his massive cock at her opening and, without warning, thrust balls deep into her. He impaled her, hard into the heart of her, over and over. Her breasts bounced with their efforts and his hands came up to cup them lovingly.

Marla pushed him away after several thrusts and made him lie back on the floor. She moved down over him again and took his cock as deep into her mouth as she could. She tasted herself mixed with his spicy masculine flavor and she loved it. She licked him clean, sucking him, letting his cock go with a wet popping noise.

She straddled him, coming down over his cock, letting it fill her like a fist knocking at her womb. She rode him as she would a bucking bronco, moving her hips over him like the graceful movement of water, washing over him, taking all he had to give. She ground her pelvis against his, bouncing gently up and down upon him, squeezing her clit between their bodies as she fucked him. Steele leaned up, sending his cock even deeper into her, and took one of her nipples between his teeth.

He pushed her back, pulling free of her body with a wet, sucking sound and positioned her on her hands and knees before him. He mounted her from behind, balls slapping her tender flesh as he slid home. He held her shoulders and thrust into her again and again. He slapped her bottom until it stung, and she cried out as blindingly intense ecstasy washed through her body.

"Put your finger in my ass," she gasped.

Steele put his thick middle finger in his mouth and wet it thoroughly with his saliva. He then gently inserted it into her anus, turning it this way and that in time with the strokes of his cock into her pussy. He rode her that way, so gentle and yet so demanding, until she was gasping and begging for mercy.

Marla put her hand back on her pussy, spreading herself wide. She laid her head on the floor so that her bottom was high, high over her head, fully opening herself to Steele's pounding cock. She found her clit with her fingers and stroked over the hard nubbin of tender flesh.

Steele removed his finger from her bottom and took her hips in his hands, bringing her harder against his pelvic thrusts. Their bodies made wet, slapping noises together and the smell of their sex permeated the room. Marla had tears coming out of the corners of her eyes, and she moaned with every stroke Steele's body made inside of hers.

Steele abruptly pulled out of her. He bent down low behind her and put his mouth on her anus. He licked her there, his tongue a wicked weapon against her frazzling nerve endings. He thrust his fingers into her pussy and let her ride his hand for a moment as he licked and suckled and kissed her most forbidden flesh.

Minutes—what felt like hours—passed. The only sounds in the room were of Marla's weak, breathless moans and Steele's mouth kissing her anus. He rose up over her again and mounted her once more, stretching her wider than she'd ever been stretched before.

With a wild, keening cry, Marla came. Her body clamped down like a vise on Steele's enormous member. Steele groaned and found his own release, filling her pussy up with his creamy cum. Marla fell forward, limp, onto the floor. Steele rode her for a few more strokes and then stilled.

He stirred against her, pulling out. He turned her over onto her back and spread her legs once more. He put his mouth on her cunt, his tongue spearing deep into her pussy. His lips and teeth tugged at her clit and Marla was mindless with the endless sensations he visited upon her.

Impossibly, she came again, shuddering against his mouth and around his tongue. When it was over, when her breathing had calmed once more, Steele picked her up and laid her on the bed. He joined her seconds later and took her into his arms beneath the covers. They dozed, then fell deeply asleep, holding tight to each other.

It was the best sleep Marla had had in years.

Chapter Six

Two days later

"We've sent the chip in for analysis and I've informed my contacts of Siren's activities. Siren's been engaging in illegal activities for too long. Once their secrets are uncovered they shouldn't bother Marla anymore."

Steele nodded. "She's going to move in with me anyway. She just doesn't know it yet," he chuckled ruefully.

Ryan smiled. "I'm glad to see you so happy, Steele." He sighed. "I remember when Dad brought you here, that first day, when you were still so painfully shy about using your gifts. I remember envying you your strength because I knew the ladies really got into that sort of thing." He chuckled.

"I never knew that," Steele said. "I was too busy fighting my own nature, I think, to notice what was going on around me."

"When I found out you were so strong because of your mastery over your own Chi, I nearly ran myself ragged trying to do the same myself. It never worked." Ryan grinned sheepishly.

"I don't even know how I use my Chi. I doubt I ever will. But I was so grateful when my team of scientists told me that's what I'd been doing over the years – honing my life energy into something tangible and strong. That was when I first started to relax around here."

"I remember it took you awhile to grow accustomed to our way of life here."

"Your dad was the only real father figure I ever knew."

"I know."

"He bought me from my real dad, did he tell you that? For fifty thousand dollars."

"Yes. Years after you came here he told me," Ryan admitted.

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"That was the best day of my life. I'll always be grateful to Sterling and to your father for helping me lead a normal life." The corner of his mouth lifted. "Well, as normal as it can be anyway."

"There's nothing to be grateful for, Steele. You're one of the best men I've got. Without you I don't think we'd be successful. You're very important to us."

Steele nodded. "I've got to get back. Marla will be through with her tests soon."

"How is she coming along?"

Steele shrugged. "She's not learning too much about why she obtained these powers of hers during her coma. But I think her team is coming up with a way to help her control them to some extent."

Ryan smiled. "She's a unique individual. We'll be happy to learn more about her and her new talents."

"So will we," Steele said, speaking of himself and Marla. "Marla's tired of sleeping with all the appliances unplugged."

Ryan and Steele shared a laugh over that.

There came a knock at the door and Johnny Vicious poked his head in. "Can I interrupt you two?"

"Sure, Vicious, what's going on?" Ryan asked.

Vicious looked at Steele. "Marla's doing some amazing stuff in the lab. I thought you might like to come and see for yourself."

Steele was on his feet in a second, followed by Ryan. The three men made their way over to the lab where Marla was running through her daily regimen of tests. Lights flickered along the way, some bulbs popping and going completely dark. The closer they got to the lab the more chaotic the electrical bursts got.

There was a large window before the lab and Steele watched through it as Marla, strapped down to a chair, tossed her head back and forth. The machines she was hooked up to were going haywire, some smoking as they broke down completely. Her team of scientists was scrambling to protect their computer equipment, trying and failing to move the machines out of Marla's range.

All the lights in the compound went dark, flickered, then came back on. One of the scientists attached what looked like a rubber bracelet onto Marla's wrist. Then...silence. Stillness. The crisis was over, it seemed.

"That's amazing," Ryan breathed. "Truly amazing."

"You should have seen her a few minutes ago. She was arcing electricity from her fingertips to the computer towers." Vicious chuckled. "It was really pretty to watch."

Steele went into the room and immediately went to Marla's side. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Marla, shaken but still strong, nodded. "I'll be fine in a minute," she gasped.

Steele pressed a hard kiss to her mouth then turned to face the group of scientists huddled further into the room. "She's done here for the day," he said commandingly.

"Steele, it's okay. I'll be fine," Marla protested.

His silver gaze bored a hole into her. "You're. Done. Here. For. The. Day," he said firmly, enunciating each word carefully.

Marla let out a soft protest as Steele scooped her up into his arms. He carried her from the room, ignoring Ryan and Vicious as he passed, and took her to his apartment without stopping along the way.

He set her down on her feet, then took her hand and half dragged her into the bedroom. Steele looked down at her wrist, at the black bracelet that encircled it. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's a ground. Mark thinks it will help stop my outbursts," Marla answered. "I think he might be right. When I wear it the lights don't flicker anymore. I figure it's worth a try."

Steele nodded. "Get undressed," he commanded softly.

Marla blinked. "What, right now?"

"Yes, right now. Get naked. Or I'll do it for you and I don't trust myself to do that quite yet. You scared the hell out of me back there."

Marla felt her eyes go wide as he stalked her, towering over her.

"I'm going to give you the ride of your life," Steele promised, voice wicked and determined.

* * * * *

Marla was completely nude. And nervous. It usually didn't bother her, being naked, but this time Steele kept his clothes on. She didn't like to be a solo act.

"I don't trust myself yet," he whispered, when she begged him to take off his clothes.

He unbuttoned his pants and let his cock spring free. It seemed so much larger to Marla's wide, hungry eyes. She watched as he came close to where she reclined on the bed. "I want you to touch yourself," he said. "And I want you to watch me while you do it."

Marla put her hands between her legs and began stroking all over her sex. She spread the lips of her pussy wide for Steele's gaze, which blazed a trail over her naked body like a burning flame. She watched as he palmed his cock and began to stroke himself in time with her own movements.

"Suck your nipples," Steele commanded raggedly, his movements growing faster, more urgent.

Marla lifted her breast to her own mouth and let her tongue dart out to taste its peak. Steele groaned and pumped himself rapidly, his breath catching with each lick she gave her nipple. She popped one into her mouth and sucked. Her other hand diddled with her clit, rubbing and squeezing it until she was bucking on the bed.

Steele groaned long and loud and came hard. His cum spurted onto her breasts and belly, and she rubbed the essence of him into her skin, reveling in the purely masculine

scent of his release. He shuddered and put his still-spurting cock against her lips. She opened her mouth and tasted him, swallowing every last drop he had to give.

He tasted like magic. Sweet and spicy and delicious.

Steele came down upon her on the bed. He shoved his cock into the heart of her and began to ride her at a fast, breathtaking pace. He thrust harder and harder into her until the bed was squeaking and groaning from the abuse.

His fingers found her clit and squeezed it like she squeezed his cock with her body. Marla cried out and came explosively beneath his bucking body. Her pussy milked his dick, clamping down so hard that they both saw stars and lost their breath.

Steele took her ankles in his hands and pushed them up by her ears. He sank deeper, impossibly deeper, into the wet, welcoming heat of her body. Marla screamed and bucked beneath him, coming again and again. She was so wet her juices dripped to the covers beneath them. She was so hot her body felt as if it were on fire.

"Give me a baby, Marla," Steele groaned. "Take all of me."

Marla cried out. He thrust harder into her, nearly bruising her he loved her so savagely. The iron bar of him reached to the heart of her and filled her up with unimaginable passion, until she almost swooned with the rioting sensations that gripped her.

His hands held her ankles tight, never allowing her a chance to escape. As if she would have tried. She'd never felt so mastered, so completely split open and naked and vulnerable. He reached down with his hands and squeezed the cheeks of her ass. He slapped them hard, so that they stung, and the pain made the pleasure all the sweeter.

Marla came with a long groan. Her body shook beneath his and he rode her through the storm of her climax, thrusting deep over and over straight into her womb.

He shuddered and came seconds later, filling her with hot, scalding splashes of cum. Marla felt him burning inside of her, pulsing and hard and hot. He filled her up until she was overflowing with his essence. His mouth came crashing onto hers and seconds later his body followed, taking her down deep into the mattress. "I love you Marla," he said hoarsely at her ear.

Marla felt her eyes tear up. "I love you too Steele. With all my heart."

He kissed her one last time and they both fell asleep within moments.

Epilogue

Three years later

Marla looked at her babies as they played joyously with their new puppy. She marveled that these triplets could be hers. Two boys and one girl, they were perfect in every way — and hell on her nerves at times. But it was all worth it.

Her children had Steele's eyes and her dark red hair. They were, in a word, beautiful.

Steele came to sit next to her, kissing her softly and taking her into his arms. "I've got to work tonight."

Marla had learned not to be completely terrified when Steele had to work. He was impervious to bullets—surely that was consolation enough to keep her from worrying. But it wasn't. She always worried about him. He was her husband, after all. Who else was entitled to worry over him?

"Come into the bedroom with me," he cajoled.

Marla shuddered with remembered ecstasy. Over the years their sex had become more explosive, never waning, always savagely hot and amazing. "I can't. The babies can't be left alone."

"That's why Deirdre is coming to pick them up any minute."

Right on cue there came a knock at the door. Deirdre came in, all smiles and sunshine, for everyone doted on the triplets. She gathered the children and the puppy to take them back to her own apartment within the Sterling compound.

The minute the door closed behind Deirdre, Steele was upon her like a ravenous beast. He kissed her long and deep, his tongue dueling with hers, filling her with his unique flavor. He tore her clothes from her with impatient hands and had them both nude within seconds.

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He thrust two fingers into her wet heat and suckled a breast fully into his mouth, tonguing the nipple to stabbing hardness in his hot, moist mouth. Marla wrapped her legs around his waist and held on for dear life. His head moved up her breasts to her chest and throat and at long last her mouth. He kissed her as if he'd never stop kissing her again. As if it was the first or last time for both of them.

He spread her legs wide for him and came down between them, thrusting his turgid length deep into the wet heat of her pleasure hole. Marla gasped and wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing him even deeper into her body. Steele's hands came up to play with her nipples, pinching and stroking them to diamond hardness.

He held her breasts still as he rocked upon her, filling her up over and over again with the thick, heavy weight of his penis. Marla let her fingers roam down over her pussy, zeroing in on her clit. She rubbed there, mindless in her passion, breathless with anticipation. Steele thrust hard, savagely into her. Marla cried out. Steele groaned. The lights flickered even though Marla wore her grounding bracelet.

They came together, moaning and gasping, holding each other tight.

Marla knew she was pregnant again. She could already instinctively, impossibly feel it.

"I love you, Steele," she breathed.

"I love you too, Marla. I'll love you forever."

The lights flickered then went out, cocooning them in darkness.

About the Author

Sherri L. King lives in the American Deep South with her husband, artist and illustrator Darrell King. Critically acclaimed author of *The Horde Wars* and *Moon Lust* series, her primary interests lie in the world of action packed paranormals, though she's been known to dabble in several other genres as time permits.

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