

Blue Dawn

Norah-Jean Perkin



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The
Fiction Works
eBook



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Copyright 1999
by Norah-Jean Perkin
ISBN 1-58124-406-1

Electronic version
published May 1999
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Norah-Jean Perkin has been writing romances for several years. A former newspaper reporter and magazine editor, she lives in a small city in southern Ontario with her husband and three children. She is a three-time Golden Heart finalist.

PROLOGUE

Far away in the distant galaxy of Oridian, light from the five moons of the planet Zura shone through the window of a small, bare room high in the Zalian mountains. The moonlight glinted off the balding pate of an aging seer seated at a low table, his eyes closed.

Across the room a man and a woman stood waiting for the old man to emerge from his trance to begin the ordained foretelling. Only the boy showed signs of impatience, twisting his fingers and shifting his weight from foot to foot. Each time a stern look from his father stilled his motions.

Finally the seer began to breathe more rapidly. His eyes fluttered open once, twice, then the black orbs widened and fixed on the three dark crystals spread in a triangle before him. The crystals glowed with amber light, a light that flared and sparked and died only to flare again, casting eerie shadows around the room and across the faces of the watchers. After the wildly changing dance of light, they settled into a steady golden glow.

Only then did the seer speak, his eyes focused

on the crystals, their reflection shining in his pupils. "The light is clear and strong for you, O Barak of Zalia, son of Royl and Vzaro, a sign of the strength and clarity of your destiny," he intoned. "You must begin to train now, at both the military and language academies, because you are destined to be the supreme commander of the joint counter-insurgency forces employed against the south."

The light of the crystals flared downward and the seer fell silent. Royl nodded solemnly to his wife Vzaro. Given the circumstances, their youngest son's destiny was better than they had dared hope.

Royl glanced at Barak. He noted the grin the boy could not suppress. For once Royl did not chastise his son for the inappropriate show of emotion.

Suddenly the crystals flared again, this time with a strangely cool blue flame that seemed to leap towards the ceiling of the small room. Royl noted the minute change of expression on the seer's face, and a sliver of fear pierced his calm.

The seer spoke once more. "Barak will find success in his ordained career, and shall live a long and healthy life. He will find his mate on . . ."

The seer faltered, his gaze flickering to the boy then back to the flaring crystals. “He will find his mate on the third planet of the star known as Sun, a place called Earth. Her name is Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski.”

Royl clamped his lips together to keep the groan of dismay from escaping. Though Vzaro made no sound, he could see the horror in her eyes.

He glanced at the boy again. Barak continued to watch the flaring crystals with fascination. He alone seemed unaware of the dreadful import of the seer’s last words.

“He will find his mate on the third planet of the star known as Sun, a place called Earth. Her name is Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski.”

CHAPTER ONE

Squelching a shudder, Allie Stanislawski dug her fingers into the quivering grey gunk in the small jar. She grimaced, then began smearing the beauty preparation over her face. She had trouble believing this stuff would actually perform the wonders the ads proclaimed, but at forty dollars for four ounces, it had better do *something*.

She smoothed the clay across her cheeks and over her chin and forehead, avoiding her eyes and mouth. “Not that it matters, anyway,” she muttered, glaring at the mud-covered apparition in her bathroom mirror. After dumping Cody last week, she was swearing off men, forever. Particularly the tall, dark exciting ones who thought love was some kind of recreational sport involving a cast of hundreds.

Allie swallowed and blinked back the tears she refused to let get the better of her. Sniffing, she smoothed the last bit of the clay mask under her chin, then adjusted the lime-green towel covering her wet hair. The towel clashed with the baby blue

terry housecoat wrapped around her, but who was here to see it besides Sharkey?

She smiled woefully at the runt cat fighting with the fluffy, raccoon-shaped slipper encasing her left foot. She'd picked Sharkey up from the pound at the beginning of June. Now, only ten days later—and unlike a man—he loved her faithfully. Or at least as long as she fed him.

The doorbell chimed just as she bent over to disentangle the little gray cat from her slipper. Grumbling, she straightened, and glanced at her watch on the counter. It was nine thirty, late for callers on a week night. She certainly wasn't expecting anyone. Not dressed like this. Worse, how had that someone got in without buzzing her from the lobby? The west side of Chicago wasn't exactly danger city, but what good was a security system if it didn't keep people out?

Still grumbling, Allie shook Sharkey off her foot and clumped over to the door of the huge, bare apartment in a renovated warehouse she'd moved into only two weeks earlier. Light from a street lamp that had just snapped on in the waning of the mid-June twilight streamed through the bank of windows along one wall, casting long shadows in the darkened room.

Allie made a face, then knelt down to peer through the peephole. Had the last tenant been confined to a wheelchair? The waist level installation certainly made trying to view callers a nuisance.

The mud above her eyebrow cracked and pieces fell onto her eyelashes as she squinted through the tiny hole. She blinked and brushed at her eye, then focused again. ***Damn!*** She couldn't be certain, but it appeared she was looking at a pair of legs covered in dark denim. She strained to look downwards, but was unable to see beyond another few inches. She scrunched down lower and looked upwards.

Her gaze locked on a higher portion of the caller, then started to focus. More denim, and a stitched fly pulled tightly over a bulge that . . .

Allie snapped upright, her face burning under the drying mud. Either a dwarf had lived here before or someone with a perverted approach to identifying callers.

The doorbell chimed again.

"All right, all right," muttered Allie. She undid the lock and the deadbolt, then slipped open the door as far as the chain would allow.

She looked up—up into the most hypnotic male eyes she'd ever seen. Eyes that glowed like molten

lead, their silvery light repeated in the strange streaks in the man's collar-length hair. Eyes that burned into her an unshakable impression of strength, danger and excitement, an impression that caught the breath in her throat and sent a shiver down her spine.

For an excruciatingly long moment she seemed unable to do anything but stare into those eyes. Her heart thundered in her chest; her lips parted but no sound came out.

Slowly an awareness of the man to whom the eyes belonged penetrated her consciousness. And what a man! He towered above her five foot four inches, a vision of dark masculinity filling the hallway. But in the dim lighting, she was unable to focus on much beyond his build and his compelling eyes.

Allie tried to drag her eyes away, but could not. She cleared her throat, but couldn't formulate a coherent thought, much less a word, for the thrum of excitement building in her veins.

"Perhaps I have made a mistake. I was looking for Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski."

The deep, calm voice flowed over Allie like honey on bread—heavy, and sweet, and alluring. Until she noted the growing chill in the metallic eyes.

With a jolt, the spell seizing her senses broke. “Oh, ah, yes. I mean no,” Allie stammered. She remembered the mud on her face, the lime green towel, the slippers. ***Oh no, not the slippers!*** She tried to compose herself, wishing all the time she could disappear off the face of the earth.

“Uh, no, you haven’t made a mistake.”

The male god frowned. The metallic eyes cooled to icy silver. “Then you ***are*** Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski?”

“Yes.” In the face of his disapproval, Allie’s embarrassment turned to irritation. “Allie,” she added a trifle belligerently.

The stranger stared at her, his gaze growing cooler still. After a moment he appeared to have reached a reluctant conclusion. He straightened.

“Well then, Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski, I will introduce myself.” He paused, his eyes glowing again with a strange silver intensity. “I am Barak of Zura, a planet in the Oridian galaxy far from your Milky Way.”

He cleared his throat and raised his chin, but his gaze never left her face. “I have come for you, Alina. You are my destiny.”

Allie fought the hypnotic pull of his gaze. “You have come for me . . .” she repeated.

“***What?***” She snapped upright as the meaning

of the man's words flashed across her brain. Open-mouthed she stared at him. And to think she'd thought . . .

"Oh, give me a break," she sputtered. She slammed the door, locked it and rammed the deadbolt in place. She backed away from the door, appalled to realize her heart was racing and she was shaking all over. From shock, from fear, from anger—she wasn't sure which. She kept backing up until her legs hit the couch against the opposite wall. She sat down, scooping Sharkey to her chest, and stroking him despite his struggles.

She waited one minute, two minutes, three minutes, all the time forcing herself to take deep, calming breaths. Finally, still holding Sharkey, she rose and crept to the door. Careful not to make any noise, she knelt before the peephole and looked out.

She sighed. Her knees wobbled beneath her. He was gone. Thank God, he was gone.

"I'm telling you Kate, you should have seen this guy."

Allie deposited her mug of coffee on the only empty space on her newspaper-strewn desk. She turned to her co-worker and best friend at ***The Streeter***, a tabloid upstart that had been fighting

for attention for the past two years against the formidable likes of the ***Chicago Sun-Times*** and ***The Tribune***.

“He was a hunk, an absolutely incredible hunk.” She rolled her eyes, then shook her head. Despite herself she shivered. “But a lunatic. I mean he actually said—can you believe it—he said he was from another planet and that I was his destiny.”

Kate grinned and ran one hand through her short, plum-colored hair. “From anyone else, no. But from you? What is it about you that attracts the weirdos? Like that guy last month who wanted you to help him prove the decimal point was the cause of all America’s money woes? Or that woman who just ***knew*** she was a reincarnation of Queen Victoria? Not only that, but you attract all the sexiest guys, too.”

“I don’t want to talk about attractive men,” Allie warned. “And don’t even think of mentioning the name Cody Walker to me. Or any other man’s name, either.”

She tossed back her hair in an attempt to toss off the hurt and humiliation that started to well in her at the mere mention of Cody. Grimly she picked up her coffee. “I’ve had it with men. From now on I’m concentrating on work. I may have only

been a columnist for six weeks, but I'm going to make ***Street Beat*** the best human interest column in the whole city. You'll see."

She raised the mug to her lips. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the city editor Nate Williams making a beeline for her desk. Her gaze drifted to an unfamiliar man at his side—and froze.

Her throat seized up. She couldn't swallow. She choked on the mouthful of coffee and began coughing violently.

Kate grabbed the cup from her and pounded her back. Nate raced the last few steps and joined Kate in slapping Allie's back.

"Are you all right, Allie?" Nate demanded between slaps. "I'd hate for my newest columnist to choke to death first thing in the morning."

"Th . . . thanks," sputtered Allie, as she escaped the helping hands. "You're all heart. Now stop smacking me before you beat me to death."

"Ah, that's my Allie." The gray-haired and roly-poly city editor beamed at her and then Kate. "I'd like you girls to meet the new photographer I just hired to replace George." He stepped back and nodded to the man who loomed behind him. The man the mere sight of whom had made Allie think

her heart was going to stop. “Erik, come here.”

Almost afraid to look again, Allie slowly swiveled in the stranger’s direction. She raised her eyes, steeling herself for the shock that had erupted with her first glimpse of him. A glimpse that had registered the same impression of strength, danger and excitement she’d seen in the lunatic stranger at her door last night.

She swallowed and forced herself to look again. This time her gaze was slow and deliberate, starting at the top of his six-foot-two inches. Without question, he had the same height, the same thrilling build, the same dark hair. But, she noted, the streaks in his collar-length hair were blond, not silver. His eyes were gray, not the molten lead that had glowed at her so strangely from a shadowed face in the dim hallway. For the first time she saw his broad Slavic cheekbones, square jaw, strong nose and generous mouth. Her mind assessed and concluded that the man was definitely good-looking.

But **not** the god who’d sent her pulse racing and her insides melting last night. Not the sexy stranger who had terrified her with his crazy statement.

“Allie, Kate, I’d like you to meet Erik Berenger, our new photographer. He starts today. He’s been

working in Australia, in Sydney and Melbourne, for the last five years. He just got back to the States a couple of weeks ago.”

Erik inclined his dark head first to Kate, then to Allie. She forced her lips into a welcoming smile. As his eyes met hers, she noted neither the glimmer of a smile nor the slightest flicker of recognition. It couldn't possibly be the lunatic from last night, she thought, but the realization did not generate a feeling of relief.

Nate, looking more elfin than ever beside the towering Erik, cleared his throat. “I'm sure you ladies will both be working with Erik over the next few days. He's new to the Chicago area, so I want you to be nice to him.”

A pained expression flashed across Nate's face. “Not *that* nice, Kate!” he scolded.

Allie bit her lip to keep from laughing. She hadn't missed the bold leer Kate, always appreciative of male beauty, had directed at Erik, a leer that Nate's scolding had done nothing to lessen.

Nate harrumphed and mumbled something about lack of respect. Allie glanced at Kate. From her twitching lips it was evident she was having trouble suppressing her laughter too. If they could just keep from exploding until the well-meaning

but fatherly Nate was out of earshot.

“And now, if you’ll excuse us, I haven’t got all day to make the rounds. C’m on Erik.”

Nate turned, then veered back. “Oh Allie. By the way, have you seen Cody this morning?”

“No.” The laughter bubbling inside Allie died. She stiffened. “Why would I?”

“I just thought—” Nate’s round face reddened with awareness of the relationship he’d just implied, a relationship that even he had to know from newsroom gossip had ended. He started again. “It’s just he hasn’t come in yet. And it’s not like him to be late, or not to phone if he can’t make it.”

“Well, I haven’t seen him.” Allie noted the worry in Nate’s voice, but her wounds were too fresh to respond in any other way. And pride prevented her from adding, “***Maybe you should ask Jane in Circulation. Or Tiffany in Advertising.***”

Masking her hurt with anger, she glared at Nate. He turned away, sighing. She noticed Erik staring at her, his face impassive, his eyes cool.

She glared at him too, until he turned and followed Nate. The new photographer might not be the lunatic from last night, but he was a man, wasn’t he? she thought.

Good enough reason to let him know she wasn't interested, right from the start. Not now, not ever.

During his extended tour of ***The Chicago Streeter's*** newsroom, Erik displayed polite interest as he committed to memory the names, faces and details Nate introduced. But his thoughts kept returning to the petite woman across the room, the woman called Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski, or ***Allie*** as she had insisted last night.

He suppressed a grimace. He'd told himself it didn't matter. Still, he'd been relieved this morning to see that under the blue/gray face paint, the green and blue towels and the furred animals on her feet, was the attractive woman whose image he'd seen in the visual files prepared for him by Intergalactic Research. If anything, the images hadn't done justice to her small but pert figure, her golden complexion and sun-streaked auburn hair, the almond-shaped green eyes.

More importantly, the research had failed to prepare him for the shock of coming face to face with the strong human emotions he'd heard about but never before seen. Open curiosity, suspicion and anger had burned in the woman's eyes and across her expressive face, along with an

unmistakable flash of desire—desire for him. Was it the naked emotions or his shocked response that had disturbed him most? he wondered.

He frowned, then checked himself. He glanced at Nate to see if the city editor had caught his temporary lapse of attention. He couldn't afford to blow it now. So far Intergalactic Research appeared to have done a good job —no one had questioned his credentials, his story, his identity.

Thank the crystals that he hadn't given himself away completely last night with his foolish attempt at being direct. Despite urgings from his advisers that he simply kidnap the woman and be done with it, he had hoped that his destined mate would be intelligent enough to understand the facts and accept her fate. He had naively hoped to avoid a long campaign to win her acceptance.

But no. He had underestimated the huge gap in knowledge between the faraway planet of Zura and Earth, as well as the human shock in the face of an alien encounter. It was a mistake he would not, and could not, make again. Not if he hoped to avoid the emotional and mental destruction his grandfather had wreaked some fifty years earlier while fulfilling his destiny.

But could he do it? He had a maximum of two months before the Idlanta III, now orbiting the

Earth behind the moon, departed for Zura and his homeland. Two months to convince the Earthling to willingly forsake her home for the superior Zalia, his native country in the northern hemisphere of Zura. Two months to convince her their fates had been irrevocably entwined since the day so long ago when he had learned of his destiny. Two months to overcome her resistance and convince her to accompany him back to Zura as his mate.

Two months, he thought, his mouth tightening and his eyes narrowing. Two months to succeed and finally win full acceptance. Or to fail and face shame, belittlement, and ultimately death.

Nate paused in his ramblings and Erik glanced across the room, to the untidy desk where his destiny sat, a telephone receiver cradled between her shoulder and her ear as her fingers raced across the keyboard of her computer.

A glimmer of feeling rippled through him. For a second he grappled with it, unable to identify it or to understand the uneasiness it provoked.

Then, with a shake of his head and a sense of relief, he seized on the only logical answer. What else could it be but the lure of the chase, the challenge of the hunt that was sending a spurt of adrenaline through him, preparing him for the

battle ahead? He had experienced this so-called feeling only once before, on the eve of a mission to the south of Zura to ferret out the information Zalia needed to defeat the rebels. A mission which, he remembered, had concluded successfully.

With hooded eyes, he continued to watch his destined prey, measuring and cataloguing her physical properties and actions. Properties he had decided in the last few minutes were more than satisfactory.

Maybe he was going to enjoy the challenge posed by his destiny after all.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you sure you’ve taken enough pictures?”

The new photographer nodded, maintaining the silence that had annoyed Allie more with each passing minute since they’d left the newsroom an hour and a half ago. If Erik was playing the strong, silent type, she thought, he was taking it too far.

Allie frowned, but the expression on Erik’s broad, handsome face remained calm and unreadable. The camera dangled from one of his large hands. Short of ordering him to take more photos of Maggie and Sarah Rankin—an action not usually necessary with an experienced photographer—there wasn’t much she could do. She’d just have to wait to see what he produced.

Allie checked her irritation and turned to the young blonde woman she had just spent the last hour interviewing. “Thank you,” she said, extending her hand. “I really appreciate your willingness to share your story with the readers of ***The Streeter***. Your perseverance is inspiring.”

Allie smiled warmly. She meant every word. It was a great story. Maggie Rankin had spent the

last year single-handedly tracking down the ex-husband who had snatched her daughter and disappeared. Her efforts had paid off three weeks ago when her ex-husband had been arrested and she and her five-year-old daughter were reunited. Allie had been moved by the woman's tenacity, her love and her faith, and her ability to forgive.

In those circumstances, Allie wondered, would **she** be strong enough to do the same? The woman was inspiring, and she wanted readers to be aware of such perseverance in their midst.

Besides, she thought as she stowed her notepad and pen in her large shoulder bag, it was the kind of underdog story readers loved. Though she'd been with **The Streeter** since it began two years earlier, she'd been a columnist for only six weeks—quite a coup for a twenty-five-year-old. To be successful, she needed to make a splash, and she was counting on this story to do it—and boost **The Streeter's** circulation.

She just hoped Erik had caught the woman's spirit in the few shots he had taken. But she doubted it. She'd never seen a photographer so uninvolved in a shoot. He could have been in another galaxy, for all the interest he'd shown. She should have demanded he take more photos, she thought morosely.

Allie said her good-byes and left the tiny apartment in a lowrise not far from where she lived near the north branch of the Chicago River. As she traipsed down the uncarpeted stairs to the plain lobby and the street, she heard Erik behind her, a looming presence that not only annoyed her but distracted her with his silence and inescapable maleness. Because whatever else Erik might be, you only had to look at him to know that he was all man. She sniffed disdainfully.

Out on the street she located the bronze-colored Honda Civic that she had sandwiched between a battered pickup and a rusted-out Chevy. She unlocked the passenger door, then proceeded around to the driver's side.

Inside, she glanced at Erik as she turned the key in the ignition. Scrunched into the small space, his knees forced close to his chest, he seemed larger than ever — and impossible to ignore.

She rolled her eyes. "You can let the seat back, you know. The handle's under the seat." She didn't try to hide her irritation.

Silently he released the seat and his long legs unfolded into the increased space.

Allie glanced into the side mirror, then pulled away from the curb. She felt her agitation rising.

What was it about Erik, about everything he did or didn't do, that raised her tension level? Not only had an annoying, low-grade humming sound settled into her head since Nate had brought him over after the introductions this morning and said he was to accompany her on this story, but she felt inexplicably edgy. And it wasn't Erik's similarity to the lunatic who'd appeared at her door last night; she'd already discounted that. Nor was it just a bad mood.

"Why do you drive this car?"

The question surprised Allie so much after ninety minutes of unrelenting silence that she almost rammed into the car stopped at the red light before them.

She jammed on the brakes. "Well, whaddya know. The man not only breathes and walks, he speaks too," she muttered. She glanced at Erik; he acted as if he hadn't heard.

She sighed. "What do you mean, why do I drive this car?"

Eric turned his steady gray eyes on Allie, the same eyes she knew had rarely left her the whole time she'd been interviewing Maggie Rankin and her daughter. The eyes that had watched with an eerie concentration that both puzzled and unsettled her.

“Why don’t you drive a bigger car, one with more power?”

The voice washed over Allie, its unaccented firmness disturbing her. It reminded her of something, or someone. She laughed nervously. “This is what I can afford. Besides, I’m a columnist, not a race car driver. I just need something that will get me around.”

“It’s not safe.”

The light changed. Allie accelerated, then glanced at Erik. What an odd thing for someone who was basically a stranger to say. Especially a man she’d bet her pay check was not only under thirty-five, but unencumbered by anything resembling a wife or children. He sounded like her late **Tata** and **Mama**, or her older sister. They’d have liked her to drive a Cadillac or a Lincoln. Or even better, an armored tank.

She shook her head. “Safe? No car is all that safe. The trick is not to get into an accident, period.” She remembered that Nate had said Erik intended to lease a car. “So what kind of car are you getting?”

“A Jaguar.”

Allie laughed again to cover the bitterness rising in her throat. **Cody drove a Corvette**. Was a sleek, expensive car some kind of symbol of fast,

devil-may-care men? Men who lied and cheated? Men who didn't care whom they hurt, or how often? Somehow they always seemed to be able to afford an expensive set of wheels.

"A Jag?" she said, unable to keep the sarcasm from her voice. "Why aren't I surprised? I guess that's all part of the image, the cool, sexy photographer and his—"

The car phone's sharp ring cut her off. She picked it up, then switched it to the speaker phone. Nate's gravely voice filled the interior of the car. "Is that you, Allie?"

"No, Nate, it's someone else driving around in my car. What do you want?"

"Uh, Allie, I know this is a bit out of your way, but I'd like you to stop in at Cody's on the way back to the office. He still isn't in, and he's not answering the phone either."

Flooded by bitter memories, Allie didn't respond. She couldn't. Static filled the air.

"Allie? Allie, I know you're there. And I'm sorry to have to ask you this. I know, well, I know about you and Cody. I know the engagement's off. But you're the only one I know who's got a key to his apartment. And I really am starting to worry. Maybe he's really sick. Maybe he's had an accident. You know it's not like him to just not

show up.”

Allie remained silent, fighting back the hurt and humiliation spawned by the far too fresh memory of the last time she'd walked in on Cody unannounced. She didn't want to set foot in his apartment ever again.

Finally, aware that Nate was waiting, she swallowed and forced out an answer. “Oh, all right. I can probably get there in about fifteen minutes.”

“Atta girl. I knew you'd do it. You and Erik head over there now. I don't have any other assignments for Erik today anyway.”

Allie ended the call, then turned right at the first cross street. She gritted her teeth, forcing aside her reluctance. Maybe Nate was right. Maybe Cody was too sick to answer the phone.

“It won't kill me to check on him,” she mumbled.

“Pardon?” Erik looked at her quizzically.

Allie grimaced. For a moment, wrapped up in her own misery, she'd forgotten he was there.

She sighed. “Well, at least our little search and rescue mission will give you a chance to see the ritzier side of Chicago, Erik. We should be in the Gold Coast area in a few minutes.”

Allie yanked the Honda to a screeching halt in a No Parking zone directly in front of a grand, three-story mansion on a street just off North Astor. Erik hadn't paid much attention to Earth architecture since his arrival, but the well-kept building and its gracious neighbors appeared to be remnants of an older era.

"Cody lives here?" he asked, unable to completely suppress his admiration. As a result of pollution and intermittent wars, most edifices in his native Zalia and indeed, in the whole of Zura, were built underground. Any above-ground buildings were low, mud-colored, and without windows. As they should be, he reminded himself.

"Oh, not the whole thing." Allie turned off the ignition. She took a deep breath, as if she were trying to calm herself. "He's got money, but not that much. A lot of these old buildings were renovated and partitioned into high-priced condos a few years ago. Cody's got one on the top floor."

Allie opened the door, her expression a mask of unconcern. "I'll just zip in and be back in a minute. You wait here."

"No." Erik slipped out his side and faced her over the top of the car. He had observed her distress over Nate's request she check on Cody.

He was curious about the reasons for it, as well as her present forced air of unconcern. Besides, he needed to keep her with him, to observe her while he formulated a strategy to convince her she belonged with him. That was all, he told himself, even as his gaze dipped to the shadowed cleft between her breasts revealed by the mint-colored vest she wore over a matching knit skirt.

Allie made a face, then shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Abruptly she turned and strode through the wrought iron arbor guarding the entrance to the lawn and the house. Erik's gaze followed the smooth curve of her hips under the skirt, the slim legs obviously used to a workout. He liked the confident way she walked, all of it tied together with an enticing feminine sway he'd never given much thought to before.

The observation, and an unexpected surge of pleasure, gave him pause. Until now, he had regarded this aspect of his destiny as an inescapable duty, something that must be done regardless of his wishes. An achievement that would assure his place within the Zalian elite once and for all. The possibility that he might actually derive some physical pleasure from it was a novel, and not unappealing, idea.

He hurried after her, catching up in time to wrest the heavy leaded glass door from her grasp. She ignored him and proceeded to a small directory panel protected by Plexiglas. She punched a button and waited.

“Cody?” Her voice cracked. She frowned and cleared her throat. “Are you there? Cody?” When only silence met her question, she jabbed the button again. “Cody, if you’re there, it’s Allie. Just in case you’ve got someone or something to hide, I’ll give you a warning. I’ll be up in thirty seconds.”

With one of the keys on her chain, she opened the glass door into a gleaming lobby. She walked through it without a second glance, ignoring the elevators and heading for an imposing oak staircase. “It’s faster,” she said, not bothering to look back at Erik. “You can take the elevator if you want.”

Erik caught up with her in several strides, and kept abreast as she raced up the stairs. When she reached the richly-carpeted hallway of the top floor, she proceeded to the closest of two doors. The staccato rap of her knuckles broke the silence. “Cody? Cody?”

She fumbled till she found the right key. “What a waste of time,” she grumbled. She stuck the key in the lock, turned it and flung the door open.

Erik followed her into the room, then stopped abruptly. Every available surface in the large, sunny room was littered with discarded clothes, newspapers, books, dirty dishes and half-full ashtrays. Two black leather couches were strung with clothing and books that spilled over onto the golden hardwood floor and dribbled towards a kitchenette. The room, which under normal circumstances might have been inviting, smelled of smoke, flat beer and spoiling food.

Instinctually, Erik recoiled. The mess offended his strong Zalian sense of order and undermined any respect he might have held for Cody.

Allie, however, didn't give the mess a second glance. She picked her way around the books and the papers towards one of two doors on the far walls. She was almost there when she stopped and detoured to a glass coffee table whose top was obscured with books and dishes.

She retrieved two crystal glasses, one still half full. Deliberately she held the empty one up to the light. The color drained from her face and her features seemed to crumple in pain.

Erik glanced from Allie to the glass. Even from several feet away he could see the rich, mauve lipstick marks on the edge of the glass.

Suddenly a vivid image of the memory flooding

Allie's mind flashed into his head. It took him aback; he winced with surprise. For one brief but painfully clear moment he saw what she saw, felt what she felt. Her giddy pleasure as she quietly opened her fiancé's door in preparation for a surprise visit. The jolt of shock when her gaze struck Cody and an attractive brunette, half-dressed and tangled together on the couch. The hurt and betrayal in the fleeting moment before she turned and fled.

Erik shook his head to dispel the intense images, and the incredible human emotions assaulting him, setting him off balance, and filling him with a sense of sympathy he'd never experienced before. By Zalian standards, his telepathic powers were weak and rarely worked without intense concentration on his part. Why had they suddenly focused so sharply on Allie?

He looked back at Allie in time to see the tears filling her eyes. She blinked hard and bit her lip, the two glasses suspended shakily in her hands.

The tears disturbed Erik even more than the quickly fading images. Where had he seen that kind of sadness before? No one cried on Zura, and certainly not in Zalia. No one that is, except . . ."

He crushed the thought, and the uncertainty it always provoked. All his life he'd had to fight

doubt, a weakness he suspected resulted from his mixed parentage. But now was not the time for doubts. There was only room for single-minded concentration on achieving every aspect of the destiny foretold for him at age twelve. It was destiny or disaster. The choice was clear.

He watched as Allie replaced the glasses, tears now under control. She straightened and continued to the far door. She opened it and looked in.

With a few steps, Erik reached her side. He stood close enough to smell the alluring, fresh scent that wafted from her pulse and tangled in her reddish-gold locks. Close enough to see that she was trembling.

“He’s not here,” he said. For reasons he did not understand, he wanted to stem her distress. But, he realized, he didn’t have a clue how to go about it. Mutely he reached for her.

“I can see that,” she snapped, stepping away before he could touch her.

“What a mess,” she muttered as she stepped into the bedroom. Erik had to agree as he surveyed the unmade bed, the piles of crushed bedding, the glasses, ashtrays and crumb-covered plates littering the room.

Allie snatched a T-shirt from the floor and

tossed it onto the bed. As she straightened, he caught the glitter of tears in her eyes once more. He clenched and unclenched his fists, then stopped with a shock.

Had he just had the distinctly non-Zalian desire to strangle this Cody character? To avenge what he'd gleaned from the city editor and from his limited knowledge of Earth social customs had been despicable treatment of Allie? The man might be a top-flight investigative reporter, but his personal behavior lacked the integrity Erik considered essential.

Erik shuddered and pulled himself tightly in check. He couldn't let Earth's emotional climate affect him. He might be compelled to marry an Earthling; he might occasionally be forced to feel what she felt; but it didn't mean he had to **become** one. He had struggled too hard to live up to his Zalian heritage.

He averted his gaze from Allie's stricken face and cleared his throat. "C'mon, let's go. There's no point staying here."

Allie sniffed, then shook her head. "In a minute. I'd better check the closet and his dresser. See if his laptop computer is here, his watch, maybe his loafers. I know Cody. He'd never go away for any length of time without his laptop."

She slid open the double closet door. The laptop was there, open but turned off, and sitting on a shelf that looked as if it doubled as a desk. Her gaze fell to the floor and a half dozen pairs of shoes, carefully lined up in neat contrast to the rest of the room.

She shut the door, then knelt to look under the bed. When she stood up again, the tears had been banished from her eyes. “Well, wherever he is, he’s wearing his loafers,” she said. Her gaze fell to the night table. “His watch too. And nobody’s broken into his apartment or anything like that.”

She moved across to the unshuttered window and looked out. “His car’s not in the space in the back either.”

She frowned, then worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “But still, it’s not like him to just not show up at work.”

She paused for a moment, then muttered, “On the other hand, who am I to say what he might or might not do? What do I know? How well did I ever know him?”

“Maybe he was called out of town. You know, on an urgent family matter,” Erik offered blandly. “Maybe he’s even back at work. Besides, I want to get back and get this film developed.”

Allie sighed, and kicked the foot of the bed. “Yeah, you’re right. Who knows where he is? Nate’s a worrier, anyway. Cody will probably show up anytime now.”

Erik put his hand at Allie’s waist and steered her out of the bedroom, and then out of the apartment. Some feeling he couldn’t identify and didn’t want to understand boiled just below the surface. All he knew for sure was that he didn’t like the worry Allie had shown for Cody, or how much Cody had hurt her.

He’d thought Cody’s disappearance would work in his favor, clearing the way for a campaign of seduction.

But maybe he’d been wrong. Was this another area where Intergalactic Research had failed to prepare him for the illogical behavior of humans? Had he once again failed to fully understand the strange reactions and emotions of an Earthling?

Allie stared in disbelief at the black and white prints spread across her desk. There were only six of them— that was all Erik had taken earlier this afternoon—but every one was perfect. It was as if she’d told him exactly what she wanted and he’d produced it to order.

She picked up the closest photo. It was all there in Maggie Rankin's face as she gazed down at her young daughter. The pride, the relief, the love, and the answering glow in the five-year-old's chubby face.

Allie picked up the next photo. Erik had shot it from a different angle, with a resulting shift in nuance, but it was every bit as moving as the first one.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" Coffee in hand, Kate stopped at the desk to peer over her shoulder. "Wow! Is that the mother and daughter you were talking about? Who took the photo? It's terrific."

As usual, Kate rattled out question after question. Allie waited for her to stop, then wrinkled her nose. "Erik. Can you believe it?"

Kate raised one finely-plucked eyebrow. "Well, why not? He *is* a photographer. And experienced too. He didn't spend all those years with the Aussies for nothing."

"No. That's not what I meant." Allie frowned as she struggled to find the right words. ***What did she mean?*** Was she surprised because a man who'd shown so little emotion had managed to capture someone else's perfectly? Or was it something else? An image of Erik, his eerie gray eyes watching her, filled her head. A faint hum

started up in her ears.

She shook her head and shrugged to shake the hum and the fleeting sense of uneasiness that accompanied it. "It's just, well, you should have seen him this afternoon. He's so quiet it's unnerving. I've never seen anyone take so few pictures, so fast. And with no expression on his face, no attempt to put the subjects at ease, nothing. I was furious. I was convinced he'd screwed up."

"Hardly." Kate looked at the photos again and whistled. "If that's a screw-up, I want him working on my next feature. I don't care if he ever opens his mouth."

She licked her lips and smiled lasciviously. "Besides, what's that they say about 'tall, dark and silent'? Think of the challenge of finding out what's behind that pretty face."

Allie groaned. "Why don't you just sharpen your teeth and go after him then?"

Kate pouted, but Allie didn't miss the sparkle in her eyes. She shook her head. Despite her friend's vamp act, Allie knew Kate was a one-man woman, and had decided ***The Streeter's*** photo editor Doug Long was that man a long time ago. Still, Kate could rarely resist the opportunity to flirt with an appealing male. Lucky for Doug he

understood her so well.

Allie gathered the photos together and stood up.

“Where y’ going?”

“To the photo department. Like it or not, I should tell Erik how great his photos are.” She sighed. “And apologize too. I was in a foul mood this afternoon.”

Kate chuckled. “That bad, huh? I guess it didn’t improve your mood any when Nate asked you to check on Cody?”

“No.” Allie frowned again. Talking about Erik made her edgy and tense. Throwing in her ex-fiancé just made it worse, bringing back all the hurt and anger she wanted to forget. Not to mention the germ of worry that had been gnawing at her ever since she’d left his empty apartment. Where **was** he?

She bit her lip and commanded herself to forget about Cody. “Maybe I’d better ask Erik if he’d like to go out for a drink after work. He **is** new to Chicago. And between snapping at him and then wavering on the verge of tears this afternoon, he didn’t have much of an introduction.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s terrible the things a woman has to do.”

“Stop it, Kate. You know I’m only asking him

because I was so rotten this afternoon.”

“I’m sure it has nothing to do with his rugged jaw, or stunning build, or—”

“You know I’m not interested, Kate. Not after Cody.” The flush Allie could feel rushing up her neck undermined the words she was determined to make true. Her breaking voice and the tears starting to brim in her eyes didn’t help either.

She took a deep breath, swallowed and then continued as evenly as she could. “Not now, and not for a long time. I’m not ready to trust any man. Or myself, either. So cut it out. I’m only being polite.”

“If you say so.”

Kate grinned slyly, but Allie saw the unspoken sympathy in her best friend’s eyes, a sympathy far more threatening to her composure than any amount of friendly teasing.

She swallowed again and forced herself to wrinkle her nose at Kate. For good measure, she stuck out her tongue.

Then, with a careless flourish, she picked up the photos and stomped off to the photo department.

CHAPTER THREE

A bearded man in khakis and an open-necked shirt hunched over a light table in the photo department, squinting at several strips of negatives. Doug Long had an eye for art that belied his solid build and dependable nature. Not only that, he was fun, thought Allie. It was easy to see why Kate was crazy about him.

“Oh, hi Allie.” Doug looked up from the light table. “What can I do for you?”

She waved the prints. “Where’s your new photographer?”

“Erik?” Doug straightened and nodded at the prints. “Great, aren’t they? Especially when you figure this guy just showed up on our doorstep the day George retired. Perfect timing. Perfect credentials.”

“Really?” Allie paused. That was odd. Fortunate, she supposed, but odd all the same. “So where is this paragon of photography now?” She glanced at her watch. It was almost five thirty. “Has he left yet?”

Doug chuckled, then turned back to the light table. “He’s in the darkroom. The second one down the hall.”

“Thanks.” Allie headed for the hall. She found the right door, knocked once, and waited. A moment later she heard a low “come in”.

In the darkroom’s dim lighting, she blinked several times as her eyes adjusted to the light. At first she didn’t see Erik.

Then she found him standing beside a tray of developing fluid. The light shone off his broad cheekbones and straight nose. His eyes remained cloaked in shadow, and the blond streaks in his hair glowed silver in the strange darkroom light. Like the unearthly silver of the lunatic who’d shown up at her door last night, Allie thought.

She shoved the ridiculous idea out of her head and held up the photos.

“Uh . . .Erik.” Suddenly the simple words didn’t want to come out. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Your photos are . . . just wonderful.”

He nodded. What she could see of his face remained expressionless.

Exasperation flashed through Allie. She stomped it down and forced herself to carry on.

“I wanted to apologize . . . uh . . . for being so impatient this afternoon. For my attitude. You really do know your business.”

“Yes.”

Yes? Was that all the man could say? She bit

her lip and debated whether to leave now. But no. She should do what was right. “I wondered if I could buy you a drink after work tonight. Just down the street there’s a—”

“Dinner.”

“Pardon?”

Erik straightened. His broad face remained expressionless. “I said let’s have dinner instead. I’m hungry. You must know a good place.”

“Yes, but . . .” Prepared to protest his counter-offer, Allie scrambled for an excuse. Then her gaze fell to his mouth. A broad, generous mouth with unexpectedly full lips. Lips she could easily imagine trailing kisses along her neck, across her collarbone, and lower still.

Distracted, she licked her bottom lip. The tip of her tongue awakened a tingle of anticipation, an electric current of curiosity about the man standing before her.

Suddenly she realized where her thoughts were heading. She gritted her teeth. ***What was wrong with her?*** She didn’t want a man, not any man. And particularly not this sinfully good-looking man who was likely a smooth and heartless operator behind his detached demeanor. “Ahem, I—”

“Good. I’m just about finished. I’ll come by your desk at six.”

Without another word, Erik turned back to his work. Startled, Allie stared at his broad back. Then she shook her head and left, the photos forgotten in her hand.

Outside she leaned against the wall and blinked in confusion. Dinner? How had Mr. Tall, Dark and Mute managed to change a simple drink invitation into dinner?

She shook her head again and looked at the photos clutched in her hand. More to the point, **why** had she let him?

The silo-shaped brick building in the middle of Lincoln Park appeared to grow out of the side of a hill. Erik narrowed his eyes. Except for the formidable glass doors marking the entrance, the structure was similar to many a Zalian building. The contrast to the Earth buildings he was quickly coming to accept was jarring.

He stopped abruptly. Allie bumped into him. “What’s that?” he asked.

Allie jumped away from him as if she’d been shocked. Erik turned around and observed her with care. Since their standup dinner of what Earthlings disingenuously called a “hot dog” and

"soda", Allie had bumped into him several times. And, except for the few moments when they'd been eating, she'd talked non-stop.

"Sorry," Allie mumbled, backing away farther still. She cleared her throat. "That's the Great Ape House. When they built Lincoln Park Zoo . . ."

Erik listened as she launched into a dissertation on yet another aspect of Chicago. His destined one certainly could talk, he thought. And much to his surprise, he found he didn't mind. He'd always disliked Zalians who talked too much, considering it a waste of time and a sign of weakness.

But now he was spellbound. He'd never seen such rapid-fire change of expression on any face. He'd never heard anyone speak so quickly, or careen at such dizzying speed from subject to subject. In less than two hours, he'd heard about her family, her childhood, Chicago's great fire, the political leaders, intrigue in the newsroom, the best places to live, all of it delivered without a pause for breath. Perhaps humans, in this respect at least, weren't inferior to Zalians after all.

Allie concluded. A second later she began tugging him towards the building. Erik closed his much larger hand around the slim smoothness of hers. With satisfaction he noted the tingle of

pleasure that rippled outwards from the place where their two hands joined. Good. The physical sensations he was beginning to experience towards her confirmed the correctness of the seer's predictions so long ago. He suspected her constant bumping into him was the first sign of the same sensations building in her for him. It was only a matter of time before destiny took its course, and he could take his mate back to Zura.

As they approached the imposing glass doors, Allie started to talk about the animals they would see inside. Erik listened, but concentrated on watching her. He was fascinated by the changing hue of her green eyes, the lifting of her eyebrows, the pursing and pouting and tilting of her soft full lips, the ever-changing dance of emotions across the fine structure of her face. Coming from a planet where emotions were scorned and suppressed, it was like watching a forbidden delight.

Finally he couldn't help it. "Do you always talk so much?" he blurted.

"Do I always—*what?*" Allie stopped in mid-sentence. Her eyes darkened with irritation and she exhaled sharply. "And what about you?" she demanded. "Don't you ever say *anything?*"

"About what?"

“About *anything?*” Allie ripped her hand from his and whirled about to face him. “About your family, about you, about your job, your life. Anything. The only reason I’m talking so much is because you never open your mouth.” She glared at him. “And you keep looking at me. Like . . . like I’m an insect or something and you’re thinking of dissecting me.”

“An insect?” The description, accompanied by her frustration, puzzled Erik. He had a quick vision of Allie as an indignant but chatty insect buzzing around his head. He bit his bottom lip to suppress an odd sort of gasp that bubbled up inside.

“Yes, a—” Allie stopped. “I don’t believe it. You smiled. You actually smiled.” With one of the lightning changes of emotion that he found so bewitching, her lips curved upwards and her eyes sparkled. “Good. I was beginning to think you weren’t human.”

The humor that had started to fill his soul with unexpected lightness was extinguished. ***Did she know? But that was impossible.*** He cleared his throat. “What do you mean, I’m not human?”

She shrugged. “You don’t smile. You don’t talk. You barely respond to anything I say or do. It’s like you’re shell-shocked or something. There’s

quiet, and then there's quiet. I've never met anyone as silent as you before. You make me nervous."

Erik exhaled slowly. Her statement had been just a figure of speech. But perhaps he should take it as a warning. Sooner or later he would tell her the truth again, but only after proper preparation. He couldn't risk ruining his plans by spilling a truth he knew she wasn't yet ready to hear.

He clenched one fist at his side. *Act human*, he told himself. After all, he was a Zalian from the far superior planet of Zura. How hard could it be to imitate an Earthling?

"So," he started, "what do you want to know?"

Allie cocked her head to one side and regarded him. "Well, for instance, why did you come to Chicago?"

"I'd never been here. It sounded interesting. You know, all that gangster history. Two baseball teams. And at least one world-famous newspaper."

Allie smiled. "*The Streeter* is hardly *The Tribune*. Why'd you come to us?"

"You needed a photographer. The Trib didn't."

"Where are you from?"

"Sydney."

"No. That's not what I meant. Where in the

States? Where'd you grow up?"

"Seattle," Erik said carefully. Intergalactic Research had assured him Allie had never been to the west coast, nor did she have family and friends there. "But it's been a long time since I've been there."

"Do you still have family in Seattle?"

"A brother. My sister's in New Mexico." As much as possible, Erik stuck with the truth. He did have a sister and a brother. He'd learned that was the easiest way to keep a story straight. "My parents are dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

The glimmer of compassion in her eyes and voice struck Eric with surprise and wonder. How could she so quickly recognize and identify with the sorrow he'd tried so hard to suppress?

"It's all right. It's been a while," he said from a throat suddenly tight. Likely because of his mixed heritage, he'd had to work harder than most to suppress the grief he'd experienced when his mother and father had been killed. Especially his grief for his mother. She was the only one who'd ever given a hint she understood when, as a child, he'd failed to live up to Zalia's stringent expectations. But he'd masked his grief and carried on, as any good Zalian would.

“When did they die?” she asked, her voice now filled with a gentleness so different from her usual tone.

“It was five years ago. An explosion destroyed the laboratory where they both worked . . . and them too.” He struggled to control the unseemly emotion wrenched from deep within him by her unexpected concern.

“That must have been really hard for you.” Her wide green eyes misted with sympathy, a sympathy her next words explained. “My . . . my parents died quite suddenly too, within a week of each other. It was a year and a half ago. My father died of a stroke, and then my mother from a heart attack right after the funeral.”

Allie’s eyes glittered with tears. Dismay spurted through Erik. ***Don’t cry***, he implored her mentally. ***Whatever you do, don’t cry!*** He’d rather face a phalanx of armed men than the tears he had no idea how to handle.

Whether in response to his telepathic plea, or to the reassertion of her own self-control, Allie straightened and cleared her throat. Abruptly she changed the subject. “Why are you a photographer?”

Erik relaxed. Then, using the weapon whose effectiveness he’d just discovered, he forced his

lips upward into a smile. It wasn't that hard and, curiously, he rather enjoyed it. "You ask a lot of questions. You must be a reporter," he quipped.

She responded with a conspiratorial smile that lightened his tension and sent another spurt of heat flashing through his blood. "I guess so. And a damned good one too. Just like you're a good photographer. C'mon, let's go inside before they close the building."

They passed through the heavy glass doors and were immediately submerged in darkness alleviated only by the light from skylights high overhead. Animal noises and calls Erik did not recognize echoed through the building.

"The exhibits are amplified." Allie, standing at his elbow, answered his unasked question, then started to guide him to the right and up a darkened ramp. "The animals are all in the middle behind two-inch thick glass. The ramp takes us around the outside."

As they climbed, Erik's eyes adjusted to the low light. He peered through the glass, searching for signs of life. How strange to encase inferior animals in display cases. On Zura, such animals were used strictly for food or medical purposes. Humans were indeed different from the citizens of

his planet.

An explosive crash just to his left rattled the glass and set off a cacophony of amplified screeching and chattering that echoed through the building.

Erik leaped back, his fists raised, his gaze darting from side to side, ready to defend himself and his destined one against assault.

His eyes narrowed and focused on a massive shape on the other side of the glass. A black, hairy shape that stood almost as tall as him and twice as wide, but with arms that seemed to hang to the floor. A shape whose awesome brow was marked by two small eyes—eyes staring at him with the unmistakable challenge of a king to a lowly intruder.

A giggle beside him broke Erik's concentration. He glanced at Allie to find her shoulders shaking with mirth.

He lowered his fists. "What's so funny?"

Allie sputtered, then bit her lip. "You. The gorilla," she said in a strangled voice. "You should see yourself. You look just like him. All puffed up and ready to fight. Primal man defending his turf." She giggled. "Real soul brothers."

"Hmph." Erik didn't like it when she compared him to a lower form of life. He forced himself to

unclench his fists and lower them to his side. He took a deep breath. "The animal startled me, that was all."

"Yeah." Allie giggled again, then looked from Erik to the ape. "Seeing you like this, it's not hard to believe they really were our ancestors."

"What?" Erik jerked away. With consternation he stared at the huge silverback still regarding him with menace. ***Ancestors?*** She couldn't actually mean that humans were evolved from these . . . these things? Could she?

Allie patted his arm, her eyes glinting with humor, her lips twitching with suppressed laughter. "But don't take it so hard, Erik. It's been a few years. For my family, anyway."

She took his arm. "C'mon, let's see the rest of the animals."

The immense stone steps down to Lake Michigan at the base of Fullerton Street shimmered with bodies sitting, walking, rollerblading and talking in the fading sun of the late June evening.

Allie bumped into Erik, then leapt away as if she'd been stung. What was wrong with her tonight? It had to be the fifth time she'd walked into Erik in the last hour. Between that and

babbling like a maniac, she wasn't herself at all. And she couldn't seem to help it. Whenever she stopped concentrating on keeping a foot or two away from him, she gravitated towards him as if he were a magnet and she a hapless piece of metal, unable to resist his pull.

But that was ridiculous. Yes, he was a handsome man. But she had sworn off men, particularly good-looking men she suspected were womanizers. And while she often regretted her impulsiveness, she wasn't exactly weak-willed. But this feeling, this overwhelming tug towards Erik, was unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

She studied him again as they walked along in the last rays of the sun. She did like his broad cheekbones, his sun-streaked hair, his generous mouth. She especially liked it when he smiled, awkwardly and off-kilter, as if the smile surprised him as much as it surprised her. She liked it when her comments startled him, and she couldn't resist making outrageous statements in the hopes of coaxing another smile, another jarring halt out of him. She wondered why he seemed so ill-at-ease, so tightly-held in check.

She raised her hand to push back a lock of wayward hair from Erik's forehead. Then she snapped her hand back. ***She was doing it again!***

She couldn't keep her hands to herself. She **wanted** to touch him. And not just touch him. That was the worst part. Thoughts and images of what it would be like holding him and kissing him kept sneaking up on her. Images of taking off his clothes and pulling his naked body close to hers. Totally inappropriate images for a stranger she'd just met and wasn't even sure she liked.

She shut her eyes, her thoughts whirling in confusion. ***Could this be Cody withdrawal symptoms?*** But she hadn't thought of Cody all night, or of their short-lived engagement. A low moan of frustration escaped her.

Suddenly a hand grasped her upper arm. A firm, warm, hand, whose grip sent an electric shock through her. Her eyes flashed open and her heart started to hammer in her chest.

"Is something wrong?" Erik held her arm and looked at her, frowning.

Allie blinked. "Yes, no, um. Don't you find it awfully hot?"

Erik shook his head. "Not anymore. The breeze off the lake is pretty cool now."

Allie grimaced. "Then it must be me." She raised a hand. To the touch, her forehead felt normal. But inside it was a different story. Now she was burning like a furnace at full blast. And

the humming. There was a humming inside her head like the singing of overhead electrical wires on a hot summer day. A burning and humming that made her want to inch even closer to Erik.

"Here," she said, "feel my forehead." She grabbed his free hand and pressed it to her brow.

His touch was cool and light, but it did nothing to relieve the burning inside. Her breath started to come in short gasps and she shut her eyes again, almost unable to breathe.

What she wanted, she realized with a start, was for Erik to move his hand from her forehead to her breasts, and then lower still, where she was pulsating with need for him. Where she could hardly wait for him to touch her.

She gasped and her eyes flashed open. Erik regarded her expectantly. She swallowed. "What did you say?"

"I said you don't feel hot to me."

Allie almost groaned. She bit her lip. "Well, maybe not, but I must be coming down with something." ***I have to be coming down with something***, she thought in desperation. It was the only way to explain this sudden and uncharacteristic urge to throw herself on the man beside her. Either that, or she was turning into a nymphomaniac.

“I think we’d better go back to the car,” she said abruptly. She turned away and ran up the steps to where her car was parked farther down the street.

Erik caught up with her at the car. “I’ll drop you off at your hotel,” she said without looking at him.

“No.” Calmly he took the keys from her and opened the passenger door. “If you’re sick, you shouldn’t drive. I’ll take you home, and then I can just catch a cab from there.”

“All right, all right.” Allie didn’t fight it. It would have been better if she drove—then she’d be too busy to jump Erik—but as long as he drove her straight home, she’d be fine. She hoped. Because she’d never been so hot before. Certainly not for a stranger, and at a time when she **knew** she didn’t want a man, and couldn’t possibly handle one. The tidal wave of desire had come out of nowhere, for no reason she could understand.

But if the urge had come from nowhere, she was going to send it right back there, she thought. She bit her lips and clasped her hands in a death grip as Erik eased his lean frame into the driver’s seat. As he settled in, his shoulder brushed hers.

Immediately Allie’s breasts started to tingle and her breath grew faint. She clamped her legs together. “Get me home right away,” she muttered

in a strangled voice.

Erik merely nodded. For a second, Allie thought she saw a glimmer of a smile on his lips. She shut her eyes. Impossible! Erik rarely smiled. She must have imagined it. Along with all the other things she was imagining him doing. With her. To her.

The trip home took forever. The Honda had just coasted to a stop in her parking space in the underground garage when Allie flung open the door and sprinted towards the elevator.

“Hey wait.”

Her fingers hovered over the elevator control buttons as Erik caught up to her, his camera-bag slung over one shoulder. “Your keys,” he said, holding them out to her. “You forgot your keys.”

“Thanks.” She grabbed them, then punched the button. The elevator doors slid open and she darted inside. The doors started to close behind her.

“Hey.” Erik stuck his hand between the closing doors and forced them apart. He stepped inside. “I’m seeing you to the door.”

“Oh.” Allie tried to keep her voice from coming out in a squeak. She pressed herself against the wall of the elevator farthest away from Erik.

Doesn't he know it's dangerous to shut himself up in a small space with a woman lusting uncontrollably after his body? She grimaced, her nerves screaming for release, the hum inside her droning louder and more insistently. Only five floors. Surely she could last five floors without doing something regrettable?

The doors slid open. Allie sprang out as if she'd been shot from a cannon. She sprinted to the door of her apartment halfway down the hall. She didn't look to see if Erik followed. She knew he did. Every sense, every cell in her body was tuned to a fever pitch of excruciating awareness of the man silently following her down the hall. She could smell him, taste him and feel him. Desperately she wanted to touch him.

She tried to insert the key in the door, but couldn't focus on the lock well enough to connect. After a third abortive attempt, Erik took her hand and removed the keys.

He unlocked the door, then opened it and stood aside. Reeling incomprehensibly from the brush of his fingers on hers, Allie staggered through the door and to the far side of the room. "Well goodnight," she said with the brightness of a plastic chipmunk. "See you tomorrow."

"The phone, Allie. I'd like to use your phone."

“Oh. Yeah.” Allie picked up the portable phone from the coffee table and tossed it at Erik.

Startled, he caught it, then frowned. *My*, Allie thought, ***he’s even more appealing when he frowns.*** The tension and humming inside her rose higher. She swallowed again and stepped back further. She didn’t understand what was happening to her. Was she going crazy?

“I need the phone book, too. Unless you know the number.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Allie had memorized more than one taxi company’s number. But at the moment, she couldn’t remember any of them. She retrieved the Yellow Pages, opened it to the taxi section, and rattled off a number.

Erik looked at the portable phone in his hand. His brow creased. “I haven’t seen this model before. How do I turn it on?”

Allie almost screamed. Why couldn’t he just leave? She grimaced again and inched towards him. She didn’t dare get too close. When she was about a yard away, she extended her arm. “Here, give me the phone.”

Erik handed it to her, but when she took it he didn’t let go. She looked up at him in surprise.

His eyes, always so cool and serious, flared now with the flames of a thousand tiny fires,

turning the grey into a flowing molten metal whose heat she could feel from three feet away. The flames were reflected in the light streaks in his hair, now flaming with the same burning fires as his eyes. Though he didn't smile, his wide mouth with the generous lips glistened with an invitation she could feel on her lips.

Still linked by the phone, Erik drew her slowly forward. She couldn't take her eyes from his broad face, from the fire in his eyes, from the lips whose touch she craved. The humming in her head sounded deafeningly.

"Don't be afraid, love."

Erik's voice echoed through the hum in her head, though she didn't see his lips move. He dropped the phone and cradled her waist with both hands, drawing her closer measure by measure. His lips hovered inches from her face. Allie whimpered as his mouth remained suspended only a whisper from hers. Over the humming, and through her melting bones and the unbearable tension inside she wondered faintly if it were possible to die of an orgasm without ever touching the man you craved most.

A sound like a growl escaped Erik. The next moment his mouth covered Allie's with a gentleness that surprised her, disarming her and

soothing the humming and tension in a way nothing else had. With leisurely care, his lips reassured her that this was real and she wasn't crazy. What's your hurry? his kiss seemed to say.

Allie sagged with the gentle release washing over her, and sighed into his kiss. Still holding the phone, she reached her hands around his neck, tangling the fingers of one hand into his thick, streaked hair, caressing the warm muscles of his strong neck.

Then, just as delightfully as the tension had abated, it began to build again, with a slowness and sureness that Allie welcomed this time. Erik slid his hands up her torso to her breasts, lifting and molding them under her knit top. His mouth, gentle until now, became more demanding. His tongue sought entrance and hungrily possessed hers with a confidence that brooked no doubts. He undid the buttons of her top one by one, exposing the thin lace of her bra and the swelling, aching nipples straining towards him. Allie exploded in a frenzy as he touched her nipples through the lace. Frantically she pressed her mouth against his.

The shrill blast of the forgotten phone was like the retort of a rifle six inches from her ear. Allie sprang back from Erik and dropped the phone. Dumbly they both watched it bounce across the

floor, still ringing.

With the habit of years, Allie reached for the ringing phone. Erik reached for her at the same time. “Don’t,” he said, his voice simmering with promise.

Allie swallowed and shook her head, suddenly aware she was doing exactly what she’d sworn not to do. She tried not to look at him. “No.” She shook off his hand and backed away, then pressed the talk button.

Erik clamped his lips together to prevent the Zalian curse from escaping. Damn that phone! And had he seen something that looked awfully like relief flash across his destined one’s face as she dived for the phone? Relief that she had escaped his embrace?

Erik’s mouth straightened into a grim line as he watched Allie field the call.

“Yes?” she gasped into the receiver. She swallowed and made an obvious effort to compose herself. “Yes, Nate, it’s me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just a bit out of breath.” She glanced at Erik, then quickly looked away.

Erik bit back the disappointment that seemed to come from deep inside him. He looked down at his boots and scowled. Despite a disturbing doubt he couldn’t quell, he told himself his

disappointment was strictly the result of the failure of his strategy. The interruption might be just enough to delay their physical union, which would delay Allie's commitment to him, and their departure for Zura, just that much longer.

"What?"

The sharp note in Allie's voice made Erik look up. Her brow was creased in concern. Except for her unbuttoned top and her glistening, swollen lips, all signs of passion had evaporated.

"Okay. Where did you say?"

Allie glanced at Erik as she listened to the city editor. She frowned. "No, it's all right. Erik's here right now, with his cameras. We'll be over there in," she glanced at her wrist watch, "less than thirty minutes."

Erik could hear the low drawl of Nate's voice as he made a parting comment.

"All right. Bye."

Allie punched off the talk button. Still holding the phone, she lowered her hand to her side.

"What's wrong?" Erik asked.

Allie didn't respond. She shook her head and swallowed.

"What's wrong?"

Allie looked directly at him, her sea-green eyes sharp with alarm. "It's Cody," she said. Her voice

cracked. “Nate . . . Nate said the police just called. They’ve found Cody’s car off Lake Shore Drive, just the other side of Hyde Park.”

“So?”

Allie’s eyes widened with fear. “So it’s abandoned. And Cody still hasn’t shown up.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Twilight slid seamlessly into night as Allie and Erik sped along Lake Shore Drive towards Hyde Park. To the east, the blue-black sky slowly filled with stars, their light reflected on the still darker body that was Lake Michigan.

Allie drove, her body tense, her eyes focused on the road, her lips pressed tightly together. Erik had been surprised at how completely she had broken free of the haze of physical desire and electrical anticipation that had confused and directed her earlier actions. He had felt it too, the clear Zalian signs that they were destined to mate, but no where near as strongly as had the unprepared Earthling. And while his plans had been disturbed, he couldn't help but be impressed by the strength of her will and her ability to focus on new problems as they arose. She would, indeed, make a suitable wife for a Zalian commander.

Finally Erik broke the silence that had gripped them both since their embrace had been cut off by Nate's phone call. "Why did the police call *The*

Streeter about Cody's car? Normally wouldn't they just have had it towed away?"

Allie, her face pale, shook her head. "It's the card."

"Card?"

Without taking her eyes from the road, she snapped open the glove box and pulled out a folded strip of white cardboard. She handed it to Erik.

He unfolded it. In large red letters, the sign read, "The Chicago Streeter. On official business."

"We've all got one," she said. "We're supposed to post it on the windshield when we're on company business. You know. So the reporters and photographers don't get ticketed by the cops or towed away."

Erik looked down at the card. Why hadn't he remembered that? He—

"There it is!"

Erik looked across the center barrier dividing the south and northbound lanes. There, on the northbound shoulder behind the orange flashing lights of a tow truck, was a white Corvette.

"I'll have to get off at the next exit and then turn around and go back to it."

Erik observed Allie carefully as she did just that. A few minutes later she swerved out of the

traffic and screeched to a halt on the shoulder in front of the tow truck. Erik frowned. ***Well, maybe she wasn't as controlled as he'd thought.***

Before he could say anything, she slid out of the car into the warm, damp night air and strode around the car to where the tow truck driver leaned against the bumper of his truck. Erik grabbed his camera bag from the back seat and followed.

The beefy fireplug of a man viewed Allie sourly, his mouth pulled down at one corner. The thick fingers of one hand tapped the hood of the truck. "You the lady from the paper?"

Allie nodded.

"Well, I hope you `ain't gonna be too long. I got two more calls lined up already, and it's only quarter to ten. The cops told me to wait `til you got here."

"No. I won't be long."

Erik didn't wait to hear the end. He strode past Allie, the driver and the tow truck and stopped in front of the Corvette. His gaze sped over the car. Nothing looked amiss.

Allie brushed by him, leaving behind a whiff of her alluring scent. For a second, Erik let his senses rule, flashing back to the taste and feel of her in his arms, the desire that had taken him as

well as—

“It’s not locked!”

The surprise in Allie’s voice brought him back to earth. “So?” he queried, shifting the camera bag from one shoulder to the other. He looked at her. She was holding the door open and staring at it.

“No one ever leaves a car unlocked. Not here. Especially an expensive car like this. I’m surprised it’s still here.”

“Well, it has been. Since early this morning.”

Allie jumped at the unexpected comment of the driver, who’d ambled up behind her. Once he had her attention, and Erik’s, he continued. “Cops saw it about eight this mornin’ but when they saw that **Streeter** sign, they just let it be. Wasn’t til just a while ago they started to think somethin’ was fishy.”

Allie’s brow creased and her teeth worried her bottom lip. “That’s really weird.”

She ducked her head inside for a quick look at the ignition, then straightened. “Where are the keys?”

The driver shrugged. “Dunno. Cops never said nothing `bout no keys to me.”

“Hmm. I guess they could be with him. Or maybe the car broke down when . . . when . . .” Allie faltered, then muttered words Erik barely

caught. “When he was on his way back from Tiffany’s.”

“I doubt it,” Erik interjected, unsettled once more by the glimpse of vulnerability, and her deep hurt over Cody. He didn’t understand why it bothered him, but it did. He cleared his throat. “If the car had broken down, Cody would have called a tow truck himself and the car wouldn’t be here any more.”

“Hmph.” Allie ducked back into the car. Erik jogged to the other side and opened the passenger door. A nylon jacket, a week’s worth of ***Tribunes*** and ***Streeters***, and three Styrofoam coffee cups started to slide off the cream-colored leather seat. He shoved them back while Allie did a visual tour of the interior.

“The phone’s still here, the radio and CD player, the usual garbage.” She pulled out the ashtray, then grimaced in distaste. “The usual butts.” She slammed it back into place, and exited the car. She frowned, then shook her head at Erik over the top of the car.

“I don’t like this. Not at all. It’s really strange. Why didn’t Cody lock up? Even then, I’d have expected the car to be stripped down after all this time. But nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

She shoved the hair out of her face with jerky,

worried motions, and bit her lip. “I’m phoning Nate right now. Maybe Cody’s finally shown up. If not,” she raised her anxious gaze to Erik, “we’re going to have to get the police on to this right away.”

Allie sighed. “In the meantime, you’d better get a few shots. Inside and outside, whatever strikes you as relevant. You never know how we can use them.”

She turned, sidestepped the scowling tow truck driver, and headed for her car.

A rare spurt of impatience exploded inside Erik as he removed a camera from his bag. He knew it was necessary to go through this charade, but that didn’t mean he liked it.

Instantly he rebuked himself and forced the impatience aside. He circled the car, concentrating on the job at hand. The best angle might be a long shot from the center of the divided highway, or farther down the shoulder. The car’s interior revealed nothing worth shooting, besides the fact that Cody was a slob. A slob, he thought sharply, Allie was better off without.

Erik waited for a break in the traffic before dodging to the center line. He held the camera in a crushing grip and clamped his lips. He would **not** let the delay, or Allie’s obvious concern for

Cody bother him. If they did, it would just complicate his mission. Sometimes plans worked. Sometimes they didn't. Recoup and replan. It was as simple as that.

After a few shots, he darted back across the highway to the shoulder and the Corvette. He heard the slam of Allie's car door and the crunch of gravel as she approached. But nothing prepared him for her sharp gasp.

"Erik! The car! There's a glow, a strange blue glow all around the windshield. Look!"

Erik glanced at Allie. The shock in her electric green eyes made him pivot towards the front of the Corvette.

Sure enough. The telltale blue glow had inexplicably flared up, revealing the quickly fading remains of the invisible sensory field that had temporarily prevented most passersby from even considering approaching the car. But thankfully, it was already dissolving into nothingness. Erik started to frame a response when Allie squealed again.

"And your hand. Erik, your right hand is glowing. It's glowing blue too!"

For a fraction of a second, Erik shut his eyes. He concentrated every ounce of his steel will on shutting down the traitorous glow from his hand.

He opened his eyes. Allie was staring at him, her eyes round, her face a sickly yellow in the flashing orange light from the tow truck.

“It was probably just a reflection from the car,” he said as he transferred the camera to his left hand. He jammed his right hand into his pocket as the glow snapped off. *By the stars of Zura*. He thought he’d remained detached. Obviously he hadn’t.

“I don’t think so,” Allie insisted. “It wasn’t like that. And hands don’t usually—”

“I don’t see no blue glow from the car, lady. Or from your buddy’s hand.” The tow truck driver, impatient to be on his way, stood legs akimbo, hands on hips. The wind rippled the bottom of his grease-stained shirt, exposing his well-developed beer belly. “Can I hook up the car now?”

“Maybe the glow was just from a passing truck,” Erik suggested. He was glad to note that the glow from both his hand and the car had indeed disappeared. “There’s a lot of traffic out here tonight.”

Allie looked at the windshield, then rubbed her temple and shook her head. She shut her eyes briefly, then opened them. The corners of her mouth turned down. “Maybe you’re right. It’s been

a long day, and I'm upset. I haven't been myself all night anyway. I'm not acting normally, and I'm probably not seeing right either. This isn't helping any."

She sighed and turned to Erik. "Have you taken all the pictures you need?"

"Not quite. I still want to take a couple from farther down the shoulder. But that'll only take a minute or two," Erik said, relieved they had left the alien glow behind. He nodded to the tow truck driver. "Then you can tow the car."

He turned back to Allie. "What did Nate say?"

"Cody still hasn't shown up." Allie bit her lip and looked at the ground. After a moment she looked up again, her liquid eyes brimming with worry. "Nate is calling the police and reporting him missing."

Allie snapped on the lamp in the main room of her apartment. With a thud, her shoulder bag dropped to the glass-topped coffee table. It was close to midnight, and she was emotionally and physically exhausted.

She looked up, then started as her gaze lighted on Erik, standing by the door.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I should have dropped you off at your hotel on the way back." She flushed with

guilt. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"That's all right." He hesitated. "You're upset. You shouldn't be alone."

The words, low and softly-spoken, the first Erik had uttered since they'd gotten into the car for the drive back, washed over her, setting off memories of the intimacies they'd shared before Nate's phone call. Intimacies she'd all but forgotten in the last few emotionally-charged hours. Along with the memories came the first stirrings of a desire stranger and stronger than anything she'd ever experienced.

Erik set down his camera bag and moved smoothly towards her, his gray eyes dark with intent. Too late Allie realized just what that intent meant. Before she could protest, he had grasped her shoulders and his mouth was lowering towards hers.

"Look Erik, I don't think—"

Her protest drowned in a kiss that ignited all the simmering desires doused by Nate's phone call more than three hours ago. The pressure of his lips on hers, the rough texture of his tongue as it sought entry to her mouth and began to caress the interior, the touch of two confident hands caressing her back and buttocks and molding her towards the heat of his body

overwhelmed her senses and shorted out her thoughts in a flash of burning sparks. What remained was an overpowering sense of inevitability.

For a moment she surrendered to the sensual overload, allowing herself to float in the mesmerizing sea of physical sensation. But then, with the last effort of her conscious mind, she wrenched herself free and backed away from Erik, her hand to her mouth.

She swallowed and fought for equilibrium. "Look Erik," she managed, "I don't really think this is a good idea."

"No?" His gaze remained silver, unperturbed by the overpowering passions that were released in her every time he touched her. "Why not?"

Frustration flashed through Allie. Why didn't he understand that this wasn't a good time to start something? And how could he have such a strong effect on her when she, apparently, affected him so little?

She stuck her hands on her hips. "Well, I don't know about you, but with Cody missing and all, I'm upset. What's happened to him? Where is he? I'm really not in the mood."

"You were before."

She blinked at the immediate and unexpected reminder. "That's right," she conceded. "But not now," she lied, denying the tug of attraction that she could still feel urging her towards him.

Erik said nothing for a moment. His gaze flitted over her, cool, assessing. "You want me," he stated flatly.

"Wanted you," Allie corrected. Despite all her efforts, she could hear the strange hum building in her head, the hum that seemed to vibrate through her whenever she was close to Erik. She shook her head in an attempt to shake herself free of it.

"But I don't know what that was all about. It must have been an aberration," she continued stubbornly. "I mean, we hardly know each other. I don't even know if I like you."

"Like me?" Erik sucked in his cheeks. Her statement seemed to surprise him. "You don't even know if you like me?" he repeated. "What does liking have to do with it? Why is that so important? You know you're physically attracted to me."

Allie stared at Erik in disbelief. He couldn't possibly be serious? Or was he just saying what selfish womanizers like Cody believed but were usually smart enough to keep to themselves?

“What does liking have to do with it? Why is it important?” she sputtered. “Nothing. Everything!”

She advanced towards him, her eyes flashing. “Why is liking so important? What’s with you guys? Did you all grow up on some other planet? Some place where everyone just falls into bed with whoever happens to be handy, some place where no one worries about affection or love or family?”

Erik’s eyes widened. To Allie’s surprise, he looked confused. But she was too angry to care.

“Well, I’m sorry,” she continued, jabbing her finger at his unmoving chest. “Despite what you may think—despite my former relationship with Cody—I do not fall into bed with any man who happens by. No matter how tall he is. No matter how good looking he is. No matter what kind of car he drives. I want someone I like, who **likes** me for everything I am. I want someone I love, someone who loves me. Someone who cares about me, and will keep on caring. Someone I can trust.”

Despite herself, the last words came out a sob rather than the tirade she had wanted. Her eyes filled with tears and she blinked hard to keep them back. Her head throbbed with the unexpected hurt that had suddenly welled up inside her. Damn her impulsiveness.

But she wouldn’t, **couldn’t** let it win. Not now.

Not again. She wouldn't let herself be hurt again. Not like that. Not with another man who had womanizer written all over him.

"So."

The softly spoken word made her look at Erik again. His brow was still creased, his wide mouth pursed. His gaze, serious and questioning, found hers. "So, let me get this straight," he said without a trace of sarcasm or humor. "You are saying that despite the obvious and mutual attraction between us, you will not mate with me until we develop a mutual affection or love for each other. Is that right?"

Allie rolled her eyes. Despite Erik's odd way of expressing himself, the meaning was clear. "Yes," she forced out through gritted teeth.

"Hmm." Erik pulled a computerized datebook from his back pocket, snapped it open, and consulted it. He punched a few digits, then looked up at her. "All right then. We'll have dinner tomorrow evening. Maybe lunch too. So we'll have ample opportunity to develop the required affection as quickly as possible."

"What?" Allie couldn't believe her ears. Was he crazy? Anger and hurt flared into rage. She stomped over to the door and flung it open, then picked up the camera bag and hurled it into the

hallway. “Get out!”

“But—”

“Just get out and don’t come back!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Erik jerked awake. For a moment, disorientation held him in its grip. That, and the agonizing remnants of a dream he'd had every one of the five nights since Allie had thrown him out of her apartment.

It was similar to a dream he'd had many times before. A boy of ten, he'd had to stretch on tiptoe to look through the tiny square window into the research center's isolation room. To see his grandmother, dressed in blinding white, curled in a fetal position in one corner, her face blank. Until suddenly she raised her head and emitted a keening wail unlike anything he had ever heard.

Not wanting to see yet unable to look away, he had watched, horrified but fascinated by the terrifying wail of misery. A wail that had marked him for life, in ways he had never been able to understand or dismiss.

But during the last five nights, the dream had changed. The woman's face had grown rounder, rosier, the complexion dewy rather than gray and pallid. The whitish/yellow hair cut to a half inch all round was replaced with chin-length auburn

hair, its golden streaks glinting in the overhead light.

With a jolt of horror that always woke him up, he recognized the woman as Allie. Allie had taken his grandmother's place. It was Allie in the isolation room, wailing out a misery she neither would nor could share with anyone on Zura. Allie whose mind had snapped, unable to cope with the reality of kidnap to a faraway planet.

Erik sat up abruptly. His bare feet hit the carpeted floor of the apartment hotel where ***The Streeter*** had arranged his temporary lodgings. He glanced at the bedside clock. The illuminated numbers showed it was 3:10 a.m. Central Standard Time.

He sighed. He didn't know a lot about dreams. Zalians didn't dream. But then he wasn't a full-blooded Zalian and, despite his best efforts, he'd always known deep inside he was different. He'd hoped that the fulfillment of the final part of his destiny would put an end to the questions that had always haunted him, to the strange yearnings he could neither understand nor admit. But perhaps it was not to be.

He snapped on the light, and grimaced at its brightness. He ran a hand through his hair, then grabbed the white terry cloth hotel robe from the

end of the bed. He might as well get up now. He knew from experience he wasn't going to sleep.

Opening the sliding doors to the balcony, he stepped out and looked up at the sky, its clarity and myriad stars obscured by quickly-moving clouds. He took a deep breath. One of the things he found immensely appealing about Earth, or at least Chicago, was the freedom to simply step outside, unprotected, without immediate fear of harm from noxious pollution or murderous enemies. By Earth standards, Chicago might not be the safest or cleanest place around, but it certainly beat out the violence and dirt of the Zalian borderlands he had inhabited the last few years in his struggle against rebel forces.

He took another deep breath, and looked down at the deserted street below. As he had on numerous occasions before, he wondered why, of all the destinies predicted by the seers, his had to bring him to Earth. To Earth, and face-to-face with the contradictions and unending questions that could only be spawned by his hybrid humanity.

With difficulty he forced his attention away from that traitorous thought. Instead he focused on the problem that so far he had been unable to resolve. As he recalled the events of last Thursday evening, his grip on the railing tightened.

She had thrown him out!

Even now, he had trouble believing it had actually happened. By the moons of Zura, no one had ever thrown him out of anything before. Not school, not military academy, not the armed forces. Certainly not his family, even when he had failed to live up to strict Zalian standards of controlled behavior.

He had been shocked at the failure of his plan. He had been confused by Allie's behavior, when she so obviously wanted him. But most disturbing of all, he had been hurt.

Shaking his head with disbelief, he shut his eyes. ***Hurt!*** Like some idiot on one of the soap operas he had accidentally tuned into. But it was true. For reasons beyond the physical, beyond destiny, he was drawn to Allie in a completely non-Zalian way. He'd wanted her company, as well as the physical consummation he believed would seal their destiny. He'd wanted something in her, something about her he still couldn't put his finger on.

Suddenly it dawned on him. Was this the affection she'd been talking about? The "liking" that she'd erected as an obstacle to the logical consequence of their sexual attraction? Did he, a mongrel Zalian-Human, want it too?

He groaned, then shook his head again. He released his grip on the railing and started to pace the small balcony. It didn't matter. The bottom line was that he now had to win Allie's affection. And nothing in his life, nothing in his experience—certainly nothing in that file developed by Intergalactic Research—had prepared him for this challenge. He was on his own, in a murky land of human emotions he barely felt and understood even less.

He halted. The research he'd done during the weekend had provided precious little help. He'd roamed through bookstores, coming up with several books on human relationships, including one with the likely title of ***Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus***. He'd scoured magazines such as ***Psychology Today*** and ***People*** looking for tips. He'd watched TV shows called ***Friends***, ***Melrose Place***, and ***Beverly Hills 90210***, in spite of the preference he discovered for ***Law and Order***, ***Homicide***, and ***NYPD Blue***.

Armed with scores of do's and don'ts, he'd approached Allie at work on Monday. But beyond "hello", the frustratingly intransigent yet overwhelmingly appealing Earthling had refused to engage in conversation, or any other activity that

might have provided opportunity for affection to develop. And that was despite the sexual urges he knew he provoked in her!

Erik straightened. So why didn't he, Barak of Zura, just kidnap Allie as he'd been advised to do by a multitude of Zalians? Why didn't he do what would mark him, once and for, as a Zalian worthy of the name?

Involuntarily, Erik shuddered. He knew why he couldn't do that. An image of his grandmother appeared before him, along with the sound of the wail he couldn't extinguish from his head or his heart no matter how hard he tried.

No, he couldn't kidnap Allie. He couldn't wrest her away from her home and her planet the way his grandmother had been wrested away from hers, never to recover. His grandmother had been one of the first intergalactic kidnappings in the name of destiny, and one of its most striking failures.

Other Zalians might consider his inability to act forcefully to achieve his destiny a sign of weakness, perhaps even an indication he was not fit to take his rightful place among the elite.

But he didn't care. He would not, he could not, inflict the horror his grandmother had undergone on another Earthling.

Especially not on Allie.

The sharp ring of the phone on her desk at ***The Streeter*** startled Allie. She glanced from the computer screen to the wall clock. It was only 8:47 AM—early for an outside call on Thursday, or any other day. She returned her gaze to the list of assignment ideas she was assembling on the computer, and picked up the phone.

“Allie. It’s Nate. My office. Right away.”

The bang of the receiver being dropped hurt her ear. She grimaced. She wished Nate wouldn’t always act as if what he had to say was earth-shakingly urgent. Yes, this was a daily newspaper. But no, it wasn’t necessary to jump every time he snapped his fingers.

Muttering to herself, she saved the list of column ideas, then stood up.

Before heading to Nate’s office, she looked around furtively. Good. Erik was nowhere in sight.

She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Despite what she’d said to Erik last week about the importance of love and trust in any relationship, she still felt an incomprehensibly powerful tug towards him.

And that humming. That damn humming. It was a constant refrain in her head, rising and

falling with his presence, like an early warning system for some kind of missile. Even worse, sometimes when he was nearby she could swear she heard his voice inside her head telling her he just wanted to be friends. She wasn't even safe at night, when her sleep was rife with embarrassingly erotic dreams starring herself and Erik, all of them overcast by an eerie shade of blue. She didn't know whether she should run to the nearest shrink, or toss her emotions and judgment to the wind and waylay Erik for that sexual encounter her body was urging her towards.

She shook her head and continued across the busy newsroom to Nate's office. She'd rebuffed Erik's efforts to talk to her this week, telling herself he was just another smooth operator, a Cody-clone ready to step in where he'd left off.

She frowned. But something about that assessment didn't ring true, and she was too honest to ignore it. Erik had appeared almost comically confused when his blunt approach to seduction had failed last week. And despite his stunning good looks, there was that aloofness, a detachment he seemed to use as a shield, a way of hiding what she suspected was a deep

loneliness.

“Huh.” Allie sniffed. There she went again. Seeing what she wanted to see. Imagining noble motives and sorry secrets.

She straightened as she crossed the last few yards to Nate’s office. It didn’t matter who Erik was, how lonely he might be, or what his motives were. She wasn’t ready to throw herself into a relationship with another man. She couldn’t trust another man. Worse, she couldn’t even trust her own judgment. Like a fool, she had given freely and foolishly with all her heart—only to have it used and abused.

It wouldn’t happen again. This time she was going to learn from her mistakes. She wasn’t going to let a man hurt her again. Not the way Cody had. Never again.

Buoyed by her resolve, she breezed through Nate’s open door, then stopped, the greeting frozen on her lips.

Erik lounged against a narrow table along the wall to her left. The cool silver of his unwavering gaze caught her eye immediately, sending a wave of heat through her body. She dropped her gaze to his scuffed boots, to the worn jeans over his long legs, and the black T-shirt covering his muscled and tanned upper body, to the unyielding jaw and

the sun-streaked hair. But it was no good. No matter where she looked his presence struck her like a physical blow, setting all her systems awry.

“Oh, hi Nate,” Allie gasped. In a struggle to recover her equilibrium, she focused on Nate. “Hi, Erik,” she added off-handedly.

She swallowed. “So what was it you wanted to see me about?”

“Sit down.” Nate nodded to a chair in front of his desk.

Allie sat, careful to keep her gaze away from Erik. The humming had started again, a low drone in the back of her head, along with that powerful awareness. For a second she shut her eyes, gathering her resolve to fight this unearthly attraction.

“Are you all right Allie?”

Allie’s eyes flew open.

“You’re looking a little tense,” Nate commented. “Is all this stuff about Cody getting you down?”

“Some,” Allie conceded. She suspected Nate had chosen her and her column to focus on her former fiancé’s disappearance to give the stories an emotional edge they might lack from an uninvolved stranger. Interviewing the Tiffanies and Janes and others she hadn’t known about

who had filled Cody's social calendar had hurt and shamed her more than she wanted anyone to know.

No, she didn't enjoy the role she was playing in the investigation. But Cody was missing. And if there was any chance her columns would help find him, she'd swallow her pride and just do it.

Nate sat forward in his chair, his cherubic face glowing with child-like eagerness. "That interview yesterday with Cody's mother was the best thing yet. You captured her worry and fears magnificently. I don't think anyone's ever—"

"Nate!" Allie glared at the elfin city editor, her exasperation momentarily blotting out her awareness of Erik. "Cody is **missing**. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Of course it means something to me." Nate sat back, miffed. "He was our best investigative reporter."

"Not just that." Allie's voice rose. "He's missing, Goddammit. Gone. Disappeared. He's a human being. Not just some story. Don't you feel for his mother? Don't—"

It was Nate's turn to interrupt. "Of course I do. What do you think I am, some kind of monster? I shouldn't have to tell you this is a newspaper, Allie. This is what we do. No matter how I feel

about Cody, his disappearance is also a great story. It's in all the papers, on every TV and radio broadcast. And more than anyone else, it's our job to tell that story. Besides, the more we focus on it, the better chance of someone finding him or turning up some clue."

Allie sighed. Nate was right. Cody's disappearance was a great story. And an even better story because it had put ***The Streeter*** at the lead of every local newscast and on the front page of every paper for the past week. Not to mention her column. It would have been foolish not to milk Cody's disappearance for everything it was worth. But still. It seemed so cold, so inhumane. Yet another time when her own instincts conflicted with what a reporter was expected to do.

She shoved her reservations aside. She had to concentrate on what was important—and that was finding Cody. "So. What do you want me to do?"

"Atta girl." Nate relaxed. The sparkle returned to his eyes, and along with it the excitement the news always seemed to incite in him.

"So far the police have nothing on Cody's disappearance. Not a clue, not a fingerprint, not a sighting, nothing. If we don't come up with something soon, the story will die, and likely our chances of finding Cody too. So I want you to go

see a psychic.”

“Oh, come **on**, Nate. Don’t you think that’s a bit extreme?”

“No.” Nate shook his head. “No, it’s perfect. The disappearance is a mystery. Why not a psychic? And Madame Carabini has an excellent reputation for coming up with things that no one else has found.”

“Madame Carabini?” Allie rolled her eyes. “Where’d you come up with her? She sounds like someone out of a comic book.”

“Well, she isn’t.” Nate nodded at Erik, who had remained silent throughout their interchange. “And I want you to go with Erik. He’ll get the pictures of her mulling over Cody and his fate.”

“Erik? Why?” Allie blurted out in dismay.

Nate frowned. He looked from Erik to Allie. “Is there a problem?” He focused his attention on Allie. “Because those pictures Erik took of the abandoned car captured the eerie mood exactly. There’s nobody here who does that kind of thing so well.”

“No, no, of course there’s no problem,” Allie gulped out. For a split second she shut her eyes, remembering Cody’s mother. For his mother’s sake, she told herself. She’d do it for his mother.

Nate stood up and smiled expansively. “In fact, I want the two of you to work together as long as this story keeps moving ahead. Your columns are a perfect fit with his photos. You two make a great team.”

The meeting was over. Allie stood up, conscious that Erik was also drawing his lean, muscled body to its full, imposing height by the far wall. She didn’t look at him.

“Sure,” she said faintly. Between the humming in her head and her failure to convince Nate to team her with another photographer, she felt ill and out-maneuvered.

She swallowed and turned to leave. “Sure,” she repeated. “Anything you say.”

Though his head missed the overhead steel beams by several inches, Erik instinctively ducked as he and Allie entered the low-ceilinged underground garage below ***The Streeter***. With its cement walls and floors and cool, damp air, the garage reminded him of his own planet’s underground structures. He noted but did not question the fact that this reminder of home failed to provide any comfort.

“This way.” He grasped Allie’s elbow and steered her towards the far corner and his

recently-acquired metallic blue Jaguar. It only began to approach the speed and handling of a Zalian vehicle, but he enjoyed driving it all the same. It was good to be in complete control, a state that had all but eluded him since his arrival on Earth.

“We can take my car,” Allie protested, jerking her elbow free. She started to turn in the opposite direction.

“No. Please.” The gentleness of his voice startled him. It obviously startled her too; she stopped and stared at him.

Erik swallowed, far too aware of her gaze on him. “The car is just new,” he said lamely. “I’d like you to see it.”

Allie stared at him, her brow creased. For a moment he thought she would turn him down, and the effort he’d spent both telepathically and verbally to convince Nate to make them a team would be for naught.

“Oh. All right.” With a shrug of her slim shoulders, she started back in the direction of his Jaguar.

Erik exhaled, more relieved than he wanted to admit. His plan was starting to succeed.

He unlocked the passenger door for Allie, and opened it. He strode to his side, slid into the

driver's seat and inserted the keys into the ignition. For a moment he merely breathed, appreciating the clean, new scent of the navy leather interior.

He didn't start the car. Instead, he turned towards Allie, who sat eyes straight ahead to the cement block wall in front of them, her body turned away from him as if she were protecting herself from something fearsome.

Is she frightened of me? he thought with a start. He cursed his weak telepathic powers, and particularly his inability to consistently see into her mind. Fear was the last response in the universe he wanted to provoke in her —and the least helpful. An unfamiliar anxiety seized him. “You’re acting as if you’re afraid of me,” he blurted out.

“What?” Allie turned sharply, her guarded expression giving her away more than anything she might have said. “Why would I be afraid of you?”

Why, indeed? Because I'm an alien? Because I plan to take you millions of light years away to another planet, another galaxy? He swallowed. “I don't know,” he finally said. “Perhaps because, after last week, you don't trust me.”

Allie opened her mouth to respond but he continued on in a rush to get out the words he found so hard to say. "I don't want to hurt you, Allie. I just want to get to know you."

"Why?"

Erik heard the doubt in her voice, and saw the cynicism shading her green eyes. He wondered fleetingly what it would take to cut through her defenses.

"Because I like you," he heard himself say. And it was true, he realized with shock. It went far beyond the need to fulfill his destiny, beyond a mere fascination with the human species. It had everything to do with her. The smile he was starting to crave, the sense of humor, even the stubborn resistance that challenged him at every step. All things he'd never given much thought to before.

He cleared his throat. "I am sorry if I caused you distress last week."

"Oh. That's all right."

"No, it's not."

She turned sharply, her auburn eyebrows raised questioningly. She looked at him as if she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. Finally she shook her head and a wry smile spread across her face. "Yeah, I guess you're right. It's

not okay.” She raised her chin. “So what’re you going to do about it?”

The jaunty smile renewed his hope. A wonderful exhilaration coursed through him. He just managed to kill the smile that started to move his lips in response.

He cleared his throat again. “I’d like to be friends. I know we got off to a bad start, but I don’t see why that can’t change.” He’d heard that line on a TV show called ***Friends***. If it could work for the character called Ross, he didn’t see why it couldn’t work for him.

“Friends, huh?” A hint of suspicion clouded Allie’s clear green eyes again.

Then, suddenly, she relaxed. She smiled. “All right,” she said. “But just friends. You understand? Nothing romantic. Strictly platonic. Okay?”

“Okay.” Erik nodded solemnly. It wasn’t everything he wanted, but it was a start.

His expression blank, his actions measured, he turned the key in the ignition. But even a lifetime of Zalian self-discipline was unable to dampen the elation sending his spirits rocketing skyward.

Forty minutes later, after a surprisingly

companionable drive along the North Shore, Erik guided the Jag to a smooth stop at the curb of a broad, tree-lined street in suburban Evanston. Much to Allie's relief during the drive, the dratted humming in her head and her extreme physical attraction to Erik had abated to nothing more than a pleasant awareness after their agreement to be friends, and friends only. She decided her former distraught state had to be the result of nerves and Cody's disappearance, nothing more.

Allie got out and took her first look at the supposedly celebrated Madame Carabini's home. The aluminum siding and red brick home replicated its neighbors' design. Only the door and trim, painted a bright turquoise, inserted a jarring note into the neighborhood's subdued tones of brown, terra-cotta and ivory.

Allie shook her head. Had she expected a huge flashing crystal ball attached to the roof? Or perhaps ghosts gliding in and out of the windows?

With her purse over one shoulder and a plastic bag of carefully-chosen items, Allie walked up the winding cement path to the turquoise door. Erik followed.

As she raised her hand to knock, the door was opened by a small, plumpish, middle-aged woman. She wore a tan skirt and sweater, and her hair

was a nondescript brown. She looked, thought Allie, like a woman who'd be more at home behind the counter of a small-town bakery. Certainly not the far-out flake she'd imagined.

The woman smiled. "Hello, I'm Joanne Carabini." Her soft, mellow voice sounded as normal as her clothing looked. "And you must be that reporter from ***The Streeter*** who called me earlier today?"

"Yes." Allie extended her hand. "I'm Allie Stanislawski." The woman's hand, cool and plump, closed around hers. "And this is one of our photographers, Erik Berenger."

Erik inclined his head. Allie was struck once more by the exotic quality of his slightly slanted eyes, broad cheekbones and square jaw. She'd have to make a point of finding out more about his background.

The two of them followed Madame Carabini through the entranceway, into a sunken living room, and then into the dining room decorated in tasteful shades of ivory and coral, and permeated with the strong scent of roses from a crystal bowl of potpourri.

Allie put the plastic bag down on the lace-covered table, and glanced round. Where were the crystals, the dramatic draperies, the smoky

lighting, the tarot cards—all the things that she associated with someone involved in paranormal activities?

“Sit down,” the woman said, pulling out a chair. She smiled again. “You’re disappointed, aren’t you? I’m sure you expected someone more flamboyant, right?”

Allie flushed. “Well, actually, yes.”

Madame Carabini laughed and pulled out another chair across from Allie. “Don’t worry. You’re not the only one. I’m used to dealing with skepticism and perceptions based on television and movies. Even my husband is skeptical at times. And he knows me.”

Madame Carabini settled herself in the chair, then put her hands palm down on the ivory lace table cloth. “Now, before we get started, is there anything else you should tell me about this Cody Walker and his disappearance?”

“You’ve read all the newspaper accounts?” When the woman nodded, Allie continued. “Well, the only other thing I can tell you is that the police are stumped. There’s nothing at work, at his abandoned car, at his apartment to indicate any kind of foul play. His bank accounts are intact, his memberships up-to-date, his clothes still at home, and none of his friends or family

had any inkling he was planning to go anywhere.”

“Hmm.” The woman said nothing further. Allie heard Erik behind them, quietly unpacking his cameras and flashes and assessing Madame Carabini, the room and the lighting.

“You’ve brought what I asked you to bring?”

“Yes.” Allie dumped the contents of the bag onto the table. It had been difficult to find items Cody had owned or used for a long period; he seemed to go through things quickly, much like he used people. But finally she’d come up with an engraved pen from his mother, the Humphrey Bogart tie he’d kept in his desk drawer for formal emergencies, the rope and gloves he used for rock-climbing, and the nylon windbreaker he’d left in his Corvette.

“Is that enough?”

“Oh yes, that’s fine.” Madame Carabini arranged the objects in front of her. She touched each one, pausing for a moment before moving to the next. Finally she grasped the windbreaker. She stroked it, ran her fingers along the zipper, then settled her hands on the dark blue nylon. Her aquamarine eyes regarded Allie unwaveringly.

Allie noticed the odd shade and unusual clarity of the psychic’s eyes. How had she ever thought the woman’s appearance ordinary?

"I hope you realize this doesn't always work, my dear," Madame Carabini continued. "Sometimes I can't get a strong enough impression from any of the items, or the impressions are too confused to make out anything specific."

Allie nodded.

Madame Carabini smiled, then shut her eyes. Her hands rested on the jacket, and she breathed more deeply.

Allie watched in silence. One minute, two minutes, three minutes passed. Only the sound of breathing and the quiet clicks of Erik's camera as he moved around the table and recorded the psychic's motionless examination of the jacket broke the stillness.

Finally Madame Carabini's eyes fluttered open. She looked around the room before her gaze returned to the jacket. She frowned, then looked at Allie. "This is very strange. I'm getting a lot of impressions, but they're confusing and they don't seem to add up to anything."

"Yes?" Allie leaned closer.

"It's like—well, I think this Cody fellow is still alive. In fact, I'm certain of it. The impressions, the feeling I'm getting just aren't right for death.

But it's as if . . ."

The woman's voice trailed off. "Yes?" prompted Allie.

"It's as if he's disappeared. But . . . but into nothing." Madame Carabini's strange, clear eyes flickered, then clouded over. "Some kind of void. Nothing that I can get a handle on. Nothing that makes any sense."

"But what about his disappearance? Did he go voluntarily? Was he abducted?"

Madame Carabini frowned. She fingered the jacket again, then looked up at Allie. "I'm not really getting a clear picture. I don't sense any violence, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Something's just not right about this whole thing. He's gone, but he's not gone. I'm getting strong impressions, but I don't understand what they're saying. An impression of a cold unlike anything on Earth, and a strange blue energy, like the light from a Bunsen burner but without any heat."

Allie sat on the edge of her seat. How odd that the psychic would see a blue light or energy as she'd called it. She had seen a blue light around Cody's car the other night, but it seemed too ridiculous to mention. She pushed the pen and

the tie towards Madame Carabini. “Maybe if you concentrated on these other items?”

The psychic nodded. She held the pen in one hand, the tie in the other, and shut her eyes.

Several more minutes passed. Erik had stopped taking pictures and stood at one end of the table.

Finally Madame Carabini shook her head. She opened her eyes and looked sadly at the items in her hands. “I’m sorry. I seem to be running into some kind of wall. I get so far, and that’s it. It’s as if some force is blocking the way. I don’t understand it.”

Allie exhaled slowly. Despite her skepticism, she’d become caught up in the psychic process. For a while, she’d actually thought the psychic was onto something, that she might provide a concrete clue to help in Cody’s rescue. But it had proved to be just another exercise in futility.

Hiding her disappointment, Allie stood up. “Well, thanks for trying. I guess we should be on our way then.”

“Oh no, my dear. Don’t leave yet. You’ve come all this way, for very little. Give me your hand. Perhaps I can tell a little about your future. It’s not something I do often, but I am quite accurate.”

She reached across the table and grasped

Allie's hand. "No," Allie protested. "I'd rather—"

"Oh, please, let me. I feel badly I wasn't able to tell you more. At least let me send you away with something."

"All right." Grudgingly Allie sat down again and allowed the woman to examine her hand. In contrast to its earlier coolness, Madame Carabini's hand now felt dry and hot.

"I'm not reading your palm, my dear," Madame Carabini said soothingly. "This is more like reading the impressions, the pictures and emotions that flow within you."

Without warning, the psychic's head thrust upwards. Her eyebrows rose in questioning arches. "I sense a lot of hostility. Hostility and mixed emotions towards this man Cody. You had some sort of relationship with him?"

Allie grimaced. She wasn't about to tell the psychic she'd recently been engaged to Cody. Covertly she glanced at Erik before responding. Apparently oblivious to the conversation, he was moving behind her for another shot of Madame Carabini. "You could say that. Me and half the women in Chicago."

The psychic nodded. She concentrated on Allie's hand again, this time shutting her eyes. If she picked up any of the feelings of hurt and

betrayal Allie was trying so hard to blot from her heart, of worry over what had happened to Cody, she didn't say. "Ah well, we will forget the past, and perhaps the present too," she murmured. "We'll move on to the future."

"Ahh." The psychic smiled, but didn't open her eyes. "I see someone else in your future. Someone tall, dark, strong. You've met him already."

She frowned. "But there's something strange about this man. Something odd. He's . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Then, as if the gates holding back the impressions had been suddenly opened, she began again, the words flowing strong and fast.

"I'm starting to get impressions of his life, many years ago. I see him, high in the mountains, in a tiny hut. He's with his father and mother. There's another man too, an old, respected man in a long flowing garment, maybe a priest or a monk of some sort. He's telling them something. I can't hear what it is. But I can see the reaction. The boy doesn't understand the significance of what's said. His parents do though, and they struggle to hide how upset they are, and how much they fear for their son."

Madame Carabini squeezed Allie's hand harder.

“Now I see the man as a young boy. He can’t be more than seven or eight. He’s outside, in a desolate wood. Furtively he looks around, as if he’s afraid someone will see him. From behind a bush, he pulls a wooden box. Then he lifts a bird, a species I can’t identify, from the box. The bird is wounded, and the boy has placed a splint on its wing. He cradles it in his arms, strokes it and murmurs reassuring words.

“Suddenly a man appears. It’s the— Yes, it’s the boy’s father. He tells the boy attachments to animals are foolish, and cannot be allowed. Oddly, he does not seem angry, or disappointed, merely matter-of-fact. He pulls a weapon of some sort from his pocket. It’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before. He hands it to the boy. Oh!”

Allie winced as the psychic’s fingernails dug into her palm. She watched in amazement as tears began to run down Madame Carabini’s face.

“Oh, the poor child. His anguish, his despair. It’s painful and no one understands. No one. But—but he rebels, perhaps for the first time in his life. He refuses to shoot the bird, despite his father’s insistence. Finally the man takes the weapon back and does what the boy won’t: he kills the bird.”

Allie felt the shudder that raced through

Madame Carabini. She was relieved when the woman's grip on her hand started to relax.

"The boy is devastated. But he doesn't cry. It's almost as if he retreats deep into himself to block out the pain. He goes numb."

Madame Carabini sighed. "The boy now grown into a man is . . ." Her eyes snapped open. Her teary gaze focused on a spot behind Allie. She blinked, once, twice, then her mouth gaped.

"Why, why . . . why it's you," the psychic stammered in surprise.

CHAPTER SIX

Erik froze, camera in hand. Only a lifetime of control saved him from betraying the anguish released by the psychic's uncovering of both his destiny and the long-buried incident with the bird.

He could feel the psychic's penetrating gaze on him, and Allie's puzzled, troubled look. He struggled to suppress the unwanted memories, and the disturbing emotions they ignited.

With extreme care, he forced his features to assume what he hoped was an innocent expression. He lowered his camera. "I don't think so, madame. You've got the wrong man."

The woman's gaze faltered before his show of innocence. For a second, Erik wondered if she had sensed a more important secret—his alien nature. His eyes narrowed imperceptibly. Could any Earthling's psychic powers be strong enough, sophisticated enough to uncover that? She had, after all, recognized that Cody was in an unusual place, though she could not pinpoint it. He forced himself to maintain his untroubled pose.

Madame Carabini blinked. Then she shook her

head. She glanced at Allie, and back to Erik. The strength of her aquamarine gaze grew as she regained her composure.

"I said," she stated quietly, "that you are the same person as the boy I saw in those two impressions, first on a mountain, and then in a desolate wood." Her voice grew firmer, her gaze more confident as she stared at Erik. "You are the man in Miss Stanislawski's future."

Allie's brow creased in consternation. Her troubled gaze remained on Erik.

Erik forced himself to chuckle softly. He had to act quickly to dispel the psychic's statements, before her probing destroyed his self-control and any chance of achieving his destiny.

"You're right about a relationship with Allie, of course," he said, nodding towards her. He didn't care about Madame Carabini, but he wished he knew what Allie was thinking behind that troubled gaze. The struggle to control his chaotic emotions left no room for telepathic probing. "We're co-workers at ***The Streeter***, and we've been asked to work together on stories concerning Cody Walker's disappearance. Unfortunately, that's as far as it goes."

He took a deep breath to steady himself, and looked hard at the psychic. "But as far as the

events you relate, they are not incidents from my life. Perhaps your impressions of me have become entangled with those of Mr. Walker.” He nodded to the items strewn across the table.

Madame Carabini frowned. “Perhaps. There is something . . .” Her voice trailed off, then started again. “But I don’t think so. If they had become confused I would know.”

“Maybe we’re getting off track here,” Allie interjected. Erik and Madame Carabini turned to regard her. “I mean, we came here to find out anything we could about Cody. While Erik’s background may be interesting, it’s not the reason for our visit.”

She smiled soothingly at Madame Carabini. “Is there anything else you can tell us about Cody?”

The psychic grimaced. “Not right now. I’m sorry.” Levelly she regarded Erik. “I’m afraid my impressions of Mr. Walker have been blotted out by—” Her eyes narrowed. “What did you say your name was?”

“Erik Berenger,” Erik supplied smoothly, more relaxed now that Allie had unwittingly helped extricate him from a situation that could have proved dangerous.

“Really?” The woman’s eyebrows rose. Then she returned her attention to Allie. “If you could leave

Mr. Walker's belongings here for a few days, I can try again. I'll call you if I come up with anything else."

"Thank you. Thank you very much." Allie rose, signaling an end to the conversation. "The column will likely be in Monday's paper, so if you have anything new before then, please call."

Madame Carabini rose, and saw Allie to the door without further comment. Erik slung his camera bag over his shoulder and followed, glad to escape the psychic's scrutiny.

Erik had just reached the curb when Allie turned on him. "Why did you lie?"

"Lie?" Erik looked up in shock. How had Allie known he lied? To his knowledge, she had no telepathic tendencies.

"Yes, lie." Allie spoke without hesitation. "I may not always be the best judge of people, especially when it comes to my own life. But I **am** a good observer. That's what makes me a good reporter. What Madame Carabini said upset you. You turned white. For a moment you looked as if you'd seen something terrible. It's true, isn't it?"

Erik regarded her in silence. Despite her accusation, he did not sense any condemnation. Rather, he could see the concern in her troubled

green eyes, and hear it in her voice, the natural response of her generous nature.

He wavered. Should he tell her? He didn't want to lie to her. Not more than was absolutely necessary until the time arrived to tell her the whole truth.

He took a deep breath. He would gamble, to a limited extent. "Yes," he said slowly. "It's true. Those incidents occurred."

Allie's expression grew puzzled. She frowned. "But why would your father shoot that bird? Especially after you'd cared for it?"

Erik's stomach tightened with a spasm of long-suppressed hurt and anger. "You don't understand."

"You're right. I don't. So help me to understand," Allie said softly. "Tell me."

"No." Erik backed away from the gentle plea in her soft green eyes. Under her gaze, every one of his systems was going haywire.

"Why not? Why won't you tell me?"

"It's not important." He shrugged, deliberately deleting every shred of emotion from his expression. "It was all a long time ago. Today is what matters. Tomorrow. Not some minor incident from long ago."

"If it was so minor, why deny it?"

The logic of her simple question, combined with the gentle manner in which she voiced it, were devastating. ***Why indeed?*** If it was nothing, why couldn't he talk about it? Why did he perceive such a minuscule part of his life as a threat?

With an effort, he pushed the confusing questions aside. "I don't want to talk about it."

He brushed past Allie to unlock the passenger door of the Jag, then straightened and opened the door.

Allie regarded him, her brow creased. "All right," she said finally.

But as she slipped into the car, Erik knew it wasn't all right. He could see it in the questions on her lips, and in her eyes; he could hear it in the tenderness in her voice.

Worse, he could feel it deep inside, where the questions he had never dared think before were slowly taking form.

Why had his father insisted on killing the bird he had loved and nursed back to health? And perhaps more importantly, why was attachment to another creature, however insignificant, deemed a sign of irredeemable weakness? Why was love, that most human of emotions, so scorned on Zura?

Sunlight poured through the bank of open windows into Allie's studio apartment, along with an array of noises as the street below gradually awakened to Saturday morning commerce. Thoughtfully, Allie stirred the tin of forest green latex paint, but her mind was neither on the long stretch of dingy yellow wall stretching away from her on either side nor the street noises below.

Despite herself, she couldn't stop thinking about Erik. The glimpses of his past revealed by the psychic yesterday had disturbed her deeply. Why had he lied to Madame Carabini? she wondered. And why, after he'd admitted the truth, had he refused to talk about that incident with the bird? Without doubt it had hurt Erik the boy greatly, so why did the grown man want to dismiss it as nothing?

Allie groaned and shook her head. And why did she—the woman who had sworn off all men, and in particular a man who had playboy stamped all over him—even care? Why did her heart immediately ache to soothe wounds he wouldn't even admit existed?

She shook her head again and stirred the paint with a vengeance. Because she was a sentimental sap. Because she was a fool. Because she still kept seeing what she wanted to see rather than

what was really there, getting herself into trouble again and again.

She bit her lip and fiercely shoved all thoughts of Erik away. With renewed resolve, she ripped the cellophane wrapping off a new paint brush, and surveyed the walls of her renovated warehouse apartment. Three of them were exposed brick, but the one plastered wall seemed to go on forever, a boring blah vista, much like the thought of the long, lonely weekend stretching ahead of her. Why had she refused all offers of help? What had ever possessed her to think she would enjoy painting by herself? That she might actually find it therapeutic, a calming retreat from the hurt and humiliation and worry of the last few weeks?

The doorbell chimed. Allie jumped up and raced to answer the welcome diversion. Sharkey padded after her, looking for his chance to escape into the hallway.

She didn't bother with the peephole this morning; she hadn't developed any skill at identifying callers from their crotches. Using her bare foot to block the little cat's escape, she pulled open the door—to no one.

Her brow wrinkled in surprise. As she stepped into the hall, her foot hit something and she

stumbled.

“Ouch!” She grimaced and looked down at the offending item. It was a cardboard box full of tins of Whiska’s cat food. Sharkey jumped over her foot and pounced on the box with delight.

“What the—”

“Good morning.”

Allie’s gaze darted farther down the hall from where the quiet greeting had emanated. There, hands in the pockets of his close-fitting jeans, and leaning against the brick wall, was Erik. His tanned arms were bare under the pale turquoise T-shirt, a shirt that accentuated his broad shoulders and lean build. As usual, he wasn’t smiling, just observing with those strange gray eyes.

Allie blinked. She tried to smile. Already a faint humming had started up in the back of her head. Under the long man’s shirt she wore over tattered cutoffs, her nipples tingled and perked to attention, their persistent and unwanted response to Erik’s overwhelming masculinity. Despite the warmth of the June morning, she shivered. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

Erik’s gaze meshed with hers. “Kate told me you had a lot of painting to do. She said you were

insisting on doing it yourself.”

He paused. “I don’t have anything to do this weekend. So I thought maybe I could help.”

Caught off guard, Allie almost said yes. She opened her mouth then shut it as a cloud of suspicion reined in her impulsiveness. Why was he here? What did he really want?

She straightened and tried to smile innocuously. “Thank you. But it’s not necessary. And you don’t really want to spend one of your first weekends in Chicago painting someone else’s apartment.”

For a moment Erik remained silent. If her response disappointed him, Allie couldn’t tell.

Then he disengaged himself from the wall and walked towards her. He stopped a couple of feet away, his expression suddenly earnest, and far more disarming than Allie would have thought possible.

“Look,” he said quietly, “I know how you feel about men right now. About me. And I respect that. You’re right. But I’m not doing this to be nice. I thought maybe we could trade. I’ll help you paint. And then you can help me.”

“Help you? How?”

One of Erik’s rare smiles creased his rugged face, with electrifying effect on Allie.

“I need help finding an apartment,” he said. “I don’t know Chicago. I’ll help you paint. You can help me find an apartment. Okay?”

The thought of help painting her apartment was tempting —especially since she’d just realized painting alone would not salve her worries. And like it or not, the thought of Erik helping her paint was even more tempting.

Uncertain, Allie stalled. She looked down at the box of cat food where Sharkey sniffed undisturbed. “What’s with the cat food?”

“I knew you had a cat. I noticed him the night I was here.”

Allie colored at the reminder of an evening she wanted to forget. “Well, that’s a new one,” she quipped, struggling for balance. “No one’s ever arrived at my door bearing cat food before.”

She cocked her head and regarded Erik with mock criticism. “You’re probably the kind of guy who gives his wife a washing machine at Christmas.”

“A washing machine?” Erik looked perplexed. “What does a washing machine have to do with cat food?”

Allie rolled her eyes. She didn’t understand how her humor never hit home with Erik. But maybe it was just as well.

“Never mind.” She grabbed his arm, smiled sweetly, then tugged him into her apartment.

“Ten hours from now, I want you to remember that **you** were the one who offered to help.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

With abandon, Allie crooned along to a song blaring from the radio. She swayed to the music, occasionally shutting her eyes but still wielding the paint roller to the beat.

Erik watched her, first with amazement, and then, he realized with a shock, with something that could only be pleasure. Pleasure in her happiness, pleasure in an exuberance he'd never seen before and which appealed to him for no logical reason.

Careful to keep his expression in check, he watched as Allie kept time to the music. Was this what humans called being slap-happy? Because Allie had definitely changed as the morning faded into afternoon.

Lulled by the rhythmic motion of the roller, the smell of fresh paint, and the warm, moist air as the heat in the apartment climbed inexorably to well over ninety degrees Fahrenheit, he had become almost somnolent.

But the repetitive work and the heat seemed to have the opposite effect on Allie. The hotter and

the wearier she got, the crazier she became, slapping on the paint, joking and laughing, telling humorous and revealing stories of *The Streeter's* first two years.

He watched Allie wiggle the pert little bottom that was becoming of increasing interest to him. He couldn't stop glancing at the slim, smooth, paint-spattered legs whose swaying he was responding to in the most primitive way possible, all Zalian controls to the contrary.

He swallowed. Obviously, the methodical plan he had devised to win Allie's affection both at work and on the home front was working.

The problem was, he wasn't sure *who* it was working on. Certainly he had expected the intrusion of at least some emotion. After all, he was one quarter human. But he hadn't expected to *like* the process so much. Or her.

He noticed Allie's cat slip out from behind a divider separating the bedroom from the rest of the large apartment. Allie set down her roller and, with an impulsiveness he was starting to recognize as characteristic, scooped up the little cat and started to dance around the room to the lilting strains of the next song.

After a couple of turns, Sharkey meowed and

managed to wriggle out of Allie's arms. He disappeared around the divider with a screech.

"Hmph." Allie pouted. "That wasn't very nice. You'd think after all I've done for him, he could at least dance with me. This is one of my favorite songs, too."

She glanced at Erik. Her pout turned to a grin. She stepped over to him and held out her arms.

Erik stopped painting. The expectant gleam in her eyes set off a faint spark of apprehension within him.

"May I have the honor of this dance, Mr. Berenger?"

"Why?" The word escaped before Erik could stop it.

"Why not?"

Erik cleared his throat. No one danced in Zalia. And it wasn't a skill he'd thought he'd need for his short time on Earth.

"I can't dance."

"That's what you and every other man on the planet says. But I know you can. Please? I'll lead."

Without waiting for his answer, she tugged the roller from his hand and dropped it into the tray. "Come on."

She took his hand and tugged him forward. She clasped his left hand in her right hand, positioned

his right hand at her waist and her left hand on his shoulder. "Just follow me."

She started to twirl him around the room, in a sweeping motion he recognized in seconds as following a three-beat pattern. Before ten bars of the song had passed, he had picked it up, and was skimming around the large room with Allie.

She smiled up at him, her eyes aglow. She wrinkled her nose, smudged with paint in a way that did nothing to detract from her beauty. For the first time he noticed the faint sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

"See? I told you you could do it," she said encouragingly. "You're a much better partner than Sharkey any day. Isn't this fun?"

Solemnly Erik nodded. Because she was right. Holding Allie closely, gazing down into her glowing face, sharing her pleasure in the music and being alive, was "fun".

In fact, he realized with a start, it was better than fun. For the first time in his life, he felt connected to another being. By the music. By the warmth of her hands. By the sunniness in her face.

Of their own accord, his lips started to curve upwards.

The music slowed. Allie cocked her head and

looked at him again. “You should do that more often,” she said.

“What? Dance?”

“No, silly. Smile.” She lowered the hand holding his but did not release it. “Why don’t you smile more often?”

“Because Zali—” Erik broke off. ***Because Zali******don’t smile***. For a moment he reeled with shock and confusion over his loss of control, over the fact that he’d almost given himself away.

He cleared his throat. “Levity was never a big thing in my family. I . . . we . . . in my family we were always taught to suppress our emotions. To be in control. Too much laughter, too much crying, too much anger, these were all things to be avoided.”

“Really?” Allie frowned. The pressure of her fingers entwined with his increased, sharpening his feeling of connection to her. She surveyed him with a concern he found even more unsettling.

“I guess that explains a lot. But I can’t imagine living like that. In my family, laughing, crying, singing, fighting were the norm. No one would ever describe us as too controlled. More like loud and noisy.”

For one brief moment a vivid picture of Allie’s family crowded around a tiny kitchen table

possessed Erik's head. The noise level was fierce, but what almost knocked Erik off his feet was the palpable feeling of love and happiness. He'd never felt anything like it before in his life.

"Meowww."

The pitiful plaint and the rubbing of fur against the bare ankle below his rolled-up jeans disrupted the unsettling picture in Erik's head. Sharkey was rubbing against his leg.

"Well, look at that." Allie dropped his hand, knelt down, and quickly captured the cat from the floor.

Erik watched with undisguised interest as she hugged the cat to her chest, and rubbed her cheek against its fur.

"So," she continued, the timbre of her voice lowering to match the purr of the little cat, "you wouldn't dance with me but you can't stand anyone else getting all the attention, can you, you jealous little creature."

"Jealous? You mean cats experience jealousy?" Erik knew about the high emotions of humans. But animals too?

"Of course." Allie looked up from the cat in surprise. "They're worse than people. You must have seen that before, with one of your pets."

"I've never had a pet," he said tersely.

“No? Not even a fish?”

“No.” His gut tightened.

“You don’t like animals?” Allie’s voice held a note of incredulity.

“It’s not that,” Erik said quickly. “I just . . . we just never had any pets.”

“Oh.” An array of emotions flickered across Allie’s face. Erik knew she was remembering the incident with the bird the psychic had described. The incident he had refused to discuss.

Suddenly she thrust the little cat at him. “Here. You hold him.”

Startled, Erik took the cat. With awkward motions he held it against his chest.

“Pat him.”

“Pat him?”

“Yes. Sharkey loves to be stroked. He also likes being scratched behind the ears. Scratch him behind the ears and you’ll have a friend for life.”

Tentatively Erik raised his hand and stroked Sharkey. In response the little cat snuggled closer, his body warm against Erik’s chest.

Ridiculously pleased by the animal’s response, Erik experimented with scratching him behind the ears. A deep purr of contentment rumbled from the little cat’s throat.

“He likes it, doesn’t he?” Erik couldn’t keep the

awe from his voice. Nor the smile from his face.

“Of course.”

The gentleness of her voice made Erik look up at Allie. She was smiling too, her eyes lit with that special warmth that did strange things to his insides, that made him feel connected to her in a way he had never realized possible. Even the knowledge gained through telepathy did not produce these wondrous results. Nor did the physical responses provoked in both of them by the strength of their common destiny. No, this was different.

She cocked her head again. “Did anyone ever tell you what a beautiful smile you have? It changes your whole face.”

Erik basked in the warmth of her smile, and the warmth of the little cat curled up against him. For once, he ignored every Zalian restriction he had lived under since birth, and just let it happen.

His smile grew wider still.

After a final swipe with his roller, Erik stood back and surveyed the fifty feet of wall now covered with a second coat of dark green paint. With a damp, sweaty arm, he pushed a lock of hair out of his face.

He glanced at the clock on the counter separating the kitchen area from the rest of the room. Seven o'clock. He and Allie had been painting almost nonstop since early this morning. Through the morning freshness, and through the slow buildup of oppressive heat that lingered still, despite the constant hum of two overhead fans.

"Well, that's that," he said with satisfaction. The hours of menial, repetitive work may have been nothing but part of a strategy to achieve his goal, but still, he'd enjoyed them. Was it because he was with Allie? He looked to the other end of the long room where Allie was lowering her roller. "Are you finished?"

"Yes, yes and yes!" Allie deposited her roller in the tray. She stretched, then walked towards him. Wisps of hair had escaped from her pony tail and now curled around a face even more paint-spattered than it had been a few hours earlier. Just before she reached him she executed a pirouette, then stopped, her gamin face glowing, her arms extended. "I can't believe it. We finished it all. Every bit of it. All that's left is the trim and the window frames."

Allie stopped in front of him. The light brush of her fingertips across his chest reminded him he'd discarded his T-shirt several hours ago—and sent

a jolt through him like an electric shock.

“You’ve got paint all over. In your hair. On your jeans.” She broke into a playful grin. “On your face. You should see yourself.”

She didn’t wait for an answer. She grabbed his arm and propelled him towards a full-length mirror leaning against the Japanese paper and wood divider separating her bedroom from the rest of the large open room. “See? It’s all over your chin.” She bit her lip.

Erik looked in the mirror. Indeed, he did have paint, more than he would have thought, on his face and chest and hands. But it wasn’t the paint that startled him. It was the somberness of the man staring back at him. The cold-eyed stranger whose expressionless face was a complete contrast to the glowing eyes and curving lips of the woman standing beside him. For the first time in his life he considered what he saw—and didn’t much like it.

“You’ve got paint on your face too,” he responded stiffly.

“Yes. I know. But not as much as you.” Allie stood back, hands on her hips. “Anyway, I’ll get rid of it in a moment. First though, I’m going to figure out where I’m taking you for dinner. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. In the meantime, why

don't you have a shower? I'll have one right after you."

She gestured to the apartment's only enclosed room. Before Erik started to walk towards the bathroom, she stopped him with a touch.

He turned to look at her. Her expression had gentled, the sparkling eyes had turned to a soft green mist. Her lips curved in a sweet smile that cut into him with unexpectedly sharp sweetness.

"Thank you Erik. You don't know how much I appreciate your helping me today. I'd be painting for another week if it wasn't for you. Thank you."

Erik stood rooted to the spot. He didn't even try to suppress the pleasure her words provoked, or the wave of closeness that surfaced in him when she looked at him like that. It was a new and powerful sensation, touching him deeply in ways and places he had always denied.

He swallowed. With a certainty born of years of forcing himself into a mold which did not quite fit, he knew he should reject this seductive sensation and the dangers it posed to his goals and acceptance in Zalian society. Dangerous because, in his heart, he knew it was what separated him from every other Zalian on Zura.

But his gaze lingered still on her smile, her glowing eyes. He felt the answering smile begin to

crease his face.

And he knew at that moment he wasn't going to reject it. Not yet. For once, he was going to experience this heady sense of intimacy with Allie, to explore it, to revel in it.

Time enough later to force it back into the recesses of his heart, to order his emotions into the correct Zalian mode.

But not yet. By all the stars of the Milky Way, not yet.

On the darkened beach, the quiet lap of the waves against the sandy shores slowly took precedence over the ever-present hum of the city. Allie lay back, resting her weight on her forearms, and breathed deeply, savoring the damp warm air and the smell of water, sand and grass. The breeze that had risen only moments before caressed her shoulders, bare except for the spaghetti-thin straps of the silk camisole top she had donned after changing out of her painting clothes. She sighed deeply. How she loved Chicago, and everything that it offered, from a fast-paced work atmosphere to the most peaceful of beaches. She would never want to leave it.

She glanced up at the full moon, bright despite the city lights behind them. Her glance strayed to

the man sitting as still as a statue on the gray wool blanket beside her. Erik had said little since they'd finished their take-out burgers and fries, but this time his silence hadn't set off a stream of nervous chatter from her.

Instead, she'd found his presence strangely companionable. Even the crazy hum that plagued her whenever he was around had subsided to no more than a strong awareness, pleasantly tantalizing but not demanding of immediate action. Perhaps it had been tempered by the things she had learned about him the last day or two. And the fact he had finally started to unbend and act as if there was actually a human being behind the reserved, handsome exterior she'd suspected hid only an uncaring womanizer.

A tiny smile curved her lips as it occurred to her just how wrong she'd been about Erik. She shook her head and gazed at him again. Despite the breeze starting to ruffle his hair, he remained like a dark shadow beside her, unmoving, his gaze turned upwards on the full moon and the tiny pinpricks of the few stars strong enough to shine above the lights of the city. What was he thinking about? she wondered. Was he thinking of her, or were his thoughts far away, as distant and cool as the look in his eyes?

She was so busy wondering that she didn't hear when he finally spoke.

"Pardon?" She sat up.

"Why were you engaged to Cody?"

"What?" Under the cover of darkness, her face flamed red. Was *that* what he'd been thinking about?

"I was wondering why you had planned to marry him. Why you went out with him. With Cody."

"No, I heard the questions," Allie said quickly. "I wondered why you asked."

Erik sat back. "From everything I've heard at work, Cody is selfish. Interested only in himself. Disloyal."

Methodically he listed Cody's flaws, then turned to her, his brow furrowed, his gray eyes intent. "I don't understand how you could . . . care about someone like that."

Allie grimaced. What Erik said was true. She'd been a fool, and was still grappling with why she'd plunged so blindly into a relationship that ran counter to everything she'd ever known.

She pondered how to explain—or if she even wanted to explain. Finally she looked at him. "I don't know," she said softly. "Not to speak poorly of the missing, what you've been told is probably true. And worse. And I discovered it in the most

direct way,” she added, recalling with a shudder how she walked in on Cody and one of his “other” girlfriends.

A sigh escaped her. “Down deep, I think I knew all the time that Cody wasn’t right for me. But he was exciting, and charming, when he wanted to be, and a lot of fun. In his own way, he was even generous and helpful. We did a lot of wild things. It filled up a lot of the emptiness I felt after my parents died.”

She fell silent again, contemplating the real reasons for her lack of judgment. After a moment, she turned back to Erik. Her eyes met his once more. Burying her pride, she stumbled forward. “But when it comes right down to it, I guess what I wanted was someone of my own to love.”

There. She’d said it. It was the first time she’d admitted it to anyone—even to herself. She frowned, then searched Erik’s face for understanding she didn’t really expect to find.

“And to be loved,” she continued. “Looking back now, it seems my relationship with Cody had a lot to do with my parents’ deaths. I think I told you before, they died eighteen months ago, within a week of each other, Tata of a stroke and then Mama of a heart attack. Even though I’d been living on my own for several years, I missed them.

Badly. I still do. Their house had always been home and I missed it. I don't think I realized how much until now. It was as if there was this huge hole in my life. When Cody came along, I guess I jumped at the chance to recreate all the closeness I missed so badly. I tried to blot out the grief by keeping constantly busy, by focusing on someone, whether he was the right person or not."

Allie smiled faintly to cover the ache for her parents that still filled her heart. "I can see now it wasn't the smartest response."

"But understandable."

Allie looked at Erik in surprise. In the face of the man she had initially dismissed as just another shallow playboy, was a concern she'd never expected to see. Even stranger was the sudden feeling of acceptance and reassurance that enveloped her in a warmth as palpable as a blanket. She blinked hard to keep back the tears that suddenly surfaced. ***Why does he care?***

The night shadows hid Erik's expression as he turned his head towards the lake. "I told you that my parents died five years ago," he responded to her unasked question. "In an explosion at the lab where they both worked. We were never an emotional family, so perhaps there wasn't a lot to

miss in that regard. But I know it affected me. I worked longer, harder, to forget or to replace what I was missing, I don't know. It just wasn't the same."

Allie's sympathies, always close to the surface, immediately focused on Erik. Partly because it was easier than talking about herself. But mostly because, despite herself, she *did* care.

"I guess it was hard, being so far away in Australia when it happened," she offered quietly. "No family, no friends. At least I had my sister and her family. And friends I'd grown up with all my life."

A strange look crossed Erik's face, then disappeared so quickly Allie wondered if she'd imagined it. Slowly he reached for her hand, and she let him take it. The warmth of his supple hands enclosing hers sent a thrill of anticipation through her.

Erik turned her hand over, palm up. With slow and gentle motions, he began tracing concentric circles on her palm.

"I've never really felt the need or the desire for a friend before," he said, gazing at her palm.

His thumb strayed to the inside of her wrist, stroking the tender skin there. Allie struggled to stay still. "But—but weren't—aren't you lonely

without friends?”

His dark eyes flickered, then held her gaze. “It’s not something I thought about. It’s just the way it was.”

The pressure of his thumb on her wrist increased. He brushed it across her palm, then slowly, carefully along each of her fingers in turn.

The breath caught in Allie’s throat. Erik had done nothing more than touch her hand, but already her body was straining towards him. The hum in her head had begun a steady spiral upwards, along with a gentle whispered refrain: “I’m your friend. Now and forever.” She tried, unsuccessfully, to tell herself it was merely an everyday reaction to friendship.

“You said ‘was,’” she whispered. “Does that mean . . . does that mean you’ve changed your mind? That friends are more important to you now?”

For a moment Erik remained silent. His dark gaze seemed to settle on her mouth, then her throat before returning to her eyes. “Yes,” he said finally, his voice low and gentle. “And no.”

He raised his hand to her face, and brushed her hair back, the rough pads of his fingers grazing her temple.

Despite herself, Allie trembled at his touch.

“Yes and no? What does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said.” He smiled faintly, and the moonlight gleamed off his cheekbones, making his broad strong face appear more foreign and exotic than ever. He continued to stroke her hand, his touch excruciatingly slow. “I don’t necessarily want a lot of friends. Only one.”

“One?” Allie swallowed. “Who would that be?”

She saw herself reflected in his eyes even as his head lowered towards her. “I think you know who that is.”

“I do?”

His hand cupped her chin. “Yes.”

Then slowly, with unimaginable gentleness, his mouth settled over hers, like the warm whisper of the wings of doves returning home at dawn.

A whimper escaped Allie as his lips met hers. He kissed her lightly, undemandingly, but it was enough to send the first sparks of yearning zinging through her blood. Allie shut her eyes, and let her senses fill with his masculine scent, with the taste of his lips on hers, and the intoxicating touch of his fingers on her neck.

Then, just as quickly as it began, the kiss ended. Erik released her and sat back in the darkness.

Allie blinked, vaguely disoriented and filled

with a disturbing sense of loss.

She glanced at Erik. His face was lit with the wide grin of the kid who's put something over on the teacher.

The first sparks of annoyance flared up. Annoyance at him—for messing up their lovely, platonic day, and annoyance at herself for exercising so little control. Would she never learn?

“For someone who rarely smiles, that’s an awfully big grin,” she snapped. “What are you smiling about anyway?”

Erik’s grin grew wider still. “I thought you weren’t going to kiss me.”

The laughter reached his eyes and Allie suppressed an urge to reach across and choke him.

“That wasn’t a kiss,” she declared grumpily.

“No?” Erik raised his eyebrows. Since when, Allie wondered, had he mastered so much more expression?

“In my experience, that had all the usual trademarks of a kiss,” he persisted. The smile was gone, but the corner of his mouth twitched suspiciously.

“Well it wasn’t a kiss.” Allie drew herself up primly, her nose in the air. “It was . . .” she

struggled to find the right word. “It was merely a thank you.” She pounced on the idea like a drowning woman on a life ring. “A fond thank you for your help today painting my apartment. And for the cat food.”

“Hmm.” Erik appeared to ponder her statement with due seriousness, though a suspect light still flickered in his eyes.

After a moment he looked her full in the face, his expression solemn. “Well then, you can’t be very grateful.”

“Pardon me?”

“That kiss can’t have lasted more than four or five seconds. In ratio to the ten hours I spent painting your apartment, that’s not much thanks.”

“What?” If Allie didn’t know better, she’d think that the blunt and usually humorless Erik was teasing her. But she couldn’t be sure.

Her irritation abated, but only slightly. “And what exactly would you suggest as fitting thanks? A night in bed?”

“Oh no. Nothing as . . .” His dark, sensuous eyes flickered over her with appreciation—and unmistakable humor. “Nothing as time-consuming—or intimate as that. Perhaps just a longer kiss, initiated by you.”

He turned towards her and tugged her to her

knees. "Kneel up," he said quietly, "and put your arms around my neck."

"Why would I want to do that?"

The humor in Erik's eyes fled, replaced by something darker, warmer, that took Allie's breath away.

"Because," he said, his gaze never leaving her face, "you're polite, and you're generous, and you do want to thank me properly. But most of all, because you want to kiss me as much as I want to kiss you."

Allie's throat felt dry and she could hear her heart pounding frantically in her chest, along with the crazy buzz filling her head. It was true. As much as she wanted to deny it, she couldn't do it.

Slowly, she relaxed her arms and laced her fingers through the thick hair grazing the back of his neck. She looked into those dark eyes, drawn by the promise she saw there. "All right," she whispered, her gaze falling to his mouth. "You win. But only one. Just one friendly kiss."

Gently, his hands spanned her waist. She raised her face towards his, kissing one corner of his broad mouth, then tentatively moving across, nipping him, her lips alive with his taste. She rubbed across his cheek and chin, rough with a day's growth of beard, each touch increasing the

sensitivity of her mouth, and the desire flaring once more within her.

Despite the fact she'd barely moved, she felt breathless, dizzy, her limbs heavy and full. Her arms tightened around his neck, drawing him closer to her needy mouth.

Then, with a fire that seemed to burst out of nowhere, he kissed her back, responding to her touch and her taste like a man who'd waited far too long. The touch of his lips on hers, the sensation of his tongue exploring and tasting her sweetness, overwhelmed her senses, making her dizzy and faint with the growing ache of need inside, melting her resistance and obliterating every desire but for the kiss to go on and on.

She kissed him longer, harder, unaware of her hands twisting convulsively in his hair, her frantically beating heart. Aware only of the aching need within her.

Suddenly everything stopped. Over the racing of her heart, her ragged breathing, and the returning control of her body, she realized that Erik had stopped kissing her. She blinked and opened her eyes. Erik had moved back on his knees, and was watching her, his eyes dark and unreadable.

"You're welcome," he said quietly.

“What . . . you . . . you’re welcome?” Allie blinked, confused. “What the . . .”

Suddenly she realized that Erik was doing exactly what she’d told him she wanted him to do: keeping things friendly, not pushing too hard to move their relationship into the sexual.

Instead, **she** was the one who had lost control. **She** was the one who was running headlong into a romantic relationship with a man she still barely knew. **Dammit!** Hadn’t she learned anything? Anything at all?

She swore violently. Surprise and confusion flickered across Erik’s face, but she didn’t stop to ask why. She jumped up and yanked the blanket out from under him, sending their empty drink containers and hamburger wrappings flying.

“I think I’d like to go home now,” she said as she flung the blanket over her arm.

She spun on her heel and marched towards the parking lot.

Sprawled on the grass in the remains of their dinner, Erik watched Allie stomp towards the car. He blinked, too confused to marshal the focus needed to probe her thoughts. What had he done now?

Automatically he rose to his knees and

gathered up the wrappers and paper cups, his mind already at work trying to reconstruct what had just happened.

Allie had said she wanted to be friends—platonic friends. In an effort to win her affection, and her trust, he had attempted to play by her rules. The painting, the cat food, had all been part of his plan.

Even the kiss. Especially *stopping* the kiss, something he'd found far harder to do than he could ever have imagined. Because, from the first enticing touch of her lips, he'd wanted to kiss her until they were both senseless, unable to stop the love-making they both wanted.

Instead, he'd covered up his desire with something he thought she'd understand and appreciate. Humor, as well as respect for her wishes. Or at least he'd *thought* it was humor. Apparently it wasn't. Instead, he had angered her. Worse, he had hurt her, and he didn't even know why.

He looked up as Allie reached the Jag. She tried to open the door then, finding it locked, leaned stiffly against it, her back to him.

He'd hurt her, by the moons of Zura, the last thing in the world he'd wanted to do.

Erik stood up. His brow furrowed. One by one,

his carefully-laid plans were failing to work and the murky confusion in his mind wasn't helping any. He didn't understand why Allie reacted the way she did. He didn't understand his **own** reactions.

He frowned. He'd better understand fast. Because he had only six weeks left to complete his mission—and to do it on terms best for himself, and even more importantly, on terms best for Allie.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Back in his apartment hotel, Erik wasted no time. There was no one on Earth or on the Zalian spacecraft hidden behind the planet's moon that he could consult for advice.

But there was one thing he could do. He could review his destiny to determine whether a mistake had been made. The Zalian seers rarely made mistakes, but it **had** happened before. Certainly his grandmother's abduction and mating with his grandfather had to have been a mistake, though never acknowledged. He wanted to continue pursuing Allie, but his courtship was not unfolding as smoothly as the other destined events of his life. A dangerous error seemed the likely explanation, and there was only one way to find out.

He retrieved his briefcase from the closet and snapped it open. Beside his communicator lay a small black bag, of a material similar to something Earthlings called velvet. He removed it, and slid its contents into his hand.

The gray crystal lay dark and cool in his palm, a memento of the most important day of his life, the

day on which the seers foretold his destiny. In Zalia it was customary to bestow one of the crystals used that day upon the child concerned.

But it was also possible to use the crystal to view one's destiny again. Indeed, his father had insisted, for reasons Erik had not understood, that they review what had been forecast. Always it had remained the same, but Erik now wondered if he and his father, far away and immersed in Zalian life, had missed or confused the final aspect of his destiny. Certainly neither of them had foreseen the difficulties he faced in winning the intransigent Earthling, nor the problem of dealing with his own humanity.

Erik pulled aside the drapes on the sliding door to the balcony. Moonlight streamed into the room. Reverently he placed the crystal on the spot where the light hit the floor, then sat cross-legged before it. Perhaps, here on Earth and with his limited powers, the destiny hidden in the crystal might not be released. But he had to try. He had to make sure he wasn't making a mistake he would rue for the rest of his life.

Erik shut his eyes and carefully cleared his mind. One, then two, then several minutes passed in silence. Slowly he receded from this planet, and the part of him that was of the Earth,

and gradually repossessed his Zalian persona: Barak of Zura, son of Royl and Vzaro, and a commander of Zalia's counter-insurgency forces. A commander and leader of Zalians come to Earth to claim his mate!

Through closed eyes, Barak concentrated all his powers on the crystal, urging it to fire once more and release the secrets held deep within. The thought was neither a request nor a demand, but a simple statement of what was required.

Suddenly, though his eyes remained shut, Barak saw the crystal begin to flicker with a weak yellow light. The light wavered several times, almost disappearing. Then it steadied and grew, flaring upwards and taking on an amber cast that colored the room.

In the warm golden light, Barak saw his destiny unfold, as it had been foretold so long ago, and as he had lived it over the past years. He watched as a younger version of himself entered the military and language academies, worked hard and eventually graduated with honor. He watched as he joined the military and swiftly rose to his destined post and level of accomplishment. Through it all the light grew stronger and steadier.

Barak started. Without warning the light faded abruptly. He feared it would flicker out completely,

leaving him with no answers. Pushing the fear aside, he concentrated once more: He had to know the truth.

Despite his efforts, the light continued to fade. Barak had begun to give up hope, when a spurt of blue, like the light welcoming the cool of a Zuran dawn, shot upwards through the crystal, dispelling the last of the warm golden light. Shaky and irregular, the blue flame shot wildly around the room.

Barak tried to find the center of the light, the place that held his destiny, but it kept changing and evolving, much like his relationship with the woman whom he'd always believed was destined to be his mate. After several minutes, the light settled into a cold, wavering column. An image started to form at its heart.

In Barak's mind's eye, the image grew clearer and stronger, but still distant and strangely out of reach. At last he could see two people, a man and a woman, standing a little apart. He knew instinctively that the man was himself. But the woman?

He strained to see the woman's face. In the crystal's blue light, her coloring was off, but she appeared the right height and build to be Allie. By sheer force of will, he managed to command a

closer view, zooming in on the woman's face.

Yes, it was Allie. He recognized the shape of her face, the chin-length hair, the full lips. But something was wrong.

He came closer still. It was definitely Allie. An Allie who did not appear demented or horrified or hurt by her transport to Zura, as his grandmother had been. But still, he knew something was wrong.

Again he looked at her face. The same shape, the same lips, the same nose, the same eyes. What was it that disturbed him?

As his gaze focused on her eyes, he saw the strange blankness. At first it puzzled him. And then, with a sureness that could only be human, he realized what it was. Allie exuded a complete absence of emotion. She had, in effect, become a model Zalian.

Erik shuddered. The light from the crystal abruptly shut down. His eyes flickered open and he stared at the hunk of dark crystal on the floor before him. Involuntarily, he shuddered again.

He kneeled up and reached for the cold crystal. He turned the multi-faced stone over in his hand. He had the answer he sought. The crystal had confirmed Allie was his destiny, and would make a fitting mate.

Listlessly he passed the crystal from hand to hand. He should be pleased. Despite his difficulties, all was unfolding as it should.

Why then, did he still feel that something was terribly wrong?

Slowly Allie replaced the phone in its cradle. It was only 10:30 Monday morning, but already she felt drained. Talking to Cody's mother every day was getting harder and harder—especially since no one, including the police, had a clue about what had happened to Cody. With no headway on his disappearance, Allie was starting to regret her promise to call Mrs. Walker regularly to update her. Her heart ached for the distraught woman, but besides sympathy, she had little of hope to offer.

With a sigh she focused once more on the huge pile of mail, memos and newspapers on her desk. Just as she began to settle into the task, that hum started up in her head again. Surreptitiously she looked around. Yes, there was Erik, over by the newsroom water cooler, talking to another photographer.

With a harrumph, she turned back to her work. Wasn't it enough that Erik had been in and out of her thoughts ever since she'd met him? That she'd

wasted far too much of Sunday trying to figure out who and what he was, and what exactly she felt about him? But no, this crazy, unbelievable buzz whenever he was around had to annoy her too.

Well, not any more. She was relegating him to co-worker status, and nothing more.

Biting her lip to bolster her determination, she forced herself to concentrate on an idea that had occurred to her yesterday between bouts of analyzing Erik. She'd managed to squeak a rather thin column out of the visit to the psychic, but in the absence of anything new, the story would soon die. And along with it, any chance of her helping to find Cody. Cody had taken her love and thrown it back in her face. In spite of that, she couldn't just let him disappear. She had misplaced her love and her trust, but still, he was a co-worker, and a fellow human being, and if she could do anything to help find him, she'd do it.

The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that her brainwave Sunday would do the trick. What better way to maintain interest in a mysterious disappearance than to dredge up unsolved disappearances from the past. To look at the differences, the similarities, and the effects on the families. And perhaps jog the memory or sense of duty of someone who had

seen or heard something in connection with Cody's disappearance.

But before she pitched this idea to Nate, she'd have to find some really interesting disappearances. There was no point trying to get him to buy the idea if she couldn't come up with cases that would whet his interest.

She reached for the phone to call *The Streeter's* "morgue", as they called the library, and get the librarian Karl started on digging up some cases. Before she could touch it, the phone rang.

"Alina Stanislawski. Good morning," she said automatically into the receiver.

Silence met her greeting. Then a hesitant voice began, "This is Joanne Carabini."

"Oh, how are you?" Allie snapped onto full alert. Her column today was light on facts. If Madame Carabini had more details, great. "Do you have more about Cody?"

"No, I'm sorry. I haven't received any more impressions about Mr. Walker or his whereabouts," the woman responded. "I told you everything I could see. I don't know why it was so fuzzy, but it was. No, I'm calling today about the other gentleman."

"Which other gentleman?" Allie remembered

before the words left her mouth. “You mean Erik? Erik Berenger?” She grimaced. ***The tall dark man the psychic had predicted would be in her future.***

“That’s right.” The hesitation in Madame Carabini’s voice was palpable, even over the phone. “Despite his denials, it’s definitely him. And I’m positive those incidents I saw were part of his past.”

Allie recalled the shocked look on the woman’s face as she identified Erik as the man in her future. She recalled Erik’s refusal to discuss either of the incidents, even after he’d admitted they had, indeed, occurred.

“Yes?” She wasn’t really sure she wanted to hear what the psychic had to say.

“There was something I didn’t tell you before. Something odd I felt about him, but couldn’t quite put into words. That he’s strange or foreign, but not in a way that makes any sense. I keep seeing flashes of an eerie blue light, and then a cold, forbidding landscape, unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. I don’t know where it is. I only know it’s associated with him. It’s . . . I felt I should warn you.”

“Warn me?” Allie’s voice rose. “Warn me about what?”

“I . . . I don’t know exactly . . . it’s just the

strangeness . . . he wants something from you—”

“Are you saying he might harm me?”

Silence. Then, “Noooo, I can’t say that. Not in any conventional way. But . . . he heralds some kind of change for you. He will affect you . . . and it won’t be good.”

The hair on the back of Allie’s neck stood up. Despite her innate skepticism, the psychic’s words made her uneasy. “That’s a pretty indefinite prediction,” she countered. “What exactly are you suggesting I do? Stay away from him? I work with him, after all.”

“Look Miss Stanislawski. I know this sounds odd. But at the very least, look into the man’s background.”

When Allie said nothing, the woman’s voice grew pleading. “Promise me you’ll do that. You may find something important. You don’t know how terrible it is to live with this gift . . . to have intimations of what may happen and have everyone ignore your advice.”

Madame Carabini sounded so upset that Allie reined in her skepticism. After her conversations with Cody’s mother, she could understand how horrible it was to want to help, yet be unable. She made a mental note to talk to the psychic about this later, perhaps for another column. “I promise

I'll at least look into his background," she said. "Thank you for your concern."

When she'd hung up, Allie sat and stared at the telephone. As much as she hated to admit it, Madame Carabini's vague intimations of some indefinable harm coming from Erik disturbed her. Even she had to admit that Erik, with his often emotionless, stilted reactions, could be rather odd. And that crazy hum in her head whenever he was around. What was that about?

She twisted her fingers in her lap. But none of that meant he was an ax murderer. As likely as anything, Madame Carabini's warning related to the fact that developing a romantic relationship with Erik would hurt her. Just as Cody had hurt her. One more reason to support her decision to refrain from anything more than a working relationship with Erik.

Thoughtful, she sat back in her chair. But it couldn't hurt to ask Nate exactly what Erik's resume had said. And whether the city editor had bothered to check his references.

A few minutes after one p.m., Erik pulled a chair up to the desk. "You wanted to see me?"

The dratted humming started up in Allie's head before she could even look up, along with an

unwanted tingle of anticipation. She gritted her teeth. Like it or not, she seemed to be cursed with an attraction for Erik, one entirely different from anything she'd ever experienced, and neither her own sense of self-preservation nor Madame Carabini's intimations of dire consequences changed anything.

To make matters worse, her late morning chat with Nate had been interrupted before she'd been able to confirm whether he'd checked out Erik's background.

Concealing her agitation, Allie regarded Erik's broadly-chiseled features, his generous mouth, his unreadable gray eyes. Unnerved by Madame Carabini's warning, she searched for something—she didn't know what—in his stoic demeanor.

She noticed how tightly he gripped the arms of the chair. He was nervous too, she thought with a start. ***I wonder why?*** She was about to say something when he spoke.

"I didn't mean to hurt you Saturday night," he said softly. "But you said you wanted to keep everything platonic—"

"That's right." Allie cut him off. She didn't want to talk about it. She'd made a fool of herself more than once, and she wasn't about to do it again. She forced a smile and assumed her most

business-like demeanor. “Thanks again for helping with the painting. But now I’d like to bring you up to steam on some new column ideas Nate’s approved. You’ll be taking the pictures of course, and accompanying me to the interviews.”

That strange, confused look she’d seen more than once flickered across Erik’s face, sparking her curiosity and making her wonder once again what tragedies, what harsh childhood incidents had made him the way he was. She tried to tell herself she didn’t care, but deep inside she knew it wasn’t true. She cleared her throat and continued.

“There’s nothing new on Cody’s disappearance, so we’ve decided to unearth some old unsolved disappearances to help keep the story alive. Maybe it will raise some new clues, some new directions for the investigation. Karl in the morgue dug up some great cases this morning.”

She looked at Erik to confirm his attention. “Go on,” he said, neither his tone nor expression indicating anything more than polite interest.

She continued. “The first one I’ve decided to go with is really heart-rending. It’s a child called Amanda Blake who went missing five years ago. She disappeared while going to a friend’s house three doors away. No one ever saw her again, and

there's never been even one clue about how she disappeared. I've already phoned her parents and we're going there this afternoon."

Erik nodded solemnly. Allie grimaced, then silently berated herself. What exactly did she want from Erik anyway?

"The next two are more straightforward and I'm going to put them together in one column, with an emphasis on the effects of their disappearances on their families and friends. One's an elderly man who wandered away from his nursing home, never to be seen again. The other is a mother of three who disappeared from her car —sort of like Cody."

Allie noted the slight tightening of Erik's mouth at the mention of Cody. She remembered his questions about Cody Saturday night. Why had he developed such a strong dislike for a man he'd never even met? Her anger was understandable, but Erik's?

She picked up the last sheaf of printouts. "The last one is the best, even though it's the oldest." She waved the printouts at Erik. "It's from 1936. I know it's going back more than sixty years, but it's a great story.

"The woman's name is Eva Bukowski," she rattled on, intent on explaining the story as

quickly as possible. “She was only nineteen the night she disappeared from her parents’ house. She was wearing her pajamas and no other article of clothing was missing from the house.”

Allie glanced from Erik to the blurred copy of a black and white photo on the first sheet of the printout. “Eva was really pretty. She—”

Amazement cut off her words. She stared at the photo in her hand before looking back at Erik. She looked back at the photo.

“I don’t believe it,” she muttered. “It’s incredible. And I didn’t even notice it.”

“Notice what?”

“The resemblance. See?” Allie shoved the printout with the photo under Erik’s nose.

“Look! Look at Eva. She looks enough like you to be your sister!”

CHAPTER NINE

Every muscle in Eric's body tensed as he stared at the photo only inches from his face. Not the year, not the mention of the name, nothing had steeled him to come face-to-face with the photo of the woman he recognized instantly as his grandmother.

Yes, she was younger. Years younger than the woman he remembered, the woman who had died only a scant seven years ago after a life of unremitting misery. And yes, the expression on her young, fresh face was entirely different from the one he had known.

But it was her. His grandmother. Only it was his grandmother as he'd never seen her before. He struggled for a moment to pinpoint the difference that went far beyond age.

Then it hit him. In the stark black and white photo, Eva was smiling, with a gladness and innocence that shone uncontrolled from her eyes and her lips. She was **happy**, by the stars of Zura! Happy!

Erik couldn't suppress a shudder of horror.

This was what his grandfather had wreaked by kidnapping Eva from her Earth home? This was the result of fulfilling his destiny? Taking a happy young woman looking forward to her future and turning her into the miserable creature Erik remembered. The woman who either could not, or would not comprehend what had happened to her. The woman who had stayed locked up inside her head, inside her own world despite his grandfather's limited Zalian efforts.

It took all of Erik's control not to snap the photo from Allie's hand and crumple it into a ball. To keep from jumping up, running from the building, contacting his spaceship and returning immediately to Zura. To hold on to his conviction that he would achieve his destiny without the same, devastating effect.

"So what do you think?"

The question pulled him back to the here and now. To Allie, her big green eyes watching him with surprise and curiosity. To Allie, who was young, and fresh, and **happy**. Happy, by the stars. A happiness he had only begun to realize attracted him more than anything he'd ever encountered. A happiness he didn't want to destroy.

Erik struggled to make his vocal cords work. He struggled to control the shock and despair. Though

he was loathe to admit it, he had always felt himself different from other Zalian. It was a difference he had never seen any sign of in his sister or brother, though they too were one-quarter Earthling, a difference he had suspected but never addressed in his mother.

And then there were the doubts. Doubts about destiny. Doubts about Zalia's superiority, about the rightness of the Zalian way. Those doubts had always been there, but he'd kept them successfully buried. But now the door had been blown off the crypt, and his doubts, greater and more threatening than ever before, were escaping.

Erik swallowed. With every shred of self-discipline, he forced the doubts aside. "Yes, you are right," he said woodenly, every word tasting like sawdust in his dry mouth. "She does look a bit like me. Probably there's some German blood in her, too. It is not unusual for unrelated people to look alike."

Allie looked at the photo again, then at Erik. She frowned. "Actually, there's more than a little resemblance. There's a lot. But you're probably right. Look at all the Elvis look-a-likes around."

For a split second, Erik shut his eyes. One day soon, Allie would know Eva Bukowski's true identity. But not yet. She was no more ready for

the truth than he was ready to tell it. His weak telepathic powers and interference from his burgeoning emotions might prevent him from reading her thoughts, but this he knew with absolute certainty.

He opened his eyes, the crippling doubts still with him despite his efforts. He cleared his throat. "How are you planning to handle it?"

"Don't know yet," Allie replied. She shuffled through some other papers on her desk. "I'll try to find out if she has any living relatives left. Apparently she had a couple of younger brothers who were out with her parents the night she disappeared."

She smiled faintly, that teasing light that he found so appealing there in her eyes again for the first time since Saturday night. "Wouldn't it be weird though if they turned out to be your long-lost relatives?"

His face betrayed no emotion, but inwardly Erik groaned. ***Just how "weird" would Allie think it was when she knew the truth?***

The opening bars of the upbeat tune that introduced the six o'clock news broke through the murmur of voices in the tastefully-appointed living room. With relief, Erik grasped the music as a

signal to end Allie's impromptu visit with Cody's mother.

"We should go," he said. He stood up and hefted his camera bag over his shoulder. Despite his best efforts, he was finding it impossible to ignore the unsettling disquiet that had overtaken him since Norah Walker's tearful call to Allie less than an hour ago. Accompanying Allie on the visit had only heightened the confused reactions set off by the earlier interview with the family whose young daughter had disappeared five years earlier. He had tried to remain detached, unaffected, but the family's continuing torment had shaken him to the core. Only the fact that he knew without doubt that Zalian's had nothing to do with the child's disappearance had assuaged his discomfort.

But Cody's disappearance was different. Erik had neither considered nor expected to meet the heart-broken woman who was desperately begging Allie for the smallest crumb of hope concerning her son, hope that Allie was hard-pressed to find. This was awful.

Tension spiraling upwards, Erik watched as Allie gently disentangled herself from the woman's arms. She placed one hand over Norah's jewelled hand and squeezed. "Try to get some rest

now. And take those sedatives the doctor ordered. It will do you good to get some sleep.”

Like a small child, Norah nodded. With an effort she straightened, re-assuming some of the controlled stateliness she had projected before her collapse only moments before. She glanced up at Erik, and her eyes filled with tears again.

Pain throbbed through Erik’s head. He gritted his teeth. “Allie,” he repeated, “we have to go.” He concentrated on blocking out the woman’s pain, on ridding himself of the guilt trying to cripple him and thwart his destiny.

“I’m coming.” Without looking at him, Allie stood up. Norah rose also. She shook her head, then walked toward the spacious condo’s huge entry hall. When she reached the door, she stopped, her hand on the knob.

“Thank you so much for coming,” she said, her graciousness now in firm control despite the trail of tears still visible on her face. “Both of you.”

She turned to Allie. “My dear, you have no idea how sorry I was to see your engagement to Cody ended.” She smiled ruefully. “I know he treated you abysmally, but at heart, you know, he’s really a good boy.”

Erik frowned at the mention of the former engagement, but Allie ignored him. “Goodnight

Norah.” She touched the woman’s arm. “I’ll call you again tomorrow.”

In silence Allie and Erik took the elevator to the lobby, and out to the visitor parking lot of the condo where the widowed Mrs. Walker lived alone. Erik was glad Allie appeared to have no desire to talk; he was having enough trouble dealing with his internal turmoil. ***Why am I so upset? Why can’t I stay removed?*** he wondered over and over. ***Why is the tiny part of me that’s human taking on such gigantic proportions?***

Erik’s head continued to throb as he started the Jag and then pulled it out onto the wide suburban street in Brookfield, a few miles west of Chicago. After a moment he glanced at Allie. She too sat stiffly, her profile turned from him, her gaze trained blindly on the street. She said nothing, but it was evident how much the visit with Mrs. Walker had upset her. ***Did she care about Cody that much?***

He gritted his teeth and focused on the road. The fact he could even think these questions was evidence of how badly he was being corrupted by Earthly emotions. No matter what, he had to regain his distance, the detachment that allowed him to do what was required of him, and to achieve his destiny as a loyal and true Zalian.

He made the mistake of glancing at Allie again. His eyes widened in alarm.

Tears streamed down her face. Her lips were pressed together and her arms were wrapped around her middle in an effort to prevent the sobs from escaping.

Erik screeched over to the curb. He ground the gears into park. Abandoning any attempt at Zalian detachment, he turned towards her. "What's wrong?"

Allie shook her head. If anything, she cried harder. Gray smudges from the paint Earth women used on their eyelashes streaked one cheek.

Erik gripped the shift stick until his knuckles turned white. Too rattled by his Earthly emotions to use telepathy, he had no choice but to ask. "What's wrong? Is it Cody?"

Between sobs Allie shook her head. "Yes. No," she finally managed. "Of course I'm upset Cody is missing." She hiccuped. "But it's not him as much as his mother. You saw her. She can't eat. She can't sleep. She can't stop thinking about it. Not knowing what's happened to him is tearing her apart. And that missing little girl too. The same with her family."

Allie sniffed and wiped at her eyes with the

back of her hand. "I'm sorry," she sputtered. "I know I shouldn't break down like this. Reporters aren't supposed to get so involved in their stories. They're supposed to be objective, hands off. Every time I think of Cody's mother . . . and that little girl's parents . . . and what they're going through."

Allie dropped her face into her hands and started to cry in earnest.

Tension gripped Erik. He was far more distressed at seeing Allie hurting than any Zalian should be. He wanted to gather her into his arms, to give the comfort that simple touching seemed to provoke between humans, that he'd seen Allie give Norah Walker. But should he? His Zalian and human sides battled over what to do.

He watched helplessly as Allie hiccuped and wiped her face again with her hand. "I can't stand this happening to anyone. It just hurts so much."

Suddenly Erik couldn't stand it any more either. Right or wrong, he had to touch her, to offer the solace his humanity cried out to give.

Tentatively, some part of him fearing immediate reprisal, he slipped his arm around Allie. He squeezed her slim shoulder and stroked her arm, drawing her as close to the shelter of his body as the bucket seats and gear shift would allow. With as much care and gentleness as he would have

handled a priceless treasure, he brushed loose strands of red/gold hair away from her face, then used the rough pads of his fingers to wipe away the tears streaking her cheeks. Without realizing it, he murmured human words of love and comfort that came to him, effortlessly, from some deep well within. "It's all right, sweetheart. It's all right. You'll see. You're doing everything you can. Everything will be fine. Shhh now. Shhhh."

Allie's tears slowed, then quieted altogether as he held her close. Her breathing steadied and deepened, soothing her agitation and communicating a growing calmness that Erik could feel slowly invading his own body. How strange, he thought with wonder, that the simple act of offering consolation to some one you cared about could soothe your own turmoil. And make you feel closer, and more drawn to that person than ever.

Allie sniffed; she squirmed and pulled away, breaking the spell. With her back pressed against the door, she looked at him from under lashes studded with tears. "I guess I've destroyed my image as a hard-boiled reporter. Now you probably think I'm nothing but a cream puff."

Erik struggled to keep pace with the change of mood and her confusing words. "A cream puff? Isn't . . . don't you eat cream puffs?"

Allie sputtered, then hiccuped. She laughed and grasped his hand. “Oh, Erik. You’re unbelievable. I just meant I collapse into tears easily.”

“Losing a son or a daughter is not a small thing,” Erik replied solemnly. He started when he realized what he’d said, but he didn’t take it back. Because it was true, and even his Zalian detachment couldn’t make him pretend otherwise.

“I know.” Allie sniffed. She looked down at Erik’s hand, then back up at him. Though she had stopped crying, her eyes still glittered with tears. “I know. I think about what it would be like if my sister and her husband lost one of the twins. Or how my parents would have suffered if Wanda or I had disappeared. I know how they would feel. I know how I would feel. It would be awful, just awful.”

For one long moment, Erik felt her sorrow. And deep within him he knew that *she* knew that he understood, and somehow was comforted by that knowledge.

Allie squeezed Erik’s hand. She managed a crooked smile. Erik couldn’t prevent the somersaulting of his heart.

Without warning Allie leant forward and kissed him on the mouth, with a gentleness and

sweetness that filled him with awe.

She leaned back against the door. Her eyes, still glittering with tears, shone brightly. "Thank you Erik. Thank you for . . . just for being here."

Erik blinked. He didn't know what to say or do. He didn't know how to cope with his soaring heart, with all the things he wanted to say to her, with his fierce desire to touch her.

Silently he turned back to the steering wheel, put the car into gear and stepped on the gas.

The week sped by in a flurry of research, tracking down friends and relatives of the missing people, completing emotionally-draining interviews, and making the daily phone call to Cody's mother. As a result of Allie's training and the demands of the job, she managed to maintain her composure throughout.

But it was more than that, she thought as she and Erik drove to the last of the interviews Friday afternoon. She glanced at him and then couldn't help smiling. He always drove with absolute concentration, and with an assurance that was awe-inspiring given the short time he had spent in Chicago.

No, she thought again, Erik was equally responsible for her ability to pull off these

interviews this week. His quiet presence had been like a rock, steady and supportive. He'd said little, but she'd known without doubt that he understood how the pain of the people left behind had cut into her heart. And through the week, through the heart-rending interviews, her respect and liking for him had grown day by day despite her resistance.

Could there ever be anything between them? she wondered, the ever-present hum and increasing attraction to Erik pushing itself forefront into her mind. No, she thought resolutely. It's just because they'd spent so much time together this week. It was always like that when you worked with someone on a highly-charged story. It—

The abrupt careening of the Jag into a minuscule parking space on a narrow street off Milwaukee Avenue cut off her thoughts. Allie looked around. This was it. The street where Eva Bukowski's only surviving brother lived.

She reached for the canvas backpack holding her notebooks and pens. Her hand settled on the door handle just as Erik touched her arm. She looked up. It struck her again how much she liked Erik's face, with his steady gray eyes, his broad cheekbones and wide generous mouth. How could

she ever have thought he was expressionless. “Yes?”

“Are you sure you want to go through with this interview? They’re starting to get repetitious.”

“Repetitious?” Allie couldn’t have been more surprised if he’d struck her. “Repetitious?” she repeated, dumbstruck. “What do you mean, repetitious?”

Erik shrugged, his expression revealing nothing. “This is the fourth time this week you’ve interviewed friends or relatives of missing people. Don’t you think you have enough material already?”

Allie was flabbergasted. Had he been bored all week? Had she mistaken support for mere acquiescence?

“No, I don’t,” she retorted. “Each story is different. And this one—Eva Bukowski’s disappearance—is the most interesting of them all.”

“But the reactions are always the same,” Erik persisted. “Horror. Loss. They can’t forget. It’s ruined their lives.”

“So?” Though Allie had recovered from her initial surprise, she was puzzled by Erik’s sudden resistance and his apparent dismissal of the strong emotions they’d recorded this week.

“Besides, they aren’t exactly the same. And anyway, it’s only three columns. Sometimes repetition is good.”

Allie opened the door and got out. After the car’s air-conditioning, the afternoon heat seemed to swallow her, almost cutting off her breath. She forced herself to breathe, then looked around through the waves of shimmering heat at the street so like the one she grew up on. The two and three-story houses were packed closely together, their tiny front yards marked off with wire and wood fences and everything from vegetable gardens to towering sunflowers and masses of flowers. Competing aromas of cooking dinners fought for her attention, bringing with them an unexpected wave of homesickness.

She turned back to the car. When Erik made no move to get out, she opened the door and peered at him. “Well, aren’t you coming?”

“No.”

“What do you mean ”no”? You have to come.”

“I can’t see the point of another head shot of a grieving relative.” He pressed his lips together.

Allie sighed, and pushed her hair away from her face. She was starting to wilt under the intense heat. “Come on Erik. Don’t go all *primadonna* on me now,” she said. “This is the last photo for this

series and I need it.

Erik didn't move. His expression didn't change.

Suddenly exasperated, Allie pushed forward the seat and grabbed for Erik's camera bag. "All right then. I'll take the photo myself."

"No." With lightning speed, Erik turned and grasped her wrist.

Shocked, Allie stared at him, nose-to-nose. ***Was the heat getting to Erik?*** And why, whenever she started to think she had him figured out, did he always throw her a curve ball?

After a strained moment, Erik relented. His angry gaze calmed, and he released her wrist. "All right," he said without expression. "I'll take the photo of the brother. But only one. Try not to stretch this interview out any longer than a few minutes."

More puzzled than ever, Allie watched as Erik retrieved his camera bag, eased his long body out of the car, unlatched the low wire gate, and strode up the narrow walk to the Bukowski's house. He turned at the foot of the gray wooden porch, and waited, unusual impatience etched across his face.

Allie walked slowly towards the house, pondering Erik's change of attitude. Were these

interviews getting to him more than she'd realized? Was there even more feeling behind that stoic exterior than she'd realized? Or was he just bored and impatient?

After a brief knock, the door was opened by a plump, elderly woman. With her lined face, her white hair tied back in a bun and a clean but worn apron, she reminded Allie of her own mother.

"Miss Stanislawski?"

When Allie nodded, the woman smiled kindly. "My husband is waiting for you in the living room." She lead them through a small kitchen to an equally tiny living room, where a twenty-nine-inch television in an imposing wood console dominated the room.

On an old, well-cared-for couch sat a man of close to eighty years. Despite his age, and the continuing hip problems Allie had been told had left him immobile, he held his large frame erect. The heavy blunt hands of a man who had been a butcher all his life sat unmoving in his lap. Intelligent eyes regarded them from a pale, hollow-cheeked face sporting an immaculately-groomed mustache.

"Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Bukowski." Allie took the seat beside him. She glanced at Erik, but he was already down on one knee, opening his

camera bag.

She returned her attention to George Bukowski, who had been sixteen when his sister disappeared. Mr. Bukowski picked up a cracked and yellowed chocolate box from the arm of the couch. "Yes," he said, his voice quavering, "and I found this box of old photos for you, too. I hadn't seen a lot of these for years."

"Oh, that's wonderful." Allie leaned forward. With shaking fingers, the old man unearthed a trove of family photos. She saw Eva, and later George and his brother Michael, as babies, as young children, and as teenagers. She watched Eva bloom from a chubby, smiling baby, to a shy youngster, to a sweetly beautiful young woman, all of it in the bosom of a hard-working, happy family. And then the pictures stopped.

Allie swallowed, trying to bottle the emotion that had surfaced again and again during the last few days of the most painful interviews she'd ever undertaken. Then, with a gentle but thorough approach, she began a series of questions to elicit the events surrounding Eva's disappearance, and her family's reaction.

As the questions became more pointed, the old man's eyes filled with tears. His voice quavered, and a hitherto undetected Polish accent surfaced.

“After she was gone, it was like a hole in my life. A hole nothing could fill. Always I wondered. If only I’d been there. Maybe I could have stopped it. Maybe they would have taken me instead of her. And my parents. They never recovered. It’s what killed them. Both of them died within a few years.”

Allie bit her lip against the ache that invaded her heart with each retelling of the story, each one the same yet so different. She swallowed again, trying to gather her thoughts for the next question, when the old man continued.

“What especially hurt my parents were the neighbors who claimed my sister had been abducted by Martians,” he said with a disgust that still held strong after all these years. His bottom lip curled. “They claimed to have seen a stranger and some kinda spaceship hovering over the house. They babbled on about an odd blue light—”

A crash cut off Allie’s exclamation of surprise. She turned to see Erik, pale and grim-faced, retrieving his camera from the floor. She frowned. It wasn’t like him to be clumsy.

Anxious to hear more, she turned back to Mr. Bukowski. “What? There was nothing about that in the papers?”

“That’s right. Because it was garbage. Just fool idiots who’d had too much to drink that night. The

story didn't go anywhere because the police knew it was foolishness from a couple of drunks. But it hurt my parents all the same."

"Oh my, ***Jurek!***"

Mrs. Bukowski, bearing a tin tray of tea and cookies, stood in the archway from the kitchen to the living room. She was staring at Erik, who had lowered his camera at her exclamation.

"Look! Look at the young man," she said, her voice rising with excitement.

Mr. Bukowski turned to look at Erik. So did Allie.

"Doesn't he look just like our grandson Peter?"

CHAPTER NINE

Erik couldn't breathe. The sensation of three sets of eyes watching him, waiting for some acknowledgment of Mrs. Bukowski's innocent comment, was unbearable.

The seconds ticked by in the small, stifling room. Despite the heat, Erik could feel a trickle of cold sweat running down his back. He knew he should respond, knew he needed to shrug his shoulders or make some light comment.

But he couldn't do it. The will was there; his body refused.

Finally he managed to gulp down some air. Then, like a blind and deaf man, he ignored Allie and the Bukowskis— ***his great-uncle and aunt, by the stars***—picked up his camera bag and headed straight for the door.

Outside, he unlocked the Jaguar and hurled his camera bag into the back. As he slammed shut the door, he noticed the familiar blue glow emanating from his hand.

He cursed and shoved his hand into his pocket. The unsummoned glowing was a sign that he was completely out of control. Usually he could call

it—the physical indication that he was a member of the hereditary Zalian elite class—at will. But not now. Now it had taken on a life of its own.

He gritted his teeth and leaned against the car. He shut his eyes and desperately tried to force a rigid control over his careening thoughts and emotions, to shove the blue light back where it had come from.

He thought he had reasserted firm control over his weak human side earlier this week. Clearly he had failed. But why? After Allie had pointed out the similarity between him and his grandmother on Monday, he had prepared himself for a situation like the one that had just occurred. He thought he had been ready.

He was wrong. Nothing he'd told himself, none of the Zalian principles he had reviewed over and over, had prepared him for the pain he had witnessed this past week. Particularly the pain of his own great-uncle.

Eyes still shut, he clenched his fists. As a child, he'd been frightened, then moved by his grandmother's silent, bleak misery and that terrifying wail. But he'd never understood the depth of her misery, or the reasons for it, except in the most superficial way.

He opened his eyes and stared ahead unseeing. He no longer had that luxury. For the first time, he not only understood but felt to his core his grandmother's suffering and her wordless misery at the ripping away of all she held dear.

Despite the heat, a chill of awareness crept up his spine, along with a growing sense of horror. Knowing what he knew now, how could he proceed with his plans? What if he inflicted the same misery on Allie? Or something equally as dismal? He recalled the image revealed by the crystal.

He clamped his mouth shut against the cry of despair that welled up from deep inside.

"What the hell was that all about?"

Startled, Erik turned his head and looked at Allie. She stood beside him, hands on her hips. She wore a frown, and her emerald eyes narrowed dangerously.

He suppressed a grimace. He hadn't even heard her come up! More evidence of just how badly he was falling apart.

When he didn't respond, she dropped her bag to the ground. "Erik! What are you trying to do? Mess up my best interview? And that was such an innocent little comment by Mrs. Bukowski. Not much different than the one I made earlier in the week. Why did you run out like that? I know you

didn't want to be there in the first place, but . . .”

Her voice trailed off. Her expression changed with lightning speed from annoyance to surprise, and then alarm.

“You look terrible,” she said, her brow wrinkling. “Is something wrong?”

She stepped forward and placed a cool hand on his forehead. He steeled himself not to react. Unfortunately, the physical tug of destiny that had first appeared in Allie was now working on him, too. His expression impassive, he fought it.

She frowned again. “Well, you're not hot. But you look absolutely terrible. Like you've seen a ghost or something. What's the problem?”

He moistened his dry lips, trying to control his inner turmoil.

Allie's expression softened. Her eyes, always that inviting green, widened and gentled with concern. She touched his cheek with her fingertips.

“I want to know what's wrong,” she said softly. “Something *has* to be wrong. I can see it,” she insisted. “You're so quiet. You keep everything inside. Not like me. I go on about everything. But you keep everything to yourself. And that's not good. Something is bothering you and you should tell me.”

“Why?” The word came out a croak.

“Because maybe . . . maybe I could help. And even if I couldn’t, sometimes just talking about things, problems that are bothering you, helps.” She smiled self-deprecatingly. “I know I talk a lot, but I am a good listener. Especially when it’s important.”

Erik looked at the ground and fought against the tenderness he found harder and harder to resist. ***If she only knew***, he thought, falling back on the armor of bitterness. ***She wouldn’t be offering solace. Anything but.***

He raised his head once more, determined to slay her wasted concern with coldness. He made the mistake of waiting a moment too long, of letting the human tenderness he saw in her eyes envelope him, caress him, tempt him to let down his Zalian guard.

For one brief moment he faltered, teetering on the edge of what for him could only be a dangerous trap.

“No.” He turned away from those eyes, from the generosity and caring she offered. He turned away from the part of him that was human and was mutinously trying to connect with the one human being for whom he cared far too much. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

Beside him, Allie sighed. She moved closer. He held his breath, waiting for her to touch him. Wishing she would. Hoping she wouldn't.

When her fingertips tentatively brushed the inside of his elbow, he stiffened. Slowly, gently, she strengthened her grasp on his elbow, coaxing him to turn towards her. When he refused, she stepped in front of him, and he found himself looking into the tender sweetness of the one face that could lure him to disaster.

"Maybe not," she said quietly. She studied him. "But you still don't look well."

She glanced at the watch on her slim wrist. "It's already four thirty," she said. "I don't feel like going back and writing my column now. And by the time we get back to ***The Streeter*** it will be just about time to leave anyway."

She looked at him again. This time, her lips curved upwards and her eyes flashed impishly. "You don't look good, that's for sure. Maybe you're right. Talking won't work. But if that's the case, I know something else that ***will***. Come on."

The "something else" turned out to be dinner at the small and crowded two-story home of Allie's sister and brother-in-law in a neighborhood not far from the Bukowskis. Despite a suspicion that

he'd be better off far from Allie's disturbing concern, Erik had agreed to accompany her.

Allie had barely stepped into the narrow entrance way when two tow-headed children leapt upon her with blood-curdling yelps and whoops. Erik automatically stepped forward to intervene—until he realized Allie was laughing and hugging the boys.

He stepped back to the door, and sternly reminded himself of the importance of maintaining the proper distance from all humans. But he couldn't ignore the noisy reunion taking place before him, any more than he could ignore the blaring music making the walls shake around him, or ignore the most enticing aromas he'd ever experienced wafting through the hot muggy air of the tiny house. Curiosity got the better of him.

"What smells so good?" he asked at the precise moment the music cut out.

His voice boomed across the abrupt silence. Allie and the two boys turned to look. A woman wiping her hands on a pink flowered apron stepped into the hallway from the living room. "That's dinner," she said, smiling at Erik.

Taken by surprise, Erik found himself returning the smile of the woman who immediately reminded him of Allie. She was taller, and darker,

with a mass of rich brown curls tied back out of her face. But the green eyes and the sprinkle of freckles were identical, as well as the spirit of generosity that seemed to shine from her face.

In a vain attempt to shoo the boys away, the woman waved her apron at them. She turned back to Erik. "I'm Wanda," she said, offering a hand. He shook it.

She shot a look of mock menace at the giggling boys, who appeared to be about six years of age. "And the two wild ones here are Randy and Jason, otherwise known as the twins."

"I'm Jason," piped up the closer of the boys, his blue eyes glittering mischievously. "I'm Randy," added the other.

Wanda put her hands on her hips. "Randy! Jason! You should be ashamed of yourselves. Pulling that tired old trick again."

She looked at Erik. "They try to confuse anyone new by taking each other's names. Actually it's the opposite of what they told you."

She turned back to the boys. "Outside now. Supper's not for another hour. You go out and watch for your Dad. And behave yourselves. If you're not careful, I'll stamp your names on your foreheads with indelible ink."

With more ear-splitting whoops, the boys scampered around Erik and out the door. Wanda sighed as they left, and shook her head. "Those boys. I think they're worse when I'm off work in the summer than they are any other time." She turned to lead them into the house, then stopped.

"Allie, you haven't introduced me to your friend."

"You haven't given me a chance," Allie replied good-naturedly. She winked at Erik, then nodded at her sister. "Wanda, this is Erik. He's the new photographer at ***The Streeter*** I was telling you about."

"Nice to meet you." For a moment Wanda's green eyes, so disconcertingly familiar, rested on Erik. He had the uncomfortable feeling she was taking his measure, searching for some indication of who and what he was. After Mrs. Bukowski's recognition, he didn't need any more unpleasant surprises.

After a moment she cocked her head, and smiled again. She looked at Allie. "You would bring him here on the day our air conditioner decides to conk out, wouldn't you?" she chided. "Well, come in anyway. We can always go out the back, or sit on the porch if it gets too hot."

Some of Erik's tension dissipated. Wanda had

noticed nothing out of the ordinary, no disconcerting similarity to anyone else on Earth. Now, all he needed to do was imitate a sociable human attending a friend's family dinner.

He raised his chin, his confidence in himself and his Zalian beliefs reasserting itself. How hard could that be?

From his place at the head of the dining room table, Connor O'Brien winked at his wife sitting at the other end. Wanda smiled, and for a brief moment, her face lit up. Then she returned her attention to her dinner.

Erik said nothing. He continued eating the quickly-disappearing perogies, sauerkraut, shiskebobs and salad on his plate. But he noticed the subtle interplay between Allie's sister and her husband, just as he had noticed the myriad of ways in which they expressed their fondness for each other ever since Connor had arrived home from work.

Like much of the human body language of which Zalians had failed to grasp the significance, it was rarely anything overt. Rather it was the lift of an eyebrow, the tone of a voice, a teasing comment, all of them filled with a warmth and affection that would have been frowned upon in a

typical Zalian family.

“Randy! Quit playing with your sauerkraut! Jason—stop kicking your brother’s chair! You’ll never finish dinner at this rate.” Wanda’s reprimand was sharp, but not angry.

The boys shared a sly glance, then continued shoveling food into their mouths. They were neither cowed nor offended by their mother’s comment, and apparently complied out of good nature rather than fear of punishment.

Erik blinked, more confused than ever. Certainly, it was proper he observe and note this human interplay and affection. But why was it bothering him? Why was he experiencing this sense of loss—this *envy*—for affection he’d never had, for an emotional involvement he knew was weak and foolish?

Suddenly an image of a long-buried incident flashed into his head. No more than three, he’d slid on some gravel and scraped his knees and palms. Too young to realize crying was inappropriate, he had run wailing to his mother. Immediately, instinctively he assumed, his mother—his *half-human mother*—had wrapped her arms around him, hugging him close to her body, and kissing the top of his head.

Then his father had entered the room. His mother had released him, and set about mechanically cleaning and bandaging his scrapes and cuts. He remembered trying to insinuate himself back into his mother's comforting arms; he remembered the hurt and confusion when he was rebuffed. A confusion very much like the confusion he was experiencing now.

Erik raised his eyes from his plate, conscious of Allie's gaze on him. From her place beside him, she had abandoned eating. Instead, she was watching him, a puzzled look in her eyes.

When she realized he'd noticed her watching him, she flushed. Then, in a sassy acknowledgment of her behavior, she grinned. A wide grin, one that shone from her face and danced in her eyes. A grin, he realized with a jolt, that affected him with an intensity similar yet different from that long-ago hug.

Emotion rising in his chest, he watched her, greedy for more of the affection he'd seen at the table, the affection that now was being offered to him. He wanted to ask her why. He wanted to know how such a subtle thing as a touch or a smile could be so important.

"So what made you decide to become a photographer, Erik?"

Connor's question screeched into his consciousness. Reluctantly he transferred his gaze from Allie to Connor. He noted the friendly interest in his face, and relaxed. This was a simple question, not an inquisition. And though he had learned photography only for this mission, he had discovered he not only had a flare for it, he enjoyed it.

He put down his fork. "Images have always intrigued me," he said slowly, "probably because they can capture the essence of a person, or an idea, without the use of words."

He turned to Allie. "I could never be a reporter. I can't put people at ease the way Allie can. I can't find the right words to express things."

Allie flushed with pleasure. Erik was surprised at the rush of pleasure he felt in turn. For a moment he held Allie's gaze, then broke into a slow smile.

"I find it easier to remain at a distance, an observer and recorder of events."

"Maybe sometime you could take some pictures of Wanda." Connor shot an admiring glance at his wife.

"Yeah, they'd be better than the ones you take," Jason threw in with a grin.

Wanda frowned at the boy, but Connor only grinned.

"I'd be pleased to take Wanda's photo. You and the boys too," Eric replied solemnly.

He glanced at Allie. She was smiling proudly.

He started to smile back when the voice of reality intruded. ***You're not going to be here to take Wanda's photo,*** the voice said.

His chest tightened as he recognized the truth he did not want to accept. He wouldn't likely ever see these people again.

Neither, for that matter, would Allie.

Hot water for the dishes streamed into the old porcelain sink in the tiny kitchen. Wanda turned to face Allie. "So tell me," she said, "is Erik an escaped murderer or is he the man you're madly in love with?"

Allie almost dropped the pile of dirty plates she was carrying from the kitchen table to the counter. "Huh?"

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about." Wanda dropped glasses one by one into the sudsy water. She looked at Allie, who had deposited the plates on the counter. "I saw the way you looked at him all through dinner. You never took your eyes off him."

She swiped at a glass with the dishcloth. “I want to know whether you’re watching him because you’re afraid he’s going to steal the silverware.” She tapped a fork on the side of the sink. “By the way, it’s only stainless steel—or whether it’s because you’ve finally found your one and only.”

Despite the open windows and overhead fan, it was uncomfortably hot and steamy in the tiny kitchen. The temperature zoomed up another dozen degrees as Allie’s face flared red.

She swallowed. “Don’t be silly. I hardly know Erik. We’ve worked together, that’s all. And he doesn’t know anyone here so I thought—”

“Save it, sweetheart. This is your sister you’re talking to,” Wanda interrupted. “Besides, when have you ever brought a man home before? Even when **Mama** and **Tata** were alive you never brought anyone home. Never.”

Allie blinked. It was true. She’d never brought anyone male around to meet her family. Not even Cody. And they had been engaged, however briefly. But Erik? Why had she brought him here, now? She bit her lip as the implications of what she’d done struck home.

“Maybe not,” she said slowly. “But it doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

Wanda snorted. “Sure. I don’t know why you’re having so much trouble admitting the truth. I’m not Mama, you know. I’m not going to put him—or you—through the Inquisition to determine whether he’s suitable.” She paused and her eyes twinkled. “Besides, I’m sure it’s mutual.”

“What’s mutual?” Allie regretted the question immediately.

“The attraction, of course.” Wanda shrugged her shoulders and returned to washing the dishes. “How much you like Erik. And how much he likes you. It’s obvious he’s completely taken with you.”

“He is?” Despite herself, Allie’s spirits lifted. She forced out another question. “So, uh, so what do you think of him?”

“Erik?” Wanda smiled. “Nice. Very nice. And sharp. Do you know, besides you and Connor and I, he’s the first person able to distinguish between the boys right from the start?”

“He’s quiet too, not full of himself and everything he’s done. I like that. And his manners. Very quiet. Very old world. Are you sure he’s not Polish, or some other East European? His features are very East European.”

Allie shook her head. “No, he was born here.

German parents, he said.”

Wanda smiled. “Anyway, I think it’s about time you found yourself a nice man. And sexy as all get-out too.”

Allie turned away so her sister wouldn’t see the silly grin she could no longer suppress. Could her sister possibly be right? Did Erik really care for her?

CHAPTER TEN

Abruptly Allie awoke. In the darkness of her bedroom, she blinked until her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. She could have sworn someone called her name.

The last dredges of sleep evaporated. And not just anyone. A man. Erik. Erik had called her name. His low voice had interrupted the dream of childhood summer escapades that was fast receding from her consciousness.

She sat up. Her eyes scanned the dark room. The clock read 4:15 a.m. “Erik?” she whispered. “Erik?” From the other room, she heard Sharkey’s soft snoring.

Common sense told her Erik wasn’t there. How could he be? But in some strange way, his presence surrounded her, full of a warmth and caring she felt more strongly than ever. Even the weird buzz that always heralded his arrival had begun.

Regretfully, she shook her head. This feeling had to be nothing more than the result of the unrequited longing she’d taken to bed with her.

Despite her own yearning, despite her sister's comments, she still hadn't been able to bring herself to trust Erik. Ignoring the same desire she'd seen flash across his face, she'd sent him home disappointed and with nothing more than a smile.

She sighed heavily, lay back in the bed and closed her eyes. She squirmed about to get comfortable, then smiled ruefully to herself. Imagine thinking Erik was here?

As the minutes passed, she relaxed again and drifted on the edge of sleep. But the buzz in her head, instead of disappearing, grew louder and more insistent. Her head vibrated with the sound, and the vibrations spread outwards, down through her chest and belly, along her arms to her fingertips, down her legs to her toes. Her body tingled with an increasingly pleasant buzz of anticipation.

She sank deeper into the mattress, floating lazily on this strange, enticing sea of sensation. Behind her closed eyelids, a blue mist rose on the horizon, its color and energy intensifying as it grew closer.

As she watched, mesmerized, the mist gradually took on shape and form. A man, tall and strong and naked, his skin glowing blue in the

strange light, walked towards her, his gaze trained unwaveringly on her.

Allie held her breath. The man came closer and closer, but she couldn't see his face. Finally he reached her, then passed through her, around her, over her.

Bitter disappointment swept through Allie, momentarily blocking out the hum. ***Where had he gone? Why hadn't he stopped? Who was he?***

Tears pooled at the corners of her closed eyes. A lone tear trickled down her cheek.

Suddenly she stiffened. Gently a rough fingertip wiped the errant tear away and two strong hands framed her face. As she recognized his touch, her resistance faded. Erik. He had come.

She couldn't open her eyes. Her eyelids were heavy, her body was heavy and seemed unwilling to respond to her commands. Only to the ever more insistent hum of anticipation preparing every cell in her body for what was to come.

His mouth slanted over hers, gentle and lovingly, and intensifying the excitement building in her veins. The weight of his body, solid and lean, pinned her to the bed, the contact of naked skin to naked skin making her breath catch in her throat.

She arched her body, offering herself to the overwhelming emotion and sensation, silently begging for the thrilling touch of his lips. He dragged his lips from her mouth, and trailed kisses along her throat, and down to her breasts.

He cupped her breasts in his hands, and she gasped as her fingers massaged the firm flesh. The hum reached deafening proportions in her head, and with it a growing, pulsating need centering on her core. Her breath came shallower and faster, and his intoxicating taste and feel drove her close to madness. She wanted, as she'd never wanted before.

His mouth closed on her breast, sucking and licking and teasing and nipping until her nipples hardened and her hips began to undulate with building excitement. ***Where was he? Why couldn't she touch him? She wanted him so much.***

Her shallow breath came faster still until she felt as if she couldn't breathe. His hands, fever hot, slid down her hips and slowly parted her legs. He stroked the tender skin behind her knees, then his fingertips moved gently up her thighs.

The tickle of his lips started a slow, tortuous path up her inner thigh. She whimpered, her nerve endings begging for release, her whole body

straining towards the phantom lover who stayed just out of her reach.

The exquisitely inexorable trail of kisses continued up the sensitive silk of her thighs, whispering a heated story of want first on one leg, then the other. She moaned and writhed, trying simultaneously to escape and insinuate herself more deeply into his embrace.

The kisses stopped at the top of her thighs. Slowly, firmly, he parted her legs further still. She could hardly breathe.

"I love you Allie. You're the only one I've ever loved. You're everything I've ever wanted." His voice, low and loving, washed over her. She whimpered and strained towards him, her lips forming the word "Yes."

He lowered his head and—

Allie gasped and sat bolt upright. For a moment, she sat there, stunned and disoriented, not quite sure what had happened.

Whatever it was, it was over. Like a plug pulled on a light, her erotic dream had abruptly and completely stopped. Leaving her teetering on the edge of release, frustrated beyond belief, and aching for a man who wasn't here.

Disgruntled, Allie flung back the sheet and swung her feet to the floor. Wasn't it only men

who were supposed to need cold showers?

The glass of water teetered on the edge of the coffee table, then crashed to the floor, spraying Erik with water and shards of glass.

His eyes snapped open. He swore violently. By the moons of Zura, how could he have broken the connection with one stupid, careless motion? Especially when he was so close?

He brushed the shards of glass off his knee, oblivious to the bloodied scratches there, as well as the beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. He stood up. Totally non-Zalian frustration seethed from every pore. He tossed the small black device he held in his other hand onto the bed. It was no good to him now. Making love to Allie telepathically had drained every ounce of his energy. Even with the magnifying power of his Zalian communicator, he could not reach across the distance separating them again tonight.

He clenched his fists and strode to the sliding doors. Besides, he didn't want to make love to Allie telepathically. He wanted to jump in his car, drive to her apartment, rush through her door, and make love to *her*. To the person, not the thought in his head, however real that might have seemed!

In full knowledge that he was acting far too

human, he took a deep breath to calm himself. What had come over him? Why was he acting like this?

He'd stood at her door just a few short hours ago, certain she would ask him in. Affection and longing had shone from her eyes. He knew it as surely as he knew anything. They had fueled the yearning in his own heart.

But still she had turned him away. Something about trust, and the past, was the best he'd been able to garner from a shaky probe of her mind.

Disappointed beyond anything he'd experienced before, he'd returned home. But he couldn't sleep. Finally he remembered a telepathic tool he'd all but forgotten, one he'd never used before. It was possible, with enough concentration, and the additional power of the communicator, to insert yourself into another being's mind. To make that person actually believe you were really present. To make her know what you knew, feel what you felt, taste what you tasted, smell what you smelled. Want what you wanted.

He'd convinced himself he was doing it in the interests of destiny. That it was just another plank in his strategy to break down Allie's defenses and win her for his mate.

But deep within he'd known, even then, he was

lying. To himself, and to every Zalian ideal he'd ever believed in.

Making love to Allie had nothing to do with destiny. It had nothing to do with Zalia.

He wanted to make love to Allie because he wanted her. Because he needed her.

Because she spoke to a need imbedded deep within him, as no one and nothing had before or ever would again.

Bright and early Monday morning Allie sat at her desk, sorting through the mail and phone messages she'd ignored Friday, and again Saturday when she came in to write up her interview with George Bukowski. But despite outward appearances, her mind was not on her work. It was on Erik.

Where **was** he?

Disgruntled she looked around the newsroom. So far everyone seemed to have arrived except Erik. He had worked all weekend, but she was certain he wasn't off until tomorrow. She wanted to see him.

The irony was not lost on her. Unable to truly believe he cared about her, she was the one who'd sent him away Friday night with no more than a

smile. Only to think about him constantly for the next two days. Only to dream about him in embarrassingly erotic detail, with a realism that still left her aching deep inside.

After another quick look around the newsroom, Allie sighed and began opening the mail. The first piece was an invitation to the opening of a recreation center for troubled teens. That might be the starting point for an interesting column, but whether she got to it or not depended on what happened with the Cody investigation. So far only one potentially useful call had been sparked by the unexplained disappearances columns, and she was interviewing the woman this morning. Besides that she'd had two calls from deep breathers and a third from a man who'd rambled on about aliens and UFOs and some nonsense about life forces and how she had to be careful not to disturb them. It had taken more than twenty minutes to get rid of him.

She forced her attention back to the mail, quickly opening, scanning and disposing of most of it. When the phone rang, she grabbed for it.

"Allie, there's a Grace Firetta here to see you. Says she has an appointment."

Allie glanced at her date book. "Right. 9:30 a.m. You can send her up."

Allie put down the receiver. She certainly hoped Firetta had something useful to offer. When the woman had called last Friday to say she had information about Cody's disappearance, Allie had tried to question her, but she had refused to talk about it over the phone. Only in person, she had insisted over and over.

Allie shuffled through the papers on her desk to find her notebook. A blast of buzzing in her head, like the clicking on of a radio alarm clock, made her jump, sending a sheaf of papers to the floor and attracting puzzled glances from nearby reporters.

Muttering to herself, Allie got up and collected the paperwork from the floor. Erik was certainly here now, she thought with a grimace. Between that dratted buzzing and the instantaneous longing that overcame her, like an itch she couldn't scratch, she **knew** he was here. How or why she didn't know. She just knew it was the way it was.

Straightening, she saw Erik standing outside one of the editorial offices, a camera strung over his shoulder, another camera and flash around his neck. Immediately her breath caught and her tension zoomed skyward. Unlike Erik, she thought with annoyance, who apparently hadn't even

noticed her existence. His profile to her, he listened attentively to whatever the photo editor Doug Long was telling him.

“Miss Stanislawski?”

Papers clutched in her hands, Allie turned around, expecting to see the woman called Grace Firetta. Instead, a small, bespectacled man stood before her. The first thing Allie noticed about him was the side part just above his ear, and the strands of black hair carefully arranged to cover his bald pate. That, and the fact that despite the summer heat, he was wearing a grey trench coat buttoned and belted shut.

“Uh, yes. Can I help you?” Allie dropped the papers on her desk, and moved towards her chair.

“I’m Klaus Klassen.” The man smiled, displaying wide-spaced, yellow teeth. Beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead.

“Yes?” She nodded, then glanced at her watch. Firetta should be here any minute.

“I’ve been reading your column ever since you started two months ago.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear that. Was there anything specific you wanted to ask me about?” Fans were great, but Allie preferred communicating with them by letter.

“Yes, actually. Your latest columns. Last

week's. The ones about people who disappeared. And the interview with the psychic."

Allie looked more closely at Mr. Klassen, a faint uneasiness taking hold. What exactly did he want to talk about?

"I don't like them."

Allie suppressed a groan. Was this another crazy, come to harangue her about some perceived slight or oversight in her column? Why was it always her? Why not Kate? And how did **her** crazies always manage to get past security?

Summoning patience, she stood up straighter. "If I've made a factual error, I'll be happy to correct it. But if it's strictly that you don't like what I've written, then I'm afraid there's nothing I can do."

"You don't understand." The man leapt forward, his eyes flickering rapidly behind his tortoise-shell glasses. "It's not right what you're doing."

For the first time Allie noticed the pastiness of his skin. Was it her imagination, or were his eyes glassy, too? "What?" she asked, then could have bitten her tongue. It was always foolish to encourage this kind of conversation.

"Digging up the past. Disturbing the dead. Unbalancing the forces of life. You must stop immediately."

A light clicked inside Allie's head. Could this be

the same man who had called last week, rambling on about the forces of life? She'd have to get rid of him, fast. She didn't have time to listen to him now.

She nodded towards the doors to the hallway. "Thank you very much Mr. Klassen." She moved closer, preparing to escort him to the door. "But I've got another interview right now and—"

"Don't touch me." The man jumped back and glared at her. "You're not taking this seriously. I told you. You can't fool with the forces of life. You—"

"Mr. Klassen, I'm sorry but you'll have to go."

Suddenly the man pulled a black, dull object from his pocket. It wasn't until he held it trained on her chest that she realized what it was. A revolver. Pointed straight at her.

Her eyes widened. She gulped.

"No," the little man screamed. He waved the gun wildly about, his face contorted with anger and hate. "I'm not going until you listen to me. I'm not going until you print the truth. Until you tell your readers about the forces of life."

Fear froze Allie to the spot. It stole her voice, and her ability to do anything but stare at the short barrel of the gun pointed straight at her. She was vaguely conscious of the silence that had

fallen on the newsroom but she was afraid to take her eyes off the man before her.

Finally she managed to make her parched mouth work. “I —uh—maybe we could talk—”

“I don’t want to talk,” screamed the man. He held the gun with both hands and aimed it straight at her heart. “What I want is the truth. From you. From all of the lying media who—”

A blinding light flashed from behind Allie. The man threw up his arms to protect his eyes. Allie felt a movement beside her and saw the rush of another body she registered only afterwards as Erik’s.

Suddenly Klassen was tumbling to the ground, in a confusion of arms and legs, and a cacophony of voices and sounds.

Allie sagged onto her desk.

Erik noticed the man the moment he entered the newsroom. Maybe it was his pallid complexion and the out-of-place trench coat in the summer heat. Or maybe it was the dogged look on the man’s face, and the fact that, after a quick look around, he headed straight for Allie.

Despite his conversation with Doug, Erik started drifting towards Allie’s desk. Listening to Doug, but watching the man in the trench coat, he

registered his halt in front of Allie's desk.

Doug continued talking, oblivious to the fact they were moving along. Erik's eyes narrowed. So far nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps the man simply had an appointment with Allie.

Erik kept moving until he and Doug stood about five feet away from Allie's desk. So far the man appeared harmless, but Erik's inner sense of something amiss made him wary. He tried to tune into the man's thoughts, but found it difficult to listen to Doug too.

Doug waved his hand expansively. "I'd like to try you out on some sport's pictures, maybe on the Bull's games later this week. We always need good pics for the sports section."

Erik diverted his attention from Allie and her visitor to Doug. It couldn't have been for more than a second or two. But when he looked back, what he saw wrenched his gut with fear.

The man's face contorted with rage; his eyes bulged behind his glasses. But what struck terror into Erik as nothing else had was the small blunt weapon in the stranger's hand. It was only an Earth weapon, but it was trained directly, and at close range, on Allie.

The man's scream cut through the usual newsroom commotion. A hush fell over the room.

Heads peeked around or over baffles, then fell still. Reporters and editors stood unmoving by their desks.

The surge of fear set off another reaction, one far more powerful and primal than anything Erik had ever experienced. The urge to fight for what was his, to protect Allie with his life.

“I don’t want to talk,” the man screamed.

Carefully, slowly, so as not to attract notice, Erik raised the camera and flash around his neck. He didn’t have time to reach for the film canister in his pocket that disguised a tiny but highly effective Zalian immobilizer.

The man waved the gun wildly. “What I want is the truth. From you. From all the—”

Erik aimed the flash at the man’s eyes. He depressed the shutter release.

Then, with cold fury, he leapt straight for the man’s throat.

At the news conference hastily arranged by Nate that afternoon, Allie saw Erik for the first time since he’d streaked past her to tackle Klassen. The man had been subdued, the police had arrived, and in the flurry of police interviews, statements, and questions from fellow reporters,

she hadn't had a chance to thank him.

Now, for a brief moment before they filed into the boardroom where the radio and TV reporters had set up their mikes, lights and cameras, they were alone.

"Are you all right?"

Erik cupped her elbow with a gentleness Allie had never seen in him before. She looked up into dark, usually shuttered eyes. Eyes that today brimmed with a fierce protectiveness that brought her to the edge of tears.

Her heart rose to her throat. She nodded, unable to speak. No man had ever shown the slightest inclination to do *anything* for her before. Certainly no man had ever risked his life for her. Until now. Until Erik. The Erik whom she had refused to trust, whom she had refused to believe could actually care about her.

Swallowing the lump, and blinking back tears, she turned and followed Nate and Doug into the boardroom.

The room blazed with lights for the TV cameras. A hush fell over the room as they seated themselves at a table at the front.

Nate, who had orchestrated the event to gain the utmost in publicity for *The Streeter*, greeted

the reporters and began the conference with a brief statement of fact. He said the paper had already reviewed its security measures and was instituting new controls to protect its employees and prevent another situation like this from occurring. Then he turned the conference over to Allie.

Allie outlined what had happened from the time Mr. Klassen had arrived at her desk. She spoke matter-of-factly, and with confidence. Erik's steady presence at her side seemed to calm her jitters and bolster her courage.

Briefly, but trying not to give away too much of the first-person account she had written for Nate and ***The Streeter***, she talked about how scared she'd been, and how relieved when the man had been disarmed.

Finally, impulsively, she turned to Erik. She looked into his calm, angular face, his eyes drawing her like a magnet. "But this is the person you should be talking to, not me. He's the one who saved my life."

For a moment she forgot the reporters, Nate, the press conference. The lights faded away. She had eyes for Erik only. "He's the one who's done something . . . heroic," she said huskily.

A glimmer of a smile touched Erik's eyes before

he turned to face the barrage of questions.

"Tell us, Mr. Berenger, why did you notice Klassen?"

"Erik! What made you think to use the flash to blind Klassen?"

"Weren't you afraid? Were you aware the gun was loaded?"

Allie's heart expanded with pride at the way Erik answered each question, direct and to the point, without any self-preening or arrogance.

"It was Klassen's coat that first caught my attention. That and the fact he knew exactly where he was going."

"I'm a photographer. Using the flash came naturally."

"I didn't have time to be scared for myself. But I was afraid . . . afraid that Al—Miss Stanislawski would be hurt."

After the flood of questions slowed to a trickle, a statuesque blonde TV reporter noted for her sensational takes on mundane stories stood up. In her usual manner, Natasha Klein waited until she had the room's attention, then let loose her most flirtatious smile on Erik.

"Mr. Berenger," she cooed, "what you did today was truly heroic. Tell me, do you make it a practice to rescue damsels in distress?"

Erik's eyes narrowed. "It hasn't been necessary before."

Natasha's smile turned lascivious. "Ahh, but if it was? You'd be the first one to stop if I had a flat tire on the freeway, right? A real knight in shining armor."

When Erik did not respond, the woman sashayed forward until she reached the table where he and Allie sat. She rested her hands on the table and leaned forward until her ample bosom was almost under Erik's nose.

"Tell me, Mr. Berenger, do you have a girlfriend?"

"No." Erik looked startled by the question.

"Well, I'm sure that won't be a problem any more." Natasha turned to face her station's camera, positioning herself beside Erik and effectively cutting Allie out of the picture. She smiled brightly. "I know all our single female viewers will be just dying to meet you after this. It's not every day a woman gets to meet a real old-fashioned knight."

With a parting wink for the camera, Natasha sauntered back to her place and sat down with a satisfied smirk. Allie struggled to hide her irritation. ***What an attention-seeking flirt!***

But Natasha was right, Allie conceded after a

moment's consideration. Her gaze met Erik's once more. There, in the steady, gray depths, she saw the concern and caring she'd questioned for so long.

Natasha was right, she thought again, with growing conviction. Erik **was** a knight in shining armor.

But the reporter was wrong too. Allie's stomach muscles tightened and she bit her lip.

Because if Erik was anyone's knight, he was her knight and hers alone.

Erik couldn't help it. As the elevator to Allie's apartment left the garage level, he stole another look.

A wave of relief overwhelmed him, the same feeling he'd experienced every time he'd glanced at Allie this afternoon, ever since that crazed man had pointed a loaded gun at her. She was safe. She was all right.

Again his gaze slid over her. Relief welled up in him again, filling his throat, squeezing his chest. He didn't even try to control it. If she had been killed . . . his mind refused to even consider the possibility.

He glanced at her once more. In spite of the jaunty attitude her pink silk jacket and tight blue

jeans fought to project, she looked smaller and more vulnerable than ever. The sprinkling of freckles across her nose was more evident than usual in her pale face, the eyes larger and more luminous. She turned slightly and smiled at him, her face lighting up and making his chest tighten. The thought of losing that sweetness, losing that affection, was unbearable.

The elevator came to a jerky stop. The doors opened. Allie stepped out into the hallway.

Erik swallowed, then followed her. Suddenly, from the deep recesses of his mind where events and emotions had buried it, came a thought purely Zalian in origin. Now was the perfect time—the perfect time to put into motion the final stages of his strategy to win Allie and complete his destiny.

He had saved her life, and he could see not only gratitude, love and admiration, but most important of all, trust, shining from her eyes. What better time to take her into his arms, to mate with her, then to transport her to the waiting Idlanta III and ultimately Zura and his Zalian home?

Something inside him rebelled, recoiled from what was surely only a practical end to all his planning. Suddenly what was only Zalian common sense seemed somehow odious, offensive.

Not that he didn't want Allie. Not that he didn't want to take her right now, to hold her in his arms and never let her go. He could hardly prevent himself from crushing her to his chest, from possessing everything about her he held dear.

But not now. Behind her, Erik's step slowed. To take her now, with trust and love shining in her face, would be the ultimate betrayal. And Zalia be damned!

Allie opened the door to her apartment. She turned to look at Erik. "You are coming in, aren't you?"

"No." Erik forced out the refusal. He wanted to come in, to make love to Allie, more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. But he couldn't. He wouldn't.

Surprise, then disappointment, flitted across her far too open face. She lowered her eyes, bit her lip, then looked up at him again. "I really don't want to be by myself right now."

She said nothing more. She didn't have to. Her green eyes, shimmering with a naked plea, spoke for her.

"All right. But just for a while." Erik tried to convince himself he could walk through that door, stay for a few minutes, and then leave without

touching Allie. He tried to ignore the thrum of excitement growing in his veins, the electrical anticipation he could taste on his lips and hear humming insistently in his head. The physical symptoms of destiny that had tested Allie so severely. He did not miss the irony of it.

Inside, Allie tossed her purse on the couch, shrugged out of the silk jacket, and headed straight for the refrigerator. Erik watched her from the spot just inside the door where he had uneasily stationed himself.

Allie flung open the fridge door. Her head disappeared inside. Her muffled voice echoed through the apartment. "I'm dying of thirst. I feel like I've been talking all day."

Her head surfaced over the door. In triumph she held high a red plastic jug. "***Voila!*** Lemonade. Would you like some?"

"Please." Maybe a cold drink would cool him off, douse the wanting growing in him second by second.

Allie filled two tall glasses, then swung over to him. He took the glass she offered. As he did, their fingers touched for a split second. Sparks seemed to shoot through him, burning the tenuous threads of his control. He almost dropped the drink.

Over the top of the sweat-beaded glass, Allie smiled. “To you,” she said, lifting her lemonade higher. Their eyes met. Her thick, dark lashes brushed her cheeks, then she looked up again. “To my hero,” she whispered huskily. “Like Natasha said, you’re a real knight.”

A lump settled in Erik’s throat. He swallowed. “I’m not a hero.” But it was impossible to resist the pull of her eyes. No one had ever looked at him like that. No one had ever said, the way Allie was saying with her eyes, with her words, with her body, that he was wonderful.

With one long gulp, he drained his glass. The ice-cold lemonade did nothing to quell the powerful yearning inside.

He set down the glass. “I’d better go.” ***And quickly, too.*** Before he took her while she was under the false impression he was heroic. Before he hurt her more than he’d ever thought possible. Before he turned the most precious gift he’d ever been given into the mere means to an end.

Allie set her glass aside. In the wide set green eyes was a puzzled, hurt look. She lifted her chin, exposing the slim vulnerability of her bare neck and shoulders above the figure-hugging tank top.

“But . . . but I haven’t thanked you yet.”

Her husky voice rasped across his nerves, like

the play of a bow across a tightly-strung violin.

"You don't need to thank me. I couldn't let you be hurt." Erik avoided her gaze. He couldn't look at her, couldn't let her get too close. He turned to the door.

"I want to apologize too."

"Apologize?" Erik turned back. "Why?"

Allie looked at him, then flushed, but didn't look away. "I thought you were a user. Like . . . like . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Erik knew she meant Cody.

"I didn't want to trust you. Even when . . . But now I know I was wrong. And I'm sorry."

The honesty of her words hit him like a slap. "You have nothing to be sorry about," he said quickly. Because she was wrong. He **was** a user, and had helped her and saved her only to achieve his destiny.

But even as he forced himself to face the truth, something inside him cried out in denial. ***It isn't like that***, he thought. ***It just isn't.***

Allie approached him, until she was standing only inches away. She placed one slim hand on the wall to the right of him, effectively blocking his way. He breathed in the warm, enticing scent of the woman standing far too close.

“I thought you liked me,” she whispered, her eyes dark and questioning.

“I do.” ***More than anything.***

Something in her expression changed, became more wistful. She placed her other hand on the wall to the left of him. “I thought you wanted me.”

Again Erik tried to ignore the need burning in her eyes, the same need burning inside him, and urging him to forget everything but her. He knew what he should do, for her sake if not his. But he didn’t want to deny her, or the truth either.

“I do.”

Her lips curved upwards and she rose on tiptoe. “Good. Because I think we’ve already wasted enough time.”

Her mouth claimed his, with a gentle sweetness that was more welcome than any award he would ever receive on Zura. He sank into the kiss eagerly, shutting out his doubts, letting his mind, heart and body concentrate on Allie, and only Allie.

He clasped her waist and drew her closer. The touch of her fingers in his hair, the warmth of her arms around his neck, made him hungry for more. Her mouth opened under his and he took the sweetness she offered only to him, took what he had wanted far more than he dared admit. Zalia,

destiny, it could all wait. This moment was his, and Allie's.

His hands rose from her hips, exploring and caressing the curves and softness beneath the thin cotton tank top she wore. Her tiny gasp of response and the arch of her body towards him sent passion exploding through him like a fireball.

No longer caring about detachment, about Zalian principles, he slid her top upwards, following its ascent with his lips, drinking in the intoxicating taste of which he couldn't seem to get enough. Unerringly he found the front fastening of her white lacy bra and released it, exposing the full rosy firmness of her small breasts, the nipples awaiting the attention of his fingers and lips.

For a moment he just looked, unable to believe her beauty, the perfection of body he'd left untouched so long. His eyes never leaving her, he stepped back and quickly removed his shirt. He stopped when his hands reached his belt buckle.

Allie's beautiful lips curved upwards in a teasing smile. Mimicking his actions, she undid the snap on her jeans, and slid them off, leaving herself clad only in a tiny swath of white lace.

She took one step towards him. She placed her hands on his, and moved them aside. She undid

the clasp of the belt, the metal button at the top of his jeans and then, with a flourish, pulled down the zipper.

For a moment she caressed the hard flesh within, then her hands rose up his furred chest, setting off tiny brush fires wherever they stopped. Roughly Erik grasped her bottom, pressing her softness against his hardness, moaning with the touch of her peaked breasts against his skin.

His mouth closed over hers once more, tasting, and exploring and loving. With his hands, with his body, with his heart and soul, he tried to communicate the depth of inexpressible feeling he felt for her. If it was wrong, he didn't care. If he would pay for it later, he didn't care.

The last of their clothes fell to the floor as Erik's mouth joined hers with a passion he could feel in every part of him. His need fueled hers and she responded with increasing passion.

Allie's knees almost gave out as naked body pressed against naked body. The touch of his skin against hers, the grazing of her breasts against the springy hair of his chest took her breath away, melting her bones and making her desperate for even more intimate contact.

Her swollen lips seemed to vibrate with the hum buzzing crazily and ever louder through her

body. Her lips parted hungrily under Erik's, opening herself to his love, like a flower to the rain.

Her heart and soul cried for his touch, for his kisses, to be as close to him as humanly possible. Her hands held his head, tangled in his hair, every touch sending her closer to the eye of the storm. Her breasts tingled with excitement, an excitement that was pooling steadily and unremittingly in her core.

Beneath half-closed eyelids, she saw a faint blue light, like a mist, enveloping them in a strangely erotic glow. The light strengthened with each beat of their hearts, with each ragged breath, growing steadily with their passion and love until the whole room seemed bathed with it.

Through their kisses, through the fevered touch of their bodies, Allie could feel Erik's love burning its way to her heart, branding her as his.

The electrical buzz speeded up crazily as he caressed her breasts, then slowly dragged his hands along the sensitized skin of her rib cage to her waist.

His hand slid between her legs. She gasped. He began stroking her, and exquisite pleasure rippled outwards in ever widening circles. He gripped her hair and his mouth claimed hers over and over.

Then his fingers slipped inside her, coaxing forth the liquid gold, driving her closer to the fiercest part of the storm. Unable to stay still, she responded wildly, simultaneously racing headlong towards what she wanted most and struggling to avoid it.

The hum vibrating through her body rose and rose and rose, and along with it the intensity of the blue light. Allie squirmed under the exquisite torture, sweet, unbearable anticipation thrumming through her body.

Finally Erik cupped her buttocks and pressed her against the exposed brick wall. Her legs straddled his waist and she opened herself completely to him and everything he offered.

He thrust inside her; for a heartbeat she thought she'd died of pleasure. She murmured and arched against him, her fingers tangling in his hair. "Erik. Don't stop. Not now," she managed between ragged breaths.

Slowly he began to thrust in and out, each movement pushing the tension past all bearable levels, and warning of the conflagration to come.

Allie rose to meet him, her pulsating, humming body encasing him, drawing him out, spiraling them both closer to the release they sought.

The storm within her grew darker, the heaviness in the air thick and unbreathable, every nerve and sensitive ending stretched to the breaking point. In her head thunder rumbled ominously.

Lightning struck with all the pent up power, violence, and frightening beauty of a summer storm. Release shot through Allie like a flash of ball lightning, scorching everything in its path.

Teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, she screamed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For one terrifying moment, Erik's heart stopped. He clapped a hand over Allie's mouth, cutting off the blood-curdling shriek midstream.

Gasping for breath, he surveyed her with alarm. Had he hurt her? Was there some kind of painful sexual incompatibility between Earthlings and Zalians, even one who was part Earthling? Something no one had told him?

Tentatively he released his hand from her mouth. The frantic pounding of his heart echoing in his ears, he searched her face and her naked, beautiful body. Her eyes were shut, her breathing ragged, but she was still alive. Her lovely, rounded breasts and her flat stomach, above the enticing golden curls around her most intimate parts, were flushed, and she trembled slightly. But her arms still clasped his neck, her supple legs still rode his hips. And was that a faint smile that curved her kiss-swollen lips?

Unable to contain his concern, he wriggled experimentally inside her, his erection still surprisingly strong despite the terrifying scream. A few seconds later Allie's eyelashes fluttered open,

then immediately closed. What he'd hoped was a smile on her lips curved further upwards.

Sighing, she arched her back and let her head loll back against the brick wall, her lashes thick against her flushed cheeks. "Oh Erik, I think you've killed me," she crooned.

"What?" Erik's involuntary jerk and the sharp release of his hand would have sent Allie tumbling to the floor if her legs hadn't still straddled his hips.

Allie's eyes shot open. She straightened and tightened her hold around his neck, before looking at him with alarm. Then, her expression changed, and she giggled.

"Just a manner of speaking," she managed between sputters. Her eyes took on a dreamy cast. "All I meant was you were wonderful. Sex was wonderful. Making love was wonderful," she drawled. She leant forward to kiss his nose.

"But you screamed!" He avoided her kiss and regarded her accusingly.

"That's right." She grinned. "Pretty neat, huh? I've never done that before. Ever. I couldn't help it. It was wonderful." She shut her eyes and leant back against the wall, murmuring contentedly. "Just wonderful."

"You scream when things are wonderful?"

Allie opened one eye. Her lips twitched with amusement. “Not usually. But like I said, this was just so . . . so . . . so wonderful. I don’t know what you’ve got, Erik, or what you did, but I’ve never felt like this before. What more can I say?”

Despite his lingering disbelief, Erik’s male pride started to revive. ***She thought he was wonderful?*** He resisted the unseemly urge to throw back his head and roar.

Instead, he narrowed his eyes. “You’re sure?” he asked. “Because if I hurt you . . .”

Her eyes fluttered open again. “Hurt me? I don’t think so,” she said dreamily. “But if you’re really worried . . .”

She moved against him with a seductiveness that restoked the embers and sent passion flaring within him once more. “. . . I’m sure we can do it all over again and see what went so . . . so right.”

She grinned mischievously as she slowly and rhythmically undulated her pelvis around him. She drew his head down towards her waiting lips.

“Maybe this time ***you’ll*** do the screaming.”

No more screams echoed through Allie’s apartment that night. Just the myriad sounds, and sensations, and emotions of love. Defenses

dropped, differences forgotten, in the exploration of each other and the give and take of love.

Now, in the still dark hours of the early morning, Allie propped her head on one hand and regarded Erik.

He lay on his side, facing her, his eyes closed. In the flickering light of the vanilla-scented candle on her night table, his hair appeared dark and damp, curling around his angular face. The candle light glistened off the broad planes of his cheeks, and his full lips. His muscular chest, covered with a thick mat of dark hair, rose and fell with his quiet breathing.

Allie smiled. For some reason, he made her think of an angel—Michael the Archangel after battle, to be specific—and about as far removed from the devil-may-care type of man she'd originally thought he was. The just as unlikely angel image made her smile grow wider still, and increased her urge to touch him, to draw him to her, to feel the weight and texture of his body over hers once more. She reached out and stroked Erik, slowly brushing the tips of her fingers along his hip and up towards his chest.

Immediately his dark lashes flickered upward. Disconcertingly awake eyes regarded her with a passion that set her skin tingling.

How could she ever have thought those eyes were cold and metallic? she wondered. Or that the generous lips that had pleased her in a thousand ways were grim and uncompromising? When now, his slightest glance, the merest twitch of the corner of his mouth, melted her insides in an instant.

Suddenly Erik's lips curved upwards in a knowing smile that made Allie's heart expand even more. She cherished his smiles all the more for their rarity—and this one because she knew she was the cause of it.

A spark of humor lit his eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" Allie lowered her eyelashes; a flush rose up her neck. Was it too soon to admit the deep feeling for Erik she'd acknowledged only to herself in the few hours since he'd saved her life? She'd always been impulsive; it was one of her biggest faults. But she was certain, this time, she was right.

"As if I'm dinner and you haven't eaten in a long, long time," he drawled.

Allie's flush deepened. She'd never been any good at hiding her feelings. Why was now likely to be different?

To cover her confusion, she picked up one of his hands. It was warm and solid. She liked Erik's hands. They felt so good holding her, caressing her, loving her. She stroked his hand, then raised it to her lips and kissed his palm.

The hum in her head flared to a crescendo, and her heart overflowed with warmth. She wanted to tell him so badly how much he meant to her. That she loved him for his humor as well as his lack of humor, for his obvious efforts to understand, for his endearing awkwardness, for the fact that he cared about her and wasn't afraid to act on it. She wanted to tell him that, for the first time in a man's arms, she felt cherished, treasured, and secure. And ravished beyond belief. But did she dare?

Instead she wriggled closer. She tilted her head and brushed her lips against his.

The heat of his answering kiss told her everything she wanted to know. His hand slipped from her grasp and behind her neck as he deepened the kiss.

"Mmm." Allie melted into the kiss. Her lips, soft and wet, whispered across his cheek. "I love you Erik. I love you so much."

It took a moment before Allie sensed that something had changed. Beside her, Erik grew

still. His hand slid down her arm to the bed.

She looked at his face. His expression was blank. For a fearsome moment, Allied wondered if she'd gone too far, too soon.

Then, like a flower unfolding in the morning light, the corners of Erik's mouth started to turn upwards. The smile grew, and broadened until it lit his broad, angular face. Like the first blue light of dawn after a cold, dark night, the smile spread to his eyes, chasing away the shadows and leaving nothing but sun-dappled warmth.

Allie's heart soared. She loved him. And he loved her. Though his lips weren't moving, she could hear his voice in her head, whispering gently but firmly, "I love you." He might not say it out loud, but she could see it in his face, in the happiness she'd never seen there before, and in everything he'd done for her. He loved her.

She pressed her hand against his, fingertip to fingertip. A sudden burning sensation made her yank her hand away. She looked at her hand, then Erik's.

"Erik! Your hand . . . the palm is glowing, sort of a blue light, just like—"

With lightning speed, Erik rolled over her, pinning her to the bed with his weight. He cut off her words with a hard, insistent kiss that sent

shock waves burning through her body and shorting out her thoughts.

Without another thought, she surrendered to the searing embrace. Her arms circled his neck to pull him closer.

Dust motes danced in the morning sunlight streaming through the bank of windows into Allie's apartment. On the couch where Sharkey had spent the night curled in a ball, he arched his back and yawned lazily.

Allie stood on tiptoe to circle Erik's neck with her arms. She looked up at him, her emerald gaze full of appeal. "You could stay, you know," she said. "You've got the day off, and I'm sure Nate would understand if I phoned and said I wanted to stay home."

Her eyes gleamed. "Especially after my brush with death yesterday."

Erik wavered. Allie was irrepressible. It was one of the amazing things about her he treasured.

Remembering himself, and the duty he had deliberately shunted aside yesterday, he flattened the smile. "I know," he responded slowly. "But I'd better go. There are several personal and business matters I must deal with today. I'm sorry."

Wistfully his gaze traveled the face he'd come to know so intimately over the past few days and weeks. The pert nose, the soft, teasing lips, those wonderful freckles and eyes and tousled hair. A sharp spasm of pain constricted his chest. He hated disappointing Allie. He hated hurting her.

You should have told her! His conscience nattered at him, reminding him of what he knew without a doubt. Once she'd admitted her love for him, while she was besotted with him, physically, emotionally, mentally, he should have revealed her inescapable destiny.

He drew her closer, reluctant to lose the warmth and love they'd shared all night.

He closed his eyes. He'd certainly had ample opportunity to tell her. Failing that, he should have waited until she slept, and transported them both to the Idlanta III. He could have made explanations after the abduction was a ***fait accomplis***.

But every moment he'd chosen—***chosen***—to let pass.

He withdrew from Allie and held her at arm's length. He reached out and twisted a strand of red-gold hair around his finger, watching with wonder as her pout turned into a smile. It was a miracle to him how a simple touch could have so

much effect on another human being.

But you're not human! that annoying voice nattered in the back of his head. ***And you'd best heed that important fact.***

He swallowed. He knew full well why he hadn't told Allie the truth, why he hadn't abducted her while she slept. He hadn't told her because he was enjoying being human—being human with her—with all the affection, love-making, passion and laughter it entailed. Allie had reached him on a level he hadn't known existed.

And he—despite everything he knew and a lifetime of training—had responded to it. He had forgotten who and what he was.

He continued to study her, his expression neutral. He had to leave now, if only to get control of himself, and to prepare for what was destined to follow. He had to tell her the truth, and soon, a truth he was finally starting to see that she might refuse to accept.

Finally he spoke. "I'll see you tomorrow. At work."

Disappointment filled her eyes. He rushed to soften the blow. "And after, too."

He leaned forward and kissed her, savoring every second. Then he straightened and walked to the door.

As he stepped into the hallway, an unbidden thought cut into him: Once Allie knew the truth, would she ever kiss him like that again?

Forty minutes later, Erik parked the leased Jag near the Lincoln Monument in south Lincoln Park. He got out, then locked up and headed north on foot past the Bath House and North Avenue Beach. When he reached Diversey Harbor, he watched the boats coming and going, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the summer sun and breathing deeply of the damp, hot air.

Through the morning, into the sweltering heat of the midday sun and early afternoon, Erik walked, and walked, and walked. If not for his hurried step, his distracted air and lack of attention to his surroundings, he could have been a tourist trying to squeeze in the sights and sounds of Chicago's lakeshore in a hurry.

In the late evening he returned to his room at the lakeside apartment hotel, no closer to quelling the questions and conflicting emotions that had dogged him all day, still not ready to do what had to be done. Instead, he paced back and forth from the kitchenette to the bed.

Inside a battle unlike any he had ever fought raged between his heart and head, between his

Earthly and Zalian tendencies. On the one side was Allie, and all the love and happiness she had brought into a life he had never realized before was so barren. On the other side were duty, destiny, order, and everything he had lived with and believed in since the day he was born. The incredible happiness he had experienced on Earth warred with his long-held belief in the superiority of the Zalian way.

Why haven't I told her? he asked himself again and again. It had all seemed so simple when he had planned his campaign back on Zura. He would make her acquaintance. He would tell her of the far superior Zura and his homeland of Zalia. Despite her Earthly failings, she would immediately recognize not only his superiority, but the superiority of Zalia. She would recognize her destiny and acquiesce to his demand she accompany him back to Zura as his mate. He would simply and easily avoid the devastation his grandfather had inflicted on his grandmother.

Erik halted his pacing and stood on the balcony. From here he could see Lake Michigan and the dark horizon where it met the sky. The evening lights shone up into the navy sky, reflected again and again in the dark waters, and creating a far more beautiful sight than anything

he had ever seen on his own polluted planet. The scene inspired a wistfulness he was only beginning to understand, a wistfulness he knew was connected with Allie and the deeply-buried emotions her loving had unearthed in him.

With the uncompromising honesty that was as much a part of him as the emotions he was just discovering, he faced up to the truth. He hadn't told Allie because he doubted she would react in the docile, acquiescent manner he had originally expected. After what he'd seen and experienced, he doubted even love for him would convince her to forsake the beauty of Earth forever, and the family and life that meant so much to her.

He stood still at the rail of the balcony, his hands clenched at this side. Equally disturbing were his doubts about the rightness and the superiority of the Zalian way, doubts that kept surfacing despite his best efforts to quell them. Doubts heightened by the dismaying image revealed by the crystal, the image of a blank, emotionless Allie. An image he knew he didn't like.

Was Zalia so superior after all? he wondered. He shuddered at his heresy. Certainly, scientifically, technologically and organizationally, he had no doubt about its superiority in these

areas.

But in matters of the heart? In personal relations? In family life? In simple physical beauty? He didn't know any more and he feared what he might find if he probed too deeply.

What he did know was that he had never felt as wonderful as he had last night. Never been so loved, or so happy. Never been so immersed in another person. Never felt so connected, so accepted. At home, he had always known he was not the same as the others, that something held him apart. He had hoped fulfilling his destiny would change that once and for all.

He grimaced, pulling back from the revelations he might find if his thoughts continued in this vein. He glanced at his watch. He was late.

Woodenly he left the balcony and went to the closet. He retrieved a suitcase, and from an inside pocket his communicator, a small black device similar in appearance to what Earthlings called a cellular phone. But that, and the fact it was a communications device, were the only similarities. What this piece of machinery did was heighten thousands of times over the telepathic powers belonging to many Zalians, thereby making possible communications such as the one he was about to embark on to the commander of the

Zalian vessel orbiting Earth right now behind the moon. A communication, he thought with a grimace, far removed from the telepathic love-making he'd unsuccessfully attempted with Allie.

Erik sat in the straight-backed chair by the desk. Carefully he cleared his mind of the emotional debris of the last few hours. He punched in a code on the device and concentrated on reaching Lorad, commander of Zalia's lead intergalactic vessel, the Idlanta III. He, and several other Zalians on a variety of scientific and investigative missions in the star system that included Earth, were required to report regularly on their progress. With a grimace he remembered that his was the only mission requiring collection of a human specimen.

He wiped the distaste from his mind that thought had produced. He shut his eyes and concentrated, waiting for Lorad's voice to enter his mind.

"Barak! You're late."

Even from such a great distance, the disembodied voice in Erik's head sounded cold and grim.

"Yes." Erik concentrated on that one word, not daring to waver from it for a second. To give excuses, to give any indication of his internal

turmoil would serve only to threaten his mission with immediate abortion. If he wanted to succeed—and to succeed on terms that would hurt Allie as little as possible—he needed to remain cool and detached.

If Lorad was irritated by his one-word answer, nothing in the voice reverberating in Erik's head indicated that.

"What is the status of your mission? Are you ready to transport the Earthling and yourself to our ship?"

"No. Not yet." Erik focused on calmness as he calculated the longest he might string out his mission. "I think it will take another two weeks to complete this mission appropriately."

"That is what you said two weeks ago. Most of the others have completed their assignments. You are running perilously close to the deadline for our departure. You know our supplies and mechanical circumstances will not allow us to delay. Is there a problem?"

Erik sensed suspicion in the other man's mind. If not for his own position as a commander in his own right in the anti-insurrection segment of Zalia's forces, Erik would never have been able to win agreement to court his destined, rather than

abruptly kidnap her. Even then, permission had been given only grudgingly.

“No. There is no problem.” Erik tread carefully. “But humans are much more complicated than we realized. It is taking longer than I had planned to win the woman’s willingness.”

Lorad snorted, and his scorn echoed through Erik’s head. “I will never understand this desire you have to ”win” her acceptance. She is only an Earthling, after all. Have you mated with her yet?”

“Yes.” Erik checked his sinking heart. There was no point lying. To do so would only undermine his credibility. But the truth threatened to cut his time shorter still.

Silence followed. Then, “But you have not yet told the Earthling who you are and why you have come?”

“No.”

A series of tiny electrical shocks pricked his mind, like sparks from a loose wire, a clear indication of Lorad’s deepening suspicion. Few Zalians knew Erik was one quarter Earthling; Lorad was one of the few who did, and the knowledge had made him treat Erik with apprehension. Until now it had always been undeserved.

“Why not?”

Erik concentrated on keeping his returning thoughts as emotion-free as possible. “Human beings are more complicated than we on Zura have been lead to believe. You are aware, Lorad, that my own grandmother, an Earthling, suffered an incurable breakdown as a result of her abrupt kidnapping to Zura. I do not wish to inflict this fate on my destined mate.”

“I see. But as you indicated last week, and now tonight, two thirds of your strategy has been successfully completed. You have won the Earthling’s trust, and you have mated with her. There is no reason not to take her now, willing or unwilling. Surely even the weakest of humans should be able to accept, and even embrace their destiny, especially a destiny with a superior being on a far superior planet.”

“But—”

“No buts. We have nothing further to discuss. I acknowledge your wish to refrain from disabling your destined one, but it is clear to me you have already taken steps to prevent that from happening. And I have been extremely generous in what I have allowed you. But no more.

Lorad’s voice grew louder. “You have exactly five days from today to complete your mission. Then, willing or unwilling, the female shall be

transported with you back to our vessel.
Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Abruptly the communication ended. Erik, alone and empty, stared down at the communicator in his hand.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rain poured from leaden skies Wednesday morning, but it did nothing to dampen Allie's spirits. Neither did the traffic snarls nor her slow progress through the rain-slicked downtown streets.

Her great mood continued on the elevator trip up to *The Streeter's* editorial department. She breezed into the newsroom, smiling at every person within ten feet. She swung over to her desk and plopped down at her seat, ignoring the mess of papers and a sheaf of phone messages waiting for her. Nothing was going to impinge on her great mood. It hadn't yesterday, and it wouldn't today.

Because this time she was in love—really in love—and not with some playboy with a string of women on the side. Perhaps she still didn't know enough about Erik, but in her heart she knew the important things. That he was honest. That she could trust him. That he truly loved her, even if he hadn't said the words out loud. That he was the kind of man she had always wanted and needed,

even if she hadn't realized it until now.

Allie picked up her messages and flipped through them. There was Grace Firetta, the interview she'd missed Monday when that demented Klassen had pulled a gun on her. She was glad to hear the judge had remanded him in custody for a psychiatric assessment. And here was her contact in the Chicago police department. An acquaintance who'd been pestering her for weeks about getting in on a new multi-level marketing company. And Joanne Carabini . . .

Allie frowned. "Please call, it's important," whoever had taken the call had written under Madame Carabini's name.

Allie sighed. She didn't want to talk to the psychic. She didn't want to hear any more intimations of dark doings in relation to Cody. What she wanted was hard news that would actually help find him. The police still hadn't come up with anything; neither had *The Streeter's* police reporters. It was getting more and more painful to talk to Norah Walker every day. Cody's disappearance was a dreadful thing, and not to be trivialized by a lot of hocus pocus.

Not only that, but Allie had forgotten to check Erik's background. Not that she considered it important, but she *had* promised.

She sighed and picked up the phone. She punched out Madame Carabini's number and waited, hoping no one would answer.

No such luck. After two rings, a familiar voice answered the phone. Allie introduced herself.

"Oh, good," the psychic exclaimed. "I was afraid you wouldn't call. I've been getting some new impressions about that missing reporter."

"You mean Cody?"

"Yes. I'm more certain than ever that he's not dead. But it's confusing. He doesn't seem to be quite alive either."

"What?" Allie hesitated. She didn't want to put words in the psychic's mouth. ***The Streeter*** wasn't ***The National Enquirer*** and she wasn't about to help it descend to that level. "Are you suggesting he's in some kind of suspended animation?" she asked cautiously.

"I can't be as specific as that. Whatever it is, he's not conscious. He's also cold, or in a place that's extremely cold. A place that's . . . that seems to be not of this . . . not of this world."

"What?" Allie couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"I know it sounds strange. I'm sorry," the psychic responded quickly. "But it . . . I've never gotten impressions like this before. I don't

understand them at all.”

“Hmm.” Allie paused. She didn’t like the direction the psychic was heading, but she didn’t dare miss anything either or Nate would have her hide.

“Is there anything else? Anything that would clarify your impressions?” she prodded.

“No, not that I can think of.” Madame Carabini paused. “But I was wondering whether you’ve looked into that photographer’s background yet. He keeps preying on my mind. Whenever I concentrate on Mr. Walker, he’s there too for some reason.”

“No, I haven’t checked his background yet.” Allie’s stubborn streak surfaced. “But I don’t really think it’s necessary. You must have seen the papers or heard the news yesterday. He saved my life.”

She heard the sharp intake of breath, followed by silence. Finally the psychic spoke again.

“I know dear. But it doesn’t matter. I still experience a dreadful uneasiness every time I see or visualize him. And it always focuses on you. Don’t be fooled by the superficial. Please, promise me you’ll investigate his background. I’m afraid for you.”

Allie grimaced. The woman meant well, even if

she was absolutely wrong. “All right. I’ll do it as soon as I can.” She caught sight of Nate turning into his office. “In fact, I’ll take care of it as soon as I get off the phone.”

She said her good-byes and hurried over to Nate’s office. She stood in the doorway. “Got a moment?”

“Sure.” Nate glanced up from a copy of that morning’s *Tribune*.

Allie slid into the seat in front of his desk. She pondered the best way to broach a subject that Nate was bound to consider none of her business. Finally she decided the direct route was the only way to go. “I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about Erik Berenger. When you and Doug hired him, did you ever check his references?”

Nate put down his paper. “Sure. Why d’you ask?”

Allie’s grip on the arm of the chair relaxed. She was surprised to realize she was relieved. “No reason,” she waffled. “I’m just curious. Besides being a really good photographer, Erik rescued me from that Klassen character. I guess I’d just like to know more about the man who saved my life.”

“He is a great photographer, isn’t he?” Nate responded smugly. He rested his pudgy hands on

the small round belly that protruded over his belt buckle. “He used to work at the ***Sydney Examiner*** for this editor I met at a conference in Hawaii a couple of years back.”

“Oh? Who was that?”

“Jim Miller. I doubt you’ve heard of him. I don’t think he’s been to the States. But a great guy, Aussie accent and all, and he really knew his stuff. If Erik was good enough for him, he’s good enough for me.”

Her hunger for details whetted, Allie pushed for more. “So what exactly did he have to say about Erik?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Nate sat forward in his chair and picked up the ***Tribune*** again. “I never actually talked to him.”

“What? But you said you checked Erik out. Or was it Doug who made the call?”

Nate sighed and let the paper fall to the desk. “Allie, he’s a great photographer. The day he showed up, we needed a photographer. His portfolio was terrific, and he’d worked for a guy I know and respect. What else did Doug or I need to know?”

“It’s customary to check references. You never know,” Allie retorted.

“Never know what?” Nate frowned. “That maybe

he's a serial killer or a rapist? That he's an impostor? Allie, he saved your life. That seems like a pretty good reference to me."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing." Nate folded the newspaper and slapped it on the desk. He stood up. "You haven't noticed anything strange about him, have you?"

"No! Of course not."

"Well then, get off my case. Erik's a quiet, straightforward guy, and he's a great photographer. What more do we need to know?"

Allie glanced up at the late afternoon sky before hanging up the car phone and resting her forehead against the steering wheel of her parked car. The morning's rain had petered out, but the sky remained grey and dreary.

She sighed. Dear Lord, how she hated talking to Norah Walker. She'd left it until now to call her, hoping the police, or police reporters, or **someone** would have a lead, a new direction to follow—anything she could tell Mrs. Walker that would reassure her or give some reason for hope. But no, there'd been nothing, absolutely nothing. She certainly couldn't tell her what the psychic had said. And she'd gladly forget every hurt Cody had inflicted on her if only he would turn up alive,

smiling at every female in sight.

She sat back and glanced at her watch. Almost four o'clock. Erik was supposed to meet her here, outside Grace Firetta's apartment building, any minute now. He would accompany her to the interview, and take photos if the information warranted it.

Just thinking of Erik made her mind turn to the thoughts that had been tormenting her all day between interviews and writing. Despite her resolution to ignore them, Madame Carabini's vague warnings about Erik and Nate's failure to check Erik's references kept resurfacing, gnawing at her sense of happiness. That and the psychic's odd suggestions about Cody's whereabouts.

She was still turning the situation over in her head when she saw Erik's sleek Jag glide into the parking space in front of her Honda.

She stepped out of her car at the same time he got out of his. Her uneasiness evaporated as she took in the solid, lean lines of his body, and the faint but real smile that lit his stern face when he turned towards her. As Nate had said, what more did she need to know? She wasn't going to let some vague comments by a psychic—a ***psychic!*** for goodness sake—undermine her relationship

with the most wonderful man she'd ever met. A man her heart told her she'd been waiting for all her life.

When he reached her side, she rose on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his, tantalizing herself with a taste of his searing sexuality and the evening to come. She noted his sudden intake of breath, and the hunger in his eyes. She stepped back and grinned. She and Erik were humming together like an electrical transmitter and for once she didn't care!

She glanced at her watch. "Oops, we'd better hurry. Firetta said she had to leave for work soon and I want to catch her before it's too late. Come on."

Pushing her bag back on her shoulder, she headed for the plain, soot-darkened brick low rise that looked as dull and ugly as its surroundings in a vaguely rundown section of Chicago. She'd hate to live here, she thought with a shudder.

"So what's this about?" Erik asked as he strode by her side.

"Don't know for sure. The woman—her name's Grace Firetta—wouldn't tell me over the phone. Said it had something to do with Cody's disappearance. Something about his car. She wouldn't say anything else."

After walking up three flights of unpainted concrete stairs, and proceeding down a dim hallway with torn and dirty green carpeting, Allie knocked at a peeling gold door.

The woman who opened the door was small and wan-looking, her drab blonde hair tied back from a lined face marked by pinched lips and pale blue eyes. She wore the uniform of a new restaurant chain that specialized in fast Italian food. Allie showed her press card and the woman stepped back to let them in.

“This will have to be fast,” she said, glancing at a watch on her bony wrist. “I have to leave in five minutes. I can’t afford to be late for work again.”

She sat down on a wooden folding chair in the tiny apartment. Allie sat on the sagging love seat facing the black and white TV. In the corner she noticed a plastic tub of toy trucks, and another of the action figures for which her nephews were always clamoring. Erik set his camera bag down and sorted through his equipment for the right lens.

Grace looked at Erik. “He’s not taking pictures, is he?”

“Well, I thought—”

“No!” Grace’s voice rose in a shrill. “You can’t

use my name. And there can't be any pictures. Nothing like that."

She looked fearfully at Allie. "Maybe I didn't explain well enough on the phone. I'm a single mother. My son's next door with a neighbor. My husband's dead but his mother is looking for any excuse to take my son. If she knew it was me who told you this, she'd use it to get custody of Sean."

Allie blinked. "I don't understand. Why would what you tell me help your mother-in-law take your son away?"

Grace shook her head. "You will when I tell you. But like I said, I'm not telling you anything until you promise not to use my name. And no pictures. That's why I didn't tell the police."

Allie frowned. "Hmmm. Well, we can probably do without the pictures. But your name . . . I don't like to use unnamed sources. It undermines the story."

"Okay. Your choice." Grace stood up. "I'm sorry to have dragged you here then. I just wanted to help, especially after I read the interview with that poor man's mother."

Erik cleared his throat. "Come on, Allie. Let's go. No pictures, no name, it's not worth it."

In surprise, Allie looked at Erik. His expression revealed neither impatience nor irritation, but it

was unusual for him to open his mouth during an interview. Normally he just left it to her.

Allie paused. Erik was right, of course. But in this case she wondered whether it might be smarter to take a chance. They still had next to nothing on Cody's disappearance.

She made a snap decision. "No, not yet." She turned back to Grace. "Okay. I agree. No names, no pictures. Okay?"

The woman nodded and sat down again. She took a deep breath. "You see, I usually work at night, until about one or so. My mother-in-law doesn't like it. She thinks I'm neglecting Sean. But it's the only way I can be with him during the day. Anyway, that night, Wednesday night, or actually Thursday morning, I stayed a bit later at work."

Her gaze met Allie's, looking for agreement. Allie nodded sympathetically. Grace continued. "You know, kibitzing around at work with the manager and the other staff. It's always slow that time of night in the middle of the week and sometimes, well, sometimes I just need to talk to somebody. You understand?"

"Well, this night I was driving home about three in the morning. Coming north on Lakeshore Drive. Anyway this night, there was hardly any

traffic. I was just coming over a hill when I saw this blinding blue light—”

“A blue light?” Allie interrupted.

“Yes, a blue light. At first I couldn’t see anything but the light. It was right on the shoulder. And then I realized there was a car—I thought maybe it was blue too, but it must have been white—right in the middle of the light. Anyway, as I got closer, I saw a man get out of the car, and kind of stumble forward for a few steps. I thought maybe he was hurt or drunk, so I looked again as I got along side him. But he was gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“Gone. He’d disappeared. I don’t know where. The light’s fairly bright there and there’s no guard rail. He was just gone—like he’d disappeared into thin air. It was like one of those TV shows where the guy’s abducted by aliens.”

“What?”

“See what I mean?” Grace said, her pinched face turning defensive. She rose to her feet. “You think I’m crazy too, don’t you? That’s why I didn’t tell the police. That’s why I haven’t told anyone. And that’s why you can’t use my name or picture. My mother-in-law would probably get me put away with that. She’d claim I was drunk or on drugs. But I know what I saw. And I saw that man

disappear.”

Allie regarded the woman carefully. After all, she could have sworn she'd seen a blue light around Cody's Corvette too. Erik's hand, too, she remembered uneasily, and on more than one occasion. She paused for a moment, then dismissed the ridiculous idea, and turned back to Grace Firetta. Seeing a blue light and a man disappear was one thing. But to make the leap to aliens? That seemed extreme. “What made you think it was a UFO?” she asked quietly.

The woman shrugged her thin shoulders and reached for a sweater hanging on a hook on the wall. “I guess I don't really think that. I don't believe in things like that. But that blue light—it was eerie. That's why I kept looking. It wasn't like anything I'd ever seen before. It made me think of outer space and aliens and stuff like that.”

The woman smiled glumly as she pulled on her sweater. “But that's unlikely, don't you think?”

Allie sighed and stood up. She looked the woman in the eye. “Yes,” she said, “it is unlikely.”

Out by the curb where Erik and Allie had parked their respective cars, they watched as Grace Firetta backed her rusted out Chrysler from

the parking lot into the street. She waved as she drove off.

Allie shook her head. “Well, there goes another hot tip. I’m sure this one will just make Nate’s day.”

She rolled her eyes. “Between Madame Carabini and her suggestions that Cody is alive, but some place cold and faraway, and now this—that Cody has been abducted by little green men from outer space—I don’t know what to think. Worse, I don’t know what to **do** with all this stuff.”

“Mrs. Firetta didn’t say Cody was abducted by little green men,” Erik pointed out.

Allie turned eyes bright with sarcasm on him. “Not in so many words, but she may as well have. I mean aliens. She said **aliens**. Aliens abducted Cody! Can you believe it?”

Erik didn’t know what to say. The Firetta woman’s comments about blue light and an alien abduction hadn’t bothered him anywhere near as much as Allie’s absolute rejection of the idea of alien abduction.

It bothered him because he had planned to tell her everything tonight—about himself, about his world, and about the destiny that meant she must accompany him to Zura as his mate. It had never

occurred to him that she might not believe him. He had finally accepted the fact she might not **like** what he proposed. But to not even believe him? For his plans to succeed, it was crucial she believe him.

He cleared his throat. "Does that mean you don't think it's possible what the woman said is true?"

"Are you kidding?" Allie laughed, then turned a puzzled gaze on him. "You're not saying you think it's true?"

Erik hedged. To maintain control of the situation, he had devised a timetable, and he had no intention of telling his story until this evening, at the appropriate time. "Perhaps. There is a lot Earthlings don't know about the universe. Besides—"

"Earthlings?"

"Yes. People from Earth."

Allie laughed and shook her head. "I **know** what Earthlings are, Erik."

Flustered by his slip-up, Erik pressed on. "But what about that blue light Mrs. Firetta mentioned seeing? Didn't you think you saw a blue light around Cody's car too?"

A streak of perversity he hadn't know he

possessed made him push further. Or perhaps it was the first sign of his desperation to make her believe. "And what about the blue light you saw glowing from my hand? At the car, and then Monday night."

Allie frowned, then worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "That's the one thing I don't get. I *did* think I saw a blue light around Cody's car, and your hand that night too. But didn't we conclude that it was a reflection from a passing truck? And really, how could it be anything else?"

She reached for Erik's right hand and turned it palm upwards. "And the other night?" She looked up at Erik and smiled. "We both know I have a great imagination." She winked. "And your love-making leaves me so light-headed and dizzy I'd probably swear to seeing just about anything."

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed the palm. "I see a great hand," she said huskily, looking at him from below lowered lashes. "A talented, sensitive hand, in more ways than one. But nary a trace of blue."

She bit the side of his hand, then released it. With an iron will, Erik controlled the spurt of sexual need in him that might have released the blue light once more.

Allie left flirtation behind. "I'm not saying that

glow around Cody's car couldn't be something besides the reflection from a passing truck. And I'm not saying Grace didn't see something odd too. But an alien abduction? That's a pretty big leap."

Allie leaned back against her Honda. Her golden hair swung with the motion. "You know," she said, "You're the last person in the world I'd expect to even consider such a notion. You don't strike me as gullible, flaky or open to that kind of idea. You're more the solid, down-to-earth type. You know, a real *Earthling*."

She sidled closer, flickered her long lashes, and shot him a come-hither smile. "Sexy as all get-out, and horny as a tiger in heat, but with your feet planted firmly on the ground." She reached for his hand once more and squeezed it. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think," Erik said stiffly. Despite the touch of her hand, he felt frozen, frozen into what more and more was beginning to look like a collision course with devastating results. How was she going to react tonight when he told her the truth?

"Maybe not, Mr. One-Syllable-Man," Allie zipped back. She held both his hands, and regarded him mischievously. "But we can change all that. Tonight. Your place. Seven sharp."

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was still early evening when Erik unlocked the door to his room and pushed it open. Allie brushed past him and waltzed inside to the suite-sized room. She spared barely a glance for the stunning view of Lake Michigan and the July sky visible through the sliding doors to the balcony. Instead, she looked around slowly, from the queen-size bed to the kitchenette and around the room past each of the pleasant but ordinary appointments.

He noted the faint flicker of disappointment that crossed her face. “Is something wrong?” he asked. “You were expecting something more palatial?”

Allie shook her head. “Not on a photographer’s salary, even if ***The Streeter*** is putting out for a percentage until you find a permanent place.” She smiled. “Which I haven’t done a very good job of helping you find yet, have I?”

She scanned the room once more. “No, it’s not the room.” Her expression turned accusing. “I was hoping to see some of your personal belongings. You know, photos of your family, old girlfriends,

Australia. Maybe even your old teddy.”

“My old what?”

“You know, your old teddy bear. I’ve still got mine, even if Sharkey plays with him more than I do.”

She raised her hands in exasperation. “But you! Anybody could be staying here. There isn’t one item in sight, or anything about this room that says, “Erik Berenger lives here.” She sighed. “I thought coming here would be a chance to find out some of the things that make you tick. To find out your secrets. Everyone has secrets . . . even I have secrets.”

Erik forced a smile. ***Yes, I’ve got secrets. Secrets you’re going to discover this evening. Secrets I suspect you won’t like.*** But instead of telling her immediately, he raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “You? You have secrets?”

Allie grabbed a pillow from the bed and threw it at him. “Ha! I know I talk a lot, but I don’t tell everyone ***everything!***”

She straightened and changed her tone in the quick-fire manner that so disoriented and fascinated Erik. “Anyway, men are unsentimental. Especially you.”

“Yes,” Erik agreed. ***At least I am.*** But not, he

thought, unsentimental enough to do what he should do and get it over with so his destiny could unfold. Not unsentimental enough to kidnap her, now, and take her back to Zura immediately, and curse her Earthly feelings, her responses, even her feelings for him. Along with his growing doubts and uncertainties.

Allie sashayed over to him, her auburn locks swinging. "But it doesn't matter." Her eyes smoldered; her voice lowered. "I'll find a way to worm everything I want to know out of you. If Lois Lane can do it, so can I."

"Lois Lane?"

"Of course." She slid her hands up his bare arms. "Superman may have been from another planet, but he still couldn't resist Lois' charms."

Confusion blunted Erik's response to her touch. ***What other planet?*** he wondered. He had a sudden startling vision of some highly unrealistic planet unlike anything he'd ever seen.

She caressed the back of his neck, then rose on tiptoe and brushed her lips along his. "You know," she whispered, "the old sexual torture bit. I'll tie you up with silk scarves and torment you until you beg for mercy." Her eyes gleamed and she wet her lips. "And then I'll only give you what you want after you've told me where you've hidden

the family jewels.”

“The family jewels?” What in the love of Zura was she talking about now? Erik didn’t know and, he realized as he lowered his head towards hers, he didn’t actually care. He captured her lips in a demanding kiss, trying to imprint in his memory forever everything he loved about her.

Finally he pulled back a little and rested his forehead on hers. He looked deeply into the emerald eyes he spent far too much time thinking about. “There are a lot of things I want to tell you,” he said slowly. “Things you need to know.”

Allie cupped his face with her cool hands, then stood on tiptoe and kissed him deeply. Pleasure rippled through Erik, overwhelming him with the incredible feeling of being loved and desired by the most fascinating creature in the universe.

Allie drew back, her fingers resting lightly on his shoulders. “But first the torture,” she whispered. “No secrets until after I’ve tortured you thoroughly.”

In the luminous light of the moon streaming through the open balcony door, Allie lay curled against Erik, her head on his chest, her hand resting on his hip. A light breeze cooled their heated, naked bodies. Erik nuzzled her fragrant

hair, and brushed his lips across her forehead. He stroked her arm. The feel of her body, so close and warm, and the sound of her rhythmic breathing, filled him with a momentary sense of peace.

But not for long. No matter how hard he tried, he could not forget what he had to do. There was no avoiding it. He had to tell her the truth, and he had to tell her now.

His hand stilled. He took a deep breath and began marshaling his thoughts and preparing the words with which to start. He could try to do it telepathically, but it seemed more practical to do it verbally.

Before he could manage more than a coherent thought or two, Allie sat up. She leant over him, the rosy peaks of her breasts grazing his chest.

He groaned.

She smiled. "Had enough, is that it?" She folded her arms across his chest and propped herself in a position to gaze into his eyes. "I love you, Mr. Erik Berenger. I love everything about you, but especially how you can't resist me."

Abruptly she straightened. "You know, I'm going to tell you a secret."

His chest tightened. "I thought I was the one who was supposed to be telling secrets."

Allie grinned. "Ladies first. You'll get your turn."

Besides, I want to get this out of the way. If you're going to think I'm crazy, I want to know it now."

She twisted a lock of his hair around one finger, then looked down. "You know, almost from the first time I met you, I heard this strange humming in my head. It was like that buzz you hear from electrical wires on a hot day. Whenever you were around, it started up. That and, well, almost like a physical tug towards you."

She bit her lip. "I know this sounds crazy. But that night I threw you out of my apartment—the first time we kissed—well, the humming and the attraction were close to unbearable. All the time we were walking around, I wanted to touch you so badly I couldn't think straight. And don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing," Erik said solemnly. Allie had unwittingly provided the opening he needed to begin his tale of their destiny.

He swallowed. "You should know I experienced the same humming, the same tug towards you, though perhaps not as strongly because I'm not an . . ."

He had been about to say Earthling, but decided at the last second to proceed more cautiously. " . . . not as emotional as you are."

His gaze roved over her. Her earnest face, her full lips, the rosy tips of her breasts, the flat belly

and shapely legs curled under her. Did she have any idea how much he loved her, both physically and with his new-found emotions? Did she have any idea how much he feared losing her love? Certainly, he had had physical relations before, at the bordellos run by Zalian authorities to satisfy the needs of their unmated citizens. But nothing like this. If someone had told him three months ago the difference love would make, he would have dismissed the idea as sheer foolishness. But not now. Now he knew.

He continued quietly, setting forth the first brick in the foundation of his explanation of who and what he was. "Perhaps we both experienced this humming, this mutual attraction, because we are destined to be together."

"Destined?" Allie's eyebrows rose. "You mean our relationship was written in the stars?"

He nodded. So far, so good.

A smile of delight crept across her face. "Maybe we **are** getting somewhere with this secret business. I've just discovered that you, Erik Berenger, are a closet romantic. Destined!" Her smile broadened. "You're the last person on earth I'd expect to buy into that idea. But it is kind of cute."

"You mean you don't believe in destiny?" The

words escaped before he could stop them, or stop the shock chilling his blood. Intergalactic Research had indicated that Earthlings harbored beliefs concerning the universe, destiny, and fate. Perhaps not as strong as Zalian beliefs, but constant and real. Wasn't that what the astrology business in newspapers and magazines, on phone lines and television, indicated?

But if she didn't believe in destiny? What did that do to his arguments? To his chances of convincing her to leave the family and land she loved and come with him willingly because it was her destiny as well as his? Could love possibly be enough?

"Nope." Allie shook her head, sending her golden hair swinging about her face and his hopes plunging. "Just like I don't believe in aliens. Or psychics, or any of that paranormal stuff. It all gives me the creeps."

Erik's hopes crashed. ***She didn't believe in destiny.*** She didn't believe that creatures such as himself even existed. Had all his efforts been for naught? Was he doomed to repeat the same horror his grandfather had wreaked on his grandmother?

He managed, but only just, to suppress a

shudder. He reached for Allie's hand, and lifted it to his lips. With the deliberate thoroughness of a man on the brink of despair, he kissed her knuckles, her fingertips, and finally her palm, drinking in her warmth, her taste, her fragrance.

He regarded her palm intently. "There are many things about me you don't know," he said. "And you will know them all, in good time. But first there is something I have to say to you."

He raised his head. The smile on her lips halted, then faded altogether as she noted his somberness. He could tell she hadn't expected such gravity.

"I love you, Allie. No matter what happens, or what comes between us, I love you. And I don't say that lightly. I have never loved anyone, or anything, the way I love you."

His gaze locked with hers as he tried to tell her with his eyes what words could not say sufficiently, what even telepathy could not handle satisfactorily. "Do you believe me?" He waited what seemed eons for her answer.

Finally Allie knelt and leaned towards him. She kissed him on the forehead, along one broad cheekbone, and the corner of his mouth.

"I believe you," she whispered, her lips moving gently over his. Her shining eyes found his once

more. "I believe you. And I always will."

Unable to deal with the depth of his feelings, unable to resist, he captured her lips in a soul-wrenching kiss. Her arms tightened around his neck and he pulled her closer, covering her body with his own.

Allie's murmured "Now what about those secrets?" was lost to the urgent demands of love.

The illuminated face of the digital clock beside the bed said it was three a.m. Erik, wrapped in a hotel robe, stood barefoot on the balcony, looking out to the dark, watery horizon and, far above it, the moon still sailing the navy sky.

Behind that moon, though he couldn't see it, was the space ship Idlanta III, waiting for a signal from him that he was returning with his human cargo, his mission complete.

He turned from the railing and looked back through the sliding doors to the motionless shape lying on the bed. To Allie, who had given him a gift he had neither wanted nor expected, a gift he knew now he didn't want to live without. The gift of her love.

He sighed, misery seeping through every part of him, Zalian and Earthling alike. He hadn't told her. He'd wanted to tell her. He'd known that he

had to tell her.

But after her devastating statement that she believed in neither aliens nor destiny, he'd known it was pointless. He didn't know much about love, but he doubted even Allie's love was enough to make her understand or believe what he had planned to tell her, much less accept it. Why would she ever accept something that would remove her from her home, her family, her way of life and everything she loved, with no possibility of ever seeing or communicating with any of them ever again? Why would she want to go to a planet where her feelings, her relationships, her ideas—and she herself—were scorned as weak and inferior? Why go to a place that would destroy the very essence of her being?

Knowing her the way he did now, he realized what a fool he'd been to ever think she would willingly agree to accompany him. A fool!

He gripped the railing. And now he no longer had a choice. He would have to do what he should have done the night he arrived. He would have to sedate her and kidnap her to fulfill his destiny.

Because whatever he may have learned on Earth, he was too much a Zalian to think that destiny could be denied. To fail to fulfill his destiny would mean the crumbling of the life and

the acceptance he had worked so hard to build. Zalian precepts could be harsh, and failure was not taken lightly. It was a fact of life that no one trusted a Zalian unable to grasp his fate. No one respected a Zalian incapable of achieving his destiny— especially a half-breed. If he did not fulfill his destiny, his life—for all intents and purposes—would be over.

His chest and stomach tightened. He averted his gaze from the moon, turning instead to the stars of the far off Milky Way, the other side of which resided his galaxy and his home.

Suddenly a thought more painful than anything he could have imagined stabbed his heart. He shut his eyes as the full horror of his dilemma struck home.

Without destiny, his life was over. But without Allie's love, would he ever know happiness again?

Allie stretched, enjoying the lingering warmth of the early morning bed. The familiar, reassuring sound of water running reached her from the bathroom. She smiled sleepily, happiness seeping through her. Erik. Mmmmmm. Erik.

Fully awake now, she swung her feet to the carpeted floor and tugged the loose sheet from the bed. The only trouble with staying overnight at

Erik's hotel room was that she'd come unprepared. No nightshirt, no housecoat, just herself. She smiled. Though she was sure Erik wouldn't mind her lack of clothing.

She stood up and wrapped herself in the sheet. The bedside clock proclaimed it was five minutes to seven. Good. There was plenty of time for a shower and breakfast, and then a swing by home for a change of clothes. Maybe other things too, she thought, smiling and flushing at the same time. Things she doubted she'd ever have enough of.

She started to hum, "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you . . ." Her stomach growled. She looked at the phone. Maybe she should order breakfast. Despite the kitchenette, there was no food in Erik's apartment. And she was starving; probably he was, too.

The receiver was propped between her ear and shoulder before she noticed the card listing the hotel extensions was missing from the phone. She looked around. The telephone listings, as well as a room service menu, had to be here somewhere.

She replaced the receiver and padded over to the desk. The magazines piled there included ***People, Psychology Today***. Funny, she wouldn't

have thought that would be Erik's taste in magazines. Maybe ***Sports Illustrated***, or a photography or auto magazine. But it didn't matter. There was no hotel directory, and no menu.

Undeterred, she opened a desk drawer. It was empty, save for a copy of the Bible. She tried the other drawer. Bingo! She recognized the burgundy leather cover of the hotel directory immediately. Thank goodness. Just thinking about food was making her hungrier.

The directory out and in her hand, she caught the glitter of keys from inside the drawer. The drawer was almost shut before she realized there was something familiar about the key chain she'd glimpsed.

She reopened the drawer and pulled out the keys. She opened her palm to examine the chain. It was a miniature steel copy of the bust of the Venus de Milo, complete with gaudy green rhinestones for eyes.

Recognition exploded inside her head. Her eyes widened. She gasped. Only one person she knew owned such an unusual but tacky key chain.

And that person was Cody.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paralyzed with shock, Allie stared at the key chain. Cody Walker's key chain.

A numbing chill descended over her. With it came a question too horrifying to face, too fearsome to voice.

Why did Erik have Cody's car keys?

"Hey, Allie, you want to order up some breakfast from room service?"

Allie jumped at Erik's voice. Her hand closed convulsively around the key chain; she barely managed to suppress a scream of fright.

"Room service is 11. I'll be out in a couple of minutes."

"S . S . .Sure. Right away." Allie kept her back to Erik as she forced out the words.

The bathroom door shut.

Her heart pounding, Allie dropped the keys back into the drawer. Propelled by an increasing sense of panic, she scrambled around the room searching for the clothes carelessly discarded last night.

Afraid to think. Afraid to contemplate the meaning of Cody's car keys in Erik's keeping.

Afraid to stay.

Conscious of the seconds ticking away, she tugged her skirt and T-shirt from a chair, then crawled half under the bed searching for her underwear.

She found her briefs and scrambled breathlessly into them. She tossed aside her pantyhose as too difficult and pulled on her skirt. When she didn't see her bra, she gave up on it and yanked the T-shirt over her head.

Panting, terrified, she looked around the room for her sandals. Where were they? What could she have done with them?

She ran one shaking hand through her hair. She couldn't wait. She grabbed her purse from the desk and made for the door.

She opened the door to the hallway and then remembered the car keys. She should take them. But did she have time?

Terrified she dashed back to the desk, grabbed the keys and raced for the door.

As she shut it behind her, a shuddering sob of relief escaped. She had made it to the hallway without encountering Erik.

She looked at the keys in one hand, her purse in the other, as a tortured cry echoed through her. ***Why, oh why does Erik have Cody's keys?***

She choked back another sob, looked furtively around, then ran barefoot down the hallway to the lighted exit sign.

Exactly seventeen seconds later, Erik sauntered out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped low on his hips. "It's all yours now, Al—"

He stopped. Where was she?

"Allie?"

He frowned. Had she gone down to the lobby for a paper? He noticed her bra hanging from a lampshade. And there was one of her sandals, peeking out from under the dresser. He frowned again. It was unlikely Allie would go downstairs without her shoes.

He scanned the room. A crumpled sheet had been dropped on the floor in front of the desk. On the desk sat the leather-covered hotel directory, and in front of it gaped an open drawer.

It took a full moment before he realized what had to have happened. ***The keys!*** Cody's keys. In his arrogant belief in his superiority and the inevitable success of his plans, he hadn't bothered hiding them. He'd just tossed them into a drawer, and promptly forgotten them.

He crossed the room in two strides and yanked the drawer free of the desk. He looked inside, knowing what he was going to see.

The keys were gone. Cursing, he tossed the drawer onto the bed. How could he have been so stupid?

Worse, what did this do to his commitment to complete his mission and fulfill his destiny tonight?

Grimly, he pulled his jeans from the chair and yanked them on. With a violent thrust he closed the zipper.

There was only one way to find out.

“Hey!”

Allie looked up to see Kate’s bemused expression. She hadn’t noticed her friend, or anyone else, since she’d rushed into work only minutes before.

“You look a little hot and flustered for so early in the morning,” Kate commented. She assessed Allie, then smiled slyly. “And I do believe you’re still wearing the same clothes you had on yesterday. You haven’t combed your hair, either. That wouldn’t have anything to do with Erik now, would it?”

Allie suppressed an urge to scream. Hardly able

to contain herself, she looked at her desk and ground out, "Go away Kate. Just go away."

Kate's eyebrows rose. Surprise showed on her face, followed by a flicker of concern, and then an apparent decision to treat Allie's bad mood with humor. "Ooh. That good, huh? I wonder why? But don't worry. I've always been patient. I can wait until your mood improves. Until lunch, anyway." She waved a hand at Allie and turned away. "Catch you later."

As Kate walked away, Allie concentrated on getting a grip. She'd rushed home, unable to think, not wanting to think, and grabbed the first pair of shoes she'd seen. She hadn't even thought about a bra or combing her hair.

Get a grip, she told herself fiercely. This couldn't go on. She had to look at what had happened, at what it might mean, and at what she was going to do about it. Should she call the police? Or should she give Erik a chance to explain?

She took a deep breath and tried to clear her mind. But all she could see were the keys. Cody's keys, and that horrid chain with the gaudy glass eyes of the Venus de Milo staring blindly at her. Cody's keys and all their deadly implications. The keys she could feel resting on her thigh through

the thin material of her skirt pocket.

Why did Erik have Cody's keys? She forced herself to think the unthinkable. Had he murdered Cody and dumped his body some place cold and faraway?

She shut her eyes and choked back a sob. She couldn't believe it. She **wouldn't** believe it. Not Erik. Anyone but Erik.

But the keys. What about the keys?

She slowly unscrewed her eyes and took another deep breath. Should she call the police? she thought again. Who was Erik after all? The man she loved, or a cold-blooded murderer? No one really knew anything about him. Nate hadn't even checked his references. And neither had she, despite Madame Carabini's warnings.

A heavy weight pressed on her chest, making it difficult to breath. She loved Erik so much. She couldn't believe he'd harmed Cody. She trusted him. She liked him. He'd saved her life, for God's sake!

But what about the keys? The insistent, deadly refrain refused to go away. Had she made yet another mistake in judging character? Was this her final, fatal mistake? Her mind conjured ever-worsening scenarios. Would it just be a matter of time before she disappeared too, her lifeless body

joining Cody's in that cold, faraway place of which the psychic had spoken?

But Madame Carabini had insisted Cody was still alive, she remembered with a start. Alive and in some place cold and forbidding, perhaps not of this Earth, whatever that meant. A place the psychic had also associated with Erik.

Allie gripped the rim of her desk. She had to pull herself together. To think clearly. To decide what to do. She'd get a cup of coffee first. Then, slowly and methodically, she'd review everything that had happened.

And when Erik arrived at work, as he inevitably would, she would confront him. Here. Quietly and carefully. In the safety of the newsroom.

But first, she had to do what she should have done a long time ago.

She picked up the receiver and dialed ***The Streeter's*** switchboard operator. "Janet," she said, "Get the ***Sydney Examiner***, in Australia, for me. Right away."

Erik halted at the entrance to the newsroom and glanced at the clock on the wall. It was 8:23 a.m., still early enough for the newsroom to be relatively quiet and free of employees. Good.

He scanned the room. Then his eyes narrowed.

Allie. There she was, sitting at her desk, looking at the computer screen, her fingers already flying across the keyboard.

His stomach muscles tightened and he clenched his fists as an unaccustomed wave of apprehension rolled over him. He didn't take his eyes off her. Had she told anyone what she'd found? Had she called the police? And most importantly, had what she found turned her against him?

He hardened his resolve and shut out the apprehension. This was no time for foolish Earthly emotion or wavering commitments. What had to be done, had to be done.

He strode across the room, his gaze never leaving her for a second. He took in the golden hair, unusually messy this morning, the paler than usual face, the pinched lips. With each new sign of her turmoil, the invisible clamp imprisoning his heart twisted tighter still.

Halfway to his goal, he saw her reach for her coffee mug. At the same time, she looked up, her gaze catching him square on.

She blanched. Her hand jerked. She knocked the cup over, spilling coffee on her desk and the floor.

The screws on Erik's heart twisted once more, with pain unlike anything he had ever experienced. He hadn't been prepared for Allie's reaction to him—the fear and panic that had flashed across her face, freezing her features in an expression he recognized all too well. The expression of terror in the face of a prey cornered by the enemy.

Before he reached her desk, Allie had jumped up, grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on her desk, and begun mopping up the coffee. When he stopped, she continued mopping, not looking at him, and mumbled, “Clumsy, aren't I?”

Silently he let her finish cleaning up the spilled coffee. Then she sat down. She looked in his general direction, but her eyes did not meet his. “Well, that's that. I drink too much coffee anyway. That machine coffee is horrible too. But at least it didn't get on my notes or my keyboard. Or my clothes either. Nothing worse than sitting around with coffee stains on your clothes. Especially when—”

“Why did you leave?” Erik interrupted her nervous chatter. By the stars, he didn't care about the spilled coffee. He cared only what she was thinking. About him. About them. He was too worried to focus enough to find out telepathically.

Allie stopped. She bit her lip. Her fingers worked in her lap, and tension radiated from her slim shoulders. Finally she looked at him. The clear green eyes he loved were clouded now, with pain, with doubt, and with a terrifying question.

It was the terror he saw there that hurt the most. The one thing he didn't want, ever, was for Allie to be afraid of him.

He gentled his voice. He didn't want to frighten her any more than he already had. If she bolted again, it would be worse for both of them. "I know what you found," he said quietly. "I know how it looks. But it isn't what you think."

Allie stared at him. For a long time she said nothing. Finally she swallowed, and pointed to the chair. "Then perhaps you'd better sit down and tell me what it *is* all about."

Erik sat down. He nodded. "That's what I want to do. But not here. Some place quiet where we won't be interrupted. I thought one of the dark rooms."

"No!"

Her vehemence startled her and stung him. He watched silently as she struggled to rein in her fear. Her fear of him.

He twisted his lips, then concentrated all his efforts on projecting his love and reassurance.

“Allie,” he said quietly. “You know I would never hurt you. Never.”

She met his words with a mute, cloaked stare. He waited, his tension unbearable. ***Don’t you know that? Don’t you know that I love you? Don’t you know that I would never hurt you? Except, perhaps, in the matter of destiny. For there I have no choice.***

Finally she exhaled slowly. She raised her head, and looked at him, her gaze sharp but calmer than it had been seconds before. “Do I? Do I know that? Or is everything you’ve told me, everything you’ve said, just another lie?”

“Lie?” Erik froze. He had a terrible premonition of what was coming.

“Yes, lie.” Allie’s expression turned bleak. “I phoned the ***Sydney Examiner*** today, something I should have done a long time ago.” Her eyes filled with tears that reproached him more than the angriest of words. “I know you’re not Erik Berenger. He died a year ago in a sailing accident.”

“You’re right,” he admitted. If ever there was a time for the truth, and nothing but the truth, it was now. “I’m not Erik Berenger. But that doesn’t change anything else. It doesn’t change the fact that I love you. And that I wouldn’t harm you, or anyone close to you.”

Allie regarded him. Across her beautiful,

expressive face, a battle waged. On one side was her love for him and what she wanted to believe. On the other was her frightening suspicions and the even more terrifying fear they might actually be true.

Erik waited, unaware he was holding his breath. Her decision, for or against him, would dictate his next move.

Finally she stood up. She didn't look at him. "All right," she said dully. We'll go to the dark room."

Erik exhaled with relief. Despite everything, she was still willing to listen to him, if not trust him. He stood up, and shoved the chair aside.

Allie's gaze, now shuttered and closed, settled on his face. "But first I'm telling Kate where I'm going. And to come and get me in fifteen minutes."

Allie jumped when she heard the click of the door lock. She shot Erik a questioning look, but didn't say anything. ***Don't be afraid,*** she told herself. ***This is the man who loves you. The man who saved your life. It will be all right.*** But her hollow reassurances did little to soothe her shakiness.

Erik leaned against the door. In the dim darkroom lighting, he appeared once again the

cool, impassive stranger she'd first met, his jaw square, his broad cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes making him appear more foreign than ever. Despite herself, she shivered.

"It's only so we won't be interrupted," Erik said, his tone apologetic. He gestured to a chair. "Why don't you sit down? This will take a while."

Gingerly, Allie sat down. For a moment Erik just looked at her, his gray eyes unreadable, his face grim. Was this the man who had made love to her as no one ever had before? she wondered. The man who had made her laugh with his awkwardness, and who had touched her heart with his kindness and with the loneliness she had seen deep inside? Or once again, had she seen only what she wanted to see?

Erik started to pace across the small room. Back and forth. Back and forth. As if he were winding himself up to tell his tale. Or worse, stalling to concoct something she would believe.

Finally he halted. Once again he leaned against the wall. He fixed her with a piercing gaze. She forced herself to meet it without flinching.

"I guess you want to know why I took Erik Berenger's name. And about the keys. Yes, they are Cody's. I won't insult you by denying that."

Allie's heart plunged. Had she secretly

harbored a hope that he would deny the keys were Cody's? That somehow he might own an identical set?

"Go on," she said.

Erik nodded. He fixed his gaze on the wall. "It will be hard for you to believe what I'm telling you. All I ask is that you listen to everything I have to say before you reach a conclusion. But first I need to ask you one question."

His gaze shifted to her face. The quiet desperation she saw there shocked her. She nodded mutely.

The seconds ticked by. "Do you believe me when I say I love you?" he finally blurted out.

Allie started. This was the last thing she'd expected him to ask. Yesterday she wouldn't have thought twice about the answer. But today? Today, when she no longer knew who he was, or what he was capable of? Today when her trust in her own judgment—and in Erik—had been shaken to the core?

She looked at him again. The bleak, implacable eyes, the stiffly-held body that radiated a tension she didn't yet understand. Was this the man she'd laughed with, loved with? Was this the man who'd seemed bent on protecting her from hurt, on helping her whenever she'd needed it? Even from

across the room, she could sense his loneliness, a hurt deep inside that he shielded from other's view. Did she believe this man? Did she trust him? Did she love him?

She stared at him a moment longer. A bone-deep weariness overtook her and she shut her eyes. "I don't know what to think any more," she said slowly. "I-I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. Maybe this—you— maybe you're just another one. I don't know."

When she opened her eyes, he was still watching her, his face a mask of sorrow.

"I guess I can't expect anything else," he said, his voice raw. "So many things have happened. I never expected to fall in love with you—or for you to mean so much to me. I didn't think loving you would change how I thought about so many things. About what was important and worthwhile."

The gray of his eyes softened. "No matter what, I want you to remember that I love you. And that I don't want to hurt you. Promise me you will remember."

Allie nodded. His tormented words pierced her heart, but she forced herself to confront the unsavory questions she didn't want to ask. With a mouth that felt dry and scratchy, she choked out,

“The keys. Cody’s keys. Tell me why you had them. Tell me who you really are.”

For a moment Erik stood very still. Before her eyes, he seemed to grow cooler, more distant, in ways she could never have put into words. “Cody is fine,” he said quietly.

“That’s good. But where is he? And why do you have his car keys?”

Erik hesitated. His eyes seemed to grow cooler still, like the sea in a winter storm, then hotter, blazing into silver molten metal that brought back vague, uncomfortable associations.

“Cody is fine,” he repeated. “Right now he’s in a state of suspended animation in a spaceship orbiting Earth behind the moon.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Allie blinked. She shook her head. She looked at Erik. He stood there looking as ordinary as if he'd just commented on the weather.

Allie shook her head again. She couldn't have heard what she thought she heard. She couldn't have.

"Pardon?"

Erik cleared his throat. "I said Cody is fine. Right now he's in a spaceship orbiting the Earth behind the moon."

"Oohhh." A groan of frustration escaped Allie. Nerves already strained to the limit, she wasn't in the mood for stupid jokes. "Quit it Erik. I know you don't have much of a sense of humor, but this isn't funny, believe me. I want the truth, and I want it now. You owe me the truth."

Allie's anger flared. She started to stand up.

"Sit down." The cold command in his voice and in his eyes was unmistakable. "You promised to listen. At least hear me out. The whole story."

With a shiver of apprehension, Allie sat down. "All right, but no more of this spaceship crap," she

said with all the bravado she could muster. “I’ve had enough of psychics, spaceships and little green men.”

For a second Allie thought she saw a look of hopelessness flash across Erik’s face.

“I’m not going to talk about little green men. But I am going to talk about me. And Cody. And you. And you have to promise to listen until I’m finished.”

He sighed, then pinned her with his hard gaze. “You are right. My name is not Erik Berenger. I assumed that identity solely to achieve my purpose. My real name is Barak of Zura. Zura is a planet in the Oridian star system, and obscured from Earth’s field of vision by the Milky Way.

“When I was a boy of twelve, the seers foretold my destiny. The first part predicted I would be a commander in the Zalian forces, and that has unfolded as it should. The second part was that I would marry an Earthling, one Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski, and bring her back to Zura as my mate.

“That is why I have come to Earth: To find you and claim you as my mate. Zalian research had indicated Cody Walker was a potential obstacle to my destiny, and so I had him removed until I completed my mission.”

With each word Erik spoke, Allie's anger grew. Why was Erik doing this? Did he actually think she'd believe this stupid story? Did he—

Her angry thoughts came to an abrupt halt. She stared at Erik in horror. ***Oh, no. It can't be!*** This wasn't Erik the photographer. What he was saying was too much like the words of the lunatic stranger who'd shown up at her door just a few weeks ago. Could this be the same man?

Renewed fear raced up her spine. She swallowed, and stared numbly at Erik. What should she do? Should she humor him? Should she make a break for it? Was he going to hurt her?

"Aaahhh, you don't really mean that, do you?" she asked cautiously.

Erik sighed. "Yes, I do. And I'm not crazy, Allie. Though I know right now you think I am. But yes, I am the Barak of Zura who came to your door six weeks ago to claim you."

"Aaahhh, yes."

On shaky legs, Allie rose from the chair. She backed against the sinks, and then started to edge along them. However sane Eric appeared to be most of the time, he suffered from one dreadful delusion: that he was an alien from outer space. And she still didn't know why he had Cody's keys!

She swallowed again. "You—you don't really

expect me to believe that Cody was abducted by aliens. I mean that's pretty far—"

"Fetched?" Erik supplied, his voice laced with bitterness. He paced to the other side of the room. "I guess I've been a fool all along to think I might convince you. Perhaps they were right in Zalia that Earthlings are incapable of facing the truth."

Allie winced at the bitterness in Erik's voice, and the depth of his delusion. Whatever he might have done, whoever he really was, it appeared he truly believed he was an alien.

But that didn't make what he was saying any truer. What it did mean was that the sooner she got out of this room and found him the help he needed, the better. Not taking her eyes off him, she continued to inch along the counter to the door.

"So, ah, how'd you get Cody up to your spaceship? Did you beam him up, *a la Star Trek?*"

Erik grimaced. "Stop it, Allie. You don't believe a word I'm saying. So I have no choice but to show you."

"Show me?" Allie squeaked.

"Yes."

Erik held his right hand over his head, palm towards her.

“On more than one occasion you noticed a blue glow. First from Cody’s car, and then twice from my hand. And also while we were making love. Well, you were right. It wasn’t your imagination. In the case of the car, the blue glow was a residue of the protective force deployed to deter vandals after Cody’s removal. During love-making, it was a reflection of the intense Zalian energy involved.

“And in my case, the blue glow is a birthmark, one that identifies me as a member of the Zalian elite, born to lead and privy to every privilege that Zalian society offers. Usually I can control its presence at will, and I do so now.”

Allie stared apprehensively at Erik’s hand.

As she looked, a faint blue light started to emanate from his open palm.

Allie blinked. It had to be suggestion, nothing more.

She continued to stare. The glow flickered, and then grew stronger, developing into a distinct blue marking like the blue lines of a mighty river on a map. The blue grew steadily brighter until it cast an eerie hue over the whole room.

Allie swallowed. She looked at Erik’s face. He wore an expression of extreme concentration.

She looked back at his hand. The river of light glowed more intensely with each passing second.

She shivered as the unbelievable possibility that Erik was telling the truth insinuated its way inside.

She started to back away from Erik and his glowing hand. “No, no, it can’t be, I— No!”

She finished in a scream of horror. She flipped open the door lock and bolted.

Just as Allie reached her car in the underground parking garage, Erik’s hand closed around her upper arm.

He felt her jerk of shock and heard the gasp of terror. Terror of *him*.

His heart plummeted, but he tightened his grasp. There wasn’t time for foolish emotion. He was just glad that her spontaneous flight had sent her running to the parking garage and not the newsroom. He hoped there was enough time to make her understand, to soothe the panic and terror he feared threatened her sanity and their future life together on Zura.

“Let go of me.” Though she didn’t struggle, Allie’s voice vibrated with fear. “Let go of me or I’ll scream.”

For a second her gaze connected with his. The searing hurt and fear Erik saw there hit him harder than if she had slapped him. He swallowed.

“You know I can’t do that,” he said quietly. “But you also know I’m not going to hurt you. I’d never hurt you. All I want to do right now is go some place quiet. Some place where I can finish explaining who I am and why I’m here.”

“I’m going to scream.”

Allie’s lower lip wobbled even as she shoved it stubbornly forward.

“No, you’re not.” Erik regarded her steadily, using every iota of his telepathic power to urge her to listen to him, to believe him, to understand. Not just for him, but for both of them, and for the future that he would do everything in his power to make good for her, if only she’d let it be. “In the first place,” he continued, glancing around, “there’s no one down here to hear you. But it wouldn’t matter. I could take you by force.”

Renewed fear arced across her face.

“But I don’t want to,” he rushed on, dismayed by the response his words had evoked. “I don’t want to have to force you into anything.” He ***couldn’t*** do to Allie what his grandfather had done to his Earthling grandmother.

Something in his voice and his expression must have communicated his feelings as his telepathic suggestions had not. Her brow creased

and she looked at him with puzzlement before straightening and tossing her head. "You wouldn't do that," she said with a conviction he knew was more show than confidence.

He held her gaze. "I don't want to. But I would. I have no choice. It will be better for both of us if you hear me out. I won't hurt you. I haven't hurt Cody. But you need to hear the whole story."

He could see her fear and panic warring with her confusion and mixed feelings towards him. He knew any desire she might have to believe him was tempered by her mistrust of men in general, and of her own judgement. She'd picked losers before, her expression seemed to say. Perhaps she'd crossed the line and finally made a fatal error.

He held his breath and waited. He felt like a heartless hunter presenting his victim with the choice of death now or death later. But he was no more empowered to do something else than he could allow her to escape. It was destiny, after all. He couldn't let his love for her override what had to be done.

Finally she bit her lip. Her trembling abated. She swallowed but did not look at him. "So where do you want to go to talk?"

“The steps at Fullerton. You know, outside in Lincoln Park, right out in the open by the lake.” Maybe, he thought, she’d feel safer if they were some place public.

“All right.” Allie glanced at his hand. “You can let go of me now. I’ll just go up and tell Nate we’ll be gone for a while.”

“No!” The stricken yelp escaped before Erik could stop it, destroying any illusion of self-control he might have entertained. He cleared his throat and struggled for calm. “That won’t be necessary,” he managed. “We won’t be long.”

Despite his concern that she might bolt again, he released her arm. He didn’t want her to see that he suspected she would call the police as soon as she was out of sight. It wasn’t that he was afraid of the police or how they might complicate his plans. With the help of his Zalian companions, he could easily extricate himself from any physical Earthly complication.

But he didn’t want any more complications than the one he already faced. The only one that mattered. And that was making Allie understand that he loved her and would never hurt her.

“All right. But once we’ve talked, I’m free to go. Right?”

Erik’s heart sank. He flinched from the

hopefulness in her face. Would she ever understand?

“Let’s go,” he said. “Let’s go.”

The blue sky stretched as far as the eye could see, its color reflected in the sparkling waters of Lake Michigan. Near the horizon where water blended seamlessly into sky, fluffy white clouds had begun to cluster, perhaps an omen of a late afternoon summer storm on the way. Around them, Allie heard the chirp of birds, the sound of children’s voices in the distance. Despite the city behind them, the breeze off the lake smelled fresh and inviting.

Allie clamped her lips shut against the hysterical laughter bubbling up inside. How could everything seem so normal, an ordinary summer day, when her life had just entered the twilight zone? When the man sitting so calmly beside her on the steps—the man she had been madly in love with less than three hours ago—when he had just told her he was an alien who intended to take her with him to his planet in another solar system?

She shut her eyes and took another deep breath in an attempt to slow the racing of her heart, to control the roller coaster ride from terror and depression through curiosity and trust to

denial and disbelief. What was going on? Was Erik crazy? Or was **she** crazy to suspect, fear, hope—she didn't know which was the right word—that he was telling the truth? Once again, behind her closed eyes, she saw that terrifyingly eerie glimmer of blue light from his hand. A chill ran down her spine and she hugged herself tightly.

“Are you cold? Would you like to go somewhere else?”

Allie opened her eyes to find Erik peering at her. Out here, on the lake shore, he looked the epitome of normalcy. Just an all-round American male.

For a second she grasped that thought and held it to her. Normal, yes, normal. He was normal and this was all a bad dream. In a moment she'd wake up, in her own bed, with Erik stretched out beside her. She'd ask him if he'd slept well and he'd say yes.

She blinked. Erik was still staring at her, his gray eyes dark with a seriousness that frightened her. No, it wasn't a dream. Nothing would make this moment disappear. The only course left was to go on, to discover the length and the breadth of the unreality Erik was proposing.

“Uh, what did you say? Oh, no, I'm not cold. I'm fine thank you.” She could hear herself babbling

but couldn't stop. "Isn't the lake beautiful this morning? I always love it here, it's so quiet and peaceful and—"

"We didn't come here to talk about the weather," Erik interrupted. "I've got something to show you."

Allie thought her heart had stopped. She managed to gulp down some air, and it continued on its erratic course. The last thing Erik had shown her was his eerily glowing hand. She wasn't sure she could take the shock of another revelation of that kind, perhaps the ability to levitate or disappear or zap objects with a thought. She shuddered again.

Erik reached into his back pocket. He retrieved an item and handed it to her. "Look at this."

Allie stared at the object. It appeared to be an ordinary black and white photo, plasticized for protection. A simple head shot of an elderly woman. Allie looked closer. The woman seemed familiar, except for the disturbingly blank expression on her face.

Uneasy, Allie didn't touch the photo. But she couldn't stop looking at it either. As the seconds rolled by, her impression of the woman's blankness and bewilderment grew stronger.

"You don't recognize her?" Erik prodded.

Allie grimaced. “Should I? I do feel as if I’ve seen her before, but I don’t know when or where, or even who she is.”

Erik said nothing. Allie watched as the breeze blew his hair across his forehead. Suddenly she was filled with unbearable sadness. How could Erik not be normal? How could he be crazy? Or even worse, be exactly what he said he was? ***Please let this all be a bad dream.***

Then Erik drew another item from his pocket. As he unfolded it, Allie recognized it as one of her columns. It was the one about the strange disappearance sixty years ago of Eva Bukowski, and the photo of her taken only weeks before she disappeared.

He handed it to her. “Maybe this will help.”

Allie looked from the photo of the nineteen-year-old girl to the photo of the much older woman. Was there supposed to be a connection? She looked from face to face, then back again. The longer she looked, a strange feeling began to come over her. There was a similarity, wasn’t there? Or was it just her tortured imagination, stretched to the limit?

She cleared her throat. “They look a little alike. It’s possible they are . . . related in some way.”

“They are related. In fact, it’s the same person.

This is Eva Bukowski before her disappearance. And this is her forty-eight years later, shortly before her death.”

Allie’s throat seized up. She wanted to deny it, to declare it wasn’t true. But her eyes, and an instinct so strong she knew it didn’t lie, told her it was true.

She swallowed. “So . . . so why do you have this photo of Eva? Where did it come from?”

“Look at me, Allie.”

She didn’t want to, but it was a command she seemed unable to ignore. Slowly she turned her head. Erik’s storm-colored eyes, so quick to change and usually so impossible to read, glowed now with an intensity that reminded her of their first encounter outside her door. But rather than being fearsomely blank as he had appeared the first night, she could see and feel concern and love for her in his expression. Her heart lurched painfully.

“Eva was my grandmother.”

The words that should have shocked her seemed unsurprising now. With lightning speed, her mind resurrected the clues that should have tipped her off to just such a possibility: her recognition of the likeness between Eva and Erik, Erik’s discomfort with the story idea and the

interview with the family, and his upset when Mrs. Bukowski had pointed out his likeness to one of her grandsons. Not to mention his strange unfamiliarity with so much of American life.

Allie tried to prevent her thoughts from skittering off in a dozen different directions. It was important she ask exactly the right questions, at the right time. “So,” she said slowly, “if you’re from another planet, how did Eva come to be your grandmother?”

Erik exhaled sharply. “My countrymen had just perfected intergalactic travel and begun to explore the few planets in the universe supporting advanced life. My grandfather came to Earth on one of Zura’s first expeditions here and kidnapped Eva. He kidnapped her because the Zalian seers had foretold his destiny—that he must marry the Earthling Eva Bukowski.”

“And did he? Marry her that is?”

“Yes. My mother is their only child.”

“And what did your grandmother think of all this? Being kidnapped to another planet? Never seeing her family or her home again? Married off to a stranger—to an *alien*— in outer space?” Despite herself, Allie’s voice rose with each question.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Allie looked at him with disbelief. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I mean—well, my grandmother never actually spoke since the day she was kidnapped.” Erik shifted uncomfortably on the stone step. “Not a word in English or Zalian. Not ever. She . . . I think that the shock was so great—from the kidnapping, the spaceship, Zura itself —her mind simply closed against it, shutting out everything she didn’t understand or couldn’t face. No one was ever able to help her, and I know my grandfather brought in the top medical experts.”

Erik grimaced, then looked away from Allie and out to the shimmering lake. “By the time I was born, my grandmother spent most of her days locked in a padded room. I never talked to her. I never touched her. The only sound I ever heard her make was a kind of wailing, like an animal caught in a trap it couldn’t comprehend.”

Allie’s mind reeled with the incredible story Erik was unfolding with the sincerity of fact. Fact her mind revolted against, but which another part of her recognized implicitly as the truth. Fact, that if she chose to believe him, explained so much about Erik she had not been able to understand before.

In silence she tried to grasp the incomprehensible, to accept the unbelievable. She glanced at Erik, still staring grimly out to the horizon, his hands tense on his knees. Could all this possibly be true? Could these incredible things the man—no, the creature—she loved was telling her be true?

Allie cleared her throat. “I don’t understand,” she said slowly. “Why did your grandfather marry Eva, when it was so obvious she couldn’t adjust? Why not just bring her back to Earth?”

Erik shook his head. He turned to her, his gaze burning. “It was his destiny.”

“So? Why follow a prediction when it’s so wrong? Your grandfather can’t have been happy with the results, either.”

“You don’t understand,” Erik repeated grimly. “It was his destiny. It’s not like here on Earth. On Zura, and particularly in my homeland of Zalia, destiny is everything. It always has been. Destiny and order. At the age of twelve all male members of the elite class to which I belong have their destiny foretold by the Zalian seers. After that, your life’s work is to fulfill your destiny. To not follow what was predicted, exactly, is to fail. And to fail is disaster.”

“What do you mean, disaster?” Allie’s voice

rose sharply. "You mean you'll be killed if you don't fulfill your destiny?"

Erik grimaced. "Not exactly. But the end result is the same. First, I would lose the status and acceptance I, as a Zalian of mixed parentage, have struggled all my life to achieve. Next to go would be my privileges and rights as a member of the Zalian elite, and my work. No Zalian unable to fulfill his destiny can be entrusted with responsibility. I would be an outcast, banned from work, shunned by my family and co-workers, shuttled to the fringes of society and to the uncontrolled wild lands where chaos, hunger and violence reign. If the denizens of those lands didn't destroy me, shame and starvation probably would."

Allie frowned. "It sounds horrible. Why do you even want to go back there?"

With an infuriating, almost robotic response, Erik repeated. "Because it's my destiny. It's either fulfill my destiny or die."

Allie felt colder still as she watched him retreat into the impassiveness that seemed to be the way of his world, whatever and wherever it was. A world she didn't want to believe in, but which events were forcing her to confront and accept.

Suddenly her heart stopped as the import of

what Erik had just said hit her. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open.

She touched Erik's arm. When he turned to look at her, she whispered, "And I'm **your** destiny, right? That means you want me to go back with you to your planet. Right?"

For a moment Erik stared at her. Then he turned his gaze back to the lake, and away from her.

"Yes."

"And if I don't want to go?"

"You will go. You have no choice. It is destiny, mine and yours." His voice sounded cold and bleak, the voice of an uncaring stranger.

"No," Allie pointed out. Her voice rose with the desperation growing inside her. "It's your destiny. Not mine. And what if I went? What if the same thing happened to me as to Eva? What if my mind snapped?"

"But it wouldn't." Erik turned to her. Despite his flat denial, fear flickered on his face. "Why do you think I spent so much time getting to know you and allowing you to know me? Don't you think it would have been easier to kidnap you and have done with it? Even before I knew anything about you, I didn't want to take a chance that you could be destroyed like my grandmother was. I couldn't

do that to a stranger, and once I knew you . . .”

His voice trailed off for a moment as his gaze held hers. “Once I came to love you, I could do it even less. That’s why I tried so hard to win your love. And now to convince you to come willingly to Zura.”

“And if I won’t?”

His face fell. For a moment he said nothing. Then his lips tightened and he seemed to retreat into that hard, distant place where Allie could not reach him. “You will come anyway,” he said flatly. “Do not fool yourself that there is anything you can do to prevent our departure together for Zura. There is no force on Earth—natural or technological—capable of preventing me from achieving our destiny.”

Allie shut her eyes. She had trouble believing she was having this conversation. That she was bargaining with an . . . an alien for her life and her home. That the Erik she loved was fast receding into the stranger Barak, the stranger who fascinated and frightened her, but whom she believed with gut certainty. And to believe that he was dead serious.

She bit her lip, then opened her eyes and regarded him. He sat still as a rock, hard and unreachable. She swallowed and, despite the ache

of loss within her, despite her fears, she stubbornly resisted him in the only way she could. “Perhaps you are right. You probably can take me to Zura whether I wish it or not. But one thing you can’t control. And that’s my willingness. I will never willingly go to the horrible place you describe as Zura. You can make me go, but you cannot make me love you. Not now. Not ever.”

Dismay creased Erik’s handsome face, in stark contrast to the unfeeling distance there before. The change fueled Allie’s hopes that she was wrong.

“Allie,” he said softly. “Don’t do this. I love you. You love me. You said so yourself. We could have so much together. I . . . I don’t want to lose the happiness I’ve found with you. Accept your destiny, as I’ve had to accept mine. Your life in Zalia would be different from your life here on Earth, but it would not be so terrible.”

Allie bit back a sob. It was easier to confront the alien Barak than the man who showed distinct signs that he loved her. Her bravado crumbling, she lashed out in a different direction. “And what about Cody? What are you planning to do with him?”

Erik shrugged. “Cody is not important.”

“Not important!” Allie’s voice rose in a shriek.

“Maybe not to you or to anyone on your twisted planet,” she spit out. “But he is to his mother. You saw how ripped apart she is by his disappearance. He’s important to Nate and everybody else in the newsroom. And to Tiffany and Jane. And he’s important to me.”

First incredulity, then hurt, breached Erik’s impassive expression. “To you?”

“Yes, to me!” Allie knew her words wounded Erik but she couldn’t stop. She had to use the only weapons she had. Because now she was negotiating for whatever shreds of humanity she could get, for herself, and for Cody. For whatever remained of the humanity that had blossomed within Erik, the humanity and love she didn’t want to live without. Too much hung on her success to hold back.

She took a deep breath and glared at Erik. “All right,” she said. “I will go with you to Zura. And I will go willingly. But on two conditions only.”

“Yes?”

Allie shivered at the new coldness she heard in Erik’s softly-spoken affirmative. She swallowed, and looked out at the lake. “The first condition is that I be allowed time to say goodbye to my family, and to my friends. And I need to make arrangements for a new home for Sharkey.”

Erik nodded. "That's fine. You have the rest of the week. We must leave on Sunday night. But I suggest you be discreet in your farewells."

"Yes." A burning wave of sadness washed over Allie as she realized the gravity of what she had agreed. Goodbye for all time, to everyone and everything she cared about. Wanda, Connor, the twins. Kate. Forever.

She swallowed a sob and plunged on before she could dissolve into tears. "And Cody. I want you to release him. Here. Unharméd."

Erik's eyes narrowed. He paused, then nodded. "Done. He will be released the night we leave. You will be able to ascertain his well-being before we leave."

Allie bowed her head, suddenly drained of spirit, drained of fight. Even the faint hum that always accompanied Erik's presence had disappeared, leaving an uneasy silence inside. She had won the battle, only to lose the war. She bit her lip tightly and blinked her eyes to keep back the tears.

"Allie." Erik's voice, more gentle than she'd ever heard it, pierced the veil of misery enveloping her.

Through a curtain of tears she looked up at

him.

Gravely, he reached out and took her hand, then helped her to her feet.

“Come on,” he said. “We should go back to work. The others will wonder where we are.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Is something wrong?”

Allie heard the note of concern in her sister’s voice. She shook her head and tried to smile.

“No, Wanda. Everything’s fine. I guess I’m just tired. It’s been a tough week.” She shut her eyes for a moment. The strain of pretending everything was normal was taking its toll. Especially when she knew everything wasn’t normal at all, and never would be again.

Wanda looked up from the sink full of dishes she was washing following their regular Friday night dinner together. She frowned. “Are you still a little shaky from Monday? A guy waving a loaded gun at me would have sent me to bed for a week.”

This time Allie did manage a smile as she regarded her sister. Her heart swelled with fondness. Wanda had always stood up for her, protected her, cared for her as no one but Mama and Tata had. She was going to miss her so much.

“You’re probably right,” she said, avoiding her sister’s gaze. The truth was, she’d forgotten about that incident. Ever since she’d learned who and what Erik really was—and what was in store for

her—she hadn't been able to think of anything else. Nothing he'd told her about his planet, his home, the people and topography of Zalia had reassured her.

Wanda continued to regard Allie, her gaze troubled. "Well, whatever it is, you seem . . . different. Sort of strained and—and distracted."

Allie smiled again. Her face felt as if it would crack. She'd never been able to put anything over on her sister. Never. But for her sister's sake, she couldn't give in to the urge to tell the truth. Her disappearance would hurt Wanda in ways she'd seen all too vividly in her interviews with the families of missing people. It would be worse if Wanda thought she was crazy. She sighed. "I'm just tired. That's all. Tired. I'm sorry if I'm not good company."

"I didn't say that." Wanda turned her attention back to the sink. She swiped at a plate, then handed it to Allie to dry. "I, just . . . well, I'm not used to you like this. So quiet. So subdued. You're usually so cheerful."

As if a new idea had just occurred to her, she turned to look at Allie. "Is something wrong between you and Erik?"

Allie froze. She bit hard on her lip to prevent the bitter words from escaping. **Yeah, Erik's an**

alien and he's taking me back to his planet in two days.

Instead, she cleared her throat and resumed drying the plate. "What makes you ask that?"

"Well, if anything, Erik seems even more pre-occupied, more strained, than you. I had to ask him three times to pass the potatoes. Not only that, but he keeps looking at you—almost as if he's expecting you to say or do something fearful."

Allie shrugged. Yes, Erik had been different this week. Not only had he shadowed her constantly, she could see that he was trying hard, in his stilted alien way, to reach out to her, to show her that he cared. For the first time she'd known when he probed her mind, when he telepathically tried to tell her all the things he thought she should know.

But she had been too numb with shock over who and what he was to respond. Too horrified by what he was forcing her to do to even think about whether he loved her. Too upset by the fact she still loved a man who had never really existed. She had pushed him away and retreated into herself, alternately battered by hope and fear, despair and agony over the pain she knew she would be inflicting on her family and friends. If not for the thought of Cody's aging, heartbroken

mother and what his unexplained disappearance was doing to her, she would have fought Erik tooth and nail, for herself and her own family.

Wanda cocked her head and studied Allie again. "You both seem so tense—and so preoccupied—I thought maybe you were secretly planning to elope."

The plate slipped from Allie's hand and crashed to the floor, shattering into hundreds of tiny shards. How could Wanda have guessed so close to the truth? she wondered. Though this wasn't like any elopement she could ever have imagined.

Allie dropped to the floor to pick up the bits of broken china. "I'm really sorry about the plate," she mumbled. "You just surprised me."

"Don't worry about the plate." Wanda swept by to get the broom. "It's a mismatched one anyway."

She returned with the broom and stood by Allie, who was picking china shards from the floor. "You're not eloping, are you?"

Allie continued searching the floor for bits of china. "Elope? Why would I elope?" she asked in what she hoped was a light tone of voice.

Wanda started to sweep the floor around Allie. "Well, you know. You always were impulsive. It would be just like you to do something like that. Though I don't know about Erik."

No, Allie thought. ***You don't know about Erik.*** Erik wasn't impulsive. As dispassionately and meticulously as a career criminal, he had planned his campaign to win her. Without emotion. Without a quiver of concern for anything except his overwhelming desire to achieve his destiny. She choked off the sob that rose in her throat.

Wanda stopped and looked down at Allie. "Not that I'd encourage it, of course. Especially if it meant you'd be moving away."

"Well, I'm not eloping." Allie kept her head down until Wanda resumed sweeping. Then she stood up, and dropped the bits of china she'd collected into the trash can.

A mixture of pain and fondness pierced her heart as she watched her sister sweep the floor. She was going to miss Wanda so much. And Connor, and Jason and Randy. What would she ever do without them?

Allie blinked back the tears gathering in her eyes. She put her hands on her hips and smiled at her sister. "How do you do it?"

Wanda looked up from sweeping. "Do what?"

"Manage to know more about me than anyone else?"

Wanda dumped the contents of the dustpan

into the garbage. She put down the broom. “Does that mean you **are** going to elope?”

Allie shook her head. “No.”

She moved towards her sister, too aware of the pain and suffering she would be putting her through soon, the same pain she had seen again and again during interviews with brothers and sisters and parents of those who had disappeared without trace.

She put her arms around Wanda and hugged her close. “It just means that I love you,” she whispered. “I love you and I always will. I want you to remember that, no matter what.”

With a start, Allie realized she was repeating the same words that Erik had said to her before he’d revealed he was an alien. She closed her eyes briefly and tightened her arms around her sister. Then she withdrew and picked up her dish towel.

“Hey. We’re never going to get the dishes done at this rate.”

Erik hung back a couple of feet from Allie, as he had all evening at Wanda and Connor’s home. And every day that week. He watched as she felt for her keys in the pocket of her skirt, withdrew them and inserted the key in the lock.

As she opened the door to her apartment,

Sharkey poked his gray head through the opening and mewed piteously. Allie immediately bent down and scooped him into her arms.

She straightened, holding the little cat close. She stroked him and nuzzled him as if he meant more to her than anything in the world. "How's my little guy? Did you miss me?" she murmured.

Jealously gushed through Erik. Allie hadn't let him near her, hadn't let him touch her all week, though he'd ached to be close to her, to try to make her realize that her fate wasn't the death sentence she seemed to think it was. She hadn't wanted to talk to him or to let him close to her in any way. She had erected an invisible barrier around herself, and her heart, one that he could not penetrate despite constant attempts.

His jealousy gave way to disgust as he realized what he was doing. ***I'm jealous of a cat, by the light of Oridian. A cat!*** He called on all his Zalian powers of control to bring things into perspective. Had he sunk this low, had he been so infected by Earthly emotions that he could not accept and savor his victory? Was this what his far-too-human love for Allie had done?

He looked at Allie again. Immediately his anger and disgust evaporated. He watched her stroke and coo to the cat. Yes. But he couldn't regret it

for a minute. He wouldn't. No matter what Zalian custom dictated. He loved Allie, and he loved the new world of affection and passion and emotion he had discovered within her and within himself.

Even a return to Zura and his homeland of Zalia wouldn't change that. He frowned and tried to dismiss the crystal's disturbing image of Allie that immediately came to mind. He wouldn't let it be like that. He would do everything in his power to see that Zalia didn't destroy the very things he loved about Allie the most.

"Can I bring him with me?"

Erik realized that Allie had addressed him, not the cat. "Pardon?"

"I said, can I bring Sharkey with me?"

"To Zura?"

She nodded.

Erik frowned again. He hated to deny Allie something as small as this. He had already denied her so much. But, as with the fulfillment of their destiny, there was no choice.

"I'm sorry. You can't bring him," he said quietly. A sudden vision of the bird he had cared for lying dead at his feet—the closest thing he'd ever had to a pet—made him cringe inside. "We—people don't have pets on Zura, at least not in

Zalia. Emotional attachments to other people are barely acceptable, much less attachments to animals. He'll—Sharkey will be safer here."

His voice dropped lower as he repeated the things he knew she didn't want to hear. "I told you earlier you can't bring anything beyond the clothes you wear at the time of departure. And to prevent contamination, even those will be destroyed as soon as we reach the spaceship."

Her gaze, which had never quite met his, dropped to the cat. But not before he saw the glimmer of tears.

His chest tightened. Impulsively he moved towards her.

Immediately she turned away. "Well, goodnight."

Erik halted. "You're not going to ask me in?"

She kept her back to him. "No."

"Why not?"

"I want to be alone."

"But—"

She whirled around to face him, Sharkey still clutched in her arms. This time he couldn't pretend he didn't see the tears.

"Isn't it enough that I've agreed to go with you?" she demanded, her voice breaking. "Isn't it enough that I've agreed to leave everything and

everyone behind that I love? Isn't it enough that I'll never be able to communicate with them, never be able to let them know what's happened to me? And all because of your damn destiny!"

Her bottom lip jutted out, but the tears gave her away. "Well, I want tonight alone. And tomorrow. And every minute until it's time to leave. I don't want to see you again until ten Sunday night. That's when we're leaving, right?"

Stung by the bitterness and hurt in her words, shamed by the tears in her eyes, Erik could only mumble, "Yes".

"Well then, good night. I'll see you at ten o'clock Sunday." Allie stepped inside her apartment and slammed the door.

Erik stared at the shut door, immobilized by the welter of emotions that whirled around him. Hurt, anger, shock, shame, and guilt battered and pummeled him unmercifully.

He shook his head, trying to dispel an unpleasant idea that had taken root and was slowly growing and undermining his convictions.

He hadn't ever wanted to hurt Allie. Not like this. That was why he had taken such pains to woo her, to get to know her. He had convinced himself that he was different from his grandfather.

That he wouldn't destroy Allie the way his grandfather had destroyed Eva, his grandmother.

But now, in the dim light of the hall, staring at the shut door, his head full of the misery he'd seen in Allie's eyes, he wondered whether history was repeating itself. In his own way, was he destroying Allie every bit as much as his grandfather had destroyed his grandmother?

Allie started at the sound of the door bell. She glanced at her watch. Sunday, at two minutes to ten.

For the last time she looked around her apartment, trying to imprint it on her memory. She hadn't lived here long enough for it to have become home, but she would miss it all the same. Especially where she was going now.

She shuddered, then walked slowly to the door. She reached for the door knob. She didn't bother looking through the peephole. She knew who it was.

The door swung open and she stood face to face with Erik. In the dim hallway he looked grim, and more foreign and distant than ever before, more the lunatic stranger who had stood at her doorway six weeks ago than the man she had foolishly believed she knew and loved. A man who had

never really existed, but whom she already missed desperately, as much for what might have been as for what had been.

For a moment they stood and stared at each other. Though Erik's expression didn't change, nor his gaze flinch, Allie was suddenly struck by the thought that he was as unhappy as she was at leaving. She didn't know how she knew it, or why, but she was certain she was right. Erik didn't want to go back to Zura either.

"Are you ready?"

The somber words brought her back to reality. Happy or not, it didn't seem to matter to Erik. The only thing that mattered was his goddamn destiny.

Unable to speak, Allie nodded. She stepped into the hallway and closed the door. The lock to the empty apartment clicked behind her with an ominous finality. This morning she had taken Sharkey to his new home with Kate's niece. She'd lied and said Erik was allergic to cats.

Now it was her turn. The end of her life as she had known it.

She swallowed, then felt the press of Erik's hand at the small of her back, urging her forward. Despite herself, the faint hum inside her head that always accompanied Erik's presence started up. She tried to force it out of her head but it

refused to go. It occurred to her that they were both prisoners of a cold, alien destiny that neither cared for nor respected their wishes or innermost feelings.

In silence they proceeded along the hall, into the elevator, and down to the parking garage where Erik's leased Jaguar waited.

In silence they got into the car. Erik started the engine, and swiftly maneuvered the vehicle out of the garage and onto the street. In moments they were headed south along the lake.

Ignoring the air conditioning, Allie opened the window. She wanted to feel the breeze on her face, to gulp down as much fume-laden Chicago air as she could. To hold in her senses the memories of the gritty taste, the feel, the smells and sounds of the city where she had lived all her life. Where she had laughed, and cried, and loved and raged, all things she would never do again if Erik's description of Zalia was accurate.

For several minutes she let the hot, damp breeze blow her hair about. She listened to the growl of engines, the squeal of brakes, the intermittent sound of voices. She looked at the passing buildings, the trees in full summer bloom. She inhaled deeply.

Then she looked at Erik. Sitting at the wheel of the car, he appeared carved from stone. Was he retreating into his Zalian persona? Was this how it would be on Zura? From the little he'd told her, from the few revealing incidents from his early life, she knew it was a cold, forbidding place with no tolerance for the love that meant so much to her.

A shiver of fear raced down her spine and she clasped her arms. She swallowed. She had to try, at least once more, to convince him to stay here. To not return to that horrible place he called home.

Because, she realized, she still believed—she **wanted** desperately to believe—that the wonderful man she had come to love truly did exist. He was not just an invention coldly developed to achieve an end, without feeling or concern for her. She still believed that, deep inside him, there was a wellspring of humanity, flowing with love for her. She didn't want to believe it had all been a lie, a cruel trick of which she was the victim, for an alien destiny whose reasons she failed to understand. A destiny that even Erik couldn't explain beyond a flat, "It's the Zalian way."

"Uhh, Erik?"

He turned his head towards her. In the twilight, his eyes glinted silver, and the light from the controls reflected off his broad cheekbones and square jaw. It was a face that seemed to be growing increasingly distant, increasingly cold. Taking a deep breath, Allie appealed to the last shreds of humanity she saw there, the kindness and loving buried deep inside that had been unearthed and brought to the light during the last few weeks.

“You don’t need to go back to Zura, you know. You could stay here. You’re part Earthling, you said so yourself. You’ve got a good job here. We could get married.” In her desperation to make him see the possibilities, the words gushed out.

For one long second, Erik held her gaze. His silver eyes seemed to flare with hope.

But then the light dimmed. He turned his gaze back to the road.

“I must fulfill my destiny. It is the Zalian way.”

The flat, unemotional words dashed Allie’s last hopes. She bit her lip and blinked back the tears. It was bad enough she was leaving her home, her family, her job, everyone and everything she’d ever loved. But now she knew she was losing Erik too. When they finally reached this Zura of his, she would be alone, among aliens who neither could

nor wished to understand her. And Erik—or Barak, as he had called himself—would be one of those remote strangers.

Finally Erik pulled into a parking lot for a deserted stretch of lake shore. He turned off the ignition, then looked at Allie. “We have to get out here.”

Allie nodded. Despite the still warm evening, and the jeans and T-shirt she was wearing, she trembled. The metal of the door handle felt warm to the touch of her ice-cold hands as she opened the door. For a brief second, she considered making a dash for it.

Then she shook her head. Erik had made it clear he was capable of overcoming any physical or technical resistance she or anyone else might offer. She didn’t know why, but deep in her gut she knew it was true. He meant exactly what he said.

And then there was Cody to think about. Unlike her, he had a widowed mother tormented by his disappearance, agonizing over what had happened to him. If she had disappeared while her parents were still living, it would have killed them. She couldn’t do that to Cody’s mother. She just couldn’t.

Wordlessly, she stumbled after Erik as he made his way to the sandy beach near the water's edge. He stopped under the cover of a large old maple, where grass and sand met about one hundred feet from the water.

Allie, her gaze blurred by tears, looked out at the dark waters below the navy sky. She could hear the gentle waves lapping at the shore, and in the distance she heard the squawk of a seagull. Sand, still holding the day's heat, slid into her sandals and between her toes. Fear and an incredible sense of loss combined to bring a sob to her throat.

"What?" Erik turned towards her.

"Nothing." Allie choked back the sob. In an effort to still her fears, she tried nonchalance. "So what happens now?" she asked brightly. "When does this nifty spaceship of yours whiz down and whisk us away to the far reaches of the universe?"

Erik's lips thinned. He didn't know what he hated more: Allie's tears of pain, her tremulous bravery and self-sacrifice, her withdrawal from him, or this latest version, a brittle-edged nonchalance that was as false as his show of impassiveness.

He didn't think he could stand another minute of her hurting, especially knowing he was the

cause of it all. He clenched his fists. It was eating away at him, every second more painful than the one before. All he could do was get it over with, as quickly as possible.

From his pocket he pulled the flat black square that was his communication device. Without a word to Allie, he flipped it open.

“Hey!” Allie sidled up to him and looked at the device. “So that’s the gizmo you talk to your people with. It’s like something out of *Star Trek*. But I guess it’s different, right?”

Erik bit back the misgivings that were growing by the minute. “The idea is the same,” he said as evenly as he could, “but it works on different principles. I don’t have time to explain now.”

He glanced up at the sky, where the first stars were visible and a sliver of moon glistened. Though he could not see it, the Zalian spacecraft should have come out from hiding behind the moon only seconds before.

He started to punch in a series of codes and numbers. After a few seconds, he heard the answering codes in his head. He punched again and gave the command to release the human man.

“Move.” He took Allie’s arm and brusquely pulled her out of the way. He couldn’t be sure where Cody would be set down, but it was likely to

be the exact co-ordinates from where he had issued the order.

Allie stood at his side, not moving or talking. The seconds ticked by, and turned into first one minute, then another.

Finally Allie exhaled. "So what's wrong, Starman? Isn't it working?"

"It's working fine," Erik said shortly. Her flippancy hurt. He didn't like this cold, sarcastic Allie. But he had no one to blame but himself.

"Well, on TV—"

A Zalian curse escaped him. Roughly he pulled Allie to him. His mouth covered hers, cutting off her chatter, as his arms went around her, crushing her to his chest.

All his frustration, all his anger at himself, all his desperation to possess the woman he loved so much, went into the kiss. Her lips parted under his, whether in surprise or desire he didn't know, but his tongue plunged inside, taking what he wanted, trying to silence the recriminations and misgivings that were driving him crazy. His hands traveled down the curves of her body, pressing her closer to his aching need. He wanted to drown in her warmth, in her love, in a flawed attempt to block the painful realization he was losing what he wanted most by forcing her to come to Zura.

“Oooaaah.”

He stiffened at the low moan coming from behind them. Slowly he released Allie. He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face the direction from which the moan had come.

“Cody!” Allie ran towards the dark heap lying on the sand a dozen feet from them.

Erik flinched at the joyous relief he heard in her voice. He held himself still as he watched her kneel by her former fiancé’s side and bend over him with concern.

“Cody, are you all right? It’s Allie.”

With a gentleness that set off an explosion of jealousy in Erik’s heart, Allie stroked Cody’s cheek and brushed back the hair from his forehead.

Pain shot through Erik. He could barely think, much less probe what was in her mind. ***What if she still loved Cody?*** Destiny or not, what good would possessing her be to him if he didn’t have what he wanted most? Could he stand to take her, knowing she didn’t love him? Knowing she hated him for what he’d done to her, to her family, and to Cody? Knowing he’d destroyed everything he loved in her as surely as his grandfather had destroyed his grandmother?

The prone man moaned again. His eyelids fluttered once, twice, then remained open. “Allie,”

he rasped. "Is . . .is this a dream? I . . .I can't seem to move. I . . ."

"Shhh," Allie soothed. "It's all right. Everything will be fine. Don't try to talk."

Cody appeared to struggle to lift his head. His voice sounded rusty and unused. "No. I . . .I have to tell you. I'm sorry Allie. So sorry . . . for everything. I . . .I was a jerk . . ."

His head fell back and his eyes shut with the effort of talking.

Allie turned and glared at Erik. "What have you done to him?"

"He's sedated, that's all. It will wear off in a couple of minutes."

"And then what?"

"He won't remember anything about what's happened to him. The last thing he'll remember is driving in his car the night he disappeared."

"Are you sure?" The concern for Cody in her voice contrasted with the coldness she had shown to him all week.

"Yes," Erik said sharply.

He paused, fighting his desperation, the deep hurt growing inside him. "You'll have to leave him now, Allie. He'll be fine. We need to go now."

Allie turned back to Cody. She looked at him for a long minute, then leaned forward and lightly

kissed his forehead.

Her back still to Erik, she stood up. She took another long look at Cody, then raised her head and turned towards Erik.

She walked over to him. She looked straight at him. "All right. I'm ready."

Despite the show of control, Erik heard the slight tremor in her voice. He saw the uncertain way she bit her bottom lip, and the telltale brightness in her eyes.

Erik took it all in, his heart breaking. She was so beautiful, so brave, so loving. And he was killing her, maybe not physically, but in every other way. He'd never wanted it to be like this.

He dragged his gaze away from her. He looked up at the sky, and up at the moon, where he knew the spaceship was hovering. Once he punched in the signal, they would be transported there in seconds.

Again he looked at Allie. She'd barely spoken to him since she'd offered herself as a sacrifice for Cody. Her silence, her remoteness reproached him as no verbal reprimand could. How he loved her. But the Allie she was. Not the woman he feared she would become on Zura. The sad specter of his grandmother swam in his head, alongside the equally horrifying image revealed by the crystal.

Once again, he looked to the sky. To the spacecraft, and to his home, and his planet, and his galaxy so far away. Everything that he had known. Everything that was his life. Everything that he, the mongrel Zalian, had struggled so hard to achieve.

His gaze dropped to the communicator in his hand. He took a deep breath. Quickly, he punched in a series of numbers. He waited for the answering blip. Twenty-five seconds, thirty seconds, there it was. Before he could change his mind, he punched in two more digits.

Then he snapped shut the communicator. Without a word to Allie, he strode across the sand. He stopped a few feet short of the water. He hurled the device as far out into the lake as he could.

He didn't know how long he stood there. Finally, behind him, he heard Allie come towards him, her sandals slapping in the sand.

"What—why isn't anything happening?"

He didn't look at her. He didn't trust himself. It was all he could do to force out the words. "You're free to go."

"What?"

"You're free to go. I'm not taking you to Zura."

A wave of despair overwhelmed him, along with a whirl of confusing emotions he couldn't deal with. Without waiting for her response, he stumbled forward, towards the lake. He didn't know what he was going to do now, or where he was going to go. He had refused his destiny, and for all intents and purposes, his life was over.

It wasn't until he felt the chill of the cold water lapping around his waist that he realized with a start that he had walked into the lake. But even the icy cold wasn't enough to dull the bitterness of defeat and the pain of lost love filling his heart. Clenching his fists he halted, raised his head, and stared with blank eyes at the moon, where close by, even now, the Idlanta III was preparing to depart.

Dimly, he heard splashing behind him. Then a cold, wet hand grasped his arm. "Erik, what are you doing?"

Wordlessly he turned to look at Allie. The anguish he saw on her face surprised him.

"Are you going back to Zura?"

He shook his head. Talking was painful. "No. I have failed to achieve my destiny. There is nothing left there for me now."

He turned and started to walk towards the shore, but she yanked him back.

“So that means you’re staying here?”

The delight in her voice confused him. He could not believe it had anything to do with him. He nodded.

Her brow creased. “Why did you change your mind?”

He looked at her, the woman for whom he had given up his destiny, and the only life he had ever known. He looked away, unable to bear the pain of meeting the gaze of the woman he knew now would never be his.

“I . . . I couldn’t do that to you,” he said slowly. “You’re so alive, so . . . so **human**. Taking you to Zura would have killed the very things in you I love the most. It killed my grandmother. It was hard enough there for me, and I’m only one quarter Earthling. But now you’re free,” he added. “You can go back to Cody.”

“Cody? **Cody**? You think I want to go back to Cody?”

As confused as he was, he couldn’t mistake the incredulity on her face. She stared at him, her mouth open, her brows raised.

Suddenly she started to laugh. Her laughter faded to a giggle, then a smile, which in turn broadened to a grin. With a shake of her head, she pulled back her arm and splashed the cold lake

water into Erik's face.

He shook the water out of his eyes and drew back, bewildered by her strange behavior but drawn by the sweet sound of her laughter. "Why did you do that?"

"What does it look like, you ninny?" She flung her arms around him and pressed their wet bodies together. "I'm trying to splash some sense into you before you drown."

She looked up at him, her beautiful green eyes wide and full of love. "Don't you know that I love you? I don't want Cody. I love you."

"Me?" Erik didn't know what to do with this new information.

"Yes, you. Erik Berenger, the photographer, alias Barak of Zura or whatever. The last few weeks with you have been the best of my life. You saved my life—and you've given up everything for me. How could I not love you?"

A strange lightness began to fill his heart, along with a flicker of hope he did not yet dare trust. "But . . . but I'm not human."

Allie smiled gently. "I don't care." Her gaze, strong and unwavering, held his. "You're the most wonderful man in this world, and any other world for that matter." She kissed his chin. "That's not something a smart woman gives up."

The flicker of hope grew stronger, flaring higher and brighter. He wanted to believe her more than anything he'd ever wanted before, but everything that he was, everything that he'd been, stood in the way. "But . . .but what about destiny? I—you, this isn't—"

Allie silenced him with a kiss, a warm embrace that burned its way through his confusion and the fetters of a lifetime of alien restraints, a lifetime of trying to repress every human emotion within him. As each restraint fell to the wayside, his heart expanded with joy and a soaring sense of freedom.

Allie drew back. Her lips were wet, her face dewed with water, her eyes clear and wide. "Who cares about destiny?" she whispered. "What we have is real, and honest, and wonderful. We don't need some fate predicted by some old guy hidden away on a mountain top. We can make our own destiny."

Her lips reclaimed his, with a searing heat that convinced him she was right.

He cradled her face, oblivious of his dripping hands. He kissed her eyelids, he kissed her cheeks, her slim vulnerable neck, her waiting lips, consumed with the desire to express his love and joy in her.

Then he threw back his head and laughed, long and loud, the joyful peal of triumph of a man who has lost everything only to find the love he'd been searching for all his life.

He smiled down at Allie. "I love you, Alina Kazimiera Stanislawski. And you're right. We **will** make our own destiny. And it will be better and more wonderful than any seer could ever have predicted."

His mouth covered hers once more, in a kiss that said better than any words how much he treasured his new life with her.

EPILOGUE

One year later.

The midwife squeezed Allie's hand. "Just one more push, dear. That should do it."

Erik winced as Allie screwed up her face and bore down for what he hoped was the last time. He had suffered every push, every painful contraction during the last hour, almost as if they'd been his own. He wasn't sure how much more he could stand.

"The head, the head. Th'atta girl. Keep pushing," the midwife encouraged.

Erik watched in awe as the tiny dark head crowned, and then was born. Allie gasped with relief, her breath rapid and harsh.

"Just one more push now dear, and that'll be it."

With a final momentous push from Allie, the dark, wet body of a perfect little girl slid out and into the midwife's waiting hands.

"It's a girl, Mrs. Berenger. A beautiful, perfect little girl." The midwife's broad, kindly face broke into a smile. Quickly she severed the cord and clamped it. Smoothly and efficiently she wiped off

the baby and swaddled her into a soft, warm cloth. Then she handed her to Allie.

Allie clasped the baby to her breast. In awe she looked down at the tiny being born in the same bedroom where their love had created it nine months earlier. She looked up at Erik, her eyes meeting his, and broke into the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. A smile that wiped out every second of the trauma of the long trying labor. And almost, but not quite, erased the unspoken worry he'd been nursing for months.

"She's beautiful, just beautiful." Allie's lips grazed the child's forehead. She smiled up at Erik again, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Even if she does have your nose."

"Yes." Erik's answering smile was perfunctory. It couldn't wait. He had to know now. "But . . .but her hand?"

Allie regarded him, all hint of teasing gone. He knew she understood. Without a word she loosened the blanket and took the baby's tiny right hand. With infinite carefulness, she unfurled the baby's clasped fingers to reveal a tiny, perfect palm, with nary a hint of blue.

"Ohhhhh." The word escaped on a long sigh of relief, and with it the months, and weeks, and days of worry. Would the child carry the blue

birthmark of the Zalian elite, a sign marking it as not of this Earth, with all the problems that would create? He had been pleasantly surprised as his own birthmark had faded to a mere shadow with each passing month he stayed on Earth, almost in direct proportion to the growth of his emotions and knowledge of mankind. He had hoped, he had prayed with every part of his being, that she would be her mother's daughter, and a true child of the Earth.

Relief gave way to overwhelming pride in the child they had made together, after following a path of their own choosing. He had chosen love over destiny, and he had never regretted it. Especially not now.

His smile broadened until he felt as if his face would crack. He leaned forward and kissed Allie's forehead, then regarded the girl child.

With a sense of wonder and awe not provoked by even the most magnificent galaxy in the heavens, he touched the tiny, open hand. Immediately the fingers closed around his much larger finger, grasping it with surprising strength.

A lump rose in his throat and tears sprang in his eyes.

"I think we'll call her Star," Allie whispered. "After you. And the star that sent you to me."

Over Star's tiny head, their eyes met, with a love and strength Erik knew was more important than anything else. Suddenly it occurred to him that the Zalian seers **had** indeed been right about one aspect of his destiny: he and Allie were meant to be together for all time. But on Earth, not on Zalia, and because they loved each other, not because they had no choice. Fate had brought him to the planet where he truly belonged, as he had never belonged on Zura. Perhaps then, he mused, he should be grateful to the seers for bringing him to Earth, to Allie, and now to his wonderful, perfect daughter.

A surprisingly loud wail startled them both.

Erik stood up, grinning. "Well, Earth Mother, your daughter's calling."

He turned and started to leave the bedroom area.

"Where are you going?" Allie asked.

Erik smiled again. "Out for a cigar." He winked. "Isn't that what new fathers are supposed to do?"

– THE END –