



# DEEP COVER

MOIRA REID

Loose Id

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# **Deep Cover**

## **Moira Reid**

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## **Dedication**

*For L. Shannon, queen of the clean, murder and mayhem only, no p&p manuscript. Three a.m. gets earlier and earlier, I swear, but you're there. I've learned more from you about writing than I can say, but I will say this: you rock.*

## Chapter One

Butch Markham shifted on the edge of the building's roof, leaned forward, and brushed one of the sharp stones from his ass. This spot wasn't long on comfort, but it had the best view of Simonson Consulting's exits. He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the parking lot again. What time was it anyway? He pulled the captain's cell phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. Eleven o'clock. He'd been up here for hours. He closed the phone and tucked it back into his breast pocket. Was she going to come out of the *boondan* building sometime in this Earth year or not?

The captain told him she worked late, but this was crazy. No wonder Claire Simonson needed a bodyguard. Walking alone this late at night couldn't be safe for a human woman. They were frail enough in safe conditions, and her father was convinced she was no longer safe.

The phone vibrated, and he pulled it out once more. Pushing up from the ground, he gave up on finding a comfortable place to sit. He glanced at the readout before flipping the phone open.

"Still on the roof, sir."

"She's not out yet?" The captain's loud huff confirmed his suspicions. Claire's father was as impatient as he was

"Are you watching her car?"

"Yes, sir."

A long silence ensued and he waited. He knew better than to interrupt Dirk Simonson when he was thinking.

"Check the front of the building?"

"Yes, I did."

"Check it again."

Butch walked across the large, flat roof toward the front of the building. He scanned the area as he moved. Three people were walking on the sidewalk ten stories below. None appeared interested in the Simonson building or resembled the snapshot the captain had given him of his daughter.

"Anything?"

"Not yet, no."

"Remember, when she finally comes out, follow at a distance. Don't let her see you. Do *not* approach her. It's going to be tough enough to convince her she needs you without telling her anything she doesn't need to know, you understand me?"

Butch took a deep breath. The sooner this job was over and he was off this planet and back on his own, the better. "Yes, I do."

"She might decide to take a cab home since it's so late." He snorted. "Probably won't. Shit."

"I'm watching both exits, sir." Just as well. Sitting was an impossibility anyway.

"Good. She'll come out eventually. After she arrives home, wait about half an hour, then come to the door. That'll give me time to talk to her. It's all going to go to shit right about then anyway. As good a time as any to show up. You understand?"

Butch had been on Earth for ten years now. He'd learned their simple language within a week of arriving, and the urge to tell the captain so almost overcame him. Almost. But now was not the time to piss off the one person who held the strings that bound him here. Besides, if the captain was right, this woman was in danger, and if she died on his watch, he was never leaving here. "Yes, sir. I understand." He closed the phone and stared out over the front entrance to the building and waited

\* \* \* \* \*

Time was running out. If she didn't get this project done by Friday, the company was as good as dead. Claire exited the Simonson Consulting corporate offices and made her way quickly across the empty parking lot, her mind racing. *Two more days to finalize the presentation, and I convince the Anthony Group to sign with us on Monday morning. It's got to work; it's just got to.*

Her high-heeled shoes clicked over the pavement. Today wasn't the best choice for trying to keep up her exercise regimen. She should have parked closer.

*Everything will go according to plan, and I'll keep my business from sinking into oblivion, taking everything I own with it. This is going to work. It has to work.*

Why was it so dark out here? She glanced to the tops of the tall light poles spread around the lot. This afternoon's thunderstorm had wreaked havoc with the electricity, fried a couple of computers, and must have burned out these lights. She shivered against the cool, damp air and hurried to her car. One more item on her list of things to take care of tomorrow.

Fortunately, the light next to her car was still working. She could see the outline of her Honda Civic under the trees at the far end of the parking lot. A large white van sat parked a few dozen yards away in the darkest corner of the lot.

She glanced at her wristwatch. It was already after eleven thirty. All her employees had been gone for hours. Why would a delivery truck be out here this time of night?

The late-summer wind blew her hair across her face. She stopped in the middle of the parking lot, pulled her cell phone out of her purse, and punched in Marty's number. She felt a little silly. It could simply be broken down and parked here. And what would she ask Marty to do when he answered? Walk beside her? Hold her hand? Still...

"Do you have the time?"

Claire wheeled around. A man at least six feet tall and easily weighing two hundred pounds walked toward her casually in the semidarkness.

"No, I don't." She straightened her shoulders and strode toward her car.

"You're wearing a watch."

She ignored him and broke into a run. Looking like an idiot barely entered her mind. She could feel stupid for running from an innocent man later. Keeping the phone line open, she dropped it into her coat pocket to free her hand. She pressed the button on her key fob. The cheerful chirp of her automatic door locks echoed in front of her. Just a few more yards.

The sound of his footsteps pounded behind her. "Hey, what is your problem?"

No innocent man chased a woman in a dark parking lot. Adrenaline pumped through her, and a steely taste filled her mouth. Marty would be patrolling the exterior of the building somewhere right now. He might hear her if she screamed.

Finally reaching the driver's-side door, she jerked it open, dropped into her seat, and grabbed the door handle. She yanked.

But he was too quick. He stopped the door with one hand and towered over her, his eyes blazing.

"Back away! Right now!" She pulled hard on the door, but he tightened his hold.

"I have a better idea."

He grabbed the sleeve of her suit jacket and pulled her out of the car. Clutching her keys between her fingers, she swung her fist as hard as she could toward his face. The jagged shape and extra weight helped as the sound of her knuckles and the jangling keys striking his cheekbone echoed through the night air.

"Uh!"

His grip faltered, and she threw herself to the ground. Screaming as loudly as she could, she shimmied under her car.

He grabbed her ankle, but she kicked with her other foot, landing a blow squarely on his wrist.



“Bitch!”

Claire centered her body along the length of the vehicle and as far away from the driver’s side as possible. It was dark, but she could still see the outline of his boots. He hadn’t moved away. She continued screaming and struggled to work the phone out of her pocket. “Hello? Marty?” Nothing.

She clicked the Off button in the dark and pressed the Emergency 9-1-1 button.

The man dropped to the ground and extended his leg in front of the back tire. Without warning, he kicked, and the toe of his boot connected with her forehead. Her vision swam, but she continued to scream and scooted farther away. He kicked again, narrowly missing her.

“Bitch!”

She gasped. She’d heard the word so clearly, but even with his face only partially visible—no, that was impossible. His lips hadn’t—Something gripped her thigh, and she kicked both legs in the tight, confined space. She looked for his hands. Neither of them was beneath the car, and yet she could have sworn...

She worked the cell phone toward her ear with trembling hands. “The back Simonson Consulting parking lot. Monroe Avenue.” Gasping out the words, her voice raw from screaming, she forced herself to continue. “A man is trying to kill me. Six feet, two hundred pounds, blond hair.”

He kicked toward her again, missing once more.

“He’s probably driving an old white van. Ford, maybe...at the back of the parking lot.”

She didn’t listen to the emergency operator’s words as she focused on his face, memorizing every detail.

“Oh my God.” She stared at his face, and her breath caught. *Green eyes...green eyes. But one of them is brown. No. I didn’t see brown. His eyes are green. Green and brown...*

“*Vobono etem morea!*”

He dragged his hand over his forehead and leaped from the ground. His boots moved out of her line of sight. The squeaking hinges of the van door and the roar of the vehicle’s engine bathed her in relief. Her body shook uncontrollably as the screech of tires on pavement echoed through the still night.

What if he tried to hit her car with the van?

She scrambled out on the passenger side and stood on shaking legs, her breath coming in gasps. Her mind rushed through horrible visions of what had almost happened as the van sped diagonally across the parking lot toward the entrance. He was trying to take her—why? Where? *Oh God.* Horrible possibilities flashed into her mind, but she forced the terror back, compartmentalized it, and made herself stare at the license plate, squinting to read the retreating numbers in the dim light

She leaned against the side of her car for support until her quivering knees gave way and she slid to the ground. Blood pounded at her temples, and her eyes filled with

tears. She dropped her head to her knees as terror at her near miss turned to a sobbing she didn't have the strength to contain.

The sound of footsteps smacking the pavement echoed behind her. She snapped her head up. Another man was running toward her, this one even bigger. She lurched from the ground and shook her head. "No—"

He stopped and held both hands in front of him. "Wait, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Stay back!" The tight clutch of fear in her throat brought the words on a choked sob. "Don't come...near me!"

He planted his feet, his hands motioning her still. "I tried to get here sooner. I didn't see what was happening until he— Are you all right?"

She gulped in the cold, damp air, her legs trembling, and grasped at the passenger window's small ledge for support. "Who are you?"

"My name is Butch Markham. I'm not here to—" He closed his mouth and reached inside his jacket.

Her heart leaped into her throat. "No—"

He pulled out a handkerchief and held it toward her. "You're bleeding."

Tears continued to stream down her cheeks, her breath coming in short gasps. Her legs shook so violently, she had to struggle to remain upright. Her head was so heavy...

The sensation of the ground moving from beneath her and the car sliding along her back stopped with a warm grasp of two strong hands.

"Hang on. Don't faint on me."

She forced her eyes open as the landscape shifted. One moment she was in his arms, and before she realized what he was doing, she was on the hood. Blinking rapidly to clear her vision, she forced Butch Markham into better focus.

Taller and broader than her attacker, this man's face was unlined and smooth but for the day-old stubble shadowing his chiseled jaw. His hair, coal black and wavy, framed eyes of a deep blue, almost cobalt, in the faint light.

His gaze moved over her, an indentation forming between his brows. He mumbled something as he pressed his handkerchief to her forehead. She clutched his wrist to steady herself.

"Whoa, I'm spinning."

He tightened his grip on her waist. "Don't worry. I'm not going to let anything else happen to you."

His strident voice belied the fear sparkling in his eyes. What was he afraid of? She was all right. Her temple throbbed, but it could have been worse—so much worse. She pressed the thought away, took a deep breath, and straightened. "I'm okay, really. Thank you." She placed her fingertips over the handkerchief. "I can get this."

"I should drive you to a hospital so somebody can take a look at that."

"No, I'm all right. I can drive myself." She tried to move forward, but he tightened his grip on her side.

"You're shaking all over, probably can't even stand up. The police are on their way. If you're not comfortable riding with me, you can go with them."

"I *can* go?" She sat back. "You're taking over, is that it?"

He didn't reach for her, but his gaze never wavered. "Not taking over, no."

She shook off her knee-jerk reaction. This man had come out of nowhere just in time. As dizzy as she'd been a moment ago, she might have passed out alone here. She should be grateful, but she was so used to being in charge. If that control slipped even a little...

Not slipped. Control had tumbled over a hillside the moment she'd seen that van.

The damp air settled into her bones. The van, in the dark, and that man—that *creature*... Fighting a wave of nausea, she sucked in the cold air. She could have passed out. That man could have returned...

*Don't think about that now.* Butch was right—she was trembling uncontrollably, but it was time to move. She pressed forward, and this time he took a step back and allowed her to slide off the hood on her own. She was still a little wobbly, but sucking in a deep breath, she squared her shoulders.

There was no reason to let the commanding sound in his voice stiffen her spine. It wasn't his fault it reminded her of her father. She owed him nothing short of gratitude. "Look, I'm sorry. I can't thank you enough, but really, I'm fine."

"If you're all right, I'll follow you to the hospital."

"Follow me?" She shook her head. "That's really above and beyond. There's no need—"

He smiled, his eyes twinkling in the semidarkness. "Maybe I'm one of those...a gentleman?"

Something about the way he said the words, as if he'd had to search for them. *How odd.* She opened her mouth to ask him how he'd come to be out here, but the sound of approaching sirens stopped her.

"And here they come. I'm going to get my car. You're all right?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"I won't be far behind you." He hesitated, then added, "When we get there, it might be better to pretend you don't know me."

"What?"

"Trust me on this." He turned to go.

"Trust you? Wait a second. Butch? Better for whom?"

She couldn't quite hear him, but the muttered words sounded a lot like, "For me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire touched the bandage on the side of her forehead as she perched on the edge of the emergency room gurney. The mingling scent of alcohol with other unidentifiable medicines filled her nostrils, making her woozier than the injury to her skull. She hadn't been inside a hospital since she'd broken her arm playing soccer at thirteen. That day, as if the hospital weren't bad enough, she'd come home to find her mother had packed up and left.

That was fourteen years ago, and one thing hadn't changed – hospitals remained her least favorite of places.

"What else can you tell me about the man who attempted to kidnap you?"

She stared at the short, uniformed officer jotting down her responses in a small, spiral-bound notebook. She'd told him exactly what had happened – that had been her first mistake. Now the words "attempted kidnapping" or some variation of them were in every question he asked. This was an official record, and if that phrase got thrown around, it was sure to get back to her father. He would already be full of "I told you so's!" and "Why won't you listen to me's?" as it was. If he heard that, there'd be no living with his constant worrying.

"Officer Baeck, please. He tried to pull me out of my car. It was a random attack, nothing else." She shivered at her next words but forced them out anyway. "Rape maybe, but –"

He looked up from his notebook and forced a patient smile. "And that's how you were injured. You fell on the parking lot while attempting to flee from the man, correct?"

"Well, and he kicked me." A shiver of dread at the memory shook her. She pulled the blanket an EMT had given her tighter around her shoulders. "The man" was the real question, thankfully one the officer wasn't asking. He'd looked like a man, but there was no way he was a man, not a human man anyway – and that was just crazy.

"When he tried to kidnap you –"

"Sir, please stop saying that. He tried to relocate me. That's not the same thing."

"All right. When he grabbed you, you slid under your car?"

"Yes, I threw myself down on the ground and got under my car. When I started screaming, he kicked underneath the vehicle, and his boot struck my temple."

The officer looked up from his notebook. "A man grabs you, tries to drag you out of your car toward a van, kicks you, and you don't see that as a possible kidnapping?"

She cringed. Her father had an uncanny sense for finding her wherever she was, and he could show up here any minute. Keeping weird musings from the police was one thing; trying to avoid dealing with her father's questions was quite another.

The pounding of her blood at her temples, the involuntary shivers through her chest, the crazy memories rushing through her mind of how it had all happened – her body seemed bent on agreeing with the officer. Those moments in the parking lot were blurry, but whatever the man's intentions, they were something much worse and much

weirder than kidnapping. She couldn't say any of that, however, without sounding like a nutcase.

She straightened on the gurney and tossed her hair back from her face, tossing the thoughts along with it. What she'd imagined about her attacker was nuts, an obvious side effect of her head injury. She would not talk about this. She'd find some way to figure it out on her own. There had to be a logical explanation.

"Whatever it was, it's over, and I'm fine, sir. Really."

The officer shook his head as he jotted down another note that she could not see. "Let's go over the description once more."

The longer she remained here, the more likely her father would appear. She'd been trying to get him to stop being so overprotective since he'd driven her mother away. This was just the kind of thing that would make that impossible. Claire could already hear the Third Cavalry mounting their horses just thinking about it.

"Please. I've told you everything. I'd like to go home now."

He snapped his notebook closed and tucked it inside his jacket pocket. "If that's all you remember, then that's what we're going with."

"It was a random thing. I was just stupid and unlucky."

"Or lucky. And I hope you're right, Miss Simonson." He shook his head as he spoke. "Take care of that cut"

"She's always been a little hardheaded." Her father's voice echoed through the emergency room from a distance and snapped her spine straight.

She glanced past the officer and saw her father roll toward them in his wheelchair. He'd dressed in a pair of slacks and a white shirt pressed to within an inch of its stitches. Her father might be long retired from the military, but he still believed in armed forces' precision in all things, including his clothing—and his daughter. Some things never changed, not in twenty-seven years. His instincts made him overprotective and controlling; hers made her fight both with every turn.

The officer turned toward him. When her father entered a room, people rendered the floor to him. He was just as foreboding as he'd been as a young man, and it never seemed to matter to anyone that he was going on sixty-five and wheelchair bound. Others handed over the reins of control to him without question. Over the years, she'd learned better.

She had to admit she had not fallen far from the tree of his legacy. In her business, she never showed weakness, never allowed herself to appear out of control of any situation. Being the CEO of her own consulting firm required distancing from one's emotions, taking on a persona that exuded confidence. She'd learned that from her father, although her insistence on her own independence had not been the lesson he'd intended to teach.

And he'd taught her another thing without meaning to—two people could not be in charge. Her mother had run away from his controlling ways years ago. His

subsequent attempts to control Claire's life always ran headlong into her own. He'd worked too hard and sacrificed too much for her after her mother disappeared for her to tell him off, and generally the simplest solution was to avoid confrontation.

She sighed. Sometimes, that just wasn't possible.

"You're her father?"

"Yes, Officer. Captain Dirk Simonson." Her father rolled in slowly. He was perfectly capable of racing the wheelchair with his considerable upper-body strength. Instead, he moved with purpose, the quiet control in him more powerful than any blustering would ever be. Her father was about to take over, and this poor man whose job was to serve and protect was about to be cast aside.

"We'll do our best, sir."

"She might remember more later; she's probably still in shock."

Claire pursed her lips and took in a deep breath. "Father, please don't talk about me like I'm not in the room. I'm not in shock."

"I told you she was hardheaded."

With that one sentence, her father attempted to render her the helpless female, a role she'd been fighting against her entire life. If it wouldn't have caused a scene in front of everyone in the hospital, she would have given him a piece of something inside her "hard head."

"We'll be in touch." The officer shook hands with her father, then walked toward the curtain the nurse had drawn around her gurney. As he pushed it aside, Butch stepped into view.

She hadn't really seen him that well in the dark parking lot, but under the fluorescent lighting, his body, clad in fitted jeans and an old blue sweatshirt, was exactly what she'd felt while in his arms. In top physical condition, he radiated the same air of confidence she'd seen on all the military men her father had ever worked with, that of a man trained by the most powerful government in the world and backed by the most potent weaponry ever conceived. As he stood at command rest and continued to stare unabashedly into her eyes, she could see it. Oh yeah, wherever he'd come from, he'd been one of them at some point in his life. Whether active duty or veteran, he was definitely military. Oh God, was he one of her father's –

She started to speak to him, but he assessed her in one long, appraising look, then locked his gaze on hers. *It might be better to pretend you don't know me.*

Her father wheeled closer and touched her knee. "How's your head?"

Claire pulled her attention away from Butch's intense blue gaze and looked down at her father. Never seeing anything like kindness or pity in his features before, she was startled to note his eyebrows drawn together over pursed lips.

She could still see Butch out of her peripheral vision, but more than that, she could almost feel his presence in the room. He'd moved neither closer nor farther away, and

yet he seemed in motion. No, not in motion, more like ready to move at a moment's notice.

Men her father had trained always looked like this. Before he'd been injured, he'd worked for a top secret branch of the military he still could not talk about. All her father's men had been poster boys, but none quite like this one.

Her father had asked her a question, and she forced herself to ignore Butch and answer it. The sooner she got through what he would try to turn into an interrogation, the sooner she could get out of here.

"I'm perfectly all right, Father. What are you doing here?"

"I heard the call on the police radio. When I tried to reach you on your cell and you didn't answer, I had to call the hospitals to find you. Do you have any idea what that was like? Finding out you were hurt and having to hunt you down? Why didn't you call me?" The concerned look on his face disappeared as quickly as it had come, replaced by the more common Dirk Simonson trademark scowl of reproach.

"There was no need. As you can see, I'm perfectly fine."

"All evidence to the contrary. Claire, a man tries to kidnap you, and you insist you're fine, first to the police, then to me. There's a difference between hardheaded and ridiculous."

"Father —"

"Why were you —"

"Do you know that man?" Claire glanced toward Butch, bent on derailing the out-of-control, fast-approaching train wreck. She had no interest in arguing that she was well past the age of consent and did not, despite his beliefs to the contrary, answer to him. She couldn't bear the thought of anyone else seeing the row this particular situation promised to become if not nipped in the bud. She had only a moment to get whatever control she could, and she grasped it with both hands.

Her father did not turn around. "That's a friend of mine, Butch Markham. Don't change the subject."

A friend of his? She glared at Butch. So, her father did know him. Had he been following her? What was going on here? "Would you mind asking him to step outside for a moment? This is my hospital room, such as it is, and I'd prefer —"

"Now who's talking about someone like they aren't in the room?"

She'd seen his lips part, saw his jaw move, but his rich and smooth voice, like coffee laced with liqueur, surprised her. Had he sounded like that in the parking lot? Never would she have imagined that such a wonderful sound would come from that tough-looking exterior.

The resonance through the busy noises of the hospital reminded her of snowy nights spent reclining by the fire. The cozy image of him snuggled next to her on a pillow-covered sofa popped so clearly into her mind that she gave her head a quick shake. The motion had the dual effect of making her head spin and her vision swim, but

it was worth it. That image was not something she needed in her head. Not now, preferably not ever. For whatever reason Butch had appeared out of nowhere tonight, followed her to the hospital, and stood staring at her with those amazing eyes, she was now absolutely certain it hadn't been by chance.

"What's he doing here?" She addressed her father again, staring at the man and ignoring him at the same time.

"You did it again." The corner of his mouth rose in a smirk that made his eyes dance for a moment, then return to diamond crystal solidity. "But I'm willing to overlook it."

The room shifted as the air, unnoticeable a moment ago, now caressed her skin with warmth. The blood thumping at her temples intensified, and she had to blink to clear her vision. Despite the richness of his voice and his casual stance, that gaze and mouth didn't belong to someone she'd dare get cozy with.

She forced herself to concentrate and focused her attention on her father. "What is he *doing* here? I know he isn't a cop. Who is he?"

Her father's eyes flashed as his strong baritone shook the room. "He's your bodyguard."

Claire looked at Butch. "A bodyguard I wasn't supposed to know about."

"You know about him now."

"I don't need a bodyguard. This was just a random—"

"You were attacked tonight. Anybody crazy enough to do that is nobody I want anywhere near you again. Butch is going to make sure my wishes come true." His words were slow and measured as he squeezed her knee.

"Father." Her voice sounded weak and pleading. She cleared her throat and began again. "It's all over now. This was my own fault, and I will be more careful in the future."

"You are never careful, Claire."

She ignored the comment. "Besides, I have a business to run. I can't babysit a grown man all day long. And I'm sure he has more important things to do too. This is just silly."

"Babysit?" Butch took three steps and he was beside her, the air around him scented with a delicious aroma she couldn't place. Whatever it was, a clear, lusty image of him naked came with it.

What in the world was coming over her? She blinked the image from her mind. Sure, she hadn't been with a man in a long time, which could explain her body's instant attraction, but she worked with men all day long. Not once had any feeling like this come over her. Of course, none of the men who worked for her smelled or looked like this one.

Bodyguard? Oh, this was not good.



He opened his mouth again, and Claire steeled herself to the effect his voice had had on her a moment ago.

"Miss Simonson, I haven't needed a babysitter for a long time. Don't know that I ever needed one. You, however, need someone to watch over you. I'm it."

His hands still hung at his sides, but she looked down at her own resting in her lap to be sure. No, he hadn't touched her; she could have sworn that he had. Heat moved through her whole body, whether from anger or something else she wouldn't let herself think about.

"I want you safe, Claire. Butch is not going to get in your way; he'll be with you twenty-four-seven until this maniac is caught, and that is nonnegotiable."

She'd heard that sound in her father's voice before, way too many times to count. His whether-you're-twenty-seven-or-seven-I'm-still-your-father voice trucked no discussion. She looked at Butch again, and seeing the same smirk on his full lips, she knew she had to try anyway. She didn't want a shouting match in the hospital, but the alternative was worse—a bodyguard, with her day and night? This one in particular? Trouble with a capital *T*.

"I have been taking care of myself for a long time now, and I can—"

"End up as a sex slave in somebody's basement...or worse." That coffee voice floated low and rich through the room again, and as the words "sex slave" passed over his lips, the heat coursing through her reached a fever pitch, settling between her thighs.

Doctors and nurses moved around the emergency room, their voices and footsteps swirling around her. The hospital continued its mission, its personnel hard at work saving lives. Meanwhile, she was trapped in a three-way argument she had little energy to pursue. The kind of saving she needed was nowhere in sight.

Right now was not the time for this discussion, especially while her wild-eyed, hormone-inducing savior stared at her, bringing every nerve ending in her body to vibrating life. She would think of some way to change things. His charge to watch her twenty-four-seven could not be allowed to happen. If even one full day passed and he remained beside her, she had a bad feeling about what her body, the damn betrayer that it was, might consider without the consent of her sense of reason.

Twenty-four-seven. The thought sent two chills down her spine—one of fear, the other something a lot like lust.

"Oh boy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch kept his eyes trained on the road ahead, avoiding the hot gaze of the woman next to him. She would have taken a ride with anyone else if she could have, anyone it seemed but her only other alternative—her father. She was stuck with him and had managed to turn a short drive into the Spanish Inquisition.

He pulled his Mustang into the parking lot where Claire had been attacked, and he attempted to turn her interrogation into a conversation.

"I knew your father before he was injured."

"You were one of the boys in his club."

*Club?* Obviously she didn't know a thing about her father's occupation or Vivemonde. She'd asked him at least a hundred questions since they'd gotten into his car, firing them one after another shotgun-style across the small space between them. Given strict orders not to disclose anything beyond the barest information and absolutely nothing top secret, avoiding her questions was becoming more difficult by the minute.

His instincts told him to simply radiate a palmful of calm over her, and that would end the unpleasantness, but he'd known other Viven who had their sentences extended on Earth for years for that kind of slip. Besides, it wasn't too tough to picture where that would lead—clutching the long strands of her hair in his hands, holding her mouth to his as he thrust inside her. Strange that his instincts were moving in that direction in the first place. On Earth, for almost ten years now, he'd never once considered it. Until now. Yeah. No palmful of calm.

Instead, he was trying, without much success, to ignore the questions as well as the lyrical sound of her voice.

"Did you hear me? I asked if you were in—"

"Yeah." He rolled his window down and took a deep breath. "I'm in his club."

Dennis Tito was Earth's first space tourist and had paid twenty million dollars to board the International Space Station in 2001. Butch had traveled through space years earlier than that and hadn't had to pay a dime. All he'd done to earn this trip was piss off his boss on his home planet of Vivemonde. The day he landed on Earth, Dirk Simonson, captain of UMI, the US government's secret UFO military initiative, and trainer of CETs, convicted extraterrestrials, became his new boss.

Simonson was intelligent but related to all Viven only as their leader. He could be blunt to the point of cruelty and was not above being vindictive. Over the nearly ten years Butch had been assigned to him on Earth, he'd known no one as demanding as Dirk Simonson. At least not until Claire had gotten into his car. *Ahlif ad ratsog* or "the apple didn't fall far from the tree" was a saying that obviously spanned the universe.

She wasn't especially cruel, but she had "demanding" down to a science.

Most females got along with him, seemed to like him even. When he'd shown up in the parking lot, she'd liked him. Not so much anymore. Butch reminded himself that she didn't want him to be here any more than he did. This was just another job, his last one before he could board the ship headed for home.

"Why did he pick you?"

“You already knew me—that was your father’s reasoning. He thought you’d be more receptive to a bodyguard if he weren’t a complete stranger. You and I met ten years ago.” And I’d just landed on the planet, he thought but didn’t add.

“I don’t remember you.”

“I remember you.” His instincts had been right about her then too. Even in her early years, she had shown a strong will, and unlike the women of his planet, Earth women were self-sufficient and opinionated. As soon as he’d reached out to her in the hospital room—one intraskin communication confirmed it—she was kindred, the worst kind of trouble. Definitely one to stay away from.

But she needed him, and he needed to do this job, finish his sentence and get out of Dodge, just like Harvey Keitel said in *Pulp Fiction*. Man, if there was one good thing about being sent to this place, it was movies.

“That gives us exactly...forty minutes to get the fuck out of Dodge. Which, if you do what I say when I say it, should be plenty. Now, you’ve got a corpse in a car, minus a head, in a garage. Take me to it.”

“What?”

“Nothing; it was a movie I saw once. You were saying?”

“I was saying I don’t remember you, and besides, that club—”

“It’s not a *club*. It’s a unit.”

“How much longer will you be in this ‘unit’ then? How long are you going to be bothering me?”

The twist of her mouth as she said the word left little room for interpretation. She might not know much about her father’s work, but she knew enough to hate it. “I’m in for a little while longer.”

“How much longer?”

“Long enough.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m here until we find out who tried to kidnap you.” Kind of. He was here until his time was up and not one minute more.

“It was not a kidnapping attempt! Why does everyone keep saying that?”

Her voice was starting to get under his skin, and not in a safe way. The captain wouldn’t like the direction of his thoughts. She perched on the edge of the seat, her slacks torn at one knee and covered in a chemical humans called “oil,” not unlike the *ghorol* on his own planet. The sweater she wore had been white but was now covered in smudges of dirt. The large white square of gauze covering half her forehead was held down with medical tape.

A dirty and injured kindred—she was still gorgeous.

“Would you save the third degree until I’ve had some sleep?”

“I’m not tired.”

He turned to stare at her. What kind of egocentric – Why should he care if she was tired or not? He locked his jaw to keep from saying exactly that. She was trying to get to him, and he would not give her the satisfaction.

He drove toward her car, slamming the gearshift into second, turning the wheel, and heading across the lot diagonally. The force of the acceleration in this gravity pressed her back against the seat. Why would she park two hundred yards from the entrance? He hadn't seen her exit the building, and he'd already had his ass handed to him for that mistake. She'd walked all the way across this lined pavement alone, oblivious to any threat.

Butch pulled his Mustang alongside the Honda Civic parked in the darkness of the trees. He couldn't think about what could have happened if... He cleared his throat. "I thought you owned this place. Don't they have preferred parking for the boss?"

"I can park wherever I like. I need the exercise."

*You'll get a hell of a workout if you get raped and beaten*, he wanted to say but kept his mouth shut. He couldn't afford to blow this. One last job, and he could go home. Butch had hoped the *Auquerel* was finally smiling down on his wish to return home, and this was too good to be true.

He'd been half right.

The thought of someone hurting this particular woman, though, was stirring an unusual and unwanted anger inside him. Yeah, she needed to get out of his car.

She pulled a set of keys out of her pocket. "Listen, Butch. We don't have to do this. You can tell my father you're doing your job, and I'll tell him the same. You can have a few days off, maybe do something fun. I can go about my business. You'll still get paid, and everyone will be happy. My father need be none the wiser. Problem solved. What do you think?"

"Claire," he said, then stopped himself. Giving into the unexpected anger raging through him wouldn't help this situation, and he couldn't palm her. He took a deep breath. "I have this job, and you are not going to make me blow it off."

She turned toward him, and even in the semidarkness of the car her sage green eyes flickered. "What will it take for you to forget about it?"

"The day I find the man who attacked you and he goes to jail, it'll be the first thing I forget. Until then, not a chance"

"This is all so unnecessary. It was one random thing –"

"Yes, I recall your conversation with your father. You couldn't convince him, but you thought I'd agree with you? Why? Because you're beautiful?" The words were out of his mouth before he realized he'd said them. Boondan. What an idiot. The memory of her in his arms for those few seconds was much too clear. He absolutely *had* to start thinking before he spoke.

Without missing a beat, she shot back, "This is an invasion of my privacy."

"Damn, woman! You know what this is?" He gripped the steering wheel tighter to try to control the unwanted fury and unbelievable draw of her flesh. He gritted his teeth and tried not to breathe in the sweet fragrance of her hair. He focused far into the darkness. "Someone tried to *hurt* you. No matter what you told the captain, I know you know that. What is wrong with you? Am I that repulsive?"

Boondan. He'd done it again. Her glittering eyes flashed fire in the semidarkness. "This has nothing to do with you, and there is *nothing wrong with me*." She crossed her arms over her chest. "You were hired, and now you're talking to me that way? Where'd that gentleman go, I wonder? You think my father would like that tone?"

He sucked in a breath and tried to think through his response before speaking. She shifted around in her seat, and the sweet smell of the air around her wafted toward him again. What in the name of Auquerel had he been about to say? Oh yeah. Throwing her father up in his face. If she thought pissing him off was going to make him blow off this job, she had another think coming.

"I'll tell you what, Claire. As a gentleman, I'll let you decide. What's it going to be? Either you don't want your father in your business—or you do. And while you're deciding, get in your car and I'll follow you home."

Butch leaned across the seat to reach for the door handle. She sat back with a start and put her hands in front of her. Her eyes flashed again, this time with something other than anger. "I don't want you to follow me home."

That was a lie, whether she knew it or not. Her perfume was suddenly eclipsed by the call of her pheromones in the confined space. His senses now on high alert, her small body was burning, and his had already begun to respond. The same tightening he'd felt in his midsection while watching her in the hospital moved a fraction lower. He had to get her out of here, and now.

He ignored unwanted thoughts of pulling her upheld hands around his waist and holding them behind his back. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to ignore her body's chemical messages filling the air.

"What'd you think? That I was going to do something to you?" He shoved the door open, then turned to her, his face mere inches from hers. "Claire, let's get something straight, okay? I'm here to stop people from doing anything to you. I was too late earlier. That's not going to happen again. Got it?"

"What possible difference could it make to you if I live or die?" Her voice was quiet now, almost a whisper. Her hands trembled.

He shook his head and fought off the overwhelming urge to touch her lips with his own. He'd never kissed a kindred, had steered clear of them for good reasons, but if she didn't get out in the next sixty seconds...

He leaned even closer to her, the scent of her rapid breaths filling his nostrils. "Are you going to get out, or am I going to carry your shapely behind out?"

He was a big guy, and intimidating when he wanted to be—he knew that. He'd never strong-armed a woman, but he could if he had to. Logical reasoning had had no

effect. What remained was forcing the facts of life into her gorgeous head. He tipped her chin up, his nose almost touching hers. "Make no mistake about this, Claire. I'm with you for the duration."

She smiled then, a slow, seductive grin that made her eyes twinkle and his groin clench like a fist. Warning bells rang loud and clear inside his head.

"Well, all right then. Thank you for the ride. I guess I'll see you in the morning. Want to meet me at my house around nine? That's when I usually leave for work. I have a full day tomorrow."

He shook his head. "You go to work at six. I'll be waiting for you downstairs by five thirty."

She watched him for a long moment, the smile fading away before his eyes. "Fine!"

"Good."

Claire Simonson kicked the open door and practically jumped out of the Mustang. Butch waited until she'd gotten inside her car and the engine turned over. When she peeled out of the parking space and sped across the lot, her headlights bouncing crazily over the pavement, he leaned over and pulled the passenger door closed.

"What a pain in the ass." He put the car in reverse, backed up, and turned on the captain's GPS tracker. Pulling the laptop from under the passenger seat, he logged on to Google Earth with the captain's log-in information and noted a small red dot moving onto the main road out of the parking lot. He almost felt sorry for her. What kind of father put a GPS tracker on his grown daughter's car?

He shook his head, put the car in first gear, and followed the directions given by three satellites to the laptop. He remembered a line from a movie he'd seen years ago and laughed.

"I picked a hell of a day to stop sniffing glue."

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire shook her head as she drove toward the house she'd lived in since childhood. She tried to push thoughts of Poster Boy Butch out of her mind. This had been one of the most trying evenings she could remember, but she was almost home. Within the next half hour, she would be in her bed and fast asleep, safe and sound from controlling fathers, stalking psychos, and sexy bodyguards.

And God he was sexy. The thought shook her with its sudden intensity. Since when had she become such a girl? Men as romantic partners had held no interest for her since college. She'd remained focused on her own priorities all these years, and now on the cusp of success, her hormones decided to kick in.

It was her own fault. This stupid attack could not have come at a more inconvenient time. Yeah, she'd been scared, but it was over now, or would be if her father hadn't stepped into it, and as usual, wanted to make a federal case out of it.

Tomorrow she had so many arrangements to make for her meeting with the Anthony Group. She needed to be at her sharpest to get the last items on her to-do list done. If she could just land this account, not only would it be a huge feather in her cap, it would eliminate any further financial issues for her company and seal her independence for good.

She had been unable to acquire start-up capital on her own. Simonson Consulting had her father to thank for overcoming that particular obstacle. Through his connections with various government agencies, he'd seen to the monetary concerns to get the business under way, but time was running out. She would pay back those debts with this contract and be completely independent. More than anything else, she wanted to stand on her own, and she could not do that if she still owed everything to her father's inside connections and financial resources. It was more than difficult to spurn someone's constant advice if they'd provided the means for your success. She was so close to finally cutting the rope and sailing free, she could taste it.

She'd agreed to accept help with the start-up money for the company – it had been a hard decision, but a necessary one. Since that time, she'd made good money, but she'd used that money, reinvesting in the business to build it into a bigger and ultimately stronger operation. Perhaps she'd been a little optimistic, tried to grow too quickly. Perhaps – but it was too late to second-guess those decisions. She liked to think of it as “speculate to accumulate,” and as soon as she landed this company's business, it would all be worth the risk. She would pay off the debts and be free.

Today, she'd almost blown all her chances. Normally, she paid attention to her surroundings, was able to assess a situation immediately. Simonson Consulting wouldn't be where it was without her almost sixth sense of potential danger. But this evening as she'd walked to her car, she'd been thinking about the next day's work, planning for the meeting with the top brass to convince them that Simonson Consulting was the right choice for their entire chain of outlets. She had been preoccupied, and it had almost cost her.

Cost her what, she would not allow herself to think about. It was fruitless and would only serve to make her lose her edge. And right now, she needed her edge more than ever before. There was too much riding on this week's business, and she could not afford to show even a tiny sign of weakness.

Well, the attack was over, and she was not much worse for wear. She lifted her hand to the bandage on her forehead and rubbed the gauze. One little bump wasn't going to kill her, and if it took a conk on the head to wake her up, that was a small price to pay.

Claire looked in the rearview mirror. At least she'd lost him – that smug, annoying, handsome bodyguard. *Bodyguard, my foot. Bossy, military thug hired by my overprotective and interfering father is more like it.*

Wait a second. Had she just thought of him as handsome?

Good grief. Why her hormones had decided that this was the time to come out and play she would never know. He wasn't that good looking, damn it.

Okay, yeah, he was. Really more than handsome. He gave off some kind of weird, almost electric charge. Riding in the sports car with him in that small, contained space, smelling his aftershave and the leather seats, had filled her senses in an unwanted but definitely erotic way.

*He was a man, like any other man. Get a grip on yourself.*

What possible difference did it make if he was handsome or not? If he smelled like heaven and looked like the devil himself? He was a problem and would only be more so if she didn't figure out how to ditch him as soon as possible and for good. If she needed a bodyguard, she would hire her own, and not just take any Butch her father thrust on her.

Telling her what she would and would not do? He wished.

She'd left him in the dust effectively enough—some bodyguard. If and when she did hire one, he'd be a hell of a lot better than this one. He couldn't even keep up with her from the parking lot to her house.

It was just as well too, because the last thing she needed was someone that gorgeous hanging around her every minute of the day. She already had one man to placate whether she liked it or not. She did not need one that caused her mind and body to go a little nuts.

"Shut up. Frigging hormones," she muttered under her breath as she made another turn. She glanced into the rearview mirror again. Nope. Nobody in sight.

As she'd told him earlier, she sure didn't have time to babysit, or be babysat either for that matter. Especially by hunks like Butch Markham.

A light drizzle began to fall, and Claire reached for the windshield wiper control, noticing as she snapped it on that her fingers were cramped and still sore from the gravel she'd scraped across as she scrambled under her car. She flexed her fingers a couple of times to loosen them up. Her nails were shot too, she noticed. Oh brother.

The wipers had disengaged from their hiding place below the line of the hood, and with the movement of the wiper, something like a yellow flag swiped first one way across the windshield, then back again.

Someone had stuck a flyer under her wiper. How many times had she told security to keep people from doing this very thing? She hadn't noticed a lot of other flyers lying all over the parking lot, which was what usually happened when others had them placed on their cars. They saw the trash and rid themselves of it by tossing it onto the ground. Yet another good reason to give security a call first thing in the morning before her staff meeting.

She rolled down her window and tried to reach outside and grab the now-dampening little yellow page as the wiper came back toward her while she continued to hold the car on the road. Her back strained with the effort of leaning so far forward. She



was going to be sore tomorrow. As soon as she got home, she had to remember to take a couple of Tylenol and find the heating pad.

She tried three times to grab the paper as the wiper came back to her, then slipped from her grasp. The sky opened, and rain came down like water being poured out of a bucket. A crack of lightning lit up the night.

She moved the car toward the shoulder and turned off the wipers. If she got out now, she'd be soaked to the skin on top of being bone tired and getting sorer by the minute. If the downpour would let up for even a moment, she'd get out and grab the thing. Rain teemed all around her and the lightning struck again. What a mess; a bad day had officially turned to crap.

Cocooned inside the vehicle, Claire took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Patience wasn't really her strong suit, but the storm would pass in a few minutes. She'd just give it a chance to blow over, and she'd be on her way.

A pounding on her passenger window made her jump so high out of the seat, she hit her head on the ceiling and screamed.

The outline of a human head attached to broad shoulders filled the window in the hazy shadows. Whoever it was stared at her and was getting soaking wet. The next strike of lightning confirmed her fear, even if it didn't assuage it.

A man stood outside her car—and the man was Butch Markham. Given the alternative of the man from earlier, she guessed he was a better option, but not by much. He'd not only found her, now he wanted inside. He tapped on the window again, the sound barely audible above the pounding raindrops on the roof.

Closed up inside a car with him again, sitting even closer to him this time, as her seats were closer together than those in his Mustang? Breathing his scent again? She was not up for this, she thought as her head continued to pound.

But she couldn't leave him standing in the rain either. She slid her hand over the electronic lock button just as he gave her the old-fashioned rolling motion with his hand, still oddly used, though she hadn't owned a car in years with manual windows.

She ignored the door lock and cracked the window a little over an inch.

"What's the holdup?"

"How did you find me?"

Water dripped off his head and down his forehead over his face. "Your perfume stuck with me."

She forced herself to ignore that comment. Was he coming on to her, or was she just wishing he would? Talk about something that would make her father send him packing.

Talk about something...

She snapped the door lock. "Well, don't stand out in the rain! Or are you afraid to get too close to me, Mr. Bodyguard?"

He ran his fingers through his hair, swiping the black dripping tendrils from his forehead. "I'll soak the interior. Is something wrong with the car?"

"No, nothing's wrong with the car. I saw a piece of paper..." Suddenly the idea of trying to explain how she'd come to pull over while he stood outside in the downpour was too ludicrous. Besides, she needed him in here if she was going to get this plan under way. A plan that was foolproof, if perhaps a little foolhardy. He kissed her once, she told her father, he was gone. Simple enough. He would never hire a bodyguard who would come on to her, that was for sure. This was one quick and easy way to solve the problem once and for all.

Of course, that did mean she'd have to get him to kiss her for it to work.

"Get in here! You'll get pneumonia."

His eyes glittered in the moonlight. "I'm fine. What piece of paper?"

"Butch, you boneheaded man!" She leaned over and opened the car door, shoving it toward him, a huge gust of rain splashing all over her arm and the passenger-side interior. "Now, the seat is good and wet. Get in."

He climbed into the car, surprisingly slowly for someone getting more and more soaked by the minute. But as he sat down and she saw that his jeans, his sweatshirt, his hair, and even his lips were wet, she guessed after you're soaked, you can't really get any wetter.

She stifled the thought that popped into her mind in that instant and forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

His lithe body moved like a cat, and she tried not to take note of how easy it would be to simply kiss him. Would it really make a difference if she made the first move? Stepping over the line was stepping over, no matter who did it, right?

He closed the door, then leaned against it.

"Okay, what piece of paper?"

"You must be freezing. Would you like me to turn up the heat?" She ignored his question and slowly moved her hand toward the controls, wondering if this was how a woman turned a man on. Slow the pace, move with the rhythm of heartbeats, talk slowly. She'd never seduced a man in her life, but she had a general idea of how it could be done if she had the nerve to do it. Deciding to go with her instincts, she turned the knob to high, then leaned across his legs, resting her hand on one of his knees to hold herself in place as she slowly adjusted both vents to blow over his wet skin.

She straightened, pushing on his knee as she righted herself. "Is that any better?"

His eyebrows rose; then he nodded slowly. "Sure. Great."

They sat together for a long, quiet moment, the sound of the raindrops on the roof pounding around them reminiscent of being inside a half-lit cave.

*Kind of cozy? You look good wet? Want to kiss me?* She couldn't think of what to say next that would move things along. She certainly didn't want to sit here all night

waiting for him to pick up on the hint and kiss her, thus ending his short-lived bodyguard career.

She tried to imagine just leaning over and kissing him.

Uh, no.

"The paper?"

Man, this was harder than it looked. How do you get a guy to want to kiss you anyway? She turned to him and smiled. That had to be a good first step. "Butch."

His eyebrows rose again. "Yeah?"

Closer. That was it. Move closer. She leaned back against her seat and rested her hand on his headrest, trying hard not to flinch. She'd had no idea this would be so tough. And her hormones certainly weren't helping. She needed to keep a clear head to pull this off and not get lost in the part. Normally, she might take weeks to plan something like this, to attend to every detail. Flying by the seat of her pants might not be her strong suit either, she thought ruefully. What in the name of heaven was her strong suit?

*Straight to the heart of the problem. Play those cards if you want to win.*

Finally her subconscious was telling her something useful and sadly, even truthful. "I am attracted to you."

His eyes widened this time. His lips opened, then closed and turned to a thin line. "No kidding."

"What do you mean, no kidding?" Isn't this what she wanted to happen? So why did it feel so odd?

"I mean that your pulse is racing, your face is flushed, your hands are trembling. You're either attracted to me, or you're having a heart attack."

Her face burned, but she wouldn't turn back. The die was cast. "Do you find me attractive at all?"

He laughed, then cleared his throat. "You must know that I do."

Well, now what? "So..."

He shifted in the seat and rolled the window down a few inches. "So? Were you planning for us to get to it in the front seat of your car?"

The pouring rain splashed on his head and shoulders as he continued to watch her. Maybe there was nothing to say. Maybe saying nothing was the answer. She watched him carefully, trying to pick up on any indication that this crazy scheme might bear fruit.

For a time, he didn't move, his gaze steady on her face, and when he finally spoke, his voice was so low she barely heard him over the sound of the rain.

"It's not going to work, Claire."

"What's not going to work?"

"The paper, Claire. What paper were you talking about?"

Well, this was humiliating. She shook her head with a jerk and pointed to the tiny edge of the yellow paper visible through the windshield. "That one."

He nodded, then, taking one last look at her, quickly opened the door, planted a foot outside, and leaned across the windshield. He lifted the wiper and extracted the saturated paper, then dropped back into the seat and closed the door.

Spreading it out over the dashboard, he leaned closer to it. "Turn on the light."

She flicked the button and stared at her reflection in the driver's-side window. Her face burning with mortification, she took a deep breath and blew it out.

Butch stared at the piece of paper. "Hmmm."

"I was driving and then I turned on the wipers, and well, I was going to get the sheet of paper off the windshield. Then it started raining for real, and I was waiting for the rain to slow down a little..." Okay, now she felt completely ridiculous, not to mention brainless.

"So you haven't seen your note yet."

She turned around. "Note? I thought it was a flyer."

He wiped his eyes, then ran his fingers through his hair again, pushing all the water away from his face. "No, it's not." He pointed at the yellow slip now stuck like a piece of wallpaper to her dashboard.

She leaned forward to stare at the words, trying hard to make sense of them. Even soaking wet, the black letters were stark against the sheet of yellow paper. The writer had used something waxy, possibly even a crayon. The words were not the words of a child, however.

Butch pursed his lips. "Still think you don't need a bodyguard?"

## Chapter Two

"You are not leaving this house again until he is caught. I wasn't awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by being an idiot, Claire. I know personally the difference between idle threats and the real deal. This guy means business!"

Claire stood in the middle of her living room. Her father, wearing his pajamas and robe, was in front of her, his face as red as a blazing fire. He'd been shouting for about ten minutes now, ever since Butch had handed him the soaking-wet slip of yellow paper.

And now Captain Dirk Simonson had pulled out the Congressional Medal card; things were about to take a turn for the worst.

She felt like she was ten years old again, her mother standing nearby saying nothing while her father read her the riot act. *"If you don't improve these grades, you'll think you're in prison, young lady! I will not tolerate mediocrity! I hear once more that you've not been giving one hundred and ten percent to your studies, I'll take a belt to your backside and restrict you to this house until you are collecting Social Security!"*

Never once had her father struck her, but she'd always suspected if she didn't fall in line, he wouldn't hesitate to do so. He'd meant it then, and he meant what he was saying now. Back then she'd kept the peace and did as she was told. The difference tonight was that she wasn't afraid of him punishing her anymore, and she was not staying inside this house and hiding. She was not afraid of the man with the crayon either.

"The note said I'd be sorry for what I did to him. You cannot possibly be taking that as a serious threat. It means nothing! He was just pissed off that I got away. And guess what? He was wrong. I'm not sorry. Besides, I've got a bodyguard now. That was the whole purpose of you hiring him, wasn't it, to keep me safe?"

"I think there's a possibility that Claire knows this person." Butch's voice startled them both. Her father's head swiveled toward him in time with her own. She'd forgotten that he was in the room.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father clasp his hands together on his lap. Claire recognized the gesture; her father was attempting to regain some semblance of calm. It seldom worked, but she'd seen it enough to know the level of his fury. This was step three in a four-step process. Step one was absolute silence and a belligerent frown, followed quickly by step two: the shouting. She'd rarely had to see past step two. But today, step three followed: the attempt to regain his temper.

And step four. She didn't know how well Butch knew her father, but no one should have to see step four unless they had blood ties.

"Anything is possible, Butch," her father said. "What are you thinking?"

"The note is personal. He called her by name. And the scrawl is one of an outraged serial killer."

For the first time since that crazy thing's hands had grabbed her, she felt something besides anger. The tips of five cold fingers of dread settled around her throat and squeezed until she couldn't breathe. Claire dragged oxygen into her lungs and tried to quiet her nerves. If there was one thing she would not do, it was live in fear. Yes, she was stunned by the note and by the attack. She was no idiot, but these two men were trying to turn her into a terrified child dependent on two strong men to protect her – by imprisoning her.

They might have been trained by government professionals to protect at all costs, but she'd learned something else from her military father: you can't beat the pursuit of freedom as a motivator. Even if she did agree with them on some level, this was no time to show weakness and ultimately end up under their control. No matter what they said, she refused to stay inside and hide.

"A serial killer?" Claire forced a self-assurance into her voice that she didn't feel. "Is that your expert opinion, Mr. Military Man, or is this just some added drama to make me fall in line?"

Butch's left eyebrow rose, and that same quirky smile came to his lips. "Both, with any luck."

"Butch has worked with my unit for ten years, and he's an expert on handwriting interpretation. If he says the guy is a serial killer, then he's a serial killer. Are you honestly going to stand there and argue with people who may know more than you do?"

"I didn't say he was a serial killer," Butch said. "I said he has the handwriting of one."

Claire ignored Butch's attempt to calm her father down. She opened her mouth to speak, but Butch spoke again.

"I'd like to talk with Claire for a moment alone, if that's all right with you, Captain."

Her father continued to stare at her for one solid, completely quiet minute before unclasping his hands and putting them on the wheels of his wheelchair. "That's a good idea. Maybe you can talk some sense into this girl. I'll be in the library fixing myself a drink. Claire, if you manage to see reason, you are welcome to join me at the conclusion of your meeting."

He wheeled himself smoothly across the room, the air stirring the hem of his robe. She and Butch watched him until he moved out of the room and pushed the door closed behind him. They remained silent then Butch finally spoke.

"I didn't say he was a serial killer."

Claire looked from the door back to Butch. He stood watching her, almost like a scientist examining an unusual specimen. Being under his microscope was not what she'd had in mind for how this evening was going to go. When she thought back to her lame attempt at seducing him in her car, she wanted to cringe. Well, at least that moment was over. She had plenty more to deal with without reminding herself of that.

Even if her father hadn't hired this man to be her bodyguard, she would have hired someone after the note. Talk of serial killers aside, anyone who went to the trouble of returning to leave her a threatening message was one nut job she didn't want to run into without someone nearby—preferably someone carrying heavy, metal weaponry.

"The guy who attacked you, I said he had the handwriting of a serial killer." Butch's voice was almost apologetic. "A little edgy, isn't he?"

"I thought you knew him." She sat down on the edge of the sofa's arm and took another deep breath. "If you did, you'd know he's always a little edgy."

"Point taken. He might soften up one of these days."

"Which part of that tirade makes you think he'll soften up?" Claire wanted to work up the will to be embarrassed, to care about what this man thought of her and her father, but she couldn't. If her earlier humiliation in the car weren't enough, venturing into their complicated relationship would seal the deal.

"He's still the same controlling tyrant he's been my entire life," she muttered. "Sometimes I wonder if 'one of these days' will come in my lifetime."

Butch looked around the room, then back to her. The smile had vanished, replaced by a dour scowl. "For a tyrant, he's pretty generous. This place is nicer than the White House."

Claire didn't bother to look around; nothing had changed in this room since her mother left. The same expensive antique furniture, the same rich, luxuriant drapes, and the same original art pieces filled the room. She was so used to it, she didn't even notice it anymore, and her father seldom came into this part of the house at all. When she'd landed her first big client, she'd taken the money and had a large addition built on. Her father seldom left it. Of course, tonight he'd made an exception.

Butch had likened it to the White House, but from where she stood it was a well-apportioned if not self-chosen prison in a lot of ways. She couldn't leave her father

alone; he needed her, no matter what their personal differences might be. He was her father, and she loved him. That's all there was to it, and she didn't expect this guy to understand.

Butch walked toward her, his movements those of a stalking cat. He came to rest directly in front of her, his eyes piercing. "He's a hard-ass, but he cares about you. There are people who would kill to have a dad like yours, a dad who would provide a mansion for his grown daughter to live in, one who cared enough to spend his hard-earned money to keep her safe."

"You don't know anything about it." Claire rose from her perch on the sofa arm and walked toward the fireplace. She had to get away from those piercing eyes. Her life with her father was complicated and hard enough without having to explain it to someone who had no business discussing it.

"I know what ungrateful, spoiled, and difficult looks like." Although her back was turned to him, she could feel him moving toward her once more. The expansive room had grown smaller ever since he'd come into the house. He took her arm and spun her around. "And I'm looking at it."

Claire jerked her arm out of his grasp and refused to back away as he stared down at her. "This house belongs to me! If it weren't for me, he'd still be living in the veterans' hospital! He helped me get the money to start my business, but my business saved this place. He's here because I want him here, not the other way around."

The stunned look on his face satisfied her, but like wolfing down a big meal, left her feeling a little sick. Why had she told him that? Just to get that smug look off his face? She was a better tactician than this.

She wanted her father here with her; despite all his controlling faults, she couldn't bear to think of him living in a hospital, or anywhere else but this house where he'd lived for her entire life. One day, she would move out when he was well enough to be on his own. But with his health the way it had been over the past two years, she just couldn't depend on a hired nurse.

She lowered her voice and hoped that her father had not heard that outburst. "That information is private. I would appreciate it if you would keep it to yourself."

He nodded slowly, then scratched his chin. "Okay. Let's talk about your stalker, then."

She laughed. Since there seemed to be no way around this conversation, she might as well deal with it head-on. "Stalker? He's been upgraded to stalker? Or have you downgraded him from serial killer?"

Why did he have to stand so close? The woodsy scent of his cologne mingled with the smell of the rain on his clothes and had a peculiar effect on her body temperature. In this cool room, her skin and clothing still wet from the downpour, she should be cold but instead grew warmer with each passing moment.

"Stalker fits. He comes after you, then flees the scene. But sometime later, he returns to leave you a threatening note. It's logical and spells stalker to me."



Her body grew warmer still. Body language leads power negotiation, she told herself. Straighten up and face him. Forcing bravado she did not feel, she arranged herself into the stance of power—hands on hips, feet square. “What’s his next leap in logic going to be, Mr. Spock?”

“Mr. Spock?”

“Sure. You know, *Star Trek*? Don’t you ever watch reruns on late-night television?”

He shook his head. “I watch movies on a portable DVD device.”

No television? That had to be a first. In this house they had five televisions, not that she had much time anymore to watch any of them. “You’ve never seen *Star Trek*? Butch, you haven’t lived. Anyway, what I mean is, what do you think he’ll do next?”

“He’ll try again.”

She shook her head, forcing herself to ignore the effect of his nearness commingled with her rising uneasiness at his words. Depending on her body language to convey power she felt slipping away, she said, “That’s a pretty big assumption. How do you know it’s not all over? That he was just pissed and wanted to get the last word in?”

“I just don’t think so. What makes you think it’s over? Blind hope? Because that’s all you’ve got to go on.”

She wasn’t convinced either. Butch Markham as her personal bodyguard was probably a terrible idea, but for the moment, he was who she had. If not him, it would have to be someone, but if it was going to be him, she needed to establish some ground rules.

She would do the thinking and make the decisions; he could be the muscle—and nothing else.

He stood straighter and closed the remaining distance between them.

Her tired mind raced. Had this man studied proxemics? Did he know the power of spatial orientation in managing the give and take of a deal? Or was he just intuitive and saw that his nearness was bothering her?

Either he was a better negotiator than she was, or he was just plain lucky. His glittering blue gaze tracked her every move, and she became acutely aware of her own flesh.

What had he asked?

She was not at her best right now. Better to fall back and live to fight another day. Tomorrow morning she had to be sharp, but rather than going to bed, she stood here half-awake trying to argue with a calm, coolheaded, and heartless warden. And she was losing.

She turned away from those intense eyes and stared into the fire. “I’m exhausted. We’ll table this for a later time.”

He stepped around her and rested his hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his palm seeping through her damp clothing. A sensation like warm, thick syrup pouring over her followed. "Claire, you might not have more time. That guy is out there, and he wants you."

The words rang through the air. The room seemed to shift around her as she looked up into his eyes.

"He wants me." She repeated his words involuntarily as the sound of her name from his lips echoed through her mind with electric waves of awareness.

She had to get away from this guy. There was no way he could be her bodyguard.

No, no she didn't. She had to stay right here.

She blinked to clear her thoughts. She was so tired or maybe this was leftover shock. Whatever it was, the sensation was hypnotic. With that one touch, her body had come alive just as her mind had ceased to function. His eyes were so blue...

He suddenly released her and took a step backward. "Claire, no."

Her vision began to swim a little, and the room grew even warmer. "What?"

Butch shoved his hands into his pockets and looked down at the floor. "I'm staying here tonight, and I'm going with you tomorrow. Which room can I stay in?"

She tried to regain her bearings, but the heat in the room had turned to a heavy, homemade quilt. All she wanted was to wrap them both inside it.

"Claire."

His voice jarred her, and the feeling evaporated as quickly as it had come. What was he saying? Going with her tomorrow...

"You are not going to try to convince me to stay home too?"

"If you want to work, I'll go with you. I'll watch your back, Claire."

A moment ago, she'd imagined him on her back. She blinked again. "The guest room is upstairs, first door on the left."

Was she actually agreeing to this? He would follow her around, day and night, be with her every moment? No, she couldn't be.

He looked into her eyes again, his full of a strange new intensity. "*That guy is out there, and he wants you.*" She could still hear the words in her head. Instead of inspiring caution as he'd meant them to, they'd brought on something much more dangerous.

He turned and walked away from her. She inhaled the scent of rain and sandalwood as she watched him move across the room, a warm, thick sense of indecision flooding over her. She'd needed someone, and her father had hired this man.

Her bodyguard, who had more body than she knew what to do with.

He turned at the door. Opening his mouth, he started to say something, obviously thought better of it, and stopped. She waited for one beat, then another; still, he didn't move.

What was going on behind the glittering blue eyes? She strongly suspected it was not the same thing going on behind her own. Hopefully hers weren't giving her away.

Sometime before tomorrow morning she had better get a grip on herself. Her original intention to come on to him in order to have him fired had been more foolhardy than she'd anticipated. If anything had happened in her car, if he had kissed her, it would have been downright perilous.

Struggling for words, she couldn't think of what to say to break the tension, so she reverted to her mother's favorite phrase. Many years had passed since she'd last heard her mother speak the words, but they came out of her mouth as smoothly as if she'd heard them only yesterday.

"There are towels in the guest bathroom. Make yourself at home."

"Claire," Butch began, placing both of his hands behind his back, once more standing at military rest. "Not everyone gets what they want. Whoever and whatever that guy is, he's not going to hurt you again. I'm going to make sure of it."

He nodded, then turned and was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd hated walking away, but staying was one path that wasn't going to do either of them any good. Instead he'd be the "good guy" again and spend another night in a lonely bed.

Just once, why couldn't he be bad? Just drag her into his arms and make good on all that heat sizzling between them. He'd been tired a moment ago, but his erection jerked him wide awake at the thought.

Great, now he was alone and hard. The night was just getting better and better.

He paced back in forth in the guest room but just couldn't get his mind off the sexy quirk of her lips, or that way her breasts pushed out when she squared off with him. Shit. What he needed was a shower. Wasn't a cold shower what the humans used? Maybe it would work on him too.

And if it didn't... Well, at least he'd be clean.

Towels in the guest bathroom. The only other door in the bedroom was to a spacious closet. So where was the guest bathroom? He scouted out the hallway. First door on the right opened into a small efficient bath. Tub, sink, and a cabinet neatly packed with towels.

Stripping and grabbing a towel took only a moment. Another to set the water. Testing it at cold changed his mind about the concept. Foolish human men must just like torture. Setting the spray to warm, he waited a moment and slid inside. He picked up the brand-new soap and rubbed it over his skin.

And then the scent hit him and stole his breath.

It smelled like her. Clean and pure, no nonsense. All Claire.

He closed his eyes, but it did nothing to shut out the scent. If anything it freed his imagination. Boondan. Cold water would never get her out of his system, but maybe he could satisfy his need and then focus on the job of keeping her safe.

She'd wanted him to kiss her. She'd have felt so damn good. Sliding his hand down, he stroked the soap over his aching cock, then let it fall into the tub. Back and forth. The mechanical motion meant little, but with his eyes closed and her scent teasing him relentlessly, he could pretend it was Claire's hand.

Stroking over him light and hard, alternating the grip until he ached with the building pressure—then it wouldn't be her hands. She'd kiss his chest, nibble her way downward until she knelt at his feet.

The image was so vivid, he could damn near see her there looking up at him, so close to his cock, so close her breath would caress him softly while the water pounded over them both. Her lips would soften, the teasing in her eyes giving way to excitement. Only then with him desperate as a boy, would she relent.

Shifting with a single motion, devouring his cock one inch at a time. She would swallow him down over and over, leaving him shaking and weak from the torment.

The stroking rhythm changed, tightened. He would grip her hair, stealing her playtime away. She would give in to his burning need and push further, drive him over the edge. Take him to orgasm with a completeness that nearly drowned him in the pleasure.

Her mouth, her lips, her tongue on his cock.

Coming with a jerk, he braced one hand against the wall and continued the stroke, unwilling for the illusion to end. When the final remnants of the fantasy evaporated in the steam surrounding him, he dropped weak-kneed and tingling to the side of the tub. Resting his elbows on his knees, he closed his eyes as the shower's spray pounded his feet. Maybe now he could get some sleep. Maybe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire walked downstairs the following morning, adjusting her bangs over the injury on her forehead. Before she'd showered, she'd removed the bandage and examined the cut. It wasn't deep and was mostly hidden by her hair, but the edges of the surrounding bruise still peeked out from underneath.

She could keep it camouflaged as long as she was careful today, and that was exactly what she intended to be. She didn't want any discussion or speculation among her staff about what had happened. She made a mental note to discuss increasing the patrols around the parking lot with her security company, and to investigate any vehicles present without proper parking tags hanging from their rearview mirrors.

Dressed in her best blue suit, she knew she looked presentable, but a bigger problem than her external appearance was the pounding inside her skull. She'd taken four Tylenol capsules before she fell into bed last night, but they hadn't put a dent in

the hammering headache. All the hours of tossing and turning hadn't resulted in a great deal of rest either. Considering what she had to do today, she could certainly have been better prepared physically. The muscles in her arms were still tight, and her knees ached from the scrapes she'd sustained while dragging herself under her car. She was hiding an ugly bruise on her forehead, and her fingers still ached.

This was not how she'd wanted to face this day.

With about a hundred things to do to finalize the presentation to the Anthony Group, she would need every ounce of energy she could muster. Between the throbbing behind her eyes and the soreness of her muscles, she'd be lucky to make it back home this evening, much less make any real progress at work.

She walked into the kitchen, then stopped dead in the doorway.

"Good morning. Coffee's made."

And she had forgotten about her new best friend.

Dressed in a suit and tie, Butch leaned against the counter sipping from one of her mother's antique china cups, the black shoes he wore polished to a high gleam. The porcelain cup looked thinner and more delicate in his large hand than it ever had from its customary position in the mahogany china cabinet. As far back as she could remember, no one had ever drunk from those coffee cups or used any of the other china in that cabinet.

If she'd had time to really examine all her misgivings about having a bodyguard, number one on her list would be keeping her attack a secret from her employees. After seeing him yesterday in the jeans and a sweatshirt soaking wet from the rainstorm, she'd have confessed that he'd never fit in at the office, would in fact draw much unwanted attention. His good looks aside, he had not exactly been corporate material yesterday.

Today, however, he resembled an investment banker on Wall Street. He was handsome, clean-cut, and dwarfed everything around him. It wasn't just his hands around that cup. Something about him seemed bigger, more substantial, than anything else in the room. Actually, everything in the expansive kitchen shrank with his huge frame filling the space.

"Good morning." She pushed the words out and attempted a smile to accompany them. Last night he'd departed before anything irreparable had happened, but this morning, her body spoke louder and more forcefully. Would she be able to manage polite chitchat with this testosterone-oozing bodyguard until he could get his job done and she could return to her life?

He set the cup next to the sink, disrupting the alarming train of her thoughts, and walked toward her. He lifted his hand to her face, and she stepped backward. Thankfully, her baser reflex to lean toward him had not taken over.

"What are you doing?" The words came out as a whisper, but he didn't hesitate. He pressed her bangs back with his fingertips.

The tender, warm probing of his hands on her forehead spread over her. The pounding in her head subsided as she breathed in the clean scent of his body. The smell of the rain was gone now, but a wafting aroma of her soap and his unique scent remained.

"Still a little bruised, but the cut looks good." He dropped his hand and walked back to the coffeepot. "Cream and sugar?"

Claire tried to recover her voice but managed only a croaked, "I'll get it."

"I can pour a cup of coffee. Sit down; you're a little pale. Cream and sugar, or not?"

She did feel a little dizzy—her morning routine had taken longer than usual. She always took special care with her appearance. Part and parcel to earning the respect of clients and employees involved looking like the boss, but this morning she'd taken even more care and time. She couldn't explain why, nor did she want to examine her reasons too closely. She told herself that it was not because he was going to be with her all day. In fact, she had almost forgotten about that.

*Liar.*

Whether from the morning's extra preparations or his touch, she wasn't quite sure, but the dizziness was a fact she could not ignore. Better not to examine the reasons too closely, she decided. Avoiding what might prove to be an argument anyway, she sat down at the small dinette.

"Black is fine, thank you."

He carried two steaming cups over and set hers down on the table. Taking a drink from his, he pulled out the chair across from her and lowered himself into it. "You sure you want to do this today?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Do you ever not answer a question with a question?"

She started to ask what that was supposed to mean and checked herself. "Of course, I do."

"But you're not keen on it, are you?" He smiled at her with that crazy sideways smirk she found herself starting to like. There were a lot of things about him she was starting to like. This was not a good idea.

"Not really keen, no."

He took another drink of his coffee, then set the cup down in front of him. "What time do I need to take you?"

Take me? Wild thoughts rushed through her mind. Was she dreaming? She took a sip of the coffee to wake herself up. *He means take me to work, bonehead.* She swallowed the tasteless liquid.

This was the opening. The last thing she needed was to ride in close quarters with him.

“Why don’t you go ahead? I’ll follow you in my car, and no one will have to know about any of this. Or you can follow me – whichever. I’ll go into the office and stay until lunchtime. Nothing is going to happen to me inside the building. About noon, I’ll meet you in the parking lot and we can get some lunch together. I’ll be inside the building the whole time. I’m sure you have other things to do.”

“That’s not happening, Claire.” His voice was flat before he took another sip of his coffee, then set the cup back on the table.

“You don’t want to take me to lunch?”

He stared at her while idly twisting his coffee cup in a circle, the crisp whiteness of his shirt a sharp contrast to the deep tan of his neck. “You were there; you know what almost happened to you. Don’t try to play me. It insults us both.”

Claire took a deep breath and set her coffee cup on the table. “All right, you want it straight up, fine. I have a big day ahead, and I don’t need you in my way. Everything I have to get done today is important to the company’s future, and I won’t have anything messing with my productivity today. Plus, it’s nobody’s business what happened last night, and if you’re there, it will become abundantly obvious that something is going on.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes glittering. “I mess with your productivity. How do I do that exactly?”

She ignored the question. “So, you’ll meet me there? Stay out of my way?”

“What time am I taking you?”

She rose from her seat, almost knocking it over while sending another wave of dizziness over her. “You don’t listen, do you? You are not taking me anywhere. I am driving myself. You need to wait in the parking lot or come back for me later. I admit that I need a bodyguard, but it has to be on my terms. I can’t let you stop me from doing this my way.”

She watched as he rose slowly from his seat, his broad shoulders a tangible force, his eyes boring into hers. “I heard every word. And you are not driving anywhere. I’ll take you, or you’ll stay right here.”

Flashbacks of nights at this very table with her father sped across the years to this moment: nights he’d told her exactly who her friends would be, what clubs she would join, and what she should or should not eat. Control had been the one privilege she’d desired and never received from him, the elusive gold ring she’d finally seized when she was old enough to appropriate it for herself.

She lowered her voice, letting her anger seethe through the slow, controlled words. “How dare you? What makes you think you have any say whatsoever in what I do?”

He lowered his voice also, placing his palms on the table, and leaned toward her. “I was hired to protect you. Your skin is ashen; your hands are shaky, and you are unsteady on your feet. I mean, holy shit, your eyes are glazed over –”

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. No way you should operate a vehicle in this condition." He sucked in a breath as if to calm himself. "You have important work I respect that. But you'll do it only if I chauffeur your bossy ass over there. I'm not going to wait in the car like some pet, either. The guy who did this could work for you. I'm taking you there, and I'm going in with you. I got dressed up for it, and I'm ready. You got me?"

The words washed over her. She didn't feel all that well, but taking the day off was not an option. Not today.

He watched her, obviously waiting for an answer. Something about his eyes, the way he was looking at her, his presence, the shape of him...it was so familiar.

He'd looked sexy to her last night, she wouldn't deny it. A woman would have to be blind not to notice that kind of sex appeal, but this was something else.

What the heck was she thinking? She pushed the emotions welling up inside her aside. The truth was, he was right. She wasn't feeling well enough to drive. But as he stared into her eyes waiting for her response, another truth sunk in alongside the first: Butch Markham was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen.

She nodded, accepting the first truth and forestalling the second.

"All right then. We leave in ten minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

Exactly ten minutes later, Butch followed her outside. He took the keys when she offered them, having half expected her to take off and leave him in the driveway.

They rode in silence. What did he have to say to her anyway? *How's the bump on your head feeling? What's so important about today's business that you can't give yourself one day to recover? What is it about you that makes you so damn appealing?*

*Uh, no.*

"Let's go over the description you gave to the police," he said, finding a topic that would prove more useful than his current line of thinking. "Blond, six feet, two hundred pounds. What else can you remember?"

When she didn't answer, he turned to look at her. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your skin is pale and you're shifting around in your seat like it's on fire. What happened out there in the parking lot?"

She stilled and stared through the windshield. "Exactly what I told the police. The guy tried to attack me, I climbed under the car, and he went away. That's all there was to it."

She was lying. If he hadn't already picked up on the increase in her heartbeat and breathing rate, the tone in her voice would have given her away. And she looked like



she was about to spring out of the car. Why was she lying? Did she not want this guy caught? If not, then why not?

"You know him, don't you?"

She turned to face him. "Of course I don't. What makes you say that?"

"There's something else. You told the police the truth, but you didn't tell them everything, did you?"

She hesitated a moment too long.

"No, you didn't. So, why didn't you? Don't you trust the cops?"

"I have no reason not to trust them. What is this, the third degree?"

"Tell me what you didn't tell them."

She stared through the windshield as he turned down another street toward her office. Whatever she thought, she wasn't getting out of the car until he knew everything she did about the guy.

"I'm waiting."

"It will sound insane."

"Try me."

She took a deep breath and blew it out. "Okay, fine. Just remember he did kick me in the head."

"Fine."

"It's crazy. It had to be a hallucination."

"Just say it."

She shook her head, then shrugged her shoulders, but her heart was pounding hard, her blood pressure elevated. "Forget it."

"Tell me, damn it!"

She laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. "He had three eyes."

Butch stomped on the brake and swerved to the side of the road. "Where was the third eye?"

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"The third eye, where was it?"

"On his forehead. What kind of question is that?"

"An important one."

She continued to stare at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I just told you someone has three eyes, and all you can come up with is 'where?' What difference could that make?"

It made a hell of a lot of difference. What did she know about his kind? Hadn't her father ever told her anything? He should have.

"Did he say anything?"

She blinked. "Yeah, he said, 'Get in the van.' And he called me a bitch. He kept trying to cover up that eye."

He shook his head. "His lips didn't move, did they?"

Her mouth dropped open. "How did you know that?"

"What else happened?"

She sat back in the seat. Her blood pressure was returning to normal, but her heart was still pounding. "Well, I could have sworn..." She shook her head.

"That he touched you," he finished for her. "It felt like he touched you, but he didn't."

"How in the hell do you know that?"

He sat back in his seat, checked the rearview mirror, then turned the car around. "We're going back."

"What? No, we're not! I have to go to work."

"You're not going to work. He'll be expecting you there, and I'm not taking any chances."

"Who is he? Tell me what's going on!"

Didn't she have a right to know? She was the target, but if her father hadn't told her after all this time, it wasn't his place. "As soon as we get back to your house, your father will tell you. I'll make sure of it."

"No!"

Her shout reverberated inside the interior of the car almost loudly enough to rattle the windows.

"Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down! Pull the car over right now, or I'll pull it over myself."

She grabbed for the steering wheel, but he quickly pressed her arms down, pinning them to the console.

"All right, stop it. I'm pulling over."

She yanked her hands back and sat up straighter. Her heartbeat was returning to normal, but her temperature was rising. A quick glance confirmed it. Her face burned red with fury. Getting her to listen to reason was going to be a tough one.

She pointed to the entrance of a hotel parking lot. "Park over there."

He extended the radar of his inner ear across their surroundings as he drove to the edge of the parking lot and turned the car around. A cacophony of sound gridlocked his senses. Families discussing vacation plans, the front desk clerk talking about the weather and room accommodations, a guy talking to the dog he was walking, along with a couple of dozen other conversations. Nothing there, but it was too difficult to differentiate with so much input. The bastard could be out there amid the pandemonium, and he would miss it. They were too exposed.

He parked the car but left the engine running. "Claire, it's not safe. I can't protect you out here in the open. I've got to get you home. Now, I want you to stay calm, and I'll drive us back so you —"

She turned off the engine and yanked the keys out of the ignition. "We're not going home. We're staying right here until you tell me who that was, and then you are taking me to my office."

If she wasn't going to let him take her home, he needed a plan B. He fought the urge to grab the keys from her and tie her ornery butt in the seat.

"Butch, tell me who that was."

"I can't," he said. "Let's check into a room."

She blinked. "What?"

"I can't —" What could he tell her that wouldn't be saying too much? Boondan, her father should have told her. "I need to get you someplace safe."

"I'll tell you what you need to get — *a grip*. I'm not checking into a hotel with you."

Her heart was racing. Of all the times... "This isn't about *sex*, woman. I can't protect you out here." Damn, this would be so much easier if he could just palm her. He forced himself to take a deep breath and lower his voice. "All right. Home or the hotel. Those are your options. Decide."

"I'm not going back home. You were going to take me to work! I've got important —"

"Good. Decision made. Listen to me, Claire. We're getting a room. We'll call your father when we're safely inside. He can tell you everything. Unless I miss my guess, you'll need some privacy. Now stop arguing, trust me, and come on."

Claire followed him into the hotel and struggled to remain quiet. Butch paid for the room, took the card key, then guided her toward the elevator. He might not tell her what was going on, but her father would, whether he liked it or not, as soon as she got to the telephone.

Her description of the man with the third eye had not even fazed Butch. She'd admitted everything she hadn't wanted to tell the police, and he hadn't even batted an eye. If someone had told her that, she would have assumed they had a head injury or were insane. Butch didn't appear to think either. He thought she was in danger.

It was still relatively early, and none of her employees would be at work yet. She had a little time, but she wasn't going to be delayed indefinitely. One way or another, she was going to work today. And someone was going to tell her what in heaven's name was going on.

Butch scanned the lobby until they were inside the safety of the elevator. When the doors closed, Claire's patience ran out.

"You've got to tell me what's happening."

"As soon as we get in the room." He punched the number three button. "We'll call your father —"

"Why won't you tell me? You obviously know who that guy was!"

He shook his head and silently removed a weapon from inside his jacket. Stepping in front of her as the doors opened, he slid his other hand behind him and held her waist.

Butch glanced up and down the long hallway, then took her hand and pulled her in front of him. "That way, and move fast. Room three-oh-seven."

Her muscles still sore from yesterday's ordeal, she walked as quickly as she could down the hallway, glancing at the plates on each door until she found their room.

Butch slid the card key into the door handle's mechanism. The lock disengaged, and he shoved the door open and moved her inside. He turned around and locked the dead bolt and the lock bar.

"This isn't much for security, but it will have to do until I can get you home." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and offered it to her. "Call your father."

She stared at the phone, then shook her head. "Not until you tell me something — anything. Tell me how you knew that guy's lips didn't move. At least tell me that."

He paused a second, then shook his head and punched a series of buttons on his phone. "Your father will tell you everything. If he doesn't, then I will, and you can tell him I said that."

She took the phone from him, turned, and walked into the room. After two rings, her father picked up.

"Father. I have a question for you."

"Did you get lost on your way to work? Why aren't you there yet?"

Claire stopped in the middle of the room. "How do you know I'm not at work?"

Her father's pause was short but spoke volumes. "You are using Butch's cell phone. I assume you wouldn't do that unless you had not reached your office for some reason. Is Butch still with you?"

"Yes, he is. I want you to tell me what you know about a guy with three eyes who could talk without moving his lips and seemed to be touching me when his hands were nowhere near me."

The silence was much longer this time, and when her father finally spoke, she had the sneaking suspicion she would not be able to believe a single word.

"Are you all right?"

"Father! Answer my question."

"I only ask because you sound a little bit irrational. Perhaps we should take you back to the hospital and have a doctor examine your head injury further."

Although this was the response she'd expected from not only the police but also Butch, that explanation was no longer good enough. "I'm not crazy, if that's what

you're trying to say. Butch doesn't think I'm crazy, either. I want an answer. You know who that guy was, don't you?"

He did not pause this time. "No, Claire, I don't know who the man was. If I did, I'd have the entire police force out hunting him down like the dog he is. Surely you know that already. Let me speak to Butch."

She wanted to believe him, but something was wrong. He might not know who her attacker was specifically, but he knew something he wasn't telling her. Insisting he answer her question would do her absolutely no good. Experience had taught her that long ago.

She would get the information another way. Butch had said that if her father wouldn't tell her, then he would. As soon as he disconnected, she would get some answers. She turned and held the phone out to Butch. "He wants to talk to you."

Butch took the phone. "Captain Simonson."

Claire listened for her father's voice through the receiver. She could hear sounds but could not make out his words. After a couple of minutes with her father doing most of the talking and Butch responding, "Yes, sir," numerous times, she gave up and walked to the window.

She glanced at her watch. Right now she needed to be sitting at her desk preparing the forecast reports and other written documentation for the presentation to the Anthony Group. Her entire financial future and that of the company depended on it, and instead, she was in a hotel room with a man. There was insanity afoot, but it wasn't hers.

"Claire! I'm out here! Help me!"

The sound of her father's voice from the hallway startled her...but he was on the telephone with Butch. Was this some kind of trick?

She walked toward the door.

"Claire! Help! Let me in!"

Before she could reach the door, Butch had both of his arms wrapped around her and yanked her back against his chest.

"Stop it! My father is out there!"

He dragged her into the room, then turned her around in his arms. "Your father is at home. We just called him."

"I hear him out there!"

He released her, pulled out his gun, and pushed her behind him. The doorknob rattled, and Butch pointed the gun at the door.

"What are you doing? You can't shoot my father!"

"That's not your father." Butch slowly backed away from the front door, the weapon trained on it. She was right about one thing; he couldn't shoot through the door without alerting the entire hotel.

Butch looked toward the door. "Do you hear him now?"

"Yes, of course I do! He's shouting!"

"Like this you mean?" He stared into her eyes. "*Claire, listen to me! That is not your father!*" His voice filled the room. His lips hadn't moved.

"Oh my God —"

"We've got to get out of here. Damn it."

Glancing behind her, he examined the window. It wasn't in his nature to turn and run, but sometimes running was the smarter alternative.

"This is ridiculous! This is my life we're talking about. I'm not a child. I want to know who that is."

"He must've followed us from your house."

"Who followed us?"

Butch pulled her with him to the window and shoved the curtains farther open. "Damn it, double pane — no latch." The room door rattled harder.

"That guy isn't human, is he?"

Butch darted around the room. He picked up a stuffed chair, then tossed it aside and grabbed the television. When he lifted it, the dresser came off the floor. "Shit!" He picked up the lamp and let it fall back on the dresser.

"What are you doing?"

Opening drawer after drawer, he tossed blankets, a telephone book, and a Gideon Bible onto the floor. "I need something big, heavy, and not screwed down to break that window." He took hold of the edges of the wall mirror.

Claire grabbed an old-fashioned iron from the open closet. "What about this?"

Butch turned around. "That's not heavy enough."

Ignoring the shouting from the other side of the door, Claire wrapped the cord around the iron and marched to the window. She drew it back like a pitcher readying to deliver a fastball. "Want to bet?"

Before he could stop her, she threw the heavy appliance at the center of the window with what looked like every ounce of fury and frustration inside her. The point of the iron hit square in the center of the window, sending it into raining crumbles of safety glass

"That's what I'm going to do to your head if you don't tell me who that is screaming at me."

Butch grabbed her hand and pulled her to the opening.

She wrenched back. "We need a rope or something. We could tie the sheets —"

His hands clamped around her hips, and without warning, she was in his arms.

"What are you —"

He stepped onto the ledge

A wave of terror surged through her, her vision blurring red. Thrashing against him with all her might, she struggled to get away, thirty or forty feet of air and his arms the only things between her and the concrete below. She snaked her hands free and clasped both sides of the window frame, small fragments of safety glass pressing into her palms. "You're insane! You'll kill us both!"

He tightened his grip around her and straightened. For a long moment, he didn't seem to be breathing, while her breath came in hard, fast gasps. Over the sound of her father's shouting, Butch's calm, melodious voice broke through the cacophony of nauseous fear.

"I'll protect you."

She stared at the calm set of his features. "You can't—"

His lips pursed together and he nodded. "I can. I want you to live. Let go, Claire."

She couldn't let go. Her hands were no longer under her control as terror streaked through every muscle, freezing her body against his. "It's too high—we'll die."

The crash of the room's door awakened her muscles, her grip tightening more painfully against the pebbled glass. Butch's calm, soothing voice filled her head once more

"I'm not going to let anything else happen to you."

The memory of those words and the conviction in his voice both times he'd spoken them released her. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

He took a step forward and dropped to the ground. As soon as his feet hit the narrow strip of grass surrounding the building, he ran.

"How in the... Put me down, Butch!"

He ignored her. They didn't have the time it would take him to explain any of this. Right now, they needed wheels and a lot of distance between them and their "friend." With any luck, they could get out of here before he caught up.

A shushing sound passed alongside his ear, followed almost immediately by the loud crack of a weapon.

He darted behind a car and knelt. She struggled out of his grasp and tried to stand. He pulled her back to the ground beside him.

"What was that?"

"A .38, most likely."

Her mouth dropped open. "Someone is shooting at us?"

"No, he's shooting at you." He rose a few inches and peered through the car's windows toward the hotel. A tall figure in black pants and a black shirt dropped to the ground from the broken window.

“Get up! Move!”

Butch weaved between the cars, dragging her along behind him. They had a good lead but would never make it back to Claire’s car before their pursuer caught up. Butch grabbed a door handle on one of the parked cars. Locked.

He turned to the one beside it with the same result. “Damn.”

“He’s not following us!”

Butch looked in the direction of her extended hand. She was right; he was running toward a white van parked at the circular entrance. *Oh, shit. Garren.*

“What’s he going to do, run us down in the parking lot?”

Garren got in the van and drove back onto the main street, then sped away. Butch stood and helped her to her feet. “Are you all right?”

Her glare could have melted steel. “You’ve got one hell of a lot of explaining to do.”

An hour after her adamant refusal to return to her house, they sat together in her car parked far off the main road out of town. He’d driven out here to clear his head the first night he’d landed on this planet. That had been a bad night. Garren showing up was definitely worse.

Butch snapped the phone closed and slid it back into his pocket. He’d called the captain to update him, carefully avoiding mention of the kindred’s name. Garren was *his* past, not the captain’s or Claire’s, and his presence here confused an already overcomplicated situation. If a human were out to harm the captain’s daughter, that would be bad enough. This particular renegade bent on termination was far more dire.

This one last assignment, just this last one. If he could make it through this, he’d be on his way back home. The captain’s words echoed in his ears. “*But if she dies, you’re going to wish you’d never been hatched.*”

“Your father said he’s never told you anything, and he’s not going to.”

His orders from the captain were specific: “*Under no circumstances is she to know about the inner workings of the unit. That would put her life in further danger, and I’ll kill you with my bare hands if you do that.*” Unfortunately, knowing what not to tell was not the same as knowing what he should.

She sat up in her seat and pointed at him, then opened her mouth. He interrupted her before she could get out a single word.

“Don’t bother, Claire. I said I’d answer your questions if he wouldn’t.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re going to defy the boss?”

“I’m going to protect you, and that means you need to know something about what you’re dealing with. Maybe then you’ll cooperate with me.”

“Cooperate with you?” She shook her head. “Okay, fine. That guy shot at us – I’m cooperating. Now who was he?”



How much to give away and what to keep to himself was a fine line to walk, and his being on this planet in the first place was evidence enough that he wasn't known for his caution. If he revealed too much, he would put her in even greater danger. What could he tell her and not give away so much that he'd buy himself more years on this forsaken rock?

But the real problem was Garren. What in the hell was he doing here? And why was he after Claire?

"That was a Viven" Not exactly accurate, but close enough.

Claire blinked twice. "Okay."

Butch watched her face. Did she know more than her father suspected? Maybe he wasn't going to add to his sentence after all. "You know what that is?"

"Someone who can talk with his mind and has three eyes."

Perhaps the official party line would instill enough fear in her to be cautious. "They are specialists. Trained and used by the military for unique assignments, like this one."

"You're one too, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

She nodded, then licked her lips. "Okay, then."

He waited for her to say something further, and when she didn't he checked his radar. Not another human or Viven in scope. Why had Garren run from them at the hotel? What was he doing on this planet in the first place? Had he been sentenced here too? Or had he come on his own?

When he could stand her uncharacteristic silence no longer, he turned to her.

She held up her hand. "I'm not as stupid as you or my father seem to think."

She opened the passenger door and started walking down the gravel road. Butch got out of the car and followed her.

"Where are you going?"

"Getting as far away from you as possible."

"Claire, wait."

He jogged to catch up with her, but she began to run. "Claire! Stop!" Doubling his effort, he found she ran as fast as any kindred, but fortunately the high-heeled shoes she'd chosen for work slowed her down just enough.

He caught her in his arms and held her as she thrashed wildly to disengage herself.

"Let go of me, you, you...alien!" She pounded his sides with her fists and kicked his shin, then stomped down on his foot. He ignored the pain and held her fast. She'd already figured out the truth. What harm could there be in one small palmful of calm now?

Lifting his hand off her side, he moved his fingers rhythmically until she stopped struggling, her warm back relaxing against his chest. Her head fell against his shoulder, and her warm breath blew hard and fast on his neck.

With eyes half-open, she gazed up into his face, the red in her cheeks no longer burning from the exertion, but from a much more dangerous brand of heat.

"You don't look like an alien." She slid her hands slowly up and down along his hips.

Oh shit. Why did she have to be so damn beautiful anyway? He turned her around in his arms and supported her almost liquid form as it lay against his. "Claire, listen. I'm sorry I had to do that. It'll wear off in a minute or two, I promise. You've got to listen to me."

Placing her hands on either side of his face, she pulled herself up to his lips, covering them with a breathless, voracious kiss that spoke of hunger and need. Butch had managed all his life to stay far away from the lustrous sexuality and vitality only kindred possessed, and with good reason. Her mouth was glorious, and the passion in her body was palpable in the summer heat on this lonely road.

His responding erection was not helping either.

Fighting the urge to wrap his arms tighter around her and revel in the taste of her sweet, hot mouth, he forced himself to press her body away from his, holding her at arm's length.

"Wait one more minute, and you might not have to regret what you're thinking about doing."

"If you know what I'm thinking about," she said, her voice a lower register that reverberated inside his chest, "you can read minds also. How convenient. Let me tell you what I want."

She closed her eyes and smiled, her white teeth gleaming in the morning sunlight. He shook his head to clear away his own lascivious thoughts. *Get over it, Butch. This woman is not a perk.* He checked his radar once more—still nothing. Good. At least one thing was going right.

Claire's eyes still closed, he waited patiently for the minute to tick by. She was mistaken. He couldn't read her thoughts, although from the way she licked her lips, he wished for a short moment that he could.

Finally, he felt the calm dissipate as surely as she did. She opened her eyes, her back straightened, and she jerked her hands away from his body.

"Oh my God! What in the hell did you just do to me?"

"I palmed you, and you should know that it normally ends with two people naked and going at it like *bagfits*, uh, rabbits. That didn't happen—"

Her reaction was fast and sure as she slapped the bejesus out of him.

Stunned was not the word, but it was close. Butch caught her wrist as her hand headed for his face a second time.

"I think that will do."

"How dare you? You son of a bitch! What was that, your planet's version of rape? You wait until my father hears about this!"

He released her hand abruptly. "Tell me something, Claire. Do you want to live by your rules or Daddy's? You manage to whip him out like a howitzer whenever it suits you but are hell-bound to shrug him off like a dirty shirt the rest of the time. So which is it?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him in response, her skin as red as her lips. "Don't change the subject!"

"I was right about you," he said. "You are a spoiled, annoying pain in the ass."

"And you are an extraterrestrial rapist."

"*Ahlap amitlu a are aleuqa!* I was trying to keep you alive, and when you started behaving like a lunatic, I used the kindest method I could think of to stop it!"

She took a step backward. "What did you just say?"

"I said, 'I was trying to keep you —'"

"No, not that. The language," she said, shaking her head. "You said 'that is the last straw.'"

"Yeah, that's what I said. I was accused of rape once, and I'll be —" Butch stopped midsentence. "How did you know that? You speak Vimone?"

She shook her head, and her mouth hung open. "No, it's just...it's something my mother used to say all the time."

Which made perfect sense. She was at least quarter-Viven, if not half. Based on the fury of that kiss, he was betting on the half. Her mother must have spoken it around her when she was young, but would she put it together?

"*She mustn't find out about her heritage. I'm depending on you to be sure of that.*"

"Your mother must have known about your father's work. I'll bet she met a lot of us over the years," he said, keeping his features as impassive as he could. "Now, do you want to live or not? You might not like my not being human, but that's tough! Garren means business, and whatever the fuck he is doing here involves you...and bullets. I am your one hope of staying alive long enough to stop him."

"Who is Garren?" She narrowed her eyes, her words uttered from behind clenched teeth.

He turned away and walked toward the car. If he survived this last assignment without killing her or fucking her, it would be a miracle.

## Chapter Three

“So, let me make sure I’ve got this right.” Claire marched over the uneven gravel surface toward his retreating back. “As if having a bodyguard isn’t bad enough, I’m shouldered day and night with an extraterrestrial, sexy-stud bodyguard who can turn me into KY jelly at any given moment with one wave of his palm – all to save me from Garren, *another* extraterrestrial who wants to kill me.”

He stopped at the hood of the car and leaned against the dusty vehicle. Crossing his arms over his chest, he smiled. “You think I’m sexy?”

She halted in the middle of the road. “I think you’re an ass. Who is Garren? You said you were going to tell me everything, so tell me.”

“How far back do you want me to go?”

“Start with why he’s here and go from there.”

“I don’t know why he’s here.”

“Then start with something you do know.”

He put his hands in his pants pockets. “I don’t know much. I don’t know why he’s here, and I don’t know why he’s after you. I should call your father back and tell him what we’re dealing with.”

She’d been kept in the dark her entire life, but that was about to end right here in the middle of nowhere, whether he liked it or not.

“First, you tell *me* what we’re dealing with.” It was a shot in the dark, but something about the look in his eyes led her to the next question. “You know him personally?”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, I know him.”

“I guess it’s safe to assume the two of you aren’t friends, since he was shooting at us. How do you know him?”

"He and I used to work together."

"I'm not going to drag this out of you." She took a deep breath and sat down beside him. "I do, however, have a business to run, and I've got to get there in the next half hour. So, if you don't want me to have you jailed for attempted rape, you'll start talking."

He stiffened, and she remembered what he'd said earlier. Something about being accused of rape. Had he raped someone? Was that why he was here?

No, that was crazy. He worked with her father, and her father had hired him to be her bodyguard. There was no way he would hire a convicted rapist to protect her.

But did her father even know? She didn't want to ask, and half expected someone in Butch's shoes would lie anyway. Still, she had to, if for no other reason than to let him know she didn't trust him. Yeah, he'd saved her life this morning, but he also knew this Garren. How did she know they weren't in this together somehow? And yeah, he was sexy as hell, but how did she know he wasn't doing that palm thing on her right now?

"Did you rape someone?"

His head snapped toward her. "If you think I'm a rapist, shouldn't you be just a little more afraid of me? I mean, last night in the rainstorm, this morning in the hotel room. A few minutes ago when you were all over me. I've had plenty of opportunities. You don't look too scared to me, Claire. What exactly do you think is stopping me if I'm a rapist?"

One point, Butch. "So why are you so touchy on the subject then?"

"Claire," he said, shaking his head. "In your experience, do human men like to be accused of that particular crime?"

He was doing it. He was asking questions instead of answering hers, and letting her draw her own conclusions. Yes, he was a better negotiator than she was. Well, that stopped now. "Were you or were you not convicted of the crime of rape?"

"Convicted, no," he said. "Accused and told I would be convicted by whatever illegal means were necessary if I didn't leave the planet immediately, yes. Does that make you feel any better?"

He wasn't a rapist. She would bet her life on it. "Tell me what happened."

"And why should I do that?"

She crossed her arms over her chest to mimic him. "Because I told you to. Or better yet, because I actually believe you. I doubt whoever sent you here did."

He smiled then, a real smile that reached the corners of his eyes. "Just because I said I'm not a rapist doesn't make it so, you know."

"Being accused and sent here doesn't make you one either."

He nodded, took in a deep breath, and blew it out. "Okay. I'm working for *Err Yedidyah*, what humans would call the king of my country I manage his staff, take care of his home security, his grounds, and manage the regiments under his command."

"You were his butler?"

"No, I wasn't his butler!" Butch laughed. "I was his *Modorom*, his second in command. The closest thing you have in this country would be secretary of defense."

"Oh, sorry. Please continue."

"Well, I'm with him for three *darchas*, a little longer than your Earth years, and I'm doing well. He trusts me, and I like the work. One day, I hope to see myself as an honored member of his inner circle—the *Ontetni*.

"Then, one evening before dark, I'm walking across the grounds, and his daughter, the *Asecni* Raanana, stops me."

He paused for a moment, and Claire gently prodded him. "Asecni means princess?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat. "The princess stops me and says she will ask her father for us to be joined. I'm a little shocked, but I tell her she knows that can't happen. My destiny is with another. She begins arguing that no Auquerel can bind her to one she does not want—and she insists that she wants me. She is young and spoiled and begins crying when I tell her that what she asks is impossible. She runs to the house, and I go home for the evening."

She wanted to ask him about what he meant by his destiny with another, what exactly an Auquerel was, and how a "binding" worked, but she waited for him to continue.

"That night, the Err's regiments descend upon my home, put me in chains, and take me to Err Yedidyah. He says his daughter came to him in shame over what I had done to her, that now she is not worthy of her destiny and I am to blame."

"Not worthy of her destiny?" Claire chewed her bottom lip. "You mean now she couldn't bind with whoever it was the Auquerel had picked out for her?"

"Correct."

Smart girl, she thought. Smart and selfish and unconcerned who she hurt in the process. Claire wondered if this Asecni ever cared about Butch or if he was just her ticket out of an arrangement she didn't want in the first place. "So, you were sent here. Your punishment, I take it?"

"Also correct." He placed his palms on the hood of the car and stared up at the sky.

What did he see up there? Was he homesick for that place, or was he carrying around an enormous load of payback he hoped to unleash? If that had happened to her, old Miss Raanana would be nigh on an ass whopping.

"So, basically, you got screwed on your home planet; then your people sent you here because they use Earth as their prison."

He looked down at the ground, then nodded. "Yeah."

"Butch, I'll tell you something." She pushed herself off the hood and dusted off her backside. "There are a lot worse places to live. You've been here how long?"

"A little over ten years."

"And you haven't even watched television?" She laughed. "Putting aside the fact that your people think this is a dumping ground for criminals, and putting aside the fact that you got the major shaft if you haven't realized that already, there are fun things to do on this planet. I'll tell you what. Until you find this Garren guy and put him in jail, I'm going to make sure you have some fun with whatever time you have left. But first, tell me how he fits into this story."

"Garren was her intended – her destiny."

"Uh-oh."

"I think we need to consider the possibility that your father is tied up in this somehow too."

"My father? But how..." She paused for a moment. "You're telling me that Garren was sent here before? He knows my father?"

Butch nodded. "Fourteen or fifteen years ago, he was convicted of assault and spent a year on this planet. He always said he was going to find a way to get back here. He wasn't too fond of it, and he really wasn't too fond of your father."

"Few people are," Claire said wryly.

"He told me more than once that he would get your father for the way he'd been treated while he was here. He said no petty human was going to have the last word."

"That's my father all right," Claire said. "He does like to get in the last word. Do you think he's after me to get even with my dad?"

"It makes sense. We know it's him; there is no denying that. And we know he doesn't like the captain. What better way to hurt a man than by trying to hurt his children?" Butch glanced at his watch. "Are you still planning to go to work today? I don't think it's safe, Claire. Until I can find where Garren went, we have to assume he is lying in wait in places he knows you'll be."

She patted his shoulder and walked to the passenger door. "Well, I've got you, don't I? Keep me safe long enough to get this deal put together, and you can put this guy away. You're absolutely right. We know who he is now. My father might have some input on how he'd like to get this guy. In the meantime, we'll be friends, okay? We'll both have some fun for a change. Besides, you still haven't told me about that third eye thing. Now, let's get going."

Half an hour and a great deal of weird explanations later, including how Viven palmed humans, the third eye that appeared with a Viven's murderous intentions, the mental messaging they called *gripen*, and the worst of all – the sensing of others without physical touching – it was just about the weirdest car ride she'd ever had. No wonder her father hadn't told her any of this before. She would never have taken him out of that veterans' hospital and would probably have gotten him a very good psychiatrist.

The key now was focus. Butch would stay with her to make sure this other ET didn't kill her, while trying to find out exactly what in the hell he wanted to hurt her for in the first place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch pulled her Civic to the front of the building and parked in her designated parking space. To hell with parking at the back. That had been the first mistake, and he didn't intend to repeat it. Besides, he doubted she could walk that far this morning.

Claire made one phone call during the drive – not to her father as he'd suggested, but to the hotel to tell them she would pay for the broken window.

"Call your father."

"There's no reason to get him upset by this. If you're right, and he's involved somehow...I'd rather wait. You've got to trust me on this. I know what I'm doing."

She said nothing further as she exited the car and headed toward the front door. He locked the car and followed her, glancing around the parking lot as he moved, extending the radar of his inner ear across their surroundings. A lot of people in suits and dresses were moving toward the door, chatting about breakfast meetings, corporate filings, and other business topics. One was talking about the run in her panty hose. Not a single white van in sight.

Claire climbed the steps, then turned around and waited for him to catch up. She stepped close and whispered, "I'm going to introduce you as Mark Wren, a visiting management consultant here to evaluate our operation. I don't want any of my employees knowing what happened to me. All right?"

She straightened her shoulders, adjusted the strap on her leather briefcase, and smiled, a gesture neither warm nor happy. As people passed by them, their "good mornings" low-key and appropriate when speaking to the boss, he saw the facade she pulled on like a pair of pants. The young, beautiful woman he'd drunk coffee with at the kitchen table had turned the internal switch to "corporate mode." Claire Simonson didn't want their pity or their interference in her personal life. She wanted respect.

He nodded. He sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to take it away from her. "I'm Mark Wren."

With one final glance around the parking lot, he followed her inside.

Hours, and many smooth introductions of him as the visiting efficiency expert later, Butch had experienced about as much of corporate America as he could take. The military was one thing; this was over the top. What a bunch of kiss-ass phonies she had surrounding her, not one of them speaking their mind, not a single one with a mind of their own at all as far as he could see.

During his stint on Earth, he'd followed orders, but not because he didn't know how to think on his own. He'd followed orders because they were orders, and if he expected to get out of here, he had no choice. Claire asked the opinions of employees



present in every meeting they attended. All she got was the standard company line over and over again, as if each of these automatons had eaten the company manual whole and couldn't stop vomiting it back up.

Each time she introduced him, he saw at first an interest in his sham business that she quickly quashed, then a perfected front intended just for the "boss." He wondered how many of these people were loyal, if any of them owned a white van. He wouldn't put it past Garren to bribe someone on the inside to assist him. Maybe her problem worked in the midst of these corporate suits, crisp white shirts and ties by day, lying in wait with Garren to rough up the boss by night.

As he sat at another of the endless meetings of corporate clones, he glanced at his watch, a stainless steel and eighteen-karat-gold Baume & Mercier Capeland he'd borrowed from the captain for his jaunt into Claire's world. The only watch he'd ever worn had been a Luminox Dive watch, definitely not appropriate for this corporate landscape. Still, as he'd put on the twenty-five-hundred-dollar timepiece, he'd thought he'd have been better off with something that could survive deep diving into shit.

It was already after two, and his stomach had begun a low growl. Claire continued with her meeting, her skin even paler than it had been this morning. She had yet to consume anything today other than the cup of coffee he'd poured her seven hours ago, and he had to wonder why she would try to survive on coffee and adrenaline. Didn't the business world know the needs of the human brain and body, the most important tools in their arsenal?

The meeting finally broke, and all the human robots rose from their leather chairs and began to form groups of two and three as they exited the room. Butch got up and resisted the urge to place a hand on his empty belly to still the churning. Claire flipped through a stack of folders and rose from her chair.

"Why don't we get some lunch?" Butch asked.

Claire didn't look up from her papers. "I don't have time."

Exactly the response he'd expected. "You've been at this nonstop for hours. Let's take a break."

"I don't have time for breaks. I've got a lot to do, and not much time to do it in."

Claire tapped the bottoms of the file folders on the table and turned to leave. Butch stepped in front of her, the scent of her perfume wafting toward him. The mixture of lavender and orchid struck a memory now embedded in his memory. Standing in the shower, imagining her naked with his cock—

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She took a step to move around him. Her eyes had taken on a frosty glaze, and although her posture was as erect as it had been when they'd come into the building, he could see the darkening of the skin beneath her eyes. Her blood pressure was up, she was tired and weak, and she needed to eat.

"Claire, wait."

"What?"

"Let me get you a sandwich."

"I don't need anything. Thank you."

She tried to step past him again, and he grabbed her by the shoulders. She winced, then glanced around them, her eyes darting back and forth in quick, jerky movements. Overcaffeinated, he thought. He released her but did not let her pass.

"This is ridiculous; you haven't eaten since last night. You're pale and sweating and still bruised. Probably took some painkillers on an empty stomach when you went to the ladies' room too, didn't you?"

Her face reddened, and she leaned toward him and lowered her voice. "You are my bodyguard. Not my dietitian, not my doctor. My bodyguard. Please keep your comments specific to that profession and no other, all right?"

He was guarding her body all right, had barely taken his eyes off it since his arrival. Surprisingly, he hadn't noticed any of the clones around her looking at her, but they'd already proven themselves to be little more than idiots. Sycophants surrounded her, and she was the force behind her business. A ball of energy and focus packed into a tight, great-looking, well-dressed package.

*Shit. Concentrate on your job, idiot, not hers. And definitely not on her.*

"I am guarding your body, and right now, your body needs fuel. You're operating on coffee and adrenaline, and if you're not careful, you're going to miss something important."

"Miss something? Like what?" She shook her head. "No, don't tell me. You've spent half a day watching me do my job, and you've decided you can do it better."

Butch took a breath to regroup. He was not a person who liked to argue, but since meeting her, he seemed to be doing nothing else. Something about her just begged to be disagreed with; all her employees managed to fight the impulse. He'd better figure out a way to do likewise.

"I'm not your consultant either, remember? I'm your bodyguard."

"No, feel free to comment." She put a hand on her hip and clasped the stack of folders tighter to her chest. Her breasts rose and fell with each quick, angry breath.

Just one observation? Could he allow himself just one if it would convince her to eat something? She had another four or five hours of this, and she'd never make it without something in her system. If he brought her back home this evening looking as pale as she did now, the captain would go ballistic before he could get his ass in the door.

"Your military has prepackaged food, MREs they are called – meals ready to eat – and they taste like shit. But the troops always eat on a schedule, even in the middle of a war. You know why? Because the human body is a machine, a thinking machine that depends on the same thing all machines depend on – a steady power supply. No power, no proper functioning."

She nodded as if she was listening carefully to his every word. The thin line of her lips suggested she had comments but withheld them only by supreme effort.

All morning he'd heard her ask her people for feedback and, getting none, had proceeded with her own plans. Now, as she watched him, her eyes glazed but intent on his, he realized this was most likely the first command dissent she'd heard in a long time.

Butch softened his voice. She was not in the military; a woman almost entirely on her own. She had important work, a Viven with a chip on his shoulder after her, and a father who followed her every move with a secret GPS tracker. If he was to be the only real support she got today, then he might as well go for broke. "You have a lot on your plate. You need some food on it too, to get this job done right."

She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "I hear what you're saying. I appreciate your saying it."

He frowned. "Don't bullshit me. Are you going to eat or not?"

Her lips moved into a half smile, and she shook her head slightly. "I'm not eating that MRE stuff, am I?"

What was this? Was that a crack he saw in the wall of her defiance? "What's your cafeteria food like?"

"A lot like war food, I'd imagine, but it would qualify as a power source."

He stepped out of the doorway. "Good. Why don't we get some of it?"

She stared up at him a moment longer, her shoulders still straight back, her stance unchanged. She was exhausted, and yet she continued working as hard and as much as any man he'd ever worked with. His respect for her moved up a notch.

"What did you mean when you said I might miss something?"

He had said that, hadn't he? Damn it. His job was to watch over her, not tell her how to run the place.

She'd told everyone they met he was a business consultant, but he didn't have even an hour's experience in the business world. Why she even cared what he meant surprised him. He understood war tactics and strategy, but next to nothing about running a business.

But recruits were recruits, and she had many of the same problems in her unit that he'd seen over the darchas. Even tired and possibly still in the middle of a touch of post-traumatic stress disorder, she didn't miss much. But she was, in fact, missing one crucial thing. Because she was tired and overworked, she saw the tactical plan but was missing the appropriate overall strategy: to get her people doing the work while she led them.

"I'll make you a deal. I'll share my observations when you take your first bite."

She nodded and stepped past him. "Okay, follow me, then."

She strode down the hall toward the elevators, and he glanced around at the cubicles as they passed. Not a single eye missed their exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire swallowed the first bite of her sandwich and took a drink of her soda. She felt almost immediately better. What a horrible day. Her pulse hammered against her temples, her muscles ached, and she could have slept for a week. If she didn't have to be here getting this done, she could easily imagine sitting on a beach somewhere, the warm sun soaking into her skin as she napped.

Instead she had two missions today: get everything finalized for Monday's meeting and try not to get killed in the meantime. In her next lifetime, she would take up something easier. Maybe world domination.

She took another bite and, after chewing it slowly, swallowed and looked up at her bodyguard.

"This is pretty good."

Butch sat across from her and grinned as he chewed. She didn't mind admitting to herself that his outburst a few minutes ago had shocked her. Of course, she wouldn't admit it to him, but that wasn't necessary anyway. He'd been right; he knew it, and she knew it.

Her father had always told her that military men took orders so they didn't have to think for themselves. They were all trained the same way so that in any situation, they would know exactly how to respond, and they would all respond without having to think. That's why they drilled, why the training never deviated and none of the trainers asked for suggestions. They had a protocol, a process that worked, and they worked the process.

How did that gel with being an alien prisoner? Butch appeared to have an actual brain that not only functioned but was well utilized.

Must be all those MREs.

Claire made a mental note to start bringing food to eat at her desk. He'd been right about that; trying to run a business operating solely on caffeine and adrenaline was not conducive to good decision making. What other gems of wisdom did he have hidden behind those gorgeous, extraterrestrial eyes?

Why was she not more surprised that extraterrestrials were alive and well and living on planet Earth? Hadn't she always suspected something like this could happen? Not for a moment had she believed humans were the only beings populating the universe, but to come face-to-face with one was another matter.

"How many people know that your kind are here?"

"All of us, your father, you..." His voice trailed off.

"Yeah, no kidding. Who else?"

"That's classified."

She shook her head and leaned closer. "I'm not going to disclose intergalactic secrets to the media, Butch. Tell me how long this has been going on. You've been here ten years... When did the first of you arrive?"

"Classified."

Claire took another sip of her drink. A different tactic was in order. "Then tell me about Garren."

He opened his mouth to speak, and she held up her hand. "Wait. Do not say 'classified' again. He already tried to kill me once—whatever you know, I am now officially on a 'need to know' basis. I'll go over what you told me already, and you fill in the blanks. Okay?"

"No comment." His smile remained in place as he took another bite of his sandwich.

"You knew Garren, years ago—worked with him. He was told by the Auquerel that he was to be bound with the Princess Raanana, whose father was your boss. You were working toward being in the inner circle... What was it again?"

He hesitated only a moment, then must have decided she knew this much already. "Ontetni."

"Right, you wanted to be one of the Ontetni. Was Garren one of them?"

"Yes." He'd hesitated again, but this time gave an answer she hadn't known. Progress.

"Then your boss, the Err, sent you here because his daughter accused you of a crime—one you did not, in fact, commit."

He nodded but said nothing.

"Does it ever bother you that you were sentenced unjustly?"

"Yeah."

"You know, Butch. I had my wisdom teeth cut out when I was twenty-three. I was knocked out during the three-hour surgery and awakened to find my cheeks so swollen I thought I'd swallowed two small hot air balloons. This conversation reminds me a lot of that day."

He stopped chewing, and a small crease formed between his eyebrows. "What's a hot air balloon?"

"Never mind. Well, I'm eating, so come on. You promised to tell me what I was missing."

He swallowed his bite of sandwich and picked up his napkin. "I didn't say you were missing anything. I said you might miss something."

She shook her head and took another drink of her soda. "Oh, no, don't hedge on me. You meant something specific, and I want to know what it was."

He shrugged and shifted his gaze around them.

Was he afraid someone was watching them? Nothing unusual was happening here, she thought as her gaze followed his. She had never eaten in the cafeteria before, but it was exactly what she'd expected. People showed up in pairs and small groups, got their food, and ate it. They were all ensconced in their own conversations.

"You can speak freely. No one is paying any attention to us. Tell me: what might I miss?"

For the first time since she'd met him, he looked uncomfortable and failed to meet her eyes.

"It can't be that bad. Tell me."

"You said it earlier: I'm your bodyguard...nothing else. Whatever I think about your business has no bearing on the reason I'm here." He took a drink of his Coke. "Let's leave it at that."

"It must be really bad." She forced a smile and leaned back in her seat. "I can take it. Come on. Let me have it. What might I miss?"

He looked up into her eyes, and she continued to smile at him, encouraging him to tell her the truth; then he looked back down to his food. He'd been right about the "food as fuel" thing. Why wouldn't he be right about this? She wasn't going to let him leave here without saying his piece.

She didn't speak again as she watched him eat his sandwich and finish his drink, all the while waiting for him to respond. He wiped his hands on his well-used napkin once more, then finally met her gaze.

"Okay, then." He pushed his tray forward, sat back in his seat, and folded his enormous hands on the table. "I think your people lack initiative."

"What?" This confession was certainly not what she'd expected. She glanced around again, then leaned closer to him. If this was the conversation they were going to have, she definitely didn't need her employees hearing it.

"They are not sharing their ideas, or they have none. I'm not sure which."

She forced herself to nod and keep her defenses in check. It wasn't easy to hear dissension, but if things were going to operate at top efficiency, she wanted to consider all feedback. "Go on."

"I've been trying to figure out why," he said, lowering his voice. "Maybe you just hired people with no ideas. That's one possibility. More likely, they have ideas but are either too lazy to share them or too afraid."

She nodded again. Okay, at least he's not putting the blame on me. "And what are they afraid of?"

His lips turned into a small grin as he unclasped his hands and dropped them into his lap. "You."

*Then again, maybe he is putting the blame on me.* "I think you give me too much credit. I'm not that intimidating."

"I've watched you all morning. The phone calls, the meetings, the dictation to that secretary of yours, who by the way is even more scared of you than the rest of them. They are all afraid to tell you anything."

Claire shook her head. She'd known Elizabeth for five years; Liz wasn't afraid of her. Why would she be? Claire had been completely fair with Liz, straightforward, clear about what she wanted. Liz was always straight with her. Wasn't she?

Then another thought occurred to her. "If she's so afraid, why is she still working for me? There are other jobs out there. She's a talented, hardworking woman. She could go anywhere, work for anybody."

"But she won't."

He said the words with complete finality. What could he possibly have heard or seen in the five-minute conversation she'd had with Liz that would make him think such a thing? Had he talked with other employees when she hadn't been watching? That was impossible. In every meeting, every conversation, she'd been aware of his presence. She'd seen and heard everything he'd done all morning.

"Give me one reason to believe you have any idea what you're talking about."

Butch seemed to consider this before he answered. "She has inoperable cancer. She doesn't want to tell you, doesn't want to be treated differently. She's afraid you'll find out, and it will endanger her job."

The words were like a punch in her stomach and took her breath away. Cancer? Liz had two young children and was raising them on her own. Butch was wrong; he had to be. She forced air into her lungs to ask the next question, afraid now to hear the answer. "How do you know that?"

He shook his head. "I didn't say much beyond 'nice to meet you' all morning; I had to do something during all those meetings. So I listened."

"No one said anything like that! I was there." Even if he had overheard something, what in the world made him jump to the conclusion that Liz was afraid of her? "Endanger her job? Does she really think I'd get rid of her because she's sick?"

He glanced at the table behind them, then leaned closer to her. "You'll have to eventually. She'll have more nausea and body weakness than she can continue to hide. You'll need someone at her desk doing her job; she won't be able to fulfill her duties." Butch's gaze scanned her face. "I've heard of cancer. It's slow and painful. Insidious."

Claire felt tears begin to burn at the backs of her eyes, and she blinked them away in frustration. "Are you sure about this? Why wouldn't she tell me?"

"I recommend you ask her that."

Recommend? He *recommends*? Her temper began to burn. "If you know other things like this, I want you to tell me right now."

Butch nodded. "This is why she didn't tell you, that look on your face. You might not think you're intimidating, but I can see where a lot of people would misread that look, that intensity. You probably scare a lot of people."

Not him, obviously. Claire pushed her hair back from her face with both hands and took a deep breath to clear her head. In the hospital herself just yesterday, she'd known she would be leaving soon, known she'd be fine. The picture of Liz bedridden and dying with her children standing helplessly nearby slashed like a knife in her belly. The company had a great medical plan and an employee-assistance program; something could be done. Liz felt intimidated by her, and that had stopped her from asking for help? She clenched her fists in her lap.

"Well, I can't fix things if I don't know about them. She should have said something. I'm not a mind reader."

"No, you're not."

"But I'll have to be? That's what you're saying."

He rested his forearms on the table and leaned toward her. "You're a smart woman. I don't pretend to know what you should do. You asked me what you might be missing. I told you."

"Well, I can't fix something when I don't know it's going on."

"You're not going to fix it. She's going to die, and there's nothing you can do about it." He watched her. "It's not your job to fix everything."

"Don't you dare tell me what my job is." Fury burned in her veins, more at herself than at him. He, however, was a convenient target. A man who knew nothing about consulting had diagnosed her and her business in one short morning. Moreover, he was right about this: if her own employees didn't tell her what was going on, how was she supposed to do anything about it? He'd picked up on it in a few short hours of being here, and she'd missed it all.

Now he could sit there and smugly tell her that she had no control over this situation? That there was nothing she could do about it? Well, that much he was dead wrong about.

Her BlackBerry's muffled ring startled her, and she snatched it out of her jacket pocket. "Yes?"

"Claire, you need to come home now. Say nothing to Butch. If he's with you right now, say 'yes' and nothing more."

She glanced at Butch. "Yes."

"Make some excuse. Get out of there and come straight home. I'll explain everything when you get here."

Her father hung up.

She clicked the Off button and dropped the BlackBerry back into her suit pocket. What in the world was that all about? She schooled her features. "The Anthony Group representatives are confirmed for Monday morning. Ten o'clock."

"It's funny, but you sound just like your father."

The words came out low, but they might as well have been shouted at her. "All I said was 'yes.'"



Butch's eyebrows rose. "That was a compliment. He was a great leader. Bit of a tyrant, but he earned the respect of his men."

She rose from her seat, and he rose with her. "Don't follow me. I want to be alone for a few minutes. I need to clear my head."

Butch considered this. "Where?"

"None of your damn business."

Suddenly she didn't care about all the people around them who might overhear. Yeah, but you're the boss, she reminded herself as she walked toward the door, hearing his footsteps closing in behind her. You've got people depending on you, and a business to run, and you don't need those people thinking you can't handle the pressure. And whatever that call had been about, she didn't need Butch asking questions.

She spun around before he could reach her and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Don't compare me to my father, do you hear me? If it weren't for my father, I wouldn't have half the problems I have."

"Who are you trying to convince? Me? Yourself? Or your father?"

The urge to slap his face surged through her, and she quelled it only by supreme effort. "You stay here. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Where are you going, Claire?"

She watched his eyes examining her like a war map, determining a strategy and tactic to defeat his enemy. She was not his enemy, however. She was his charge—his job—and this was all her father's doing. Well, her father was obviously having second thoughts. Frankly, so was she. Maybe he had been falsely accused; maybe he was really a criminal and a consummate liar. Right now, there was no way to be sure. And after that revelation about Liz, the one thing she didn't trust anymore was her own feelings about anyone around her.

The thought washed sadness over her, and she gritted her teeth in frustration. She had to get away from him; find a few minutes of peace from those penetrating, beautiful, and all-seeing eyes. There was no way she could do that by brute force.

She released the beginnings of the frustrated tears she'd been keeping in check. Pathetic really, to intentionally play the crying card, but no man on planet Earth knew what to do with a crying woman except leave her alone until she stopped. Hopefully, that applied to extraterrestrials too.

"I'm going to the ladies' room to wash my hands and face."

Butch nodded and took a step backward. Claire turned and walked out of the cafeteria.

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch watched her stride off through the swinging door, her head bowed and hands on her face. *Damn.* He'd intentionally goaded her, had forced her to push him away. The pheromones coming out of her pores were driving him absolutely insane, and he'd had to get some distance between them.

Before the phone call, when her eyes had misted as he'd told her about her secretary, all he'd wanted was to pull her into his arms.

*Shit.*

What else could go wrong? He'd wasted most of a day following her around, trying like hell to ignore the scent of her desire, and getting no closer to finding out what the hell Garren was doing here and why he was targeting this woman.

Humans didn't realize the powerful chemicals their bodies released, and as a kindred, hers were even more potent. Every moment near her made him ache in ways that had nothing to do with the job he was supposed to be doing.

He was her bodyguard, brought here to keep her safe. He wasn't her lover, and he wasn't a frigging consultant. What the hell was he doing talking business anyway? What a clusterfuck.

Butch walked to the large bank of windows overlooking the parking lot. He stared at the cars. *Idiot.* He'd wanted her mad at him, turned off by him at the very least – not crying. What kind of bodyguard, human or otherwise, made a stone pillar of a woman cry?

The main entrance door opened and one floor below him, along with a group of suits and shirts leaving the building, came one easily recognizable shock of blonde flowing hair. The answer to his question walked toward the handicapped parking spaces.

What kind of bodyguard?

A bodyguard who'd just been played.

Butch slapped the windowsill, then ran across the cafeteria, ignoring the gasps and stares of the other employees. Slamming the door open, he never broke stride as he raced toward the door to the stairwell. He shoved the heavy door like it was a piece of paper, then jumped down the flight of stairs in one leap, closing the distance between him and his manipulative responsibility.

*That little...*

Butch covered the expanse of lobby floor in fewer than ten strides, then slammed the glass doors open and jumped. As soon as his feet hit the pavement, he took off running as fast as he'd ever moved toward Claire's car.

She dropped into the driver's seat and almost had the door closed when he reached her. He grabbed the car door and jerked it out of her hand.

"You little lying –"

Her head snapped up, her face first registering surprise, then a celebratory grin. "I didn't lie. I exaggerated, Mr. Spock. Now get out of my way."

She grabbed the door handle and wrenched the door out of his hands. The slam echoed through the parking lot, followed quickly by the snap of the automatic door lock.

“Open this damn door!” Butch hit the window with his fists, most likely drawing the attention of anyone within earshot, but he didn’t give a shit. The woman inside this car was the most hardheaded, obstinate little...

“Open it, Claire!”

She didn’t look up. Slipping the key in the ignition, she started the car and began backing out of the parking space.

Butch grabbed the door handle and yanked on it, knowing the motion was a waste of time but needing to do something with his hands besides break the window into a thousand pieces.

“Claire! Stop! Damn it!”

For an instant, he considered jumping on the hood but decided against it. That look on her face told him one thing. She wouldn’t stop. She turned, smiled up at him, then mouthed the word that sent his blood pressure off the meter.

*No.*

She peeled out of the parking lot, her tires squealing on the black asphalt and kicking stray rocks at him. Butch held up his hands to block them from hitting him in the face as he watched her go.

*That damn...*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw another vehicle pull out of a parking space along the tree line. As his fury blazed, he knew even before he saw exactly who was driving.

A large white van with a panel door on the passenger side and double doors in the back made a beeline across the parking lot toward the exit.

“Claire!”

He took off at a dead run, following the exhaust that still hung in the air from her car. Her windows were rolled up, so there was no way she would hear him shout again. He wanted to roar her name anyway, but even with telepathy she wouldn’t hear him from this distance. When that van got to her, this time she wouldn’t be so lucky. Garren wasn’t one to make the same mistake twice.

His legs pumped with his arms, but the dress shoes he wore were not made for cross-country racing. On Vivemonde, he wouldn’t be able to run this fast, as the gravity was about double Earth’s. But even with the advantage, he couldn’t catch the van, now less than fifty yards away from her.

The blast of a car horn behind him broke his stride. He looked over his shoulder. A vintage Corvette Stingray drove a few feet behind him, the driver waving him out of the way with wild movements of his arm.

Butch skidded to a stop in the fancy dress shoes and turned toward the car, careful not to move out of the driver's path. Gasping for breath, he pulled his .357 out of his shoulder holster and pointed it at the driver.

"Get the fuck out of the car!"

The driver's eyes opened so wide, Butch could see the whites all the way around the poor guy's irises. Intimidation, weaponry, and fear were powerful motivators, as was the element of surprise. Before the driver thought to simply mow him down with his Corvette, Butch ran over to the car, grabbed the door handle, and jerked it open.

He clasped the guy's suit jacket and yanked. "Get out!"

The man held up his hands and cowered out of the vehicle with Butch keeping the gun trained on him just in case. Some guys grew a spine out of nowhere, and Butch didn't want his bluff called. He wouldn't shoot the guy – probably wouldn't, anyway.

When the man finally had both feet on the ground, Butch shoved him to the pavement, jumped into the car, and shut the door.

"Sorry, dude! Call the cops! Now!"

He stomped the gas pedal, and with two-hundred-some horses beneath the hood, the power threw him back against the seat. The car kicked up a spray of stray gravel, pieces of rock hitting the poor guy's suited form like hail raining down from heaven as he lay sprawled on the ground.

The car was speeding along before he had a chance to look down at the speedometer. Luckily, no one else was driving through the parking lot. If they had been, the fiberglass body projectile would have killed them. He jammed his gun into the crook of the passenger seat and grabbed the seat belt from behind his shoulder. Jerking it forward and across his chest, he heard the snap click as he lifted his foot from the accelerator and stomped the brake at the parking lot's exit.

The Corvette skidded to a stop as a driver moving past the joining road honked his horn for all he was worth. Butch ignored him and stared down the road so he could get into the traffic. The driver, still irritated, decided to drive as slowly as he possibly could. Butch had an immediate flash in his mind that he should drag out his .357 once more and show the guy how he felt about that particular driving maneuver.

Instead he stared up the road to get a look at what he was up against. Claire and her not-so-friendly tail had already pulled out into the traffic and were moving off into the distance.

Butch flipped his cell phone open and punched in the speed-dial number for her cell. Thank God he'd had the foresight to program it yesterday when he'd picked up the GPS monitor from the captain. Who'd have guessed the woman he'd been charged with protecting would be this difficult to protect? When he got back home, he was taking up gardening or something equally slow-paced. Plants didn't turn him on or make his life a living hell.

He spun the steering wheel hard right and hit the accelerator as the car finally got out of the way.

The phone rang only once before she picked up.

"Hello?"

"Dammit, Claire! Wait for me!" Butch stomped the accelerator to the floor and flipped the driver a bird as he zoomed past him.

"Oh, hello, Butch. Sorry, but I'm afraid I'm busy."

"He's right behind you!" His voice croaked out the words, and the shitty reception probably made it sound even worse. His heart hammered against his chest.

"What?"

"The van! It's behind you!"

She paused, and the sound of traffic and wind rattled through the cell phone's earpiece. "Don't mess with me, Butch. I'm not coming back for you."

He took a deep breath. "The van, damn it! That guy followed you out of the parking lot just now. Are you insane? Why did you leave—"

"There's no van behind me."

Was she blind? Butch whipped around a slow-moving Subaru and pushed the gas pedal farther toward the floor to close the distance between them. With these hills, he could see her car; then he couldn't, but he could clearly see the van, first the whole thing, then just the top of it. He closed the distance between himself and Claire steadily.

"He's not right behind you yet, but he's there."

"Where are you?"

"I'm back here, too, damn it!" He shifted lanes once more, then accelerated again, not daring to look at the speedometer. If a horde of policemen started following him, all the better.

"You wish you were behind me." She laughed, but the sound was cut short. "Oh wait. There is a van back there. It's white."

*No shit.* He crested another hill and had her car in full view. The van reeled along two cars in front of him.

"Claire, listen to me carefully. Stay on this road, and slow down so I can catch you. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, but Butch, wait a minute. That's..."

As he darted between the cars in the right-hand lane in order to close the distance between himself and the van, the Corvette's rear wheels slid. He grabbed the wheel with both hands and dropped the cell phone into the floorboard.

When he was one car behind the white van and four cars behind Claire, he fished his hand around in the floorboard while trying to hold the car in the road. He finally laid his hand on the phone's thin metal antenna. Picking it up carefully, he struggled to right it, then pinched it between his cheek and shoulder. He jammed his hand down on the horn and left it there.

“Butch, what’s going on?” Her voice in the receiver changed from annoyance to confusion to fear. “What’s that noise?”

The van changed lanes and, moving faster down the passing lane, closed in on her. “He’s going to try to broadside you, Claire! There’s an exit coming up on the right. I want you to take it. Don’t slow down until you get off the highway.”

Claire said nothing, and Butch was still quite a distance away, but close enough that he could see her eyes in the rearview mirror. They were huge.

“I can’t do it, Butch. I’m going too fast to make that turn.”

Butch read the sign at the approaching exit. REDUCE SPEED TO 25.

*Shit.*

“No, you can’t. Where are the damn cops?”

Right on cue, Butch heard the faint peal of sirens in the distance. *Thank Auquerel.* “All right, Claire Just stay on this road. When that van gets closer, I want you to tap your brakes a couple of times, then press down on them – hard. You got me?”

“Butch, listen –”

“Just do it, Claire!”

He snapped his phone closed and tossed it onto the seat, preparing to chase that van to the end of the Earth. Once he got his hands on Garren, he was going to toss him over the horizon – but good.

Police sirens screamed as both he and the van moved in on Claire’s Honda. Butch looked up to see the black-and-white cavalry three cars back and closing.

The car to his right pulled off onto the shoulder. A moment later, the cop’s squad car rode along beside him. Butch stole a glance at him, then back to the curving portion of the highway ahead.

“Pull over, sir!” The bullhorn blasted through the closed windows of the Corvette as if the T-tops were off and the windows wide open.

He pointed at the van ahead of him and kept driving.

“Pull over now!”

He turned toward them while searching along the side door for the electronic window button. Damn antiques. It had the crank. He held his hand out to the window, but his focus was off. The passenger- and driver’s-side windows both opened, air rushing into the car, the sound of the siren now deafening.

“The hell I will! The woman in the Honda! She’s being followed!”

Shouting over the screaming siren was a waste of breath. Butch could barely hear his words inside his own head. He started to yell the message again, when the policeman’s bullhorn rose once more to his lips.

“Pull over immediately! You’re under arrest!”

*Shit.* Butch looked to see Claire's position in relation to the van. Garren passed by her, didn't apply his brakes at all or even appear to notice her alongside him. Claire slowed and took the next exit.

"Pull over now, sir!"

*Damn it to hell.*

## Chapter Four

Claire held her foot on the brake as she drove down the exit ramp, the car slowing as she approached the end of the deceleration lane. Butch and the cops were in her rearview mirror for a moment; then they were gone from sight.

Her heart continued racing. That *had* been the van she'd seen yesterday. Butch had seen him, grabbed a car, and followed her to save her.

Where had he gotten that car? It looked like Jerry's pride and joy. If that was Jerry's Corvette, she could just imagine his face right about now. No way Butch had asked to borrow it, and it wouldn't matter if he had. Jerry wouldn't even let his wife drive it. Butch had somehow appropriated it, and Jerry had most likely been the one to call the cops now racing down the road alongside Butch. Life or death, didn't matter – Jerry would sell his grandmother before he'd loan his car.

Well, at the end of the day, that wasn't the behavior of a guy she needed to get away from. Crap. She reached the red light at the bottom of the hill. She stopped and peered out the windshield back up to the highway but could see nothing from down here. She listened for the police siren somewhere ahead of her. They'd either pulled Butch over, or they had gotten so far away she couldn't hear them any longer. Surely Butch wasn't crazy enough to try to outrun the police. It would have taken them a little while to slow him down and get him pulled over. She could still get there.

Garren had been driving the van, but he was long gone now. Hopefully.

She shook her head as she sat trapped at the red light, cars passing from both directions in front of her. Give the police about ten minutes, and they'd have Butch in custody for racing down the road like a maniac, stealing a car... Heaven knew what all. Butch was going to jail, unless she did something and fast.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed her father. She should have asked him the reason he'd wanted her to leave before she'd followed his command. But



this was how they were. How they'd always been. He said jump, and she said how high.

When the light finally changed, Claire stomped on the gas pedal and drove her car straight across the road to the acceleration ramp. Speeding down the road, she was thankful not many cars were around at this time of day or she'd never get there in time.

*There.* She could see the beginning of the traffic holdup, and not surprisingly she could just make out Jerry's black Corvette on the shoulder of the road. A uniformed officer held Butch's chest pressed against the Corvette with his hands behind his back. Someone had removed Butch's suit coat, and she realized for the first time that he'd been wearing a shoulder holster.

"Oh man, Butch. You are in so much trouble," she muttered.

Every car in front of her drove slowly past them, rubbernecking as if this were the most interesting thing that had ever happened on this part of the globe. Finally, she passed them, applied the brake, and pulled off the road. She climbed out of her Honda and started walking along the shoulder to deal with the mess she was at least partly responsible for creating. Not entirely responsible, but somewhat.

One of the police officers walked toward her, holding his arm straight out and pointing.

"Ma'am, get back in your car, please."

Claire shook her head as she kept walking toward him. Of all the things she needed to get done today, keeping Butch out of jail had to be at the bottom of that list. What in the world had her father been thinking when he'd called her?

"Officer, that man is not a criminal. He's my bodyguard."

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch stood at military rest in the middle of Claire's living room, his hands behind his back, feet shoulder width apart. They needed to get out of here. Garren certainly knew this house, and unless he missed his guess, the outlaw could be waiting outside right now. Despite his arguments, she'd insisted on coming back to talk to her father when he wouldn't answer the phone. Butch had secured the alarm system on his way in, but he didn't count on that to keep Garren out for long.

She paced back and forth across the oak floor with the phone stuck to her ear, trying again to reach her father on his cell. Butch watched her strut around in the impossibly high heels on those long, sexy legs. Damn good thing she had no idea how this woman-run-amok routine was pissing him off and turning him on at the same time. If she had known, he had a sneaking suspicion she wouldn't have liked it much.

And neither would her father. Yeah, good thing he wasn't here.

He'd seen her in action today, and he'd been right about his first impression of her. She had some serious IQ points in her favor. Not to mention a couple of other points, which he was trying hard not to stare at.

Her leaving had really pissed him off, but she'd managed to handle those policemen beautifully. With tears in her eyes – which he now realized she could turn off and on at will – she explained how she'd been attacked, and he'd been hired as her bodyguard. She'd stretched the truth about knowing she was being chased by the same man who'd attacked her last night, but all in all, his racing to save her had been explained away to their satisfaction. He'd gotten off with a warning to “dial back the race-car driving and just call nine-one-one next time.”

Hell, she'd even managed to placate Jerry about his stolen Corvette, although that had taken some finagling.

Why she'd taken a powder in the first place was the basic sticking point now, but they had no answers. Claire was in a high snit as she almost shouted into the receiver. Butch wished he could say something to help, but silence was the best option at this point.

She slammed the phone down on the cradle. “I left another message. Damn it! Where is he?”

The dressing-down she'd just delivered to the captain's answering service was mild compared to some he'd gotten since he'd been here serving under her father's command, and, he thought contentedly, a hell of a lot more fascinating to watch. He'd been careful not to let her know the effect she was having on him, but with the heat of her temper mingling with her already raging pheromones, it was getting harder all the time to keep his libido in check.

She made another three-point turn and stared first at the phone, then at Butch. Her eyes flashed, and Butch held his breath to try to fight off the desire burning through his body every time he breathed in her scent.

“He said this arrangement wouldn't interfere with my work, yet I spent an hour explaining to the state police why they shouldn't let you rot in jail! He's controlling, and now he's disappeared. Two things I don't need. I had to guard your body, which is sort of the opposite of what he was going for when he brought you here in the first place. I don't know why he insists on treating me like a child. I am perfectly capable of taking care of things myself!”

He tried not to think about the way she said, “guard your body,” and reserved comment. Claire might sermonize now, but her father would have the last word. He was sure of that. While she'd spoken strongly to him on the phone, he had yet to see her really stand up for herself in his presence. Was that why she had argued not to have him as a bodyguard last night? That certainly made sense in terms of their crazy relationship.

Why she didn't just move out was the real question. Didn't human women do that? If his parents had bothered him this much, he certainly would have.

“Oh, and Jerry! God! You know he tried to tell me that he could sue for pain and suffering?”

Butch scowled. “He hasn't seen suffering. Yet.”

She spun around and pointed a long accusing finger at him as she moved. "Well, we're just lucky it worked, and you're not stuck dodging some Bubba in the joint. If it hadn't, you'd be wearing a nice, bright orange jumpsuit instead of that thousand-dollar Ralph Lauren."

He watched her pivot at each end of the room as she paced relentlessly, her shapely leg muscles tightening and loosening with each stride. He tried to think about anything but the sound of those clicking heels and exactly what was inside them.

Why did she wear such high heels anyway? She was pretty damn tall for a woman. Was it to establish control, to look larger and more powerful? Unfortunately, to him, all that made her look was more attractive.

This woman who looked like a model and ran her mouth like a three a.m. drill sergeant had an amazingly exotic appeal, even when she was talking in no certain terms about nefarious incarceration. Even when she was driving off and leaving him in a parking lot.

She ranted on about her anger at her father, but her emotional outburst was probably more closely related to her near miss with Garren than anything her father had done. Yeah, her father had called her away, and that had started the snowball rolling downhill. But it wasn't really Dirk Simonson she was in such a snit over.

"What I want to know is where he went. He seldom ever goes out at night, and never without telling me where he's headed. I wonder if he went to the police station." Her hair swung with the next spin around the rug, falling around her shoulders like a waterfall pouring over her.

Pictures of what she'd look like in a string bikini standing under an actual waterfall instead of that dress-for-success suit flashed unbidden to his mind.

Time to get his head back in the game. Garren was out there somewhere, and neither she nor his raging pheromones were going to keep her safe. It was time for him to say something. She appeared to be winding down from her tirade, and considering all she would get from this was the satisfaction of having had her say, she might as well have it. He was fairly certain it wouldn't matter, wouldn't, in fact, change one single thing. The sooner she got over this, the sooner they could get the hell out.

"Keeping the police involved is smart and a logical step."

Claire's eyes widened. "Well, he could have told me! How can you be so calm? Because of what he's done, you were almost arrested by the police after a high-speed chase along the interstate in a stolen car!"

Maybe she wasn't done ranting yet. He sighed. "Yeah, I was there, remember?"

"So, why aren't you upset? He calls me, and it almost gets you arrested!"

Butch slowly closed the distance between them, resisting the urge to place his hands on her. He wasn't sure if he wanted to comfort her or pull her body against his. Or slap her silly to arrest this out-of-control tirade. Each impulse had a solid logic behind it.

"Yeah, well he was wrong, but why did you listen to him anyway? Who are you mad at, Claire? Him for calling you, or yourself for following his orders?" That comment had struck home; he could read it in her eyes. Perhaps he shouldn't have been quite so blunt. "I'm here to protect you. How am I supposed to do that when you go running off?"

"What if something has happened to him?"

Butch's cell phone rang, and they both froze for a moment. He grabbed the phone out of his pocket but didn't recognize the number. He hit the Speaker button and motioned for Claire to say nothing.

"Butch? Are you there?"

The sound of her father's voice, tinny over the speaker, still sounded as commanding and intimidating as ever.

"Father?"

"Claire. Where's Butch?"

"He's standing here with me in the living room. A better question would be where are you?"

"I drove to Washington to find out what the hell this Garren character is doing here. I tried to leave a message on your cell, but the damn thing wouldn't record it, and you wouldn't pick up."

"I didn't get any messages. You called me once today..."

Butch grabbed her arms and shook his head. He stared into her eyes, sending his message telepathically. "*Don't tell him about the phone call.*" She paused, her eyes wide.

"What did you find out about Garren, Captain?"

"UMI took him into custody this evening. He's not Claire's problem anymore."

The room grew still as Claire's eyes widened.

"I see. Excellent." Butch kept his voice even. "My job here is finished."

"Yes, I've spoken with Err Yedidyah, and you're scheduled to go home on the next flight. Better pack your gear."

"Going home?" Claire's voice rose, but Butch quickly stifled it by putting his hand over her mouth.

"Yes, sir. Going home, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Fine work, Butch. Claire, I'll see you tomorrow."

The phone disconnected. Butch pressed the Speaker button once more, a sense of dread shrouding him.

She pushed his hand off her face. "What are you doing?"

He took a deep breath. *Oh shit.* "Claire, we've got to get out of here."

"What are you talking about? You heard him."

"Yeah, I did."

"Garren is in custody. It's all over."

Butch began to pace, treading the same path Claire had covered not long ago. Where in the hell could he take her? Should they try to hole up here somehow? Damn it. He had to tell her his suspicions, but how? The old man drove her crazy, but he doubted seriously she wanted him dead.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what he feared.

Butch took her hand, ignoring the heat that thrummed through her body to his. "Claire, I need to talk to you."

"Talk to me? About what?"

He didn't have any personal experience with human females in situations like this. He'd seen men notified of the death of their friends and comrades. Generally, men were quiet, contemplative, and wanted to be alone. His only exposure to this with human women had come from movies. In movies, they never behaved the same way twice.

But he had watched enough movies to know that sitting seemed to help when humans gave each other bad news. He gestured toward the sofa.

"What's going on, Butch?"

"Just come and sit with me, all right?"

She eyed him warily, then finally followed him to the sofa. Her pheromones calmed to a dull roar as she lowered herself into the cushions, which helped him to focus.

In the movies, humans always seemed to draw out the bad news to catastrophic effect. If they were going to get out of here with any expediency, perhaps a more direct approach would work.

"That wasn't your father. I believe your father is dead, and I need to get you somewhere safe."

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Are you ready to go, then?"

She leaped from the sofa. "What in the hell are you talking about? That's ridiculous!"

"Claire, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down! Are you insane? My father isn't dead!"

*Maybe that's why they don't use the direct approach.* His mind clicked through his options. Grab her and shake her. Get into a shouting match. Try to reason with an unreasonable woman in a horrible situation.

To hell with it. Holding his hand toward her, he palmed her just enough to slow her breathing and rapid heartbeat.

"Claire, I'm not sure if he's dead, but that wasn't your father."

She slipped down to the sofa, her limbs loose and liquid. She leaned against him and rested her head on his shoulder. "Of course it was my father. I heard him." Her

voice, dreamy and low, caressed his senses as she began to slide her hands around his waist.

He straightened, took both of her hands in his, and held them still. "Your father didn't know it was Garren."

She turned her head and looked into his eyes, slowly processing his words. "He didn't know?"

"We never told him."

She closed her eyes for a long moment, then opened them again. Tears slipped from their corners. "You think he's dead?"

"Claire." He stood and fought off the burning urge to pull her into his arms. A palmful of calm was good for some things, but it made a mess of others. Her pheromones rolled into hyperdrive, and he clenched his teeth against the pull of his own desire. "Listen to me. You're not safe here. Garren will show up sooner or later, and he'll find a way to get to you. We've got to leave."

"No, we're safe here. We have the alarm system. And I have you." She choked on a sob. "You're all I have."

Against his better judgment, he pulled her into his arms. He had set the alarms and checked all the entrances. After she was asleep, he would call the police again and have them post a car outside. Moving her now would be too difficult anyway. Her responses would be too slow, and he needed her alert every moment from now on. Damn it, this was exactly why he shouldn't have used the palm.

"All right, we'll stay here tonight. And listen, I could be wrong, Claire. He could be fine—we don't know anything for certain. We'll try to reach him again tomorrow. Let's get you to bed."

She didn't stop crying all the way up the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch removed all his clothing. He couldn't imagine trying to get any sleep wearing a pair of those human pajamas. If there was an emergency in the middle of the night, he'd have to deal with it naked.

He pulled back the bedspread and grabbed the pillows. He shoved one against the headboard and stacked the other on top, then lay down on the soft sheets.

The bedside lamp cast enough light around the room for him to see the details of the furnishings. Cherrywood everywhere, expensive wood flooring, a fireplace. Hell, this was just the guest room.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The lavender and orchid of Claire's perfume remained in his memory, but she'd not visited this room lately. Her bedroom one door away was probably filled with the sweet aroma.

He opened his eyes and linked his fingers over his waist, pushing the thoughts aside. As if she didn't have enough to worry about. The last thing she needed was her bodyguard lusting after her. And the last thing he needed was to give into the urge to lust after her.

He turned out the lamp. Thinking about her perfume solved nothing. He'd better check his hard-on at the damn door and come up with a plan.

Even if the police caught Garren, he wondered if they'd be capable of containing him. How had Garren gotten here in the first place? Ten years ago Butch had been brought to the planet in shackles with a group of convicted Viven, and they'd been monitored and tracked every moment. Somehow Garren was on his own—but how? Butch needed to get back to his apartment and contact Err Yedidyah.

Eight hours and some breakfast and maybe this wouldn't resemble a ticking bomb.

Sometime later, a sound woke him from a dream of Claire standing beneath a waterfall. His eyes snapped open. A tentative footstep on the staircase brought him upright.

Had Claire gotten up? What time was it? He slid out of bed and crept to the door, trying to see the expensive watch face in the dark. Slowly turning the knob, he opened the door a crack and stared down the hallway. For a long moment he heard nothing, then another riser creaked. He grabbed his weapon off the dresser.

A faint glow from the hall night-light illuminated the long, open space. He could make out a tall, unmoving shape in the stairwell. Training his weapon on the form, he prayed that shape wasn't Claire.

When the shape retreated, he moved into the hallway.

"Claire?"

Racing footsteps echoed through the hallway as the shape disappeared down the stairs at breakneck speed.

He ran toward the stairwell as the hall lights came on.

Claire's voice filled the hall. "What—"

"Get back in your room!" Butch shouted. "And call nine-one-one!"

Butch raced down the staircase. With light spilling down the stairwell, he could now make out the details of the shape. A man wearing camouflage pants, a turtleneck long-sleeved shirt, and a ski mask. His heart thrummed in his chest as he took the stairs four at a time.

He stopped and fired his weapon at the shape, the bullet ripping through the door frame inches from his body.

The man yanked the front door open and ran like hell.

Butch was about thirty steps behind him. When the cold night air hit his body, he aimed the gun at the man's back, then lowered it to the man's thighs. If he shot this asshole now, he'd have more trouble on his hands than a home intruder. Without the

captain's assistance, explaining why he'd shot someone who was no longer a threat would bring on a whole new hell of details he didn't want to give alongside investigations that would not withstand close scrutiny by local authorities.

Butch followed after the fleeing man for another twenty or thirty yards, but ultimately the man's tennis shoes won out over Butch's bare feet. The decorative gravel surrounding the house ground into his skin, and he stopped in the middle of the rocks.

Butch listened to the neighborhood dogs bark like possessed wolves as he stood naked in Claire's yard. If any of the neighbors emerged to investigate, he'd have even more to explain. He couldn't afford to be the topic of conversation at the next homeowners' meeting.

He jogged back over the sharp rocks and bounded up the steps he'd taken in one single leap on the way out. Darting inside the open door, he ran into Claire in the shadows of the foyer.

He grabbed her by the shoulders to steady them both. "I told you to get back in your room and call the police!"

In the semidarkness, she stared up into his eyes, hers wide in shock, her mouth hanging slightly open. "Was that him?"

The first answer that sprang to his lips would have helped no one. This was his fault. He should have listened to his instincts and gotten her out of here. Lame-ass human alarm systems. He looked back out through the open door to the police car parked in front of the house. The driver was sound asleep and snoring loudly.

"Claire, why don't you just go back to bed?"

Her entire body shook as she stared up at him, her lips moving as if trying to form words, but no sound came from her throat. She looked like a fish gasping for air after falling out of the small, safe tank she'd lived in her whole life.

His first impulse was to pull her into his arms and hold her until she calmed down, but he fought it with everything inside him. She hadn't grabbed a robe during the melee, and she wore a barely there negligee. Standing in the front foyer naked holding her in his arms was not a good plan. Being here naked with or without her was not much of one either, but he couldn't just leave her standing here.

The point became moot when she wrapped her arms around him and began to cry against his chest. He slid one hand up her back and cupped her head to his thrumming heart. Butch reached behind him and swung the door shut.

"It's okay now. He's gone."

She snuggled more tightly against his body and lifted her face to his. His cock stirred with the movement.

"Butch."

Claire's lips trembled as she looked up at him with those huge green eyes, her blonde hair wrapped around her face like a soft, curly halo. He disengaged her body



from his and purposefully took a step backward, folding his hands in front of him, hopefully not so obviously trying to hide his body's instant response to her nearness.

"Claire, go back to your room."

And I'll come with you, his mind shouted, but he ignored it and clenched his teeth together. All the fantasies he'd let wander through his mind earlier were back to taunt him. This was exactly why bodyguards didn't get involved with people they were supposed to be protecting. Didn't even let themselves imagine what it might be like, because one day you could be standing inches away from them naked and sporting a rock-hard woody. And they might look at you exactly as she was looking at him now.

"That was him, wasn't it?"

Her voice was full of something like resignation and surprisingly not loaded with accusation the way he'd expected. Did she forget that he was here to stop that from happening? It might be an easy thing to forget, considering she'd been stalked three times and nothing he or her father had done had made any difference.

"Go back to your room, Claire," he said again, because it was the only thing he could think to say. He had no comforting words, no answer for the question in her eyes. All he had were more questions, and the middle of the night barely dressed didn't seem like the right circumstance to ask any of them.

Her arms hung down by her sides, and she looked for all her height like a small child after a particularly harrowing nightmare. Her next words, however, did not incite in him the type of comfort he would have given a child.

"Would you come with me and stay with me until I fall asleep?"

*Sounds good to me* was the first thought that sprang into his mind, followed quickly by the second: *that's a terrible idea*. He decided to act on the third. He would sit beside her bed and hold a gun on the door all night if he had to. Garren might make it back into the house, but he wouldn't set one foot over her threshold before Butch blew him away. Tomorrow, he would find them a place to stay until he could figure out how to get this bastard.

"Yes, I'll join you in a minute. First, I just want to have a talk with that cop outside."

She stepped back into his arms, and clutching her body against his, she shook her head against his chest, the soft tendrils of her hair like strands of silk over his bare flesh. "No! Don't leave me here alone."

Millions of years of instinct could not be overridden simply because this was his job. The words coming from this woman who didn't want him anywhere near her yesterday, this woman who prided herself on her independence, still made perfect sense. A near brush with death brought a person around to wanting someone heavily armed nearby, even a stone pillar of strength like Claire. There was nothing quite like having a woman want you to protect her to turn a guy on.

He didn't need the extra help. Protect her, he reminded himself. A desire to be her hero should have nothing to do with it.

Stroking his hand over the back of her head, letting his fingers tangle in the soft blonde curls falling over her shoulders, he held her body against his and tried to ignore the brush of her belly against his erection.

“Claire, let’s go.”

She released him just enough to enable them to walk side by side up the staircase back to her bedroom. Her arms clasped around him, she merged her body against his side, making it difficult to walk. He considered for a moment picking her up and carrying her up the stairs, and his erection twitched again.

The image of her in his arms headed toward her bedroom was not something he needed in his head right now. Danger and near-death experiences brought on surges of adrenaline and caused people to do things they had no business doing. They had a tendency to react to their baser impulses, and his impulses at the moment were about as base as they could get. Giving in to them was not an option.

As they reached her open bedroom door, he disengaged her arms from his body and gently nudged her into the room toward the bed. She stood with her arms hanging limply at her sides, as if she’d lost all will of her own and waited for him to tell her what to do. This diverged so greatly from her behavior yesterday, he should have been concerned.

Instead, the one impulse millions of years of evolution had not changed was winning. He was completely turned on. As he stood naked before this woman who was waiting for him to put her to bed, wanting him to remain with her as she fell asleep, the situation was almost more than he could possibly be expected to walk away from.

He pulled the covers back from the bed and pointed toward it. “Get in,” he said through gritted teeth, struggling to hold on to the desire pumping through him. Damn it, why couldn’t she have been ugly? Or stupid? Or a guy?

She sat down on the bed, slid her feet under the sheets, and lay down on the pillow, staring up at him with those enormous, great eyes. He saw no desire in her face, only fear and confusion. He wanted to sit down beside her on the bed but fought the impulse like the soldier he was.

“Close your eyes.”

Telling her this was obvious but served two purposes. One being that he wouldn’t see her eyes anymore, and two, she wouldn’t see his enormous erection.

“I’ll be right back.” He reached for the blanket and covered her shoulders, careful not to touch her skin. He turned and walked from the room. From now on he was going to sleep in pajamas, whether he liked it or not.

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire lay in bed with her eyes closed until she heard Butch close the door. Then she sat up and turned on the bedside table lamp. Her entire body was still shaking. Her

blood pumped in her head, bringing the headache she'd suffered with all day long once more to the forefront.

Was she shaking from a fear or something else entirely? Yes, she was afraid, but the touch of Butch's body against hers had brought on a new kind of trembling, the kind that was every bit as dangerous as an extraterrestrial killer in her house.

She heard Butch's bedroom door close and him moving quickly around in the room. The image of him standing naked in the front foyer flashed back into her mind, causing her head to pound even more fiercely. His body was something she needed to get out of her head, and now. She had to focus on the problem at hand. Her father was missing, maybe dead.

No. She would not allow herself to believe that. Until she had verifiable proof, she would not believe it. Her father had survived two stints in Vietnam and countless years fighting for his country in dangerous jobs. He could not be so easily killed by some insane extraterrestrial. No, he was not dead.

Time to get a grip on herself and assess the situation rationally. She was in her room, it was two a.m., and her bodyguard was next door right now putting some clothes over his magnificent body.

Danger from Garren was one thing. The urge to climb out of her bed, go into Butch's room, and climb into his was quite another and astonishing in its intensity. She pushed the covers aside and placed her feet on the floor, clutching at the bedspread with her fists to gather herself. It had been so long since she'd had any feelings of this nature, she hardly knew what to do with them. "It's fear," she said. "Adrenaline. That's all it is."

Her bedroom door opened and Butch's body filled the doorway.

"Are you okay? Did you say something?"

She'd forgotten how thin the walls were in this enormous house. "No, I was just talking to myself."

Butch shook his head and walked into the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him. He stood a safe distance from her, and she began to wonder: How distant was safe? And safe from what? Her own inexplicable desire?

"Well, stop talking to yourself and get back into bed. I've checked all the doors and windows downstairs. I'm going to stay awake and sit outside your bedroom so you can sleep. Tomorrow we figure out where to go until this guy is caught."

"We're going to my office," she said without hesitation. "That bastard is not going to make me lose this deal and my freedom all at the same time. How are you going to go to work with me tomorrow if you haven't slept all night?"

"I'll be fine. Are you all right?" He smiled, a look that she assumed was supposed to comfort her. It wasn't a patronizing smile, more of an understanding sympathy smirk. Whatever he'd intended, his gaze burned through her blood.

She nodded slowly as she looked at him, now fully dressed, although she could still easily picture him as he'd been a few minutes ago – naked and pressed against her.

She rose from the bed and walked toward him before she could stop herself. Clenching her fists at her side, she refused to let herself touch him, although every instinct inside her wanted to.

"I can't sleep."

He nodded and straightened. "All right then. Why don't I make a pot of coffee and we can talk for a while?"

"Coffee?" The word sounded foreign on her tongue. "How would I sleep after that?" She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest, rubbing her hands over her upper arms. "It doesn't matter. I don't know how I'll ever sleep again."

He placed his hands on her forearms and stilled her body, which she realized had been shaking. She looked up into his eyes and waited. His gaze moved over her face, and he opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again. Whatever it was, he decided to say it with his hands instead as he slid them to her neck and caressed her cheeks with his thumbs.

"Claire." For a moment it looked like he was going to say something else, but no other words came. His eyes, however, spoke to her heart, unuttered words about her fear and his need to protect her from that fear.

Maybe that was just her imagination and what she wanted to be in his eyes, in his heart. *In his heart? Don't be ridiculous. He's an alien, for crying out loud. You're losing your grip on reality.*

Standing here with him in the dark, in the aftermath of what had happened, though, she wasn't sure any more. Had he held her in his arms to soothe her, or...? Here next to his warm, lean body, she didn't quite know how to feel or what to think.

She continued to wait for him to say something else, all language skills temporarily disengaged from her own brain stem. He bent over closer to her, his lips a breath away. She started to close her eyes and await the oncoming kiss she desperately wanted, but forced them to remain open.

He didn't kiss her. "Claire, get in the bed before..."

Before indeed. Her body hummed with the nearness of his, the heat from him swirling around her. "I don't want to."

"This is dangerous territory you're treading." He gritted his teeth and glared at her. "You're not a fool. There is no way that the two of us..."

The words meant nothing to her, and she stopped listening. All she knew for certain was that she wanted to kiss him. She placed her hands on his cheeks and stepped up on her tiptoes. He remained rigid until she pressed her lips to his.

His lips parted, his hands tightening around her body, crushing her to the long length of him.

A long time ago she'd been in a man's arms, had pressed her lips to his, had even thought she'd enjoyed it. She'd had boyfriends, had seen kisses on television and in movies – passionate kisses between lovers, illicit kisses, even short, quick kisses on the cheek.

Nothing she'd ever seen or experienced had prepared her for this.

She breathed in the scent of him and drank the warmth and spice of his lips. Swaying against the fluid rushing of sensation flowing down her shoulders, her body remained buoyed solely by his hard flesh.

Whether it was remnants of the fear that coursed through her or the tiredness that ached through her bones and lowered her defenses, she didn't know, but every inch of her skin came alive as if she'd been living in suspended animation and was finally set free. From the first tentative touch of her lips to the quickly burning full heat of his, she fell headlong and without regret into the swirling, tumbling awareness of this moment.

His breath was hot, his tongue at first licking the edges of her lips, then moving inside her mouth, capturing her tongue in an instinctive dance of desire. A blood-hot surge of raw want ran through her limbs. She grasped his flesh with unrelenting greed.

Her fingers traced the defined muscles of his arms, squeezing until she felt him shiver beneath her hands. A sense of power coursed through her – she'd caused this tremble. Her hands, her touch...her. A mirrored shiver moved through her, and as she felt the press of his erection against her belly, she imagined him inside her.

He broke the kiss and released her, taking a long step backward, his jaw tight as he clenched his teeth. "Claire, I feel every beat of your heart inside my head. The pheromones pumping through you are killing me. If you don't stop, and *now*, I won't be able to."

This was a terrible idea, but one she would not push from her mind. The image of Butch removing her clothing, then his own in front of her, the two of their bodies joining together – the enormity of her desire for him fulfilled. The possibility of such a reality surprised and amazed her. Not twenty-four hours ago, she'd wanted him gone. But the first notes of the song of their bodies together were a rhythmic, melodious dance of pleasure, one she did not want to end. A pleasure, indeed, that was beginning its first crescendo.

She stepped forward and touched his face gently with her fingertips. "I don't want to."

He looked down into her eyes, his own reflecting something like a question that remained unasked. She did not want to ask any questions, did not want to hear any, for she had no answers. Yes, this was insane, but she didn't care. She slid her fingers across his shoulders to the buttons on his shirt and began to unfasten them one by one. His body became rigid as he watched her move slowly from one button to another, exposing his flesh to her hungry eyes.

When she'd unfastened the last button, she let her fingers trail over the hardened muscles of his stomach up to his nipples. He continued to stand like a statue, his hands now frozen at his sides.

"Claire."

The warning sound in his voice could not stop her. If he wanted to say no, then let him say it.

"Butch, I know what I'm doing."

"I work for you, remember? I'm not your consultant; I'm not anything but your bodyguard. And I certainly shouldn't be your lover." The sound of his voice, low and deep, vibrated through her chest and increased her heartbeat another notch.

She smiled at him, realizing that all the power belonged to her in this situation. Finally, for once, she was in total control. Letting her fingers slide down to his waist, she unfastened the first button on his pants, but as she began to lower the zipper he closed his hands over hers and stopped her.

The ache that had begun low in her belly began to slip even lower. He had not moved, and she pressed her fingertips against his erection, which had not lessened in the slightest.

His eyes blazed hot fire, and he took her hands, stilling them low between them. "Claire, don't do that. I can't be responsible for what I might do with your hands on me."

"I assume that means you want to touch me, but you are duty bound to ignore these desires. I am not." She pressed their joined hands against his fly. "I don't want you responsible. I've seen you responsible. Now I want you naked and in my bed. Let go of my hands, Butch."

Butch's hold on her hands was so tight, she couldn't move her fingertips over him anymore.

"I don't hear you saying no, and no is the only word I'm going to listen to."

He pulled both of her hands behind his back, bringing her body against his. As he stared down into her eyes, his jaw tightened. He leaned over and pressed his lips to her ear. "I can do this in complete silence, can you?"

"Silence?"

"If Garren comes back, he'll kill you. I need to hear his approach. If you make a single sound, I'm going to cover your mouth with my hand, because, Claire, I am not going to let you die just because I couldn't resist you."

The idea that he would cover her mouth sent her blood from a hot burning to a liquid boil.

"I won't make a sound."

He turned her around so fast that the room spun. He lifted her body and walked the two steps to the wall facing the hallway and pressed both of her hands flat against the wall.

Before she knew what was happening, his hands were everywhere...over her breasts, down her sides, then pressing hard against the thin fabric of her panties.

She squelched a low moan that started in her throat, for fear he would stop, and no matter what else happened, she did not want him to stop.

He tore her panties down her thighs and grasped her body, pulling it hard against him. His hand moved down her back, then slid to his cock. He stroked the tip of his erection along her buttocks, sending a trembling shiver along her thighs. He slid his hands over her belly to her breast and gripped her nipple, twisting it hard. The brush of his breath against her ear taunted her.

“Absolute quiet.”

She nodded and leaned back against his shoulder as he shoved his cock inside her. Sucking in a hard breath, she bit down on her lower lip to stifle the moan of pleasure in her throat.

With the sweet agony of his immense cock inside her, he held himself rigid, his chest pressed hard against her back. He took both of her breasts in his hands and squeezed her nipples, then whispered into her ear, “Okay?”

She nodded fiercely and placed her hands back on the wall to brace herself.

As his fingers slid over her shoulders to her waist, he pulled away from her until the tip of his cock almost exited her body, then plunged in again. It took every ounce of control she had to remain silent, to fall wordlessly into the beauty of this moment, spiral soundlessly into the intense pure joy of his filling the most sensitive part of her. His movements took on a steady rhythm, each plunge inside her moving her closer and closer to the orgasm building low and hot inside her.

His fingers slid around her waist and circled her clit. He stroked her, and she pressed her buttocks hard against him, urging him deeper and faster against the increasing friction along the tightening walls of her pussy.

The sound of a distant siren floated through the room, and the movement of his hips stopped. His fingers, however, continued to stroke her as he bit down on the soft flesh of her shoulder.

“Butch.” His name came out as a faint whisper. She tipped her hips forward, then quickly back against him, working his cock with her pussy.

A very low growl emerged from his throat. He pressed her chest flat against the wall and held her hips still against him. She was so close, on the precipice, but her hips were immobile. She tried to urge him deeper, harder.

He held her still, but the caress of his fingers grew firmer, more sure, rhythmic, hypnotic. His warm breath caressed her ear. “Just let it happen, Claire.”

Her name on his lips propelled her over the edge, her mind and body tumbling into waves of sensation and a cacophony of pleasure hidden in the midst of whispers.

His arms slid around her body and he gently, slowly pulled out of her. In the darkened daze of satiation, she turned and opened her eyes to see him. His jaw was tight, his eyes narrowed and focused.

“What...?”

He pressed his finger to her lips and shook his head. “Put your hands on my shoulders.”

She did, and as he lifted her into his arms, she wrapped her legs around his waist. His hands were on her hips as he settled his cock back inside her. “Still okay?”

She closed her eyes and mouthed the words. *Oh yes.*

Locking her fingers together behind his neck, she leaned back as he thrust into her again and again, each joining harder and deeper than the last, everything she had wanted to demand before, he now freely gave to her. She didn't need words or patience anymore, nothing but the driving desire of his body with hers. The explosion of color and light and heat inside her catapulted her into oblivion with him, the orgasm she had worked moments ago to achieve a pale shadow in comparison.

He clutched her body to his, and she tightened her legs around his waist. He turned and leaned his shoulders against the wall, capturing her mouth in the most possessive, most complete kiss she could imagine.

He finally ended the kiss and disengaged her body from his with obvious effort.

“Come to my bed.” The words were out before she knew she would say them.

He stared down at her, his intense blue gaze mesmerizing. “I can't protect you—”

“Sleep beside me, Butch. Protect me here.”

She took both of his hands in hers and led him toward the bed. She sat down and pulled him beside her. As she lay back on the pillow, he reclined next to her, wrapping her in his arms.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

He pulled her closer against him and rested his head against hers. Whether it was reality or not, she felt safe. If anyone tried to come into this room tonight, they would have to go through him first. She closed her eyes and finally gave in to her body's exhaustion.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Butch awoke the next morning with Claire still wrapped in his arms, he stretched for one languorous moment before he realized where he was. He jumped up from the bed, jostling her awake.

Bodyguards didn't sleep with the person they were guarding, and they certainly didn't make love to them and then pass out cold. What the hell had he done?



“Good morning, handsome.” Claire turned over and smiled up at him, her hair mussed and absolutely more beautiful than he’d ever seen it. Her gaze caused his groin to stiffen immediately, and he backed away from the bed so quickly he almost tripped.

“Claire,” he began but didn’t know what else to say. *How are you? Did you sleep well? What time is it?* Every question that came into his mind seemed inane and not nearly close to what he really wanted to say. *What in the hell were we thinking? Why did you let me do that? Did you enjoy it as much as I did?*

“Are you still going to work with me today?” she asked, derailing his train of thought.

“Of course I am.” He blinked to focus his thoughts from her beautiful face to a dawning realization. “Did you think because I slacked off on my job last night that I was going to let you go on your own today? If anything, I plan to never let you out of my sight again.”

“Touchy.” She stretched and closed her eyes. “Oh, I slept like a rock.”

Butch hated to admit that last night was arguably the best night’s sleep he’d had in years. What they’d done, the danger he’d allowed himself to put them both in, had sucked every bit of strength out of him. This was a hell of a way to guard somebody.

If Garren had returned last night and found the two of them in bed sound asleep... He rubbed his hand over his belly as fear clenched his stomach muscles. A smile crossed her lips, and the urge to take her again surged through him.

*Damn it.* How in hell had he let this happen? It made no sense, and yet the truth lay tangled in the sheets before him. The thought of something happening to her now was worse than imagining something happening to himself. He didn’t know this woman well enough to feel this unrestrained sense of possession. There was no logic to it. Her pheromones and his response to them had taken over on a dangerous, visceral level, and as she lay on the bed, her fingers tangling and untangling in her long blonde hair, he knew he was in some deep, serious shit that could get them both killed.

He would not—could not—make that mistake again. He had one purpose and one purpose only, and that was to keep this woman alive. *And if you’re asleep with her body pressed against yours, your weapon is too far away, asshole.*

He cleared his throat and grabbed his underwear. Yanking them over his hips, he took a deep breath. Time to fix what he’d screwed up. “I hope you know what happened last night could get me fired this morning.”

She smiled and stretched. “Yeah, I guess it could.”

Oh yeah, once the captain found out what he’d done, Butch doubted the man wouldn’t throw him out or worse. No self-respecting employer would do anything less.

*You’re assuming she’ll tell him.*

But hadn’t that been her plan all along? She’d been scheming to get rid of him since the first moment they’d met, and he’d given her the reason she needed.

Only last night, her hands and body – none of it felt like a scheme, which just went to show how he'd let her fool him, how he'd fooled himself. Had she done it for reasons other than the same unbelievable pleasure he'd sought and found? Or was this just him trying to shove his own guilt off onto her?

"If that was the reason we did what we did, you can dream on. I'm here for the duration."

"The reason 'we *did* what we *did*'?" She sat up and stared at him. "What we *did* was make love. And you think I made love with you to get you thrown out?"

"Smart woman. That's exactly what I'm saying. And you can forget it. I'm not going anywhere."

Her mouth dropped open. "What kind of whore do you take me for?"

Was she actually trying to deny it? He'd been stupid last night with the dark and his own rampant desire for her body hiding the truth. This morning, though, while she was still beautiful, he was seeing things a lot more clearly.

"Based on your behavior, I'd say a very talented and conniving one. Right up until you kissed me, the only thing you really wanted was me away from you. Now you're trying to tell me that changed? Or did you expect me to be as stupid as I've behaved?"

How could he have been so blind not to realize it last night? In the moment, when she'd walked into his arms seeking comfort, so beautiful and so vulnerable, looking at him with those huge green eyes...well, he'd lost his brains in his pants.

She climbed out of bed and placed her hands on her naked hips. "I expected something a little nicer this morning than you calling me a whore! How could you believe I would do something like that?" She shook her head vehemently, her eyes narrowing. "Okay, wait. I will admit I tried to come on to you in the car – I wanted you fired. But I didn't and you didn't, and that has nothing to do with last night!"

"So you just came on to me last night in this room because you wanted me." The statement sounded ludicrous in his ears, and he wished he'd said it out loud last night before he'd managed to screw up everything by listening to his damn hormones.

She pushed past him toward the adjoining bathroom, then stopped in the doorway, her back to him. "You are an idiot. Get out of my bedroom and get ready for work."

She stepped onto the tile floor and yanked the door closed behind her.

The bitterly uttered sanction rolled over in his mind. Had she begun with the thought of getting him fired in mind but changed her mind? Was she telling the truth?

Yeah right. Everything changed when he was deep inside her and she was bucking against him. She forgot she wanted him gone, and he'd imagined all of this.

*Sure. Right. You're good, but not that good.*

To hell with it. He needed to get a shower and a shave and maybe his attitude would improve. He'd need all the energy and vitality he could muster just to make it through another day of dealing with her business clones. Not to mention the little

matter of keeping her alive. And after last night, there was no mistake: Garren wanted her. Whether he wanted her dead or alive was something Butch didn't even want to think about.

He showered and shaved quickly, put on the same suit with a clean shirt, and slipped his feet into the expensive dress shoes. After this job, he would never wear another suit like this. Business suits were for businessmen, and he'd never felt more uncomfortable in his life. Put a pair of fatigues on him and slip a weapon into his hand, and he knew exactly what to do. He knew who the enemy was, knew where the target was, and knew exactly how to eliminate it.

Claire's office was much more complicated and well out of his realm of experience, if not ability. Yesterday he'd done all right faking it, at least until she'd ditched him. Even the idiot clones who worked for Claire would be able to see through him soon enough. The more he talked, the more it would become apparent he was not trained in one of this country's finest business schools, but rather on foreign soil – really foreign soil. He'd not ridden around in company cars and limousines, but instead for the past ten years had driven tanks and ridden on aircraft carriers.

He ran a brush through his hair quickly, then left the bedroom and jogged down the staircase toward the kitchen. *Keep your eye on the ball, and that ball is Claire. She's your only concern. Everything is about sticking close enough to her to keep her alive.*

## Chapter Five

Claire slumped under the shower's jets and ignored the tears burning in her eyes. How dare he accuse her of being a whore? Had she been the only one in her bedroom last night? She'd opened herself to him in ways she didn't even understand and could not control – didn't want to control. How humiliating to wake up this morning and find out it was all a lie, just a roll in the sheets for a few breathtaking moments.

Oh, and those moments had been breathtaking.

"Damn it."

She sniffed and squared her shoulders. She hated feeling like this. He believed he'd been deceived? She had never felt more betrayed.

Yes, all right, yes. She had started to fake an attraction for him in the car to get him fired. Maybe he had reason not to trust her, but couldn't he tell that her lame attempt at coming on to him in the car and last night were completely different things?

She'd made love with him because she'd wanted to, needed to, and for absolutely no other reason, overwhelming common sense, danger, and everything else.

Now she wanted to kill him. The look on his face this morning hadn't been regret. No, it was much worse – anger and mistrust. And between her own fury and his mistrust, they were not where she'd expected to be in the cold light of day.

How could she face him now? She'd love to think that her feelings for him were momentary, a sudden itch she'd needed scratched, but she knew better. She wasn't ready to call it love, but there was something between them.

Something between herself and an alien.

Crazy. She didn't have time for this complication right now. The last thing she needed when she was supposed to be concentrating on this deal was Butch Markham filling her mind.

She could fire him. Contrary to anyone's opinion, even her father's, she didn't need a reason. She could just do it—do it today. Find herself another bodyguard, and be done with him.

*But you won't. Because you don't want to.*

"Damn it."

Finishing her shower and getting ready for the day in record time, she walked down the staircase to the kitchen. He stood next to the coffeepot as he had yesterday, in the same suit, the same shoes, the same perfect hair.

He placed his coffee cup on the counter and turned toward her as she approached.

"Claire—"

"Don't say one word to me. You listen."

His lips closed, his eyes sparkling so beautifully her stomach wrenched in pain. She narrowed her eyes and ignored the rage of almost physical burning inside her. "I am not a whore."

"I know that. I'm sor—"

"Shut up!" Claire held her hand up and took a deep breath. "Now, let's get a few things straight. As far as we're concerned, last night didn't happen. You are my bodyguard, and you're going to do your job—keep me alive so I can do mine. When this is over, you'll be gone, and all of this will be forgotten. You got me?"

He didn't move for a long moment, then shook his head. "No."

"No? What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean this." He wrenched her to him with one hand behind her neck and the other at her waist. The movement was so quick, she didn't realize what was happening until she was pressed hard against his body. He captured her lips, the taste of coffee, the smell of soap, and the heat from his body blasting through her senses like a bomb through a retaining wall. She moaned and felt herself lean into him, felt the vibration of his return moan. His clutch around her nape tightened.

The kiss deepened as the sound of his breathing filled her head. His hands were everywhere, and she lost control of her own. One moment she'd been ready to slap him as she had yesterday. But now all she wanted was that day-old suit off his body.

His lips dipped to her neck, his teeth gently nibbling the soft flesh at the base of her throat. "I'm sorry about what I said. You are not—"

She stopped listening as she grabbed for his tie and pulled the knot hard, struggling to release it. "Take this off."

He lifted his hand, but she grabbed it first. "Don't you dare do that palm thing."

He smiled and shook his head. "Oh no. Not this time. Watch."

He waved his hand again, and his clothing disappeared before her eyes.

Cool air touched her flesh. She glanced down to find her own body as naked as his. "Wow."

"I have no idea what it is about you, Claire." He pulled her body back into his arms, pressing her chin up with his thumb. His eyes glittered like flames in a frosted crystal votive. "I've thought of a million reasons not to do this, but I don't give a damn about a single one of them. Last night did happen, every fucking second of it, and whatever the reason, it's going to happen again."

Lifting her body into his arms, he carried her to the kitchen table and set her down firmly, her hips at the edge of the smooth oak. He pressed her knees wide and dropped down to the floor, his head between her thighs.

"Do I have any say in this?" Her words were breathless and meaningless in her own head, yet they emerged as one last grasp for control.

He stroked the insides of her legs with his thumbs, slowly moving upward toward the apex of her thighs. "You can say no even if every molecule in your body is screaming yes to me at this very moment. You can open your mouth and say no."

Whatever she might have said was lost when he placed his tongue on her pussy. The heat from his mouth at first surprised her, then lulled her into a place far from the firm, hard table under her. She leaned back, caught herself on her quivering arms, her head suddenly too heavy to hold upright. Closing her eyes, she slid her hips closer to his mouth.

His tongue slid over her once, then again and again, circling, dipping inside, and circling again. Oh God, he might not be from this planet, but he knew what to do with a human woman. The ache inside her burned hot and low and steady, gathering fury with each swirl of his tongue. As if he'd been born to drink in her body, his groaning voice became a hum that titillated her clit with each stroke.

She leaned on one elbow, burying the fingers of her other hand in his hair, moaning his name over and over. The pressure and heat built quicker and quicker, and hot, pulsing, raging, she finally found her voice, but "no" was not the word she wanted.

"Oh yes!"

The orgasm broke through her, and her shout shattered the silence of the space around them.

Drinking every drop of her, his tongue lashed in and out as the waves of pleasure coursed through her, shaking her body against his mouth. She fell back on her elbows, bent her knees, and held on to him, lifting her hips off the table, but it was not enough. Not nearly enough. With each empty clench of her muscles, she gasped another breath.

"Inside me. Inside me now."

He stood and pushed her body farther up the length of the long table, then climbed over her. He stared into her eyes, seeing everything—her need, her ache, her urgency.

"You are too used to having your own way, Miss Simonson. It's time you gave up some of that control."

She blinked through the haze of her receding orgasm and tried to focus on the words.

His voice was low and steady, his eyes burning into hers. "Take my cock in your hands, Claire. Rub it across your clit. Do it now."

She hesitated. How long had she been in charge, completely managing everything in her life down to the most mundane detail? What would it be like, for even a moment, to let it all go? To hand the responsibility, the power, everything—over to someone else?

"You can trust me, Claire," he whispered.

She gazed into his eyes. What would it be like...?

She touched his erection cautiously at first. *It would be heavenly.* She threw the reins of power blissfully away from her and encircled his firm, hot flesh in her hand.

The house of control she'd lived in all her life now abandoned and disappearing in the rearview mirror, she drove onward, squeezed his cock in both of her hands, then brushed him along her spread legs. As the hard tip of his cock touched her wet flesh, she lifted her hips again, stroking him over her pussy, so close to being inside her, so near to filling her again.

"Close your eyes and see what I can see."

She obeyed him, and a complete and full-color view of their bodies opened like a curtain. Her hands, in full view behind her closed eyes, were on him, his smooth, narrow hips poised just above her body.

"Stroke it, Claire. Stroke it over your pussy."

She squeezed him between her palms, seeing the movement in her mind as she felt it in her hands. Sliding her hands up and down his long shaft, each stroke moving the head of his cock across her swollen clit, she saw and experienced the pleasure simultaneously.

"You're so beautiful." He took in a deep breath. "Now watch this."

The thrust was unexpected, hard and deep. Her eyes flew open on their own in time to see his jaw tighten, his eyes squeezed shut in rapturous pleasure. As he began a slow, steady thrusting, a small smile curved the corners of his lips.

"Your eyes are open."

"You're beautiful to watch from here too," she gasped.

The slow, easy thrust of his hips shifted to a harder, faster movement, and the change burned inside her. As a damp sheen of sweat covered her skin, she slid her hands to his face and pulled his mouth down to hers.

His kiss was possession, ownership, and control, and she gave way to it all. She wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted her hips even higher to meet each thrust. As his mouth moved over hers, his body pounding inside her, the sweat on his skin mingled with her own.

The echoes of his pleased shout of release rumbled inside her mind as another orgasm built, bloomed, and exploded within her body. His mouth moved over hers less ferociously as they clutched each other, the only steady, solid things in the swirling world.

Holding his body over hers, he placed slow, soft kisses on her cheeks and her eyes, then dropped his lips to her ear.

"It's crazy, but I..."

She gasped for breath, holding on to his shoulders for support in the remaining swirling of the ceiling tiles in her vision. "I know it's crazy." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I love you too"

He cleared his throat and pushed himself up on sinewy arms. His eyes widened, and the smile fell away from his face. "You're going to be late for work." He rose and helped her up from the table. "I'm going to need another shower. Want to join me?"

Her heavy breathing continued, but she struggled to contain it. Naked, postcoital in the most obvious way, and standing in her kitchen with a man she'd just confessed love for – who had blatantly not confessed shit to her – great. Humiliation burned in her cheeks as she glanced around the room. "Where are my clothes?"

He pointed to the countertop. "There."

The clothes were folded neatly in a stack, her shoes side by side next to them. How in the hell he did that took a backseat to her self-flagellation. She'd had a plan, which had instantly evaporated with one kiss, and to top it off, she'd confessed love for an alien.

It was going to be one hell of a day if this kept up.

She walked to the countertop, scooped the suit under her arm, and turned with as much dignity as she could muster. "I'll be ready in fifteen minutes. All right?"

"Good," he said, then turned and walked out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch sat in the driver's seat waiting for Claire to come outside and tried to ignore the pattern of his thoughts. Shit, this was such a fucking mess. He wanted her; he could still feel her body beneath him. Even after the rigorous shower, he could still smell her shampoo and lavender perfume, almost as if it were the largest part of the air he breathed.

She'd told him she loved him. Damn it to hell. He'd almost told her the same thing! This was a nightmare.

She sat down in the passenger seat and turned to him. "So you no longer think I'm a whore, is that right?"

He shook his head. "I never thought you were a whore." He groaned in frustration. "Hell, I don't know what I thought. I'm an idiot." *In more ways than I even want to think about.*



She pulled the car door closed. "Let me see if I can help. You thought I wouldn't have sex with you unless I was trying to get something I wanted."

*Oh man. This is worse than a nightmare. "Yeah."*

"That's a whore."

"I apologize, Claire. I should have never —"

"And I guess we know that isn't true for sure now, don't we? It appears I'll have sex with you whenever I'm near you, and I don't have to want anything from you — except sex, I suppose. Well, at least we have that out of the way."

He turned to her and tried to ignore the hypnotic lavender scent and beauty of her face. He tried to forget about what she felt like in his arms, under his fingers, in the control of his body as she gave hers over to him. But as he gazed into those green eyes, he found himself wanting to believe.

But believe what? That she really did love him—that he loved her? It was impossible, for one thing, and ludicrous for another. He could not join with her. She was a kindred, and the Auquerel had spoken long ago. This woman was not to be his mate. He could not fall in love with someone who was not his mate. Impossible.

*Yeah, well, maybe she's confused about what's possible since you keep jumping her bones every chance you get, fool.*

"Are you going to drive us to work, or beam us there, Mr. Spock?"

"I need to talk to you, Claire." He should say something, but what? What a shit he was. A low-life, slimy pile of stinking shit. "I—"

"Just drive," she said, her voice clipped and professional. He knew that voice. She'd used it all day at work with every employee she'd come in contact with. Is this what happened between human beings when one spoke the sacred words and the other did not? He should have watched fewer action movies and more chick flicks.

"Claire."

"Move it, alien. Before Garren drives a tow truck behind us and drags this car away. Go!"

He cranked the engine and pulled out of the driveway. Maybe they were done talking. She'd made an offer, and he hadn't consented. So, were they done now? Was that how the people on this planet handled situations like this?

Shit, who knew? Well, no matter how beautiful or desirable she was, and no matter what memories of their bodies were now burned in his mind, she was not the one. The fact that his body wasn't inclined to listen made the situation a hell of a lot worse, but obviously only for him. The real question was, how was he going to leave her clothes on now that every moment she was near him all he wanted to do was take them off?

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire busied herself with the work she had to get done to make this deal come together in time. Working was easier than thinking about anything else at the moment—her father, wherever he'd gone off to, a crazed alien after her. Butch.

Her father disappeared sometimes; he'd done it before. He'd left the country for a month once, hadn't called, didn't return her calls. When he'd returned, he'd brought her another sweatshirt with a palm tree on it and told her that he was a grown man who didn't answer to her. Butch's fear that he was dead was most likely a Viven version of plain-old human paranoia.

And Garren—yes, he'd come after her last night, but her bodyguard had chased him off. Garren was probably right now realizing all this pursuit business was a perfectly good waste of time and was having a burger or whatever aliens ate for lunch across town somewhere.

And Butch, well, she'd just been stupid this morning. *Plain-old, ordinary stupid. Love? I mean, really. Love! You met him yesterday! It's hormones in supremely high gear. How many women have mistaken great sex for love? Too many. Seriously, girl, get a grip.* She didn't need to think about anything right now but the sheaf of financial reports in front of her.

As she told herself all these things, she realized something: she sucked at lying to herself.

Her hands twitched on top of the conference table, and she placed them in her lap.

"Everything okay?"

Claire glanced up from the papers to Butch. He'd been sitting quietly at the opposite end of the table all this time. He looked none the worse for anything. Actually, he looked completely bored.

She'd told that bastard she loved him of all things, and he'd behaved just as she should have known he would. He thought she was nuts. All she really wanted was him away from her so she could get this job done, get home, take a long, hot bath, and forget she'd ever gotten out of bed this morning.

Unfortunately, since they'd arrived he'd never let her out of his sight.

"Do you have to follow me around all day again?" Claire asked. "I never did get the chance to talk to Liz yesterday, and I need to. I'd like to do that in private."

"Yes, I need to stay with you all day. However"—he paused and rose from his seat—"if you promise that you'll stay inside the building, I do have a few phone calls and some checking to do. You have all your work here—perhaps I could use your office to do that?"

"I'll stay inside the building unless you leave with me. Will that be acceptable?"

"That's fine." He rose from the table and left the room without another word.

So civilized. She wanted to kick his ass to kingdom come.

Claire latched on to this release from the prison of his watchful gaze. Finally, she could take a deep breath without sucking in the sandalwood scent of his body. She could open her eyes without seeing his gorgeous face. Oh man, this sucked.

The fact that he could walk away so easily, completely ignoring what had happened, cut her to the bone. Every moment next to him was more and more difficult.

Her gaze strayed out the door, and she told herself she wasn't watching him as he waited for the elevator. Although he stood not twenty feet away, he couldn't have been farther away if he'd been back on Vivemonde, wherever that was. Considering how close they'd been last night and this morning, this gap between them was worse than if they'd never been together at all.

Butch stepped inside the elevator and punched a button. She watched until the doors closed. A low, burning ache formed in her stomach. He had not looked at her again.

Okay, that was enough. She would switch the power off on this emotional roller coaster and leave the cars standing in midair. If that's where they were, then fine. They could remain there. She'd had quite enough of this ride. Today was Friday, and the last day to get everything ready for Monday's meeting. She would focus on the work. Work had carried her through many difficult days, and it would carry her through this one.

Her BlackBerry beeped, the readout announcing a visitor for her at the front desk. Dread prickled the back of her neck. She told herself not to be ridiculous. No way Garren would just walk through the front door. Whoever this was, it had to be work related.

She left the conference room and headed to the front entrance. As she approached the front desk, she noted Jo Ann's odd expression.

"Miss Simonson, you have a visitor."

"So I gathered from your page. Where is he?"

Jo Ann's gaze darted off to the row of windows at the front of the building. "Not a he, a she. She's standing right over there."

Claire turned to see a tall, slender woman with graying blonde hair staring out the front windows. She strode across the marble floor toward the woman, but before she could reach her, the woman turned around.

Claire halted in the middle of the lobby, and twenty years disintegrated. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she couldn't seem to remember how to make her lungs work properly. Dressed in a pink suit dress with matching pumps and sheer white hose on her long legs, the woman was in her mid to late forties now, but she looked like a Paris model, her face and demeanor that of someone much younger.

Claire managed to suck oxygen into her empty lungs again, inflating the crushing pain in her chest. She'd pictured this moment so many times, dreamed of it during her childhood as she lay in bed. Finally the moment was here.

The woman smiled and walked toward her, never taking her eyes off Claire, locking her in a crystal blue gaze.

The elevator door dinged and the sound of heavy, running footsteps echoed through the lobby "Claire! Wait!"

Butch was behind her before the woman reached her. He stepped around Claire, placing his body between them. "I came looking for you, and—Are you all right?" Butch looked over his shoulder, then back to the woman.

"I'm fine." Claire stepped around him. A deep look of sadness filled the woman's eyes, or was that her own wishful thinking? Did she want to see regret over what this woman had done, remorse over all the lost years between them? Was there a response in those liquid eyes to the one question she'd never been able to answer for herself. *Why?*

Claire tightened her grip on Butch's knuckles. "Butch, this is Mrs. Olivia Simonson, my mother."

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is my bodyguard, Butch Markham."

Claire's voice was surprisingly steady, as if every day she met those who had abandoned her and then suddenly reappeared. Butch was uncertain what to do, so he held out his hand toward Olivia Simonson, a full-blooded Viven. She shook it quickly, her attention diverted for only an instant before refocusing on her daughter.

"Hello, Claire. You've become a beautiful woman." Olivia's voice was deeper than Claire's, but there was no mistaking the similarity in the inflection. The timbre of her voice was as musical at her daughter's. He wasn't sure exactly when she'd left Claire and her father, but he'd lay money on who'd taught Claire to speak her first words.

Claire's mother adjusted the strap of the small handbag on her shoulder. "Lead us somewhere we may speak in private, Claire."

The audacity of her demanding a private audience with the child she'd abandoned struck Butch like a physical blow. Audacity from full-blooded Viven female was unheard of, but it appeared her mother had lived among humans long enough to acquire it despite her breeding.

His first instinct was to step between the women and tell Mrs. Simonson she could make a fucking appointment. The urge to protect Claire burned like that of a bonded mate through his blood. He cursed himself silently. This was not his place to interfere.

Claire had, however, introduced him, which was completely unnecessary. Perhaps she was having just as much trouble figuring out what to say as he was.

"Why don't we go to my office?" Claire asked. "Butch, would you mind giving us a few minutes?"

He didn't like the idea of letting her go alone. She wanted him away; he could feel it within every fiber of himself, but he was here to protect her. He'd spent the entire day tailing her again, trying hard to ignore the pain in her eyes, the doubt he'd put there about her own desirability. She could not understand their ways. Yes, they were the ways of the kindred also, but she did not live among them and could not understand.

*No wonder she doesn't understand. You joined your body to hers, knowing she is not your intended, asshole She's confused because you confused her. This is on you.*

He stepped back to let the two women pass.

Her mother gave him a long look, then averted her eyes and walked past.

As he watched them move gracefully toward the elevators in silence, Butch was almost glad he wasn't going to the meeting. Those eyes had seen him very clearly, and they didn't like what they saw in him any better than he did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire stood inside the elevator, staring at the row of numbers at the top of the doors. She watched each one light, then extinguish as they climbed to the top floor. All her prepared speeches, so fluid and clear all these years, were as thick and tangled as Butch's dark hair had been in her fingers this morning.

Oh God, not now. This was no time to think about Butch, she told herself. One catastrophe at a time, please.

Her mother had said nothing either. Perhaps she was waiting for more privacy, perhaps for more time to allow Claire the chance to get used to the surprise of seeing her. Perhaps she, like Claire, did not know what to say.

For whatever reason, when no words came to either of them, they rode in silence throughout the protracted trip to the top floor.

They walked down the long hall together, passing by Liz's desk. Liz did not look up from her computer screen. So many questions were swimming through Claire's mind, she could hardly decide where to begin. She hated to barrage her mother with all of them, but then why should she give her a break? *She had all this time to contact me, but she didn't. She must know, must expect, that I would have a few words to say to her by now.*

The only problem was, Claire couldn't think of a single one of them.

She closed the door behind her mother and stood with her back pressed against it. All this time wishing for this moment, hoping for it, dreaming of how it would be, and it had finally arrived. So long not knowing her, not knowing where she was, and now she stood a few feet away. Anger, frustration, and an overwhelming desire to run to her mother and wrap her arms around her mingled together in Claire's mind, but she couldn't move from the spot.

Her mother walked farther into the office, slowly turned, and took a long, examining look at her daughter. "I guess you're wondering what I'm doing here."

Claire wondered a great deal more than that. This was the mother she remembered, the one who got right to it. If her mother had only managed to be as direct with her father, could have dealt with him as clearly and firmly as she'd always dealt with her daughter, things would have gone so differently for all of them.

*Why did you leave? Where did you go? Didn't you love Father? How could you abandon me?* She could bring herself to form none of these questions into words and instead opted for simple acquiescence. "Yes, I am wondering."

"It's time for me to talk to you. You're old enough now to understand, and I wanted to see you again. I thought maybe we could get to know each other."

Of all the times for a family reunion. "Understand? You thought I would understand?"

"You were young, but you're older now. Very beautiful too, Claire. You've grown up so nicely. Very beautiful." Her mother's long, slender fingers caressed her own cheek as she gazed at her. "What do you know about this bodyguard of yours? What was his name again, Butch?"

So that was it? They were supposed to actually converse as if a lifetime hadn't passed since they'd set eyes on each other?

Claire searched for a sign of regret but saw none.

Her confusion was overshadowed by the anger and bitterness choking her throat. "What do I know about him? I know he's probably right outside this door." She turned and yanked open the door that led to the hallway. "See?"

Butch stood from his chair. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine, Butch." She turned back to her mother. "Unlike you, I knew exactly where he was." She closed the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Butch had been waiting to see what color smoke rose from the office behind him. From that quick exchange, he had a clear picture, and it wasn't pretty.

Butch punched in the numbers to Dirk Simonson's cell phone again and sat down to keep from fidgeting. Where in the hell was he? Was the man dead? The first thought he'd had last night, his first gut feeling – Garren got to him.

But that would mean the bastard was after the whole family. Or had he kidnapped the captain to get to Claire? If he'd kidnapped him, why the hell wasn't Garren contacting them with demands?

The sound of a cell phone suddenly ringing down the hallway caught his attention as he waited for the captain to pick up. The wheelchair-bound man rolled out of the elevator toward him, holding his phone and waving it at Butch.

"Butch, stop calling me, will you? I left this thing in my van last night on purpose. Now I wish I'd left it there indefinitely. Annoying invention."

"Where in the hell –" Butch cleared his throat and tried to control his rising anger as it mingled with a deep relief. "Claire has been trying to get in contact with you since you called her yesterday. She had no idea where you were! Why didn't you answer your phone?"

"Called her yesterday?" Dirk shook his head and scowled. "I didn't call her, and I can by God go wherever I want without her knowing what I'm doing every damn minute."

"You didn't call her? You didn't tell her to leave me?"

"What in the hell are you talking about? I told you to stay with her!"

Now the call to Claire's BlackBerry made sense—that call had been Garren too. He'd called to lure her away from him so she'd be an easier target. When that hadn't worked, he'd broken into the house.

Damn, how could he have missed it? As a bodyguard he was starting to doubt if he had what it was going to take to keep her alive.

Butch glanced up at Liz's desk and caught her listening to them. He would tell Dirk about Garren's tactics when idle ears weren't listening. "Nothing. Your wife is here," he said to change the subject. Hopefully he wasn't betraying Claire by telling him this, but the captain paid the bills. He deserved to know what was going on, and besides, maybe he could give Butch a hint as to what might be happening on the other side of that door.

"Where is she now?"

"She's with Claire." He gestured toward the door beside him. "In there."

"Ah." The captain rolled his chair until his back was against the wall next to Butch's. "What's going on in there? What have you heard?"

He could have listened in, but Olivia would know he'd eavesdropped. From the way she'd looked at him earlier, he didn't think she would appreciate it much either. "I thought you might tell me."

The captain laughed, a nasty, choked sound. "I have no fucking clue. I didn't know she was in town. I spent hours last night trying to get in contact with her, but she wasn't answering. Who knows what she is up to?"

"You tried to contact her? You know where she lives?"

"Of course I know where she lives. She's been in the Bahamas for years. She's still my wife, you know. I know where everyone in my life is."

More GPS devices? Butch wondered. "I thought she was out of your life—and Claire's."

Dirk turned to him, a stern scowl burned into his features. "It's not your job to know. It's your job to protect her, not manage her personal life. You trying to piss me off?"

Yeah, well, if the captain knew how he'd been managing the personal portion of Claire's life in the past twenty-four hours, he only *thought* he was pissed. Trying to find a safe subject was becoming difficult. "She's living in the Bahamas?"

"Yeah, that's where I moved her when she left. I didn't need her underfoot and suddenly showing up. My contact who's supposed to be keeping up with her comings and goings is obviously going to get fired for this shit."

Butch processed this information and pursed his lips. The captain had been tracking her for years, just as he'd been tracking his daughter. Hell, the captain had probably been tracking him too.

"What should I do about her?"

"I'll take care of Claire's mother. You stay with Claire. What are they saying in there? How is the meeting going? Is she all right?"

"How would you expect her to be?" Butch's voice was low, but loud enough for the captain to hear.

"Pissed would be my guess," the captain said, then took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Her mother always could get me pissed off pretty quick when she put her mind to it. What are they saying?"

"I don't think it's much of a family reunion, if that's what you're asking."

"I want to know what the hell they are saying, Butch. Now."

The captain's voice turned back to the commander-in-chief tone, and Butch knew he'd stepped over the line. But suddenly, he didn't care anymore. Besides, he suspected the captain knew a lot more than he was telling about what she was doing here in the first place.

Butch waited for a moment of silence in the room. *If this guy knows what's going on in there, and his wife has something to do with it, why doesn't he let me in on it? How am I supposed to do my job when he's intentionally keeping me in the dark? Not that I've done much of a job protecting her so far anyway. Hell.*

When a silence finally fell in the room, Butch crossed one leg over the other. "They aren't saying anything."

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire leaned against the closed door. "Unlike you, Butch can be counted on to stick around when he's needed. I go get a cast in the hospital, and when I get home, you're gone. Forgive me if I don't share your desire to get reacquainted and pick up where we left off."

Her mother shook her head, and a slow smile crossed her lips. "So much like your father. It's amazing. I guess I should have expected that he'd poisoned you against me, but still, I'm a little surprised."

"Don't you dare say anything negative about my father," Claire said, her voice rising. "He didn't leave me—you did. And as to poisoning me against you: He's never said one negative thing about you in all the years you've been gone. Not one in all those years...and there have been a lot of them, Olivia." She spat out her mother's name like a curse. She could not bring herself to call this woman mother, mom, or anything like it.

Olivia took a step toward her, and Claire pushed off from the door. She no longer needed it to support her. She knew who she was, whose daughter she was, and it was



not this woman standing in her Diane von Furstenberg and Ferragamos, carrying a Dooney & Bourke.

"So spare me your trying to make him into the bad guy. I'm not interested in your perception of him, or of me either. I have a lot of things to get done today. Perhaps you could check with my secretary and set up a proper appointment. That might give you time to decide exactly what you need to tell me. Better yet, put it in a letter and mail it."

Her mother shook her head, and the smile disappeared. "Yes, I left, and yes, I haven't been in contact with you. But you don't know everything, and it's high time, obviously, that you do."

"Spare me, Olivia." She began to like the sound of her mother's name on her own lips. It was mean, distancing, and comforting all at the same time. She wished this meeting could have gone another way, had imagined it so differently, but not now. She was not ready to do this, not ready to hear whatever her mother had come here to say.

Claire strode to her desk with purpose and hit the Intercom button on her phone. Liz's desk sat conveniently right outside her office for moments just like this. "Liz, would you come in here, please?"

She stared at her mother and waited in silence. A moment later, Liz stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Would you please make an appointment for next week after the Anthony Group meeting for this woman?"

"Yes, ma'am, I will." Liz walked toward her mother carrying a notepad and pen. She and Liz had done this numerous times before...had rehearsed it so if ever the need arose, Liz would know exactly what to do. When Claire told her to "make an appointment for next week," Liz knew what she meant.

Get rid of them.

"I'm so sorry, but Ms Simonson is very busy this week. She has an opening for next Thursday. I'm sure we can coordinate something for you then."

Claire took another long look at her mother, then turned to walk out of the room. She reached her office door before her mother called to her. Olivia Simonson hadn't married an overbearing man and survived this long by being a pushover.

Claire knew she would say something, but she hadn't expected her mother's next words.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there, but he wouldn't let you go with me."

Claire paused for an eternity at the door, her hand on the knob; then she straightened her shoulders. That was probably the truth, but it didn't matter. If she had a child of her own, nothing in the world could stop her from taking that child. Nothing could convince her to leave that child behind. And nothing Olivia would say could change that.

She jerked the door open, then halted in the doorway.

“Well, there you are.” Her father rolled his chair away from Butch until he was directly in front of her. “I see you’ve spoken with your mother. Are you ready to talk with both of us now?”

## Chapter Six

"Where have you been?" She threw her arms around her father before she realized what she was doing.

"The same thing I'm always doing." He turned his head until he was whispering in her ear. "Trying to take care of you."

She straightened immediately and flattened her hands down the front of her jacket. The sense of relief flooding over her was almost palpable. She hadn't really expected anything had happened to him, but once Butch planted the seed of doubt in her mind yesterday, she'd had a difficult time putting the thought out of her mind. "Why didn't you answer any of my calls? I left messages. I thought something had happened to you."

Her father looked up at her, his face as composed as always. "As I was just telling Butch a moment ago, cell phones are an annoying invention. I left mine in the van yesterday, so I didn't get any messages. Why were you trying to reach me?"

Two of her R&D managers stood at Liz's desk, trying very hard to look like they weren't listening to every word being said. They made eye contact, then quickly looked away.

Butch rose from his seat and stood beside her. "Maybe we should go into your office." He kept his voice low, but Claire was certain even if her employees couldn't hear him, they could see the burning embarrassment reddening her face.

She turned to go back into her office but came face-to-face with her mother. The last thing she wanted to do was walk back into that room, but what choice did she have now?

"I think that's an excellent idea, Butch." Her father rolled his wheelchair into her office, naturally assuming all of them would follow. Claire had the sudden urge to run

out of the building like she had yesterday, race away from all the responsibility and confusion and emotional turmoil that had become her life.

Unfortunately, her responsibilities outweighed her desire. Besides, running away wasn't the way she handled things – she was nothing like her mother. She straightened her shoulders and walked into the room, Butch close on her heels. He pulled the door closed behind him.

“What is he doing in here?” Her mother's voice snapped like a rubber band and flew across the room at the three of them.

“I hired Butch to be her bodyguard.”

“I already told her,” Claire snapped back, making her voice sharp as her mother's.

“I hardly think he needs to be involved in a family discussion about Claire and her life.”

“You've had your say in any family discussion, Olivia,” Claire said. “That part's over. Right now the only thing we're doing is waiting for those people at Liz's desk to disperse so we can all walk out of here.”

*And probably walk around the rest of the afternoon gossiping about me. It will be a miracle if they get any work done.* Claire walked to her desk and picked up her phone. She pressed the button to Liz's line.

“Yes, Ms. Simonson?”

“If Jack and Harry are still standing out there, tell them something for me.” She paused for a moment to let that sink in. “We have the most important meeting of this company's future on Monday morning at eight o'clock. If they aren't one hundred and ten percent prepared, they will be cleaning out their desks by eight thirty Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, ma'am. I'll tell them They were just leaving.”

Claire clicked off and stared down at her desk. The Anthony Group's company prospectus lay in front of her, the full-color photograph of the front of their corporate offices beginning to blur in her vision. She lifted her head slowly and looked from one of her parents' faces to the other. “Give them about two minutes. You can all get out of here then, so I can get back to work.”

“Unfortunately,” her father began, “we do have something we must discuss. Your mother got here first, but I'm not sure how much she's told you.”

Claire examined her parents' faces. Whatever was going on, while they might not have started out being in on it together, they were now.

“The only thing Olivia told me was you wouldn't let her take me when she left – as if I would've gone. Beyond that, we've established my bodyguard sticks closer beside me than she ever did.”

She knew the words were cruel, but she couldn't find the will to care. Her first moment of excitement when she'd seen her mother had been crushed. There was nothing to do now but get her out of here.

Her father was unfazed by her anger. "That notwithstanding, we have something we need to tell you."

"I still want to know why said bodyguard who is such a good watchdog that he never leaves her side" – Olivia stared hard at Butch, her eyes glinting cold blue steel – "belongs in this room while we're having this discussion."

"If you have information regarding the recent attack and kidnapping attempt on Claire, I need to hear it. I have no other interest in listening in on your private conversation." Butch's voice held barely restrained rage.

"Let's all dial back the claws, shall we?" Her father placed his elbows on the wheelchair's armrests. "Butch, Olivia knows nothing about what has been going on with Claire. She is here for an entirely different purpose. Correct, Olivia?"

Her mother's scowl remained in place, but she nodded once.

"And Olivia, would you not agree that Butch should remain for reasons perfectly evident to probably everyone in the room except our daughter?"

Her mother's scowl deepened creases in the otherwise flawless skin of her forehead. "I still don't understand what he could possibly have to do with this. There is absolutely nothing he can do about it now."

"What are you talking about?" Claire asked. Her father was right. Everyone seemed to know what was going on but her.

"Claire, honey." For the first time in Claire's life, her father seemed to struggle to find the words to say what he wanted to communicate. His shoulders slunk in the wheelchair, and she saw just how old he had become when she wasn't looking.

"Let me tell her." Her mother took a step closer. She lifted her hand as if preparing to lay it on Claire's shoulder.

Claire took a step back, then moved behind her large desk, keeping the barrier between them. "Someone had better tell me what's going on. Father? What is it?"

"Oh my God." Butch's words chilled her like a cold wind over bare skin.

Olivia pivoted hard on her heel and pointed at him. "How dare you? Stay out of my thoughts, criminal."

But he ignored her words, strode past her, and stopped beside Claire. "Let's get out of here. Now."

Gripping her arm, he pulled her toward the door. She tried to shrug him off, but he did not relent. "Butch, what are you doing?"

His burning gaze narrowed. "Trust me. Come."

*Why should I trust you?* she wanted to ask, but something in his demeanor stopped her. He knew something. He'd read something in her mother's mind that she didn't want him to know. Had Olivia intended to tell her whatever it was? Given the two choices of whom to trust, she chose Butch.

He exited the room, escorting her along beside him, placing his arm around her back and pulling her close against him as he moved.

Surprisingly, neither her mother nor father followed them. Butch did not stop until he'd reached the door to the supply closet. He yanked it open, pressed her inside, then followed her and closed it behind them.

They stood close together in the dark space.

"Is this what I think it is?"

She sighed. "If you think it's a closet, yeah."

She could just barely see the outline of his head as he nodded. The scent of cleaning supplies and something like a dirty, wet mop mingled with the smell of soap on his skin. He said nothing, simply wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him.

"What's going on, Butch?"

"Where's the light switch?" Butch reached over his head, probably searching for a string to pull to illuminate the small space. Claire flipped the switch on the wall behind her.

Shelves full of paper towels, toilet paper, reams of bond paper, and other office paper accoutrements surrounded them. A dirty mop lay inside a large bucket with wheels at their feet.

Claire placed her hand over her mouth to fight off an insane urge to laugh. "Liz is probably wondering what the hell we're doing in here. What are we doing, Butch?"

"I have to tell you something neither of them wanted to tell you. You've had enough shocking things happen to you in the last two days, but you're going to have to prepare yourself for another." Butch brushed his hand over her hair. "And you should probably hear it from me."

She pressed her hands against his chest to disengage herself from his arms. "Okay then, tell me."

"Olivia is your mother —"

"Yeah, I know that."

"And she's a Viven, like me."

Claire stared at him in the yellowish light of the room. "What?" Did he just say what she thought he'd said? No. That was impossible.

"That's not all."

Her heart stopped beating, and she sucked in a short, hot breath. "It's not?"

"Dirk Simonson is not your biological father."

Claire felt her knees turn liquid, and she sagged until he pulled her against him once more. "Not my father?" The words were impossible, their meaning obviously obscured by his first revelation. Even in the complete quiet of the broom closet, she could not have heard him correctly over the roaring sound in her ears.

"Your mother came here years ago when she'd gotten pregnant by one who was not her intended. She would not consider him as a mate. She ran away to this planet to

have her child. Your father met her, fell in love with her, and married her. He raised you as his own, while your biological father knew nothing of your existence.”

Whether he was pausing to let that sink in or if he had something worse to tell her next, she wasn't sure. His features were drawn together, the pain of revealing this to her evident in his gaze. She stared into his eyes, pleading with him to spill everything in one quick motion, to cut the lock on the Pandora's box of lies from her past.

“Why didn't he tell me?”

“I did not to delve deeply into his thoughts.” Butch rubbed his hand slowly over her back, pressing her into his protective warmth. “I respect him too much to do that, but I'm certain he did it to protect you. Many children search for their biological parents when they discover they're adopted. The agreement between Vivemonde and Earth is strategically secret, and for your own protection, he never wanted you to know that you weren't his.”

She had no words, no clear thoughts at all save one: her father loved her. She held on to it like the lifeline it was in a swirling sea of horrible truth. She struggled to listen without falling into pieces before him.

“Claire, from the first moment I met you, I was sure you were his child. His belief in that fact is so strong that I never picked up on any other possibility—until a few moments ago. And even then, the thoughts were not his, but your mother's. Your mother has returned for you.”

“Returned for me? So I am—” She could not make herself finish the sentence.

“You are an earthling, although not in the way Dirk Simonson is. You are what we call a kindred—part human, part Viven. You were adopted by an Earth man, but your blood is only part human.”

“Part human? That means I'm part...” She tried to let the weight of that sink in but couldn't. She searched for a simpler piece of his revelation to dissect. “Olivia's returned for me to do what? She can't possibly think I'm going to leave the planet with her?”

“I did read her thoughts—I apologize to you for that, not to her. I had to know what the hell was going on.” His voice rough, he clenched his teeth as he continued his soft caress on her back.

“Hey, that might be a big problem on your planet, but frankly, I don't give a damn how you found out. What is she planning?”

“She returned to tell you why she left. I don't believe she wants you to return with her; she knows you have a life here. She's stayed in touch with the captain all the years you've been apart. She cares for you deeply, Claire. It was not her choice to leave you, but the captain's. He didn't believe her staying would be safe for you, and so he sent her away where you would both be safe. In spite of what you might believe, he loves her as much as he loves you.”

Claire tried to let this information sink in, but it didn't compute. So many years she was gone, so many times Claire had wanted to ask the only question that mattered:

why? And yet, the only times she'd ever asked, her father's reply had always been the same: *"She did what she had to do. We will do what we have to do."*

"I'm sorry, Claire, but there's something else."

If the timing of her mother's appearance was more than coincidence, there could be only one other thing he hadn't told her. Her biological father. The reasons began to click in her mind: why her mother had shown up now, why Butch was here to protect her from someone bent on getting to her.

"That's why my mother came back when she did, isn't it?" Claire swallowed. "This is about Garren."

He nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"She's here because of him. She knows him."

"Yes."

"He's my father, isn't he?"

Butch paused a long moment, then nodded once. "Yes."

Trying hard to let everything she'd heard sink into her mind as it spun crookedly out of control, she shook her head. "If I'm his daughter, why was he shooting at me? Why is he trying to hurt me?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Butch squeezed her to him once more, then released her. "And something we're not going to figure out in here. The only people besides Garren who might know the answer to that question are in your office."

"Then we're going to my office. I've had all the hiding away and living in the dark I'm going to put up with." She turned and opened the door. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire strode up the hallway with new purpose. She'd had to hear about her life from someone outside her family, and now she wanted to hear it confirmed by the two people who'd had the biggest impact on making it all happen. Dirk and Olivia Simonson had a lot of explaining to do.

She walked past Liz's desk again, training her features. "Liz, what time is it?" She could have easily looked down at her own watch, but wanted Liz's full attention.

"It's four thirty, ma'am." Liz's voice was the epitome of efficiency as if she'd not witnessed Claire just walk into the broom closet and back out again.

"Go ahead and finish up whatever you're working on and take the rest of the weekend off. Be with your family, and we'll tackle this meeting with the Anthony Group first thing Monday morning. We're ready."

Liz's eyebrows disappeared beneath her bangs. "Are you sure you won't need anything else over the weekend?"

Claire shook her head. "You go and be with your family. Family is the most important thing, and neither one of us is going to forget that. Are we, Liz?"



Butch walked up beside her and placed his hand in the center of her back. She straightened slightly and leaned into the comfort and reassurance of his palm.

"Yes, Claire. I completely agree." Her smile was timid.

"And while I'm thinking about it, I want you to contact the employee-assistance program personnel immediately. Discuss your situation with their counselors and have them contact me so we can work out a way for you to be in the office as long as possible. After that, we'll implement an arrangement with the disability-insurance people. Whenever you need to begin working at home, that's what we'll do."

Liz's mouth dropped open.

Claire stepped over to her desk and leaned in close. "I am so sorry this is happening. But you need to know one thing: I want you here as long as you want to, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen. You can trust me, and you can count on me. You've earned my loyalty, now allow me the chance to earn yours. Okay?"

Liz blinked away the beginning of tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Claire."

Claire placed her hand over Liz's hand. "Thank you, Liz."

She turned on her heel and headed toward her office door. "Butch, would you come with me, please?"

Claire opened the door, then stopped. Butch bumped into her, causing her to stumble one step. She righted herself at the same time Olivia climbed off her father's lap.

"What is going on in here?"

The question was rhetorical, as it was quite evident what was going on. The two of them had been kissing each other, and judging by the smear of lipstick on her father's mouth—fervently.

"A private moment between your mother and me." Her father's smile was one of pride and not embarrassment. "Next time, you might consider knocking first."

*This is my office*, she wanted to say but could not form her lips around the words. Olivia glanced at Dirk with the most loving gaze Claire had ever seen, then gently rubbed her thumb over the lipstick on his lips.

Another brick fell into place as she saw the two of them together. These were not two people who hated each other as she'd believed all these years. These two people truly loved each other. "You really did stay apart for me, didn't you?"

"Not all the time." Her mother's cheeks flushed pink.

"That's where you went all those times you wouldn't tell me where you were going." She looked at her mother. "You live near a beach, don't you?"

"Near Paradise Island, in the Bahamas."

That certainly explained all the beachwear her father brought back to her after his trips, and why he always told her it was none of her business where he went. "I always

wondered why a man who doesn't swim would continually go to a beach. I thought you were just picking up those items in an airport somewhere."

"The most difficult part was sending gifts to you and never getting to see your face to see if you liked them. Also, trying to find something you wouldn't be able to pinpoint to a specific location." Claire's mother's eyes seemed to plead with her to understand all she had gone through for her daughter.

Her parents really did love each other, and there was absolutely no question in her mind anymore that they loved her just as much. Finding that out almost made having a maniac after her worthwhile.

She took a step closer to her mother. "Well, do either one of you know why Garren is here? What he wants with me?"

Olivia glanced at Butch, her kind eyes turning hard. "Have you told her?"

Butch directed his gaze at Olivia. "I told her about Garren and the princess, how I ended up here. I didn't know Garren was her biological father until today. I can only assume he wants to hurt her because if her birth became known, he could no longer be joined with the princess under any circumstances. Raanana does not want him, but she could not have refused if he accepted her."

Claire's thoughts spun. "So, he's trying to erase any proof that I exist."

"The birth of her intended's child by anyone other than herself would make it impossible for her to join with him." Her mother's voice was bitter, but she reserved the bitterness in her eyes for Butch. But why?

"And you ruined that for her when you kept Claire," Butch said. "No wonder he hates me. I thought he was simply angry because he'd believed..."

"Not only the princess's accusations of rape, no," her father finished. "He believed it, but he didn't care. He wanted the princess in spite of what she'd accused you of. The knowledge of Claire's birth, however, would remove any remaining chance for him to join with her. Yes, he hates you and Claire, as well as my beloved Olivia. He's got plenty of hate to go around for all of us."

"You were my baby, and I loved you from the first moment I felt you inside me." Olivia's voice pleaded with her to understand. "Garren wanted to kill you when he discovered I was with child, and I came here to hide from him. You were mine, and nothing he could do was going to stop me from loving you. I'd thought..."

When her mother did not continue, Claire searched for the answer. "You thought you loved him...that he would love me too?"

Her tortured gaze answered the question easier than any words could have. This was not about love at all. Something else had happened between them. Something far from love.

Butch cleared his throat. "I can leave the room, if you prefer."

"I would prefer." Her mother's voice took a vicious bite out of the thick air in the room.

"Olivia." Her father pulled her hand into his and squeezed it. "You know Butch was falsely accused. Why are you behaving this way?"

She turned toward him, and after a long moment, Butch sat back in his chair.

"That's impossible," he said.

"I wish it were." Her mother squeezed his hand, then turned cruel eyes on Butch. "I only wish it were."

"What? What is going on?" Claire searched the faces of everyone in the room. "Hell, if I'm – what am I, a kindred? – why can't I hear your thoughts? Somebody had better tell me what is going on here."

"The Auquerel has spoken regarding the name of your intended, Claire, but your parents believe that I am he." Butch straightened. "They are mistaken."

"I don't believe it." Olivia pulled her hand out of her husband's grasp and crossed her arms over her chest. "The Auquerel has spoken. Yours is not the name of Claire's intended."

"Your husband does not agree." Butch's voice, flat and low, held not the slightest misgiving about whatever it was her father did believe.

"Does it ever occur to anyone that the Auquerel is wrong?" Her father gestured toward the three of them. "It was wrong about us, Olivia, and it is wrong this time."

"The Auquerel is never wrong," both her mother and Butch said at the same time. They glared at one another, and Claire felt the fury from both of them fill the room.

"Who did the Auquerel say is my intended?" Not that she cared, because no oracle on another planet was going to tell her who she would or would not spend the rest of her life with. However, whoever this person was seemed to be a sticking point they could dispense with right now.

"It doesn't matter, because there is no way that is going to happen." Dirk Simonson straightened in his chair and pointed at Butch. "Now, you have a job to do, and I expect you to do it. This Garren is out to kill my daughter, and if he succeeds, no Auquerel or oracle or Roman god for that matter is going to save your ass. Olivia, I have told you many times that whatever happened back on Vivemonde has nothing to do with what is going on here. You and I are together in spite of the Auquerel and everything else, and we're going to stay that way."

Her father backed his chair up and turned toward the door. "Now, this meeting is over. Butch, it's not safe to take Claire back to the house, so you need to find her a place to stay until Garren is either behind bars or dead. Whichever you choose is up to you. Olivia, you are staying with me tonight."

Olivia's angry countenance instantly changed, and Claire saw the new emotion in her eyes. One of abject terror.

"I've found somewhere safe for us to go. He's not going to do anything to you there. And once Butch takes care of him, he'll never be able to hurt you again." Dirk opened the office door and looked over his shoulder. "Butch, you know what to do."

“Wait a minute.” Claire followed her parents into the hallway. Liz had obeyed her instructions and left for the day, and no other employees were in sight. “I asked you a question. Who did the Auquerel say is my intended?”

Her father smiled. “Claire, since when have you let anyone tell you what to do? Does it really matter? Now go with Butch, and believe me when I say I would only trust you to someone I knew could take care of you better than I could.”

“But if you have somewhere safe to go—” Claire began, then shook her head. “No, we shouldn’t all be in the same place. We’ll be safer if we’re separated. You already figured that out, didn’t you?”

“You will be safer with Butch,” he said, nodding. “Garren wants to hurt you because he couldn’t find your mother, and he’ll never find her as long as I am still sucking air on this planet. But I can’t take care of you both. You’ll be safer with Butch. You’ve got to trust me.”

She leaned over and kissed his forehead, something she hadn’t done in so many years, the movement startled them both. “I do trust you. I still think you should tell me who the guy is. Maybe I’d like him.”

His father smirked. “Trust me. You wouldn’t.”

Her mother reached for her hand as her father rolled his wheelchair toward the elevator door. “Claire.”

Claire folded herself into her mother’s arms, another movement she hadn’t made in too many years. Olivia, however, obviously hoping for this, grasped her daughter to her tightly.

“Garren wants revenge on Butch. He wants to destroy me for keeping you, and you for being born at all.” Her mother’s voice, soft and tender, was ragged with emotion. She loosened her grasp and touched Claire’s cheek. “This Butch person—your father trusts him, and I trust your father. But I want you to be careful. No matter what your father thinks, the Auquerel is never wrong.”

In the matter of a few hours, what her mother thought about her life had come to mean something. Olivia had given up the two things that mattered most to her in order to keep her daughter safe. She’d missed every moment of Claire’s teenage years and her entire adulthood—not selfishly as Claire had always believed, but for the most selfless of all reasons She’d done it to keep Claire alive.

While Claire wasn’t prepared to throw herself into her mother’s arms, she was beginning to understand that while she’d suffered, her mother had suffered too. It was a difficult thing, to forgive someone she’d hated yet loved for so long. The first step would have to be her own.

“You be careful too, Mother.”

The word hung in the air for a long moment. Olivia softly stroked her thumb over Claire’s cheek. “I know this Viven’s thoughts, as I know yours. The roads you have traveled will soon diverge, and you have to decide, Claire. Which road will you take?”

You must truly see with your full consciousness before you act. Listen to your head as well as your heart, my love."

Butch came up behind her and touched her shoulder. "We should be going too. Captain, we'll head out the back in thirty minutes. Which way are you going?"

Her father looked over his shoulder. "Another way, son. Another way."

\* \* \* \* \*

Claire had never felt so tired in her life. She laid her head against the headrest and closed her eyes as Butch buckled the driver's-side seat belt.

"Where did this car come from?"

"Your father rented it under a false identity."

"So, where are we going there, E.T.?"

"I would think you'd be a little less comical about that 'ET.' thing now, seeing as how you're one of us."

She laughed and looked out the passenger window. "Yeah, well. It's not that funny when it's me."

"Point taken."

They moved out of the parking lot, the tinted windows filtering much of the early-evening light. No one had been in the corporate suites, but plenty of her employees and their vehicles remained after six o'clock. Preparing for the meeting Monday, no doubt.

God, would she even be back by Monday? She had to be. If Butch could find them a safe place to stay through the weekend and keep her alive long enough, she still had the Anthony Group to deal with bright and early on Monday. She sighed, weariness soaking into the marrow of her bones. If it weren't for the acidic pain in her belly, she could probably fall asleep. But thanks to Garren, a good night's sleep would most likely elude her for a long time.

"How do we know he's not just sitting out here in that van, waiting for us to leave?"

"I've checked the area telepathically, and I'm watching out for him. He's expecting us to leave in your car. This decoy should do nicely."

She closed her eyes again. Leave it to him to have his mind on his job. With all the thoughts rolling around in her own mind, she was happy for once to let someone else take care of a few important details—like finding them a place to stay and keeping her alive.

Yeah, just a couple of important details.

Her mother wasn't crazy about him. That was apparent. But her father trusted him, and she took comfort in that. She trusted him. Her trust, like that of her father, always began in her gut. And her gut told her unequivocally that he was completely

steadfast and trustworthy. Between her father's gut and her own, she had no doubt next to him was the safest place to be.

Well, safe might be overstating it a little. She smiled to herself. "Wonder how much my father would like you staying alone with me if he knew what you were thinking right now."

"What do you believe I'm thinking?" His voice dropped lower in the quiet confines of the car, but she could still hear the hint of apprehension in his words.

She didn't know what he was thinking, although within the tight space of the vehicle, breathing in the masculine scent of his body, she knew what she was thinking. With her life in the balance and a psychopath biological father who was apparently also a rapist after her, she was still remembering how good Butch's arms had felt around her.

"You're thinking about what it's going to be like later trying to pretend you don't want to see me naked."

She opened her eyes to see what his response would be. He did not disappoint. He looked at her for a moment, then back to the road. "How did you know that? You have not delved into my thoughts."

"I'm a woman, and you're a man. Whatever planet we're from, that fact remains."

He shook his head and laughed. "What are you trying to say? That males and females everywhere are always thinking about being naked together? That isn't true."

"Maybe not." She smiled and closed her eyes again. "But this female on this planet knows what this male in this car looks like naked. And between you and me, I wouldn't mind seeing that again. Even if the darn Death Star were right around the corner and headed straight toward us. But you're right. I don't know exactly what you're thinking, even though you sort of just admitted it."

And why was that? she wondered. Why couldn't she tell what he was thinking? If she was indeed a kindred, some kind of extraterrestrial-Viven-whatever, then why couldn't she? He could certainly determine what she was thinking if he wanted to, although from what she could gather, his kind considered it rude to do so.

Her kind, she reminded herself. Their kind.

"So, anyway." She decided to let him off the hook on that particular discussion. There were certainly more important problems on the horizon for her than what would ultimately happen between the two of them.

"Anyway, what?"

"Where are we going?"

The sound of his deep inhale and slow exhale relaxed her yet another step closer to being able to fall asleep, wake up, and hopefully discover all this was just a bizarre dream. "Your friend and loaner of classic Corvettes, Jerry, has a beach house at the Outer Banks in Duck. There is a key underneath the trash can next to the house. No one

will be there for another week. The cleaning company he has hired finished yesterday and, from what I can discern, have done an adequate if 'ridiculously overpriced' job."

She let her head fall to the left and opened her eyes lazily. "And how do we know this, Mr. I-don't-read-people's-private-thoughts?"

His profile remained stern. "I never said I didn't eavesdrop on people's verbal communications, now did I?"

Her eyelids were so heavy she couldn't keep them open. "I like the way you think, E.T." She yawned and crossed her arms over her chest, sinking deeper into the plush velour of the passenger seat. "Wake me when we get to the trash cans."

When she'd almost fallen asleep, she could have sworn she heard him say, "As you wish, my queen."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Claire. Wake up."

Butch touched her shoulder lightly to try to rouse her. She'd fallen asleep before they'd gotten outside the city limits and had slept soundly the entire five hours of the trip to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The sound of her steady breathing had, in turn, relaxed him and driven him insane.

He parked the car in the small covered area next to the beach house and extended his radar for approximately the thousandth time since they'd gotten in the car. He didn't know where Garren was, but he wasn't anywhere near them.

Butch quietly opened the door and stepped out into the warm, moist clutch of the ocean air. Sucking in a deep breath that wasn't full of the scent of Claire's body, he closed his eyes. After so many hours inside the air-conditioned vehicle, the heavy taste and feel of the salty dampness chilled his skin. Five hours of forcing himself not to let his hand stray toward Claire with her already so close had become a physical effort of epic proportion.

He left Claire asleep in the vehicle while he searched the perimeter, checking to see if anything unusual or dangerous lay in wait for them. Finding nothing, he quickly located Jerry's trash cans next to the front entrance, which faced the Atlantic Ocean.

He found the key exactly where Jerry had told Liz his cleaning company left it. Unlocking the dead bolt, he pushed hard to get the swollen door open. The air was heavy with the scent of salt water and sand, permeating the space inside the beach house like a physical presence. He flipped the air-conditioning control to the lowest setting, then swept through the house, checking all the window locks. Minutes later, he returned to the car and removed the small bag of items he'd gathered to bring with them until they bought supplies to last through the weekend.

What kind of masochist was he? The salt air, a small, secluded beach house, the ocean, and Claire. God, could he make this any harder on himself?

Slinging the bag over his shoulder, he walked around to the passenger door and opened it. With all his machinations, she still continued the deep sleep she'd fallen into hours ago. He considered trying once more to wake her, then changed his mind. Best if she didn't open those sage green eyes, best if she didn't speak to him any more than absolutely necessary.

He slid his hands beneath her knees and behind her back and lifted her easily from the car. She moaned softly against his neck, then tucked her arms against her chest. The scent of her body began once more to resume its assault on his baser instincts. Ignoring them, he strode with purpose toward the door. The sooner he got her locked safely inside, the better.

The beach house had two large bedrooms, both with king-size beds, and a third bedroom full of bunk beds. He'd already tossed aside a mound of throw pillows and the bedspread on one of the king-sized beds during his sweep through the house, and after laying her gently down on the clean white sheets, he slid her spiked heels off and covered her.

He turned to leave, forcing himself to hold his breath and not take in the sweet scents mingling in the room. Between the mixture of the salt air and her pheromones, it was taking a Herculean effort not to strip off his own clothing and climb in bed beside her. The sooner he got out of here, the better.

"Where are you going?"

Her sleepy voice broke the silence of the night and almost cracked through the protective barrier he'd built around himself over the past five hours. She was not his, could never be his. She belonged to another.

"I'm going to bed. I brought some coffee from your office. I'll wake you in a few hours and we'll have some. Get some rest."

"Stay with me, Butch."

He clenched his teeth together and squeezed his hands into fists. He would not turn around. He would not look at her. "I'll be right across the hall. See you in the morning."

He pulled the door closed behind him and marched into the kitchen, then dropped the bag from his shoulder to the floor with a thud. The sound snapped his mind back from thoughts of her lithe body lying in that huge bed all alone.

She would fall back asleep in another minute or two, and he would be safe. For tonight. Damn, he had to do this twice more. He forced himself through one last check of the perimeter and the door and window locks before entering the other large bedroom.

What if she decided to come to this room sometime in the night? Could he resist her? Closing the door, he turned the lock and stared at it. He needed to be able to reach her at a moment's notice. He couldn't lock the door. Besides, keeping her out wasn't really the problem. What he needed was a lock on the other side of the door to keep him in. Hell, if he gave into the urges burning through him, what lock could stop him?



He snapped the lock back and opened the door.

Tossing off his clothes, he climbed beneath the blankets with jerky movements. Tired and pissed off was no way to get a good night's sleep. Olivia was right, of course. Her thoughts had burned into him like this planet's sun fired his skin, but without the subsequent warmth and glow. The only thing coming from her in waves had been the resounding echoes of her accusations.

Too bad they were well deserved and all true.

So far, he'd done exactly nothing proactive to find Garren, he'd barely managed to avert two attacks meant to kill Claire. And yes, he'd compromised her future with her intended by mating with her – not once, but twice.

No wonder her mother hated the sight of him. If it weren't for the captain's unfailing belief in his ability to protect her, he'd have been on the next ship to Vivemonde already.

Considering that going home was the one thing he'd been waiting for all this time, he was surprised to find himself relieved it hadn't happened.

"Yeah, that's because you're an idiot," he mumbled.

He closed his eyes to encourage a few moments of relief from the never-ending loop of self-recrimination, but sleep was just not happening. Every nerve ending in his body tingled with the call of her body to his, every sense bristling with the memory of her in his arms.

She still wanted him. After everything she'd been hit with today, the one steady and unrelenting beat inside her had been desire. Desire to touch him, to taste him, to breathe in – oh hell. He slid his hand beneath the covers to the rock-hard erection he'd steadfastly ignored for the past five hours. If he didn't do something about this right now, he'd never get any sleep.

"Butch? Are you awake?"

He might have been able to pretend he wasn't if he hadn't sat straight up in the bed, sending the springs creaking through the quiet night. He cleared his throat as he squeezed his balls to the point of pain. "Claire, go back to bed."

As usual, she ignored him. "I want to talk to you."

"I want to sleep," he lied, then corrected himself. "I should sleep. We're safe here, but I've got to stay sharp. We'll talk in the morning. Go to bed."

Damn, was she naked? He couldn't see anything but the outline of her body in the dark doorway, but he closed his eyes anyway. The air was thick with her, and any effort to hold his breath was useless. His breathing became more rapid as her scent filled the room. He should have found a larger space for them to hide. A stadium, maybe. Or the Grand Canyon.

"I know you're tired, but I have to ask you something. It will only take a minute."

*You are not opening your eyes. You are not.* "What is it?"

"My father wouldn't tell me. Who is my intended?"

A knife in his gut would have hurt less, but this was fortuitous – exactly what they should be talking about. “Another Viven, a prominent male of means and stature. Females say he’s handsome.” His words twisted the knife with unimaginable pain.

For a moment, he thought she had gone and her scent only lingered, until her voice tingled over his flesh once more. “Do you know him?”

He released his cock and squeezed the sheets in his fists, holding himself in place. *You are not moving from this bed.* “Yeah, I know him. He is a male of worth. If you join with him, you will be a very rich woman in a position of honor and power. If you join with him, there will be nothing Garren can do to you. If you join with him, you’ll be safe.”

He repeated the phrase over and over in his mind – if you join with him – and tried not to hang on to his own ridiculous hopes in that small word. *If.*

What could he offer her other than more of what he’d already given? Nothing. His intended was not a kindred. This he knew with absolute certainty. The Auquerel was never wrong, despite what the captain might believe. The captain and Olivia had taken their own path, had spurned the ways of his planet. That was their affair; he was going back one day to live among his people. He could not afford the luxury of sloughing off everything he believed to pursue what amounted to his body’s own lusts.

So what if Claire was a female of worth herself? She was not his female. The Auquerel acknowledged that when it ordained her intended mate. All the more reason to steer clear of entanglements, especially the one jutting between his legs and tenting the sheets.

“Butch?”

“I’m trying to sleep. Can’t we talk about this tomorrow?” *When my cock isn’t throbbing to be inside you?*

“What’s this guy’s name?”

He clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. “Err Yitzchak Yedidiah.”

Her laugh was clear and loud. “What? You gotta be kidding me. Isn’t that the...”

*I wish I were.* “Yes, your intended is the king.”

\* \* \* \* \*

He didn’t sleep well, but sometime after she’d finally walked away from his door, the echoes of her laughter ringing inside his head, he must have passed out. Sunlight streamed through the thin curtains hanging over the large window in his room, and the air was cool and fresh.

No trace of her scent remained.

Had she gone? He leaped from the bed, yanked his pants up his thighs, and burst from the room. Her room was empty, the bed unmade. Judging by the state of the bedding, she had slept about as well as he had – like a boat tossed in a storm.

“Claire!”

He raced through the house, checking first the bathroom, the other bedroom, then the living room. The smell of brewed coffee filled the air, and he ran to the kitchen. A clean coffee cup sat next to a half-full pot.

“Claire!”

His heart thudded in his chest as he looked around frantically. The vertical blinds hanging in front of the sliding glass door of the living room were pulled halfway open, the sunrise casting a golden glow over the teal and blue fabric of the plush living room furniture. He shoved the blinds aside and searched furtively across the sandy visage leading to the sea.

About fifty yards up the shoreline, her slender body cast a long shadow to the west. She faced the rising sun, her pale, bare feet dug into the sand as a frothy, tumbling wave licked at her ankles.

Shoving the unlocked door to the side, he ran out on the deck and grasped the handrail for support, his knees as liquid as the waves before him.

“Hey!”

She spun around, coffee from the cup in her hand cascading in a wide arc.

“Ouch!” She dropped the cup, and the porcelain rode an incoming wave of the morning tide. She shook the spilled beverage from her skin.

He opened the gate. His legs pumped like pistons, thick sea air filling his lungs. Wearing a pair of boxer shorts he’d thrown into their travel bag last night and the blouse she’d worn yesterday, she resembled just another beachcomber and not the hunted kindred she was. She’d tied the length of her professionally dry-cleaned blouse casually at her waist, revealing a long, narrow stretch of bare skin to the air and his eyes.

His chest clenched with a yearning to drag her body to his and drink from her lips. He mentally jerked himself back by his hair fifteen yards from her.

She bent at the waist and retrieved the rolling mug. She was fine. She was here. She was alive.

And she was astoundingly beautiful.

“What are you trying to do?” she demanded, making her way over the loose sand toward him. “You scared me to death.”

He scanned both ends of the long shoreline. An elderly couple walked away from them about a quarter of a mile to the north. Otherwise, they were alone.

She slapped his chest. “And you made me spill my coffee.” Holding the empty cup in one hand, she continued to shake the other. “That was hot, ya know.”

“What are you doing out here? How am I supposed to protect you when you keep running off?”

“Cool your hyperdrive there, buddy. I was just watching the sunrise, not loading the speedboat for my big getaway.”

His heartbeat began to return to normal, until he looked into her eyes. Her face was fresh and dewy in the early-morning light, her hair swept back in a ponytail and tied with a ribbon. He forced himself to look toward the sunrise.

"You could have told me where you were going. I was..." *I was terrified.* Not because protecting her was his duty. Not because he'd been hired to do a job and he'd feared he'd failed. Not for any of the reasons he should be. "When I woke up and you were gone..." He did not finish the thought.

That was a mistake.

She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You thought something happened to me." She rested her head on his chest, squeezing his body until it molded to hers. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

He disengaged her arms and forced himself back a step. "You shouldn't be out here. We don't know where Garren is or what he's up to. You're too easy a target for a bullet out in the open."

"You're right." She drew in a deep breath and lifted her arms over her head. As she stretched, the tied ends of her shirt lifted, revealing the smooth skin of her bare midriff. "I just wanted to see the sunrise. Sorry. I'll go in with you."

Her chagrin twisted a knot in his gut. He turned and headed back to the house, his long strides outdistancing her shorter gait until she jogged to keep up with him.

He walked inside once more, knowing she would be safer in here while he was anything but. Being trapped in this small house with her was probably as dangerous as having a lunatic lurking out there.

What in the hell were they going to do for two days, trapped inside with her scent and the throbbing ache in his groin? The first idea that sprang into his mind was a nonstarter – as were numbers two, three, and four.

Claire poured herself another cup of coffee, then sat down in the living room. "So, how did you sleep?"

"With my eyes closed." He walked into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee for himself, then stood motionless. No way was he going into that living room.

"Hmm. Well." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her tuck her feet beneath her hips. He focused deep into his mug at the dark brown liquid.

"So what do you want to do today?" she asked.

As hard as he focused on it, the coffee offered no answer to that question. And he needed a better answer than those his oversexed mind was considering. A lot better.

*Focus – work.*

"I told your father I'd call him tonight at eight to see if the police have apprehended Garren – find out if he's tried to make contact in any way."

"Butch?"

"And I'm going to be sure he's notified the council on Vivemonde of Garren's activities here."

"Butch?"

He ignored her attempts to interrupt him. This was a status report on his strategy to keep her alive, and that was the only thing either of them should be talking about. "After that, I'll catch up on some sleep, as should you. We haven't gotten much rest in the past two days, and you've got a big day on Monday."

"Butch!"

He didn't lift his gaze from the interior of the mug. Since nothing in his plan could begin until fourteen hours and twenty-two minutes from now, he had to find a way to put some distance between them, find a way to fill the time without touching her. Not making eye contact had to be the first step. "Yeah?"

"Why were you so angry last night?"

He gritted his teeth. "I told you, I needed to get some sleep. If I'd kept talking, you would have kept me up all night." *And moaned, and...*

"Well, come in here and drink your coffee." Her voice sounded resigned, as if all they had to concern themselves with was filling the hours until they packed up and left this little vacation home.

If only it were going to be that easy.

"I should check the perimeter." He set his cup down purposefully on the counter.

"Come on." The exasperation in her voice echoed through the room. "Garren has no idea where we are. We're at one of the most gorgeous beaches on the Eastern Shore, and you need to relax. You're tied up like a noose. Come sit beside me, and we'll watch some of those old television shows you've never seen."

"Let's set some ground rules." He turned and stared at the space just over her head. *Don't look into her eyes. Don't breathe.* "Stay inside unless you're with me. Keep all the doors and windows locked, and don't answer the telephone, either the house phone or your cell."

"Yes, warden."

"This isn't a vacation, and we're not here to have fun, you got me?"

"You know something? You've got to learn how to live in the now once in a while. All this stress can't be good for you. Come over here and sit with me."

Time to get this out of the way. Once she understood that nothing further—nothing—was going to happen between them, perhaps her body's natural responses would take note and tone down the production of that dizzying scent.

"Claire, I will protect you and keep you alive. That's the job I've been brought here to do. The Auquerel has spoken. You are intended to my king, and whether you decide to honor that or not, I'm not your gigolo."

## Chapter Seven

*Not her gigolo?* She drew in a deep, calming breath. She'd never taken long to make up her mind about anything, and in two short days, she'd decided. What some Auquerel on another planet proclaimed wasn't her problem. What her mother thought of him wasn't her problem either. She'd been making her own decisions for a long time now. So whatever the heck his problem was – also not her problem. She knew who she wanted, and nothing on this planet or any other was going to change that.

This speech of his, this edict, was obviously an attempt at an interplanetary “right thing” for them both. Did he think he was fooling her? She could read the truth in every nuance of his face and body language. He might believe his stony visage was conviction, the military stance fortitude, but the only being in this room who refused to see the truth was him.

Boneheaded, hardheaded, being from another planet notwithstanding, she wanted him, and not as a gigolo. The urge to smack that government-sanctioned, protector-alien look off his face simmered deep inside her. Either that, or wrap her naked body around his and make it disappear another way.

His glare burned through her, but not in the manner he intended. It conjured the memory of his strong limbs and broad shoulders against her skin, awakening every nerve ending. When he was in a room with her, she could barely focus for the wild longings rampaging across her flesh. The urge to touch him practically lifted her off the sofa and drove her into his arms.

That glare, though, that new sense of purpose in his eyes. Something had happened in her office last night. Something had convinced him to keep his distance.

She didn't believe for one moment that this “king thing” was it. As if she would marry somebody she'd never met before because some oracle decided she should? Not on this planet or in this universe, in fact.

Besides, it didn't matter what rich, handsome king of the planet came along – she loved Butch. The oddest part was discovering that she was his kind had sealed her resolve. Finding out she was a damn alien had to have some perks.

So what was the problem?

He had an intended of his own? Obviously, that meant something to him, but it hadn't kept him from her arms before. And as far as she could see, said intended was nowhere on this stretch of beach. *But I am.*

Maybe he didn't find her attractive anymore? No, she thought watching him. If the fury in his gaze wasn't clear enough, the strained sound in his voice last night certainly was. He hadn't wanted her to stay and talk for one reason – a reason that had nothing to do with wanting to sleep. She'd bet her life on it.

Whatever the real reason for this new, all-business Butch standing before her didn't matter. He would be hers, one way or another.

Jealousy appeared to be as major a factor in relationships on Vivemonde as it was on Earth. Between the jealousy of the princess and the jealous rage of Garren, primal green envy drove people past considerable obstacles all over the universe. What if...

First things first. That gigolo comment had to be dealt with. Her long silence would have already set the tone. Last night was the final time she'd be sent away from his bed.

"I said watch television, Butch. Not act out porn movies. Besides, that's over. I have a rich, handsome king waiting for me, remember?" She curved her lips into a sweet smile. "I'm spoken for now. Your virtue is safe with me."

She grabbed the remote control and started flipping channels.

He remained in the kitchen, and Claire noted the clench in his jaw. She'd seen him do that before, last night in her bedroom.

*The pheromones.* Damn, she'd forgotten that. How did a person direct their body's uncontrollable chemical responses? They didn't. But a little misdirection might work. He would believe what he wanted to believe if she gave him the right reasons.

"You know, I get a little keyed up just thinking about it. Imagine – me, married to a king. Weird, huh?" She shifted in her seat in her best imitation of *too excited to sit still*. "Tell me more about what he's like. You already said he took pity on you when his daughter falsely accused you. He sent you here to protect you from Garren's anger. He wasn't punishing you at all, was he? He knew Garren blamed you for what happened, and your life was in danger. He probably even knew his daughter had lied, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he knew."

"So, he's smart and kind and understanding. I've spent my whole life with my father, who as you know can be a little on the overbearing side. Wouldn't it be something to live with a man who wasn't always trying to tell me what to do?"

She let her gaze drift out the window to the sea. "Yeah, that would be something."

Butch hesitated, then slowly entered the room and sat in the nearby recliner.

“Being with you for these few days has made me see things more clearly. Between my father bossing me around my whole life and you picking right up where he left off... Well, kind and understanding would certainly be a change.”

She lifted the remote control and pointed it toward the television, calmly flipping channels. She tried to keep a semi-dazed, dreamy look on her face as she stared at the screen.

“No offense taken.” He turned and looked at the television. “So, you’re seeing things more clearly.”

“Oh, absolutely. You are a very sexy guy, but we both know I was in a very vulnerable state. Somebody who turned out to be an alien grabs me in a parking lot. Then a big, handsome bodyguard shows up while I’m scared out of my mind...” She let her voice trail off, then shook her head. “You saved my life. Maybe I misplaced gratitude and sex appeal for something else. It’s a wonder I didn’t do something completely irreparable. I’ll be sure to let the king know how you saved me. I’m sure he’ll be very grateful.”

She placed the remote control on the cushion beside her and wrapped her hands around her feet. “Oh, I love this show. Have you ever seen this? No, of course you haven’t. You’re going to love this. It’s hilarious.”

“Hmm.” The sound was noncommittal, but she could smell blood in the water. He was buying every bit of it.

“And you know what? I owe you. I could talk to Err Yedidyah about that daughter of his for you. What she did to you wasn’t right, and I want you to know that I won’t let her get away with that. I’ll get your name cleared, so it doesn’t mess up anything for you and your intended. It’s the least I can do.”

“You don’t even know him.”

She cleared her throat. Did sharks feel guilt? The sudden pang in her gut reminded her why she didn’t use people to her own ends. She’d managed to keep to the truth so far, but the spin was as manipulative as any multimedia conglomerate. But she wasn’t doing this only for herself. She was simply turning him to face the truth, letting him see for himself the simple fact—he cared for her. He didn’t want her to marry a king.

She trained her features to remain passive. “Of course I don’t know him, but that’s how it works, isn’t it? The Auquerel speaks, and once a Viven or kindred or whatever knows who her intended is, then I assume they meet, and the rest goes from there. I’m lucky, though. You can tell me about him before I ever meet him. You said he was handsome.”

“So.” He cleared his throat and leaned back in the seat. “You’re just going to leave your father and your mother here and go to another planet? You honestly expect me to believe that? What about your work?”

She forced a laugh that sounded amazingly real in her ears. She turned to look at him. “Work? How rich is he?”



His eyes bore into hers. "Very."

She flipped her hand in the air. "Then why would I need to continue working? I needed that contract to go through on Monday in order to secure the company's financial future. Is that really my problem anymore? I mean, I wouldn't just leave or anything. I could hang around long enough to train my replacement. Jerry has had his eye on my office since he started working there. He would be a logical place to start looking for the next president and CEO of the company."

"So you're actually thinking about doing this?"

She looked at him again and creased her eyebrows together tightly. "Why wouldn't I?"

He shook his head and laughed as he stood up. "Good try, Claire. But I'm not buying one word of this. You and I—"

She looked up at him and kept the same expression on her face. "You and I?" She stood up and walked over to him, then placed her hand on his shoulder. Softening her voice, she smiled gently. "Great sex is not enough to make a good marriage. A stable home, enough money—it's like you said last night. He's a male of worth, and when I marry him I will be a very rich woman in a position of honor. Why would I say no to that?"

He straightened his shoulders, and once again, his jaw clenched. Blood began to race through her veins. She lowered her hand with effort and turned toward the kitchen.

"All you have to do is keep me alive long enough to get to him."

\* \* \* \* \*

Get to him? He ground his teeth together so hard, his jaw began to ache. His mind battled with something deeper, something stronger burning inside him. *Wasn't this what you wanted? What you insisted on? What the hell is wrong with you?*

Everything was going exactly as he'd hoped. She was being completely logical about this, and so should he. Her businesslike mind had assessed the situation and realized this was the only possible outcome.

She expected nothing else from him now except that he kept her safe.

And he could expect nothing further from her. No smiles just for him. None of her confidences and trust. No more late-night visits to his bedroom door. No more of her body against his, surrounding his, or part of his. No more of her voice whispering his name.

She stood with her back to him. The refrigerator door was open, and she was bent at the waist searching the empty drawers. His groin tightened with the memory of standing behind her just so, taking her hips in his hands...

No. This was for the best, damn it.

His feet moved toward her as he ignored the logical reasoning of his mind and all her sound arguments. He grabbed her elbow and turned her body to his.

"Butch?"

He squeezed her soft flesh in his hands and pulled her against him. "I do have an intended, and damn it to hell, yes! Your intended is the king. He's rich and powerful and handsome." He choked on the word. "Your mother can't stand me. Your biological father is my mortal enemy. All perfectly good reasons for me to leave without ever seeing you again. But Claire, it's not going to happen like that."

He captured her mouth with a bruising kiss to leave no doubt of the sincerity of his words. She would never belong to another as long as he lived. All the logic in the world be damned. He ended the kiss abruptly and held her face in his hands.

"I'll keep you alive, but not for anyone else."

"What are you saying? You would disregard everything, deny your own king? For what? Just to have sex with me?"

He wanted to shake her. "This is not about sex, woman. You cannot join with Err Yedidyah!"

"And why not?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Because I love you." He couldn't believe what he was saying, but he didn't want to take it back. Now that the truth was finally out, he ignored everything but the emotions burning in his chest. "I don't want to live the rest of my life without you in it."

She sighed deeply, and her lips turned into a soft smile.

He blinked. "What?"

"I'm so glad you said that. I didn't know how much longer I could spout such bullshit." She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck.

He forced himself to disengage from her luscious mouth as her pheromones welled up around them both like the ocean's rising tide. "You aren't going to join with Err Yedidyah."

"If you weren't so bullheaded, you'd have realized that long ago." Her eyes burned into his. "I never wanted a king, Butch Markham. I want the man who jumps out of windows with me in his arms, the man who risks his life to save mine, the one whose hands hold me until I've forgotten what it was like to be alone. I want you."

Even with her scent thickening the living room air as she'd spoken, with every word to the contrary, she'd wanted him. "Everything you said – instead of fighting with me, you turned a mirror toward me and made me see the truth." He hadn't given her nearly enough credit – she was smarter than he'd ever realized. "You said all those things to snap me out of it."

"You could have told me to put on my crown and take the next spaceship out of here. It was a risk, but you've taken a few for me."

"You are one sassy woman." He brushed a long strand of her hair from her eyes. "You're going to pay for that one of these days."

"I've got time now, if you do."

He smiled and scooped her body into his arms. "Not nearly enough, but I'll make good use of what I have."

Butch carried her to his bed, avoiding the pheromone aroma still lingering in her room. He would have enough trouble maintaining control as it was. But he had to get a grip on himself—had to talk to her first. The sex they'd had before had been dangerous enough for both of them. Now they'd declared their love for one another, and the next time they lay together would change everything. There'd be no going back.

They had a lot to discuss, and once he had her clothes off that body, he had no guarantee he would be able to converse about anything.

Her lips at his throat nipped at the soft flesh below his ear. "Claire, wait."

He set her down on the carpeted floor and took her face in his hands. They had decided in one unrestrained moment to throw caution to the wind—ignore the Auquerel's proclamation, close their eyes to her mother's feelings about him... The list went on and on.

She slid her hands over his chest. "Not having second thoughts, are you?"

He had none; however, he couldn't let her do this without knowing. "What are you going to do about the king?"

She blinked, tilting her head to the side as she closely examined his face. "Do about him? I've never even met him. There's no reason to believe I ever will, so there's nothing to do. I don't know about your planet, but on this one, we ask. We don't let some oracle tell us what to do. Besides, the king isn't my intended."

"What?" He laughed. "I know you don't understand everything about the Auquerel—"

"That's kind of the point. I've been thinking about this. Remember when you said I hadn't met him, and I said that's how it works on your planet. The Auquerel speaks, and once a Viven or kindred or whatever knows who her intended is, they meet. That is how it works, isn't it?"

"Yeah. So?"

"You also said you couldn't join with a kindred because you're Viven."

"That doesn't matter anymore. I..." He opened his mouth to say more but stopped.

"Yeah." She nodded. "I have no idea why they told us that, but the king can't be my intended, can he? We were both so shocked, we didn't think it through."

"The king is Viven."

"Yep."

"Your parents lied."

“Yep.”

They stood together for a long moment, unspeaking.

She broke the silence first. “Or the Auquerel has changed his mind about kindred.”

He shook his head. “That’s not possible.”

She shrugged. “Then the only other explanation is they meant for us to end up like this. My father is no dummy. He must have recognized how I feel about you, maybe even how you feel about me. It wouldn’t be the first time parents forbid their children to do something, making the forbidden even more desirable.”

“They showed us both the mirror.” He shook his head. “The only problem with your theory is that your mother can’t stand me. That’s readily apparent.”

“She didn’t look that thrilled with the situation either. Remember that warning she gave me? She was in on it, I’m sure of it. On some level, though, she must agree.” She paused and suddenly seemed miles away.

“Claire? What is it?”

Tears sprang into her eyes. “Or she really does want me to be happy.” She stroked his jaw with her fingertips until he took hold of her hands and held them tight against his chest. “I want to be with you, but before we take this any further, I need to tell you a couple of things.”

She smiled. “Any further? It’s not like we haven’t been here before, Butch. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten?”

“I haven’t forgotten, but this time will be different – there are larger consequences than ever before. We’ve declared our love. Anything that happens from this moment on... You’ve got to be sure, Claire.”

She groaned loudly and rested her forehead on his chest. “Do we have to do that right now?” He could feel her heart hammering in her chest, the sweet fragrance of her skin seeping through the fabric of her clothes and continuing to release into the air around him.

“There’s no going back. I need to know you understand everything you’re giving up.”

“Riches, fame, trips to Disney World?”

He shook his head and released her hands. “I’m serious.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She dropped down to the edge of the bed and leaned back on her arms. Staring up at him, her features were framed in exasperation. “What?”

“If you disobey the command of the Auquerel, you can never live on Vivemonde.”

“What do you mean, never live there? I am a kindred. They won’t stamp my passport?” A quirky smile curled her lips. “I don’t know if you know this, but Vivemonde is not exactly a vacation spot for me. I had no intention of ever going there.”

"I know you think of Earth as your home, but you are a kindred. Are you certain you want to give up the only chance you have to live there?"

The look on his face must have convinced her that this was no joking matter. She straightened and placed her hands in her lap. "It's really beautiful, I guess."

"I could spend the rest of my life trying to describe it for you and never be successful. Earth is a shadow compared to the light of Vivemonde."

She nodded slowly, then shrugged her shoulders. "I've never been to Hawaii either. I understand it's a beautiful place. I may never see it. But between the choices of not having you and not seeing Hawaii, there's really no choice to make."

He shook his head and sat beside her on the bed. "You could see it. You could go there. We could go there together."

"I thought you just said we couldn't."

"I said we couldn't live there. No one would speak to us. No one would sell us food or clothing or a place to live. We would be cast out everywhere we went – pariahs. It is forbidden to share even a drop of water with someone who has ignored the oracles of the Auquerel. We wouldn't survive three days."

She nodded slowly. "Then we have nothing to worry about. I don't care if I ever go there, as long as you're with me here."

He took a deep breath.

"Oh." Claire placed both of her hands on his. "You couldn't go back either."

He shook his head. He and Claire belonged together, no matter what the Auquerel had proclaimed. He would never see his home again, and as much as he would miss that, he would miss breathing more. Without Claire beside him, he could not imagine how he could draw another breath.

"Your family is there, your friends – your home. You've been waiting all this time to go back."

"They might be able to come here one day. I love my family, but I'm not concerned about that." He squeezed her hands and turned to look into her eyes. "I understood fully when I told you that I love you what that would mean for me. I had to make sure you understood what it would mean for you."

"What will happen to you if you don't follow the command of the Auquerel? They won't come after you or anything, will they? Nobody came after my mother, that I know of."

"There is no 'they' to come after anyone. And the Auquerel does not issue commands, Claire. The Auquerel renders pronouncements. These pronouncements are sacred and in the best interest of all concerned. Disobeying a pronouncement is tantamount to playing with fire with your life. Your parents made that choice, and for most of your life they've had to live separately. There is no way to know what will happen to us when we disobey."

"Like Garren could catch up to us and kill us both, you mean."

"That's one possibility, yes."

Claire stood and began to pace slowly back and forth across the carpet. "Let me ask you something. Do you think my parents are really in love?"

"No question. They have suffered at the hands of their own destiny, but yes, I believe they are in love. And I believe they love you."

"So do I." She continued pacing for a moment longer, then stopped in the middle of the floor and put her hands on her hips. "We have our own set of beliefs down here on the mainland. We believe that love is stronger than any obstacle. And know this Butch: I love you. Nothing is going to keep me away from you. No oracles, no bad destinies, no asshole like Garren. Nothing."

Her words were strong, and he was certain she believed them. However, this was all happening too quickly. How could she possibly fathom the choice she was making? Now was not the time to rush headlong into a decision she could not undo.

"You know, you never did show me that television show about Mr. Spock like you promised."

She stared down at the floor, tendrils of long hair falling over her face. "Television? Butch, are you changing your mind about all this, about us?"

The pain in her voice was evidence enough. This was not the time to seal their joining. Everything that happened from here on must be done with extreme caution.

He stood and pulled her slowly into his arms. "Never. But we have two days and nights—enough time not to rush toward the bed like a couple of teenagers, right? This is not something to be taken lightly. As far as I'm concerned, you belong to me. That's not changing."

\* \* \* \* \*

A few minutes later, Butch stood in the kitchen pouring them both another cup of coffee. Claire sat on the floor before Jerry's large-screen television and pulled out stack after stack of DVD cases from the cabinet. Butch wanted her to be sure she was making the right decision before they did what she longed to do. She didn't have a single doubt, but obviously, some time was going to have to pass before he was convinced. Fine. Time well spent was what she needed. Time spent getting her closer to what she wanted. She almost giggled. Did science-fiction television work as an aphrodisiac on extraterrestrials?

"I'll bet you...aha! You must be living right. Look at this!" She held up a boxed set of DVDs. "Fortieth-anniversary edition *Star Trek*, the original episodes, released 2006."

"He keeps that here?"

"Jerry is a major Trekkie. I bought them for him two Christmases ago in the company's Secret Santa gift exchange. And not surprisingly, based on his pale skin, Jerry watches *Star Trek* instead of soaking up the sun."

"What's a Trekkie?"

She laughed. "Man, you gotta be kidding me. You've lived on this planet for ten years and you don't know what a Trekkie is?" She shook her head. "They've really got to improve the training for you guys while you're here. A Trekkie is an avid fan of *Star Trek*. Before we're done watching these, you will be transformed into one, trust me."

"That's a lot of movies. We're going to need some food."

"These aren't the movies—there were movies too. These are digitally remastered versions of the original television episodes." She flipped the boxed set over and read from the back cover. "Yep, starting with the original episode released September 8, 1966. We have ourselves a marathon here."

She kept her voice light, as if watching old television reruns was exactly what she wanted to be doing while at the beach with the man she loved. "You know, we could order some food delivered, pull one of those mattresses in here, get naked, and hang out all day."

He carried the cup of coffee to her and gave her a knowing look. "I think you're trying to seduce me."

"Seduce you? Me?" She handed him the box and stood up. "No, not at all. I just want you to be comfortable."

"You order the food then. I'll get the mattress. But I'm fine in my clothes." He kissed her forehead. "And so are you."

*That's what you think.* She kept the thought to herself. His boxers were comfortable, but his naked skin against hers would be abundantly more so. Was all this caution necessary? She didn't like much of what she'd recently discovered of her family history or Vivemonde in general, but being with Butch was one good thing amid a plethora of bad. She didn't need to be cautious, and she certainly didn't want to be.

Hadn't that been what her parents wanted too, though? They'd married but only spent ten years together before destiny took a hand. Was this Auquerel that vicious when it didn't get its way? If so, what exactly would it do to them? They'd be ignoring the thing's proclamations not once, but twice.

She picked up the telephone and shouted toward the bedroom as she dialed information. "Hey, Butch. How does this oracle notify you of its proclamations anyway? E-mail? Phone calls? What?"

He pulled the king-size mattress through the bedroom door. "The Auquerel visits dreams."

She watched him drag the bedding into the living room as the information operator came on. Within fifteen minutes, she'd been connected to a local grocery store and hired a delivery service to bring the appropriate quantities and varieties of junk food to the house.

By the time she hung up the phone, he'd situated the mattress along with a pile of pillows and blankets in the center of the living room floor facing the large-screen television. He'd put on a shirt and buttoned it halfway up, revealing his smooth chest to her hungry eyes.

He caught her looking and smiled, then slowly buttoned the shirt. "Sorry. No temptations. It's marathon time."

She rolled her eyes. "Hey, buddy. You're sexy, but not irresistible, ya know? I can actually contain myself when I want to."

He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. "Oh really? Well, I'm glad to hear it."

"So, we could dispense with the clothes after the delivery man brings us some sustenance if we wanted. In the interest of creature comforts, of course."

"Of course." He squatted on the center of the mattress, still holding her in his arms. "You are very considerate."

"Yes, I am." She lightly stroked his chest with her fingers.

He lifted her off his lap and placed her amid the pillows. "I might be irresistible, but you aren't. I'm trying to do the right thing here."

She sighed. Maybe she should think about this, but there was nothing to consider. She loved him; that was all that mattered.

On the other hand, he'd said he loved her. He'd written off his family and his homeland in that one short phrase. There wasn't anything for her to consider – she'd still be where she'd been her entire life. He, however, would lose everything but her.

He'd said he loved her; he'd sounded sure, but perhaps she wasn't the one who needed time before making a decision regarding the final stage of their relationship. Maybe hers were not the dire consequences she should be considering.

"You're right. Let's take this slow."

Rising from the mattress, he picked up the box of DVDs. "Which one first?"

"Might as well go in order. Put in the first one and grab your coffee."

They watched most of the premier episode by the time the delivery service arrived with her order. He sent her into the back bedroom out of sight, but she could hear both of their voices through the closed door. They made idle chatter until all the groceries were unloaded and the deliveryman was gone.

They left the DVD paused while she popped popcorn and he fried eggs and bacon. Side by side in the small kitchen, Claire brushed against him unintentionally as she shook the pot over the burner, corn merrily chinking against the secured lid.

"Sorry. Popping corn this way requires a little dancing."

The moan in his throat was low, but it vibrated through her nerve endings. Standing this close to him was difficult enough without the added coziness of the beach house, the fragrant smells of food cooking, and the warmth of his body.

Staying away from him was going to be harder than she'd thought.

He cleared his throat. "Who eats popcorn for breakfast anyway? I thought eggs and bacon were the staples for earthlings after sunrise."



"Well, I'm a kindred, remember. And I eat whatever I want." The rate at which the corn was bouncing against the lid finally slowed. She removed it from the burner and poured its contents into a bowl.

She forced herself to take a deep breath to calm her pounding heart. "See? Instant breakfast."

"You can have some of this too, Miss Kindred. A grown woman can't live on popped carbohydrates and fat."

"And a man can't live on the saturated fat and cholesterol in that bacon either. Besides, popcorn has protein." She sprinkled salt over the bowl of corn and escaped to the living room. All this forced "friendliness" was going to wear on her already frayed nerves. How would she keep it up lying on a mattress with him?

Not a good plan, she thought. Okay, time for some adjustment. No more flirting, no more innuendo. No more touching him. If she really loved him, she would give him the time he needed to come to the same conclusion she had.

He carried two plates in and handed one to her. "You need to keep your strength up. Eat this too."

She popped a small piece of the bacon into her mouth. "Good."

He bit a piece of bacon and chewed slowly, his eyes burning into hers. Swallowing, he picked up another. "Turn on the DVD, Claire."

She pressed the Play button, and Kirk's frozen body began to move once more on screen.

By the time she'd eaten the eggs and some of the bacon, the episode was finished, and the next one had begun. She set her plate aside and leaned back into the pillows, crossing one foot over the other.

"Welcome to 1966, when special effects didn't exist." She yawned, stretching her arms over her head.

He slid farther away from her and adjusted his pillows. "What's with that neck thing Spock does?"

"The Vulcan nerve pinch? You guys don't have that?"

He looked at her, his eyes burning coals of desire. "No."

Uh-oh. This wasn't going to work. She stood up. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon. Why?" His answers had become shorter, his shoulders more tense with each passing moment.

"I'm going to lie down for a while in my room. You were right when you said I needed some rest. Why don't you stretch out in here and get some yourself? You look worn-out."

She pushed thoughts of lying beside him far from her mind. "I'll check back with you later on. Okay?"

His jaw tightened again. Before she gave into her own desire, Claire turned and practically ran from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

By a quarter to eight that evening, Butch was pacing endlessly. He'd knocked twice to check on her. He'd offered her food three times. She'd politely declined all his invitations to come out and watch more of the series television show with him.

She'd locked the door and made every excuse not to join him.

This is what you wanted, he reminded himself. This is what she needs to do. This is the best way for her to consider the ramifications of the decision she's making.

*Away from you.*

Butch's cell phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket. The readout said, *Dirk Simonson.*

Butch let it continue to ring until it switched over to voice mail. He opened the phone and dialed the captain's number. The call connected on the first ring.

"Butch? Why didn't you answer my call? Is everything all right?"

"Just double-checking. I wasn't supposed to call you for another fifteen minutes. Has something happened?"

Butch heard something in the captain's voice he didn't believe he'd ever heard before. Happiness. "Yes, something has happened. Something fantastic. Get Claire on the phone with you."

Butch strode to Claire's bedroom door and knocked on it. "Your father is on the phone." Butch's stomach tightened when she opened the door immediately.

"What is he saying?"

Butch glanced at the Speaker button on the cell, then held the phone to her ear and rested his head against hers so they could both hear her father's voice. How many hours had passed since she'd been close enough to touch? Too many. It was pathetic, but he'd take his chances to be near her as they came. "Yes, sir? Claire is here. What has happened?"

"I just hung up with the state police. Garren has been arrested and is awaiting transfer to federal custody. That should be taking place in the next few minutes, if I know my boys. Wherever you are, you can come back home now. Claire, are you all right?"

Claire placed her hand on the phone. "I'm fine, Father. Are you both still safe?"

"We're fine. They found Garren casing the parking lot at your office, Claire. It took five of them to beat him down, and they had to sedate him. Right now he's on his way to the police station, soon to be followed by a specially designed federal holding cell. He'll be on the next flight back to Vivemonde, where he'll be turned over to the authorities and executed."

She blinked. "He'll be executed?"

"He's wanted for crimes on his own planet as well as this one. They will take care of him much more expeditiously than we could. How soon can you be home?"

Claire crossed her arms over her chest and looked up at Butch. "Four hours if we leave right now. We're ready to leave, aren't we, Butch?"

Her smile was the most beautiful thing he'd seen all day. "Yes, sir. We will leave in the next ten minutes."

"Thank you, Butch. You did your job, and you did it well. I can get you on whatever flight home you'd like to take, son. You are released from your sentence, and you can do anything you like now. Oh, and Claire's mother would like to speak to her privately for a moment."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He handed the phone to Claire. "I'll gather our things and put everything back the way we found it. Jerry might be surprised the next time he shows up to find food in the kitchen. Maybe we'll even leave him some coffee."

Claire covered the phone with her hand. "Don't leave anything. He never has to know we were here at all. Okay?"

Butch nodded as she put the phone back to her ear.

He quickly replaced the mattress and remade both of their beds. By the time she'd gotten off the phone with her mother, he had the remaining food in bags next to the front door, all the DVDs put away, and all the dishes washed.

"Wow. You are one heck of a cleaning lady." She handed his phone back to him.

"We're ready to go. We can carry the rest of the food out as we leave. I'll lock the door and replace the key in Jerry's hiding place." He waited for her to say something, although he wasn't sure what he wanted to hear. Someone might have noticed the rental car parked out back. Maybe she was afraid that Jerry would find out they'd been here together.

Perhaps after all the hours she'd spent alone in her room locked away from him, she really had had the chance to think. Perhaps she'd changed her mind. He felt nothing from her right now except happiness and relief, which exuded from her in waves.

"So, I guess we can go then. Any last-minute bathroom visits before we head out the door?"

"No, I'm ready now." She walked toward the door, then glanced round one last time before stepping outside. "Oh, wait a minute."

She ran over to the house telephone and picked up a slip of paper where she'd jotted down a grocery list. "Jerry knows my handwriting. He would know I'd been here. If we ever hope to come back here again without him knowing, we'd better not leave any evidence behind."

When she walked back across the room, she avoided the door and came directly toward him. Standing up on her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek lightly. "Once this joining

thing happens, we could have a very inexpensive honeymoon here. You know what I mean?"

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that."

## Chapter Eight

Butch and Claire exited the interstate less than four hours later. "I promise, this won't take a minute or two. I'll grab a quick shower and a set of clean clothes; then I can get you back home."

"You're trying to make a good impression on my mother, aren't you?"

"That might be impossible, but I'm going to try."

"So what is your place like? What model spaceship you got parked in the garage?"

He placed his hand on her knee. "Not good enough for you. Not nearly as nice as the beach house, and nothing like your place."

"And me without my white gloves."

"What did I tell you about that sassiness?"

She placed her hand over his. "Guess that didn't sink in. Maybe you should try again."

The memory of that conversation sparked a tightening in his groin. One long day of wanting her and waiting had been more than enough. A change in the subject might keep him from pulling the car to the side of the road and making love to her right now before they had a chance to tell her parents their intentions.

"Tomorrow morning, I'll take you to work so you can get that contract finalized. Then you can tell Jerry you're going to take a couple of weeks off to hang out with your internal management consultant."

"You sound confident I'm going to get the contract. If I don't, I won't have to take time off. The place will be near-broke."

"I'm not worried about that happening. Don't you usually get what you want?"

She smiled. "I did when I got you."

He remained silent as he drove down the tree-lined residential streets. If the past few days had taught him anything, it was to discourage conversation between them in confined spaces. Her voice, mixed with her body's chemicals, destroyed his concentration.

Claire turned to look out the passenger window. "Nice neighborhood." She squeezed his hand and laughed, the soft echo inside the car easy and deep. He hadn't gotten used to the sound. Every time she laughed, a spinning sensation filled his brain.

"You know something? I think my father wanted us together from the very beginning."

"What?"

"Trust me, I know my father. When he felt the need to hire a bodyguard, I think he already had you in mind. I think he handpicked you long before that evening. He was just waiting for the right moment to spring you on me."

Butch slowed at a yield sign, then continued the last few blocks to his house. "And what brought you to that conclusion? The fact that you hated me on sight? The fact that you wanted me fired from the first day we met?"

"My father knows me. He knew I wouldn't agree to a bodyguard. That was the only thing he insisted on, remember? That you stay with me day and night? I think he knew the rest was bound to happen."

"Bound to happen?" He laughed along with her. "You have a lot of faith in your ability to attract a man, I must say. Not that it isn't deserved."

"Maybe he knew I'd be attracted to you. More likely, he just thinks you're suitable husband material. He made sure to reject my nay-saying long enough for nature to take its course."

Butch rolled the thought over in his mind. "Let's say you're right, and he brought me in as your mate."

"Mate?"

"That's what you're saying. He intended the two of us to fall in love and get married the whole time."

"I'm saying he knows me. He knows I wouldn't take up with you if he introduced us like normal people. He threw us together and made it sound like you were to be there strictly for the job. The rest he left up to us."

"That's just nuts," he said. "That would mean he'd depended on me falling for you too, you know."

"Well, I am irresistible in a lot of ways." She laughed again, the same easy, full sound that wrecked his focus. "I know I'm right. He had us marked for each other from the very beginning."

"Well, however it happened, we're together." He could feel her heart begin to hammer in her chest. They were together. She belonged to him, no question. But on this

planet, males and females officially asked each other to join together. The question was, how did they do it exactly? "Claire, we're going to, aren't we?"

"Going to what?"

She turned around in the seat and batted her eyelashes at him. He knew that look. She was teasing him again. For a smart woman who was all business most of the time, she had a way of pretending to be ditzy when she felt like it.

"You know good and damn well what." He memorized the features of her beautiful face. "Marry me, woman."

Her smile was slow as her eyes misted. "What woman could resist a romantic like you, E.T?"

He leaned over and kissed her quickly, then returned his attention to the road. "You're going to get us killed if you keep looking at me like that. Sit over there and behave yourself, so I can get us home."

She was still laughing when he pulled the car into his driveway. He grabbed the bag they'd lived out of for two days and got out of the car. She quickly followed, grabbing his hand as they almost raced to the front door.

Butch unlocked the dead bolt and stepped inside, Claire close behind him.

Before he could reach the switch, light flooded the room. A tall, dark figure in leather illuminated by the overhead fixture stood in the middle of the foyer. He lifted the glimmering silver barrel of a .44 level with Butch's chest.

"Welcome back, you two. I've been waiting."

Butch stared down the barrel of the weapon and pressed Claire's body behind him. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, sending his every sense into high gear.

"Oh, excellent. Thank you for improving my shot."

The sound of the weapon firing echoed in the small foyer. A burning pain gripped his chest, and he stumbled backward. Claire's scream reverberated off the walls.

Butch's knees gave way as he fell to the floor.

"You come with me." Garren stepped over him and grabbed Claire's arm.

"Take your hands off of her." His voice sounded far away in his ears. He struggled to ignore the ache in his chest as he squeezed the fabric of his shirt and pressed it to cover the bleeding wound.

"Shut up!" Garren wrenched Claire's body against his chest and held the gun pointed at Butch. She struggled against him. "Unless you want me to finish him off right now, you'd better stay still."

Claire's eyes were wide as she stared down at him, but she ceased moving. Her lips trembled and tears filled her eyes.

"You know, Butch, I like the idea of you lying there in agony before you die, but if you annoy me, I won't mind finishing you off. I'm here for the girl. Finding you after all this time is a bonus."

"The girl?" Butch didn't expect an answer but needed to buy time. If he tried to grab the weapon and got shot again, there'd be nothing to stop Garren from taking her. His only hope was to keep him here talking. He pulled in a breath of air that stabbed his lungs, and spoke in Vimone. "She's not just a girl. She's your daughter. Don't hurt her."

The weapon twitched in Garren's hand, and he responded in their native tongue. "Shut up."

Butch continued in English. "If you're doing this to her because of me, don't. You know I didn't do anything to Raanana. Let her go."

Garren's eyes narrowed, and he tightened his grip on the weapon. "Raanana was not ready to follow the oracle's pronouncement. She was young, and she made a foolish mistake with you. I loved her, and I understood why she sequestered herself all these years. I knew that given enough time she would emerge."

Butch did not take his eyes away from Garren's. He saw not only anger, but the final betrayal of the Viven Garren loved. "The princess has emerged, hasn't she?" He coughed and forced himself to continue. "But still does not wish to join with you."

Garren raised the weapon higher. "The Auquerel has chosen a new intended for Raanana, an order she will not defy. None of this would have happened if you hadn't been there. My reasons for killing you have nothing to do with this girl."

"I don't care what you do to me, but let him live. If the princess hadn't chosen Butch, she'd have picked someone else. Butch did nothing. You said it yourself. She was young and made a foolish mistake." Claire's voice sounded calm and reasonable, but Garren's burning eyes proclaimed one truth: he would not listen to reason.

Garren roared as if from a deep hole. "You are in no position to speak! You shouldn't even be alive! But that is something I'm going to remedy."

"If you hurt her" – Butch blinked to clear his swimming vision – "I'll make you pay for the rest of my life."

"Which won't be much longer," Garren said. "And now, we must be going. We'll take your car. My van is no doubt being sought by those fumbling policemen, and I have a long-awaited meeting with her mother."

"Before you kill me," Claire said, choking back tears, "can I tell him something?"

"Sure." Garren's laugh was deep and soft. "Say your good-byes. How very sweet."

Claire knelt down beside him and pressed her lips to his ear. "That third eye. How do I get him to open it again?" She trailed trembling kisses across his face, then finally rested her ear against his lips.

Butch pressed his hand tighter to his chest and sucked in the smallest amount of air he could without coughing. "Kick...kneecaps. Hard. Then –"

His cough interrupted the rest of the sentence, and he struggled to stop. The pressure in his chest was a crushing agony, and he could not take in another breath to speak.



She nodded and kissed him once more. Taking his face into her hands, she mouthed the words. *Don't you die on me.*

Claire placed both of her hands on the floor as if to push herself back up. This was her only chance, and she had to make it work. She glanced once more into Butch's eyes, assuring herself in their reflection that Garren had not moved. He stood right behind her. She tucked her head between her shoulders.

In one swift move, she leaned hard on her palms and pushed first one leg, then the other off the floor, aiming a one-two punch to Garren's knees.

The resounding crack and Garren's horrible scream confirmed she'd connected with one of them. Claire flipped over onto her back, in time to see him collapse to the floor, but before she could move toward Garren, Butch kicked the hand holding the gun.

The string of profanity echoed through the foyer, but Claire did not hesitate. She leaped forward and landed on Garren's chest. After drawing back to gain momentum, she punched, jamming her knuckles into the open third eye in the center of Garren's forehead.

Both of his other eyes closed, and a moment later, his body fell slack.

Claire jumped up and kicked Garren's midsection, but he made no sound. "Is he dead?"

When Butch did not answer, she turned to him. His skin was gray as he clutched his hand to his chest. Blood soaked his shirt. He nodded slowly, his eyes questioning.

Claire fished Butch's cell phone out of his pocket and dialed 9-1-1. Quickly giving the information to the operator, she ran toward the open door of the kitchen. Yanking open drawer after drawer, she searched frantically for anything to stop the bleeding. He couldn't die. He had to live.

Finally finding a pile of dish towels folded neatly inside one, she yanked them out and ran back to him. Moving his hand away from the wound, she pressed three towels on top of his blood-soaked shirt, then lay his hand on top of it again. She checked his carotid pulse. His heartbeat was weak but steady.

"You've got to hold on, Butch. They'll be here in just a few minutes." She grabbed his free hand. "Hold on to me."

"How did you know?" The words were whispered, and she barely understood them.

"I know something about the third eye, although not about Viven. In the way he'd kept trying to cover it up that day, I suspected I was right. It's the gate that leads to full consciousness, isn't it?"

His eyes widened against his gray skin.

"I thought so."

“But how—” His voice was weak, but his eyes sparkled with curiosity and admiration.

“It was something my mother told me.” The faint sound of sirens in the distance helped her to breathe deeper. “‘See before you act. Listen to your head as well as your heart.’ It finally all made sense.”

## Epilogue

"I'm so sorry, Claire," Butch said. "I know you're disappointed. But we'll think of something."

Claire was more than disappointed. She was devastated. She continued pacing back and forth in her living room. Butch sat watching her, his presence the only thing keeping her from snapping completely. Nothing, however, not even Butch, could ease the catastrophe that losing the Anthony Group's business meant.

"After all the wonderful things that happened—my mother, you, defeating Garren. I thought we'd outrun the curse of the Auquerel. But it managed to get the last word in after all, didn't it?"

Butch shook his head but said nothing.

"I just couldn't believe it when they said they were going with a company that proffered a less expensive bid for the work. It was the biggest slap in the face. I've never been so angry or desperate in my life. I have no idea what I'm going to do now. All those people are going to lose their jobs. I won't be able to pay the lease on the building."

"You still have quite a few clients."

"Enough to carry us through a couple of months is all. I built this business, including my staff, equipment—everything—so we could handle accounts the size of IBM. With all the assets I committed to this level of productivity and expense, my current customer base cannot support it. We'll be dead in the water by the end of the year."

She shook her head as she continued pacing. "I took a risk, and I lost. It was my choice and my decision. My fault."

Butch stood and walked over to her. Grabbing her arm, he pulled her against him. Although she struggled, he did not release her. "The timing was terrible. A maniac was

trying to kill you, for crying out loud. You'll find another large client like the Anthony Group. You'll get extensions on your credit. Something will come along. You are a smart woman, and you'll figure out a way."

She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed, careful not to press too hard on his healing wound. "It's sweet of you. It really is. But it's too late. If they'd signed today, they would have given me a three-million-dollar retainer that could have carried us through the end of next year without another payment necessary. There's just not enough time to try to pull that rabbit out of the hat again."

The phone rang, but she didn't move out of his arms.

"I don't want to answer it."

"It might be your father. He said he was going to bring your mother over tonight."

She sighed deeply and pushed aside all the overwhelming thoughts in her mind. There was nothing she could do about it now. Tomorrow was soon enough to determine how best to notify everyone. They would have to liquidate.

The word echoed over and over in her mind as she walked to the phone and picked it up.

"May I speak with Miss Claire Simonson, please?"

"This is Claire Simonson. How may I help you?"

"Miss Simonson, this is Captain Gary Harris. I worked with your father before he retired."

"I'm sorry, Captain Harris, but my father isn't here right now. May I take a message for him?"

"Actually, Miss Simonson, it's you I wanted to speak to. Tomorrow morning a messenger will deliver our contracts to your office, unless you would like us to have them brought to you tonight. For our part, the sooner we have this paperwork signed, the sooner we can get the financial end of the deal under way. So I wanted to check with you and see if you could have them signed and notarized this evening."

"I'm sorry?"

"Forgive me. It's late, and I've had a long day. You probably don't have a notary there, of course. Along with the messenger, we will send a notary to complete the contract."

Claire's heart began to pound in her chest. "What branch of the government did you say you were with?"

"This phone line is not secure, and that information is classified. However, all the necessary documentation will be included in the contracts. Might we have those messengers over to you this evening?"

"Yes." She struggled to pull air into her lungs. What contracts? What classified documentation? Was this some kind of mistake? "The parties to the contract are a classified agency of the government and Simonson Consulting?"

"Yes, ma'am. That is correct."

"What was the final contract amount?" She held her breath.

"For the first year, approximately twenty-three million dollars and change. For the subsequent years through ten, we have the option to renegotiate. However, we have designated the Simonson Consulting Company as our sole provider for this contract. If we are unable to come to terms in years two through ten, the agreed-upon amount will continue at twenty-three million dollars per annum." Captain Harris hesitated. "I was unaware the details of the contract had not been finalized."

"They have been finalized," she said quickly. "I just wanted to make sure you have the most current contract agreement. Please messenger it over immediately, along with your notary. I will sign the documents as soon as they arrive."

Captain Harris's sigh of relief sounded through the receiver. "Excellent. Thank you, Miss Simonson. Have a wonderful evening."

Claire continued to hold the phone to her ear long after Captain Harris hung up.

"Claire?" The sound of Butch's voice awoke her as if from a dream. "Are you all right?"

"What?"

"You're standing there with your mouth hanging open. Who was that?"

The door to the den opened, and her father rolled his wheelchair into the room. Her mother walked beside him.

"Judging by the look on her face, I'm betting on Harris."

Claire spun around to face him. "You did this?"

Her father's face remained firm. "The UMI notified me of their desire to request bids for management consultants for the program yesterday. I made two phone calls. That's all I did."

"You made two phone calls."

"One phone call to General Mickelson of UMI to tell him this division was highly classified and not open to just any civilian consulting firm. Fortunately, I had knowledge of the perfect firm for their needs—a firm led by a kindred herself. They did some checking, and within two hours they notified me what they were prepared to offer. I suggested they put it in writing and send it to the CEO of Simonson Consulting for her perusal and possible approval. The rest I leave to you, Claire."

"Your mouth is hanging open, sweetheart." Her mother's voice was stern and kind, exactly the way she remembered it as a child.

"You said two phone calls. Who was the other call?"

Her father's face reddened. "I was afraid you might sign the Anthony Group documents before they could get the contracts together. I called the Anthony Group and suggested to them a less expensive alternative."

Claire walked slowly toward her father. She shook her head as she smiled and placed both of her hands on his. "You really can't stay out of my life, can you?"

"You're my daughter. Why would I?"

She gently kissed his forehead, tears burning the backs of her eyes. "Thank you, Daddy."

He cleared his throat and gently pushed her away. "You're welcome."

"Would anyone like a cup of coffee?" Olivia asked. "Butch?"

"Coffee would be fine, Mrs. Simonson. Thank you." Butch rose slowly from his chair and joined Claire. She wrapped her arm gingerly around his waist. His healing from the bullet wound was considerably faster than a human's, but more time would have to pass before he jumped out of any more windows.

The room was quiet for a moment; then her mother smiled at Claire. "Butch, why don't you just call me Olivia?"

"Thank you, Olivia."

"Help me a moment, Dirk?"

"Help you with coffee? Since when do you need help with coffee?"

Her mother shook her head, then grasped the handles on her father's wheelchair. "Men can be so dense. They'd like to be alone for a moment, all right, dear?"

"Oh, all right. Butch, will you light the fire while I assist my helpless wife in making a cup of coffee?"

As her father and mother left the room, Butch pulled Claire into his arms. "I have a fire I'd like to light right now. But I guess we need to wait for your parents to leave."

"I can wait."

"I hope so, or I'll have to kidnap you myself." He kissed her lips. "They'll never catch me based on your description, though."

"Oh, this time I'll know what to tell them." She looked into his eyes. "I'll just say a gorgeous E.T. tried to relocate me – and I let him."

 THE END 

## Moira Reid

Moira Reid is a graduate of the University of Nebraska, majoring in Actuarial Science with a minor in English. She writes erotic and romantic suspense (among other things that take her fancy at any given moment). She loves long walks in the park, the outdoors, and...no wait, that's somebody else. Moira sits in front of her computer day and night making up stuff. Yeah, that's Moira. She's the obsessive-compulsive one that gets an idea one day and is typing furiously the next while housework, bill-paying, cooking, and all other chores go undone around her. She has a husband who brings food to her on occasion and keeps her supplied with coffee hoping that once in a while she'll take a break for some "research." He's been waiting off and on for over twelve years now – patient fellow.

Moira's young daughter often asks why Moira laughs at her own jokes – alone. (Her friends say when she laughs, she *commits to it*.) What any of this has to do with her writing is beyond me, but you'd have to meet her to appreciate why it seems important. Her outlook on life is pretty simple—be nice, smile a lot, give something back. (Especially if you weren't really supposed to borrow it in the first place.)

Visit her website: [www.readmoore.com](http://www.readmoore.com)