

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



**CONN
'N'
CALEB**

Ciana Stone

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Conn 'n' Caleb

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Dedication

For the “real” Caleb – a man whose photo should be displayed in the dictionary beside the word “fine”.

Acknowledgements

My deepest appreciation to all the people who were so instrumental in the creation of this book:

Grandpa – gone but never forgotten.

For all you taught me about life, our connection with the earth and all that dwells on it.

And to Chase, thanks again, my friend.

You’re always there to inspire and cheer me on. What a guy!

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Chapter One

She kept her eyes closed, listening to the voices of the men in the cockpit of the military helicopter. She didn't want them to know that she was awake. Or that she was no longer bound by the restraints they'd placed on her and therefore free to move around.

For the last two days every time she'd roused she'd been given another injection. This was the first time she'd managed to regain full consciousness. Her mind was still not clear. There was a heavy shroud of drug-induced fog clouding her thoughts. She needed to be able to think clearly. Her survival depended on it.

From the conversation going on in the cockpit, they were apparently flying over a place called Arizona. Keeping below radar level. That didn't surprise her either. No one wanted to take credit or blame for what was happening. The men in the cockpit were like all the others before them. They just wanted to pass her off to those higher in the chain of command and be done with her.

Knowing that time was running short, she focused her mind on a plan. The minutes ticked by. The pilot's voice alerted her to a change in their status. They were suddenly losing fuel. He wasn't sure they had enough to make it to their destination. He had to radio for instructions.

"This is Bravo Tango Charlie 227."

There was an answering blast of static. He tried again. Still nothing. Focused on the problem at hand, he and his copilot turned all their attention to checking the instrumentation, their comments made in hopeful tones. Maybe the instruments were wrong. Maybe it was a glitch.

This was her chance. She slowly sat, peeling off the blanket they'd placed over her. Keeping her eyes peeled on the cockpit, she inched toward the door. Neither of the men sensed movement until she placed one hand on each of their shoulders.

"This aircraft is going to crash," she said softly. "You must escape before it goes down. You are lucky men. The only survivors."

"The only—" The pilot never finished the sentence. The chopper suddenly lost altitude and all his attention was on battling the controls.

Standing between the two men, for a moment she was weightless. Had she not reached up to absorb the impact with hands and arms, her head would have banged into the ceiling of the cabin.

The copilot issued a mayday call, giving their location. Hope swelled inside her. They were passing over a lake. As the chopper dropped lower, she reached for the door. The copilot grabbed her, trying to stop her. The fear must have overridden the suggestion she put in his mind. She tried focusing on the thoughts again but didn't rely just on that since her window of opportunity was so small. She backed it up with physical strength and fought him with everything she had. This time he wasn't going to overpower her. She'd played nice. She'd played fair. And it'd gotten her nowhere. Except kidnapped, drugged, bound and gagged, and flying who knew where with this surly barbarian and an equally dour pilot.

It was time to get the heck out of Dodge as she'd heard on the black and white western show she'd watched at the last holding facility she'd been kept in. And this was her best chance.

The pilot was trying to find a place to land. She'd spotted the lake and knew this was the time to act. All she had to do was get free of the co-pilot who had a death grip on her wrist.

He yanked on her and she put everything she had into a punch, right into his groin. His mouth opened wide but only a strangled gurgle came out. She vaulted over to the door as he collapsed in his seat.

The aircraft did a sudden nose down, throwing her forward onto her knees. As the pilot fought to level out the plane, she scrambled to her feet and headed for the hatch.

With all the wobbling and the steep angle of the dive, it was next to impossible to push the door open. If only she had more time and didn't have to rely on brute strength. A look toward the front told her she was out of time. With a grunt, she shoved at the door. It slid open and wind buffeted her, whipping her hair around her head.

She closed her eyes, stretched out her arms and leaned forward. This was insane. She'd probably die. But she was going to die anyway. Better to go this way than the way the people waiting for her had planned. Just then the helicopter lurched. Then the world turned upside down and topsy turvy as she fell forward into nothingness.

* * * * *

Caleb rowed along, watching the indigo sky flare with those few final moments of reds and oranges as the sun disappeared into the horizon. What a great weekend it'd been so far. Just what he'd needed. No drinking, no women, no noise. Just him, a kayak and a sleeping bag.

It'd been a while since he'd come to the lake. Back when he was young, he'd come up here with his brothers often. They'd race their jet skis, drink like fish and swap tales of their exploits with women.

Those had been good times. Now they were all grown, all of them but him with families of their own. He was the last of the single Russell men. Not that he minded it. Blessed with good genes, he made out just fine with the ladies and he didn't have any complaints about his social or sex life. They were both quite active.

But now and then he needed to get away and have some time to himself. This weekend he'd found himself thinking about his brothers and how happy they were being settled down with wives and kids. He wondered if he'd ever meet a woman who'd inspire him to want to try it. So far it hadn't happened.

One moment he was stroking along the glassy surface of the water and the next thing he knew something was falling out of the sky in front of him, a dark silhouette that looked remarkably like a person.

It couldn't be. Could it? He dug in on one side with the oar, turning the kayak and watching the strange sight. A moment later the shape hit the water. He had time to think that it couldn't have been a person because the surface of the water moved as if a giant beach ball the size of a truck had suddenly plunged into it.

A second later the resulting wave from the impact capsized him. He was slammed upside down hard enough to have him passing from a startled state of confusion into a consuming darkness.

Her landing was far rougher than she'd hoped. All the way down she'd focused her mind on the image of a bubble encasing her, visualizing it hitting the surface of the water and bouncing until it came to a soft landing.

Such was not the case. How could water be so hard? Spots danced in front of her eyes, threatening unconsciousness. She fought against it, kicking to the surface. Slinging her hair back from her face, she looked around.

And that's when she saw it. A kayak bobbing in the churning water, upside-down, and a large man floating face down in the water. Fear that she'd killed someone infused her with a rapid spike of adrenaline, providing the strength she needed to roll the man over, wrap one arm around his neck and swim for shore.

It was harder than she'd anticipated dragging him on shore. She must have suffered more from the fall than she imagined. And he was one big man. Tall and muscular in all the right places. She scolded herself for even noticing how well built and handsome he was. This was not the time for her hormones to take over.

Concentrating on his physical well-being, she maneuvered him over to a truck that was parked beneath a thin stand of trees. He was breathing. Just unconscious. She had

no idea who the vehicle belonged to but hoped they wouldn't mind when she spotted a rolled up bundle of fabric and grabbed it.

Turned out, it was some kind of bedding. She draped it over the man and knelt down beside him, putting her hand on his forehead. By the stars, he was divine. She could not resist admiring the strong lines of his face, and wondering what color his eyes would be when he opened them. And he had to open them. He had to. She could not be responsible for injuring an innocent person.

When Caleb suddenly came to, he bolted upright, finding himself on the ground beside his truck at his campsite.

"Are you damaged?" a feminine voice with a musical accent asked.

He jerked his head to the right and saw a woman kneeling beside him. And what a woman. She was stunning. Exotic. Her skin carried a slight tint that spoke of the East— Iran or perhaps India. But the eyes were the color of amethyst, a violet that was pale but possessed of almost a glow. Clearly she had mixed heritage. Her features were classic— elegant arched brows, a thin delicate nose and lips that could be used as a model for women who want to achieve that full kissable pout.

"What the hell happened?"

"Your vessel capsized and I brought you to shore."

"You ..." He looked around in confusion. His kayak was nowhere to be seen. Caleb leaned forward, running his hands back through his wet hair before looking at her again. "Was that you? That fell from the sky, I mean?"

She regarded him for a moment. "You think I fell from the sky?"

"Lady, I know what I saw. You fell and hit the water and...and capsized me."

"Then I suppose you have your answer," she said and sat back on her heels, watching him.

Caleb couldn't help but notice the way the white T-shirt clung to her, revealing full, high breasts with hard, perfect nipples. He also noticed the slight smile on her face when she caught him staring.

"Look, I'm not crazy. I saw you falling. But from what?"

She looked away, hugging herself. Night air was falling and the temperature was dropping. Caleb stripped off the bed roll that was draped over him and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Let's get a fire going so you can get warm. I have an extra shirt in the truck if you want to put it on and we'll dry your clothes by the fire."

He got up and reached into his pocket for his keys. "Shit!"

"There is something wrong?" she asked.

"My keys. They must have come out of my pocket when I capsized."

"Then we shall search for them," she said, throwing aside the bed roll and springing to her feet.

"Hold on." He grabbed her arm.

She jerked away so fast and with such fury on her face that he involuntarily took a step back. "Do. Not. Ever. Do. That." Her words were sharp and punctuated.

He raised both hands up in surrender. "Sorry. I just meant that there's no point. Night's falling and we'd never find them anyway."

"Then you cannot open the door to your vehicle?"

"Well, I do keep a spare set of keys."

"That is very wise."

He grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, well the problem is, they're inside the glove compartment of the truck. We'll have to break a window to get them."

"Oh."

Before he had a chance to move, she stepped over to the window, balled up her fist and slammed it through the passenger window. Caleb gaped at her in shock as she turned and smiled at him. "Now you may retrieve your keys."

He was unable to respond for a moment. *First she free-falls out of the sky and ends up without even a bruise, and then she slams her fist through a window like it's papier-mâché?* What the hell kind of woman was she anyway?

"Your keys?" she prompted.

"Oh yeah, right." He didn't bother to state the obvious. He didn't need the keys now. He reached in, unlocked the door and rumbled through the duffle bag that was on the floorboard.

"Here..." He handed her a blue plaid flannel shirt, "get out of those wet clothes and put this on while I get a fire started."

"Thank you," she said with a smile, hung the shirt over the window and started stripping off her wet clothes.

Caleb's mouth fell open in surprise. He'd been around uninhibited women before, but never one who'd strip off her clothes in the same manner one would kick off a pair of muddy boots. Despite his desire to see what delights lay beneath the wet clothing, he turned away and busied himself building a fire.

Fortunately he'd stocked up on wood earlier in the day, prepared for a cool evening. Of course, he hadn't dreamed he'd be sharing his campfire with a totally gorgeous and completely out of the ordinary woman.

He grinned to himself as he watched the kindling ignite and spread. Life sure was full of surprises.

Chapter Two

"What do I do with these?" she asked from behind him.

Caleb had just finished spreading a plastic tarp on the ground, topped with a wool blanket. When he turned and saw her standing there, his shirt covering her from neck to mid-thigh, exposing long, strong, sexy legs and her wet clothes held in one hand, he momentarily lost the ability to speak.

Damn, she was sexy. Wet hair cascading down over her shoulders to nearly her waist, eyes watching him with the curiosity of a cat, and those lips. Those full, please-kiss-me lips. It was enough to drive a saint to sin.

"My clothing?" she asked with a seductive little smile.

"Oh right. Here, let me take care of that." He grabbed a couple of stout sticks and jammed them into the ground near the fire, draping her shirt and pants over them. "There. They'll dry in a few hours."

"Thank you," she said. "Mr.?"

"Russell. Caleb Russell."

"Thank you, Mr. Russell."

"You're more than welcome, Miss?"

"Raenea Thothtoft," she replied after a moment's hesitation.

"That's an unusual name."

"So is Caleb," she said with a smile and gestured to the pallet on the ground. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Oh sorry. Sure. There's an extra blanket there if you want to wrap up. It gets pretty cold at night."

"Thank you, but I'm fine," she said and sank down in an Indian-style, cross-legged position.

"You rest and warm up. I'm going to change and get things going for dinner."

"Might I assist you?"

He knew her offer was for food preparation but he couldn't help but think about her assisting him in getting out of his still damp shorts. "No thanks, I got it."

She smiled and nodded then turned her attention to the fire, staring into it as if there were secrets in the flames that only she could discern. He watched her for a moment then hurried to the truck, changed into jeans and a shirt and grabbed the cooler.

Raenea stared into the flames of the fire. She had no doubt that Caleb would revisit the topic of her unusual arrival. Naturally he was curious. She didn't blame him. It wasn't every day a person fell out of the sky. Her dilemma was what to tell him.

It was against her nature to lie. But could she trust him? She'd made the mistake of putting her trust in a stranger and it had landed her here, on the run and unsure what to do.

She did sense that he was an honest and honorable man. And was obviously compassionate, giving her dry clothing and building a fire so that she could warm herself. And now preparing food.

But her experience of late had taught her that compassion could sometimes be a self-serving act. People would feed you, keep you safe from the elements and provide you with the necessities to survive, but in return they wanted to take your life from you, make you their prisoner.

She could not afford to be taken prisoner again. Now that she was free she had to stay that way. Which meant she was going to have to find one trustworthy person. She had no money, no identity papers and no way to secure food and lodgings.

And then there was the matter of the people who would be looking for her. Fear swelled inside her at the thought of being found. They claimed to be good people, interested only in the benefit of mankind through scientific exploration and research. But their methods spoke otherwise.

“You hungry?” Caleb’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

She looked up at him, thinking that her mind must have been more affected by the impact than she realized because suddenly it was very clear that she needed to learn how to speak as he did, master the accent and the cadence so that she did not sound quite so much the foreigner. She’d pay close attention and hope he didn’t notice the change in her speech patterns.

“Yes.”

He sat down, putting the cooler between them. “Not a lot to choose from, but I have stuff to make sandwiches, some fruit, beer, water.”

“Sand witches?” Wouldn’t you know he’d offer something she had no clue what it was?

“Yeah, roast beef and cheese.”

“Roasted beef?” She felt her stomach recoil. “You mean the roasted flesh of a bovine?”

His face crinkled in a puzzled expression. “Uh, yeah.”

She shook her head. No way was she going to eat flesh. That was disgusting. “Fruit?”

He pulled a fat red apple from the cooler and she accepted it with a smile, taking a big bite. “Mmmmm,” she moaned, nodding and chewing. “This is heavenly. Thank you.”

He shook his head with a smile and popped open a beer. “Want one?”

“What is it?”

The question stopped him cold turkey. "What is it? You mean you don't know what beer is?"

"Oh yes, of course. A general name for an alcoholic beverage created by the fermentation of a cereal or mixture of cereals and flavored with hops."

He laughed despite thinking that was the oddest way of explaining beer he'd ever heard. It sounded like something quoted from a dictionary. "Yeah, right. So, you've never tasted beer?"

"No."

"Would you like to?"

She cocked her head to one side for a moment then nodded. "Very well, I would love to taste beer."

Caleb handed her his bottle and watched as she lifted it to her lips, tipped it up and guzzled half of it. When she lowered the bottle, her lips pursed for a moment, her eyebrows drew together slightly and then she smiled and handed him back the bottle. "Interesting and—" She suddenly belched then laughed. "My apology."

"No worries," he said and tilted the bottle up for a drink. "So, you want one?"

"Hmmm, no. Thank you."

"Water?"

"Oh yes, please."

Caleb handed her a bottle of water and watched her tip her head back and guzzle it down. How was it possible that just watching her throat as she drank was one of the most erotic things he'd ever seen?

He needed to get a grip. Turn his attention to something besides how much she got to him sexually. Like how out of place she seemed and how she'd fallen from the sky.

"So, Ran, where're you from?"

"Rain," she corrected his pronunciation then answered, "I am not really from anywhere."

"Everyone's from somewhere."

"Really?"

"Well sure. Usually people consider the place they were born or grew up as being the place they're from. So where did you grow up?"

She saw that the moment had come. Either she took a chance and was honest with him, or she had to concoct an elaborate lie. And lies tended to trap the person who spoke them, even if it took a while.

"I have no idea," she said at last.

"What?"

"I don't know where I'm originally from."

"I heard what you said, I just don't understand."

She sighed and picked at the peel of the apple. "I have no memory of my origins. My memories begin when I was...I don't know how old I was. I only know that my first memory is of being in the Song Sang in the Henan province with an elderly man, Jin, whom I came to love as a father."

"China?"

She nodded.

He frowned at her for a moment. "Well your name sure isn't Chinese."

"No, I was not given a Chinese name since it was clear by my appearance that I am not."

"So how'd you end up here?"

"It has been a long journey.

"You want to elaborate on that?"

Raenea looked down at the apple then tossed it away. The questions robbed her of her appetite. "I lived in the Henan province for many years then we moved to India. From there we traveled to Iran and on from there to Egypt. After a time we left Egypt

and spent some time in Russia and the Ukraine, then on to Spain, Portugal and finally to Brazil and the Yucatan. We were in Mexico when my father – when Shen was killed.”

“Which doesn’t explain how you came to be here, falling out of the sky.”

She sighed and studied his face for a long time. He reached over and put his hand on her shoulder. “Rain, I don’t know what kind of trouble you’ve got, but it’s a sure bet that people don’t fall from the sky without a reason. And it’s clear that you’re hesitant to tell me what happened to land you here, but I promise you that whatever you say I’ll keep in confidence and will do whatever I can to help.”

She’d never heard more honesty in a man’s voice, or felt more assurance of sincerity. It was as refreshing as happening upon an oasis in the desert. But still, it was frightening. Secrets, once revealed, could not be retracted.

“You’re right. There are...difficulties in my life. I did not simply fall from the sky. I escaped from a military aircraft en route to a base somewhere in the southwest of the United States.”

Caleb didn’t know what he’d been expecting but it sure as hell wasn’t that. “You...you escaped a military aircraft?”

She nodded confirmation.

“Why did the military have you? Are you a terrorist or something? How did you come to be a military prisoner? What’d you do?”

“I am not a terrorist,” she replied. “I came to be the prisoner of the United States military when my father was killed in an attempted robbery in a street market. I...I killed Shen’s assailant. When the authorities arrived upon the scene a man who claimed to be a representative of your government claimed that he saw what happened. He said that my act was self-defense and he claimed to be traveling with me and Shen. They believed him and he offered to help me arrange to have Shen’s body transported back to his homeland for burial.

“But instead he drugged and held me hostage for weeks, then I was transported via automobile to an airfield where I was put on a jet and flown somewhere. I am not sure where. I was kept drugged. I do not know how much time passed, only that many medical examinations occurred. I was wakened in the night to be told I was being moved. I do not remember much about it except for being transferred to an aircraft. I regained consciousness as the military helicopter I was being transported in flew over this area.”

“And you escaped?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I jumped.”

Caleb wanted to believe but it was too much to ask of any sane man. “That’s impossible. I didn’t hear any helicopter before you landed in the lake.”

“I believe I heard the pilot talking about stealth mode and keeping under the radar to avoid having the flight logged or recorded.”

“Still, you’d have had to have fallen from...thousands of feet. There’s no way you could’ve survived.”

“But as you can see, I did.”

He opened his mouth then closed it and picked up a stick to poke at the fire. “Okay, let’s say I believe that it did happen. Why were you a prisoner to begin with?”

She was silent for a long time. Finally he looked at her. She stared at him silently. Either she was trying to cook up another elaborate tale or she had run out of lies. As beautiful as she was, she had to be lying. Her story was just too fantastic to be real.

“Well?” he asked.

She sighed before speaking. “Caleb, the wisest course of action for you would be to pack your belongings, get in your vehicle and pretend that you never met me.”

“Why?”

“Because they will be looking for me and I do not wish to bring you trouble.”

“What makes you think they’ll be looking? Just what is it about you that makes them want you so bad?”

Again she hesitated then raised her hand, gracefully rotating it at the wrist so that her palm faced upward. “This.”

To his shame, he actually yelped as his body suddenly floated up off the ground. His legs unfolded from a seated position and dangled a good two feet from the earth.

“What the hell?”

She smiled and slowly turned her hand palm down. His feet touched the ground and for a moment he felt a little weak in the knees. Was this possible? Had the accident in the kayak left him unconscious and cooking up fantasies in his mind?

“How’d you do that?”

“I do not know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

Raenea was trying to be patient, to understand how unbelievable and fantastic it must sound and seem to him. But her patience was being sorely tested with the effect the continuous bombardment his maleness was having on her, and the fear that the longer she stayed there the stronger the possibility that she would be found and taken again.

She stood and faced him. “I do not know why it is I possess these abilities. I only know that they exist and because of that your government wants to dissect me, and I have no desire to be their laboratory rodent. Believe me or not. That is your choice. All I know is that I have to find a place that is safe where I cannot be found.”

He stared at her for a few moments then reached out to grasp her hand. “This is—well, it’s pretty unbelievable. I mean people don’t survive falls from helicopters without a scratch, and what you just did...well, it’s like something out of a sci-fi movie. I’m

sorry if I seem harsh, but I'm a down-to-earth kind of guy and I sure as hell haven't ever dealt with anything like this before – well not exactly like this anyway."

"I apologize," she said, wanting to extricate her hand from his. His touch was sending tendrils of fire up her arm to spread throughout her body, igniting the primal female within her and making her long to couple with him. "I have been less than understanding. I realize this must seem quite strange to you. And I do not want to endanger you. Again, the wisest course of action for you would be to –"

"I'm not abandoning you," he said in a determined tone. "That's not an option. If you need a safe place then you can come home with me. To the Circle R."

"What is a Circle R?"

He chuckled and gave her hand a squeeze. "It's a ranch."

"Are there others who live on this ranch?"

"Well, yeah. We have a lot of employees and provide housing for some of them. And my father and step-mother live there from time to time. When they're not at the capital."

"The capital?"

"Yeah. My father's the governor of Arizona."

Fear spiked inside her. "He is part of the government?" She jerked her hand from his and took a step back.

"Of the state, Rain. He's not part of whoever's responsible for what happened to you. I promise you that."

She felt the fear recede at his assurance and wondered if she was being completely foolish placing her trust in him. But something inside her said that he was worthy of trust. She prayed her instincts were not wrong.

"Then the people on your ranch would also be at risk, Caleb. Would you endanger their lives to aid me?"

"They won't be in danger," he insisted and sat down, tugging on her hand to get her to sit beside him. "Here's what we'll do. We'll give you another name and tell everyone that you're—shit, we have to come up with a good cover story."

He fell silent and she waited for him to continue. After a time his eyebrows rose and he turned to her with a smile. "We'll tell them that you're someone I hired to work for me and you're staying at the ranch until you can get settled into a place of your own."

"You want me to work for you? Doing what?"

"Do you know anything about horses or cattle?"

"In the breeding or raising of such animals? No."

"Okay, then what about as a vet assistant?"

"A vet assistant?"

"Yeah. See, along with ranching, I'm also a large animal vet. I have a clinic at the ranch and mainly focus on horses and cattle but sometimes people bring their pets to me for vaccinations or to set a bone or something like that."

"And you would like for me to assist you in caring for these creatures?" The idea appealed to her. She loved animals and had an affinity with almost every species.

"Yeah."

"I think I would enjoy that."

"Great! Now we just need to come up with a new name for you. Got any favorites?"

"Constantia," she said without hesitation.

"Constantia?"

"Not good? Then perhaps Constance, or Conner."

"Conner? Doesn't that sound a little masculine?"

"I do not think so, but if it offends you then perhaps Connery."

"Okay, fine. Connery. And your last name will be..."

"I am not familiar with contemporary American surnames."

"Okay, how about Hoffman?"

"Connery Hoffman," she murmured. "Yes, I will be Connery Hoffman."

Caleb stuck out his hand and she looked at it then at him. "Shake on it," he said. "It's a way of sealing a bargain."

"Oh!" She smiled and put her hand in his. The moment their flesh touched a spark ignited.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I believe it is called energy," she said with a smile.

Caleb chuckled. "Looks like it's going to be real interesting having you around, Rane – I mean Connery."

She grinned in return. For the first time since Shen's death she had hope. And as her teacher had always told her, where there was hope there was possibility. She prayed he was right.

Chapter Three

While Connery took a shower and changed into the clothes Caleb had found for her, some things his sister-in-law Ana had left at the ranch, he went through the refrigerator to see what he had to offer her in the way of food. Saying a silent thanks to his housekeeper Hannah, he pulled out a plate of fried chicken, containers of potato salad, green beans and corn.

Hannah had been working for him ever since his father took office and Caleb took over running the ranch. She was the wife of his ranch foreman Clyde, and one of the best cooks in three counties. Not only did she always make sure he had plenty to eat, but she kept the place as immaculate as Clara, his step-mother had done all his life.

He filled two plates and put them into the microwave to heat. He leaned back against the counter. He wondered what his family would say if he told them a woman fell out of the sky and damn near drowned him? They'd probably call him loco. Hell, he was having a little trouble believing it'd happened.

He and Connery had decided to head back to the ranch during the night. They could both probably use a good night's sleep, and he wanted to do some checking before daybreak, just to see if he could find out anything about the military helicopter she told him about.

Not that he didn't believe her. Exactly. He just wanted to check. He got his laptop from the office and brought it to the kitchen, accessing the local news site. There was nothing about a crash of any kind or a missing woman.

Acting on impulse he called his father.

"Hey, Dad," he said as soon as the call was answered. "Listen, have you heard anything about any plane crashes around here?"

"What makes you ask, son?"

“No real reason. Just thought I heard an engine when I was packing it in for the day at the lake. Sounded like it was having engine trouble. But I never saw anything...”

“You heard this where?”

“At the west end of TR Lake.”

“Caleb, you know that if there was information about a crashed military helicopter I couldn’t tell you about it. Hell, boy, if the two pilots had miraculously escaped when the bird hit a substation and blew up, blacking out power for fifty square miles, I couldn’t tell you. Couldn’t say a damn word if both of the pilots claimed that a woman died in the crash. Sorry, boy, but I just don’t have any news to share with you.”

Caleb grinned. Charlie took his position as governor seriously, but his loyalty to and trust of his sons was still rock solid.

“I hear ya. Well, thanks anyway, Dad. Love to Clara. Talk to you later.”

He hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. Things were really getting strange. The beeper on the microwave sounded and he rose to take the plates to the table. He was pouring two glasses of iced tea when Connery appeared in the door.

“Whatever that is, it smells delicious.”

The sight of her had him overfilling the glass. Tea slopped over the rim and onto the kitchen counter. “Shit!” He put down the tea pitcher and made a grab for the towel, but she beat him to it and started mopping up the mess.

She smelled of soap and woman. Clean and inviting. Her long hair was still wet, hanging nearly to her waist. Even without the enhancement of makeup she was stunning.

And the clothing he’d given her would have made most women green with envy to have achieved such a look. The jeans, an old pair of Ana’s, were a bit loose and hung low on her hips. The T-shirt was tight across the chest, emphasizing her full breasts, and fell a good three inches short of her navel, displaying her tight torso and an interesting belly ring in her navel.

It was enough to have things south of the belt taking way too much of the blood supply from his brain. All he could do was stare. And breathe. Damn, she smelled good.

"Thanks," he finally managed as she moved to wring out the wet cloth in the sink and rinse it out.

He took the glasses of tea to the table. "Hope this is okay."

She took a seat and looked down at the plate in front of her. She picked up her fork and pointed to the chicken leg on her plate. "What's that?"

"Chicken."

"That is a breed of domesticated fowl, correct?"

"Uh, yeah."

She shuddered and pointed to the potato salad. "And this?"

"Potato salad."

She speared a chunk and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes closed as she chewed and a moan of "hmmmm" came from her throat. She opened her eyes, grinned at him and dug in.

Caleb watched in amazement. Aside from the chicken, that went untouched, Connery cleaned her plate in a matter of minutes, *hmmming* the whole time like it was the best food she'd ever tasted.

She put her fork down on her plate, lifted her glass of tea and drained it.

"That was so delicious," she said with a smile. "Did you prepare all of this?"

Caleb shook his head with a smile. "Nope. My housekeeper Hannah deserves the credit."

"You have a housekeeper? Well, she is quite an accomplished chef and that...potato salad is the most marvelous thing I've ever tasted. Thank you."

"Rain— Shit on a stick! I mean Connery. I've got to get used to that. Anyway, I talked with my father and apparently a military helicopter went down, crashing into an

electrical substation and blacking out power for miles. The two pilots survived, and from what I know, claim that a woman died in the crash.”

There was no reaction at all from her at the news. Her expression did not change in the least. Either she was really good at concealing things or she was in shock.

“Why would they claim you were killed?”

She stared at him without expression. “Come on,” he encouraged. “I swear you can trust me. I just need to know how you ended up in that lake and why...” He shook his head and ran one hand back through his hair. “Why when you hit the water it moved out like something big and round had hit it.”

Connery watched him for a few moments then leaned back in her chair. “Caleb, there are some things that are best left unexplained. You already know too much. And you’re such a wonderful man. Smart, compassionate, sexy as...as sin, and you have a good life. Getting involved with me could be disastrous. While I appreciate everything you have done for me and all you have offered, I have to remind you that the best thing for you and everyone you care about is for me to just walk out the door and disappear and you to pretend that you never saw or heard of me.”

The words “sexy as sin” hit him like a dose of Viagra. One moment his mind was completely focused on the mystery of her and the next he had a raging hard-on and could barely think of anything but jumping up, throwing her over his shoulder and taking her to his bed.

Christ on a crutch! He shifted in his seat, trying to get more comfortable and will his erection to subside. “Darlin’, that’s the absolute worst way to dissuade me. Not that I don’t appreciate the compliments, but right now I’m sitting across the table from the biggest mystery I’ve ever encountered and I’m a true-blue sucker for mysteries.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” she said.

“And satisfaction brought it back,” he countered and was rewarded with a rise of color on her face.

She pushed back and stood. "Trust me, Caleb, there's nothing I'd like more than to discover the satisfaction I've no doubt you could deliver, but the longer I stay the more dangerous it is for you."

He stood and rounded the table to her. "Why don't you let me decide if you're too dangerous?"

She looked up at him and for a moment, a wistful expression appeared on her face. He put his hand on top of her shoulder. "Just level with me. If it's too much, I'll back down. But at least let me make the decision for myself."

It had been a while since she'd trusted anyone, but the urge to trust Caleb was getting stronger every moment. Was it because of the chemistry between them, or was it what she saw in his eyes? That look of honesty and integrity that shone like a clear light.

Help! She was afraid and didn't know what to do. She needed a sign.

"I have to be outside," she said in a choked voice, feeling suddenly claustrophobic. "Please, the walls are crowding in."

Caleb took her by the arm and led her out the back door onto a wide porch with wooden rocking chairs padded with thick cushions. The stars twinkled overhead in the clear sky and a breeze lifted her drying hair. She pulled away from him and went to the railing circling the porch.

Closing her eyes, she put both hands on the rail and raised her face, taking in a long, slow, deep breath. The sound of the wind and the night creatures filled her mind, soothing and comforting. For a long time she stood rooted in place, sending out a silent plea for guidance. Finally she opened her eyes. And a star shot across the sky.

"Penny for your thoughts," Caleb said softly from beside her where he leaned against one of the wooden columns that supported the roof of the porch.

Connery looked at him for a moment. Did he have any idea how truly gorgeous he was? Like some legend sprung to life, a god of old, capable of conquering the strongest opponent or soothing the most horrific fears from a frightened heart.

"Tell me about this military transport again," she said

"All I know is that it went down at a substation and blew up."

"But the pilots are unharmed?"

"Yeah, they're fine."

"Thank the stars."

"You were worried about people who were holding you captive?"

She nodded. "Those men were simply following orders. They believed it was for the greater good. I could not bear the responsibility of their deaths."

"And all of this is because you can...levitate stuff?"

"No."

"Then what?"

She sighed and dropped her head for a moment then looked up at him. "Because of that," she said, "and other things."

"What other things?"

When she didn't answer he took hold of her upper arms and leaned down, looking her square in the eyes. "Come on...Conn. What other things?"

"You do not want to know."

"Oh yes I do."

She chewed her bottom lip for a moment, her eyes searching his. "Very well. Things such as this."

And with that she vanished.

"Holy fuck," he breathed. "How're you doing this?"

"I have no idea," she answered, becoming visible again and dreading the barrage of questions she knew would be forthcoming.

But instead of questions, he pulled her to him, engulfing her in his embrace. "Don't be scared, Conn. I won't let them find you. You're safe here. I give you my word."

She wanted to believe that. More than she could express. But at the moment, expressing anything would have been a monumental task. The feel of his hard body against hers and his arms holding her tightly had her body singing like electricity on a wire.

"You must release me," she managed to whisper.

"What's wrong?" He ended the embrace but kept his hands on top of her shoulders.

"You affect me, Caleb."

"Affect you?"

"Yes," she looked up at him. "Sexually."

"And that's bad? Baby, you've been affecting me since I woke up and saw you kneeling beside me."

"It's not the same."

"Oh? Well what's different about it? Sexual attraction is pretty simple."

She did not know how to say it and it not sound insulting. "Desiring may be simple. But acting upon it presents many complications."

"Like what?"

"Like whether you would be able to satisfy my needs."

He chuckled then laughed out loud. "Honey, if that's all you're worried about, then you've got no worries at all because I promise you that when we're done, you'll definitely be satisfied."

She admired his confidence and was tempted to test his claims. But now was not the time. She still had much acclimating to do in order to fit in and sex would only distract her from what she needed to learn.

Not willing to insult his manhood, she smiled at him. "I will keep that in mind. However, right now there are more pressing matters to attend to. If I am going to act in the role of your assistant, I need to learn about the care of animals. And I need to learn to speak in the same rhythm and cadence of the natives of this area. Otherwise, I will be unable to blend in and if I do not blend in, then I could attract undue attention."

"Babe, you'd attract attention if you didn't mutter a word."

She couldn't help but smile, and felt a warm flush stain the crotch of her jeans at his words. "I doubt that. But I do need to learn and you are the only teacher I have. So, will you teach me of animal medicine?"

"Sure, what do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"That's a tall order, honey. I guess I could dig out my old textbooks and you could start on them. But there's no way you'll know it all by morning."

"Books would be excellent," she agreed enthusiastically.

"Okay, I think I have them packed in a box in the attic. I'll go look."

"Thank you, Caleb." She stood on tiptoe to brush her lips against his. He gathered her to him and slanted his mouth across hers. Despite her intentions to not fall victim to desire, she could not stop her lips from parting beneath his. Could not stop her tongue from twining with his. It was a kiss that promised of great passion, and also great tenderness. She wanted it to last forever, but he pulled back.

"A promise," he said.

"A promise?" She did not understand.

"Of what's to come."

She actually felt her knees go weak. He gave her a sexy grin and went inside the house. She turned and looked up at the stars. If only she could find a way to remain here and explore the possibility of passion and emotion he offered. Closing her eyes she sent the wish skyward.

Chapter Four

Connery had been awake all night, reading the books Caleb had provided her and accessing the documents on the Internet site he'd connected to so that she could read professional articles on the topic of animal medicine.

She'd finished the material long before dawn but was not sleepy. She didn't require a lot of sleep. She'd spent the intervening hours going to different sites on the Internet, reading excerpts from popular fiction, watching bits and pieces of shows on the television and trying to decide the best course of action. For the first time in her life she found herself drawn to a man. And not merely for sexual gratification. Caleb promised more and she longed to explore that attraction, and the emotion he evoked in her. She wanted to remain with him, here on his ranch.

But that created conflict within her. Unless the government was convinced beyond all doubt that she'd died in the crash, they would be searching for her. And that would put Caleb and everyone on the Circle R in harm's way. While the government of his country professed to be a proponent of human rights, when it came to certain things, they were quite apt to ignore the rights of the individual in order to achieve their means. She had no argument with them. In the defense of one's homeland, sometimes harsh measures were required. But she was no threat and did not want to be treated as such.

She had to find out if they were convinced she'd died in the crash. It was the only way she'd be able to stay.

A knock at the door had her turning from her place at the window. "Yes?"

Caleb opened the door. "You're up."

"Yes."

He entered the room and walked over to the bed where the books he'd loaned her were scattered on the spread. The laptop screen displayed an article from a university site.

"How'd you fare with the reading?" he asked.

"Very well, thank you." She walked over to the bed and started stacking up the books. "I appreciate you allowing me to read your books. They were quite informative."

"You..." He reached up and ran his hand through his hair, an affectation she was coming to recognize as something he did when he was uncertain or confused. "You're finished?"

"Yes." She finished stacking the books into three neat piles.

"All of them?"

"Yes," she said then realized her blunder and looked at him anxiously.

He regarded her in silence for a moment. "You read all of these books? In one night?"

Connery looked away. Once again she found herself in the position of having to explain things she had no answers for.

"Connery?"

"Yes, Caleb," she said and met his eyes. "I read all of them. And all of the documents on the site you opened for me and all of the documents those linked to. And I watched your television and listened to your local newscasts so that I might learn to speak as you do. And yes, all in one night."

"How's that possible?"

"I don't know."

His hand went to his hair again which made her feel a little agitated. "Caleb, I'd explain it to you if I understood it. I don't know how I'm able to do these things that seem so odd to others. This is how I've been as long as I can remember so it's normal to me. I know it seems strange to you – to others – but to me it's just natural."

“Like becoming invisible and levitating.”

“Yes.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed and patted the spread beside him. “Come here, Conn. Let’s talk.”

She took a seat on the end of the bed and angled to face him. “What’s up?” she asked, using a phrase she’d learned from the television.

Caleb smiled at the question. “Not bad. You’re already sounding more like a local. I spoke with my father this morning and apparently the military’s shut down the crash site. No civilians allowed and no information is being shared. The pilot and co-pilot have been moved to an undisclosed location but they’re still claiming that the woman they were transporting was killed in the crash.”

She nodded but made no comment and after a moment he continued. “There was a small mention sent out via the Associated Press that a military helicopter crashed but the crew survived. No mention of a woman being on the craft.”

“Then we have no way of knowing if they truly believe me dead.”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Then I should go.”

“Why?”

“Because if they do think I’m alive, they’ll search for me. And that places you and everyone here in danger.”

“Connery, our government isn’t going to just come in here and kill people. And even if they are looking for you, there’s no reason for them to look here. We’re miles off the flight path.”

“Someone could discover you were at the lake and want to question you.” She saw surprise register on his face and realized he’d not considered that. “I do not want you to lie for me, Caleb. If they come, you must be able to say truthfully that I am not here.”

He leaned forward to reach for her hand. As before, his touch elicited a flash of scintillating energy that slithered through her veins like Kudalini, rising hot and overwhelming.

“Christ on a crutch,” she whispered, unconsciously mimicking his tone and cadence.

Caleb smiled and lifted her hand to his lips. “I’m gonna take that as something good, if you don’t mind.”

Conn returned his smile. “This might be a lot more difficult than I imagined.”

“What?”

“Being around you. Honestly, Caleb, you affect me.”

“Likewise,” he murmured, running his lips over her knuckles.

She couldn’t take it. Even this simple act was too potent. It overwhelmed her, robbed her of her ability to think rationally. Clearly they would not be able to effectively carry on their planned masquerade with so much sexual energy arcing between them. At least she couldn’t.

And that meant there was only one option. Shoving aside doubts, she angled to face him and draped her arm around his shoulder to run her hand into his thick mane of hair.

His eyes widened slightly in surprise as she leaned in close and whispered, “Will you allow me to make love to you, Caleb?”

“Absolutely,” he replied without hesitation.

“Then so be it.” Her lips closed on his softly.

Caleb pulled her onto his lap, molding her body against his as he plundered her mouth. Her hands roamed over his shoulders and back, her lips soft and pliant beneath his and her luscious ass rocking back and forth, inflaming an erection that already had him straining painfully in his jeans.

When she pulled away from the kiss, her lips trailing over his face and down his neck, he could have sworn he felt sparks of electricity tingle on his skin. Her hands moved to his shirt, working nimbly at the buttons. Each inch of soft and warm skin she exposed, her lips touched. It was like liquid fire radiating out from each touch until he felt suffused with a heat that had his belly tightening and his dick throbbing.

Slipping off his lap, she stood beside the bed, leaning forward to continue trailing her lips over his skin as she pushed the shirt off his shoulders to bare them. He helped, pulling the shirt off and letting it fall on the floor.

“Magnificent,” she whispered as she straightened and looked at him. “Have you any idea what a perfectly beautiful man you are?”

He opened his mouth to return the compliment but she came to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and filling his mouth with her questing tongue. Her taste was sweet and exotic and unlike anything he’d ever experienced. Her firm lush breasts pressed against his chest, the hard nipples giving testimony to her excitement.

He could not resist cupping her breasts, his thumbs tracking slowly over the hard buds of her nipples that strained against the thin fabric of her T-shirt. He was rewarded with a sound not unlike a purr that came from her throat.

Not breaking the kiss, he reluctantly moved his hands from her breasts to pull off his boots and socks. When he stood and reached to loosen his belt, her hands quickly pushed his aside, leaving him free to return to the pleasure of fondling her breasts as she quickly divested him of his jeans.

Once he stepped free of the denim pooled around his ankles, she ended the kiss and stepped back. Her eyes moved slowly down the length of him and back up, stopping on his eyes and holding.

“As I heard last night on television...hot damn!”

Caleb grinned and reached out to take hold of the bottom of her T-shirt and strip it up over her head. Before he could toss the garment aside she was sliding out of her jeans.

"The feeling's mutual," he murmured, taking in her nude beauty and taking note of the hairless state of her sex. That in itself was a major turn-on. He couldn't resist reaching out and tracing his fingers over the bare temptation.

"Damn, that's some wax job, darlin'," he commented at the silken feel against his fingers.

"Wax job?" she asked as her hands started a slow trek from his chest to his groin.

Caleb was momentarily distracted by the question. "Your pussy, babe. All the hair's gone. And it's way too smooth for a shave job, so you had to have it waxed."

"Oh," she laughed and let her hands drop lower to fist his erection. "No, *darlin'*, that's all natural, just like the rest of me."

Caleb felt his eyebrows rise and his dick throb. He'd never heard of a woman naturally having no body hair. Sure as shit, Conn was a horse of a different color.

"Well, damn," he breathed just before she pressed up against him, rubbing her hard nipples against him and wedging his dick, still gripped in both her hands, between them.

"I don't want to talk, Caleb," she whispered against his skin and then nipped at the firm swell of his chest. "I want to feel you, and taste you, and take you inside me."

"You're singing my song, honey," he replied but resisted when she started to push him back on the bed. "Baby, there's a couple of things we need to clear up before we start a hard ride."

"What things?" She stepped back and regarded him with a look he read as frustration.

"Things like STDs."

"What is an STD?"

Caleb groaned and sat down on the bed. "You don't know about STDs? Damn, Conn, are you from another planet? Sexually transmitted diseases."

“Oh. Yes, I learned about such diseases. Dreadful. In the worldwide HIV or AIDS epidemic, the continent of Africa has the unfortunate distinction of having the highest prevalence of reported cases of infection, at well over five million people. There is not a continent on the planet that does not have a substantial number of such cases. It appears the prevalence rates are far higher in developing countries where treatment is less accessible. For example, among the female population, syphilis rates can be from ten to one hundred times higher in developing countries. Gonorrhea and chlamydia rates also prove to be markedly higher and –”

“Honey, I’m not talking about statistics,” Caleb interrupted. “I’m talking about you and me and whether either of us is infected.”

“Oh, well then you have no need to fear. I carry no disease of any kind.”

Caleb smiled and shook his head. “And you know this because?”

Conn was taken aback by the question. She’d always known if there was a disease, infection, virus or bacteria trying to attack her. She assumed everyone was the same in that respect. Clearly she was mistaken.

She took a seat on the bed beside Caleb. “Are you disease free?”

“Yes.”

“And you know this how?”

“I have regular tests and I practice safe sex.”

“You are referring to such things as condoms?”

“So you know about that?”

“Yes, I saw an advertisement for Trojan. Apparently a preferred and dependable brand. And you use these things in your sexual activities?”

“Yeah.”

She grimaced at him. “Doesn’t that detract from the tactile experience?”

Caleb chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, it is kind of a dampener.”

“But since neither of us carry a disease—”

“Honey, I’m not calling you a liar, but how can you know you’re not infected if you haven’t been tested?”

“My body tells me when it is in danger from any attack.”

“No way.”

“I would not lie about such a thing, Caleb. However, I do not wish to cause you discomfort and I would gladly undergo whatever testing is required, but I cannot risk such a procedure. “I deeply regret that I cannot enjoy the delights of your magnificent body, but fully understand your reluctance and—”

“Hey now, hold on,” he interrupted. “I didn’t say we couldn’t enjoy ourselves, just that we have to steer clear of certain things until we’re sure.”

“Such as cunnilingus.”

“Yeah, afraid so.”

She thought about it for a moment then smiled up at him. “Well, that only applies to you, Caleb. You did say you had undergone the tests and are disease free, correct?”

“Yeah.”

She rose and stepped in front of him putting her hands on his shoulders to push him back on the bed. “Then there is nothing stopping me from pleasuring you, is there?” she asked right before she lowered down and ran her tongue over the head of his penis.

Caleb opened his mouth to respond, but that one lick sent a bolt of heat through him strong enough to have only an expulsion of air escaping his lips. She straightened with a sexy smile on her face. “This would be much more comfortable if you were fully on the bed.”

He wasted no time scooting back so that he was stretched out on the bed. Conn’s eyes moved over him in such a heated manner that it was almost tangible. She climbed

up on the bed, straddling his body, her moist sex settled firmly on his belly, creating a burn that had his cock pulsing.

When she started to speak softly, her voice was fully her own, that exotic husky tone and musical accent. "I want you to lie very still, Caleb. Let your body relax and loosen. I will be as gentle or rough as you wish, but want only to please you. Can you submit to that?"

"I think I can manage," he quipped, thinking she really was quite unusual. Most women were interested only in the pleasure a man had to give them. At least from his experience. Ride the wild bull seemed to be the current theme. The longer and harder you were and the more time you could stay in the saddle, the better the women seemed to like it. To have a woman wanting nothing more than to give him pleasure was not only an unexpected treat, it was downright unprecedented.

"Did you know," she said softly, leaning forward and bracing herself on her left arm, tracing her fingertips lightly along the side of his face. "That there is a common misperception that men only have sexual feelings in their penis?"

She lowered, her breasts lightly pressing against his chest. Her lips grazed his face and traced slowly to his ear. "For example," she whispered. "There are numerous nerve endings in the ear. Making it a highly erogenous area."

Caleb couldn't have agreed more when her lips closed on his earlobe and her tongue played with the pliant flesh.

"Hmmm-ummmm," he hummed, gathering her long hair in his hands and smoothing it back over her shoulders.

"Not simply the ear itself," she whispered then ran her tongue along its rim. "But the area surrounding it."

Her lips moved to a point just below his ear and he could have sworn he felt his heart beat in that one place as her lips and tongue caressed it. Slowly and gently her lips moved down his neck and along the edge of his collarbone, stopping at the hollow of his throat then working upward, over the peak of his chin.

When she reached his mouth and sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, biting lightly, he couldn't stop his hands from tightening in her hair.

That sound like a purr came from her and a spicy sweet smell rose in the air. He could feel the wetness from her pussy on his belly and the hard nubs of her nipples pressing against him. Combined with the sudden burst of pleasure that came from her tongue invading his mouth, her hands fisting in his hair to hold him captive, Caleb felt like he was about to pop a testicle, he was so worked up.

Conn took her time, exploring his mouth, tasting and biting until at last she gave an excited purr and sat up, her eyes at that half-mast stage that is a true signal of desire.

"Interestingly," she crooned, tracing her fingertips over his chest to circle his nipples, "some men have very sensitive nipples."

Her fingers circled then fastened on his nipples, squeezing lightly, then more firmly, at the same time, rocking on his belly so that he felt the slick slide of her pussy on his skin.

"Others find it less stimulating," she continued, leaning down to clamp her mouth on one nipple.

Caleb had never been particularly sensitive in that area, but Conn put a new spin on things. By the time her mouth was sliding down the center of his torso, he was pretty sure that if she even touched his dick, he'd come like Old Faithful, spewing a geyser.

Conn's tongue painted a trail of fire from his torso to groin, then she stopped and repositioned, spreading his legs so that she knelt between them, her weight on her elbows and knees so that her ass was higher than her head.

The position alone was erotic enough to have his balls tightening and his dick throbbing. She gathered his testicles in her hand, lifting them and blowing lightly on the hot skin beneath them.

Caleb was surprised at the way his body jolted. How could something as simple as a breath feel that good? When her fingers squeezed the tissue between his testicles and anus, massaging up and down, pre-cum beaded on the head of his dick.

"Hmmm," she murmured and ran her tongue over the head, then blew on it, the sensation making a shiver dance over his skin.

"I'm going to take you to the edge of climax, Caleb," she whispered. "But I don't want you to come. You have to resist it."

And with that she took him in her mouth. Her fingers played over his scrotum, perineum and between his buttocks to circle and tease his anus. And all the while her hot, wet mouth worked on him.

His balls were as hard as stone, drawn up tight, and his belly was starting to tense, his body arching up as orgasm pressed closer.

"No," she whispered and slowed, running her tongue over the head of his cock and around it, but not taking him in her mouth. "Not yet."

"Darlin', you're killing me," he replied in mock complaint.

"Not even close," she replied and started over.

By the third time, Caleb's entire body was a sizzling network of nerves that were about to drive him crazy. He'd been as submissive as he could be, but the need was too great to submit further.

He sat up, slung his leg over her and got off the bed.

Conn watched as he left the room. She didn't understand. She knew he was enjoying it. His body told her that. So why did he leave?

She started to get up and follow but before she could get off the bed, he was back, sliding a condom on.

"My turn," he said and rolled her over onto her back, spreading her legs with his knees as he knelt between them. "I'd love to return the favor, honey, but right now all I can think about is sinking into that sweet, hot pussy and riding you long and hard."

Conn felt a burst of wetness from her vagina at his words and the look on his face. Here was a man who meant exactly what he said. She could only hope that he lived up to his words.

She reached out to take his penis in her hand and guide it to her channel. The moment he was in position, she lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist, pulling him down onto her and his penis deep inside her.

He was thick and long. She felt the initial resistance of her body to the penetration and gasped.

“Too much?” he asked, easing up on the pressure he was exerting.

She shook her head, willing her body to accommodate, rolling her hips to aid the slow push he gave. “Take me,” she moaned as need suddenly erased all but the hunger. “Feel my hunger.” She reached up and pulled him down to meet her lips.

Caleb had heard those words before, but never had it caused him to lose his mind. No sooner had their lips met than everything but the feel and smell and look of her vanished. There was no sense of time or place. There was only the two of them, joined. Hearts pounding in unison, breaths fast and hard, the slap of flesh on flesh as he stroked inside her.

He felt something swell inside him, something he didn’t recognize. It was erotic and powerful and hungry. He pushed up, braced on his hands so that he could look down at her.

Her eyes were dancing with light, a swirling mix of colors that was almost dizzying to see. But he couldn’t pull his eyes away. The lights seemed to suck him in, until he was blind, lost in a whirlwind of color and sensation.

The feelings grew stronger, electric, overwhelming. The approach of orgasm like the rumble of a giant train getting ever closer. He couldn’t tell if the feelings belonged to him or her. There didn’t seem to be a distinction between the two. He could swear that he felt her inside him, inside his mind. Like they were one mind.

He heard her cry his name at the same moment all control was stripped from him. Like a leaf caught in a hurricane, he surrendered to the storm of sensation, letting it take him where it would.

When at last the tempest began to fade, sight returned. Conn was watching him, the lights fading in her eyes.

Caleb gave in to the weakness that followed and rolled over onto his back, pulling her close to his side. For a few minutes he simply drifted in the satisfied glow, closing his eyes and letting his pulse and respiration normalize.

When he opened his eyes she was watching.

“Darlin’, I don’t know what you call that, but it’s for damn sure, I’ve never felt anything like it in my life.”

“Does that mean you’re eager to repeat the experience?”

“Oh yeah, it most definitely means that.”

She nodded and sat. “Then we have to have a way to have my blood tested to prove that I am not infected with any disease, because next time I don’t want anything between us. You were quite correct. It dampens the experience.”

Caleb couldn’t help it. He laughed. And when Conn’s brows drew together in a frown, he laughed harder. She started to get off the bed, but he pulled her down beside him, wrapping his arms around her.

“I fail to see what is humorous,” she muttered against his chest.

Caleb cleared his throat and released her so that she could look up at him. “Conn, I’m sorry. It’s just that—well the truth is, if what I just felt was in any way dampened, then I’m not sure I could survive the full experience because...well because...damn, woman.”

She stared at him with a confused frown. “Because damn woman? That is a good thing?”

Caleb’s laughter returned. “You’re damn skippy, baby. That’s a very good thing.”

Chapter Five

Pandora turned away from the man seated across from her. Azarth's visit had been unannounced and unwelcome. It vexed her that her informants had not discovered the girl's whereabouts before Azarth's arrival. For that was the only reason he was there.

"There can be *no* other explanation," Azarth insisted. "The tests conducted by the government facility prove beyond all doubt that she is of V'Kar."

"There are many of V'Kar on this world," she replied, returning her eyes to his.

"And all accounted for from the reports gathered from all factions."

"Mistakes happen."

"This is no mistake!" He jumped to his feet. "This is your doing! You and your damnable Sisterhood. Your infernal unending games. You've done this and I want to know why."

She rose slowly, never breaking eye contact, making sure he felt the power she projected. "It would serve you well to remember to whom you speak, Minister."

He stared angrily at her for a few moments then slumped back into his chair. "Have you any idea the difficulty this creates? There are far too many who know of her existence to merely erase records. We would have to alter the memory of scores of people to eliminate knowledge of her existence. Not to mention the fact that we'd have to wipe out the entire Alliance, a task you well know to be impossible. Their numbers are too vast."

"That is preposterous as you well know. Should we find the need to have information altered or deleted, we merely have to activate the cells within the respective branch of whatever world government possesses the data."

“And...” She held up her hand for silence as he opened his mouth to speak. “Perhaps it would be prudent to look at the situation from another perspective. If—and mind you, this is in no way an admission, merely a thought on a hypothetical—if this female does exist and is not a V’Karian that can be accounted for, then we must assume that she has either been sent here from V’Kar as an emissary or spy.”

“That possibility has already been explored and discounted. The Sisterhood controls the gate. Passage is impossible without their permission. Without your permission, Mother Superior. Therefore it stands to reason that if there is another of us here on this world, it is because of a direct dictate from you.”

“There are other possibilities, Azarth. However, if it will assuage your concerns, I will have the Sisterhood provide a detailed accounting of the whereabouts of our entire conclave.”

Azarth barked a laugh. “As if I would trust such an accounting. Don’t assume that high and mighty look with me. We both know that you and your conclave of witches are not above lies and subterfuge if it suits your purpose.”

“Such a high opinion you have of us, Azarth. I’m sure I’m blushing from the barrage of compliments.”

He scowled and fell silent for a few moments. “Then let us set aside our respective titles for a moment. Not Mother Superior to Minister of Science and Medicine, but one lover to another. Tell me the truth. Is this female one of your acolytes?”

She smiled, thinking how well he knew her. Approach her from a political stance and he knew he would get nothing from her. Appeal to her as her lover of more years than she could count, and he knew she would feel compelled to speak the truth. At least as much of it as she felt was safe for him to know.

“Azarth, upon my honor I do assure you that this female of whom you speak is not now nor has ever been a member of the order. Nor is she a resident of any of the worlds of V’Kar.”

“Then who is she?” he asked.

“Hope.”

“Hope? For what?”

“Our salvation.”

He stared at her for a long time. She knew there were questions swirling through his mind. She could hear them. Just as she knew that he was certain that she would provide no more answers. They might be lovers who had been together longer than humans had walked this green world, but still they were separated by position. He belonged to the J'Zahn, the ruling council of V'Kar, who answered only to the Emperor. And she was the leader of a group more powerful than the J'Zahn and the emperor combined. For she controlled the Sisterhood, the most powerful and feared body in this galaxy or her own.

At length Azarth stood and offered his hand. “I pray that your actions are grounded in wisdom and are instituted for the welfare of our people, for this will surely see rise to tensions between the factions here on Earth.”

“There are always tensions between the factions, my darling,” she replied, placing her hand in his and rising. “Just as there are always battles to be waged and won against the Alliance. But make no mistake. Regardless of the actions of our people here, or the interference and inconvenience created by the Alliance, our mission has not altered from its original course. You and I are here for one reason. To save our people. All the people of V'Kar. Should there exist a being who can further that cause, I submit to you that it is our responsibility to safeguard that person at all costs. For not only our lives, but the life of an entire star system depends upon it.”

“Then so be it,” he whispered and lowered his head over her hand.

Pandora smiled and went into his embrace when he raised his head. It was clear that she would have to take a personal role in assuring that her plans did not fall asunder. But for the moment, she could indulge herself in the pleasures her lover was most skilled at providing.

* * * * *

Caleb took the rutted old trail path to the house and left his truck parked out behind the house. He'd been out all day helping with the roundup and was hot, sweaty and tired. He was eager to get clean and see Conn. He'd left her in charge of the clinic today. She'd already proven herself capable of handling just about anything. And she had a radio she could use to call him in case of an emergency.

Conn was certainly acclimating to being on the ranch. It'd been only a few weeks and already everyone had come to accept her as one of their own. Hannah was even teaching her to cook.

And he was having the most amazing sex of his life. Tonight if he was lucky he'd have her for the first time without a condom. They'd ordered every home HIV test on the market and done all of them this morning. When he'd called her later in the day she was excited to tell him that they all came back negative.

The sound of voices from inside the house drew his attention as he mounted the steps. He knocked the dust off his boots and hurried inside.

Conn was at the kitchen counter, pouring iced tea into glasses. At the table sat his half-brother Chase and Chase's wife Ana. Conn turned at the sound of the door closing. "Caleb!"

He could see the look of anxiety in her eyes and understood it all too well. It was one thing to be around the people who worked on the ranch. They were going to accept whatever story Caleb told them about Conn. His family was another matter.

"Hey." He resisted the urge to gather her in his arms and tell her everything was going to be okay. No use in letting on to Chase or Ana how close he and Conn really were.

"Hey, bro." He greeted Chase with a handshake then walked over to lean down and give Ana a kiss. "Hey, beautiful. What brings you here?"

"Escape," Ana said with a smile. "There's a houseful of teenagers at our place and we couldn't take the music any longer. Besides, Chase wanted to pick up that horse."

Caleb laughed. "You still figuring on training that mare for barrel racing?"

"Yep," Chase replied and cut his eyes at Conn. "So, Miss Hoffman here tells us that she's your new vet assistant."

"Yep." Caleb avoided Chase's eyes and headed for the sink to wash his hands. Call it whatever you wanted but Chase had a way of seeing through a lie. Caleb had never known if it was due to his mixed heritage or something of Ana had rubbed off on him. Chase's mother was Charlie's first wife, a full-blooded Apache. And Ana was a witch.

"I invited your family to stay for dinner," Conn said softly, surprising him more by speaking in an almost perfect imitation of his accent, than by her statement. "I hope that's okay. Hannah said there's a casserole in the oven, and a rack of ribs and I made a broccoli salad and cooked some fresh...snap peas, I think she called them."

"Sounds good." Caleb gave her a smile, hoping it would ease her anxiety. "Here, let me help you with those glasses."

They distributed the glasses of tea and took a seat at the table. Caleb sat down between Ana and Conn, and Ana wrinkled up her nose at him. "Honey, you need a shower in the worst kind of way. Why don't you run on upstairs and clean up? Chase and I'll entertain Conn."

Leaving Conn alone with Chase and Ana was the last thing Caleb wanted to do but he saw no way to refuse without it seeming suspicious. "Good idea," he said and lifted his glass to drain it. "Be back in a few."

He hated the pleading look he saw in Conn's eyes when he looked at her. Hoping he hadn't made a huge mistake, he took the stairs three at a time.

Conn watched Caleb leave the room with a sinking feeling in her stomach. She turned and looked at his brother, Chase. There was something very primal and male about him. He was probably the most intensely sexual male she'd ever seen.

His dark eyes seemed like endless wells of mystery and his equally dark hair was long and worn loose. Caleb had said that he and Chase were half-brothers. Whatever race Chase belonged to must be one where there were people of great power because there was an air of power about him.

“So, what’s the lowdown on you and my little brother, darlin’?” he asked.

Conn looked from him to Ana and back to him. “As I mentioned previously, I am employed as a—”

“What happened to your accent?” Chase interrupted.

Conn felt like a bird caught in the gaze of a viper. She’d made a terrible blunder. How to undo it, she hadn’t a clue.

“I...I...” She looked at Ana to find Ana smiling at her. And in that smile was something Conn had not expected. Acceptance. How was it that she would sense something like that from Ana? And why did it have such strength and assurance?”

“It’s okay,” Ana said and reached out to put her hand on top of Conn’s. “We’ve all had secrets from time to time, or had to hide who and what we are. But you’re safe with us, Conn. In fact, why don’t we ignore Chase’s question for the moment and let me tell you a little about this family.”

“Ana,” Chase growled in a tone that sounded distinctly like a warning to Conn.

Ana didn’t appear to take it as such. She just smiled and waved the warning aside. “Simmer down, cowboy. We’re treading on safe ground here. Trust me.”

“If you say so,” he relented and leaned back in his chair to watch.

Ana turned her attention back to Conn. “To start with, I’m a witch. Not the stir-your-cauldron, do-evil-deeds and scare-little-children variety. I’m a white-lighter. Chase and Caleb have two other brothers, Cole and Clay. They’re twins. Cole’s married to a skin-walker. At least that’s what the Navaho call them and she’s part Native American like Chase—only different tribes. She’s what you might call a were-cat because she can take on the shape of a mountain lion. Clay’s wife Rusty is also a witch.

Another white-lighter. She doesn't use her power too much except for communicating with animals and she's really adept at that."

Conn felt like pinching herself. Was this real? She'd never met anyone who claimed to have abnormal abilities before. And to talk about it like she was discussing the weather? It was unbelievable. And exciting. And it was like a lever that magically appeared and lifted some invisible weight from her.

"You..." She looked at Chase for verification. "This is true?"

"Fraid so," he replied.

"Oh! Oh!" She jumped up and ran around the table to hug Ana. "Oh thank you, thank you!"

Ana laughed and returned the embrace. "You're very welcome. But I don't know what for."

"For being honest," Conn replied and reclaimed her seat. "I've been so afraid ever since I arrived."

"Of what?" Chase asked.

"So many things," she said with a sigh. "When I fell into the lake —"

"Whoa, darlin', back up there," Chase interrupted. "Let's start this at the beginning. Like how you and Caleb met."

"That is an excellent idea," Conn agreed enthusiastically and began to recite the events that led her to being on the ranch.

She was just starting to tell about the morning after she read all Caleb's medical books when Caleb entered the room. "Conn!"

"What?" She turned at the sound of alarm in his voice.

"What're you doing?"

"Telling your family how we met and I came to be here."

"Conn, honey, I don't think —"

"It's okay," Chase said. "She knows all the Russell dark family secrets."

"You told her?" Caleb asked, moving to take a seat beside Conn.

Chase shook his head and jerked his thumb in Ana's direction. Ana just smiled and raised her hand like a kid in a classroom. Caleb looked around at everyone. "So you know everything."

"Well, except for what happened that morning after she read all your books from college," Ana said with a mischievous grin.

"Uh, I don't think you need to hear that part," Caleb replied.

Conn looked at him in surprise. "I don't understand. We are being truthful. Is there shame in two people engaging in sex and —"

"I'm starved," Caleb cut in and bounded to his feet. "What say we get some grub on?"

Ana and Chase both laughed, making Conn feel even more confused. Ana looked over and smiled at her. "Don't be offended. Caleb's been such a rake for so long he's scared you'll spill the beans and the truth will be out that a date with Caleb isn't really a night riding the wild bull."

"Ana!" Caleb bellowed, making Chase laugh even harder.

"Spill the beans?" Conn asked. "Riding the— Are you referring to the size of Caleb's penis and his ability to sustain an erection for an extended period of time? If so then I can assure you his reputation is solidly intact because he is very well endowed and —"

"Conn!" Caleb yelled, causing Chase to nearly double over laughing and Ana to lay her head on the table and howl.

"What?" Conn shouted to be heard over all the noise.

"They don't need to know that," he insisted loudly.

"But Ana said...I thought you wanted everyone to know that you can sustain an erection for hours and that the size of —"

Her eyes flew open wide as his hand clamped over her mouth. “Honey, there are just some things you don’t want to discuss with your family, okay? And the size of my...well, you know – that’s just not a topic meant to be discussed with family. Okay?”

She nodded and he removed his hand. She looked at Chase and Ana who were still snickering and suddenly she understood. And understanding allowed her to see the humor in it. And also freed her to do a little teasing of her own.

“I promise not to tell any of your family that you’re hung like a horse and sex with you is some world-class fuckin’ and ain’t that some fly shit. You have my word.”

Ana and Chase lost it. She collapsed against him laughing and Chase howled and pounded the table with his fist. Caleb sputtered, turned red and looked at her in shock. “World-class fuckin’...ain’t that some fly shit?”

“It was in a song on one of the films you have on DVD.”

Caleb shook his head and turned away from all of them, busying himself with pulling things from the oven. Conn looked at Ana and winked and Ana gave her a big smile. “You know, Conn, personally I’m going to enjoy having you around. Welcome to the Circle R, sister.”

Conn looked at the hand Ana extended across the table. She reached out to clasp it, but hesitated and looked at Chase. He smiled and nodded and when she clasped Ana’s hand he placed his on top of theirs. “Welcome, Conn.”

“Thank you,” Conn replied gratefully. In that moment she felt closer to being a part of a family than she’d ever known and she couldn’t help wishing that it would last.

Chapter Six

Conn waved one last time to Ana and Chase as they drove away then turned and grabbed Caleb's hand. "Come with me," she said excitedly. When he didn't budge at first tug, she added, "Please? It's important."

He let her lead him to the den, where the only light came from the dying flames in the fireplace. She stopped at the sofa and pushed him down then stepped back a couple of feet.

"Ana said that your brother's wife, Rusty, is a...skin-walker. That she can shift from human to animal form. Correct?"

"Yeah." He wondered where the question was leading.

"So can I."

"Huh?"

"Tell me an animal."

Caleb wasn't really sure he was ready to delve into something like this, but curious if she could really do it, he decided to play along. "Okay, let's see. A grizzly."

"Grizzly?"

"Bear."

"Oh, yes. *Ursus arctos horribilis*, also known as the silvertip bear, a subspecies of the brown bear that—"

"Yeah, that one," he interrupted, having learned that unless he did, he'd get an encyclopedic lesson on the animal.

She grinned at him. "Like this?"

Caleb blinked once, then again. Standing before him on hind legs, front legs pawing the air was a bear. A very big grizzly bear. Much as it shamed him, he actually shrank

back into the cushions of the couch when the bear landed on all fours and lumbered over, sticking its face in his.

“Uh—I believe you,” he said, pulling his head back as far as possible from the big snout and mouthful of teeth.

“Shit!” His eyes slammed shut on their own as the bear’s face came closer. The feel of something on his face had him jumping, then his eyes flying open. Conn was leaning over him, her warm full lips working over the side of his face.

“Christ on a crutch, Conn!” He pulled her down on his lap. “How’d you do that?”

“I don’t know,” she said and repositioned so that she was straddling his lap. “I wish I did. Maybe I should let Ana try to perform the regression technique she mentioned.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “But right now, is there anything else you can do besides invisibility, levitation and shape-shifting?”

She gave him a look sexy enough to have him almost bursting the seams of his jeans with the raging erection it inspired. “I can make you orgasm without intercourse.”

“Well hell, honey, you wiggle on me a couple more times and I’m gonna be damn close.”

“I mean by not touching you at all.”

“Now that I find hard to believe.”

“Want me to show you?”

Caleb wasn’t ready for that kind of sexual experience. He preferred to think of himself as a hands-on guy. “Actually, I’d rather we do it the old-fashioned way.”

Conn’s smile was immediate. “Some world-class fuckin,’ ain’t that some fly shit?”

Caleb chuckled at her imitation of the song then sobered. “Conn, what we do—it’s not just fucking. Not for me anyway. I need you to know that.”

Her smile vanished and she jumped up and hurried from the room. Caleb was shocked and for a moment just sat there. What’d he do wrong? He got up and went in

search of her, finding her standing out in the backyard, looking up at the sky through the limbs of the ancient Emory Oak.

“Conn?” He walked up behind her but didn’t touch her.

She turned to face him. “I’m sorry, Caleb.”

“Look, if I said something wrong—”

“No. No. Caleb, my most fervent wish is to be cared for, to know love and to be part of a real family. When you say our sex is more than a simple act of gratification it turns my mind to those things I wish for and it frightens me because this may not be the meaning your words convey.”

Caleb couldn’t stand the tremble in her voice, the raw emotional need that gleamed in her eyes. It opened a wound in his heart. He took hold of her shoulders. “Honey, you don’t have to be afraid. Conn, I know it doesn’t make a damn bit of sense. I don’t even know who you really are, but that hasn’t stopped me from falling in love with you.”

The astonishment in her eyes shocked him. How could she not have known that he was a goner for her?

“You...love me?”

“I sure do.”

“Oh, Caleb,” she whispered with tears suddenly springing from her eyes. “I love you.”

“Then why the tears?”

“Because I have not been honest with you.”

Caleb felt something equivalent to a lead weight suddenly land in his gut. “What do you mean?”

“When we met. I told you that my name is Raenea Thothoft?”

“Yeah.”

“That is not true. It is only what I was able to spell using the letters assigned to me by Shen.”

"That's about as clear as mud."

She sighed and looked down. "Shen never called me an actual name. He always referred to me as 'Not of the earth'."

Caleb was glad she wasn't looking at him because at the moment he was a little at a loss for words. If the man who'd raised her had called her such a thing, what exactly did it mean? She was an alien?

He had a hard time buying into that. Even being part of a family that included several witches and a shape-shifter.

She looked up at him and he hoped she didn't see the doubt in his eyes. But Conn saw too much.

"You think I am being dishonest."

"No, baby, I don't. I don't doubt for a second that Shen called you that. But that you might be an alien? I admit I have some trouble with that."

"As do I," she replied. "Caleb, I do not know where I'm from, but it's clear that the abilities I possess are not typical human capabilities. And the idea that perhaps I am not native to this world might explain why your government is so set upon finding and imprisoning me."

A sudden sick feeling took hold of Caleb. "They performed tests on you, didn't they? Blood tests and things like that?"

"Yes."

"Shit on a stick."

"You're upset with me."

"No." He took her hand. "Conn, honey, it doesn't matter to me where you came from. Pittsburgh or Pluto. I love you. But we really need to find out what the government has on you."

"How?"

"I wish I knew."

She moved in to wrap her arms around his waist, resting the side of her face on his chest. He hugged her close and for a long time neither of them spoke or moved. When she pulled back and looked up at him, her violet eyes were swimming with light.

“Have a condom handy, cowboy?” she asked in a flawless accent.

Caleb grinned at her. “Well, seeing as how we don’t need them anymore, why don’t we take this inside and –”

She didn’t wait for him to finish. He laughed as she headed for the house. He closed in on her and swept her off her feet and into his arms. “I want you so much,” she whispered before her lips locked on his.

The kiss stopped him dead in his tracks. She squirmed and wiggled in his arms, getting herself wound around him so that her arms circled his neck and her legs were tightened around his waist. And all the while her tongue warred with his for dominance, her exotic taste more of an aphrodisiac than he’d ever tasted.

“Fuck!” he grumbled into her mouth as he stumbled, trying to navigate his way to the back steps.

Conn laughed and released him from the kiss, focusing her attention on his neck and ear.

Caleb hurried up the steps and into the house. To hell with going upstairs to the bedroom. He carried her into the den, stopping in front of the fireplace. She unwound her legs from his waist and slid down his body, her hands moving behind him to grab his ass.

He wound one hand in her long hair and pulled her to him for another searing kiss. She purred in her throat when he unfastened her jeans and peeled them down her thighs, one hand moving between her legs to stroke her slick sex.

The sound of hunger that came from her and the way she moved against his questing fingers had him as randy as a young stud during a first mating. She looked up at him as his lips abandoned hers.

“Tonight you’re all mine,” he said. He’d waited long enough to have all of her and tonight he fully intended to have his fill.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she agreed in a voice rough with desire.

“Then shuck those clothes, darlin’.”

“After you, sugah,” she drawled and toed one boot off, kicking it aside.

It didn’t take either of them long. In seconds their clothing was strewn across the floor and he was reaching for her, winding one hand in her hair to pull her head back. She arched against him, presenting him with the perfect moment to feast on her breasts.

Conn let out a slight hiss when he bit lightly on her nipple, but instead of moving to stop him, she fisted her hands in his hair, encouraging him. With one arm supporting her back and the other gripping her breast, he teased the hard nub, licking and flicking it with his tongue then sucking it into his mouth.

“Ummmmm,” she purred and worked one hand down his body to fist his erection.

Caleb raised his head long enough to lower her down onto the thick rug in front of the fireplace, spreading her legs as he knelt between them. She started to pull him down on her but he took her hands in his and stopped her.

“Not so fast, quick draw. I been waiting a while to taste you and I don’t plan on rushing.”

“Heavens no,” she agreed, moving her hands to trace her fingers up her inner thighs to her wet sex.

Caleb bent over, spreading her sex, his big fingers gentle as he traced between the lips then spread her labia more. When he lowered his head and lapped at her, she felt something inside her belly swell, a heat that took only a moment to engulf her entire body. She wiggled against his mouth and gasped as his tongue worked over her clit.

Surprised at how quickly her body reacted and how close she was to orgasm, she was doubly surprised that he recognized it and sat back on his heels.

“Baby, you gotta hold off a little.”

“Easy for you to say,” she quipped in return, knowing from the smile on his face that he knew she was teasing. Just looking at Caleb was an erotic experience. His broad muscular chest and rippled abdomen, his tanned skin and those brawny arms and big strong hands were a feast for the eyes. As was his face. All male and at the moment wearing an expression of desire hot enough to start a fire.

As her eyes moved over his body, she felt her nipples tingle in excitement. She raised her hands to her breasts, letting her thumbs track slowly over her nipples. She knew it was a turn-on for him to watch her fondle herself.

Her hands moved lower, framing her sex as she bent her knees. Just as she started to spread her pussy to expose her clit, his hands moved to stop her. “You’re trespassing,” he warned and grabbed her behind the knees to push her legs back toward her chest and spread them wide.

She wasn’t about to protest when his mouth staked a claim on her pussy. His tongue laved her slow and easy and then faster. Conn was certain she’d never felt so on fire. He sucked her labia, plundered inside her, his tongue sending sparks of energy through her that had her literally whimpering for release.

It was marvelous and frustrating and unbelievable. She wanted to come yet she didn’t want it to end.

And it didn’t appear that he was about to let it end. Every time she came close to a climax, he’d stop. Finally she reached her limits. “Please, please,” she gasped. “I need to —”

The next sound out of her mouth was a low drawn-out moan. His tongue worked over her clit, building the fire until her body started to tremble with the onset of an orgasm.

As she plummeted over the edge, he pulled her to him, sliding into her wet depths. Conn moaned, lost in a void of sensation, feeling her pussy clench on him as the orgasm rolled through her. Before it could fade, she grabbed his arms and hoisted herself up so

that she straddled him as he knelt on the floor. The feel of him fully hilted inside her was enough to have another wave wash over her.

"Baby, you come so pretty," he murmured. "Come for me again."

"My pleasure," she replied, then gave him a sassy smile. "But first..."

She lay back on the floor, pulling him down on top of her and then rolled them both over so that she straddled him.

By the stars, has anything ever felt so good or looked so magnificent? she thought as she reveled in the moment. Leaning down, she flicked her tongue over his nipple then lightly bit it, moving her hips in a slow ride.

The slight intake of breath that came from him had her moving a bit stronger, straightening to prop her hands on his chest, squeezing him with the muscles of her vagina then easing up, only to start again, slightly rocking her hips as her inner muscles contracted on him.

"Conn...honey," Caleb groaned, "You're gonna make me come."

"That's the idea," she purred, rocking a little faster.

She couldn't explain it. Didn't understand it. She'd never felt the desire to please anyone this way, to lose herself in the sensations of another. Yet with Caleb, that's the way she felt. She could feel his need, his pleasure, and she wanted to give him more.

It was almost frightening. Like an addiction, it was so strong, this need. She did not care that she didn't understand it. Surrendering to it was the path toward greater pleasure. For both of them.

Caleb rolled over onto his side, taking her with him. "Darlin', you're gonna do me in and I'm not ready for it to be over. What say we take advantage of that hot tub on the porch?"

Conn grinned at him. "I love your hot tub."

"Yeah, I know you do," he said as he untangled from her and got to his feet, pulling her with him.

Naked and giggling, they ran outside. The night air was cool on her damp skin. She lifted her hair, feeling the whisper of air on her neck as Caleb started the jets in the tub.

Conn was naked and in the water by the time he lifted his leg to get in the tub. He'd no sooner stepped into the water than she was on her knees in front of him, taking his erect shaft into her mouth.

"Slow. Down." He gently pushed her back and sank down into the water. Damn if the woman couldn't call up a climax in him faster than a snake striking.

"I like the way you taste," she said and submerged. A moment later he felt her mouth on him. And it felt good. He leaned back and closed his eyes, abandoning himself to the sensations.

A climax began to build. And at the exact moment he realized it, another thought intruded. She'd been under water an awfully long time. Caleb took hold of her shoulders and lifted her up.

Conn's hands replaced her mouth on his cock. "Damn, woman, you part fish?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were underwater a good long while."

"Another hidden talent?" she asked with a sexy smile, stroking him a little faster.

"Well you're sure full of 'em," he said around a groan as the climax suddenly spiked hot and fast, so strong that he didn't think he had the will to control it.

But she did. "Not yet," she whispered. "I want you to resist the need as long as you can. Until the hunger tears so hard at you that you have no strength to resist. Let me show you pleasure beyond anything you've known, Caleb."

"I'm all yours," he replied. How sexy and unusual it was to have a woman talk to him in such a manner, control the action without really exerting control other than a few huskily spoken words that promised of passion and satisfaction.

“Sit up on the next step,” she urged and added when he raised his eyebrows in question, “I don’t want you to fear I might drown, and ruin the experience.”

Caleb slid up a step and leaned back, the motion lifting his groin up enough that his erection stabbed up out of the water. The cool night air whispered on his wet skin, bringing a slight shiver. But when Conn’s mouth closed on the head of his dick, a spike of heat shot through him hot enough to dispel any sensations of cool.

He couldn’t resist fisting her long hair and driving his dick deeper into her warm wet mouth. Her nimble fingers played with his balls, working around and behind them to circle and tease his anus.

Her mouth and hands played him as expertly as any musician upon their instrument of mastery. His hands tightened in her hair. Much more and he wouldn’t be able to hold on. She already had him teetering on the edge.

“Darlin’, please.” His voice came out in a constricted growl as he fought against the rising tide that threatened to send him tumbling into freefall.

She raised her head, slithered up his body and claimed his mouth in a kiss that was almost as powerful as the sensations she’d given when she had her mouth on his dick. He could taste himself on her, that slight tang of pre-cum. Oddly, combined with her exotic taste, it was intoxicating.

When she released him from the kiss, she sank back down with a sexy grin and started again. Caleb lost track of the number of times she took him to the brink then pulled him back. His body was taut, need vibrating through him like the current from an electrical tower.

“Conn, honey,” he moaned. “Darlin’, I can’t...”

Her answer to his unfinished plea was to suck harder. And faster. And all the while that unusual purr accompanied the sound of water slapping against the sides of the tub and the bubbles from the jets breaking the surface of the water.

Caleb moved his arms out to his sides, gripping the edge of the tub as his body tightened and arched. Held captive in the wet warmth of her mouth with her fingers fondling and teasing his balls and ass, he was too far gone to hold on.

He plummeted. Sudden and powerful and overwhelming. Reality faded. There was only sensation and in that feeling was Conn. Right there with him. She was part of the orgasm. He could feel her with him. It was amazing. It carried him higher and further than he thought possible and to a place where nothing else existed. And then further.

Lights exploded in his mind, colors dancing and swirling. He couldn't identify or understand it. He didn't want to. She was with him. And they were locked in a cosmic dance of pleasure and oneness that he never wanted to leave.

Conn felt him surrender and followed, keeping her mind close to his as he soared through the realm of sensation. Though a novice to this level of sensation, he showed no fear, but embraced the experience, giving himself to it and to her.

Something hot and driving seized her. Something she'd never experienced. Something calling to a primal part of her she'd never known existed. She couldn't fight it. Didn't want to. It was elemental to who and what she was.

Slowly she rose on her knees, her hands moving from his still pulsing cock to trace up his body. She pressed against him, running her tongue over the hollow of his throat and up the side of his neck.

His pulse pounded fast and hard beneath the surface. She could feel it as her own, hearing the singing of the blood in his veins. That blood called to her in a voice that was both foreign and familiar.

Wrapping one hand around his cock, she climbed atop him, guiding him to her wet channel.

He groaned and surged to erection at the touch and she slid fully onto him, rocking back and forth to create a friction that was as sublime to her as it was to him.

Her mouth opened against the side of his neck, her tongue tracing over the racing pulse point.

“Conn,” he whispered, his arms moving to grip her hips and pull her more firmly onto him.

The sound of her name on his lips robbed her of all reason. Coherent thought fled. In its place was only need. She tried to push away, suddenly afraid. But the call was too strong. Her sense of self fled and she was taken by a force she did not know how to battle.

Caleb sensed a change in her a split second before he was taken spiraling into an even higher sphere of sensation. He sensed fear. Then need. Need so strong that it nearly robbed him of breath.

He tried to speak, to call her name, to hold her tighter and drive deeper inside her. He wanted to give her as much as she’d given him. But before he could do more than register the thought, something took him.

And there was no more thought.

Conn came back to reality before Caleb opened his eyes. She pushed back from him, breathing hard. And that’s when she saw it. Blood. On his neck.

Fear took hold of her with sickening force. Her throat seized, cutting off her air. Her hands trembled as she cupped them and lifted water to his neck, washing away the smeared blood.

What she saw had her gut twisting. There were puncture wounds on his neck. Well, there were for a moment. But they were already closing. Within moments the wounds had sealed.

Unconsciously her tongue ran over her teeth. The feel of sharp, rather elongated incisors had her eyes widening in shock.

She reached out to run her fingers over his neck. That's when he opened his eyes. The smile he gave her turned into a look of concern. He straightened, grabbing her by the arms. "Conn? Honey, what happened?"

"What do you mean?" Her heart felt like it was trying to lurch out of her chest at the question.

"There's..." He reached up and ran two fingers over her chin then raised them in front of his face to look at them. "Honey, this is blood."

Conn wanted to vanish. To be sucked into a tornado and be carried away. How could the most potent sexual experience in either of their lives be so destroyed? That completeness and love she'd felt inside that sphere of complete pleasure and oneness was not what either of them had imagined. How could she tell him that she might have discovered the answer to not who she was, but what?

How could she tell the man she loved that she feared she was a vampire?

"Caleb...I..." She couldn't find words. "I...bit you."

His eyes widened then narrowed. "You bit me?"

She nodded. "On the neck."

His hand moved to his neck. One side, then the other. "There's nothing there, Conn. Maybe you bit your lip, honey."

She shook her head. "I saw it, Caleb. I saw the marks. They were right there on the left side of your neck. And they just...closed up and vanished. I think..." Her eyes filled with tears and a look of anguish came on her face. "I think I'm a vampire."

If anyone had told Caleb that he'd be following the most incredible sexual experience of his life with the woman he loved saying she was a vampire, he'd have laughed and asked what they'd been smoking.

Nothing could have prepared him for this.

"Conn, that's...crazy. There's no such thing as vampires."

“Then how do you explain this?” She bared her teeth at him.

“What?”

“These!” She tapped on her incisors and gasped in surprise, running her finger over them. They were normal.

“Caleb, I swear to you that a few moments ago I had elongated incisors. Just like the images of fictitious vampires. And I bit you. I do not remember doing so, but I did see the evidence of it. There were two small puncture wounds. And blood on your neck. “

“Honey, I don’t know what to say to you. Maybe you just imagined it or —”

“Caleb, I am scared.”

Being this kind of afraid was new for Conn. She’d always known there were things outside herself that deserved respect and even fear. But to fear who you are was something she’d never considered. She had called her *Not of the earth*. She’d often wondered about it, and even considered that perhaps she wasn’t native to Earth. That she could accept. But the idea that she might be some evil creature such as was written about in mythology, a creature who lived off the lifeblood of others? That was more horrifying than anything she could imagine.

Caleb sank down into the water and held her trembling against him. “Conn, listen. Let’s say you did bite me. And the bite miraculously healed. That doesn’t mean you’re a vampire. Think about it. In all the myths and legends, vampires exist solely on blood. They sure don’t get green around the gills at the idea of eating meat. And they don’t wolf down a quart of potato salad for a snack.”

“But the marks —”

“Like I said, maybe it happened. I’m not saying it didn’t. It’s a sure bet that something happened because you took me somewhere I’ve never been before and that’s no joke. But still, a vampire? Honey, you go out in the sun all the time. Vampires aren’t supposed to be able to do that. Sunlight destroys them. I just don’t think it fits, Conn. Besides, do you remember biting me?”

She thought about it. "No. I just remember being filled with...need. And a little afraid. Then that disappeared and we were together and floating in a sea of sensation and love and nothing else mattered."

"I felt that too," he said. "And I did feel something else for a split second, but I can't explain it. Something just...took me. And the next thing I knew you were with me and we were in that place and I didn't want to leave."

"But I know it happened, Caleb."

"Okay, so let's see if we can make it happen again."

"What?"

"Well, obviously it was brought on by sexual arousal, so let's see if we can make it happen again. Only this time if you feel it, try to control it."

Conn wasn't certain that was the answer, but she didn't have a better plan so she nodded and started to lower her face to his groin. He stopped her.

"Only this time, it's my turn."

"I'm all yours," she agreed and wondered if he knew just how true that was. For she was certain. What had happened might be frightening, but it had connected her to him in a way deeper than anything she could have imagined. Whether she wanted it or not, she knew to the core of her soul that she was forever bound to him.

Chapter Seven

Pandora's smile faded when she saw who awaited her in the luxurious parlor. The woman stood as Pandora entered. Beautiful and as youthful and powerful as she had been the last time Pandora saw her nearly twenty years ago.

"Stay away from her," the woman said before Pandora had crossed the threshold.

"What a delightful surprise." Pandora chose to ignore the threat. "And how foolish. But then you always were rash, Resa. Prone to leap before looking, as the humans say."

"Cut the crap and let's get down to it," Resa replied and took her seat. "We know she's been spotted and the only reason I'm here is to warn you that if you renege on our bargain—"

"I need neither your warnings nor your reminders of our agreement," Pandora interrupted, taking a seat adjacent to Resa. "And might I add that the agreement was not with you, but with your mate. Odd that he sends you instead of coming to me himself."

"He's not that stupid. The situation hasn't changed. The Emperor still favors his second born, leaving the Heir Apparent in perpetual exile. The only way for him to return and claim what is rightfully his is for us to succeed in seeing this through. And that will not happen if he is spotted. Unless, of course, you've failed to filter the information released to the V'Kar on this world and someone knows that he has not returned to sit at the left hand of the Emperor."

"Failure, as you well know, is not an option," Pandora replied. "But let us not rehash issues we've covered innumerable times. You come seeking assurance. I would like to oblige, but the truth is, her existence has been noted by many."

"Meaning?"

“Meaning that we must devise a plan to make the respective Earth governments aware of her existence believe that she is no longer among the living.”

“Agreed. What do you propose?”

“At present I am uncertain of the best course of action. I have a man in position within the national security sector of this country. According to his latest report, all that is known is that the aircraft transporting her crashed, leaving two survivors. Even under drugs, the survivors remember only that she perished in the crash. The description they gave of the woman was of a tall, heavy-set woman with sandy-blond hair and brown eyes. None of which describes her. Which means her powers of persuasion and mind control are strong.”

“Then you’re certain she lives?”

Pandora noted the way Resa’s hands gripped the arms of the chair, giving testimony to her anxiety. She could exploit that anxiety if she so chose, but it would not further her cause. Resa was the one being in the universe who held the trust of the Heir Apparent. And Pandora needed his cooperation.

“She lives.”

“Where is she?”

“My dear, that is information that can only bring you pain. You cannot see her and should you be given her location the temptation would be too strong.”

Resa slumped in her chair, a gesture uncharacteristic. “You’re right. I know. But I have to know that she’s safe. You must give me your word that she will be protected.”

Pandora reached out and placed her hand on top of Resa’s. “Protecting her has been a priority for more than twenty years. It will continue to be so. We need her. She could be the key, Resa. A key in the puzzle that once pieced together will be the salvation of V’Kar.”

Resa nodded sadly. “Yes, I know. But there are times I wish she wasn’t.”

“We all have a destiny to fulfill, Dhampir,” Pandora deliberately used the old term, knowing that it would have more of an effect than all the sympathy in the world.

Resa’s eyes hardened and her spine straightened. She stood and looked down at Pandora. “Yes, we all have a destiny to fulfill. See that you fulfill yours, Mother Superior. Because if harm comes to her, nothing will protect you from my wrath.”

Pandora inclined her head in acknowledgement. Resa did not possess power as great as her own, but nonetheless she was a formidable woman. One Pandora would rather have fighting with her than against her.

She watched Resa stalk from the room then summoned her aide. “I want to see our operative from within the national intelligence sector.”

The aide nodded and hurried to do Pandora’s bidding. Pandora leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. One thing Resa’s visit had proven was that time was a luxury she did not have. She needed to conceal Raenea’s existence and she needed to do it fast. It was time to use the resources of the humans to achieve that goal.

* * * * *

Caleb gritted his teeth and counted to ten. He wasn’t in a good mood to begin with and it seemed that fate had it in for him and was dumping one problem after another on his plate today.

He and Conn had tested his theory, and while she had not sprouted fangs, chewed on his neck or disappeared in a puff of smoke at sunrise, she was still upset over what had happened and now obsessed with trying to find out who she really was.

And that was a can of worms neither of them wanted to open because as soon as they started searching for answers it would expose her. And then the military would be after her.

His heart hurt for her. Not knowing who you were and where you came from would be hard enough. But to be possessed of super-human abilities and paranormal fears about your identity had to be nearly impossible to deal with.

"Caleb!" Bobby, one of the ranch hands yelled, getting his attention. "The guy's here for that mare."

That wasn't news that brought a smile to Caleb's face. An old acquaintance of Caleb's father had shown up a while back looking for a horse for his granddaughter. Ordinarily, Caleb would have told him to go elsewhere. Hinson Daws was a mean-spirited old man who had a reputation for being hard on animals.

That didn't set well with Caleb, but his father had asked Caleb to cut Hinson some slack. Hinson Daws had a lot of clout in the state and Charlie needed that clout to get certain legislation passed that would benefit the state.

Caleb didn't like being used as a political tool, but did as his father asked and agreed to sell Hinson a sweet little mare.

Little did he know when he made that deal that Conn would take a shine to that mare and the mare to her. The mare followed her like a puppy and responded to verbal requests from Conn like a trained circus animal.

Conn was going to be quite unhappy to see the mare go. But what choice did he have?

Hinson waddled around the corner, bellowing as he approached. "You got that horse ready, boy?"

Caleb gestured to the ranch hand, Bobby. "Get the mare loaded up for Mr. Daws, Bobby."

"Yes, sir."

"So, word has it you got you a filly shacked up in the main house with you," Hinson said and spat.

"That so?"

"That's what I hear."

Caleb walked past him, forcing the man to turn and follow.

“So, who’s this gal anyway?” Hinson puffed, struggling to keep up. “Your daddy know ‘bout this, boy?”

The urge to turn and drive a fist in the old man’s face was strong but Caleb just gritted his teeth and kept moving. He saw Bobby leading the mare toward Hinson’s trailer. Conn was with them, and he could tell from the way Bobby cut a pleading look his way and the way Conn’s mouth was moving, that she wasn’t happy about what was happening.

Just then Hannah hurried up to him. “Caleb, there’s some people at the house. Government folks. They want to talk to you.”

Caleb felt acid bubble in his gut. Acid caused by fear. It could mean only one thing. They were here about Conn.

“Tell them I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he said and watched her hurry away.

He reached the truck a few steps ahead of Bobby and Conn. Hinson’s man, Joe Stilwell, got out of the truck as Bobby stopped in front of it. “I’ll take it from here.”

Bobby looked at Caleb and at his nod, handed the lead to Stilwell.

“Wait!” Conn hurried over to Stilwell as he started to tug the horse toward the trailer.

“Who the hell are you?” he snarled.

“I just want to say goodbye,” Conn said softly.

Stilwell snorted and gave the rope a viscous tug. The mare balked and started backing up, prancing nervously. That made Stilwell angrier and he tugged harder, cursing and yelling at the mare.

“Stop!” Conn shouted. “You’re scaring her.”

“Shut the fuck up!” He tried harder, succeeding only in making the mare rear up, pawing and whinnying in fear.

“Caleb, make him stop!” Conn screamed.

"Conn, honey." Caleb made a grab for her arm but she evaded and dodged around the mare to Stilwell.

"Stop that!"

"Lady, get the fuck away from me or I'm gonna put you on your ass!" he shouted, then yelled at the horse who reared and pawed, her whinnies sounding more like anger than fear.

Things were getting out of hand. Caleb started toward them to try to settle things down and suddenly things got a whole lot worse. Hinson Daws, who no one had been paying attention to, walked up behind the mare with a prod and proceeded to shock her.

"Get the nag in the damn trailer!" he shouted at Stilwell.

Caleb felt his blood pressure rise. Shocking or beating a horse was not something allowed on the Circle R. And the idea of selling a horse to a man who would do such a thing made him see red.

But apparently not as fast as it did Conn because before Caleb could make a move, she'd screamed in anger, run over to Hinson Daws and knocked the old man flat on his ass with a solid roundhouse.

If that wasn't enough, she'd snatched the prod from his hand and she jammed it against his ass when he rolled over and tried to push himself up.

"You are not taking this horse!" she shouted.

Caleb made a grab for her but she dodged him. He grabbed hold of Daws to drag the lard-ass to his feet. And when he did, Conn turned on Daws' man.

"You're not taking that horse anywhere. Let go of that rope right now!"

"Fuck you!" Stilwell snapped and took a swing at her.

Caleb turned just in time to see Stilwell throw a punch. He let go of Daws who hit the ground again with a loud grunt, and a split second later Bobby exclaimed, "Holy shit!"

That about summed it up. Daws was on the ground wheezing and Conn had his ranch hand Stilwell by the throat, lifted up off the ground, his legs kicking weakly, his face pasty and his eyes quickly rolling back in his head.

If that wasn't enough, half the ranch had responded to the commotion and was watching. All in dead silence.

"Conn!" Caleb grabbed her free arm but she didn't budge an inch. It was like she was made of lead, immovable and mad as hell. Lights danced in her eyes.

"You will *not* harm this horse," she hissed at Stilwell who was kicking weaker with each passing second.

"For Christ sakes, Conn, you're killing him!" Caleb shouted and yanked her arm hard.

Her head whipped around and for a moment the force of her anger was turned on him. He actually staggered back a step, feeling a sudden loss of air in his lungs.

"Conn," he gasped. "Stop."

She blinked and gasped. "Caleb!" She released Stilwell who landed in a heap on the ground and threw herself at Caleb, wrapping her arms around him as if to hold him up.

"It's okay." He pried her off. "I'm okay. But we've got a mess on our hands, honey, and you'd better skidaddle 'cause sure as shit old Daws is going to be raising hell in about five seconds or so."

"No, this is my fault. I won't let him take it out on you."

"Conn, go," he ordered and when she stiffened, added, "we can't afford to have him call the law."

She didn't say a word but turned and marched to the front of the truck where she stopped, crossing her arms over her chest, her eyes flashing fire. Caleb saw everyone watch her. Saw the shock on everyone's faces. And knew that nothing was going to be easy from this point on.

Bobby and another ranch hand got Daws to his feet. Caleb checked on Stilwell. He was coming to. Mad as hell but not hurt.

“Boy, you just bit yourself off a world of hurt,” Daws wheezed. “You think for one red-hot second that you’re gonna get away with letting some two-bit slut attack me with a cattle prod then you got yourself another think coming.”

“Mr. Daws, now settle down. This was all just a misuder—”

“Don’t you take that tone with me, boy. That little tramp attacked me and I’m gonna see her locked up. Best thing you can do is say ‘yes, sir’ and tie that bitch up ‘til the sheriff gets here. Stilwell! Get the goddamn sheriff on the phone!”

Stilwell coughed, wheezed, climbed to his feet and stumbled to the truck.

“Mr. Daws, there’s no need to call the sheriff.” Caleb tried to be calm even though his heart was racing. “I’m sure Conn just overreacted. She’s grown fond of the mare and—”

“Boy, one more word outta your mouth ‘cept ‘yes, sir’ and I’ll come down on the Circle R so hard, when I’m done with you, Charlie Russell won’t have a fucking ranch to come home to! Stilwell! You got the damn law on the phone?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” a smooth male voice announced from behind Caleb.

Caleb whirled to face the tall, dark-haired man in the black suit and dark sunglasses. Beside him stood a stunning woman with platinum hair worn in a tight bun, equally dark suit and dark glasses.

“And you’d be?” Caleb asked.

The man reached inside his jacket and produced his identification. “Marcus London, NSA. We must speak. Now.”

Caleb gestured around. “Well, as you can see I kind of have a little situation on my hands at the moment.”

The man stepped close to Caleb, lowering his voice so that no one else could hear his words. "Not of the earth, Mr. Russell. Does that ring a bell?"

Caleb's heart sank. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't think of anything that was going to save Conn now. "Conn, honey?" He turned and held out his hand to her. "We need to go inside and have a talk with these nice folks."

She didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes were wide and her face pale. She was staring at the newcomers with an expression he couldn't begin to identify.

"Conn!" he barked and she started.

"Honey, go on up to the house and wait for me. Please?"

Without a word she turned and walked away.

Which did not please Hinson Daws at all. "Whoa there, boy. That bitch ain't going nowhere. She attacked me and I'm gonna see her —"

"You are going to do nothing," London said, advancing on Daws. "Aside from getting in your vehicle and leaving. This is a matter of national security and should it be discovered that you have discussed or revealed anything that happened here today, the consequences could be quite severe. Do we understand, sir?"

Daws swallowed nervously and nodded.

"Then I suggest you leave immediately, sir."

Daws gestured to his man and both of them got in the truck. Caleb watched them pull off then looked around at his people. "Ya'll go on back to work. Bobby, take the mare back to the stables. Everything'll be fine."

"What's this all about, Caleb?" Bobby asked.

"Go on back to work, Bobby," Caleb said. "It'll be okay."

Bobby nodded but didn't look convinced. Caleb turned to face the pair in the dark suits. "So what now?"

"Now you invite us in and we have a discussion," London replied.

Caleb saw no way to refuse. "Fine, come on in."

In the history of bad days, this one was chalking up to be a real prize winner.

* * * * *

Caleb didn't bother with manners. He entered the house, leaving the agents to follow him inside. Conn was waiting in the front room, standing in front of the window, watching. Hannah was lurking in the hall.

"Hannah, why don't you call it a day." Caleb tried to put as much calm and assurance as possible into his voice.

"I don't mind staying."

"That's okay. Everything is fine."

"If you say so."

Caleb watched her turn and head back toward the kitchen. He went over to Conn, draping his arm around her waist and pulling her close to his side. He waited until he heard the back door close before speaking. "Honey, these people are with the NSA and they –"

She completely ignored him. "Who are you?" she asked the couple in a low menacing tone.

"Honey, I told you," Caleb said. "They're with –"

"No, they're not," she cut him off. "These people are..." She looked up at him. "Caleb, they're like me."

It wouldn't have surprised him any more if a bomb had gone off under his feet when the woman stepped forward and said, "You're right."

"What?" Caleb hugged Conn closer. "You're telling me you're not with the NSA? Then who the hell are you and what do you want with Conn?"

The woman gestured gracefully toward the seating arrangement. "Might we sit?"

"Have at it," Caleb growled, keeping his position.

The couple took a seat on the sofa and the woman removed her glasses. Her eyes were the same strange violet color as Conn's. She smiled at Conn. "You have long sought answers, Raenea, and I am here to answer them. Please sit."

"Why do you call me Raenea?"

"That is your name, my dear. Raenea Belenus, daughter of Constantine Belenus of the D'Harahn, Heir Apparent to the Throne of Shadallah, the crown prince of V'Kar."

"Say what?" Caleb asked.

The woman cut him a smile. "Perhaps it would be best if we spoke with Raenea in private."

"No," Conn said. "Anything you have to say to me you can say in front of Caleb. He's my...mate."

The man who'd introduced himself as Marcus London, removed his glasses. Like Conn he also had violet eyes.

"What makes you apply that term to this human?"

Conn stared at him for a moment. "It's applicable."

The couple exchanged a glance and the woman spoke up. "Very well. We will speak. However, Mr. Russell, do not doubt that should you think to reveal any part of what is said here today, you will not live to speak of it again."

"Don't you threaten him," Conn hissed, eyes flashing with light. "You hear me? I want answers and if you've answers for me then speak them. But never threaten Caleb again. Do you understand?"

"She is much like him," the woman remarked to the man.

Conn went weak against Caleb, but only for a moment. Then she moved away from him to cross the room and stand in front of the man. "Like him? You know my father? Who are you?"

The man stood. "I am Azarth, Minister of Science, and I have served your father for longer than humans have walked upright on this world."

Caleb felt his own knees go a little weak and decided it was a good time to have a seat. He took a chair by the window.

Conn stared at the man for a long time, reaching out with her mind to probe his thoughts. And met a wall too thick to breach.

"You will find it far more difficult to infiltrate the thoughts of your own kind than that of humans, Raenea," Azarth said with a smile and sank back down on the couch.

"You could tell?" That was a shock. No one had ever felt her invade their mind before.

"There is much for you to learn," the woman replied, earning Conn's attention.

"Such as your name," Conn said.

"You may call me Pandora."

"And what role do you serve, Pandora?"

Pandora smiled. "Let's just say that in the system of V'Kar, a female may rise to positions of great power."

Conn heard the deception in the tone. "In other words, you are not going to be honest."

"My words are true."

"Your words are evasive," Conn said, falling back on her normal speech patterns and accent. "If I cannot trust you to be truthful about your identity and position then what is there to inspire me to trust any other words you might speak as truth?"

Azarth chuckled, earning an annoyed glance from Pandora. "She has a valid point," Azarth commented.

"Indeed," Pandora said. "Very well. I am SyFeth, of the Sybelle De'Fane V'Kar. In the language of these people, Mother Superior of the Sisterhood of V'Kar."

Conn looked to Azarth for confirmation and he nodded. "The Sisterhood is the most powerful and feared organization in this galaxy or our own. As Mother Superior

and the oldest of the V'Kar, Sy—pardon, Pandora wields enormous power and holds information—and secrets—not even the ruling body of V'Kar, the J'Zhan or the Emperor is made privy to. She is, in effect, the most powerful woman in the known population of the Universe.”

“Lofty,” Conn murmured, “but illogical. If indeed you wield such tremendous power then why not dispatch an underling to do your bidding? Why come to me yourself, in the guise of a human? And why be here on this world if the galaxy you rule is so powerful and vast?”

“Excellent questions and questions worthy of a daughter of the throne,” Azarth commended.

Pandora regarded her in silence for a long while then smiled. “In time perhaps you will become privy to certain knowledge, Raenea Belenus. But for now my concern is simple. To erase all knowledge of your existence from human minds and records and ensure that you are not harmed or terminated.”

“Why?” Conn asked. “Why would someone of such power be concerned with a single life? With my life? Of what benefit am I to you or your worlds?”

Pandora sighed lightly. “I can see that dealing with you will be equally as vexing as dealing with your father. Very well. The simple truth is, the worlds of V'Kar have lost the ability to reproduce. Since before humans crawled from the primordial soup of this world, our worlds have suffered infertility.”

“Then how is it that your worlds survive? Unless, of course, you’re immortal.”

“Close,” Azarth replied, and at the sharp look from Pandora, chuckled. “Oh, come now. It is no secret. In human terms we are virtual immortals. And in answer to your next question, Raenea, our system suffered a cosmic cataclysm that poisoned our peoples, rendering them infertile. Yet here on this small green world we may have found a key to ending that sterility.”

“And I factor into this how?”

“You are the child of the Heir Apparent, a D’Harahn, the most pure bloodline of all V’Kar, and a mutant. A woman fathered by a D’Harahn and a human witch. Amazingly your mother’s genetic makeup is more than ninety percent D’Harahn and you, Raenea, are the first child ever to have been born of a mixed union who has not only survived, but possess nearly complete D’Harahn genetics.”

“I’m a test result,” Conn whispered, then her voice grew stronger. “Then where are my parents and why don’t I remember them?”

Azarth sighed. “When you were the human equivalent of ten years old, your existence was discovered. It sparked much internal turmoil between the various factions of V’Kar on this world, bringing us to the brink of war. It was decided that in the best interest of all, you should be hidden.

“An accident was staged and from all reports your parents were gravely injured and a report was issued that your father was recalled to the home world to sit at the left hand of his father, the Emperor. The reports stated that despite her half-breed status, your mother accompanied him. You were reported dead.”

Pandora picked up the tale. “I arranged for a suitable guardian and mentor and erased all knowledge of your parents from your mind. It was the only way to protect you.”

“Hold on,” Caleb spoke up.

Conn turned to look at him as he stood and walked over beside her. “I’ve been listening to all this and yes, it all sounds like science fiction to me, but knowing what Conn can do, I can’t entirely discount the possibility that maybe you people are from another galaxy. So for the sake of argument, let’s say that everything you’ve said is true.”

“Very well,” Pandora agreed.

“Okay, so it still boils down to a load of shit,” Caleb announced. “If Conn is who you say and what you say then why would any of your people want to harm her? She could hold the key to your sterility problems. I’d think every single one of you would

want to protect and safeguard her. So, I'm betting there's more to this tale than you've said. Just who is it that she needs to be protected from?"

"An intelligent man," Azarth said and smiled at Conn. "And correct. While our peoples might be willing to go to war to discover the secrets hidden within your genetics, none would raise a hand to harm you. But there are those who would."

"Who?" Caleb asked.

"The Alliance," Pandora hissed the words. "An organization founded when man worshipped at the feet of the Pharaohs, dedicated to the eradication of our race."

"The Alliance," Conn whispered, feeling a cold shiver slide down her spine. "Why do those words inspire fear inside me? Have I ever encountered them?"

"It was you they were trying to kill in Mexico when Shen was murdered," Pandora answered.

"Why do they want to kill me?"

Azarth and Pandora shared a look. Pandora turned her head, looking to one side while Azarth answered. "Because they believe our people to be something of myth and legend. They covet our abilities, and because they cannot discover a way to harness these abilities for themselves, they fear us. And what man fears, he tries to destroy."

"Something of myth and legend?" she asked, then looked quickly at Caleb. "Vampires!"

"Yes," Azarth confirmed her guess.

"Well are we?" Conn asked.

"Hardly," Azarth scoffed then added, "however, there are certain proteins in human plasma that are very fortifying for our kind."

Conn shivered. "What are you saying?"

"Simply that if injured or wounded, human blood has a healing effect that is almost instantaneous."

Conn thought about it. "Well that could apply to anyone on this planet. If a human is injured and suffers blood loss they require transfusions."

"We take it in another fashion."

"No. Oh no," Conn groaned. "We are vampires!" She looked at Caleb. "I told you. I saw the marks on your neck. Oh merciful heavens, I bit you!"

A laugh from Azarth had her turning on him. "You think that's funny? Well I don't. No one should have that done to them against their will. And I wasn't injured or wounded or sick. I was..."

"Yes?" Azarth asked.

Conn couldn't bring herself to tell him what inspired the act. It was too personal.

"It is also an act of mating," Pandora spoke up. "An act that binds us to another."

"Mating?" Caleb asked. "How does something like that act as binding?"

"When a V'Kar takes the blood of another, he or she takes a part of that person's essence, if you will. And, in turn, imparts something of their own essence to the other. In other words, Mr. Russell, should you have a genetic test performed it would be discovered that you carry alien DNA."

"What?"

"You and Raenea have mated, in the most primitive and binding way possible for one of V'Kar."

Suddenly memories that had been long suppressed resurfaced. Conn staggered, nearly overwhelmed. Memories flooded in, or at least fragments. Her parents, her childhood and the knowledge of her kind and their enemies, the Alliance.

"Oh, Caleb," Conn whispered. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

He pulled her close to his side. "No worries, honey. I can't think of anyone I'd rather be bound to." He looked at Pandora and Azarth. "But this business about the Alliance concerns me. Is there any chance they could find her?"

"They already have," Azarth said in a deadly serious tone and bounded to his feet. "Take her and flee. You must protect her at all costs. Go. Now."

"Hold on!" Caleb protested then jumped when the front door crashed open.

"Go!" Azarth shouted and flew into action.

Caleb had never seen anything move as fast as Azarth and Pandora. Men poured into the house, bearing swords and crossbows and daggers. And met with whirling disturbances in the air that sent them flying.

Conn yanked on his arm, nearly causing him to fall, she pulled so hard. Together they raced through the house and out the back door, headed for the stables. What met Caleb's eyes nearly doubled him over. His people were scattered on the ground like lifeless dolls.

He had to stop. Bobby was lying near the barn door. Caleb felt for a pulse. "He's alive."

"They didn't want to kill them, just render them unconscious so they would be unaware of what transpired," Conn said.

"What?" he yelped.

"Azarth told me. With his mind. Now the question is, do we stay and fight or run?"

"Run," Caleb said and jumped to his feet, racing into the barn. Conn flew into high gear, moving as fast as she could, which turned out to be rather swift because in a matter of seconds, she had two horses saddled.

"Hell, you can probably outrun them without a horse," Caleb commented as he mounted.

"Caleb, are we doing the right thing?" she asked, suddenly unsure. "What if those people kill Pandora and Azarth? What if they do something to the people here to try to find out where we've gone?"

She stepped back from the horse. "No, we can't leave. We have to stay and fight."

Caleb came down off his horse and grabbed her. "Listen to me. You heard him. You agreed. We have to go. I have to protect you. I can't let them get you, Conn. I can't."

"It's a little late for that, cowboy," came a deep voice from the door.

Caleb turned to see a tall, muscular man with a crossbow aimed at Conn. He stepped in front of Conn. "Get off my land."

The man laughed. "That only works in the movies, cowboy. Now step aside. Or not. Doesn't matter much to me."

"You'll have to get through me and I won't make it easy," Caleb warned.

"No!" Conn shouted from behind him.

Caleb felt her move but never saw her. Apparently neither did the man with the bow because one minute he was aiming at them and the next he was flat on his ass and Conn held the bow in one hand and the arrow in the other, with the point of the arrow pressed against the center of the man's chest.

"Leave this place now and do not return if you value your life," she growled.

"Go ahead, kill me," the man laughed. "There's thousands more. And we'll never stop coming until you're dead, vampire bitch."

Conn knew that to be true. As unbelievable as it was and as heartbreaking, there was no way she could stay with Caleb. The Alliance would not rest until they saw her dead.

Or believed her dead, she realized. Tossing the arrow aside, she knelt down beside the man, gripping his head in both hands. It was the most horrible act she'd ever committed and it sickened her, but she forced her way into his mind, projecting the images she wanted to plant firmly and permanently.

He screamed and thrashed, but her strength was greater than his, fueled by the need to protect Caleb and their chance at love.

When at last the man's eyes rolled back and he went limp, she rose and turned to face Caleb.

“My god, Conn, what’ve you done?”

“Made him believe that I’m dead. Caleb, we have to go to the house. We have to neutralize all of the attackers.”

“What?”

“It’s the only way. Please.”

“Conn, this is way out of control.”

“I know, but unless they believe me dead they’ll never leave you in peace. Please, we have to ensure that no one here is in further danger from them.”

Caleb hesitated for a moment then nodded. She grabbed the unconscious man by the back of his jacket and started dragging him as she started for the house. Conn felt a growing sickness inside her. The Alliance may not have succeeded in killing her, but they might have effectively killed her chance at a life with Caleb.

Chapter Eight

The scene inside the house was something from a nightmare. That was the only way Caleb could describe it. Azarth and Pandora stood in the midst of the carnage. Bodies were lying strewn and broken. There was no blood which shocked him. But there was the unmistakable smell of death. Everywhere. His stomach recoiled and he had to step back outside to catch his breath.

Conn left the unconscious man just inside the doorway, making Caleb have to step over his body to go outside. She remained inside with Pandora and Azarth. When he reentered the house a few minutes later they all stopped talking and looked at him.

"They agree," Conn said. "With their help we can make him," she said and pointed at the unconscious man, "believe that after he was overcome, others came to his aid and killed me. He alone escaped."

"So you think he's just going to wake up and leave this?" Caleb gestured around them at the bodies. "You don't think he'll call for help?"

"He will not awaken here," Pandora said. "We will move him to another location."

"And what about this?" Caleb gestured around again. "If they were dispatched here then what makes you think they'll believe they found nothing and then got lucky and found her somewhere else?"

"They will believe what we want them to believe," Pandora said and smiled at the disbelief on Caleb's face. "Trust me, human. We've been doing this since before your kind—"

"Crawled out of the primordial soup," Caleb interrupted. "Yeah, I know. Still, there's a lot of dead bodies here."

"We have people en route now," Azarth replied. "Within hours it will be as it was before the Alliance attack."

“As it was?” Caleb shouted. “As it was? Are you fucking insane? A dozen people died here and you think anything can ever be as it was?”

Conn heard more than his words. She heard his heart. And hers came close to shattering into a million small pieces. He was right. Nothing would ever be as it was. Caleb would never forget the deaths that occurred here. He would never forget seeing her forcing her way into that man’s mind to break him and impose her will on him. He would never see her in the same light again. From this moment on when he looked at her he would see only an alien who brought death and destruction with her.

“You’re right,” she agreed. “But we have to make it appear so for the others who live and work here. They cannot suspect anything more than what they saw. Government agents arrived and took me into custody.”

“They’re not government agents. They’re fucking –”

Conn fought back the tears that threatened. “Go on, say it. They’re aliens. Some kind of freaks or vampires.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Yes, Caleb. It is.”

She sensed the presence of others and looked in the direction of the door. A moment later people began to file into the house. Silently they started gathering up the bodies. Caleb watched them with a look of distaste on his face that hurt her to see.

She turned her back on him. “Can you make sure that everyone on this ranch remembers me being taken into custody and nothing else??”

“Yes,” Azarth replied.

“Then please do so,” she said quietly. “I would like a few moments alone with Caleb.”

Azarth and Pandora left and she turned to face Caleb. “Could we take a walk, please?”

"Gladly," he said without hesitation, but did not take the hand she offered. She walked through the house and out the back door, stopping beneath the shade of the ancient oak.

"I am so sorry, Caleb," she said when he stopped beside her. "I've brought death into your home and I can never undo that."

"It wasn't your fault," he said in a tone she read as grudging, and knew from the connection she had with him, aptly described what he was feeling. She had no doubt that he cared for her. Deeply. But at the moment he also resented her. It was because of her that all of this had happened and it was human nature to seek something to be angry about when horrible things happened beyond a person's ability to control.

Intellectually, she understood. Emotionally, she was devastated. She'd hoped the bond was stronger between them. Apparently she was wrong.

"It is because I am here that this happened. I must leave, Caleb."

Her words struck a chord inside him he didn't want played. Right now he needed to be mad, to let anger consume him so he didn't have to feel that sickness that was curled in his belly, wanting to expand and take him over completely.

But the thought of her leaving was like acid washing through him, bitter and sharp. "No." He shook his head, wanting to take her into his arms but unable to escape the image of her in the barn and the feral light that danced in her eyes as she tortured that man into submitting to the dictates of her mind.

"I love you, Conn. I do. It's just that right now..."

"I know," she whispered. "And I love you, Caleb. Too much to stay. You look at me and see some monster, a creature that brings death and torment and pain. You see me bending another to my will even when it causes excruciating pain. And that image will, in time, wash away all feelings of love you have for me, leaving only revulsion and anger, which will evolve into hate. And I cannot bear for you to hate me. I will leave with the others, as soon as the repairs to your home have been completed."

"Conn, no." He took a step toward her but stopped short.

She looked up into his eyes and saw his pain. She felt it as if it was her own. And she knew she could not let him live with it. Steeling herself against her own pain, she stepped up to him.

"I love you, Caleb. I always will. But I will not destroy you."

He flinched when she reached up and stroked the side of his face, then closed his eyes and tried to relax. She felt his struggle and she wanted to scream against the unfairness of it, shove it from her mind and pretend that none of the ugliness had happened. But there was to be no forgetting for her.

Caleb, on the other hand, did not have to remember. He must have sensed her intent because his eyes flew open and his hand clamped on hers, trying to pull it back from his face.

But Conn was stronger. She knew that now. And she'd rather force this on him than have him live with bitterness.

"Forget," she whispered, pushing a tendril of energy into his mind.

"Don't," he gasped. "Conn...don't."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed and pressed deeper. "I love you, Caleb."

His mouth opened in a silent howl as she pushed past his defenses. Within moments it was done. When his body went slack, she caught him, and propped him gently against the trunk of the old oak.

In sleep his face was relaxed and peaceful. She knelt down and kissed him, lingering so that in the long years to come she could remember the feel of him, the smell and taste of him.

"It is time," Azarth said from behind her.

Conn rose, swiped at the tears on her face and turned. "When he wakes he will believe that I have been taken into the custody of the NSA."

“That is acceptable,” Azarth said. “Should he try to pursue you, he will meet only at dead ends, for even if that particular agency did have you, they would never admit to it. You are, for all practical purposes, dead to him.”

That stabbed her in a way that made her breath hitch and suddenly it was all too horribly real. She’d mated with Caleb. Shared her spirit with him and she was bound to him for the duration of her life. And she would never be with him. Never have love in her life. From this day on, she would be alone.

“You are not alone, Raenea,” Azarth said, putting his hand on her shoulder. “We will place you with those of our own who will protect you and be your companions. They will teach you all you’ve forgotten of our people and you can live a full and productive life.”

“But a life without love.”

Azarth made no comment. She didn’t expect him to. They both knew she was right.

* * * * *

Something hard was poking him in the back, messing up the spicy dream. He and Conn were at the lake, making love in the water. Damn, what the hell was that? He rolled over and started to bunch his pillow up under this face. All he got was a face full of grass. Which had his eyes flying open.

“Oh shit!” He pushed himself up and ran for the house. How had he gotten out there? The last thing he remembered was being in the front room with Conn and those NSA agents.

He came to a sudden stop as the thought registered in his mind. They took her! How the hell had he gone to sleep? They’d taken Conn and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to stop them. So how in Sam’s Hill had he fallen asleep? Much less gotten outside?

He didn't have any answers and at the moment that wasn't nearly as important as finding Conn. There had to be some way to find out where they'd taken her. He ran inside and snatched up the phone.

His father answered on the second ring. "Somebody better be dying."

Caleb hadn't stopped to consider the time. It was just a few minutes past four in the morning.

"Sorry, Dad. I need help."

"You hurt?"

"They took Conn."

"Yeah, I heard from Hinson an hour after he left the ranch. That little gal caused quite a mess, Caleb. And if the NSA has her, there's no way we're getting her back. I don't want to be hard on you, boy, 'cause I know you're hurtin', but the sooner you write her off the better."

"I just want to know where she is."

"And you ain't gonna get that, Caleb. You know what it means when the NSA takes someone into custody? It means they own her until they're convinced she's not a security threat to this country. And they don't arrest people who are just ordinary law-abiding folks, son. If they have her they probably have a good reason. Now I'm gonna hang up and I suggest you go back to bed or get your ass in gear and tend to what you can tend to, like the Circle R. G'night."

The distinctive click of Charlie hanging up had Caleb slamming down the phone and kicking the refrigerator hard enough to leave a sizeable dent. There had to be something he could do to figure out where Conn had been taken.

An idea came to him. He grabbed his keys and headed out.

* * * * *

Chase's house was dark when Caleb pulled up in front. But a light went on before he reached the front porch. The door opened to reveal Ana, sleepy eyed and wrapped in

one of Chase's old shirts. The legs of what appeared to be a pair of men's boxer shorts peeked from between the held together folds of the shirt.

"Sorry," Caleb said as she pushed the screen open for him.

"What's happened?"

He followed her into the kitchen and took a seat at the table as she started preparing a pot of coffee. "The NSA showed up and took Conn."

"What?" Coffee grains spilled onto the countertop as she whirled to look at him. "When? What happened?"

"What the devil's going on in here?" Chase bellowed from the hallway. A few moments later he walked into the kitchen, his jeans unbuttoned and his feet bare. "What the hell's going on?" he asked.

"The NSA took Conn," Ana said and turned her attention back to the coffee.

Chase blew out his breath, slung his hair back over his shoulders and took a seat across from Caleb. "Let's have it."

"It was a day out of hell. Hinson showed up to pick up a horse Dad insisted I sell him. It was a mare Conn had gotten attached to. It balked and Hinson shocked it. Conn went at him and kicked his ass."

Chase barked a laugh and Ana snickered. Caleb would have laughed, but all the humor had been sucked out of him. "Hinson was hollering about calling the law and out of the blue these two agents showed up. London and...something. The woman never gave her name. Anyway, they blew Hinson off with some bull about national security and him keeping his mouth shut or else, then they went inside with Conn and me.

"And announced they were taking her into custody. That she was a fugitive from justice and a threat to the security of this country."

Caleb propped his elbows on the table, covering his face with his hands for a moment. "There wasn't anything I could do. I just stood there, Chase. Stood there and watched them take her away."

Chase reached across the table and put his hand over Caleb's. "You both knew there was a chance it could happen. Question is, how did they know where to find her?"

Caleb hadn't considered that. "Damn if I know. But I gotta find her."

"Sorry, bro, got no influence with the government."

"I was thinking maybe Ana could help."

"Ana?"

Caleb looked at Ana who had turned and was leaning against the counter, watching him. "Maybe you can hypnotize me or something and I'll remember something one of them said that will give me a clue where they've taken her."

Ana crossed the room and took a seat beside him, placing her hand on his arm to give it an affectionate squeeze. "Honey, that's a long-shot at best, but I'll try."

"Then do it."

Ana glanced at Chase. After a moment he nodded.

"Chase, would you get me that big candle from on top of the fridge?" Ana asked as she got up and went to the pantry. She returned with an incense burner and a box of long fireplace matches.

After pouring a sprinkle of powdered incense into the metal burner, she lit it. It sparked then billowed, filling the room with a sweet yet spicy smell.

"What you want me to do with the candle?" Chase asked.

"Light it and set it on the hutch behind Caleb, then turn off the lights."

In a minute they were all sitting at the table with the light from the single candle casting dancing shadows around them.

"Caleb, I'm going to strike this match. I want you to watch it burn."

He nodded and she struck the match. It flamed to life and she held it in front of him. "Watch the flame. See it consume the wood. The shorter the match gets, the more relaxed you feel. You're feeling a little sleepy and that's okay. Just keep your eye on the flame. When the flame dies you can close your eyes and sleep. You're perfectly safe and relaxed. Just watch the flame."

Caleb was feeling a little sleepy, which was odd. He'd never been more wide awake in his life. He guessed panic did that to a person, and sure as shit smelled, he was feeling more than a little panic.

He didn't see the flame die. He didn't even remember closing his eyes. But he knew they were closed. He just didn't feel the need to open them.

Ana's voice was soft and soothing. She led him through the day. Funny, but he could remember it all so clearly now. Especially the look in Conn's eyes when Hinson shocked that mare. And the way she screamed his name, looking to him to make it right and save the horse.

It made his chest hurt, like something had ballooned inside it and needed to escape. He didn't realize what that something was until he felt wetness on his face. Was he crying?

He must have been because Ana said it was okay. He just needed to remember the NSA agents and what they said before they left with Conn.

Suddenly things weren't so clear anymore. He couldn't remember exactly what they said. He couldn't even remember Conn saying anything. And why didn't he remember seeing the car drive off? Surely he didn't just stand there and let them take her without watching her leave?

Confusion set in and with it the relaxation of a few moments ago fled. He opened his eyes. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Chase honey, turn on the lights," Ana said softly.

"Why can't I remember?" Caleb asked.

Ana regarded him in silence for a moment, gnawing absently on her bottom lip. "Maybe that's not what really happened."

"What?" Caleb's voice was joined by Chase's at almost the same moment.

Ana leaned back in her chair, arranging her arm so that she supported her right elbow in her left hand. Her right hand cupped her chin and her index finger tapped at her lips.

Caleb waited. And waited. Finally he couldn't take it. "Well?"

The lip tapping stopped. "I wasn't going to say anything because...well, because I wasn't sure. But tonight, after we went to bed, I had a strong flash. It was Conn. She was in...the mountains. But not here. It was different. She wasn't locked up. There were people with her. People who had eyes the same color she does. But she was sad and crying."

"They had eyes the same color! Those NSA people. But what does that mean?"

"Probably that they're not with the NSA," Ana said. "In my vision I got the sense that the people she's with are like her."

"But why would her own people take her away?"

"To protect her," Chase said, earning Caleb's attention. "Think about it, little brother. Conn's on the run. The military isn't convinced she's dead and it's only a matter of time before they get a lead that brings them straight to the Circle R. Now, let's suppose it was us. If I knew you were in danger, I'd snatch you out from under the military's nose."

"Especially if you weren't human," Ana added.

"There's no proof that she's..." Caleb couldn't bring himself to say it. Didn't want to believe it. Conn couldn't be an alien.

"Caleb honey, you have to be realistic," Ana said soothingly. "The things Conn can do? That's beyond anything I or any other witch I know can master. And she does it

without effort. I think she just may be from another world. And if she is and her people have found her, chances are you won't find her. No matter how long you look."

It was the last thing Caleb wanted to hear. "No, you're wrong," he barked and shoved his chair back as he stood. "I am going to find her."

"Caleb!" Ana started after him as he headed for the door, but Chase put his hand on her arm and stopped her.

"Let him go, Fancy. This is something he has to work out on his own."

Caleb stopped at the door and looked back. "You're right. And I will. I'll find her."

Chase nodded. "Walk well, little brother."

Caleb nodded and hurried from the house. He had no clue how he was going to find Conn, but one thing was for sure. He wasn't going to stop looking until he did.

* * * * *

"Enough, please!" Conn exclaimed and jumped up from where she sat in the luxurious study of the villa to rush out onto the balcony.

She'd listened for days on end to the tales of the V'Kar worlds. She'd read the histories, seen the marvelous holographic images showing historical events, listened to endless recollections from everyone at the villa and through it all, her mind could not help wandering to a ranch in Arizona where the man she loved suffered.

Had anyone told her that mating would forge a connection so strong that even separated by thousands of miles she'd feel his pain, she would have become a recluse and hidden away from the world. For surely it was better never to have known love than to give yourself so completely that you went through life feeling the pain and anguish your mate suffered.

Pandora and Azarth had tried counseling her. Azarth had assured her that in time Caleb's anguish would ease. He would forget her and go on to love another. And, he reminded her, she needed to learn to answer to her true name and forget the name Caleb had given on her.

She didn't believe him. Nothing was working the way they'd promised. Not only was Caleb furious and worried, he was determined to find her. And he no longer believed that she'd been taken into custody of government agents. She felt his resolve and frustration. Just like she felt bits and snippets of his memory returning.

Azarth was adamant that it was impossible. No human could counter the control imposed by a V'Kar. Caleb would never remember what really happened. Conn disagreed. She could feel it happening.

And she didn't want to be Raenea of V'Kar, daughter of the Heir Apparent. She wanted to be Conn Hoffman, veterinarian assistant and Caleb Russell's lover.

Azarth stepped out onto the balcony behind her. "We should step up your training. There are techniques for controlling rampant and unwanted emotions I can teach you that—"

"I don't want to control my emotions!" She turned on him with rage flaming hot and bright. "Don't you get it? I don't want to forget him. I don't want to be some...some princess or tool or key or potential savior. I want to be Connery Hoffman. I want to be with Caleb!"

"That isn't possible, my dear."

"Oh but it is." Not until she'd uttered the words did she realize it was far more than a protest or argument. It was a statement of intent.

"I'm leaving. You can either help me get back to Arizona or I'll find my own way. But one way or other, I'm going back." She could not voice her fears. That despite her need to be with Caleb, there was still the possibility that he might see her as a freak, something to be feared and loathed. Regardless, she had to go to him. If he sent her away then she'd have to find a way to accept it and exist without him.

"That would be ill-advised. Your safety would be compromised should you return and we cannot guarantee—"

"I'm not asking for your guarantee or your advice. I'm sorry, but this isn't a negotiation. I'm going. The only question is will you provide me transportation?"

“Raenea, we’ve been over this before. The same danger awaits you if you return that existed before you left. The Alliance will have eyes on the Russell abode, and at the first sign of your return—”

“I know the danger. It doesn’t matter. He’s my mate. I can’t forget him no matter what techniques you teach me. You said it yourself. When the people of V’Kar mate it is an irrevocable bond that can’t be broken. Well, I’ve bonded. No, it wasn’t with someone from V’Kar. It was with a human. But there’s human blood in me if what you say about my mother is true. And even if there wasn’t the result would be the same. He’s my mate. It’s done and it can’t be undone.”

When Azarth turned and placed his hands on the railing, dropping his head with a heavy sigh, she moved beside him and put her hand on his arm. “I appreciate your position. I do. And I appreciate all you’ve taught me and all you offer. But in matters of the heart, I don’t have a choice, Azarth. Mine has been given and if he’ll have me after what I did, I’ll stay with him. If they come for me...well, we’ll cross that bridge when and if it’s necessary.”

Azarth studied her for a long time, searching her eyes. She met his without hesitation, letting him inside her mind when he probed. She wanted him to see her determination, as well as the depth of her emotion. One of the lessons he’d stressed was the passion and devotion of the V’Karian heart. Well, here was a prime example for him. Her heart belonged to Caleb and she’d rather live one day with him than ten thousand years without him.

At length Azarth sighed and broke both mental and eye contact. He looked out over the scenery. “You are much like your father. He would have given up the throne rather than give up your mother.”

“Thank you for telling me that. It’s the nicest thing anyone has told me about him.”

He turned and smiled at her. “If you insist upon returning, at least let me assign a detachment to you. Bodyguards.”

“No.”

“My dear, whether you want protection or not, I cannot simply leave you unguarded. The Alliance is still a great threat.”

“No. I don’t want any of...any V’Kar on the ranch.”

Azarth smiled. “Very well. But help will be close in the event it is needed.”

Conn returned the smile. “Fine. Give me a phone number and I’ll use if I need to. But nothing more. Deal?” She stuck out her hand.

Azarth chuckled. “You’ve become quite adept at that accent, and the mannerisms.”

“So do we have a deal?”

Azarth took her hand. “Yes, we have a deal. If you agree to a bit of patience. There are preparations to be made and research to be done before you return.”

“What kind of preparations and research?”

“I merely want to explore options before you make your final decision.”

“I’m not going to change my mind. I have to be with him, Azarth.”

“I am not arguing with you, my dear. I merely want to present you both with options. I ask that you allow me a bit of time to complete what I need to do.”

“And then I can go back?”

“Absolutely.”

Conn let go of his hand and hugged him tight. “Then please hurry with what you have to do.”

“I will endeavor to move as expediently as possible.”

She nodded and released him. As he moved away to enter the villa she turned and leaned on the rail as he returned inside. Now that she’d made up her mind, she felt better. But what she’d face when she returned gave her cause for nervousness. If Caleb’s memory fully returned before she did, then she might be going back to a man filled with too much anger to see she’d acted out of love.

Which meant she ran the risk of Caleb turning his back on her. The thought of that made her sick with worry. But better that he make the choice. At least then she

wouldn't have to live with making the choice for him. She'd just have to try to find a way to survive without him.

Chapter Nine

Caleb threw the beer bottle at the old oak, taking no satisfaction in the way it exploded on the bark and rained to the ground with the rest of the collection that littered the ground.

Not much mattered to him these days. Nothing except the brief flashes of memory that plagued his mind. And even those moments provided no comfort. He didn't know what was real. Had Conn been taken or had she left on her own accord? He kept going back to one moment that had flashed through his head a week ago. Conn's hands on his face. Feeling something crawling into his mind and her voice. "Forget...I'm sorry...I love you."

Was that real? Had she used her abilities somehow to make him forget what really happened? Had she left him because she wanted to? Because she felt she was protecting him? Did she love him or was that nothing more than something he'd cooked up in his head?

He groaned and leaned forward in the lawn chair, his elbows on his knees and hands covering his face. What the hell was he going to do? He couldn't go on like this, not able to concentrate or sleep or be civil to anyone around him. Another month of this and he'd be a worthless alcoholic. Or insane.

He had to find the answers. But where?

"Start with me," came a voice from behind him. A voice he thought was nothing more than a wishful imagining until he felt her hands on his, pulling them away from his face.

"Conn!" He was out of the chair, pulling her to her feet from where she knelt in front of him to engulf her in his arms.

"Caleb." Her voice was a choked whisper against the side of his neck.

For a long time they stood locked in each other's arms, not speaking, just clutching one another. At length, she gently pulled back.

"I'm so sorry, Caleb," she said, tears tracking down her face.

"What happened?" he asked. "Things are...jumbled in my head."

Conn's throat constricted painfully, choking back the sob that rose. What had she done? Caleb had aged five years. His eyes were hollow and ringed with dark circles, his face unshaven and his hair a matted mess. His clothes looked like they'd been worn for quite some time and he'd definitely lost weight.

She'd done this to him. It made her sick. "Caleb, there's a lot I need to tell you. But you need to be rested and possessed of a clear mind. Let me take you inside. You can bathe and I'll prepare you something to eat. And after you've eaten and slept, we'll talk."

"Talk now," he barked. "Tell me what happened!"

"Not now," she insisted quietly, feeling a stab of guilt as she utilized the skills Azarth had shown her how to employ and sent a tendril of energy into his mind, a suggestion that he was hungry and tired."

His eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened and she wondered if maybe she'd failed. Then he blinked, blew out his breath and nodded. "You promise you're not going to leave again?"

"I promise."

He nodded again, took her hand and went inside with her. As he mounted the stairs to head for the shower, she went into the kitchen and picked up the phone.

Ana answered on the second ring. "Hi," Conn said.

"Conn! Oh my god. Conn. What happened to you? Where are you? Caleb is half crazy and —"

"I'm with him, Ana," Conn cut in. "At the Circle R. I'll explain everything. I promise. After I've explained to Caleb. I just wanted you to know I'm here."

"Thanks, honey. You call if you need me."

"I will. Thank you, Ana."

She hung up the phone and looked in the refrigerator to see what she could heat up for Caleb. By the time she had two plates filled and heating in the microwave, the table set and tall glasses of iced tea poured, she heard the soft pad of bare feet enter the room. She turned to look at him.

And her breath caught in her throat. Standing there with wet hair, wearing only a pair of faded jeans, he was every bit as potent as the first moment she'd set eyes on him.

"You can't imagine how much I want you at this moment," she admitted.

"The feeling's mutual," he said with a hint of his old self that faded too quickly to be replaced with a look of anguish.

"Were you taken from me, or did you leave me, Conn?"

She knew then that dinner would be a forgotten affair. She could see the need in his eyes and the determined set of his jaw. He'd go without nourishment, but answers were critical to his well-being.

"Yes."

"Yes...," he stammered in shock. "Yes? Yes what? Yes, you left because you were forced or because you wanted to."

"Because I saw no other way to protect you and the other people on this ranch."

"What does that mean? The NSA threatened me and my employees?"

"No."

"Then what?" he yelled and snatched up a glass of tea from the counter, hurled it across the room and stalked over to her.

"Those people were not agents of the government."

"Then who the hell were they?" He grabbed her by the arms and lifted her slightly as he pulled her a little closer.

"You're hurting me," she said softly.

"You damn near killed me," he growled in reply.

That effectively smothered anything she could think to say. He was right. She'd wronged him and deserved whatever anger he felt. But there was more than anger in his voice and in the tension in his body. There was hunger.

"And you're the most magnificent man I've ever known," she whispered. "The one man I want and need."

The tight-fisted grip he had on her arms loosened to become a slow caress on her skin that flamed the fire inside her brighter. "You're so beautiful, Caleb," she said as she reached up to trace her fingers across his chest. "So perfect."

"There's nothing perfect about me, Conn."

"Oh, but there is," she argued, moving her hand from his chest and down his abdomen, feeling his muscles tense. She reached the top of his jeans and slowly unbuttoned them, keeping her eyes locked with his.

His eyes were filled with heat and longing as she unzipped his jeans and pushed them down over his hips. "I've missed you so," she said, letting her fingertips glide up the inside of his thighs to his manhood then move away. She felt him shiver at the light caress and repeated it but this time when she reached his erection, she took him in her hand, squeezing and stroking in a slow rhythm.

His eyes closed and his head tilted slightly back. She knelt in front of him, taking him in her mouth and was rewarded with a lusty groan. The movement of her tongue and mouth had him tensing. She felt his need and knew that he would not last long. But she did not stop until his hands fisted in her hair and tugged her to her feet.

His lips claimed hers in a kiss that was near brutal in its hunger, need so hot and urgent that gentleness was momentarily forgotten. She understood and did not protest

when his hands grabbed her shirt and ripped it open. Nor did she protest when his hands closed on her breasts, pressing them together and lifting them high. His mouth closed on one nipple, sucking and biting as if in a frenzy.

She gasped at the small jolt of pain, but did not fight against it. She was his and would give him what he needed.

As if suddenly realizing how rough he was, he stopped, turning his attention to undressing her. When she stood nude before him, he stepped back, his eyes leaving a tangible tingle on her skin as they traveled down her body.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered hoarsely then let his eyes meet hers. “Are you mine, Conn, or is this some trick? Are you really here or is this just another trick my mind is playing on me?”

“I’m here, Caleb.” She took his hand and placed it against her heart. “This is real. As is my love for you. And I am yours. For as long as you want me.”

The thrill that raced through her when his hands cupped her breasts was as strong as the first time he touched her. “Caleb. My love,” she breathed as he leaned down, his lips touching her neck.

His lips moved slowly up her neck to her ear. At the same moment he sucked her earlobe between his lips, his fingers moved to her nipples, stroking and squeezing. She exhaled with a trace of a moan and arched against him.

Caleb’s lips abandoned her ear to focus on her breasts. Holding them firmly, he moved his mouth from one to the other, his tongue teasing the hard nipples. Conn felt her breath quicken when one of his hands moved down her body and into the slippery folds of her sex.

She was wet when his fingers penetrated her and she gasped at the wash of longing his touch evoked. “I want you. Please,” she whispered, not in the least embarrassed to beg.

His answer was to scoop her up in his arms and carry her to the den. He lay her gently on the thick rug in front of the fireplace then moved away to strike a match and

start the prepared wood in the fireplace. A small flame danced and he returned to her, kneeling between her legs. Putting his hands under her thighs, he lifted her, spreading her legs.

Conn raised her arms up above her head, the weight of her body on her shoulders as he lifted her higher. When he lowered his mouth to her and his tongue lapped at her sensitive, erect clit, tremors of sensation rippled through her.

“Ahhh, Caleb,” she breathed as the sensations intensified. His hands moved her legs apart even more, his tongue taking her closer and closer to release. She fought to control it, but was powerless against the pulsing wave that engulfed her, making her cry his name and tremble in its wake.

Caleb released her and knelt on his hands and knees above her. Conn grabbed his hair and pulled his face down to hers, licking at his lips and sucking his tongue into her mouth, tasting the heady mixture of his unique flavor mixed with the taste of herself.

At the onset his kiss was one of controlled passion. But when she writhed against him the kiss turned hungry and rough. She responded eagerly to his hunger.

“Please,” she whispered when he pulled back from her lips to look into her eyes.

His eyes gleamed in the reflection of the fire. Still kneeling between her legs, he took hold of her arm and flipped her over. His hand fisted tightly in her hair to pull her head back. She complied with the unspoken command and got onto her knees.

This was one time no thought was given to protection. He rubbed the head of his cock against her wet sex, spreading her lips then pushed inside.

Conn cried out in pleasure and Caleb’s hands moved to encircle her and lift her, impaling her on his thick cock. Conn moaned in lust and moved against him, rolling her hips as he pumped inside her.

His hands traveled up to cup her breasts as his mouth moved down the side of her neck. She raised one arm and felt behind her to grab his hair. Turning slightly she pulled his face to hers, licking at his lips. And in that moment, for the first time since she’d been back, felt their connection.

Caleb groaned, feeling her in his mind. Feeling her love and her fear and the pain she'd suffered from being parted from him. He crushed her against him in a kiss that conveyed all of the emotion inside him. The fear, confusion, need, anger, hunger and love. It didn't matter that she saw what was inside him. She was his love. His mate. He knew it like he knew the sun would rise in the morning. She was his and because of that, he was complete.

His fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her head back to expose her neck. He bit at her ear, the tender flesh at its base and moved lower to the junction of her shoulder.

Conn pressed back harder against him, her lush ass moving in slow erotic circles as she rose and fell on his throbbing dick. His mouth opened against her neck, feeling the rapid beat of her pulse beneath his lips and tongue. The overwhelmingly sexy movements of her firm ass against him and her tight pussy squeezing him as she took the length of him slowly, increased his hunger to a fevered pitch.

His lips sought hers and he was not gentle, or in control. He wanted to devour her, to taste every part of her, to have her trembling with need. Her response to his hunger was a fire that burned as bright as his own. The kiss became a battle, each seeking to fill their own desperate need.

Conn broke free, her lips swollen and red. She moved forward onto her hands and knees and he followed, staying hilted inside her. With feline grace and flexibility she twisted so that she faced him, her legs circling his waist to pull him deeper into her tight channel.

Caleb worked his hands under her ass to lift her, driving deeper inside her. She almost robbed him of all control with the way she undulated against him, soft gasps and moans accompanying the sight of her hands snaking down her body to play with her clit. Her violet eyes were darkened to the color of a thunderhead, hooded with desire and her skin glistened with a sheen of perspiration and a flush of need.

She was the most intoxicating sight he'd ever witnessed. Caleb took her hands to pull her to him. She wound around him like a python, all muscle and grace as his lips ravaged her mouth.

She acquiesced, but briefly. Then she became the dominant, fisting both hands in his hair to imprison him in a searing kiss that made his balls pulse and his control weaken.

He stroked deeper inside her, gripping her ass tightly to drive her down the length of him. She arched back, offering her breasts. His tongue moved between them and then beneath her right breast, nipping at the soft underbelly before moving up to take the nipple in his mouth. She screamed as a climax ripped through her and she ground around him, gasping his name.

He was going to lose it. He could feel it. "Slow down, honey," he groaned and slid free from her wet sex. He knelt between her legs, sliding his hands up her legs to her hips then higher until he cupped her breasts.

She moaned in pleasure and arched against him as he pressed her breasts together and ran his tongue into the crease and then up to tease one peaked nipple. Conn writhed against him.

"More," she panted. "Please, Caleb."

More was exactly what he had in mind. He let go of her breasts and slid his hands slowly down to her sex and then back up, barely brushing the sides of her pussy. She quivered and stretched in pleasure as his hands traveled over her body, across her belly, circling her breasts in ever decreasing spirals until his fingers rubbed across her nipples.

Then he reversed the direction, working steadily down her body and back up. And as he worked slowly up her body again he lowered himself onto her. Inch by inch until he was stretched over her, his flesh barely in contact with her slick hot body, his weight supported on one arm.

She wiggled sexily, brushing her nipples against his chest and pressing her pussy up against his erection, sandwiching it between their bodies.

“You feel so damn good,” he murmured against the side of her neck then proceeded to lick and bite his way to her ear lobe. “I can’t get enough of you.” When his lips moved to hers, she rewarded him with a kiss so passionate he nearly came. But he wasn’t about to let it end. He assumed control, plundering her mouth, tasting her, feeding off her.

They were both breathing hard, bodies pressing and grinding against one another in increasing fervor. His hard cock rubbed against her belly, throbbing with as much intensity as the pulse-pounding thrum of her pussy.

They had no awareness other than that of their joined lips, mouths and writhing bodies. When their lips parted, Caleb rose over her to look down into her eyes. And saw what he wanted in their violet depths. Felt it in his mind and his heart. She truly was his. His woman, his mate. She would take and match all he could give.

The knowledge ignited a fire inside him so hot that his body burned with need. When he slid his hands to her hips and pulled her to him, impaling her on the length of his cock, she raised her arms above her head, arched up and surrendered to his need.

The fire died away and night gave way to day before their passion was finally spent. With the sound of Conn’s whispered “my love” echoing in his mind, he succumbed to sleep.

Chapter Ten

Conn was feeling more than a little anxious as she and Caleb descended the stairs of the ranch. She'd returned two weeks ago and since her return neither she nor Caleb had left the house. No one aside from Ana and Chase knew she was there. It had to be that way.

Caleb had even sent Hannah and her family on a three-week paid vacation to make sure that the house was empty.

Conn had explained everything to Caleb. Where she came from, the political situation on the worlds of V'Kar, why the V'Kar were on Earth and about their greatest enemy on Earth, the Alliance.

As a credit to him, he'd accepted her at her word. She suspected it would have been more difficult if she had not mentally joined with him, giving him access to her thoughts.

Their greatest difficulty to overcome was the fact that she'd left to protect him. She understood. As a man it went against the essential male grain to have a woman feel she was in the position of protector as it was a man's natural inclination to see himself in that role.

It'd taken some time, but in the end he agreed that had the situations been reversed he probably would have done the same thing. Relief couldn't come close to describing the weight that lifted from her when he said he understood.

But they still had some hard choices to make if they were going to ensure the safety of the people on the Circle R and all of Caleb's family. And the best solution meant revealing information that was sure to be not only a shock to all of the Russell family, but to bring to the forefront old family anger that had lain dormant for many years.

Caleb had called his father and all of his brothers and asked for a family meeting. Everyone had arrived two days ago and since then Conn had told them everything, not sparing a detail. She wasn't sure it was wise, but Caleb had insisted on full disclosure and she was not able to go against him on that.

Having two witches and a shape-shifter in the family had certainly dulled what could have been a shock. Still, even with paranormals as family members, announcing that not only do aliens exist but that they'd been walking the earth for countless centuries was not the easiest story to make seem believable.

In the end they had believed her. Well, after a few demonstrations of her abilities and a lot of inside information that Azarth had warned her might prove dangerous for them to know.

Last night the discussion had ended with Caleb announcing that he and Conn had a plan to keep the Alliance from targeting the ranch and their family but they'd discuss in the following morning.

Now it was time to face the music and Conn felt this aspect was going to be far more of a blow to the family than having been introduced to a woman from outer space, as Caleb's brother Cole put it.

Caleb stopped at the door of the kitchen and gave her hand a squeeze. "Don't worry. It'll be okay."

She could hear the voices inside the kitchen. There was a lot of speculation about what kind of plan Caleb could have in mind. She looked up at him. "Are you sure you want to do this, Caleb?"

"Absolutely. I love you, Conn."

"And I love you."

"Then let's get this show on the road, honey," he said with what she read as false bravado.

She nodded and they entered the room.

All talk ended and all eyes focused on her and Caleb.

“Okay, let’s have it,” Charlie said.

“Morning, Dad,” Caleb said with a grin. “That coffee smells good.”

“Sit, sit,” Clara said and rose from her seat. “I’ll get it.”

Conn and Caleb took seats at the table. Caleb placed the leather portfolio he had tucked under his arm on the table. After Clara had poured them coffee and taken her seat, Charlie spoke up again. “Well?”

Caleb looked from him to Conn then back again. “I think it might be best for Conn to explain.”

“Please do,” Charlie said to her.

“Very well,” she said and folded her hands together on top of the table. She saw the eyes that followed the motion of Caleb’s hand landing on top of hers.

“In order to explain, it is necessary that I delve into the history of the Russell family.” She saw the way Charlie’s eyebrows rose and the way the twins looked at each other. Only Chase seemed unaffected. But then she’d learned that Chase was like deep water. There could be much activity in the depths even when the surface was as pristine as glass.

“Specifically,” she said, “Mr. Russell’s brother Jack and his wife Alana.”

“Hold on there, missy,” Charlie said. “We don’t discuss that...that bitch in this house.”

“Sir, with all due respect, there is much you do not know about Alana and your brother,” Conn argued gently. “Your family believes that Jack abandoned his place in the family to run off with some gypsy tramp, turning his back on the family legacy. In truth, your brother left in order to protect all of you.”

“That’s a load of shit,” Charlie spat.

“On the contrary,” Conn met his anger without flinching. “Alana was neither a gypsy nor a tramp. She was V’Kar. More specifically, a member of the Sisterhood. Your

brother left because by staying he put you in the crosshairs of the Alliance's sights. He was willing to risk his own life for the woman he loved, but not the lives of his brother or his father.

"The only way to protect you and your family was for Jack to leave with Alana. The V'Kar number is strong in Florida and they offered to provide Jack with land and the funds to start his own ranch."

"That's such a load of cow shit!" Charlie exclaimed. "Jack's nothing but a whore-mongering renegade who lost his honor the day he turned his back on this family and took off with that slut."

"Hold on, Dad," Caleb spoke in a voice so quiet, yet so full of strength and power that everyone, including Charlie looked at him in surprise.

"She's not lying," Caleb said. "I know because I talked with Jack myself. He confirmed everything she said."

Charlie's mouth fell open then closed and he shook his head, clearly at a loss for words. There was loud silence for a long time.

When Chase spoke, Cole's wife Rusty was watching Charlie so intently that she actually started in her seat. "You always told us that nothing's thicker than blood. It's all you can trust in this life. Well, he's blood. Regardless of who he's married to."

"You mean your uncle is married to one of Conn's people?" Rusty asked, and when Caleb nodded she smiled. "Cool."

Chase smirked at her comment. "Let's say all this is true. What does that have to do with what's happening now?"

"Glad you asked," Caleb said. "I'm moving to Florida. The lady Conn told you about—Pandora? She met with Jack and Alana and they've arranged everything."

"You're leaving?" Ana asked in a voice choked with emotion.

Caleb nodded. "No other way, beautiful. If we stay, the V'Kar will try to protect us, but the Alliance is strong and there's no guarantee that they won't strike out at one of you to get to Conn."

"You moving to Florida won't keep them from striking at us if they mean to use us as leverage against you," Chase pointed out.

Caleb looked at Conn and his hand tightened on top of hers before he answered. "Two weeks from now information will be released that the woman who escaped the helicopter crash was an illegal alien with ties to a terrorist cell. She was five foot ten and had sandy-blonde hair and brown eyes.

"It'll go on to say that she showed up here impersonating a woman I hired as a vet assistant and when I found out that the real Connery Hoffman had been killed, I called the authorities who came and took Conn into custody.

"She was killed when the car the government agents were driving was forced off the road by a cell of terrorists. Many of them were killed in the battle as well and those who did escape are being sought by the government now."

"What?" Caleb's brother Cole, up until that point quiet, bellowed.

"I will not perish," Conn answered, "but the Alliance will believe that I have. When Caleb arrives in Florida, he will be introduced to a relative of Alana's who has come to stay with her, Constance Zane. An identity has already been arranged that will hold up to even the closest scrutiny."

Charlie shook his head. "Honey, I ain't calling you a liar, but that's a mighty tall order. And if what you say is true, then there are people who've seen you and can identify you."

"I think not," came a voice from the door. All the men jumped. Chase was already out of his chair with fists clenched. "No, it's all right," Conn exclaimed and stood. Azarth stood framed in the doorway.

More than one person at the table started. Azarth entered the room. "Forgive the intrusion, but I felt it prudent to visit and lend my assurance to all of you that the plan Raenea – forgive me, Conn – has set in motion, will indeed succeed."

"Just who the hell are you?" Charlie asked.

"Forgive me." Azarth inclined his head. "I am Azarth, Minister of Science and Medicine."

"So you're an alien?" Cole's wife Rusty asked.

"From your perspective, yes," he answered with a smile.

Rusty and Clay's wife, Scout, shared a look and grinned. Charlie did not smile. In fact, his frown deepened. "I'm not going to ask you to prove that statement, sir, but I will ask you to prove to me that this plan has a chance in hell of succeeding and keeping this family safe from your enemies."

"Of course. May I?" Azarth gestured to chair that sat beside the refrigerator.

"Sorry, let me get that," Caleb answered and pulled the chair to the table.

"Thank you." Azarth took a seat. "The identity that has been secured for Conn is one that will never be put to question. I feel sure she has mentioned Pandora to you?"

"The Mother Superior of this Sisterhood in your star system?" Ana asked. "Yes."

"Excellent. Pandora has lived on this world, as have I, since the time before the civilization of Sumer rose to greatness. In that era she was worshipped as a goddess, as she has been in many subsequent cultures. Today she is known as Pandora Gotleib, the majority stockholder of one of the most powerful communication conglomerates in the world.

"And as something of a recluse who guards her family with great care. As a contingency that something should go wrong when a member of her board of directors, Eric Zane, lost his wife and child during childbirth, information was released that the wife had died but the child had survived. At the time Conn was placed in Shen's care, additional information was released that this child was being schooled in the most

exclusive and private academies in the world. Photos have been amassed over the resulting years of Conn, should the need arise to move her from Shen's care to Pandora's protection."

"Last week Eric Zane died and today a press release was issued that his only surviving heir, Constance, had sold all of her stock back to the majority stockholders. Mr. Zane's only surviving family aside from his daughter is his sister, Alana Zane Russell. Mrs. Russell flew to Zurich immediately following the death of her brother to help Constance settle the estate.

"Today information was leaked that Constance Zane would accompany her aunt to Florida where she would be staying for an indefinite period of time."

"Damn!" Cole muttered. "You people sure plan in advance, don't you?"

"But why?" Clay asked.

"I'd like to know that myself," Chase added.

Azarth looked around at everyone. "When you have lived as long as we have, you learn to always think ahead. Contingency plans are a necessity for one can never predict when a random element will wreak havoc with even the best-laid plan."

"You mean like Conn jumping out of that helicopter?" Ana asked.

"Exactly," Azarth said with a smile. "Had she stayed aboard the aircraft, she would have been taken into custody upon arrival by people loyal to us and we would have extricated her from further scrutiny."

"Guess that just wasn't in the cards," Chase said. "Fate has a way of intervening."

"Indeed it does, sir."

He looked around at everyone. "If there are no further questions, it is time for us to take our leave."

Caleb rose and extended his hand to Azarth. "Thank you."

Azarth nodded respectfully and accepted the handshake. Conn got up and when Caleb turned to her, went into his arms. "I'll try not to screw this plan up," she said.

Azarth chuckled. "My dear, this time I believe we have a plan that not even the daughter of the Heir Apparent can destroy. Although, as am I fond of saying these days, it would be wise not to underestimate your ability."

Conn chuckled. "Well, I'm sure that's a veiled insult, but today I can't be upset about anything. Thank you. For everything."

"I believe that if one of my kind chose to mate with a human, a member of this family would be a wise choice."

"Amen, brother," Conn chirped in a perfect accent that had everyone chuckling, even Azarth.

Charlie shook his head and leaned back in his chair. "I tell you what, I sure am glad I don't have any more kids. These four have given me enough surprises to kill a weaker man."

All the men laughed at the comment. Conn watched the interaction between the members of the family and was suddenly looking forward to the day that she could take her place as a member of the family and share such love and companionship.

"So when do you leave?" Chase asked Conn.

"Now," came a soft female voice leading into the living room.

Everyone started. Azarth extended his hand as Pandora entered. She placed her hand lightly atop his as he made the introductions. "This is Pandora, Mother Superior of the Sisterhood."

"No harm will come to your son," Pandora directed her statement to Charlie. "He and Princess Raenea—forgive me, Conn—are merely fulfilling their destiny. As unbelievable as it may seem to you, this *is* Caleb's destiny. And it is the way to ensure lasting protection to your family and a member of the royal family."

"You sure he'll be safe?" Charlie asked. "I'm still not sold on the idea of him spending time with that renegade Jack. Even if he is married up with one of your...followers or whatever."

"They will not be alone," Azarth answered. "Remember, our numbers are many and our plan well considered. Upon his arrival in Florida, there will be many to safeguard him from harm. As there will be here. With your permission, of course. I have volunteers willing to work on your ranch to ensure your continued safety."

"I only want my family to be safe," Charlie said as he stood and walked around the table to face Azarth. "Man to man, I have your word?" He stuck out his hand.

Azarth took it without hesitation. "Upon my honor, I give you my word."

"I hope for your sake your honor's worthy, sir. Because if something happens to any one of my family, including Conn, nothing on this world or yours is going to stop me from exacting vengeance. You get my drift?"

"Indeed, I do," Azarth nodded respectfully then looked in Conn and Caleb's direction.

"Are you ready?"

Conn hugged Caleb tight. "I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll be there, baby, don't you worry."

"I love you, Caleb."

"I love you, Conn. It doesn't matter where we live as long as we're together. And just so you know. I'm gonna marry you. If you'll have me, that is."

She grinned up at him. "Just try and get rid of me, Caleb Russell. Remember I can shape-shift and I'd hate to see you wind up with the world's biggest slug stuck to your fine behind."

Caleb laughed and hugged her again, then released her as Ana got up and ran over to Conn. "You hurry back, little sister," Ana whispered through tears. "And we'll have the biggest wedding this county's ever seen."

"Thank you," Conn replied, blinking back tears of her own, and looking around at everyone. "Thank you all."

She gave Caleb a long lingering kiss then nodded to Pandora. "I'm ready."

"Very well," Pandora said and nodded to the family. She and Azarth left the room. Caleb took Conn's hand and followed.

When they reached the dark sedan parked outside, Caleb paused and held Conn close. "Promise you'll be there waiting for me?"

"Upon my life," she vowed. "You don't think I'm going to let you weasel out of marrying me, do you? "

"Honey, that's the last thing I'd do. You call me on the phone Azarth gave me when you get there. And a hundred times a day until I arrive."

"I will."

Caleb looked at Azarth. "You make sure she's safe."

"Always. Now we must go."

Caleb grabbed Conn for one more kiss then reluctantly let her go. He watched until the car disappeared from sight then returned inside the house where the family was waiting.

"Son, I'm not happy about this," Charlie said the moment Caleb entered the room. "Not happy at all."

"It's going to be okay, Dad. They'll keep her safe and once I get there and spend enough time to make it reasonable, we'll come back and –"

"That's the part that rankles me, boy. You being there with that scoundrel, Jack."

"Just what is the deal with you and Jack, anyway?" Clara asked.

"Yeah," Chase added.

Charlie blew out his breath. "I told you. He's a renegade and a scoundrel."

"What does that mean?" Caleb asked, taking a seat.

"It means that when Pa was ailing and we needed him the most, he up and left. Took off with that gal and turned his back on the family without a look back."

"He was in love," Ana said softly. "And wanted to protect the woman he loved. Surely you understand that better than most, Charlie. Look what happened when you thought Clara's life was in danger."

Charlie shot her a heated look but it faded fast. He sighed heavily. "Still, he could've come back. Or stayed in touch. It's been...damn fifty years."

"Did you ever try to get in touch with him?" Caleb asked.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

Charlie opened his mouth as if to answer, then closed it and shook his head. "Too much water under that bridge, boy. You can't go back."

"But you can go forward," Caleb said gently. "Dad, it's time to mend those bridges and bring the family back together. Conn taught me that in a roundabout way. She's spent her whole life wondering why she was alone with no family. And longing to be part of one. And now she knows who she is, but still she can't be with her parents. Hell, she can't even see them for fear of putting lives at risk. But she can be part of a family and know what it means to have that love and support. And I want her to have as much of that as I can give. Including Uncle Jack.

"And I think you want it too. To mend things, I mean."

"So now you know what I want?"

"No, but I do," Clara spoke up. "And Caleb and Conn have provided the perfect opportunity for you and Jack to heal those old wounds. So you will mend the fence, Charlie Russell."

"Is that a fact?"

"Oh, it is indeed," Clara said with a smile. "Or you can take it to the bank that the Russell women will make sure you're miserable as an old goat tied at the shed 'til you do."

"Amen," Ana spoke up, followed by a chorus from Rusty and Scout.

Charlie shook his head, trying in vain to stop a grin from spreading on his face, but failing. "I swear, if it ain't my boys that are gonna kill me, it's you damn women."

Clara laughed and hugged him. "You better believe it, you old coot. Now, get yourself on the phone and call your brother. Me and the gals got some planning to do."

"What kind of planning?" Charlie asked as she got up from the table.

"Honey, we got a wedding to plan," she said as she got a notepad and pen from one of the kitchen drawers. "Girls, let's go into the den and put our heads together."

Charlie looked around at the men as the women got up to follow Clara. "Ain't that jumping the gun a bit? Caleb hasn't even left yet."

Ana spoke up from the door. "Planning a wedding takes time."

Charlie just looked at Chase who groaned and shook his head. "Don't even try to fight it. This is a battle you can't win."

Caleb laughed and leaned back in his chair, grinning at his father and his brothers. He couldn't wait for the next step in the plan.

Chapter Eleven

Caleb peeled off his wet shirt, pried off his boots and socks and fell face first into the pool. Damn if the Floridians didn't have it worked out. Spend a blistering hot day working on the ranch and come home and ease the heat in a nice cool pool. He'd have to remember to suggest that to Charlie when he and Conn got back home.

Jack and Alana had provided him and Conn with the use of their guesthouse so they could have their privacy and Caleb had enjoyed every moment of it. But there were times when he missed home.

He'd ended up spending longer in Florida than he'd planned. It was a whole new world. Ranching was pretty much the same no matter where you were, but the climate and landscape provided different challenges, and the breed Jack raised was different from the stock raised on the Circle R.

And getting to know his uncle had proven to be fascinating. Jack and Charlie were like night and day. Charlie was big boned, stocky and bellowed when he talked. By contrast, Jack was tall and wiry and rarely raised his voice.

Conn walked out onto the patio and spotted him. "Well, what have we here?" she asked with a grin and dived fully clothed into the pool.

Caleb grinned when she slithered up his body, her hands sliding over his skin to end up clasped behind his neck. She wound her legs around his waist and captured his lips in a kiss hot enough to rival the Florida sun.

"Ummm, salty," she murmured when the kiss ended. "Have a good day?"

"Yeah, it was good. How 'bout you?"

"Good. But Alana's a little down about us leaving."

"And you? You want to go back home, don't you?"

"I want to be wherever you are," she replied and nibbled his ear. "But I do feel bad for her, Caleb. With her boys gone...well, you know."

Caleb carried her over to the edge of the pool and climbed up to sit beside her, dangling his legs in the water.

"It's still kind of hard to believe. The part about her and Jack letting Pandora send their sons back into the past. I mean doesn't that set up some kind of paradox or something?"

"Apparently not. At least not from what I've learned from Azarth. As odd as it is, if they hadn't gone back into the past, then your—let's see, what is it? Your great, great, great, great, great grandfather wouldn't have left Florida to head west and start the Circle R."

Caleb shook his head. "Boggles the mind, doesn't it?"

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Horatio?"

Conn chuckled. "From your English playwright, William Shakespeare, in Hamlet. Act one, scene 5."

"Been in Uncle Jack's books again, have you?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "He has a marvelous library."

"Yeah. Who would've thought that a rancher would have such a love for classic literature. But still, that whole time travel thing. I don't know if we want to tell the rest of the family that part."

"I think that should be up to Jack and Alana," she replied.

"Right you are. And right now I don't want to think about time travel or ill-tempered bulls or anything except getting clean and getting you in bed."

"What about dinner?"

"Dinner can wait," he said as he stood and took her hand to pull her to her feet.

“Hmmm,” she murmured as she rose slowly, working her way up his body, kissing and licking until her tongue traced its way up the side of his neck and she captured his ear lobe between her teeth. She moved her hand to cup his crotch.

“Hmmm doesn’t even come close,” Caleb said as he took hold of her hair to pull her up to meet his lips. He’d never get enough of the taste of her. She writhed against him, allowing him to take her mouth, her hard nipples raking across his chest, creating trails of fire on his skin.

His lips left hers and moved down the side of her neck and over the top of one shoulder. The scoop-necked gauze top she wore was easy enough to slide down off her shoulders, baring her breasts. His mouth gravitated to the tantalizing bud of her nipple. Conn purred and arched back when his lips closed around the sensitive tip. He supported her with his arms, bending her back like a bow.

The blast of energy that sizzled from her mind to his nearly weakened his knees with its power. Uninhibited, raw and primal, it was like a live wire in his mind that sizzled throughout his body. And it was an offer he wasn’t about to refuse. He continued to torture her breasts, his hands moving down her body to peel off her shorts.

When one hand moved between her legs, his fingers spreading her sex and dipping into the silken wetness, she spread her legs, pressing against his hand, riding his fingers as he penetrated deeper.

The throaty moan that came from her announced that he’d not only found her secret spot, but that it was so alive that only one stroke had her working toward orgasm.

Caleb held onto her and stroked his fingers inside her, each movement driving her closer to the edge. A rush of wetness preceded a vibration that ran through her body before her pussy started to spasm around his fingers. Her hands gripped his upper arms, fingers digging into his skin as the climax rolled through her.

It was like an aphrodisiac. Everything about her was. He wondered if he'd ever get enough of her.

"Please," she gasped as the climax started to subside. "More."

Caleb didn't hesitate to comply. He pulled her over to a large round lounge, lay back and pulled her on top of him. "Take it, baby," he said, watching her eyes for reaction. "Let me see how much you want me."

Lights danced in her violet eyes and a sly, sexy smile came to her face. She straddled his body, taking his dick in her hand and slowly, inch by inch, impaled herself on his length.

Once fully seated, she started a rocking glide, back and forth, higher then lower, the movement slow and seductive. Caleb moved his hand to the junction of her thighs, his fingers working into the folds of her sex, imprisoning her hard clit between thumb and finger.

A gasp exploded from her at the touch. She arched back, bracing herself with her hands on his thighs. The sight of her, bowed back with breasts high and his dick filling her pussy, was enough to make a man lose his mind. Her pussy was hot and slick, gripping him as she rode him.

Harder and faster she moved. Her clit grew tighter and harder, signaling a coming release. Caleb fought to hold back his own climax as she vibrated on and around him. He rolled her clit, squeezing harder and she moaned loudly, a sound all female, no matter what the species.

At the moment of that moan he felt her orgasm. It literally radiated from her pussy, down the length of his dick and throughout his body. Unable to control it, he quaked beneath its power, his seed shooting inside her in great throbbing waves.

How long it lasted he had no idea. It could have been a moment or an eternity. He didn't know or care. He was lost in sensation, a climax that claimed both body and soul. He felt Conn with him, her passion and her love.

And as always, it shook him to his soul. He felt the claim he had on her and her acceptance of it. Moreover, he realized the claim she had on him. They were joined in a way he'd never dreamed possible.

When she sagged, melting down on top of him, her breath still fast and her heart pounding against his chest, he wrapped his arms around her, feeling complete.

For a long time they lay on the lounge, letting the last of the dying rays of the sun bathe them. Finally she sat up. "I'm starving."

His stomach rumbled and they both laughed. "Well, I guess I'm not the only one," she said and got off him. "What say we take this inside and get something to eat?"

"Did you cook?" he asked as he got to his feet.

"Why, I'll have you know that I fixed fresh squash, a roast and —"

"Let me guess. Potato salad."

"I love that stuff," she said with a laugh. "But I also made you rice and gravy."

"Well damn, come on then. We don't want good food like that going to waste."

She grinned and started for the door but he took her arm and stopped her. "Conn?"

"Yes?"

"I just want you to know that I love you and I promise we're going to have a good life."

"We already do," she said and stood up on tiptoe to graze his lips with hers. "And we will. One day at a time."

"Works for me," he replied and licked at her lips, parting them with his tongue.

"Hmmm," she murmured, sinking against him for a moment then pulling back. "Damn, cowboy, you sure know how to make it tough on a woman."

"You ready for round two already?" he asked teasingly.

"Don't tempt me. At least not until I get some food in me. Then we'll see how much round two you have left." She turned and headed for the door. Caleb laughed and smacked her lightly on the bare behind.

“Then get ready, honey, cause once I get refueled, it’s on.”

She laughed and tossed him a towel. “Promises, promises. Are you nervous about going back? To the Circle R, I mean?”

“Actually, I think I’m ready. I miss my family. And I want them to know our son.”

He reached over and put his hand on her belly. “Still hard to believe. Your stomach’s flat as a fritter. You sure you’re pregnant?”

“Positive,” she said with a smile.

“Then all the more reason to go back where we belong,” he said.

“As Constance Zane,” she reminded him.

“Soon to be Constance Zane Russell,” he said and grabbed her to pull her into a tight hug. “This is going to work isn’t it? This identity switch?”

“Absolutely,” she assured him. “We’re safe, Caleb. Safe to live our lives, raise our children and be happy.”

“Then bring it on,” he said and swept her up into his arms. “In fact, let’s celebrate.”

“But what about dinner?” she asked as he carried her through the kitchen and toward the bedroom.

“Later, darlin’. Right now we got some world-class loving to do. That’s got to beat out potato salad.”

“Hands down, cowboy. Hands down.”

About the Author

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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