



HYBRID  
HEARTS

3

A vibrant, futuristic illustration for a book cover. A woman with long, wavy hair that transitions from purple to blue sits on a white stool at a white bar counter. She is wearing a white t-shirt and brown shorts. On the counter in front of her is a tall glass of iced coffee with whipped cream and two black straws. Behind her stands a muscular man with extremely long, flowing white hair that cascades down his back and around his waist. He is shirtless, showing his well-defined muscles, and has a serious expression. The background is a bright, modern interior with large windows and blue curtains. Purple streamers and confetti are scattered throughout the scene, adding a celebratory or party atmosphere. The overall color palette is dominated by purples, blues, and whites.

# NICE AND SPILICY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
ALANA KHAN

# Nice and Splicy

**Forbidden Love Romance Between the  
Boss's Daughter and the Hybrid Centaur**



Alana Khan

Temptation Of The Horizontal LLC

Nice and Spicy: Book Three in the Hybrid Hearts Series by Alana Khan

St. Petersburg, FL 33709

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# Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four Epilogue

Dear Reader

Sneak Peek: Brekk: Book One in the Arixxia Fields

Many Thanks

About Alana Khan

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# Chapter One

## **P**resent Day Planet Earth

### **Chance**

“You’re going to love it here,” my friend Brock says as he lumbers down Main Street, escorting me to my new room in the males’ dorm.

My head is spinning. My life just changed in the span of one minute. I shake my head as I try to absorb what just happened.

They call us splicers. We were created in a science lab deep in the Rocky Mountains west of Denver. I was kept in cages barely large enough to lie down in until three years ago. That was when the army raided the rogue military science operation and liberated us.

They loaded us into large black helicopters and took us to Area 51. Under the direction of Colonel Slater, they worked with us over the last three years, helping us assimilate into society. We learned reading, writing, and basic social skills.

All of that time, we were never allowed near a female. Never saw one. Never even *smelled* one.

Three months ago, we were all brought to this enormous area in a remote part of Texas. I think of it as a reservation. A splicer reservation.

They housed us all in barracks on the southern edge of the property and conducted their final selection for the twenty of us who would be the first to integrate with women. They picked not only the most socialized and compliant of us, but the males they thought would be the least frightening to the women.

Sadly, I was not picked.

I've never said a word in protest, but I didn't understand how Ty, the male with all that tiger DNA, or Noble, who has lion DNA, or Nyx, who is a naga, were somehow less terrifying than me with my equine DNA. I look like a storybook character—a centaur. Frankly, I think I should have been in that first cadre of lucky males.

There's an Old Western town at the north end of the property that used to be the set for a television program. They brought in twenty women to create little shops to make an attraction for visitors. We males are to be taught trades, learn to socialize with the women, and eventually mingle with visitors. The end goal is for us to assimilate into society and leave the fenced boundaries.

Personally, I think we splicers will be ready to integrate with the humans long before they're ready to accept us.

When I wasn't picked to be in the first group of lucky splicers, I soldiered on under the tighter restrictions of the southern barracks. Coping with whatever is thrown at me is what I was bred to do.

After the first twenty left, we've taken to calling ourselves the rejects, though I don't like to think of myself that way.

A few days ago, Ty got permission for me to take part in a production number he and some friends performed when the top brass came to see how the Splicer Project was going.

For the life of me, I don't quite understand what it was all about other than he called it Bollywood dancing. The final dance incorporated the theme of an Indian wedding. I was brought in for the "groom" to ride in on to meet his "bride." They told me it's tradition for the groom to ride in on a white horse. I was the closest thing they could find.

I had no complaints and was happy to help. It got me out of the barracks for an hour.

After the dance, everything happened at once. Olivia, the "bride," gave a passionate speech requesting I be able to join the males in the dormitory. Brock, who seems to have a great deal of grizzly bear DNA, is escorting me there now.

All the males are still full of adrenaline from watching the performance.

"Glad you're here, Chance!"

"Yeah. In my opinion, you should all be allowed to roam free," Nyx says. That naga male is always one to speak his mind.

The others are heading to the dining room to feast on Indian food, but I'm happy to bypass that so I can check out my new room and decompress.

I'm not so sure Nyx is right about all the males from the southern barracks roaming free. My equine DNA has equipped me with a poor sense of smell compared to most of the other splicers. Even so, the scent of all the women is drifting in from the nearby dining room.

Suddenly, it becomes crystal clear why I was not in the first group to be integrated. It doesn't have to do with aggression; I'm one of the least aggressive males here. Nor is it that my looks are intimidating. These women have seen and been around horses all their lives, if only on TV.

No, it's neither of those things.

I wasn't included in the first group because my body is not built for pants. The military tried several styles of coverups, but no matter what we tried, nothing worked. I have no waist. Everything fell off within a few steps. My genitals are still exposed.

I never understood why the humans made such a big deal about fitting me for pants. Until right this minute.

Right this minute I have a raging hard-on that can probably be seen at twenty paces. And that's simply from the scent of human women tantalizing my nostrils over the savory smell of Indian spices wafting from the next building over.

The moment anyone notices my erection, they're going to force me to return to the reject barracks. Although I was content there until an hour ago, disappointment squeezes low in my belly when I think I'll have to return.

## Chapter Two

**J**° “Are your affairs in order?” My attorney, April, asks.

Her question slams into me, causing my heart to pound in my chest. “Are you talking... d-death penalty?” As we’ve prepared for this trial for the past eight months, I thought I was looking at four to ten years, which is bad enough.

“No! No, Josephina. We’ve been over this. The death penalty isn’t on the table, but your trial starts in two days, and the DA is bound and determined that you serve hard time for this. What I meant is, have you spoken to your landlord about early termination?”

Early termination? Why did she have to use that word? Now my mind is looping on the idea of the death penalty.

“Have you arranged for people to help you move your things into storage?”

“I thought you said I had a good chance of getting off.”

Where have I been the last eight months as we prepared for trial? Understanding how serious the situation was, I stayed off the dark sites. How did I miss that my own lawyer thinks I'll be in jail by the end of the week?

“That’s why I asked you to come to the office today. The DA produced a last piece of evidence. It’s a common trick. They are under orders to produce their evidence, but they can ‘find’ something at the last minute, which puts us at a severe disadvantage because we have less than forty-eight hours to prepare.”

She pulls something up on her screen, turns it toward me, and lets it play out. There, plain as day, is my hacker signature breaching Liberty Trust Bank’s back door.

Damn Chris all to hell. Did I not know him at all? We were lovers, for God’s sake. Was he framing me for his illegal activities from the moment we got together? Bastard.

“It’s the smoking gun, Josephina. My assistant and I will do everything we can with the time we have, but... they’ve caught you red-handed.”

“But I didn’t do it,” I tell her for the hundredth time. “What about a continuance?” I know I’m grasping at straws. The court turned down our last two requests for more time.

“I’ve already put in a motion, but don’t count on it.” She scoots her chair closer and leans forward. “If you have any Hail Marys, now would be the time.”

“Hail Marys?”

“Miracles? Someone you know with a similar computer signature that might cast doubt that you were the perpetrator? A friend in high places? Someone with terminal cancer who will take the fall for you? Maybe your uncle is the President?” She sighs, looking genuinely concerned for me. “Otherwise, you’d be best served by at least talking to someone about helping you pack up your belongings.”

The meeting continues for a few more minutes, but I can’t pay attention. I’m too worried. Prison. Maybe I’m crazy, but I never thought it would come to this.

After driving home, I strip down to my underwear, crawl into bed, and contemplate the cold, hard facts.

There is no one who would take the fall for me, no one I can pin this on. I have no friends. That happened when my ex-boyfriend and my ex-best-friend became a couple somewhere between my being charged and my having to sell just about everything I owned to pay for my legal defense.

“I do have a friend in a high place,” I whisper to the empty room. “I guess I need to give him a call.”

Slater. He’s my stepdad, but I never found it in my heart to call him Dad. I resented him when he married my mom. Looking back, I think I was jealous. At the time, I felt he was ruining things with me and my mom. Actually, in twenty-twenty hindsight, I must admit he brought a great deal of needed stability to our home.

I not only think Slater has the connections to get me out of this jam, but I’m also pretty certain he’ll drop everything to do it.



I don't even realize I'm crying until a tear rolls into my ear. This disaster has been going on for eight months and I've yet to shed one. Until today. Everything just became real. Despite my tendency to put on a brave face, I feel as though my whole world is crumbling. I've got one chance at a Hail Mary and I'm going to take it.

After washing my face and climbing back into my clothes, wishing they were armor, I dial the bane of my childhood and adolescence, Colonel Jason Slater.

"Hi... Slater." Why is it still awkward to call him Dad after all these years? It's not as if I have a real dad. I don't remember the man. He bailed on us when I was two years old.

"Josie?" He sounds surprised to hear from me. Of course he is; we haven't spoken in years.

I should take a moment to play the game—banter, small talk. But I don't. I don't want to, and the Colonel isn't the small-talk type.

"I'm in trouble."

Although he's a thousand miles away, his sigh comes through the phone loud and clear. When he says nothing, I assume it's my cue to launch, giving him the story without embellishment.

There's really not much to tell. I was hacking, which wasn't exactly news to him. My bad habit started in junior high. I was doing white hat hacks when he and Mom found out. I stopped for a while, but started up again not long after.

Will he believe I never even tried to do anything as heinous as hacking the second largest bank in America? How lame it must sound when I blame it on my ex-boyfriend. I even let down my barriers and admitted the jerk dated me in a premeditated plan to pin the whole thing on me.

Slater's a buttoned-up lifer in the military. Will he even *want* to help me?

I finish my story with, "So, my lawyer tells me things don't look good."

"And your trial is in *two days*?"

Why is it that no matter what he says, I always feel like I'm twelve years old and receiving a scolding from a man with austere military bearing?

"Yes. I think the chances were better until this new piece of evidence came to their attention."

The line is silent for longer than I expected. Is he contemplating how to let me down easy? Sadly, this surprises me. As much as we were like oil and water when I was growing up, I always believed, deep in my angry teenage heart, that deep in his stern, military heart he cared for me.

"I think I can fix this, Josie, but it's going to cost you."

Although my heart stutters in my chest, I see a tiny sliver of light at the end of a very dark tunnel. Slater's nothing if not fair.

"I can make a call to the DA and tell him I'm bringing you onto my Top Secret project. Like the other twenty women

involved, you will have to sign a nondisclosure agreement and commit to staying the remainder of the two-year program. We're only a month in, so you've got twenty-three months to go."

Although I experience a moment of overwhelm, I quickly tell myself that twenty-three months is better than the four years or more I'm facing.

"You'll have to stay on a contained, sixty-thousand-acre parcel of land in Texas. Not only won't you be allowed to leave, but you'll also be prohibited from contacting family or friends."

My mind bounces as I consider the facts he just laid out. Almost two years on sixty thousand acres in the back of beyond of rural Texas. I settle on the one fact that causes me no grief—the no-contact clause.

There's absolutely no one in the world I want to talk to.

"What do you want, Josie? Just say the word and I'll make the call. I'll buy you a ticket to the San Antonio airport and meet you personally to drive you to our little... town."

"So let me get this straight. My lawyers tell me I'll be lucky if I only do four years in jail for my alleged hacking crimes. You can just make a phone call and I walk? Just like that?"

"No. Not just like that. You'll have to swear you'll walk straight onto a plane, straight into my Jeep, and onto this facility. It's surrounded by razor wire. You won't be allowed to leave until the project is complete."

"Got it."

I swallow, then rub my palm over my sternum. I don't know why I'm stalling. It's the best deal I'm going to get. Being incarcerated on a huge reservation, even if it's in middle-of-nowhere Texas, is a damn sight better than a jail cell.

Maybe I should ask what I'm signing on for.

"What's the project?"

"Was there something ambiguous about the words 'Top Secret'?"

It's been so long since we've talked, I forgot how military and by-the-book he is.

"Give me a hint."

"You've never seen anything like it. Couldn't even imagine it. Not in a million years."

Now he's got me wondering. Sounds intriguing. If he does make a phone call to magically get me out of all this trouble, maybe I could slide onto the web and poke around... Did Mom hint once that after their divorce he'd gone to Nevada? Could this be about *extraterrestrials*?

*Stop it! I'm going to wind up in even more trouble if I try to sneak into Top Secret files.*

"Should I make the call, Josie? I'd..." He pauses a moment, then adds, "I think I can create the ideal job for you."

Between not going to jail and the idea that he wants to offer me the perfect job on some type of hush-hush project, I'm all in.

“Yes. Thanks. I appreciate it.”

## Chapter Three

**J** It's been an awkward drive from the little coffee shop in San Antonio where Slater and I stopped to get reacquainted and sign a foot-high stack of nondisclosure paperwork. He said this project was Top Secret, but it didn't seem real until I initialed in at least thirty places, then signed on the dotted line.

For the last several hours, we've driven through some boring, desolate landscape in what can only be described as no-man's-land. We must be getting close to our destination because Slater pulls off the two-lane highway and onto a gravel drive, then turns off the Jeep's motor.

"I decided to keep you in the dark until we were close to the facility. I didn't want you stewing for the entire ride." He shrugs, then admits, "And I didn't want you peppering me with questions the whole way either. We may have had our differences, but I've never doubted how smart you are, Josie. Once you get over your surprise, I think you're going to love this job."

He flashes me the meagerest lift of the corners of his mouth. I imagine he thinks he's smiling. I don't begrudge it. He's trying.

"Thanks."

One thing is certain, I'll like whatever he has me doing more than I'll enjoy sitting in a cell for four years.

"I'll explain everything, then you'll see for yourself in less than half an hour."

He settles back into the Jeep's black plastic seat, then says, "Over five years ago, my team got word that a military science project went rogue and was performing an off-the-books science experiment for decades. When I finally tracked down the facility three years ago, we discovered one hundred..."

Even though we're parked, he focuses out the windshield on the scrubby Texas brush in front of us.

"One hundred splicers, er, we've decided to start calling them hybrids. These were human males genetically spliced with animal DNA."

Although he's paused, giving me time to absorb the absolutely crazy words spilling out of his mouth, my brain has seized up and quit working. I'm trying to picture what he's describing, but can't manage it.

"They'd been kept in cages and were poorly educated other than in the ways of war. The people in charge of the program, who managed to escape right before we breached their facility,

were creating an army of unbeatable soldiers to overthrow the government.”

He shakes his head. I know this look, though I’ve only seen a paler version of it when it was directed at me. He’s pissed.

“We rescued the poor souls, took them to a safe facility, and have spent the last three years educating and rehabilitating them. The next step is to integrate them into American society. When you see them, you’ll understand why that will not be an easy task.”

“Can you give me a clue? What are we talking about here?” I guess that was the nice way of asking just how terrifying these males will look.

“They’re mostly bipedal. Lion-men, tiger-men, grizzly-bear-men.”

I shiver, imagining the worst. He doesn’t elaborate on the non-bipedal variety. I can’t even imagine how disgusting they will be.

“Because of their bestial genetics, we kept them away from all females the whole time we housed them in Area 51.”

Area 51! I knew it.

“We brought them to this reservation, surrounded by barbed wire, to introduce them to women. We’re creating a little town, a tourist destination. We’re going to have a bakery and coffee shop, candy shop, clothing store, and bookstore—things like that.”



His gaze flicks toward me, I guess to see if I'm swooning in shock, then continues, "People who want to meet these males can come, spend their money, and see the males as they work. The males can feel as though they've integrated into society."

His gaze meets mine and his excitement about the project shines through.

"They'll never be able to walk freely down the sidewalks of a big city. Nor do I think they'll ever be accepted, but in the safe confines of Splicer Town—shit, we have to come up with a better name—they'll have a modicum of freedom."

Even though my mind is spinning, I can poke about ten holes in his happy little theory. Does he think the world will learn about these males and just let them live happily on their little slice of heaven? Doesn't he watch the news? I can picture angry people massing at the town gates with signs that say, "Splicers Go Home," even though they were born here.

"So we picked twenty of the most socialized of the bunch and introduced them to twenty women we shipped in. For the past month, they've been mingling and learning some skills that will be useful in the future when they work in the shops."

"And me?"

"You told me the DA was out for blood. I figured if I just put pressure on him so you could walk free and resume your carefree life, he'd turn me down in a heartbeat. Bringing you here was partly to appease him, let him feel you would be doing time somewhere, even though it wouldn't be in jail. And

it was partly to reconnect. Even though your mom and I divorced, I should have reached out to you after she died.”

His expression is contrite. I don’t know why I hated him so much. Well, I do. I didn’t want an interloper coming between Mom and me. Besides, Mom had been so lenient, and he was so damned strict. But at this moment, I’m not sure why I’ve carried a grudge for so long after I grew up and left home.

“I’d like to reconnect, too.”

“And I think you can bring something to the project. You’ve got spectacular computer skills, and when this project gets closer to going public, I’m going to need you to keep your feelers out to see if any bad actors are planning to harm these males. I’ve become... attached.”

Slater does have a heart! He *likes* these guys, these splicers. He’s not stupid or naive. He knows as well as I do that there will probably be protesters at the front gates... if not worse.

“In the meantime, I thought you could take one or two of the guys under your wing. Teach them computers. It’s a life skill.”

He doesn’t say hacking, but I wonder if that’s what he’s hinting at.

“I don’t know what the scientists threw into the mix, but there isn’t one of these males whose IQ is under 200. You’ll fit in well.”

“A compliment, Slater? You don’t give them lightly. I’m honored.”

This time, he grants me a bigger smile.

“Keep your seatbelt on, Josie.” He starts the engine. “You’re about to enter Splicer Town.”

He might as well have welcomed me to the Twilight Zone. I’m halfway between terrified and more excited than I’ve ever been in my life.

## Chapter Four

**C**hance

I back toward the mirror, then turn around, then turn the other way.

“Olivia, I can’t thank you enough.”

I should look at her when I speak to her. We learned the importance of eye contact our first few weeks after the military rescued us. It’s just that I can’t take my eyes off myself. The only time I’ve ever worn clothing was when the army staff tried to fit me with pants. Not only didn’t they work, they chafed and slid off at the most inopportune times.

Now, look at me. Olivia made me this spectacular kilt that will allow me to roam the area without worrying I’ll offend any women.

Noble has taken on the self-appointed task of being the informal leader of us splicers. When I didn’t leave my new room in the males’ dorm for three days, he pounded on my

door until I opened it. Then, the lion-like male pressed me for answers until I told him why I was hiding.

“When you trotted into the dance number with Ty on your back, it was Olivia who played the bride. You might not know it, but she’s a fashion designer and seamstress. She almost won *Fashion Frenemies*.” He said that as though I should have known what he was talking about, though I didn’t. When I raised a questioning eyebrow, he said, “The TV show? It’s reality TV.”

Although I always scroll past those shows, I nodded as though I was sufficiently impressed.

After dropping all that on me, he took off, and half an hour later returned with a computer pad in hand. It contained four sketches of how I could join the women without scandalizing anyone. I gave some feedback, and just a few days later, Olivia, Ty’s girlfriend, returned to my room with her first draft.

It fit so well I wasn’t embarrassed to leave my room and happily clip-clop down Main Street to have her finish fitting me.

When I emerge from the dressing room, she examines me from all angles, pulling at the leather straps, tightening here and loosening there until it fits like a glove.

“I just don’t understand why the army personnel didn’t try harder,” she says, shaking her head, her nostrils flaring in disapproval. “It’s simply a take-off on a horse’s winter blanket, with a lower swoop from withers to rump.”

“Like a dress,” Ty helpfully interjects.

By the look on Olivia’s face, she’s no happier about that analogy than I am.

“More like a kilt, Ty. Some metal medallions and leather tassels even provide some bling. I’m going to order some leatherworking tools and a brass stamping kit. I can really zhuzh it up if Chance wants. It will be masculine. Sexy.”

Ty hisses at that and takes a step toward me.

“Other women will find it sexy, Ty,” she corrects. “Leave poor Chance alone. He has prey animal DNA and you’re 100 percent predator. Have mercy.”

She shakes her head in amusement, then makes notes on her pad.

“If you like this design, I’ll make a few more. The brown one you’re wearing is nice, but hunter green will look great against your dapple-gray coat.”

“I don’t want you to go to more trouble. This is fine.”

“This is one of the reasons the military brought me here, Chance. I’m here to make tail holes in the ubiquitous khakis they make all the bipeds wear, including us women. I plan to bring that up at our next town hall meeting. And if I ever meet the person who decided everyone in town had to wear Hawaiian shirts and khaki pants or shorts... well, it will not be a friendly discussion. That’s all I have to say about that.”

“Speaking of Hawaiian shirts,” I say, shrugging. “If everyone must wear them, I guess I should have one, too.” I look into

the mirror, enjoying my new kilt. I feel as though I belong in a Renaissance jousting competition. The shirt would look terrible with it, though I shouldn't complain. I'm just lucky to be on this side of the reservation and out of the reject barracks.

"Nope!" Olivia says. "Nope, nope, nope. You will not be wearing one of those heinous Hawaiian shirts with this. Not if I have anything to say about it. You would look... ridiculous." Her eyes dart to me and she quickly amends, "Sorry. But in American society, it's considered acceptable for men to go shirtless. If the soldiers give you trouble, you come let me know. I'll take this up with Colonel Slater himself."

The little bell over the door rings and Noble and Jenna barge into the shop. Word has it that they've moved into one of the Quonset Huts the military built for the officers.

Noble demanded one after Slater gave Ty and Olivia a private hut the night of the big Bollywood show. His roars after sex have woken me from a sound sleep every night since I moved to the dorm.

Jenna says, "Great outfit. When do I get something other than these horrible Hawaiian shirts to wear?"

I hadn't realized the women were so salty about their clothing. Most of the splicers were just happy to wear something other than the rags we wore in captivity or the makeshift Army camo they gave us at Area 51.

Noble interrupts my musings. "Did you hear who just came to Splicer Town?"

I was told we were all locked in here for the next two years. “Nobody in, nobody out,” were the exact words the military used. Noble’s statement makes me think the answer is going to be interesting.

“The colonel’s daughter. I heard Corporal Barton say Colonel Slater’s daughter is going to be working here. They even made her sign that stack of papers you women had to sign.”

“I wonder why she’s here,” Olivia says.

“Sounds as though she’s some type of computer whiz.”



## Chapter Five

**J**° “This was the set of an old TV show from the ‘60s,” Slater explains.

The impressive gate is held up on both sides by wooden uprights the size and height of telephone poles. We’re allowed in by a uniformed sentry who checks Slater’s badge even though he’s the CO of the facility.

It’s a huge place. I can’t see anything but foliage as far as the eye can see. It’s prettier here than most of the scenery we’ve traveled through the last few hours. Perhaps the TV studio planted evergreens years ago because the trees are denser here than anywhere on our trip. Finally, I see some buildings up ahead.

“This was Main Street in the show’s imaginary town, Rattlesnake Flats.”

I chuckle. It all seems so... 1960s. The dirt main street is wide enough for a six-lane highway.

“The street is authentically wide. Streets back in the day had to be wide enough to turn the beer trucks around, complete with horses.”

He points toward the street, which is lined with old-fashioned wooden storefronts that connect with a raised plank walkway.

I don't know whose idea it was to put splicers here to serve coffee and cupcakes, but it's not a completely crazy idea. It allows them to stay together, maintain their camaraderie, and interact with humans in doses they can tolerate. Sadly, I can't imagine they're all keen on remaining in this free-range zoo forever.

“I'll show you around later. First, let me take you to your dorm room.”

We pull up behind the clearly labeled Town Hall, which looks as though it was plucked straight out of the 1800s. It's tall and wide and I can imagine it being a gathering place in an old-timey town.

There is a T-shaped structure behind the Town Hall. Though it's meant to blend in, it's clear this has been built recently.

After walking through the high-ceilinged Town Hall, which could have existed two hundred years ago, we enter a modern lounge with big-screen TVs, couches, and recliners large enough for a grizzly.

“This is the coed lounge. It's not in use yet.” He points to doors leading to the right and left. “To the left is a women's-

only lounge that leads to the women's dorm. To the right is a mirror image for the males.”

Somehow, everything is starting to feel real, from the off-gassing stench of the new carpet, to the lame attempts at making a dorm seem homey.

“You can unpack. Take a nap if you want. I should have told you not to bring many clothes. We've provided them for you. Wear a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of khakis to dinner. It will be your uniform for the entire time you're on base. You'll hear an overhead announcement when it's time to eat. Just follow the crowd to the dining hall. I'll make sure the women know you're here. They'll show you around.”

He awkwardly bends to give me a fatherly kiss, but thinks better of it and turns on his heel to leave. It's just as well. We never were a touchy-feely family.

My room looks like any college dorm on the planet, with sturdy faux wood furniture and an attached bathroom that's surprisingly roomy considering this is compliments of the United States Army.

After stowing the few clothes I brought, I lay down to take him up on his offer of a nap.

I thought it would be hard to nod off with so much adrenaline coursing through me, but I must have slept hard, because I'm startled awake when Alexa's computerized voice wakes me with, “Would all members of the crew join us in the dining room? Please join us in the dining room.”

Her voice, so calm and welcoming in this sterile environment, is like something out of a dystopian thriller.

I pull on a pair of khaki shorts and one of the seven Hawaiian shirts hanging in the closet as I wonder what Machiavellian sadist chose the wardrobe. Dear god, I hope it wasn't Slater. I'm surprised he hasn't been fragged for it.

As soon as I step into the hallway, the words, "Stepford wives," pop out of my mouth before I can think. Did Slater bring me here to use in some diabolical experiment? The twenty other women in the hallway are all dressed exactly like me.

I guess things aren't too nefarious. Everyone seems happy as they surround me to say hi.

"You must be Slater's daughter. You don't look a thing like him."

They sweep me forward down the hall, through the women's lounge, and out a door to the nearby dining hall.

Everything is all rainbows, butterflies, and kittens until I step through the doorway. That's when my forward motion stops. I'm in a room with twenty splicers.

I'd swear the world slowed on its axis as I take a moment to assess each and every one. A woman who whispers that her name is Olivia grips my right hand and pulls me toward a wall. Another woman clutches my left hand, so I'm flanked on both sides, my back to the wall.

“That first meeting is terrifying. I’m Jenna, by the way,” says the woman on my left. “They’re the nicest people you’ll ever meet. I guarantee it.”

I’m having trouble paying attention to her words. I’m too busy noticing random details like the wolf-guy’s teeth, or the scales on the snake-guy. Oh, perhaps the politically correct term is naga. There’s a big, burly male who must have an abundance of grizzly DNA.

“L-lion,” I say. Then, as if my meaning wasn’t clear, I point.

“Yeah,” Jenna says. “Don’t get any ideas. That one’s mine.”

I stop moving. Completely. As if I’m paralyzed. My gaze is glued on the lion until I turn my body toward Jenna, tip my head forward, my brow furrowed and ask, “You? And the lion?”

“Yep.” She nods happily, her ponytail bouncing. “The best male I’ve ever known.”

I allow myself a full sixty seconds to take in the rest of the males, doing a double-take on the handsomest male in the room. If he weren’t shirtless, I’d think he was a soldier—a very tall soldier.

His upper body is completely human—only... more. Wide shoulders taper to a slim waist with an eight-pack so pronounced it looks as if it were airbrushed onto his well-tanned skin. And his hair! No one under seventy has hair that perfectly silver. It hangs to the middle of his back and shines under the dining room lights.

His silver eyebrows are striking on the chestnut skin of his face. What's he doing here? He should be in Hollywood.

Then he steps out from behind the buffet table—on four horse-like legs.

“Centaur.”

“He's new here. Kind of still in shell shock himself, he's only just joined us from the other barracks.”

“Shell shock? Yeah. Join the crowd,” I murmur as I try to slow my pulse. It was originally racing because of all the fangs, fur, and claws. Now is it galloping because of the handsome male who is the only person who could literally gallop out of here?

The women explain how there are three lines of tables: women only, coed, and males only.

“That way you can keep your distance if you want.”

The idea is great, but aside from the centaur, everyone in the room is crowded into the coed area. If I choose women-only, I'll be eating alone.

Something strikes me fast and hard as a thunderbolt. For the last eight months, I've shut myself in, not wanting to make friends or even buy anything other than food. Why bother? In the back of my mind, I feared I'd lose everything and be sentenced to jail.

I'm here now. The threat of jail is behind me. Ahead of me? Possibly the most interesting thing that has ever happened in the history of the world. I'm going to grab onto this experience! Dive in!

I go through the buffet line and make my way to one of the  
coed tables.

## Chapter Six

**C**hance

Though I have yet to meet any of the women other than Olivia and Jenna, it's clear who the new person is. She looks terrified as she backs against the wall and holds their hands.

She's dumbstruck. I guess that's only fair. If I'd been raised seeing only splicers, not even knowing of humans' existence my entire life, it would be shocking to see a room full of them milling about as if it were just a random Tuesday.

I pretend not to watch as someone dishes her some food, and she eases into a chair at the coed table with the fewest people. Her pretty purple hair looks good with the flowers on her shirt. I didn't know humans came in that color.

This is my first time in the dining room, but I think the new woman's presence has taken center stage. No one is the least bit interested in me. Which allows me to take stock of how things are done here.



Noble explained the three lines of tables, but I'll attract attention if I sit in the male-only section, which I'd prefer. Because of my size, and the fact I don't need a chair, I ease along the outer wall and approach the last coed table from behind. Holding my tray in one hand, I eat with the other, hoping it all doesn't clatter to the floor when I make one false step.

Suddenly, Slater's daughter's gaze catches on me as she scans the room. The corners of her perfect mouth turn down, and her brow furrows.

This. This is why the military officers chose twenty other males rather than me. They knew my presence would upset the women. Why a centaur is troubling, rather than Noble or Ty with their long, sharp teeth, is beyond me.

Setting my tray on the table, I back up until my tail hits the wall, then frantically look for the quickest escape route to the exit. I wince as my hooves clatter loudly over the floorboards and I break into a faltering trot.

“Wait up!”

It's her. Slater is a fair and honest male, but he's pointedly outspoken. Is his daughter cut from the same cloth? Is she coming toward me armed with a cutting remark?

I put my hands up in a don't-shoot pose and pick up the pace toward the door when she calls again.

“Hey! Let me help.”

Let me help. I haven't heard those words strung together in a sentence in a long time. Maybe ever.

I watch her approach, unable to ignore the way her large breasts move beneath her shirt, or how her hips sway from side to side as she walks. Thank goodness Olivia created my leather kilt, which slants down toward my hocks and hides what hangs between my hind legs from even the most prying eyes.

"Help?" I ask when she's only a few steps away.

"The table's too low for you to eat comfortably. I watched you juggling your food. I'd hate to see it land on the floor at your feet... er, hooves."

She calls her friends and before I know it, they've collected all the chairs from the empty males' side of the room and pulled them to where I'm standing. They work as a team, placing them one on top of the other until the stack is the perfect height for me to set my tray on the top chair's arms.

"Thanks."

I assumed this would be the end of our interaction, but she pulls the stack of chairs next to the table she was sitting at and motions for me to eat with her and her new friends. Her hand flourishes toward my food as if she were a game show hostess revealing the next big prize.

"Try it now."

I hadn't wanted to get into the thick of things today. Well, I hadn't wanted to get into the thick of things ever. Although

horses are a herd species, I've never felt really comfortable with any of the others.

How can I say no to her generous offer, though? Besides, now that I'm closer to her, I can pay attention to the way there's one dimple to the right side of her mouth and how her green eyes gleam sometimes. If I pay attention, maybe someday I'll figure out what makes those gorgeous eyes sparkle.

## Chapter Seven

**J**<sup>o</sup> Twenty-four hours ago, if someone had told me about splicers and half-men/half-beasts, I would have had a good laugh at their expense and seriously considered calling for a welfare check on their mental health.

Today, it seems as if it's the most normal thing in the world to share breakfast with a very chatty grizzly-guy to my right elbow and a naga with a droll wit to my left.

The way Slater talked, these guys could barely carry on a conversation three years ago. Whoever was in charge of their education did a great job. Not only is it clear they're bright, but most of them seem well read.

Someone's going to show me to my new office after breakfast, and at some point I'm going to get a mentee. I've never had any desire to teach before. Some people have that gene. I do not.

However, the idea of teaching one or two of these guys everything I know about computers is pretty appealing. I'm not exactly sure what the colonel's ulterior motive was for encouraging me to be here. What I do know is that someday, possibly soon, I'm not going to be sneaking onto the dark web, I'm going to get a written invitation.

Fun times.

I don't need eyes in the back of my head to know when Slater enters the dining hall. The room quiets. First in one conversation at a time. Then it seems all the folks who didn't notice the second he walked into the room are shushed into silence at the same moment.

Sure enough, when I turn my head, there's Colonel Slater in his green and khaki cammies, striding straight toward me.

When he's standing next to me, he announces to the room, "I assume everyone has had time to meet our newest crew member, Josephina—"

I interrupt to say "Jo," loud and clear enough for there to be no mistake that I will not appreciate any name other than the one I call myself.

Slater lifts a confused eyebrow and in a hushed tone for my ears only says, "Sorry. I didn't know."

"I like Jo lately," I announce to the group as if it's a brand-new idea and I haven't gone by this name for the last eight years.

"If you're done with breakfast, let me show you to your new office. We might as well invite your new assistant along. I

figure working with you might be a good fit for Chance.”

Before Slater’s gaze flits in that direction, I know as sure as I’m sitting here that Chance is the strikingly handsome dapple-gray centaur I met yesterday. The one with the long silver hair and tail and the shockingly blue eyes that have followed me since I walked into the room this morning.

## Chapter Eight

**C**hance

Shit! No, what am I saying? This is great. No. This is terrible.

Jo. She said her name is Jo. She's the prettiest woman I've ever seen, and she smells amazing, and she was so kind yesterday when she rigged a way for me to eat with everyone without dropping my food on the floor.

I'm not used to being around women, though, and I barely said a word to her because my tongue felt tied in knots. And there's the matter of my cock. My cock that gets hard just thinking about her, which I did all night long.

"You're burnin' daylight, son," the Colonel says.

He's almost to the door, with his daughter close on his heels. I hurry to keep up.

They kept us mostly indoors in the southern barracks, and with my self-imposed isolation due to lack of clothing, I didn't

leave my new dorm room until Olivia hand-delivered my kilt yesterday.

My brisk walk from the dining hall to the military area is my first taste of sunshine in days. As I trot to catch up, I can't contain my urge to lift my face to the sky and enjoy the warmth of the sun beating on my face.

The military area is behind the dorms. It consists of domed corrugated metal buildings. I assume the long ones are barracks for the soldiers. The small ones are single dwellings meant for the officers.

I thought it was just a rumor that Ty and Olivia are living in one of the small units. When I asked him, though, Ty couldn't hide his proud smile as he admitted he and Olivia were living as a couple in the building meant for the Colonel himself.

I assume if they're living together that he and Olivia have kissed. When I can scrape up the courage, I'm going to ask him what it's like to kiss a woman.

The Colonel escorts us into one of the long metal buildings as he says, "This is the President Woodrow Wilson Office Building. Your office is right near the entrance."

Although the building is bare bones metal on the outside, it's nice and bright inside, with big windows and freshly painted yellow walls. I can't complain after living in a cell or an underground bunker most of my life.

Since I never had a family, the only thing I know about it is what I've seen on TV and movies. I can't quite figure out how



Jo and her father interact. It's not like those shows where the father and daughter talk a lot and touch each other with affection, that's for sure. They haven't exchanged a word this morning.

If I didn't know better, I'd think they were complete strangers.

"Here are two HPE Cray EX computers. I thought you could show Chance some basics this morning."

Before he can say more, she says, "He'll need a standing desk."

This is the second time she's paid attention to my needs and comfort. I tilt my head, trying to figure out why she would do such a thing.

"Eventually, you two are going to be monitoring the Internet and social media for references to the splicers. I won't tolerate hate speech. Once this goes public, we're going to keep a tight watch on that type of thing."

"I thought you said that wouldn't happen for over a year," Jo says, one eyebrow raised in question.

"Keeping secrets is a curious business. You never know when someone will let the cat out of the bag. I wouldn't have climbed to this rank if I wasn't thinking ahead and troubleshooting things before there's even a whiff of a problem."

## Chapter Nine

**J**<sup>o</sup> I never knew Slater well. Never wanted to. I was just an angry kid who didn't want a dad. I wish I could take all that back. Surely my childish actions put a strain on mom's relationship with him.

Perhaps I can get to know him better now that we're on this base together. From what I've seen, he's a stand-up guy. He could make fun of the males in his care, treat them as second-class citizens, or worse—animals. Instead, he goes out of his way to be fair and provide what they need.

He's thinking ahead. I imagine there are many ways to smuggle info out of this base. Food and supplies have to come in, which means trucks leave. There are a lot of ways an ingenious person could get information out to the public. I imagine the plan to have a big, happy coming out party when all the splicers are ready for worldwide attention might be a fantasy. When this hits the front page, not everyone is going to be happy about it.

“I’ll put in a requisition for a sturdy standing desk for Chance if you tell me what paperwork to use,” I say. “In the meantime, we’ll figure out a way for me to teach him some basics.”

Soon it’s just Chance and me in the room with two desks, two computers, and an unboxed printer in the corner.

How to make a setup Chance can use? I’m not sure how to manage this logistically. I’m a hacker, not an engineer.

“We could put my computer on the floor. I can lie down.”

He kneels onto all four knees, then rolls slightly with his back legs to the side and front legs curled but forward, keeping his head and human torso erect.

“Perfect. I’ve never been around horses—” I stop myself. It’s hard to know what’s politically correct. “Um, I know you’re not a horse.”

Other than his obvious pleasure at me including him at dinner last night, I find his emotions hard to read. Not now, though. He leans toward me, his expression serious and thoughtful.

“This is new to both of us, Jo. I’d never been within a block of a woman until a few days ago. We both shared our first meal in the dining room at the same time.”

I let my surprise show on my face. I thought Slater said the women have been here for a month.

“They kept me at the reject barracks until then.” He shrugs.

I’m sure there’s more to the story, but I’ll save my questions for another day.

“You didn’t know about splicers until yesterday. Let’s just admit we’re in uncharted territory and are discovering how to do this one step at a time. You’ve been very nice to me, so if you say something that might hit me wrong, I’ll assume you had no intention of being hurtful.”

There’s something about the soft look in those piercing blue eyes and his quiet tone of voice. It makes being in his company feel safe. I feel accepted and respected.

“Same here, Chance. Maybe we can figure out how to be friends.”

Friends. That’s an odd thing to aspire to. I’ve had very few in my life, and after my lover just framed me for a federal crime, I’m not overflowing with trust.

A few minutes later, I’ve unplugged Chance’s computer setup, moved it to the floor in front of him, and plugged everything back in. Just one problem. Though he can reach his computer, he won’t be able to get a good look at the monitor on my desk as I explain things to him.

“You could sit here.” He rearranges his body a bit, indicating I could nestle against his flank between his two sets of horse legs. That way we can share the keyboard and both see the computer.

“Uh... okay.” If any other man suggested I practically sit in his lap, I would already be calling the HR department, but the way Chance looks up at me from the floor, so open and unsure of himself, I know his motives are innocent.

As soon as I'm on the floor, tucked against his belly between his legs, I realize how intimate this position is. His short coat feels pleasantly soft under my hand as I hold his foreleg to lower myself down. The scent of fresh air and clean linen clings to him.

Trying to keep us focused on the task, I ask, "How much do you know about computers?"

"They taught us how to turn it on and use Google."

"That's it? No social media? Not even the rudiments of programming?"

"I live with everyone I've ever known, except for the evil scientists who bred and experimented on us. I wouldn't need social media to communicate with anyone. And what would I need to program?"

## Chapter Ten

**C**hance

I have no idea if what I just said made sense. I'm totally preoccupied with the stupid kilt Olivia made for me. It worked great when I was standing up, but it has ridden up as I twisted my hind quarters to tuck my back legs in. It was only after Jo sat down and scooted so close I can feel her every inhale and exhale that I realized my cock is exposed.

Exposed—the word echoes so loudly in my head I imagine it's ricocheting around the room like the crack of a rifle.

I have to keep her focused on the computer, which is in the opposite direction of my cock. My *erect* cock, which is pointing directly at her.

“What do you call this?” I ask, pointing to the cursor.

“The cursor,” she answers, her voice sweet and level. I imagine even kindergartners know what that is. It's a credit to her that she acts as if my question isn't the stupidest thing to ever come out of a person's mouth.

“And these? What are these for?” I point to the keys labeled with Fs and numbers that are in a row at the top of the keyboard. I’ve always wondered what they were. Too bad that no matter how well she answers the question, I’ll never understand it because I’m totally focused on my inadequacies as a male.

Don’t human men learn how to deal with random erections at an early age? I’m an embarrassment.

The problem is, this isn’t a *random* erection. It’s because of a woman. Not just *any* woman. It’s because Jo is right here, her shiny purple hair directly in my line of sight. I can feel the curve of her ass against my flank. My tail flicks at that thought. I hope she doesn’t know it signals my agitation.

And does she have to smell so damn good? And be so pretty?

The moment Colonel Slater releases us today, I’m going to speak with him in private and ask—no, demand—to be switched to another placement. This is absolutely intolerable. No male could withstand this!

“Chance? Have you heard a word I said?”

Busted. My gaze flies to her face. She’s staring at me. If I’m reading her right, I’ve hurt her feelings.

“If you don’t want this assignment, we can talk to the colonel. Computers aren’t for everyone. Some people find them deadly dull.”

Though a moment ago I was planning to escape from working with her, it’s suddenly clear to me I would do anything to stay.

“No, no. I’m just preoccupied.”

I don’t know what catches her attention. That’s not true. My tail swishes and she catches it out of the corner of her eye.

It’s obvious when she sees it—my hard cock pointing at her—because every single muscle in her body tightens.

Her spine stiffens and her nostrils flare at the same moment she manages to inch forward so our bodies no longer touch.

What do I do? Mention it? Pretend nothing’s happening? Ask her to repeat her explanation about those blasted F-keys? Get up and bolt from the room, run back to the southern barracks, and barricade myself in my old room?

“Uh, Chance? Should we…” She stops mid sentence.

Damn it! What does that mean? Should we leave the room? Should we talk about this? Should we… ? I don’t allow my mind to go there. She couldn’t possibly be asking if we should touch, could she?

“Wh-what?”

“You have a hard-on?”

Shit. Is that a question? An observation?

“Um.” There. I gave her a definitive “um” as an answer. I’m not a centaur. I’m an ass.

“That’s a hard-on.” This time, it was not phrased in the form of a question.

She’s moved a few more inches away.



“They told us to expect this,” I say, my gaze avoiding her.  
“Even though I couldn’t be less interested in you. It’s the pheromones.”

Did I really just say that? Did I say I wasn’t interested in her?  
The prettiest woman I’ve ever seen?

Shit. Horses have a poor sense of smell, worse than any other guy in the barracks, but the acrid tang of her anger, embarrassment, and hurt is so pungent even *I* smell it.

I have to fix this.

## Chapter Eleven

**J**° “No. That came out wrong. You’re beautiful, Jo. And I’ve never been near a woman before. This is new to me, and I don’t want to offend you or hurt your feelings or make this creepy for you. I don’t know what to say and I don’t know how to control my body and...”

He takes a deep breath and finally looks at me. His handsome face is so expressive as I watch his emotions appear, then give way to another and another.

Panic. His piercing blue eyes are wide, and if he weren’t such a massive male, I’d almost think he was afraid of me.

Embarrassment. He’s mortified as his long, silver lashes slam onto his cheeks.

Pain. That beautiful mouth grimaces.

Worry. Now he’s wincing.

Finally, he quits spluttering all his confused words and his gaze locks onto mine. There's no mistaking this emotion.

Desire.

Pure, unadulterated lust.

As if to illustrate the point, his long, long, thick cock thumps against his belly with a dull thud.

“Shit,” he whispers as he glances heavenward. “So embarrassing.”

He was never in the same room with a woman until yesterday. I imagine his body is racing with more horny hormones than a seventh grader at his first school dance. And here he is without benefit of pants.

After turning to face him, I reach to place a finger against his lips. If I don't stop the cascade of crazy-talk flying through his lips, he's going to dig himself into an even deeper hole.

“It's okay, Chance. Like you just said, we're new at this.”

He opens his eyes and breathes a shaky sigh of relief.

I need to shut this down somehow. Make this better. Unless I do, we'll never get past this. As my mind organizes a pretty speech about how we're going to forget this happened and put it behind us, I watch myself as though it's an out-of-body experience as I remove my finger from his lips lean toward him, slip my arm around his back, tip my head up, and pucker.

The whole time I wait for his lips to meet mine, I'm berating myself for my crazy, impulsive behavior. I half expected

nothing. I figured when I opened my eyes he would have run—or trotted—from the room. The other half of me imagined he would press the most tentative, soft kiss to my lips. I never expected his lips to crash against mine with the force and intensity of a tsunami.

My eyes widen in surprise as he slides his tongue along the seam of my lips. Without conscious decision, I open to him and allow his tongue to barge inside my mouth. He explores me with lust, just as I would expect from a grown male who desires a woman.

An involuntary moan escapes my throat and I feel his body tense. His hands slide down my arms and wrap around my waist, pulling me closer. His hard body presses against mine, sending jolts of pleasure through me at every touch.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I tug him closer, unable to resist the pull of his lips. His kiss is hungry and possessive, claiming me for himself. I revel in this moment when all of life's worries seem insignificant and all that matters is here and now, him and me.

Chance's kiss tastes and feels amazing, like nothing I've ever experienced before. His lips are firm and warm and his tongue strokes mine with electric intensity until my limbs tingle with pleasure. A swirl of emotions runs through me, from tenderness to arousal to something deeper still, something that goes beyond the physical.

Something wild and heady curls around us like a fog in the air. His scent is like a forest after rainfall; fresh, earthy, and natural

—unlike anything I've ever smelled before. How does he manage to smell so good? We both slept in the dormitories last night. Why does he smell like fresh air?

His pelt feels so silky against my palms as they slip lower, below his human waist to where he's covered in dapple-gray hair. It's not just the silken feel that sparks something deep inside me, it's that he's so foreign, so unlike anyone I've ever known.

He tucks me closer as he turns my body toward his face. His hands move to my cheeks, caressing them gently as our kiss deepens. His tongue explores the cavern of my mouth, tasting and sampling me like a master chef, savoring every morsel.

Pulling away long enough to sigh, he gazes at me with the sweetest expression. There's a crackle of electricity between us as he assaults my mouth again, as though he can't get enough. I can feel his heart pounding against my chest in time with mine and I revel in this moment of perfect harmony we've created.

My fingers slide through his long, silken silver hair and I cup the back of his head with both hands. As I press closer into him, I nip his upper lip playfully. His head tips back in pleased surprise. One second later, he mimics the same move on me—tugging on my lower lip with his teeth before releasing it with a gentle kiss that sends shivers down my spine.

We explore each other's mouths hungrily until finally we pull away completely breathless from the intensity of our encounter. It's almost too much for me to process. I feel

lightheaded from the sheer force of what just happened between us—something I never imagined would be possible before now.

He moves his lips to my neck and I tip my head back, giving him better access to my sensitive throat. Gusts of warm breath skitter across my skin, sending shivers of delight down my spine.

My nipples are needy points and it's all I can do to keep from scooting even closer to graze against his exposed skin.

Suddenly, he grips my shoulders and pulls away, those bold, blue eyes round and wild.

“We... we need to stop.”

He doesn't need to explain. Not only is his cock pulsing against the small of my back, but he already admitted he has no idea how to control that big body of his.

I stand, taking a few steps back. It was to give him the separation I thought he needed to pull himself together. I didn't anticipate exactly what I would see.

His big, beautiful cock is fully on display, thumping against his horse-like belly.

“I'll... give you a moment,” I say as I practically run from the room.

Though I'm no virgin, what just happened—that kiss—took me into uncharted territory. I don't know if it was how big and warm his body was, or the allure of being with someone so different, so foreign, from me. Maybe it was his undistilled

lust combined with complete respect as we shared that blazing kiss.

Whatever it is, I know two things. I want more kisses—many of them. And it shouldn't be now.

## Chapter Twelve

**C**hance

The door snicks closed behind her just in the nick of time as I orgasm in thick, ropey jets, spraying my belly, the tops of my forelegs, and a healthy portion of the floor. The pleasure pulses through me in hot waves. Even though Jo has left the room, her scent lingers, making it seem as though I'm coming with a partner for the first time in my life.

I'm taking in huge gusts of air through my nostrils as I breathe through the full-body orgasm that makes me shudder and nicker my pleasure.

My chin slumps to my chest as my body recovers. The back of my mind scolds me for my lack of self-control and chides me that I'll have to clean up my mess before she returns, but I allow myself one extra moment to wallow in sheer bliss.

That kiss was the best thing I've ever experienced!

I rise to my hooves and am not surprised to see no tissues in the room. At least there is paper in an unopened ream near the



printer. As unabsorbent as it is, I manage to wipe myself, then the floor, practically filling the small, round wastebasket with soggy, slick, white paper.

Now that my ecstasy is over, the full awareness of what just happened barrels at me like a freight train.

While we were kissing, it seemed she was happy to touch me, to share the intimacy. Now that my thoughts aren't brimming with lust, I'm sure I must have read her and the situation wrong.

Luckily, this room is near the exit doors. I'm a big male. Even for an equine, I'm big. The military's DNA testing suggests I have a lot of Shire horse in my genetics. That's one of the biggest breeds on Earth.

For some reason, they constructed all the units with extra high ceilings and oversized doors since all of us are larger than the average male I've seen. I'm the tallest so I still have to bend way over to clear the door.

I doubt it will be easy for me to sneak out of here. That doesn't matter. I don't have to sneak. I simply have to—

“Chance? Can I come in?”

Jo, usually self-assured, sounds hesitant.

“If you'd prefer, I'll just leave through the nearest exit,” I offer, my tone clipped.

When I take one last glance at the floor, I see several drops and a small puddle I didn't clean. I shake my head, knowing it

will be the first thing her glance lands on the moment she returns to the room.

“Great idea.” Her tone is perky.

It’s for the best. I knew she couldn’t have wanted that kiss.

“Let’s leave. I thought we could go for a walk.”

*We?*

“I don’t need an escort back to the dorm,” I say, although I doubt there’s a trip to the barracks in my future. I assume it will be off to the reject barracks for me.

“One of the women said there’s a lake nearby. Want to go?”

The door edges open and there she is, looking so beautiful she should star in a movie.

“You want to take a walk? With me?”

It’s only when she approaches that I realize how imposing I must seem to her. A regular Shire horse, standing at twenty hands, would be almost seven feet tall at the shoulder. Because of my hybrid nature, having a human torso instead of a horse’s neck, I’m over seven feet.

She’s so tiny next to me. It’s surprising she’s comfortable getting close. Especially after what happened.

“We’re going to take a walk, Chance. Unless you don’t want to. We’re going to get over this awkwardness. If you feel like it, you might even give me a riding lesson, unless that’s a horrible, offensive idea.”

She pauses here, giving me just enough time to sputter, “N-not a horrible idea. I’d be happy to have you ride me.”

Jo bursts into a bawdy laugh, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “You have no idea how dirty that sounds.”

She must see the look of pure shock on my face, because she adds, “It’s a lovely offer. Let’s go.”

Great. I don’t care what happens next as long as she doesn’t see that little puddle of my cum on the floor.

## Chapter Thirteen

**J**<sup>o</sup> I heard a funny groan and a nicker when I was returning to the office. If I'm not mistaken, I think Chance just orgasmed. Should I be disgusted? I'm not. My nipples tighten and my channel clenches in need at the thought of the big masculine centaur coming because of what we shared.

When I ease into the room after giving him ample time to recover, there's no doubt what just happened. There are shiny, wet speckles on the floor that couldn't be anything but cum. For some reason, this makes me want to jump his virginal bones.

We need to get out of here. Fast.

It's a beautiful day. A lovely day for me to ride him. I can't stifle my chortle.

Neither Chance nor I have had the opportunity to explore the property. Now's the perfect time to escape what just passed between us in that room.

“Olivia said there was a lake to the west. If only I knew which way west was.”

“This way,” he says, pointing away from the buildings with his chin.

“You’ve been here before?”

“No. I don’t have the best sense of smell, not like most of the others, but I can smell water.”

Instead of helping me onto his back, he holds my hand. He’s enormous. I have to crane my neck to look at him as we make our way through the open area near the barracks, heading for the trees.

There’s something magical about the moment when you step from hot sunlight into the humid shade of the woods. I like to pay attention as the warm heat on my skin cools, and my nostrils fill with the lush scent of last fall’s decomposing leaves.

I must have stopped walking, because Chance is looking at me with the most expressive question on his face. When I explain why my steps have slowed, he backs up, closes his eyes, and walks forward in an effort to experience things the way I described. By the smile on his upturned face, it’s clear he’s enjoying the enchantment of the moment just the way I do.

“You’re right, Jo. It’s like I’m walking into... new possibilities.”

After a few more steps, he drops his front knees to the ground and says, “Hop on. I figured you might not want everyone to

see you on my back.”

Now that he’s closer to the ground, I easily climb on. When he hitches his weight to rise, I fling my arms around his human waist to steady myself. There’s something so arousing about hugging him like this, my hardened nipples plastered to his back, that I softly gasp.

He reaches around, snugs his arm around my waist from behind, and tugs me even closer. Maybe he did it to be careful, so I won’t slip off, but this position is not subtle. It’s sexy.

He picks his way through the trees, which are mostly evergreen with a few deciduous trees, the leaves shimmering in the wind.

“You were locked up most of your life?” I ask, then immediately regret it. Why would he want to discuss those things? I shouldn’t have brought it up.

“Yep. First in cages, then in Area 51 where we never saw the sun. Then we came here and needed to stay in the fenced area near the reject barracks. I can’t tell you how amazing it feels to be free to roam in this vast expanse.”

I nuzzle his naked back, enjoying his warm, masculine scent more than the piney air. He has no idea how vast the real world is beyond this humongous parcel, and I have no intention of rubbing it in his face.

“Are things still awkward on your end, Chance, because I don’t want them to be. I’m glad we shared that kiss.”

His back stiffens and he keeps his head pointed straight ahead.

When he doesn't respond, I lean closer, press my cheek against the warm skin of his back, and then press my lips between his shoulder blades.

He stills, one of his huge hooves stomping onto the soft ground with a clop.

After dropping another and another and another kiss onto his soft, burnished skin, I skim my hardened nipples against his back and ask, "And you, Chance? Are you glad we shared a \_\_\_"

He whips his head around to look at me, his blue eyes darker than I've seen them—hotter.

Somehow, he scoops me up and around, holding me as though I weigh nothing more than a piece of kindling, and positioning me so I'm straddling his front, my open thighs around his human waist.

Is this what it felt like for him when I was arousing him from behind? So intimate it's almost scary? Because I'm pressed against him without a whisper of air between us. His massive arms, roped with muscles, are holding me tight. One palm between my shoulder blades, the other cupped on my ass cheek.

"Glad we shared a kiss, Jo? Glad isn't the right word at all. Glad is what you feel when the people in charge let you have an extra helping of food or give you a blanket that doesn't scratch."

His mouth crashes onto mine. There is no asking, no questing or probing. No. This male is taking what he wants.

My only response is to kiss him back as if he's a king and this is his tribute.

“Chance.” I cup his cheek with one hand and slide my fingers through his long, silver hair with the other. This kiss is more passionate than our last as we give and take, exploring each other, not holding back.

He grunts with pleasure when I almost fully retreat, then flick the tip of my tongue against his lips. In response, he nips first my bottom and then my top lip in sexual retribution.

“I came from our last kiss,” he admits as he pulls away, his warm breath ghosting across the tender flesh of my cheek. “You’re wrecking me.”

He nips me again, then gives me a smoldering look that would make him a movie star—if centaurs could star in Hollywood films. Before I can recover, he’s lifted and manhandled me onto his back again. I’m panting and clutching my neck as if it was strung with pearls.

“Hang on!” he calls.

The moment I wrap my arms around his waist, he takes off at a trot.



## Chapter Fourteen

**C**hance

I was bred and raised for battle. As far back as I can remember, I was pitted against the other males and forced to fight. I can take apart and reassemble twenty types of guns, from pistols to assault weapons. I can use a rocket launcher as well as every type of blade. If hard-pressed, I can set explosive charges, although I never excelled at that.

The memories of what I've been forced to do haunt my daydreams and my nightmares, but I live with them and never complain.

Why, then, does what's happening with Jo seem more difficult than my deadliest fights?

It's terrifying and exhilarating, and my heart feels as though it's pounding out of my chest. I had to stop our kiss. It was too heady—overwhelming. Her legs split, straddling my waist, her fingers clutching my hair, the soft gasps and little moans that

signaled just how much she was enjoying our kisses... it was too much.

We trained all day every day, then were locked back in our cages. They forced us to battle each other in terrain like this, thick woods. The stakes were high then, but no higher than now. I trot, avoiding low-hanging limbs as my hooves eat up the turf along the path. Jo is plastered to my back. When I duck, so does she, so I don't worry about her getting hurt.

“Oh, my God!”

I stop my forward movement from one stride to the next, then turn to see what happened. Did a branch whack her in the face? I'll never forgive myself if—

“Oh, my God, Chance. Why'd you stop? That was amazing!”

I turn to see that she's panting, her cheeks pink, as if she were the one who was running through the trees.

“Amazing? I thought you were hurt.” I brush my knuckles down her cheek and twist at the waist enough to nuzzle along the same path.

“I was always too terrified to climb onto a horse,” she admits.

My mouth drops open. Unaware of her fear, I should have never pressured her to do this.

“I figured I would be safe on you, Chance. I don't even have to hold reins or anything, just sit back and let you do all the work.”

“Well.” My voice dips low in a tone I recognize from TV shows. I hear it when men and women are talking about sex. I always figured it was faked, but it comes naturally to me. “Tighten your hold around my waist and hang on, Jo. I’m not stopping until you tell me.”

I take off at a trot. When the trees thin out, I move into a smooth canter. Soon we’re at the lake. Maybe the soldiers, splicers, or the women have been walking circles around it, because there’s a path near the water’s edge.

I remain at a canter. It’s my smoothest gait. I never cared about that before, but I want to make this as fun and easy for Jo as can be.

“You good back there?” I call.

She leans her head close, her lips at my ear, and says, “You don’t need to shout. I can hear you just fine.” Did she just lick my ear? It not only made me shiver, it caused my cock to jerk in appreciation as if there were a direct connection between the two parts of my body.

Though she didn’t answer my question, I guess if she weren’t doing okay, she would mention it. I reach behind me to tuck her closer to my back, then kick out into a faster canter.

It’s almost as if this isn’t real, that it’s a dream sequence in a vid. The sun is shining down on us, but it’s not too hot. The breeze is rustling through my hair. There’s a sweet scent coming from up ahead. It must be flowers.

I used the gym they provided in the reject barracks, but it can't compare to running free like this. I kick out my stride, using all my self-control not to break into a gallop. It would probably terrify Jo.

"Can you go faster?" she asks, her lips at my ear.

She doesn't have to ask twice. I pick up the pace and enjoy both the challenge it gives my body and the way Jo tightens her grip around my waist.

I don't need to ask if she's okay. She's giggling and whooping in happiness behind me.

I never allowed myself to even dream of anything this fantastic before, yet here I am, living it.

## Chapter Fifteen

**J**<sup>o</sup> I drink in the scent of honeysuckle and hold tighter to Chance. We're as close to flying as we can be and still be on the ground. The sound of his hooves and his deep, panting breaths are all I hear. Hugging him so tightly it's as if we're one being instead of two—this is complete joy.

Eight months ago, I shaved my head, then dyed my hair purple as it grew back. I figured if they were going to take me to court for my hacking activities, I might as well look the part. I wish I had my long hair now, though. It would be whipping out behind me like a flag.

For a while, I sit upright and peer around Chance's big body to see the scenery: the evergreens and oaks, the scrub brush, the shimmer glinting off the water. When I've drunk my fill of the beauty around me, I tuck myself closer to Chance and snuggle against his warm, tan skin.

I don't know him at all. Just met him. What possessed me to kiss him like that? Twice? I've certainly never felt like this before, this immediate, intense attraction. It's not just attraction, it's a connection.

I want to share more kisses with him, but I want something else. I want to get to know him. A moment ago, I figured I shouldn't ask him about his past, but maybe that was misguided. I want to know everything about him. And, although I'm the most private person I've ever met, other than Slater, I want Chance to get to know me.

Even though Chris—shady, conniving bastard that he turned out to be—and I lived together, I never felt this type of bond before.

I have never, not once, not even when I was a little girl, daydreamed about a wedding or a white dress or some nameless, faceless groom who would stand at the altar with me. Even with Chris, I never imagined a future together. I've always lived in the now.

Why, then, am I thinking of all the things I want to teach Chance about computers? Or how I want to make sandwiches—though I never cook—and come back here with a picnic lunch someday soon?

When I ask myself why I'm imagining all the things we can do in bed together, I realize that's obvious. He's the sexiest male I've ever met. Imagining how his four legs will somehow fit with my two just seems like an arousing challenge.

Suddenly, I catch something out of the corner of my eye.

“A drone,” I breathe as I watch its movement. It’s not hard to do since it’s keeping pace with us.

Chance speeds up, trying to avoid it, I imagine, then shakes his head.

“I don’t think we can escape it,” I say.

It eases closer, making no secret that it’s surveilling us. The thing looks like a miniature black helicopter and is barely bigger than a football.

“Leave us alone,” I say, my displeasure clear in my tone of voice.

It doesn’t waver from its path, which never veers more than a few feet from Chance and me.

“Slater...” My word is full of threat, though I have no power to back it up.

“This is not Slater, Ma’am. I’m Corporal Barton. I simply wanted to inform you that the area is surveilled by cameras. Just a simple communication of facts.”

Anger flies through me, hot and fast. I’ve always had a quick temper. When I fully realize our predicament, I can’t help but laugh.

I signed all my rights away yesterday in that foot-tall contract. And Chance probably has no rights at all. I imagine there’s no legal status for the splicers. There are only a handful of people in the world who know of their existence.

If the powers that be, which means Colonel Slater, decide they want to watch the comings and goings of everyone on this base, they have every right to do so. Actually, it was nice of Corporal Barton, whoever he is, to alert us about the cameras.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I say, looking directly into the camera, then giving my best imitation of a salute.

“We should get back,” Chance says as he wheels on his hind legs.

In a final, ridiculous act of defiance, I plant a kiss between his shoulder blades as he takes off in a dejected trot.

I thought we were going to fast-track it straight back to the office building, but Chance detours into the thickest part of the woods. It would be possible for that little drone to follow us, but I doubt it will. Corporal Barton made his point.

Maybe Chance has the same idea as me—to share another incendiary kiss before we’re back in that sterile office.

We’re making our way through thick woods when we stumble into an almost-magical clearing. Here, surrounded by trees, is a round meadow filled with white and yellow flowers.

Chance slows to a walk, then stops and turns to look at me.

“I was never bold enough to imagine a kiss like the ones we shared, Jo. Not even in my dreams. It’s just as well I never dreamed of it. It could never have been as good as the real thing.”

Though we just met, our connection is so strong his praise touches me deeply, flowing through me like a warm summer



stream.

“But if I had been courageous enough to visualize such things, it would have been with a woman I knew and liked.”

He twists at the waist to see me better, then grips my hand in the sweetest gesture as he gazes into my eyes.

“Jo, I definitely like you, but I can’t say I know you. Is it crazy for a male to say he wants to slow things down? That less than two days ago I’d never met a female and believed I’d be relegated to the reject barracks forever? Is it insane that I want to savor this? That I want to know everything about you?”

Heat flashes through me as I realize I’ve never had a relationship with anyone as sweet or sincere as Chance.

“No. Not insane.”

“It’s like I was just born two days ago, Jo. I’m trying to pick things up at lightning speed, but I’m a babe at this. I imagine I shouldn’t tell you that just holding your hand like this makes me weak in the knees—all four of them.”

His little joke breaks the spell and we both laugh, although I know what he means. I’ve gone to bed with males who didn’t spark something as hot or deep as the simple act of feeling his hand in mine.

“What are you suggesting?” Somehow, I know he’s got a plan.

“I want to drop you at the office, then go to the barracks. When that desk comes, you’ll begin teaching me everything you can show me about computers. When the time is right, I want you to explore me as much as you like, and let me learn

you in return—but not on the floor like we did earlier. You being near me like that will probably cause the same thing to happen again. And there aren't even any tissues.”

We both laugh. For all he's been through, Chance has a good sense of humor.

“As time passes, you're going to tell me everything you're comfortable sharing.” He squeezes my hand. “And if you want to know anything about me, I'll tell you.”

I really like the idea. Hadn't I already had similar thoughts? Well, not the abstinence thoughts, but the getting-to-know-each-other thoughts. I have a feeling he has something more to say, though, so I wait.

“And when we're both ready, if you're still interested, I want to do a hell of a lot more than kiss you, Jo.”

His burnished cheeks flash pink. His boldness must have shocked him.

Using the pad of my finger, I trace the outline of his top, then bottom lip as I consider my response.

“I like your plan, Chance. I want to get to know you too. Maybe someday you'll tell me why you chose the name Chance.”

He laughs. “I didn't choose the name. The name chose me.”

## Chapter Sixteen

**C**hance

I never thought I would enjoy working with computers, but I love it. I'm not sure whether it's because I truly love the work, or because it keeps me occupied, which prevents me from going crazy because of Jo's proximity.

My standing desk came two days after we started working together, which was two weeks ago.

Jo gets up to peek around me.

"Wow! You do catch on quickly. If you'd asked me if someone could learn this much in JavaScript after only two weeks of training, I would have said that was impossible. It's a pleasure to see you in action."

I have to control my urge to puff out my chest in pride. I'm not sure if it's because I received little praise in my life, or because those words are flowing out of Jo's pretty pink lips, a look of obvious appreciation on her face.

"Thanks."

“I packed us lunch.” As she steps away, she trails one finger along my forearm. It’s as if sparks flow along the path her finger travels. She has such a profound effect on me I can’t control my shiver.

“Lunchtime already?” I ask nonchalantly, though I’ve been glancing at the clock with increasing frequency as noon approached. Lunch break means Jo’s going to climb on my back and we’ll travel to the lake’s edge to share a picnic.

“I can’t wait, Chance. It’s only 11:30. Think we can cheat by half an hour?”

“Let’s go.” I grip her hand and lead her out of the building.

Jo has become a better rider, steadier on top of me, but because I’m so tall, there’s no way she can climb on my back without me kneeling for her.

“I feel like a queen when you do that,” she giggles.

I trot into the woods, slowing for that miraculous moment when we slip from full sun into the shelter of the green, leafy canopy. Somehow it signals that the workday is behind us and we can change our roles from teacher and pupil to... what? I don’t have a name for what we are. I just know it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

When we arrive at the lake’s sandy bank, Jo jumps down and lays out the blanket she snagged from the dorm linen closet. Soon we’re eating our sandwiches as we look at the lake.

Without having to discuss it, Jo always situates herself so her gaze is in the opposite direction of my cock, which still has a

mind of its own. I spoke with Corporal Barton, who's one of the kindest males here. He assures me I'll gain control at some point, though I'm not sure about that.

As Jo licks a drop of mustard from her fingers, I have to stifle a groan and try not to imagine her little pink tongue in my mouth again. We've kept our promise to each other to go slow, although I know there are moments we would both like to do so much more than sit by the lake and talk.

Without even glancing toward my cock, she nonchalantly uses the blanket to cover the eager traitor that is twitching at the edge of my kilt. Once there's no chance of accidental exposure, she lies with her head on my flank and points to the sky.

"That looks like a gnome. See? There's his pointy hat."

It takes me a moment, but I spy it plain as day. As I watch, it changes into an old man with a beard. When I point it out, she sees it immediately.

Over the course of the next few minutes, we see an elephant, a teapot, and a mouse, complete with tail. Then Jo shifts onto her side to look at me.

"I'm dying to kiss you, Chance. I can't lie."

Her admission sparks the same desire in me. Though I've been stifling it for weeks, her words bring the sweet yearning to life. For a minute, I consider throwing our agreement aside and spanning the distance between us to share another kiss. It's only with colossal self-control that I lean away from her as I

remind myself why we decided to put our physical desires on hold.

As I struggle with myself, she says, “A few weeks ago, we agreed we wanted to get to know each other. I’ve kept parts of myself hidden, but today’s the day I want to tell you why I agreed with you that waiting’s a good idea.”

I cradle her in my arms for the swiftest moment, then set her away from me so it’s easier for us to look each other in the eyes. It also keeps her warm, curvy body at a safer distance.

“I hated Slater. I guess that’s obvious.”

Although I say nothing, I’ve often wondered why, if he’s her father, they spend so little time together. The atmosphere is always strained when he visits our office.

“It was just me and my mom for years. When they married, I was jealous, pure and simple. I didn’t want him there and made it known. I disobeyed him at every turn. Even called him some names. I said, ‘you’re not my father,’ more times than I can count.”

Though I’ve never had a family, I imagine words like that would sting.

“I was rebellious. To be honest, I was a bitch. I...” She not only pauses, but she searches the ground in front of her as if it held answers she’s been seeking for a long time. “I acted out. The boys who showed an interest in me were rewarded with...” She breathes deeply, then pierces me with her green gaze. “With my body.”

I assumed she wasn't a virgin. These things were explained before they brought the women onto the property. Knowing Jo, I would have never guessed she'd given such a precious thing away so cheaply.

"I was easy. For years. I guess it's cliché, but I was looking for love in all the wrong places. That was up to and including Chris." She heaves a sigh. "That's a story for another day."

She reaches to twine her fingers with mine and slants me a weak smile.

"All of this is to explain why this self-imposed touching prohibition is one of the best things that ever happened to me. I've never given myself a chance to take things slowly. To be honest, I'm enjoying our time together. Looking for shapes in the clouds? I imagine that's something most girls do in high school. That's why it's so special I'm sharing these things with you, Chance."

She lances me with the most sincere look, as if she's gazing into my soul. It causes my breath to hitch in my chest.

"Tell me one thing, Jo."

"Mmm?"

"Is this killing you, too? Is the waiting as hard for you as it is for me?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. It's harder."

"Why?"

"Cause, unlike you, Chance, I know what we're missing."

I'm glad my cock is covered by the blanket because it kicks against its scratchy protection.

“And one more thing,” she says as she flashes me a wide smile, “when we finally reach the end of this self-imposed marathon, it's going to be *spectacular*.”



## Chapter Seventeen

**J**<sup>o</sup> “I brought cupcakes!” Olivia calls over the din in the coed lounge. “For inauguration day.”

All twenty-one splicers who aren't in what Chance calls the reject barracks are here, as are all the women. There's the usual cadre of armed soldiers making sure none of the males' bestial natures bursts forth, but I'm not exactly sure why we need them anymore. All the males but Chance have been integrated with the women for almost two months.

It's not terrible to have the soldiers around, though. It doesn't feel as if we're in an armed encampment. I have to give Slater credit for vetting every soldier on base to ensure they were all calm and compassionate. I don't know if they harbor any hate in their hearts, but outwardly, they've been kind to all of us.

A freestanding popcorn cart is tucked in a corner, pumping out bushels of hot, buttery kernels. The smell overpowers the sweet and savory cupcakes Olivia brought.

Slater strides to the front of the room, which shushes itself quiet with no prompting. Interesting, he's wearing a Hawaiian shirt and khakis just like all the splicers and women have been ordered to wear. I'm still not sure why that's our "uniform," although someone said it was to make the guys look less threatening. One look at the teeth of Noble, the lion-guy or Ty the tiger-guy, and the word nonthreatening flies right out of my mind.

"Welcome all."

Slater flashes a genuine smile. He's mellowed a lot since he came to live with Mom and me almost two decades ago.

"When I helped design this facility, I pictured this room as the hub of activity. It was always my dream that males and females could congregate here in peace. It seemed prudent to integrate things slowly, which is why this room has been off-limits until today."

He nods happily as he scans the room.

"I want to say how proud I am of how well all of you have adapted to your changed circumstances. Except for a few missteps that first night..."

As he pauses, I picture what one of the women described to me. "It was like the cantina scene in Star Wars," she'd said, her voice hushed. "Most of us women had total freakouts, and the males were mostly in their beastly selves. They were growling, hissing, and chuffing, and one of the males pissed at Bella's feet. A full-on territorial display."

“Except for a few missteps,” Slater continues, “I’d call this program a success so far. We’ve got a few shops open on Main Street, albeit only serving those of us from the base. All in all, we’re on target to welcome the general public at or before the projected two-year deadline.”

We all break out in applause. Initially, I thought two years sounded like a life sentence. Now, I’m happy to be here.

There are a lot of couches and lounge chairs dotting the homey, wood-domed room. I snagged a high-backed bar stool from the nonalcoholic bar area so I can sit next to Chance, who is standing. I can’t wait until the lights go down so we can hold hands.

I love acting like high school kids on their first date. I missed that opportunity the first time around and feel lucky to grab it now, in my twenties.

“So, let’s kick off this shindig with *The Lion King*. Don’t forget to help yourself to some popcorn, some of Olivia’s amazing treats, and a beverage. Don’t blame any of the enlisted men for what’s on tonight’s marquee. I picked the first movie myself.”

The lights go down and before I can reach for Chance’s hand, he grabs mine, flashes me a close-lipped smile, and tugs me closer, chair and all.

“Talking animals?” he asks a few minutes later, his head tipped, a skeptical look on his face.

“It’s a good movie. I think he meant it as a peace offering. To normalize things.”

Other than Noble’s loud roar when Scar threatens Simba, the audience is quiet, happily munching their choice of junk food.

I tuck myself closer to Chance, reveling in his warm skin, his even warmer furred coat, and the occasional swish of his tail or clop of one foot, which always signals his impatience. I imagine I know exactly what’s making him impatient tonight.

If we were normal people on a date at a movie theater, there might be a little lip-on-lip action, maybe more. He has to be yearning to touch me as much as I want to touch him.

Glancing at his hind flanks, I notice Olivia has retrofitted the garment she calls his kilt. She’s added an apron, extending it almost to his knee.

I bring our linked hands to my mouth for a brief kiss.

“Good things come to those who wait,” I whisper as I wink at him.

On screen, Simba and Nala are belting out the lyrics to *Can You Feel the Love Tonight*. Corny as it seems, it’s giving me the shivers.

## Chapter Eighteen

**C**hance

As I relax in my dorm room after work waiting for dinner, it strikes me that every day is a revelation of some sort or another. I'm finding out things about myself I never had the opportunity to discover.

The army has treated us well from the moment they shot their way into the facility where we were kept in cages. It's just that living underground in Area 51 while they educated and socialized us was not the freedom I'd dreamed of.

Even in the reject barracks at the southern end of the property, it seemed as though my life was on hold. It's only now that I feel as though I'm truly living.

I thought I'd hate computers, but I don't. There are several moments every day where I feel as though I'm setting the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle into place. When I figure something out after struggling with it for a while, it's a feeling of pride and accomplishment I've seldom felt before.

Sure, when my abusers forced me to do something physical that was almost beyond my limits, there was a mild feeling of achievement, but it always tasted bitter because failing meant punishment.

Working with computers, my effort is all internally driven, and I feel as though I'm on top of the world several times a day when I master some new programming challenge.

I've always kept to myself. When we were in cages, it was because we were punished for fraternizing with other splicers. Even when we were at Area 51, I didn't make many friends. Most of the males are predator species. Being spliced with mostly equine genes qualifies me as prey.

I never, not for a moment, worried that any of the males would eat or attack me. I've trained with them all my life. With my height advantage, I've bested most of them in one-on-one skirmishes just as often as they bested me. I never felt at ease enough to fully let my guard down with them. I never felt at ease enough to fully let my guard down with them

Being free to roam the acreage and set my own schedule, at least to some extent, has given me more confidence. I've joined a few poker games in the males' lounge with not only splicers, but some of the soldiers. For the first time in my life, I feel as though I belong somewhere.

Of course, when I'm with Jo I expose even more of myself. I believe she truly wants to get to know me, so I share not only my thoughts and feelings, but my hopes and dreams.

For the first time in my life, my dreams include a future that is more than just getting by. I can actually imagine thriving.

As much as I think about a future that includes Jo, I spend an equal amount of time cautioning myself, bringing my thoughts back to reality. Jo is here on a contract. She's hinted that she was in some kind of trouble on the outside and that she was lucky Slater brought her here. She frequently mentions how many months it will be until she's released from her obligation.

Sadly, it's clear to me she has no intention of remaining here after the military allows her to walk out the front gate.

It feels as though I'm constantly walking a tightrope between dreaming of a future with Jo, and imagining the day she'll jump up, kiss my cheek, and wave goodbye.

It's no use trying to keep my emotions in check, though. As the saying goes, the horse has left the barn. I've already fallen in love with her. At least I think it's love.

It's one thing to ask Corporal Barton if I'll ever gain more control over my cock, and quite another to ask about love. Although Colonel Slater has already allowed a few couples to live together in private dwellings behind the dorms, it still seems that species-mixing, as they call it, is frowned upon.

Before I leave for dinner, I shake my head, as if it were easy to shake all those worry-thoughts out of my mind. Even though I've been in the office no more than five feet from Jo all day, I can't wait for dinner when I can be with her again.

## Chapter Nineteen

**J**<sup>o</sup> As I put the last bite of dinner in my mouth, I look around the dining room. I've never eaten so fast as I have lately. I want to set my fork down so I can hold hands with Chance. It's like I'm a schoolgirl again. Because Chance feels the same way, I barely feel embarrassed.

We've taken to sitting with the two other established couples. Noble and Jenna, and Ty and Olivia. They have no reservations about giving each other moon-eyed looks. My grandma would have called them twitterpated. That word is so old-fashioned it always cracked me up, but it perfectly describes what I'm seeing across the table.

Chance sets his fork down the same moment as me, as though he's mirroring my every bite. We keep our gaze on our table companions as we twine our fingers under the high-topped table Slater brought in so it's easy for Chance to eat with his newfound friends.



“You’re coming tonight, right?” Ty asks, a terrifying smile on his face.

Luckily, I’ve been eating with him for weeks now. I must admit, the first time he graced me with one of his long-fanged smiles, my sphincter puckered. Now that I know him, I’d say he’s one of the nicest males I’ve ever met.

There’s always a smile on his face. He almost never walks; he dances wherever he goes. It makes me so happy that these males, at least the ones I’ve met, are all the lemonade-out-of-lemons sort.

“Coming where?” Chance asks.

“Someone’s been distracted,” Ty teases, his tiger DNA showing as he lets out a happy chuff. “Haven’t you been listening? I’ve been talking about the dance for days.”

A dance. When I was in high school, the prospect of a dance would have gotten my full attention, especially if I had a boyfriend du jour—and I almost always had one of those.

However, the idea of dancing with Chance doesn’t sound very dreamy. The difference in our heights would make it hard to wind up in a dark corner dry humping all night like I did in high school. Besides, there’s the little problem of our let’s-take-it-slow agreement.

When I glance at Chance, the look in his wide, blue eyes tells me he’s as keen on dancing as I am.

“I don’t think—” he says, shaking his head.

“C’mon, Chance. You were part of the Bollywood production a few weeks ago. You sashayed down Main Street with Ty on your back for the big number,” says Jenna.

“That... that wasn’t dancing. That was carrying,” Chance protests.

Everyone but me laughs as though Chance was joking.

Despite our reluctance, after dinner we’re swept away with all our friends into the coed lounge. Nyx the naga and Forest, the fox-guy who peed at Bella’s feet, are set up behind a hastily constructed DJ stand.

Soon, we’ve all piled in, the tunes are playing, and the lights are dimmed. Nyx, a male who never seems at a loss for words, is playing the part of DJ. Our dinner companions are happily dancing without so much as a shard of light between them. Others are dancing at much more discrete distances.

Chance looks at me and shrugs. I get the crazy idea that maybe we really could dance, but I’m reminded I don’t stand as high as his withers.

“I’m sorry,” he says, a look of regret on his handsome face. “It’s not going to work.”

“No problem.” I give him a nonchalant shrug. “We’ll watch.”

I make my way to the edge of the room, telling myself I’ll be content to hold Chance’s hand. Wasn’t I feeling that way not more than an hour ago?

“I have a better idea.” He’s suddenly energized as he grabs my hand and pulls me to the exit, his feet *clip-clopping* on the

wooden floor.

## Chapter Twenty

**C**hance

I felt powerless there for a minute. The moment I realized that was what I was feeling, I looked for a solution.

“I have an idea.” It takes all my self-control not to trot ahead of Jo. We’ve left the building, and I want to get out of sight of the dorm and arrive at our little clearing in the woods.

Jo’s voice tinkles with laughter as she tries to catch up. When she’s almost at a run, I slow down, realizing she might trip and fall in the darkness. She only has two feet to keep her steady. I need to be more thoughtful.

I detour to our office and grab my laptop.

“Where are we going?” she asks when we’re back outside, hurrying to the wood’s edge.

“Dancing.”

“I call this running.”

“Sorry. I was in a hurry.” I kneel and help her onto my back as we slowly head to the woods, then wend our way through the trees as shards of moonlight trickle through the canopy.

Finally, we arrive at the little protected meadow in the middle of the trees. There’s enough silvery moonlight to see perfectly.

I find the music I’m looking for and cue it up, then set it on a tree stump.

“Hold me, Jo.” My voice has dipped low in that way it does when I can’t pull my thoughts from the shimmer of her purple hair, the fullness of her breasts, or the way her ass sways when she walks.

She slides closer, not needing an invitation to slip her hands around my waist and tuck herself against my back.

Some of the leaves shimmering in the warm breeze are aglow from moonbeams. The air carries the scent of wildflowers and rich earth mingling with the sweet, melodious strains of Ravel’s *Bolero* as it begins to play.

I stand tall and proud, hooves firmly planted in the soil below, with the woman I love on my back.

Her delicate arms tighten around my strong waist as her body presses closer to mine. Her warmth seeps into my skin, her hair tickling my back.

This piece has always struck me as magical. It begins with only a snare drum, which keeps the beat throughout the entire piece as other instruments join, rising and falling with their melodies.

I dance, my hooves paying attention to the drum, as my heart soars with the other instruments.

“Chance,” Jo whispers, amazement in her voice as her breath whispers across my skin.

My big body sways as the music swells, my movements fluid and graceful. Though she’s behind me, I feel her body sync with mine, as if we’ve been dancing together for years. The wind picks up, whipping our hair wildly around us, but we remain locked in our embrace.

When I turn toward her, the moon above casting a soft light on her smiling face, I can’t help but marvel at her beauty. I feel her heartbeat quicken against my back, her body trembling with excitement as the music accelerates, approaching the crescendo. As we move together, I feel as though I were flying with her on my back, soaring through the night.

I gaze deeply into her eyes, filled with love and tenderness. Leaning closer, I whisper softly in her ear, “I love you.”

A warmth spreads through her body as my words touch her heart. Pressing my palms over her hands which are lodged around my waist, we continue to dance, our bodies and souls entwined.

It’s a moment of pure bliss, a moment I’ll treasure forever—long after she leaves when her contract is up.

We remain lost in our dance, our hearts beating as one. The sound of our breathing, the rustling of the grass, and the beautiful melody of the music fill this magical place. It’s a

moment of pure love and beauty, a moment that will stay with me forever.

As the music fades, she nuzzles my neck with her lips, then whispers, “If things were different, I would ask you to hold me in front of you and kiss the daylights out of me. But things aren’t different. We’re going to break our promise to each other if we don’t leave soon, Chance.”

She’s right. There’s more than a year left on her contract. When our hormones weren’t blazing through our bodies, we made a pact. I bend to grab the laptop, *Bolero* is on repeat with only that one snare drum beginning the piece again.

Wheeling on my hind legs, I snap the computer shut and take her back to her dorm.

## Chapter Twenty-One

**J**<sup>o</sup> Part of me thinks I'm being ridiculous and need to chill out. The other part of me is so excited I'm about to jump out of my skin.

Although we've hung out practically all day every day since we got here, there's something different about today. Because Chance was practically tongue-tied when he asked me if I wanted to go to the Wild About Ice Cream Shoppe with him, I think this may be an actual date.

I don't bother to look in the full-length mirror in my room. We're only allowed to wear khakis and Hawaiian shirts. After a month on base, I don't need to gaze at my reflection to know just how baggy these are on me. Frankly, I think that's why the powers that be mandated them as the only things we can wear—to reduce fraternization between males and females. I don't know what they were thinking. There are several couples already living together in spite of the heinous clothing mandates.



My hair has grown back longer than you'd think since I shaved it eight months ago. It scrapes my collar. I've spent more time and effort on it than I have since junior high, even though it still looks as though all I did was finger-comb it. After one last glance at the mirror over the sink, I head out.

Less than a few hundred steps later, I've traveled through the women's dorm hallway, through the women's lounge, and see Chance in the coed lounge. He has that eager, expectant, slightly anxious look you'd expect on a young man when he knocks on a girl's front door to pick her up for prom.

Just like a high school girl, my heart goes loop-de-loop and my insides feel all squishy. Maybe it's a good thing I missed all this in high school. For my prom, my high school date and I skedaddled to the hotel room a bunch of us reserved for the after-party and had our private horizontal dance before everyone showed up.

This is so much nicer.

Although it makes perfect sense why Chance was exempted from the khaki pants mandate, I've always wondered why he's gotten away with going shirtless. I'm not complaining.

Today, he's wearing a new kilt. Although it's lavender, there's absolutely nothing feminine about the way it hugs Chance's masculine frame. Olivia said lavender would be a thing of beauty on his dapple-gray coat. She was right.

"You look beautiful," he says.

He's so cute, totally acting the part of a young man on his first date. I guess that makes sense. It *is* his first date.

I was so busy looking at how handsome he is, I failed to notice the bouquet of wildflowers he's clutching in his huge hand. If I don't rescue them immediately, he's going to choke the poor things.

"I'll put these in water."

When I turn toward the door to the kitchen for a vase, he reaches to grab my wrist.

"There's plenty more where those came from. I'll pick more for you later. Can we... can we go on our... date?"

"Absolutely."

I'm a little reluctant to toss them in the wastebasket. They're the first flowers I've ever received from a guy. Chance has gotten pretty good at reading me because he says, "I *promise*. I'll pick you more."

Gripping his hand, I pull him down so I can reach his face to kiss his cheek. "I'd like that, Chance. This was sweet."

We make our way outside and head toward all the shops on Main Street. They're opening one by one. Although they only serve those of us who live on the property, it's giving the males time to learn basic trades and social skills. Even in the short time I've been here, I've seen them not only improve, but feel more comfortable in their own skins. It's been a privilege to watch.

I travel the raised wooden sidewalk, holding hands with Chance, who walks in the street. This somewhat evens the difference in our height. It's nice not to have to strain to look at him for once.

We've had some amazing talks since we agreed to take things slowly. That magical night a few weeks ago when we danced in the moonlight set us back a bit. I think we've both been swimming in an even more potent hormonal stew than we had been.

Sometimes I hear either Noble or Ty roaring from their Quonset huts, obviously enjoying the pleasures of the flesh. Those two couples wasted no time getting it on, and from the sounds of things, they don't miss one night of sharing pleasure. I'll admit, I get jealous.

When I give it more thought, I feel slightly smug about how Chance and I are taking it slow. Maybe if I'd been a normal teenager, if I'd gone on dates and had actually gone to prom instead of partaking in the after-party, this would be too slow and boring for me. Instead, it's giving me the opportunity to experience the adolescence I was too bitter and angry to enjoy.

I'm happy I fell for one of the only prey species in the program. Let the other women have the predators with their terrifying claws and sharp teeth. I'm happy with my handsome centaur in his sexy, purple kilt.

"Here we are." He steps onto the wooden sidewalk and opens the door for me as if he's a knight in shining armor.

The little bell over the shop door tinkles as we enter. This place has a nice high ceiling to accommodate him, although he had to hunch to get through the door.

“Hi, you two.” Lucy greets us, a wide smile on her face.

“Welcome to Wild About Ice Cream. What will you have?”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

**C**hance

I'm too old and have been through far too much to be this anxious over a trip to the ice cream shop. Maybe if I keep internally repeating that, reminding myself I'm just sharing dessert with a woman I'm with almost all day, every day, my body will take the hint. In the meantime, my palms are sweaty, my heart is racing, and I have to bite my cheeks to keep from grinning so hard all my teeth show.

I called ahead, and Lucy had one of the guys carry over a bar stool from the lounge. They also set the table on stacks of books, lifting it a foot off the ground. It looks sturdy enough that it won't fall over on Jo.

I'm about to pull her stool out for her just like in the movies when Lucy says, "Take a look at the chalkboard menu and order over here."

We've all been given "hybrid bucks" so we can buy things at the stores. Colonel Slater wants us to learn life skills, which

includes spending money and making change. Olivia made me what she called a fanny pack that hangs in front of me below my waist. I've tucked the colorful pieces of paper there.

"My treat," I say earnestly. "Buy whatever you want."

Lucy looks as if she's trying not to laugh. Perhaps I misunderstood the basics of dating, though I've read over a dozen articles on the Internet because I didn't want to act like a fool.

"That's very sweet." Jo gives me an appreciative smile, then studies the board. "I'll have a minty meow milkshake. With whipped cream."

Even though I'm one of the only splicers who enjoys sweets, I have no idea what to order. When I finally shift my gaze away from the menu to give Lucy my order, she's looking at me as though I took far too long to make my decision. I wish her face was less expressive. I'm getting more anxious by the second.

"A scoop of panda-monium pecan, please."

She gives me an approving smile. Maybe I just read her wrong. "How about two scoops, Chance? I'll pop for the extra one."

"Pop?" I have no idea what she means, so my mind throws me a picture of her scattering into a million shreds like a popped balloon. That couldn't be what she meant. Right?

"No charge for the extra scoop." She explains, smiling indulgently.

When Jo and I are alone, I'll have to ask why Lucy didn't just say that in the first place.

Once we're served, I escort Jo to our tall table, pull out her stool, and lift her onto it. I thought maybe Jo would feel silly at this rigged table, but she looks happy enough to be with me.

There's a question about Python programming language that's on the tip of my tongue, but I bite it back. I may be new at this, but I know that's not what two people are supposed to talk about on a date.

Jo pushes her milkshake across the table and tips the straw in my direction. "Want to try it?"

It feels like a century since we shared our last kiss. There's something so intimate about placing my lips where hers just vacated. I keep our gazes locked and take a sip. To my dying day, I'll never know what her minty meow milkshake tasted like. All I can pay attention to is the wordless conversation we're having. Without a doubt, I know we're both wishing we were kissing instead of eating.

It dawns on me that I should be sharing my ice cream cone with her. When I reach across the table, cone in hand, she grips my wrist and pulls it closer, her green eyes flaring deep emerald as she gazes at me.

When she licks her lips and then her little pink tongue flicks out to lap at the cold treat, I wonder if her antics will kill me. Instead of using the flat of her tongue, she uses the tip to excavate a piece of brownie embedded in the vanilla ice cream.

Is she doing this on purpose? She's digging and swirling as she works to extricate the dark, little piece of brownie. I'm glad Olivia made this kilt long, because my cock is hard as a steel rod and it's pointing straight at Jo.

"Ummm." She elongates the syllable and her eyes close as if she's in ecstasy.

Damn her. She's doing this on purpose. I may not know much, but I know that sound should be reserved for sex and has no place in the Wild About Ice Cream Shoppe.

Her eyes close as her lashes fan her face. All the while, she acts as if that one tiny bite of brownie is the best thing she's ever had in her mouth. I'm reminded of our first day in the office when I came all over both myself and the floor when she wasn't even in the room.

"Jo. Please." Shit. I was pleading. I imagine that sounded pathetic, not macho or attractive at all.

She opens her eyes and gives me the most innocent look. "Please what, Chance? I was just thinking this is the best thing I've ever tasted. In fact," she pierces me with her gaze, "I can only imagine one other thing in the world that might taste better than this."

Her gaze darts to my flanks, right where my cock is hidden by the kilt. She's so focused, I glance back to ensure nothing is accidentally hanging out. Relieved that I'm fully covered, I look back at her to see a knowing smirk on her perfect face.



Perhaps she's waiting for me to ask her what might taste better than ice cream. I don't know what she's planning on saying, but what I do know is that, by the bold look on her face, she's going to embarrass the shit out of me.

"Want to know what that might be, Chance? What might taste better than panda-monium pecan?"

"No." I shake my head, then shake it faster when it becomes clear she's going to say it anyway. "No, Jo. I don't want to know."

Just as she's about to respond, the bell dings. By the sour look on Jo's face, there could only be one person walking through that door right now. Sure enough, when I turn to look, it's Colonel Slater.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

**J**<sup>o</sup> “Hello, Colonel,” Lucy says, her voice perky. “Welcome to Wild About Ice Cream. What can I get you?”

I consider sneaking out while he’s ordering, but can’t figure a way to do it without being obvious. He orders a scoop of Howlin’ Hazelnut and is about to leave when Chance politely asks if he’d care to join us.

Slater’s face lights up, as if he’d been hoping for an invite. Because there’s only one stool in the shop, his choice is to either sit on a regular chair and feel like a child at the adults’ table, or stand. He chooses to stand and bellies up to our table.

“Watch it.” I glance at the floor, indicating he should notice how the table is perched precariously on books. “This thing is none too sturdy.”

“Looks as if I’ll have to order a tall table and stools for this place.” He smiles, then takes a long lick of his cone and calls

to Lucy, “Absolutely delicious. You’ve made some excellent choices for your menu.”

His attention back on us, he asks, “How are you two doing? I haven’t gotten a daily update from you in weeks.” He quirks an eyebrow in a way that makes me wonder if he’s scolding me or just interested in our progress.

I praise Chance. That’s easy to do. Although I don’t mention how good he’s gotten at circumventing the net nanny, I describe how well he’s doing with both JavaScript and Python, which are both notoriously tricky computer languages to learn.

“Nice to know.”

The conversation stalls. Chance makes an awkward comment about how much he enjoyed *The Lion King* the other night. Although he and I have wonderful talks, he’s not great at throwing the conversation ball back and forth with the commanding officer of the base.

Slater says, “Glad you liked it,” then sighs and pierces me with his steel gray gaze, and says, “Have you forgiven me yet, Josie?”

Josie, my childhood nickname. No one has used that in years. Calling me that must be a hard habit to break.

“Forgiven you? For what?” I ask innocently, as if I have no idea what he’s talking about.

Chance’s eyes are wide, his head tipped back in fear. He’s not oblivious to the tense subtext and must wonder if one or both of us is in trouble.

Slater's mouth quirks, which is his only tell that he's disappointed in my answer. I'm about to fluff it off, find a way to wiggle out of the conversation, and go back to the deep discussion of favorite movies and ice cream flavors when I see Chance's expression out of the corner of my eye.

His gaze flicks between Slater and me as he waits for us to have the discussion we've obviously needed to engage in for a long time. As I consider if now is the time to finally dig up old wounds and put them to rest, one of Chance's back hooves clops onto the floor, his tail swishes in that way I've learned means he's agitated, and he says, "Why don't I leave you two alone? There are several things back in my dorm—"

"No. Stay." I reach to clutch his hand, heedless that Slater has noticed the casual act of intimacy.

His gaze wordlessly asks if I'm sure, and I nod in response.

"Have you forgiven me, Josie?" Slater asks again. A vertical line appears between his eyebrows as he adds sincerely, "I was a fucker."

My head jerks back in surprise. Especially when I was younger, I imagined this conversation often. I've pictured it a thousand ways, but never with his bold admission that he was a fucker.

"When I married your mom, I was young and cocky and knew nothing about wives, much less kids. I was a shitty husband and a shittier father. I was lucky your mom didn't divorce me sooner. She was good to me. Better than I deserved."

I feel like a confused cartoon character whose head is turning in circles as I sort out what he's saying.

"Uh, I don't know what to say."

"I'm sorry. I waltzed into your two-person unit and became a commanding officer instead of a father." He closes his eyes and shakes his head ruefully. "Did I really keep you at the dining room table until way past your bedtime, forcing you to finish your homework? What was I thinking? That the work would get easier the sleepier you got?"

"I'd forgotten, but yeah, I remember once you took my wrist and finally wrote the answer on my paper yourself. You were really mad that night."

"You had every right to hate me, Josie. I'm sorry. I've been sorry for years and have been too much of a coward to reach out and apologize. I should have done it long ago. Certainly should have done it when your mom... passed."

Dear God, he looks so genuinely remorseful. This has been eating him up. Before I can absolve him, he forges ahead.

"I can't tell you how happy I was when you reached out to me for help. Here you were, giving me the perfect opportunity to fix something. I was so happy to do it."

He looks at me, his eyes shining, clearly holding back tears.

I've hated him for a long time. A younger Jo would want to grab his balls under the table and twist them, or gloat at the emotional pain he's in as he admits his shortcomings not just

to me, but allowing Chance, a hybrid, to hear him confess his myriad imperfections.

But I'm not a younger Jo. I'm old enough to have made a boatload of my own mistakes—and regret them.

I slip off my chair and into his arms, press my cheek to his chest and allow tears of relief to track down my face. Something unlocks deep in my chest as if his words were the key that opened something inside me.

Tipping my head up so I can both see him and allow him to see the profound effect his words had on me, I say, “I’ve waited a lifetime to hear an apology, Slater. I can’t lie. I’ve wished for it forever. It feels even better than I dreamed it would.”

He holds me and rocks me and for a moment, I feel like a little girl in her father’s arms. There’s been so much water under the bridge, so much pain, but I’m ready to say goodbye to all that, to let it float away like a leaf in a swift-running stream.

“I’m sorry, Josie. I wish I could have a do-over.”

When he presses his lips to the top of my head, it causes my tears, which I thought were slowing, to kick into high gear again. I refuse to examine why this feels so good and just allow it to pour over me like a soothing balm.

When my tears finally stop, I say, “I have a lot to apologize for, too. I was awful to you. I never followed your directions, argued with you at every turn, took pleasure in irritating, frustrating, and disappointing you. I’m sorry.”

The look I give him is filled with regret and apology.

“You asked for a do-over. I’d love that. Maybe we’ve already started. You saved my ass by bringing me here. Without your generous offer of help, I’d be in jail right now.”

I don’t need to glance at Chance to know I’ve shocked him. His tail is whipping up and down accompanied by stomps of his back leg. Shit, I should have confessed why I’m hiding out in Splicer Town days ago.

“Can we, Josie? We can use this time to start over? Can we get to know each other? Develop a relationship?”

“Yeah, Slater. I’d like that.” I give him a watery smile.

“Your milkshake is melting.” He tips his chin toward my minty meow, but the look in his eyes is pure fatherly affection.

Father. Crap. Can I do this? I think what I’m about to do will require more courage than I would have needed to walk into court and get sentenced to prison.

“So...” I take a sip of my warm mint soup. “How do you feel about the word *Dad*?”

I keep my gaze on the walnut table until the silence stretches far too long. When I finally lift my glance to look at him, I see him beaming. It transforms his stern colonel’s face into something slightly goofy.

“I’d like that, Josie. Very much.”

“Okay, D-Dad.” That wasn’t easy. Maybe I should try it again.

“Okay, Dad, as long as you call me Jo from now on. Oh, and

you may want to buy another cone. Yours is a puddle on the table now.”

The easy laughter around the table is a balm to my healing heart.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

**C**hance

Colonel Slater left a moment ago. I didn't wait a second before I moved closer to Jo's chair and tucked her to me, giving her my wordless support. While she's still deep in thought about what transpired with her dad—wow, it's funny to use that word regarding Colonel Slater—I examine my own feelings about what just happened.

I don't have a family, have never had one. As I probe my heart deeper, I realize I'm jealous. What I just witnessed was so profound. Two people who have had such a difficult relationship just made peace with each other. There would have been no reason for it, except for their bond. Their *family* bond.

Though I don't know how I would make it happen, I realize I want that.

“What?” Jo asks.

Shit. Did I just say that out loud?

“You said you want that. Want what?”

“Uh.” I’m not sure I want to admit it. It seems so ridiculous. Should I study the menu and ask Lucy for a hot fudge dragon’s delight?

Pressing her palm to my face, Jo asks, “You want a dad?”

A dad? Is that what I want? I can’t imagine it. Maybe it worked for Jo, but I think it’s a little late in the game for me to have a dad.

“No.” I shrug. “I don’t know what I want.”

“Tell me.” She tips her head and doesn’t drop her piercing gaze. “Tell me what you’re thinking, Chance. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you more about my history. Sorry I didn’t tell you that Chris framed me for hacking into a banking database and I was about to go to trial and be sent to prison for a crime I didn’t commit. I’m sure you wondered why I’m here, why I didn’t come in with the first twenty women. To be honest, I don’t know why I didn’t share that with you.”

I hug her tighter and kiss her forehead and cheeks. This isn’t sexual. It’s pure affection, letting her know I’m sorry for all the pain she endured.

“I wish I’d been there with you. To hold your hand, support you.”

“And I wish you didn’t have to go through all the shit you’ve been through, Chance. But here we are. Together. And you just mumbled that you want something. I’d like to know what you want.”

After stroking her silky purple hair, I step away to look into her eyes. “I want a family.” I shrug, hearing how stupid that was. “I don’t know how to get that.”

For a swift moment, I wonder if she thinks I just proposed. It would have been a crazy thing to do—we’ve only known each other a few weeks. That’s not what I meant. She doesn’t look upset, though, so I imagine she didn’t misunderstand me.

She sucks her milkshake, then shakes her head in disgust and says, “Blech! It’s warm.”

She scratches a place between my withers, then says, “I have an idea. Let’s blow this popstand.”

First, Lucy popped for something, now Jo wants to blow some popstand. I shrug, feeling as though there’s a lot of pop culture I need to read up on. There’s obviously something I’m missing.

Jo and I say goodbye to Lucy, then leave the shop to walk on the wide, dirt main street. A moment later, we’ve cut between two stores and are in the woods.

“Lean down, big guy, give me a ride.”

In two seconds flat, I’m picking my way through the trees, my female on my back and the sun dappling down on me through the canopy of leaves. Everything seems right with the world again.

Soon, we’re at our special clearing. It’s not as magical as it is in the moonlight, but it’s pretty and serene here. We’re

surrounded by tall trees, yet we're sheltered in this almost perfectly round little meadow, away from prying eyes.

She leaps off my back and stands on a stump so we can talk face-to-face.

"You told me you've never allowed yourself to get close to the other splicers. You said it was something about them being predators and you being prey."

"Yes."

"Maybe that wasn't a good decision."

I expect her to elaborate, but she pauses, waiting for me to put the pieces together.

"You're saying I should be friends with all the splicers?"

"No. Not everyone, but aren't there a few people you feel an affinity for?"

"Well, we eat with Noble and Ty every night. They're nice males," I hedge. Although I enjoy their company, I wouldn't say they're good friends. Besides, they're so consumed with their newfound mating relationships, I doubt they'd have a lot of time for me.

"Okay... nice males. Not exactly a glowing description. Out of a hundred guys, are you telling me there's no one you've felt a connection with?"

"Oh, sure. There's Mason the minotaur and Maverik the monk. Come to think of it, neither of those are predator species. They're in the reject barracks."

Her nose crinkles. Although it's adorable, it signals I've said something that bothers her.

"The south barracks," I correct.

"What about pursuing those friendships?"

"When I moved from there to the dorms, the soldiers didn't allow me to go back to collect my things. They did it for me. They said it's best to sever ties."

Jo's expression isn't subtle. Her brow furrows, the corners of her lips turn down, and her lips pooch out.

"Sever ties, huh? We'll see about this. I've got a plan."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

**J**<sup>o</sup> It would be an understatement to say Chance was not on board when I initially explained my plan. He was in the not-no-but-hell-no phase of concept discussions.

As time wore on, we laid down on the grass. He placed his weight on his flank, his lower legs sideways and his human body upright, with me nestled between his forelegs like we were for our first kiss in the office. Now that he's got a longer kilt, we like to sit like this during our off time. It's close and intimate and allows him to hug me tight and tuck me close.

I don't give up easily and continue to drill down, making the plan more specific each time we talk about it. Finally, he agrees.

I think two things won him over. One is his genuine craving to not only see his friends, but to allow their relationships to grow. The other is that Slater, the commanding officer of the entire project, is my dad. I think it eliminates some of his fear

that if we're caught, he'll again be banished to what he calls the reject barracks.

His handsome face, framed by his amazing silver hair, still expresses his worry.

"Do you want to back out? I feel like I'm pressuring you. I don't want to do that."

"It's just..." He quits moving. He doesn't do that often. His tail always swishes, or his fingers absently travel up the channel of my spine.

"It's just what?" I tip my head as I ask.

"It's just that if I get into trouble, I'll never be able to see you again. *Nothing* is worth that."

Heat rushes to my face as his words fly through me. It's been quite an emotional day. Shit. I don't want to cry a second time in a matter of hours. Even though he's said he loves me, there's something about hearing how much I mean to him that feels as if something else unlocks inside my heart, just as it did earlier in the ice cream shop with... my dad.

This has been a day for firsts. After taking a deep breath, I decide to go big or go home.

I lean closer, press my palm to his precious cheek, and make sure our gazes are locked when I say, "I'm in new territory. I guess we both are. You're a virgin and I'm..." I force a laugh, "not. But this is new to both of us. I've never..." I breathe deeply and force myself to keep going. "I've never felt so much affection for anyone I've dated before."

Sliding my fingertips up his muscled arms and down his bare back, I say, “Tell me what you want. I’ll help you make it happen. If you want to see your friends, let’s go. If you don’t want to risk it, it’s all good. I just want you to be happy.”

He thinks for a long while. As he does so, his fingers sift through my hair. If I was a betting woman, I’d bet he doesn’t even know he’s doing it. It’s as if neither of us can keep our hands off each other. It’s as natural as breathing.

“Let’s do it,” he says, slashing me a smile. “In fact, let’s have fun with it.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

**C**hance

I'm not surprised when I see Jo in the shadows, waiting for me. I assumed she'd get here first. Not only is she a tiny female, but she's the colonel's daughter and I doubt they watch her as closely as they watch us splicers. It was easy for her to slip out of her dorm in the middle of the night.

Me, on the other hand, I'm big as a horse. Ha ha. Funny how so many old expressions are so true. Between the noise my hooves make, no matter how stealthy I try to be, and my sheer height and girth, it's a miracle I got out without tipping off the guards. I guess it's a good thing all of us splicers have been so compliant. The soldiers have gotten complacent.

I move slowly toward where she's standing at the edge of the woods and only pick up my pace when I'm far enough from the military barracks that they won't hear me. Moments later, I've helped Jo onto my back and I'm picking my way between the trees.

We've decided to go through the woods as far as the lake, then skirt the edge of the lake. There's no way to travel the last tenth of a mile without being fully in the open as we head to the southern barracks.

Jo leans close and kisses my shoulder. When I turn my head toward her, she kisses my cheek.

"Scared?" she asks. "We can turn back."

"Nope. I'm going for it. You? Are you scared?" I'd never want her to be fearful. Nothing is worth that.

"Nope. Although it's not fair, if we're caught, I assume I'll have immunity because Slater's my dad. Famous last words, though." She tosses her head and laughs.

"I love you," I say. Those words don't seem odd coming out of my mouth anymore. I know she won't say them back, but that's not why I say them. I simply say them because they're true.

Although she doesn't say the words I long to hear, she answers with another kiss. Right between my shoulder blades. That's good enough.

"Shit!" she says.

I don't know if I've ever heard her sound so mad.

"What?"

"Look to your left."

There, over the lake, is a drone. It was hard to make out in the dim moonlight, but now that I'm looking for it, I can not only

see it, but I can hear its low hum.

“Should we turn around?” I ask.

“Probably. They’re certainly not going to let us get as far as the southern barracks before they intervene.”

As I turn around, I get a better glimpse of the drone.

“Funny. It doesn’t look the same as the drone that caught us kissing weeks ago.”

Jo stiffens behind me.

“Nope. That one was like a black mini-helicopter. This one is gunmetal gray and has four rotors.” Her arms, already snug around my waist, grip me tighter. “And no one’s saying anything over a speaker.”

“What if this isn’t the army?” I whisper. “What if these aren’t... friendly?”

Something on the drone tips slightly, like a camera moving to get a better angle.

“I think we’d better run.” We both say the last word at the same time.

We’re more than halfway to the southern barracks. It would be foolish to run back to our dorms. I decide to press forward. At a gallop.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

**J**<sup>o</sup> Although Chance and I have been on the go-slow plan, I've always assumed we couldn't stay on the slow track forever. To that end, I've been keeping track of the drone flight patterns, figuring that one day we'd desperately want to know when it was safe to get down and dirty in the woods.

It was child's play to hack into their activity logs and track their movements. That's why I didn't worry we'd be interrupted when we danced in the clearing the other night. It's why Chance and I met in the woods tonight after midnight. I knew the drones don't fly at night. Why would they?

It's after midnight. These aren't friendlies.

I hang on tight as Chance takes off at a gallop. It's a good thing I've been riding him daily for these last few weeks. If this were my first time on his back, I'd have fallen off by now.

His hooves are pounding on the dirt, his hair is flying in my face, and he's striding so hard he's already panting from the

effort.

The drone is directly to our left, the red eye of the camera pointing at us, not even trying to hide.

“Shit,” I say, my throat parched and constricted with fear.

When I was tracking the army’s drone movements, I investigated their different types. There are those for kids playing in their backyards that start at under a hundred dollars, and non-military-grade varieties that go up to the thousands. Military-grade can be much more. Because they have weapons capability.

Chance knows none of this. I don’t want to mention that in addition to the unblinking red eye of the camera, the drone could open fire on us without a moment’s notice. Instead, I let him focus all his attention on getting us to the southern barracks.

I’ve never been on this part of the property, but I’ve looked at the aerial footage I found in the military database. I’m not a good judge of these things, but I think we have several more minutes before we get there, even at top speed.

My arms are hugging Chance’s waist as I grip my wrists to keep from letting go. I guess I’m as close to death as I’ve ever been. My heart is pounding, I’m swallowing convulsively, and I’m gasping for breath.

Instead of worrying about my possible impending death, though, my thoughts turn to the male I’m riding.

Chance. The male who has been generous in his praise, kind with his words, and unafraid to use the L-word on more than one occasion. I've always loved Maya Angelou's quote, "When someone shows you who they are, believe them."

Perhaps even more to the point is what my mom always told me. "Sometimes you have to ignore the words coming out of someone's mouth and listen to what they are *doing*."

Well, no matter which quote fits best, Chance is a great guy. Considering that drone might open fire on us at any minute, I think now is as good a time as any to say something I should have said a few days ago.

"I love you, Chance."

To his credit, he doesn't break his stride, doesn't falter, doesn't lose us one nanosecond of time. He simply whinnies so loud I not only hear it over his pounding hoofbeats, I feel it vibrating from deep in his chest.

I've seen lights up ahead since shortly after we caught sight of the drone. We're so far from civilization that a single light can be seen from a great distance. I wasn't sure how far we were from the barracks, but now it seems the lights are getting closer fast.

"Almost there," Chance bites out, then presses forward, huffing with exertion.

When I see the barracks, a series of connected Quonsets surrounded by a fence topped with barbed wire and dotted with floodlights, I almost breathe a sigh of relief. The drone,

rather than peeling off as I expected, stays with us as we approach the facility.

“Hang on tight!” Chance shouts as he approaches the fence.

The fence must be at least eight feet tall. I don’t care how superhuman they bred him to be, he couldn’t possibly jump that high, especially with me on his back.

“Help!” I scream.

They call this the reject barracks for a reason. It must be guarded by a cadre of soldiers.

“Help!”

Soon, soldiers are pouring out of doorways. Some, I guess those who were on duty, are in uniform and have their weapons in hand. Others must be coming from their dorms. A few are pulling on pants as they hurry toward us.

“Drone!” I shout, pointing to it.

Numerous rifles aim at the thing, and it flies off, zigzagging to avoid being shot.

As if this night couldn’t get any more surreal, what I see out of the corner of my eye grabs my full attention.

“Hawk! Come back here!” One of the soldiers calls. “Hawk! You’re not authorized!”

Chance faces the action. Keeping himself between me and the drone, he backs up as we watch a splicer male with a wingspan more than twice his height chase after the drone.

“Hawk won’t listen,” Chance murmurs. “He’s one of the bravest of us. They bred him for this. It’s in his DNA.”

“Stand down!” one of the soldiers calls over a loudspeaker. “Hawk, you’re too valuable to lose. We don’t want you dead. That’s an order, soldier.”

What must be the commanding officer of the southern barracks shouts, “Our radar can track the thing. Let the men in the command center do their jobs.”

Hawk keeps pursuing the drone for a few more seconds, but his wings aren’t beating; he’s sailing on air currents. Finally, he gracefully turns in mid-flight and glides towards the ground, like an angel descending from the heavens. His magnificent wings begin to fold, revealing a silhouette that embodies strength and gentleness all at once.

Hawk eases in for a landing next to where we’re standing. The male almost died up there. He could have been hit by the enemy or friendly fire. If the focus of his gaze is any indication, though, he’s more concerned with me.

“A female, Chance? A human female?”

Chance laughs, obviously as shocked as I am at Hawk’s nonchalance about his brush with death. Speaking of a brush with death, “Chance, I think we almost died. It’s a miracle that drone didn’t open fire.”

He reaches behind and tucks me closer. Although I can’t see his face, by Hawk’s response, I have a feeling Chance is giving off some very possessive facial expressions.



My pulse is still jackhammering in my carotid over our wild ride and brush with danger, but I can't help but feel a flare of pride that my guy is staking his claim on me. I shiver at the feeling.

There's a flurry of activity from the military guys as someone calls the colonel to give him an update. Despite my shaking hands and pounding heart, I must admit, it makes me feel good to hear my dad over their comms as he inquires about my safety the moment they mention I'm here.

I should jump off Chance while we get everything sorted, but I can't force my limbs to comply. I just want to sit here, plastered to his back, my arms clinging to his chest, and feel the reassurance of his heartbeat beneath my fingers.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

**C**hance

My heart is beating so hard and fast it feels as if it will pound right out of my chest. The entire ride here, I worried the drone would open fire and I wouldn't be able to keep Jo safe. I'm glad she won't remove her hands from around my chest. It's reassuring to know she's right here with me.

Over the din of all the activity, I turn to ask if she's okay.

"I'm terrified." Her green eyes are wide with fear. "But I'm relieved we both made it."

The colonel must have driven fast because he's jumping out of his Jeep and jogging toward us before my heartbeat slows to normal. It's only been a few minutes since I barreled toward the barracks with Jo on my back shouting for help.

Perhaps he was still awake when he got the call, because Slater looks every bit the commanding officer. His uniform is ironed, his gray brush-cut hair immaculate.

"Jo, are you all right?"

So many emotions are warring inside me right now, but a surge of happiness flies to the top of the pile. The military part of Slater should be taking command of the scene, firing questions about what happened, and securing the perimeter. Instead, he's taking a minute to check in on his daughter. He really loves her, which delights me for both of them.

“Yes. Shaky, but fine.”

His gaze roams her up and down, checking, I guess, to make sure she's truly okay. To my surprise, he gives me a thorough visual inspection as well.

“Corporal Evans,” he barks as he motions the soldier over. “I want a full report.”

Because Evans has few answers, Jo and I add to the story, though there's not much to piece together. Slater comms the men back at the command center, telling them he wants a full report on his desk about not only this drone's flight path, but to go through all previous airspace violations with a fine-tooth comb.

“If it's bigger than a honeybee, I want it included in the report,” he barks.

“Now, I'm going to escort you two back to your dorms and you're going to tell me what the holy hell you were doing here. And young lady, I don't want any bullshit lies like you used to give me when you were a teen. I saw through them then and I'll see through them now.”

I feel Jo's muscles tighten behind me, but she doesn't argue. She contritely says, "Yes, Sir," which not only startles me, but surprises the colonel to the point he barks out a laugh.

He climbs into his Jeep, motions for me to keep up, and we leave the area via a gravel road.

On the colonel's side of the open-topped Jeep, I keep pace with him as we meander home.

"Care to tell me what you two were doing there at..." he pointedly glances at his wrist, "0143?"

I'm about to explain when Jo interrupts.

"It's all my fault. Chance mentioned he missed his buddies at the rej— southern barracks and I convinced him we should visit."

Colonel Slater gives me a pointed glance, his expression speaking volumes about how slim my chances are that he will let me off the hook.

"And the idea of simply asking to go during daylight hours never crossed your minds because...?"

I explain how I was forbidden to even say goodbye to my friends when I moved to the males' dorm from the southern barracks. "I didn't think you'd allow it, Sir."

"Thanks for not even giving me a chance to say no."

He stops the Jeep, gets out, and leans his hip against the door.

"I'm not a monster. In the three years since I orchestrated your

rescue, have I ever shown you I didn't have your best interests at heart?"

I don't give a knee-jerk response. I consider his question. Rumor had it this man was given the option of leaving the project, moving on with his career. Instead, he chose to stay with us for three long years in the bowels of Area 51.

He never used his power to harm us. In fact, every step of the way he insisted we be treated with the utmost respect. Even the day I was rescued.

Shame flies through me, hot and painful as a live wire. When I look into his eyes, I know he's remembering that day as clearly as I am.

"I'm sorry, Sir."

It's silent except for the crickets, thousands of them, who decide in unison to start chirping at the same moment.

"What am I missing?" Jo asks.

"I told you I'd tell you how I got my name. I guess now's the time."

There are many moments of my life I don't like to remember, but this is one of the worst. I take a deep breath, then explain.

"We'd been on a practice mission. They used me for what they'd bred me for. I was loaded with enough weapons and equipment to last a cadre of twenty splicers a week. I sprained a fetlock the first day out and had trouble keeping up. When we arrived back at our cages, I was given a death sentence."

I don't turn around to see how Jo's taking this. It's obvious by the way she reaches behind her to stroke my flank that she's trying to soothe both of us.

“Those in charge found the right people to work there. Every single one of them was a sadist. When they were done with us, they didn't just take us out and shoot us.”

His tail usually flicks once or twice when he's agitated. It's in constant motion, speaking to the level of his discomfort.

“They left me in my cage and quit feeding me. It was an incentive to the others to do their best or die trying. When the army came to rescue me, I was lying in a pile of my own filth, every rib showing. I was too weak to stand.”

The Colonel touches my withers. “I'll finish the story, son. When I walked by his cage, the enlisted man with me asked if he should put this male down. I looked you in the eyes, saw there was still an ember of fire there, and said ‘no, let's give this one a chance’.”

When Jo presses her cheek to my back, I feel the wet trails of her hot tears snaking down my flesh.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**J**<sup>o</sup> I'm not crying. I'm weeping. The feeling is overwhelming. That Chance and I met and fell in love seems all the more magical because he had been so close to death. And that Slater—Dad—saved his life?

“It’s as if the stars aligned to get us together,” I say through a throat clogged with emotion.

One of my hands is roaming up and down the warm skin of his chest as the other reaches behind to burrow through his dapple-gray coat. It helps calm me.

“So next time, give me the benefit of the doubt, will you? I’m not a monster,” Dad says as he tosses Chance some keys.

“What’s this, Sir?” he asks.

“You two look like you need some time alone to sort things out and have a long talk. I need to get back to the command center to investigate exactly what happened here. If our location has been compromised, we haven’t heard the last of

this. As we've known all along, when news of this breaks, it will be a shitstorm to end all shitstorms."

Chance glances at the keys, then asks, "And these?"

"Quonset C. It's behind your dorms, near where the other couples are now living. We're building them as fast as we can. It looks like splicers can be irresistible to some women." He belts out a laugh and smiles at me.

"It's yours. Or not. Either way, it's a quiet place for you to talk. Don't worry about waking at reveille, but the three of us will have lunch together at noon on the dot and you're going to tell me everything that happened tonight, leaving nothing out."

Jo's mouth opens several times before she manages to say the words which are going through my own head. "How did you know? We were careful."

"It might be hard to believe, but I was young once." He huffs out an awkward breath. "When your mother and I met... well, let's just say things got heated pretty quickly. We rushed into a relationship."

As he looks out into the night, I imagine he's replaying that entire relationship in his head.

"I've been watching you two for some time now. I'd have to be blind not to see how fond you are of each other. According to the rules, I should have stepped in and put a stop to it, but knowing you, Jo, I figured it would make you more likely, not less, to pursue the relationship behind my back. So I watched



and I waited and I was pleasantly surprised when I saw you taking it slowly and really getting to know each other before giving in to any....” he clears his throat, “animalistic urges.”

He chuckles at that last remark, slides into his Jeep, and takes off so fast he leaves a rooster tail of flying gravel behind him. Chance leaves the road, choosing instead to make his way through the scrubby field paralleling it.

“Uh, did your dad just give us his blessing to uh...”

“I’m not sure about his blessing, but encouraging us to share a Quonset, and probably a bedroom, certainly gave us permission and opportunity.”

I’m still in shock over the story of how he was so near death when they rescued him. That it was my own stepfather who saved him? Isn’t that as close to a miracle as I’ll ever witness?

I lean forward and press my lips to that spot between his shoulder blades that I kiss whenever I’m on his back. I have a feeling it’s going to get a lot more kisses as time goes on.

We travel in silence, the moon lighting our way.

“What’s the hurry?” I ask when I notice his pace is quickening.

“I’m just wondering what a Quonset hut is like.” His voice is all innocence.

“Yeah. Maybe we should stop by the army work hut on the way there and grab a tape measure. I can’t wait to see how tall the ceiling is.”

“And how they decorated it,” he says without a trace of irony.

“And how comfortable the... kitchen chairs are. Since I’m certain we’ll be in the kitchen talking the rest of the night away.”

He laughs, then adds, “I wonder if it echoes. You know, with all that steel in there?”

He’s trotting now, his bounciest gait. Instead of gripping him tighter, I lean back just enough for him to feel my hardened nipples press against his back with every step.

“I know we were going to take it slow...” He extends his trot into an easy, rolling canter.

“We have very different backgrounds, Chance. By my standards, we’ve waited light-years.”

“So it wouldn’t be too forward for me to assume we might...?”

It’s so adorable that he can’t bring himself to even say the words. I need to let him know he doesn’t need to be shy with me in the bedroom.

“Might go all the way? Have sex?” I lean closer to whisper in his ear, “Fuck?”

He can’t control his whole-body shiver.

He doesn’t say a word, just pushes himself into a gallop.

“Say it,” I goad. “Say what you want.”

He’s silent for the longest time with just the sound of his hooves pounding into the soft dirt, the buzz of crickets a

constant chorus.

“I don’t want to *fuck*,” he says that last word as though it’s a curse.

Have I shocked him? He knows my history. I didn’t keep it a secret. Does my slutty past disgust him? A pang of sadness shoots through me.

“I want to do so much more than that, Jo.” He reaches to grip my hand, twining his fingers with mine. “I want to rip your clothes off. Would that shock you?”

Oh, thank god. Though I love all his prey-animal ways, I’m so glad he’s going to be a predator in the bedroom.

“No, Chance. Tell me more.”

“I want to explore every dip and curve of your body. First with my hands, then with my tongue. I want to map your intimate details—inside and out.”

What a day filled with emotions this has been. From the poignancy in the ice cream shop with my dad, to the terror-filled gallop near the lake, to this sex-fueled gallop on the way to our Quonset. I’m getting hornier by the second.

“Is that all you want to do, Chance?”

“I want to taste you, Jo. I know one thing. It will be better than panda-monium pecan.”

“And I’m going to taste *you*, Chance.”

His answer is another whole-body shiver, then he pours on the speed as if he were about to win the Kentucky Derby and

millions of dollars were at stake.

We see the glint of the metal buildings up ahead. As far as I'm concerned, we can't get there fast enough.

## Chapter Thirty

**C**hance

Running with a hard-on isn't child's play, but I barely pay attention to that. How can I think of anything but the pictures scrolling through my mind of all the delicious things I want to do with Jo's delectable body?

The moment we get to the hut, Jo jumps down, keys the door open, and we both race inside. I glance around the structure, still panting, having worked up a sweat.

Though it's built from corrugated metal, the inside walls are made of planked wood and plasterboard. The back wall is one big floor-to-ceiling window. The vertical blinds are drawn, moonlight spilling inside through the narrow upper windows.

The place is sparsely furnished, but in the center of the large main room is a big bed. It's larger than an enlisted man would need. I think it was built with splicer couples in mind. Why did I think for a minute that Slater didn't want us to find love?

“I want to rip your clothes off and do everything I said.” My voice is that low tone that only means one thing. Sex. “But I never imagined doing these things to your perfect body after galloping for miles. I’m going outside to hose off and will meet you back here in five minutes. Don’t make me wait.”

Jo’s eyebrows rise in surprise at my order, then her lips tip into a sexy smile.

“Don’t make *me* wait, big guy.” She hurries to find the bathroom as I undo my kilt buckle, let the leather garment slap to the floor, and leave in search of a garden hose.

I find one at the back of the building with hot and cold taps. Slater has thought of everything. I get a surge of regret that I didn’t trust him to allow me to see my friends in the southern barracks. I push that away and replace it with gratitude for every minute that led to me being here with Jo.

No more than five minutes later, I enter the front door, my hair still dripping.

Jo’s waiting for me at the foot of the bed, wrapped only in a towel. I step back until my ass hits the door, just wanting to take in the sight of her.

Her wet hair has darkened to a deeper purple as little droplets sluice down her shoulders and neck, past her collarbones, and into the fluffy white towel.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I rub my sternum. Damn, she takes my breath away.

She bends her knees and tilts her head, not even trying to hide that she's checking out my cock.

"Hmm. Dapple-gray," she observes with a smirk. "One long, long, fat, dapple-gray cock. Would it be politically incorrect for me to say you're hung like a horse? Because I mean that in a good way."

"You might think hung like a horse is good, Jo, but I must admit, I think the logistics might be... challenging."

"You know what they say? Yankee ingenuity." She taps her temple. "Where there's a will, there's a way. Wild horses couldn't stop me."

She crooks her finger at me. When I don't immediately step toward her, she lets her towel drop to the floor.

Lightning. For a moment I feel as if I'm struck by lightning as flares of desire zap through my body. My cock thumps against my underbelly, and my throat runs dry.

"Let's get this party started, Chance."

Instead of waiting for me to regain my senses and come to her, she steps toward me. Steps? Is she walking? No. She's swaying her hips, her generous breasts bouncing with each footfall. Her eloquent gaze never leaves mine, speaking volumes about just how much she desires me.

She gets close enough to grab my hands and rests them on the swell of her hips, then immediately shakes her head and steps out of my grip. Did she just change her mind? Regret spears through me as my mind races, wondering what's bothering her.

I quit worrying when she gives me a saucy smile, steps to the dining table, and grabs a chair. She places it in front of me and steps up as I return my hands to her warm, smooth hips to steady her.

Now her head reaches my shoulder. Much better.

“I believe you said you wanted to start with a thorough reconnaissance. Go ahead. Get the lay of the land.”

I keep our gazes locked as my palms explore her pale plains and delicious curves, the gentle swell of her belly, and the generous globes of her ass. I say nothing, but I’m sure she hears my appreciative nicker as I take her in.

My first pass was all for me. I enjoyed the feel of every inch of her. On the next foray, I pay attention to what she likes, watching her pupils dilate, or the subtle lift of her chin when I caress a sensitive spot.

I’ve avoided the obvious erogenous zones. “Saved the best for last,” I murmur.

When I rest the weight of her pretty, brown-tipped breasts in my palms, she can’t help but suck air in through her teeth. It’s only when I strum the hardened tips with the pad of my thumb that she finally grants me a noise of appreciation. It’s the slightest, most feminine moan.

“I knew you’d be sensitive, Jo.”

I learn her. Assessing what she likes best, the soft pass of my thumb, the pluck between two fingers, or a gentle roll and twist. Perhaps they put some predator into the test tube when



they created me, because I'm enjoying teasing her, heightening her need, watching her slam her lids shut and arch her back for me so I can take more of what she so eagerly wishes to give.

It's when I bend my head, unable to wait a second more, and suck her little bud into my mouth that a real moan escapes her lips—long and low and loud enough to echo softly through the room.

Her fingers comb through my hair, then lodge at my nape. It's a loud message that she doesn't want me to stop.

## Chapter Thirty-One

**J**<sup>o</sup> I'm flying. Or is it floating? I've been with so many guys who would have been balls-deep in me by now, but this sweet, slow torture from Chance is more mind-blowing than anything I've ever experienced. My body quivers under his touch, electricity coursing through my veins as he brings me closer and closer to the edge.

I feel my cream dripping at the top of my thighs, a delicious ache building between my legs. Although I want Chance inside me so badly, I also want what he's doing with his mouth and fingers to go on forever.

His lips move expertly over my hardened nipple, sending sparks of pleasure shooting straight to my core. His silver hair glimmers in the soft moonlight cascading through the high windows, making him look ethereal and otherworldly.

In my head, I'm giving silent instructions. I need to feel him between my legs. I'm desperate. Frantic. If not penetration,

maybe he could just... I let out a satisfied sigh as his palm finally moves, gliding from my waist to my ass, across my hip, teasingly close to where I crave his touch the most.

But instead of granting even the tiniest bit of relief, he's hovering there, scant millimeters from my flesh, prolonging the exquisite torment. The scold creeps into my voice as I can't contain my desire any longer. "Chance!" I plead, wanting him to fulfill my burning desires.

He nips my bottom lip playfully, intensifying my craving. My body thrums with need as I anticipate his next move.

"Ask nicely." His voice is thick with desire, his eyes burning with lust.

"Please, Chance. I'm going to explode if you don't touch me," I beg, my voice filled with desperation and need. I've never felt this kind of ache before, this intense yearning for his touch.

I don't know how a virgin manages to have so much self-control or so much command, but he has the audacity to poke my hip with the tip of one finger

"Touch you here, Love?"

"Chance, touch my pussy. Please.

His hand flies to the spot between my legs, cupping me so tightly it almost lifts me off my feet. I can't help but gasp at the sudden contact.

"Fuck, Jo. You're dripping wet," he growls, his voice filled with hunger.

“For you,” I whisper breathlessly, my voice laced with desire.

Cupping my ass, he lifts me effortlessly in his arms and sets me on the bed, positioning me on my back. His hands glide up from my ankles to the inside of my knees, spreading my legs in slow, deliberate increments. The hungry look in his eyes sends shivers of anticipation down my spine, making my skin tingle with excitement.

He lowers his equine half to the floor and pulls me to the edge of the bed. His warm, rough palms slide up from my ankles to the inside of my knees, spreading my legs. His face is a study in rapt attention as he exposes my pussy inch by delicious inch.

Most guys I’ve been with weren’t in a hurry to pleasure me like this. If they did, their efforts were rushed, hidden in darkness, or done with minimal time or effort. But not Chance. He takes his time, exploring me as if he’s uncovering a hidden treasure.

“You’re so fucking beautiful down here. I want to learn every fold, Jo. I want to make you come and come and come until you can’t move.”

“Who’s stopping you?”

That shuts him up as he slides one finger through my slick folds. His response is to hum with appreciation as he shivers with need.

“I just have to...”

He leans closer and spears his tongue into me, moaning louder than when he licked that ice cream cone. He's lapping at me, exploring inside me, finding that patch that makes me gasp with pleasure.

He's intuitive and completely tuned in to me. It doesn't take him long to learn which spots aren't any more sensitive than my elbow, and which make me squirm with pleasure. Smart guy, he likes to make me squirm.

He changes position, maybe resting his fore-knees on the floor, because his angle changes, giving him more access to delve with his tongue, then slide between my folds to home in on my clit.

“Yes!”

A little praise goes a long way as he focuses his attention there. Between my wiggling and my desperate, keening noises, it only takes him a few minutes to make me gasp with pleasure. His tongue dives deep into my drenched channel, then his lips pluck at my clit with growing intensity.

I moan uncontrollably, my body quivering beneath his touch. His intuition astounds me as he learns where to focus his attention, bringing me higher and higher with each passing moment. I grip the bed sheets, my fingers digging into the soft fabric as he brings me to the edge of oblivion.

Realizing I'm too desperate to toy with, he goes for it, circling next to my clit with two fingers as his tongue thrusts rhythmically inside my drenched channel.

My emotions are whirling within me as my desire rises from arousal, to need, and finally to desperation.

I eke out one word, “Harder!” my voice filled with urgency. He adjusts his position, his tongue swirling expertly around my sensitive clit as he plunges his fingers deep within me, my body bucking against him in response.

Pleasure courses through me in a tidal wave, my release crashing over me with an intensity I’ve never felt before. My walls clench around his fingers as spasm after spasm sears through me, each one more intense than the last.

He doesn’t let up, milking every ounce of pleasure from me until I’m left boneless and utterly spent. As I lie back on the bed, my body still tingling with post-orgasmic bliss, Chance joins me, his arms and torso resting on the bed while his horse half remains on the floor. The look of absolute adoration on his face fills me with warmth and joy.

I trace my fingers through his long, silver hair, relishing the intimacy of the moment. “Maybe you didn’t hear me earlier,” I say, my voice filled with affection. “I need to tell you again. I love you, Chance.”

The non human part of him shimmies ever so slightly. This reminder that he’s not completely human sparks even more affection for him deep in my heart. His eyes light up, besotted by my words.

He leans in to kiss my fingers, his lips caressing them gently. “I’ll never tire of hearing you say you love me, Jo,” he whispers, his voice filled with devotion.

Fear jolts through me for a second. For the shortest moment, I actually thought saying I loved him might be a one-and-done thing. I'm not demonstrative. God knows, it wasn't role-modeled for me as a kid.

It's a great day for firsts. How about I step out of yet another comfort zone?

I roll toward him, grip his face so hard between my palms that he has duck lips, and say, "I love you, Chance."

That wasn't so bad. I think I can do it again.

"I love you, Chance. I love you, I love you, I love you."

A bubble of laughter escapes me as I realize I crossed another bridge just now. It was scary for a moment and now it feels amazing.

He tucks me close and nuzzles me. We kiss, our lips move against each other as we proclaim our love. It tickles and is ridiculous and I feel more affectionate and intimate with this male than I've felt with anyone in my life.

My giggling stops abruptly when I realize my guy hasn't come yet.

"I've been remiss," I say as I sit up so I can position myself near his cock. "I can't wait another minute to touch you."

## Chapter Thirty-Two

**C**hance

I scoot away from the bed, my heart pounding in my chest, as she joins me on the floor, her naked form gliding between my two sets of legs. The anticipation in the air is charged with desire and longing. I hold my breath, captivated by the way she gazes up at me, on all fours like a temptress ready to devour my very soul.

“My gorgeous lover,” she whispers, her voice a sensuous melody that reverberates through my body and ignites a fire within me.

With steady hands, she reaches out and firmly grips me at the root, her touch sending electricity coursing through my veins. It’s as if her skin is made of the finest silk, leaving a trail of scorching heat wherever it grazes my sensitive flesh. I need to keep my mind off what she’s doing or I’m going to come.

In an attempt to ground myself, I summon my darkest memories—the solitude of the cold cage I was confined to in



that sterile facility, the anguish of loneliness that plagued my soul. I immerse myself in the depths of those painful recollections, hoping to distract myself from the intensity of her touch. But she is relentless, determined to unleash every ounce of pleasure within me.

She senses my struggle, her brows furrowing with genuine concern as she changes her position, turning on her knees to face me. Her face is only inches away from mine, a blend of desire and compassion shining in her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Chance?” she asks softly, her head tilting as she searches my gaze. “Do you want to wait? Did I push you too fast? Was this a terrible idea?”

I would have gone to my grave with the secret that I’m struggling not to come, swimming in horrible memories so the woman I love doesn’t think I have a hair trigger, but the deep creases in her furrowed brow tell me how concerned she is for my feelings. Changing my mind about my strategy, I decide to tell the truth.

“I don’t want to stop, Jo,” my voice comes out raw and filled with longing. “Or wait. And no, it wasn’t a terrible idea. It’s just that your touch... overwhelms me. Every sensation is so powerful I’m afraid I’m going to come. I’m pulling away to not be present so I can hang on.”

Instead of judgment or disappointment, a delicate smile dances across her lips, enchanting me further.

“I have just the fix for that, big guy,” she purrs, her voice dripping with mischief.

With a swift movement, she reaches behind her to where she'd dropped her towel earlier. Her confidence fuels my curiosity, and I find myself hanging onto her every word.

“Let's take the edge off,” she whispers, her breath warm against my chest. “Don't drift away to somewhere else in your mind. Stay with me every step of the way. Come in a second if you want. I don't care. We have all night long. And,” she lifts the towel as if it's a courtroom exhibit, “we have this towel. After you come once—or more—you'll have even better control.”

I rub my mouth with my palm, trying to hide the raw emotion on my face. Her words hit me like a brick. I've never experienced complete acceptance before.

She tosses the towel to me, the fabric landing gently in my hands, and resumes her original position with her eyes locked with mine. With both her hands now caressing my steel-hard shaft, the sensations shift and intensify.

Each stroke feels like a symphony of pleasure, orchestrated by her tender hands. The fear that gripped me before fades, replaced by a profound connection. Surrendering to the waves surging within, I allow myself to indulge fully in this shared intimacy.

And just as I feared, the release comes sooner than expected. Ecstasy courses through my veins and I surrender to the explosive pleasure, my hips involuntarily thrusting into her grip. Moans escape from deep within me as I experience the

unadulterated bliss of sharing this deeply personal moment with a lover who truly sees and embraces me.

As the euphoria subsides, I move to clean up the mess I've made. But she swiftly halts me, a newfound determination lacing her voice.

"Stop!" Though her tone is filled with authority, affection wraps around my heart. "Slow down, Chance. Don't wipe it all up. I haven't tasted you yet."

A primal groan escapes my lips, as I succumb to the sheer ecstasy of her words. This woman, this captivating creature before me, has awakened a part of me I never knew existed.

I watch in awe as she leans low, her tongue grazing the head of my spent cock. Every nerve-ending ignites as she savors the remnants of my passion. As her tongue glides along my sensitive flesh, she moans softly, unabashedly relishing my unique taste. It's a symphony of sensations that enrapture me, the embodiment of desire manifesting in every electrifying touch.

I abandon all attempts to contain myself, overwhelmed by the intensity of her actions. This moment is beyond any fantasy I ever dared to conjure.

She makes a satisfied moan from the back of her throat, and licks me through a full-body shiver.

She turns to me, lips glistening with my spend, and smiles as she says, "Better than ice cream!"

“Kill me now, Jo. If you keep doing things like that, I’m going to die a happy male.”

She laps at me a few more times, says, “You’re yummy, Chance. And look, you’re getting hard again. That first release just took the edge off.” She gently towels my cock, belly, and the floor.

I inspect her again, but as hard as I look, there’s no disgust or regret on her gorgeous face, just a smug smile that tells me she feels as though she just won the jackpot.

“I hope you’re ready for what the rest of the night holds, Chance,” she purrs seductively. “Because we’re just getting started.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

**J**<sup>o</sup> I love that Chance isn't jaded. That every touch, every caress feels delicious to him. It just makes me want to please him that much more.

"Are you ready for the big event?" I ask. *Big*, yeah, that's an understatement. "We can wait, you know."

"No waiting." His eyes glint with desire.

"I have to admit, Chance, I haven't quite figured out the logistics."

I imagine I could climb between his two sets of legs and hug his belly, or nestle my back there, and he could pump into me while we're both on our sides. It's a legit position. I've seen it in books, albeit with two humans.

"P-perhaps it's in my DNA, Jo. I've been picturing it a certain way." His face quirks in a filthy smile.

I give him a perky salute. “You be in charge from here, Chance. I’d like that.”

It was one thing to escort him through his first time as I brought him to completion with my hands. It was sweet and fun. But I’d love to give him the reins... so to speak.

He must sense what I need, because his voice changes to that low, sexy, bordering-on-threatening tone. “Good. Follow my directions.”

My nethers respond immediately as they ready themselves for the main event.

He rises and circles through the house. His hooves clatter on the wooden floor as he grabs cushions off the kitchen chairs, then stacks them at the foot of the bed along with the two bed pillows, creating a plush, makeshift throne. After a quick flash of the princess and the pea, my mind gifts me some much more delicious, erotic pictures.

Instead of telling me what he wants, he simply lifts me and places me on all fours on the bed with my stomach propped high on the stack of pillows. I’ve got to admit, he must have given this a great deal of thought. My exposed, eager core is just the right height for Chance’s horse cock. My body tingles with anticipation, each nerve ending alive and yearning for his touch.

He eases closer, his hand gliding along the curve of my spine, sending shivers down my body. I can feel his breath warm against my ear as he leans in, his voice dropping to a low, seductive whisper.

“I’m going to get you wet, my love. I’m going to make you beg until that sweet pussy is dripping wet for me.”

A surge of desire rushes through me, pooling between my thighs. I arch my back, pressing my most intimate parts closer to his touch, silently urging him to fulfill his sexy promise. I fucking love that he’s lost his nice-guy persona and is spewing filth into my ear.

His fingers venture between my folds, teasing and coaxing, making me gasp with pleasure.

“I’m going to fill you with my fingers until you’re ready…” he pauses to swipe a finger through my folds, “to take my thick,” another swipe, “horse,” another swipe, “cock.”

Each word drips with raw desire, his voice a sinful caress against my senses. As he slides one finger inside me, his thumb grazes dangerously close to my back entrance, causing me to buck against him in a desperate plea for more. I surrender to his touch completely, my body aching for his command.

I ease my shoulders to the mattress in an animal show of surrender. It’s the nonverbal equivalent of saying, “Do whatever you want.”

He takes my earlobe between his teeth, nipping lightly before moving his lips to the top of my shoulder. I shudder under his touch, feeling the delicious blend of pleasure and pain intertwine. My surrender deepens as his other hand latches onto a nipple, already hardened and yearning for attention. I’m

shuddering now, so turned on by the male behind me who is letting loose all that yummy animal DNA.

“Lift up onto your hands.” There’s nothing sweet to his tone now. He’s definitely not fully human at this moment, which makes my channel clench in arousal.

I obey his command, elevating myself to a position parallel to the bed. It’s a vulnerable posture, one that gives him full access to every inch of my body. The anticipation electrifies the air as he continues his assault on my senses, fingers thrusting in and out of my throbbing core while his touch on my nipples fluctuates between gentle caresses and thrilling twists.

I am lost in a haze of pleasure, my body quivering, my breaths coming in ragged gasps. It’s a heady mixture of pain and pleasure, causing sparks to ignite within me.

I buck back against him. My slit is fully exposed. If I can just get the right angle, perhaps I can feel the brush of his cock. Maybe it will take the edge off. But he jacks his hips back, nips my shoulder—harder this time.

“Naughty, naughty. You’ll have to wait, my love,” he scolds in my ear as he twists my nipples a bit harder. There’s something about the intersection of pleasure and pain that ratchets my arousal up several notches.

“Please, Chance,” I manage to breathe, my voice a mere whisper. “Please...”



As one hand pleasures my breast with tugs and twists, his other hand begins its assault on my pussy.

A swift slide inside me with one finger promises relief, only to take it away a second later. Then that slick finger circles my clit as my hips respond in a please-fuck-me rhythm.

“Please, Chance.”

“My pleasure,” he says as he adds another finger inside me and quickens his pace. “You’re so tight. I can’t wait until I plunge inside you.”

It’s arousing and abusive at the same time as he builds a fire within me without even a hint that he will quench it anytime soon.

He moves closer, his huge frame so close I can feel his warm coat against my skin. I feel dwarfed by him, yet know I’m completely safe in his embrace.

“Please,” I mewl, thrusting my ass backward as if it will convince him to grant me release.

Instead, he throws accelerant on the flames as he slides a third finger inside me and presses on the patch that can send me into orbit. No trip to outer space is granted though. He just keeps torturing me.

“Chance, please.” I don’t know why I’m asking. He seems hell bent on tormenting me all night.

When his rhythm accelerates, my shoulders return to the mattress as I signal my readiness in every way possible.

Finally, finally he removes his fingers and positions his cock at my entrance, poised to quench my desperate need.

I'm about to be fucked with a gigantic horse cock! The thought pierces into my addled brain that this is why he needed to make me crazed and desperate. A sane woman would rise from the bed and run screaming into the night.

His mouth touches my ear as he whispers, "You ready, Jo? We don't have to—"

I interrupt him by pushing my ass backward, trying to impale myself on his cock. It will take a lot more effort than that to accomplish the deed, but my answer is clear. In case he missed it, I groan, "Fuck me!"

He eases in and I embrace the burn and stretch as his huge, hot cock breaches me.

To his credit, he doesn't let my moans or wails or grunts deter him. His hips piston like a machine on a slow setting as they thrust in and out, gaining ground with each iteration.

"Chance." I think I said the word, but it was muffled in the bedsheets.

Now I'm only focused on the task at hand. I want him inside me—all of him.

"Jo. Bliss."

The S on his word goes on and on, circling the room, ringing in my ears as it sings my praises.

I'm stunned when I feel the soft scruff of his coat touch my ass, signaling he's hit bottom.

"Now I'm going to fuck you, Jo." He nips my shoulder again and pounds into me in earnest.

I've never been on the submissive side, which serves me well now, because I give as well as I take. At times, I press back to feel all of him inside me as his length slides against my inner walls and sets my world on fire.

His spicy scent envelops me as he grunts with every thrust. My arousal builds at the same time I'm overcome with affection for this male who has burrowed into my heart in the span of a few short weeks.

Waves of pleasure build as I climb higher. I'm so close. He nips my shoulder harder as his hand reaches between me and the stack of pillows. The moment he presses the spot he discovered at the side of my clit, the fire he's been kindling and building ignites.

"Chance!" I scream. It's with surprise and delight as I spasm with ecstasy, pulsing around his huge male staff. The pleasure is exquisite as flashes of white lightning burst behind my lids.

Although I'm moored to this bed, his weightless bulk behind me, I feel as if I'm untethered, flying in bliss. It's more than physical. It's mental and emotional and so intense it's spiritual.

I think I'm saying words: his name, the deity, and the L-word, but my lips are numb and I'm unable to track more than the way my muscles are rippling in ecstasy.

When his own pleasure overtakes him, his thrusts quicken, and he whinnies. His hips thrust deep as he shoots his essence inside me, the hot liquid bathing my inner walls.

After we both burst through the finish line of a long marathon, he kisses the top of my sweaty head, gives a happy, satisfied hum, and pulls out of me. I hate the loss of our connection, but he makes up for it by pulling me with him as his upper body crashes next to mine on the bed. Tugging me close, he gazes into my eyes, his brow furrowed as if he's trying to read my mind.

“Was that...” He shakes his head, struggling to find the right words. “Was that...” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “I won't ask you how it was for you. Let me express what that felt like to me. It was as if everything I've ever known was a lie.”

His knuckles slide down my cheek, expressing their boundless affection.

“Like a snow globe. Everything was shaken up and is now slotting into new places inside my mind. I feel transformed. I'm open to... *everything*. I want to try everything, taste everything, go everywhere, learn new things. I'm open to every new and different thing in the universe. Except one, Jo. You. I want to love you forever.”

Even his face has transformed. Those gorgeous pale blue eyes are even bluer than they were. Muscles on his face that have always been tight have slackened. But now some of the old

Chance comes back as he scans my face, anxiously waiting to see if I feel the same way. I don't make him wait long.

“Snow globe. Yes. Everything old is new again. New pieces of me. New possibilities. But there's one thing I want to keep constant in my life, my handsome male. You, Chance. You.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four Epilogue

**C**hance

I gaze around the property, a sense of unease swirling in the back of my mind. After reassuring myself that nothing is out of the ordinary, I pay better attention to the emotion that's niggling at me. Nostalgia.

As soon as I identify the feeling, the significance of today's date rushes at me. Ten years. Ten years ago today Jo and I discovered the backdoor to the treasure trove of information hidden by the scientists who created me and all the splicers. They thought they'd buried it deep enough, but between Jo and me, we found it after several years of searching. By then, I was almost as good a hacker as my dear wife.

We didn't tell a soul other than Dad. That's what I've called Colonel Slater since he practically ordered me to call him that the day Jo and I were married. We have a great relationship. He treats me like a son and I consider him the father I never had.

The three of us spent days agonizing over what to do with the potentially dangerous information Jo and I discovered. We finally decided to destroy the roadmap on how to build splicers. We never want anyone to go through what we had to endure.

What we kept, though, was the knowledge about raising a healthy embryo in what we decided to call a nurture tank. It was only through this discovery that we were able to raise a biological child to term. Jo could have never carried a colt or filly in her human womb.

“Noah! Grace! How many times do I have to scold you to finish your homework before you help with the dude ranch?”

Our naughty children were sneaking around the back of our house toward the stables Jo and I run. “And how many times do I have to tell you it’s not easy for centaurs to *sneak*? Your mom and I will always catch you, so you might as well quit trying.”

“Dad,” they both complain in unison.

I don’t know how they manage to make three letters into three syllables.

“Show me when you’re done with your lessons and then you can help with the next group of guests.”

They race each other into the house in a whirlwind of hair and tails, bickering the whole way as they accuse each other of being the one to get them in trouble.

Jo ambles over from the barn. She supervised as our second trail ride of the day left under the competent care of two splicers on horseback.

“Do you know what today is?” I ask when she steps close and places her hand on my withers which is her sign language for wanting a lift.

Firmly ensconced on my back now, she hugs me tight, kisses between my shoulder blades and says, “The anniversary of the day we discovered it was possible to create those two amazing kids who were just breaking our most basic rule.”

She sways against me and I follow her movements, then turn toward Splicer Town.

“When I came here, I couldn’t wait to leave. If you would have told me I’d still be here over a decade later, I would have laughed and called you crazy.” She slides her fingers through my hair, then absently braids it while we talk.

“And yet, here we are, running the dude ranch at the far end of Main Street.”

We’ve cobbled together an interesting life for ourselves here. Although some of us left for parts unknown, after much discussion, Jo and I agreed that raising two centaurs in the general population would be too hard on all of us.

The kids need room to roam as well as socialization and acceptance. What we created here couldn’t be more perfect. We’ve got our friends, many of whom stuck around Splicer Town. We built a barn that is part of the Old West theme of the



town. Now, people don't just come to shop and gawk, they can take a horseback ride through the acreage.

We only have rides three days a week, the other days Jo and I do white-hat hacking. That is, we hack when we're not parenting or having fun with our friends, or hanging with Dad, who retired from the military and built himself a spread nearby.

We dive deep on the dark web to find abducted children, ferret out sex traffic rings, and locate arms dealers. Some of our jobs pay us money, but the satisfaction of our pro bono work feels better than money.

“Who would have thought we'd wind up having a family, saving lives, and having fun?” Jo must be in a nostalgic mood, too.

## **Jo**

Riding behind my husband has many, many perks. Not the least of which is that I can get teary-eyed at times like this and not be discovered. Oh, who am I fooling? He always knows.

I'm feeling sentimental. Sometimes I get this way on Thanksgiving, when you're supposed to take a moment to count your blessings. At other times, it just sneaks up on me. Like now.

I fell so hard and fast for Chance that I didn't give a thought to kids. Frankly, I never thought I wanted any. Until Chance asked me to marry him and my ovaries demanded to be put to good use. Military doctors said it would be impossible to carry

a centaur baby to term. It was hard to argue with their logic. Just the thought of four hooves kicking in my belly told me the idea was a nonstarter.

That's why it was a miracle we stumbled on the answer. Chance and I had been hacking our way through every cranny of the Internet in search of the scientific research supposedly lost when the military rescued the splicers. We never gave up, though, and our efforts paid off.

"Mom, Dad, we're hungry!"

"I don't think they've been studying for more than fifteen minutes," Chance gripes under his breath. Then he cheerily calls, "Snack time!" and trots through our front door.

My mind casts about for a moment as I wonder what I would do with a magic wand. When I come up with nothing, I think harder.

I have wonderful kids, not one but two fulfilling jobs, a relationship with my dad, and the best, sexiest husband on the planet. What more could I want?

## Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed Chance and Jo's journey to their HEA. And if you've read the whole series thus far, I hope you also enjoyed the Colonel's journey from jerk to nice guy.

More books are coming in this series, but I don't have one written yet, so I'm including a sneak peek of one of my other series with a similar fun vibe and heat level: Brekk (just keep reading to find it). It's from the Arixxia Fields series: short, sexy romps with aliens.

I have so many freebies for you:

Want to try my mate-match test to see which alien or monster is your best match? [Click here](#).

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I'm so glad to have you as a reader!

Alana

# Sneak Peek: Brekk: Book One in the Arixxia Fields

## **C**hapter One Planet Hallion

**Sometime in the future...**

**Isabella**

“Thanks for coming,” I say for the third time as I check my wrist comm. “If you don’t mind, let’s just wait a few more minutes for any stragglers.”

Who am I kidding, I wonder as I look out at my audience of two people. It’s a quarter after. No one is going to straggle in to the Arixxia Fields Town Hall. I’m left with the two people sitting at opposite ends of the room.

I try not to let them see all my optimism spool onto the ancient wooden plank floor, but this wasn’t what I envisioned when I cooked up what I thought was a great idea.

The blue male with what looks like a terrible white wig at the base of his fragile antennae, and the elderly female with four

golden eyes looking out of her emerald green face, look like they're going to bail in two minutes if I don't get the show on the road.

“Well,” I say with a shrug, trying to dredge up the same enthusiasm with which I pitched this project to the mayor, “let's get started, shall we?”

Their lack of observable emotion makes me wonder if Mayor Alderon paid them to show up. They couldn't be here because they're excited about this, could they? Because they're both glancing longingly at the door.

“I'm Isabella Martinez, a transplant from Earth. I'm here to tell you about my favorite Earth holiday and why I want to bring it here, to Arixxia Fields.”

At least they're giving me eye contact. That has to be a good sign, right?

“As you know, Arixxia Fields is known throughout the galaxy for our Jule celebration. We even change our name to Frosttown for the festivities. It's an event people look forward to all year. Because it brings so many tourists—and their money—to our small town, over the last few decades, we've beefed up celebrations at other times of the year.”

Crap. I'm losing them. The four-eyed female's eyes are drooping.

I increase my volume and continue, “Which made me wonder how much fun it would be if I brought my favorite Earth

celebration to Arixxia Fields. Everyone could enjoy it, and over time, perhaps it could be a value-add to the community.”

To keep their attention, I’m pacing in the front of the room in the town hall on this Hallmark-perfect picturesque town square. If this doesn’t keep them awake, perhaps I should lead them in a quick round of calisthenics.

The door behind me bangs open, and I wonder if someone from the women’s choir arrived early.

“I’m sorry, we have this room until…” Words quit falling from my lips and the thoughts evaporate from my mind as I turn to see the handsomest male in the galaxy pause in my doorway.

“Sorry,” he says.

I should speak. I should find the brainpower to tell him not to be sorry. I should invite him to join us. The word, “Welcome,” should escape my mouth. Instead, I look at him, dumbfounded, as I take his inventory.

Why aren’t males who look as good as him required to walk shirtless on mild autumn nights like this? I mean, really, shouldn’t all women be treated to whatever is hiding under his t-shirt? It’s a good thing it’s tight and hugs his wide shoulders and bulging biceps. It’s almost as good as if it revealed the contours of his manly purple chest.

With a symmetrical face like that, he could be a top-tier star on Earth vids.

“Welcome,” I force myself to say, even though it came out as a squeak. “Are you here for the Halloween planning

committee?”

I can't hide the doubt in my question. Certainly he's not here for that. Guys who look like him have better things to do on a Friday night.

“Am I too late?” he asks, his brow furrowing like he'll be heartbroken if I ask him to leave.

“Perfect timing! Have a seat.”

I explain my vision for the haunted house I want to organize, but I can tell by the expression on all three faces that I'm losing them.

“Excuse me?” the green female says, her arm raised. “My husband wasn't thrilled about me attending this empty penis meeting. I told him it must have been a typographical error. But the more you talk, I'm wondering if perhaps he was correct. In which case, I want no part of this.” She grabs her voluminous purse and rises.

“Empty penis?” I tilt my head, baffled while my brain finally translates and retranslates until her question makes sense. The translators must have gotten weenie, or penis, from ween, which made the word into hollow weenie or—empty penis.

“These subdural translators are amazing, aren't they? But this was definitely a mistake. Halloween doesn't translate into much, but it definitely doesn't mean empty... um.” I try to explain while I feel my face flushing in embarrassment.

My gaze flicks to handsome purple guy, then back to the concerned matron.



I start at the beginning, giving short shrift to the origins of the holiday, and focusing on how much fun the haunted house will be. I'm still receiving blank looks, and the woman is still standing, getting ready to make her escape when I finally recover.

“So it really doesn't matter about the holiday's pagan origins. Let's call it the Spooky Fun Holiday, shall we? There's an amusement park in nearby Brexton Woods. Remember how fun it is to feel scared out of your mind on the Durragan ride?”

Ah, that seems to smooth things over. Now that we're all on the same page, I describe creepy looking people jumping out from dark places and making you scream, all the while you rest secure in the knowledge you're perfectly safe. I hadn't realized how hard it would be to describe my favorite holiday in a way that sounded fun.

“It's fun when ugly, scary people come to hurt you?” antennae-guy asks, full of skepticism.

I circle back one more time, referencing adrenaline and relief. When that doesn't do it, I focus on caramel apples, decorated cupcakes, and how many credits I thought our project could raise for the Children's Hospital. Finally, they're all on board.

Now that I've got their buy-in, it only takes a few minutes to explain my vision, pass around a sign-up sheet, and beg them to get their friends and family to volunteer.

I make a mental note to pull whatever word the Internet used for Halloween and change it to Spooky Fun Holiday. When the

mayor approved this, why didn't he give me a heads up that it translated to porn?

When the sign-up sheet circles back to me and the three of them are filing out the door, I see only two names on it.

"Um, excuse me?" Please don't let it be the handsome purple guy who's going to bail on the committee. "Who forgot to sign the sheet?"

He's already in the doorway. By the way his shoulders hunch, it's a dead giveaway he's the culprit.

"You don't want to help plan the Spooky Fun Haunted House?"

When he turns to speak to me, I realize I've stepped so close I'm invading his space. Every cell of my body lights up like a circuit board on overload. Is it his male gorgeousness? His physical perfection? Some quirk of alien hormones? I'm conducting a stern internal debate to prevent myself from jumping him.

"I'm not sure I can be of much help. I thought perhaps it would be better if someone else would take my spot," he says.

"Look around. Do you see other people vying for your spot?"

He looks like a trapped prey animal.

"I assumed you have dozens of people you've already onboarded."

I almost laugh out loud at that. He thinks I have dozens of people waiting in the wings to step up for Spooky Fun Holiday

help? “Will you help, uh... what’s your name?”

“Brek.”

“Will you help, Brek? Are you busy tomorrow? The mayor had a tip on an abandoned facility that might be perfect for the haunted house.”

He pauses for the longest time. So long, in fact, that I’m certain his brain is running like the galaxy’s fastest computer as he tries to figure how to extricate himself from this commitment. I’m not much of a salesman, but I’ve read a couple articles on how to close a sale.

“Terrific of you to join the team, Brek. How about we meet here tomorrow at noon to take a drive to the abandoned meat packing plant on Terryson Road.”

## **Episode Two**

### **Brek**

As we share tea in my sister Dacia’s kitchen, she asks, “Why don’t you want to go?”

While I gave her the details of the town hall meeting, I expected her firm pushback when I got around to informing her I wasn’t going to participate.

I don’t want to tell her it’s because Isabella is so attractive. She was obviously nervous as she paced back and forth at the head of the room, her high heels clicking on the floor.

I’ve never seen a human in person before and might not have even known that was her species except she mentioned Empty

Penis was an Earth Holiday.

I have to admit, the name tripped me up for a few minutes until she changed it to Spooky Fun. It sounds stupid to me, but she was so passionate about how fun it was going to be, I think she even convinced the elderly Maxxion with the droopy antennae that he would enjoy being on the committee.

Mostly, I just watched her pace, noting the way her full breasts pressed against her t-shirt and her rounded ass filled out her jeans. For my decade in the service, I was seldom around females. Our military is all male.

Since I left the service a few months ago, I've been a hermit in Dacia's home, trying to recover from my war wounds. I must admit, I didn't give a thought to my aching left thigh during the entire town hall meeting. By the end of the night, I was much more consumed with my eager, aching cock.

Instead of telling Dacia I want to avoid Isabella, I inform her the project sounds frivolous and a waste of time.

“We've had this talk ten times since you came to live with me, big brother. You're going to live with me, Harrid, and our adorable daughter until your thirtieth birthday. You've come to planet Hallion to heal.”

She pours more tea into my cup, though I've only taken a few sips, then continues, “You've had two months to lick your wounds since your stint in the military is over. Now you're going to become part of the community. That means meeting people.”

“And I agreed to that. I wanted to meet *male* people. We both know I need to go back to Detrovia when I turn thirty to experience *desmonii* and find a mate.”

I don't know how she does it, but since we were young, my sister has the ability to tip her head, look at me from beneath a lowered brow, and make me feel like I just said something idiotic.

“You're twenty-eight years old, Brekk. Don't tell me you're incapable of being in the same room with a pretty female. The project sounds fun. I'm sure lots of other people will join the committee and you'll meet lots of guys to have a drink with.”

Having a friend would be nice. If I had one, I'd be at a pub right now talking about the latest pepball game and not justifying my actions to my sister.

Her husband, Harrid, joins us in the kitchen. Evidently, he heard enough of our conversation to feel he needed to add his two credits.

“It would do you good, Brekk. Get you back out. Join the living. Your service is over. It's time to have some fun.”

I don't argue. I know when I'm outnumbered. It's just that the Empty Penis Holiday doesn't sound like fun. A building filled with spooky, blood-covered people emitting blood-curdling screams sounds a lot like the war I've been fighting for the last ten years.

Every male from Detrov is mandated into service from age eighteen to twenty-eight. That's supposed to give us two years

to acclimate back into Detrovian society before we turn thirty.

At some point in our thirtieth year, our body chemistry changes, and *desmonii* begins the moment we meet our enamored mate.

It tempts fate to connect with a female prior to that, because *desmonii* is so compelling it overrides any other relationship you have. Every Detrovian male knows not to get involved with anyone before *desmonii* hits. It's a recipe for heartbreak.

“Go on the ride with the human female tomorrow. What harm could it do?” Dacia asks.

She's right. I'll go with Isabella to scout a building. After that, I'll volunteer to paint the sets or something.

“You're right. What harm could it do?”

### **Episode Three**

#### **Isabella**

I haven't felt this excited about a guy since I was wishing, hoping, and waiting for Kirk Melchior to ask me to prom in senior high. Jerk. I wound up going with my best friend.

As I pull up in front of the town hall, I slow down, just to get a better look at Brekk who is waiting for me on the front steps. How does anyone get a body like that? Which begs the question, how do you get a body that perfect when you have the most handsome face in the galaxy? It doesn't seem fair.

Even his long, black hair is shining as it blows in the wind like he belongs on the cover of a romance novel. Well, I can't hold

that against him. Instead of being stuck up, he actually seemed shy last night.

I set the hover down, open the door enough to wave, and watch his expression as he sees the little red hover is mine. Instead of being excited to see me, his face locks down. I'm not sure whether it's with disdain or apprehension.

Perhaps there's still some residual weirdness about the name of the holiday. I'm not going to let that deter me.

Soon he's crammed in my hover, reminding me just how wide those muscular shoulders are. And what gives him the right to smell so darn good? I promise myself I will be subtle and take only small olfactory sips of the delicious smell that seems vaguely reminiscent of hazelnut coffee and polished leather.

"Thanks for coming with me," I say brightly, using that as an opportunity to take another look at him. Yum.

My hover, which hasn't acted up in over two weeks, decides today is the day to be difficult. I have to press the start button three times, but it eventually sees the error of its ways and starts with a hum as if we didn't just have an argument.

As we fly to the site, Brekk is studiously keeping his eyes on the road, although there's no traffic in the direction we're heading.

He's a terrible conversationalist. I imagine it like a tennis game where I lob him easy shots and he drops the ball. Unless I ask him a specific question, he simply nods or shakes his head.

“Could this be it?” I mutter when I close in on the coordinates Mayor Alderon gave me. “Wow! At least from here, this place looks perfect.”

“Really?” he asks, which tells me he still doesn’t quite get the idea of the Spooky Fun holiday.

It’s an abandoned meat packing plant, all right. If I was from Hollywood, scouting for the perfect setting for a scary movie, this would be it. Unless we could find an abandoned psych hospital, although that’s been done to death.

The roof on the rightmost wing of the building has caved in, but the left wing looks to be in good repair.

I park close, but we still have to make our way through ankle-deep fallen leaves and then mount crumbling steps. Because I wanted to look my best, I wore heels and a red dress that would be more at home at a cocktail party than scouting for creepy locations.

I’ve always been socially awkward, but have spent my life ignoring my fear and forging ahead. I should have known better than to have dressed this way, but I wanted Brekk to notice me. Bad planning.

When I almost turn my ankle, his lightning reflexes catch me to keep me from falling. Although I’ve been narrating everything, chattering on about how perfect this place looks from the outside, the crumbling appearance, the leafless trees, my verbal diarrhea stops in mid-sentence.



His palm is on the small of my back with the other hand holding mine. Electricity is arcing between us that is not a figment of my imagination. His touch actually turned something on inside my skin.

I've experienced a lot of things since I left Earth and arrived on Hallion, but this is by far the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me. When I glance at his face to see if he feels it too, his face is paralyzed: jaw tight, nostrils flared, eyes straight ahead. If I had to bet, he's feeling it, all right. Are we both socially awkward? Because neither of us mentions it.

Continue reading Brekk.

## Many Thanks

I have so many thanks for my early reading teams. My earliest readers: Dr. Lee, Stephanie A., Roberta B., and Patricia M., and Naomi S. read the book hot off the presses and not only find major typos, but, more importantly, they give feedback on plot and characterization. My Beta team does the same thing on the next round when things are more refined. These are: Hilga H., Gill V., Anne-Marie S., Jhane J., Marianne K., Anuschka-Marie W., Holly S.

And thanks to you, dear readers. I really do think about you as I write, hoping to make you laugh, perhaps bring a tear to your eyes, and make you *hot* even on the coldest days,

Hugs,

Alana

## About Alana Khan

Do you really want to know I have the cutest ragdoll cat in the world? Aren't you more interested in the sexy books I write for fun?

My sexy heroes inhabit my dreams and insist I put their love stories on the page. Most of my books happen in outer space, but the emotions and struggles could happen to anyone. Well, not the villains who look like snakes, or the spaceships, or the lion-men, or... well, okay, maybe none of this could happen to you. But you can go there with me when you read my books.

Join my [newsletter](#) for FREE BOOKS cover reveals, free chapters, deleted scenes, and weekly giveaways.

## Want More Of My Books?

### **Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series:**

This 19-book series can be read as standalones, although it's fun to read them in order because the books are full of that rich, delicious found-family trope where people with nothing in common form connections that are stronger than blood. You'll grow to love this ragtag bunch of escaped slaves and the human women they rescue. Or do the women rescue them? Full of action, romance, and spice.

### **Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series**

As the name implies, these alien Robin Hoods are scoundrels and rascals. Opportunists all, they've never met a human damsel in distress who wasn't worth saving. Full of action, romance, daring capers, and spice. P.S. The bad guys always lose their money and our pirates walk away all the richer.

### **Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series**

There's one thing about flying across the galaxy righting wrongs (the Gladiator series) or stealing from people who

deserve it (the Pirates series)—you can't have kids on a fighting ship. Some worthy freed gladiators end up on planet Fairea and find themselves on a safe parcel of acreage, yet in desperate need of funds. Between jostling for control of the operation and the lengths they must go to stay safe and keep the lights on, there is plenty of action, romance, and steam.

### **Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series**

What was I thinking writing 19 books in the Galaxy Gladiators series? Call it temporary insanity. This series is similar to Gladiators, but lets new readers jump in without knowing any backstory. Action, adventure, my trademark spice, and romance.

### **Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series**

All the heart-pounding passion and gut-clenching action I could cram onto the page. This series will grab you by the throat from the first page and never let you go. More action and hotter than previous series. And love. Did I forget to mention love?

### **Rescued by the Monsters Reverse Harem Romance series**

In a future dystopian Earth, males have been spliced with animal DNA. Human women have been reduced to chattel and when they say no, even once, they're banished Down Below to where the "monsters" live. This series will soon have you wondering just who the monsters are as the human women each bond with three adoring human/animal hybrids.

## **Arixxia Fields: A Steamy Small-Town Alien Romance Series**

Are you ready to party? I imagine so, after reading all the drama in all my previous series. Each of these books is short, sexy, romantic, and FUN. Each revolves around a holiday. Check them out.

## **Hybrid Hearts Series**

Bred to be soldiers, these rescued genetically engineered males are all given a new lease on life. How does the United States military plan to do that? They create an isolated town with cute shops and train the males in new jobs. How about a sexy lion-man baker for starters?

## **Galaxy Artificials Series**

Packed with passion and spice, USA TODAY Bestselling author Alana Khan brings robots to life in this science fiction romance series. Oh yeah, she manages to give the metallic buckets of bolts smokin' hot humanoid bodies, too.

## **Orcfire Series (written with Aria Vale)**

Twenty-five years ago, thousands of Others (orcs, nagas, minotaurs, and other species only known in fairytales) fell onto the burning sands of the Mojave Desert with no way to go home. They were rounded up by the U.S. Military and placed in a fenced enclosure on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The OrcFire series features one hot, green, tusked orc as the hero of each book as they battle fires and so much more to find

their happily ever after. The OrcFire series will be hot, hot, hot in all ways.

### **Cosmic Kissed (Earthbound Alien Romance Series)**

This fun duet manages to make reptilians sexy (trust me). Two alien brothers are abducted to Earth. Each gets his own book and manages to get the girl in this upside-down take on alien abduction.

### **Monster on Board (written with USA TODAY Bestselling author Ava Ross)**

What happens when two USA TODAY Bestselling sci-fi romance authors get together to have some fun? We write these entertaining, short, and sexy books set in space. They're all standalones, so take your pick of an orc, an ogre, a merman, or a hunky blue-winged alien. Or take them all!

### **Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series**

The US government gave the Zinns permission to take human women as wives. Let's just say the unsuspecting women, who know nothing of this unsavory deal, are none too happy—until they fall in love.

### **Billionaire Doms of Blackstone (written as Deja Blue)**

Alana's only contemporaries. The heroes are all doms, the women are only happy to serve.

### **Boxed Sets**

**Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 1 to 4**

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 1  
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Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series

Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series

Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series

Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series

First In Series : Zar / Sextus / Arzz

First In Series : Zar / Sextus / Arzz / Thran

Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series

Mastered by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series

Cosmic Kissed Duo Box Set