

A Feel-good paranormal romcom

ALIEN *hated*



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SOPHIE-LEIGH
ROBBINS

Alienhated

A feel-good paranormal romcom

By Sophie-Leigh Robbins

Alienhated

I hate the alien hottie who got us stuck in between worlds. Too bad I need to work with him if I want to get my life back.

Aliens don't exist. Right?

I thought so too until I met Ray. He's charming, he's hot, and a complete klutz. Thanks to one of his failed experiments with a new device, the two of us get stuck in between worlds. That's right, he's alienated us from the rest of the world. So what if he didn't do it on purpose? I desperately need to get back to my daily routines, but I can't. It's enough to make me hate him.

Too bad I can't leave his hot alien ass by the side of the road. The only way we're getting out of this mess is by working together, and that apparently means traveling to a hidden base in the desert.

The possibility of getting my life back instead of being stuck in an empty world with no one but a sexy alien to keep me company is the only reason I don't give up. But the farther we travel down deserted roads, the more it dawns on me that I won't ever be the same after this—if we ever make it out.

This enemies-to-lovers paranormal romcom is a funny and lighthearted read that will make you wish aliens did exist after all. Alien hated is a dual POV romantic comedy with all the sizzle, but no explicit scenes.

Copyright

Alienated by Sophie-Leigh Robbins

© 2023

All Rights Reserved

Cover design by Joey Van Olden

Editing by Serena Clarke

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

If my book boyfriends give you heart palpitations, please consult a doctor (or call your best friend to swoon over him together).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

To every reader who loves to escape into the world of a book and fall in love during the process, even if that means temporarily believing aliens are real. This one is for you.

Chapter One

Josephine

The beeping sound of the grocery scanner is weirdly hypnotizing.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The steady rhythm of fresh produce sliding over the red laser light soothes me every single time. It's why I love working at Feeding You. It doesn't pay a lot, but it's easy and uncomplicated. Predictable too. I like predictable. And routines. Whatever is on my mind tends to fade away when I hear that beeping sound. Like the memory of my boyfriend—sorry, *former* boyfriend—charming his way into my life before running off with all my money. How was I supposed to know he was a world-class scammer? He looked real. Okay, so I never met him in person, but I did do lots of research and even voice chatted with him. He seemed totally legit.

My blood starts boiling and my hands get clammy. Recalling that horrible experience isn't good for my heart. Anger rises up from the depths of my stomach until it feels like my skin is on fire.

“Josephine, dear, you're mangling my bread.”

Charlene gives her bread a worried look, then lifts her horrified gaze to me. There's a big chance she thinks I'm crazy. I've been strangling her loaf of bread like a professional killer. She'll have to eat squished sandwiches tonight, all thanks to me. In my defense, it's better to strangle a loaf of bread than, let's say, hypothetically, a stealing, lying, scamming, conniving boyfriend, right? So all in all, considering what has transpired these past few weeks, I'm doing great.

I release my death grip on the bread and offer poor Charlene a smile. “I'm sorry. I hope I didn't spook you.”

She lifts an eyebrow while I slide another one of her grocery items over the laser.

Beep.

“Spook me? I've seen a lot of crazy things in my life. You strangling my

bread doesn't even make the top fifty."

Beep.

I arch an eyebrow. What on earth *does* make her top fifty?

"Trust me, dear, you didn't spook me. I do hope you're okay, though."

Beep.

I look up at her and smile, giving her a thumbs-up. "I'm A-okay."

Beep.

"That will be forty-two dollars and sixty-four cents, please."

Charlene fumbles with her purse and slowly takes out the bills and coins she needs to pay for her groceries. Unlike in big cities, no one cares that she's taking her sweet time. Tumbleweed Ville has a population of 887. It's not like we get a lot of long queues at the stores. People have time here. Another thing I love about living in this small town in the desert.

"This heat sure is something, huh," she says while counting her money. "And it's already October."

I nod. "It definitely is. Promise me you'll be careful and don't forget to drink enough water, even when you're not thirsty."

Temperatures have spiked to an all-time high this past week. The Arizona climate can be insane, but 115 degrees is way too much for an October day. It feels like Satan has stoked a fire in our small town. Maybe he doesn't like the prospect of us celebrating a normal Halloween night in two weeks? Beats me. What I do know is that this heat is an anomaly.

It's all over the news, and it worries me. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, but Charlene is old and alone. I feel it's my duty to remind her to stay hydrated. I always look out for my regular customers. They've become like friends. Except when they complain about certain promo prices not registering when I scan the discounted items. Then they're not so friendly anymore, but I can't be blamed. It's not my fault I have to work with a cash register that's probably been around since dinosaurs roamed the planet. Maybe even longer. With technology that old, mistakes are bound to happen.

She finally hands me the money and puts her wallet away.

"Have a great day, Charlene," I tell her.

"You too, Josephine."

The old lady shuffles away at five on the dot, which marks the end of my shift, so I roll my chair back and hand over the register to my colleague Jill. Then I get my bag and sunglasses from the break room and push the shop doors open.

The heat hits me like a wall of bricks. It's hard to breathe properly. I only live one and a half miles away, but in this blistering heat every step is too much. I decide to wait for the one bus that passes through town once an hour.

I cross the parking lot and sit down on the bench at the bus stop. There's no real refuge from the sun here, but my ride should be here in five minutes tops. I let my gaze wander over the posters that have been plastered all over the back of the glass bus shelter.

There's an array of subjects and purposes. One girl is looking for a roommate who's into yoga and pilates, while another flyer is from someone looking for additional members for the local jigsaw puzzle club. I didn't even know Tumbleweed Ville had a puzzle club, to be honest. I try to imagine what happens there. A bunch of people fitting puzzle pieces together while chatting about the newest jigsaw puzzle rage?

There's also an announcement for the town's Halloween celebrations. I rip a small paper stub with the details for the event from the bottom of the poster and put it in my pocket. Despite the fact that I don't like unpredictable circumstances or crowds, the Halloween fair might be the perfect opportunity to sell some of my homemade book sleeves. The grocery store pays okay, but if I ever want to level up from living in a studio apartment and eating instant noodles multiple times a week, I need to have an additional stream of income.

Selling book sleeves at in-person events might be perfect for that. I've been selling my stuff online, but it's not enough. I've got a stack of thirty sleeves waiting to be claimed by a book-loving girl or guy.

I make them with my Nan's old sewing machine and often pick up discounted fabric from the local handcraft shop. Their sales bin is perfect for people who are on a tight budget, like me—or for those who have been scammed and are now on the verge of bankruptcy.

The bus arrives a minute early, and I get on and slide into one of the seats. There's only one other passenger, an older man whose face is partly shielded by his newspaper.

After a short trip, I get off at the last stop in town, about five hundred yards from my apartment complex. The building used to be a house, but then the owner converted it into six rental units—three per floor.

One of the neighborhood cats comes running toward me. I crouch and scratch him under the chin. The cat rolls onto his back, paws in the air, purring softly.

“How has your day been, Buster? Caught any mice? Run after a squirrel?”

The cat yawns. Great. Not only am I talking to a cat out loud, but I'm also boring the poor creature. I've got to get out more. Set my social anxiety aside and mingle. Talk to people about something other than grocery store coupons and cabbages.

The thought makes me queasy, though. I don't know if I'm cut out to be a social bird.

A loud bang pierces my ears, and Buster shoots away like a bullet, leaving me with a small scratch on my wrist. I jerk my head up just in time to see a brilliant zig-zag of lightning right above the apartment complex. That's right. A lightning strike in the middle of a heat wave in October. It doesn't get weirder than this.

Except, it does. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a person tumbling down the roof.

I shriek. "Watch out," I yell, as if the guy doesn't realize what's happening.

He's about to plummet to his death. I turn away right before the impact, but it doesn't come. I peer between my fingers to see him dangling from the gutter. Phew. Not dead after all.

I rush toward the building. "Wait there, I'll get you a ladder or something."

I frantically look around. If I were a ladder, where would I hide? Maybe one of the neighbors has one. I rush inside and slide my hands down all the doorbells, hoping someone will help me rescue this person.

Not one of them answers, so I hurry back outside, where the guy lets out a guttural sound. His fingers give way, and he falls straight into the rose bushes below.

Another shriek escapes my lips. I run toward him, but then stop in my tracks. I've never seen a dead body before. I never intend to see one either, so I should keep my distance, right?

I get my phone out to call an ambulance, but the guy scrambles up, his head sticking out from the top of the bushes.

"Hello, I'm Ray Smith, your new neighbor. I'm honored to make your acquaintance."

My acquaintance? Doesn't he have other things to think about right now, like his recent tumble from the roof?

"I'm calling 911 for you," I tell him.

He's clearly got a head injury, judging by all the weird things coming out of his mouth.

“That won’t be necessary at all. See? I’m fine,” he says as he emerges from the bushes with the grace of a gazelle.

He brushes some leaves and dirt from his clothes and smiles. There’s not a scratch on him. How is that even possible?

“May I offer you some tea?” he asks with a formal curtsy.

A curtsy! Doesn’t etiquette state that men have to bow instead of doing a curtsy? I feel like I’ve been transported to a topsy-turvy Bridgerton episode. I’m almost tempted to do a curtsy myself, but I haven’t lost my marbles. Yet.

“Sure,” I say.

“Before we go, would you tell me your name?”

I nod. “I’m Jo. Short for Josephine.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I follow Ray to his apartment. His is right above mine and has an identical layout, but the interior is miles from my own.

Everything is so neatly positioned that his minimalistic setup looks like a Pottery Barn catalogue page. The placement of the cream-colored sofa next to the black metallic side table and the flatwoven jute rug looks oddly familiar, like I’ve seen it all before in this exact same arrangement. Huh.

“Would you like chamomile tea or raspberry, Jo, short for Josephine?” Ray asks from the kitchen.

I frown. Why does he repeat my full name like that? Does he take everything this literally? “You can call me Jo. And chamomile sounds great, thanks.”

I perch on the edge of the sofa. It looks like it’s never been used before. The cushions are too perfect. The firmness? Too ideal. The side table doesn’t even have a speck of dust on it.

Ray puts down a tray with two steaming cups of tea and a plate of cookies. Now that I think about his furniture being too perfect, I have to admit that Ray himself looks too perfect.

I blow the heat off my cup and take a sip, scrutinizing my new neighbor while he picks up his own drink.

He’s the epitome of male hotness, if there is such a thing. The guy’s got the dimples, the dark hair, the blue eyes with the dark pupils threatening me with death by drowning if I stare too long into their depths, and his jaw is the most balanced I’ve ever seen. Even his stubble seems... mathematically correct, like someone programmed every single hair. And what about his name? Ray Smith. So generic. It sounds made up.

“Everything okay?” he asks with furrowed brows.

I politely smile at him and put my cup back down. I probably shouldn’t drink this. It could be tainted.

I take a deep breath in. Tainted? Do I even hear myself? Ray’s doing everything he can to welcome me into his home and my mind immediately goes to nefarious intentions. His. I’ve got to start going out more. These thoughts don’t sound healthy to me. Besides, he just hit his head after falling from the roof. He’s entitled to come across as strange.

“The question is, are *you* okay? What were you doing on the roof anyway?” I ask.

A threatening beeping sound blasts through the apartment before he gets the chance to answer my question. The teacups rattle on their saucers, and Ray’s face falters.

“Oh no. Oh no, no, no.”

“Oh no? What do you mean?”

He’s white as a sheet now. “Nothing.”

“It sounds ominous to me.”

He blinks a few times. “What I meant to say was, *Oh no, I forgot to eat my daily portion of Captain Crunch*. I’m sorry, Jo, I’m afraid I need to be alone right now. I prefer to eat without anyone around to see me chew.”

He jumps up and ushers me out the door before I can blink or steal another glance at his too-perfect face and too-perfect furniture placement.

Captain Crunch? Chewing alone? For real? Is he blowing me off?

I stare at the closed door for a full minute, trying to process what just happened. Did I do something to scare him off? I can’t think of anything, except for maybe drinking my tea wrong, but that’s so far-fetched that it seems impossible.

I think this is a case of *it’s not me, it’s him*.

Maybe it would be wise to stay away from Ray. He’s kind and, fine, I’ll admit it, super-hot, but something doesn’t add up. If he does turn out to be dangerous, I don’t want to find out I was right all along.

I traipse down the stairs and let myself into my apartment, shutting the door behind me. Then, just to be safe instead of sorry later, I shove a chair under the doorknob.

With neighbors as weird as Ray, you’ve got to be prepared for anything.

Chapter Two

Ray

I rush into the bedroom and turn off the alarm. Then I check all the parameters. Everything looks good, except for...

Oh no.

Please no.

The numbers stare me in the face as if they're mocking me. I've made a terrible mistake. I thought going up onto the roof and installing the antenna and receiver would avoid this, but I was so unbelievably wrong.

This was not supposed to happen. In fact, it's the worst thing that could've happened. Well, apart from life on planet Earth ending due to this mistake, but thankfully, that's not what this is. Still bad, though. Officer Reeva is going to be fuming, but I'll deal with that later. First things first: damage control.

I try to communicate, even though I know it's futile. The comms won't work until I do a reset from the base.

I sigh and drop my shoulders. The mistakes have been piling up these past few weeks. The worst thing is that they're all *my* mistakes.

And the girl... She was here. She saw me on the roof. She heard the alarm. She must be... affected by the device. Crap. What do I do with her?

I run outside and head to the garage that came with this apartment. I use it as a place to store my stuff, as I don't own a car. Thankfully, the row of boxes against the far wall are labeled in the most efficient way—my way—and it doesn't take me long to find my copy of PUMPED UP, aka the Practical Universal Manual for Problems on Planet Earth, Decoded and Unilateral Practices.

I shove some boxes aside and crouch between them, flipping through the pages like my life depends on it. Because it does. I'm not being dramatic here. This most recent mistake could cost me my Earth license. This planet, this work, this objective... it's where I belong and what I was born to do. I've spent far too many years and energy in brutal Earth training classes to let my dreams go down the drain because of some stupid mistake. Okay, fine,

mistakes. *Plural*. It's not exactly my first one.

With the manual under my arm, I jump up and head back to my apartment. I scan the pages until I'm at chapter seven hundred and thirty-two. Aha. There, on page one million, six-hundred, one thousand and twenty is my answer.

Relief floods through me as I read the protocols. There's a way around having to... eliminate her. Jo seems like a decent human being. She also looks good—if you're more into humans than our own species, which I am. I've observed, studied, and admired the human race ever since I was a kid. My parents had a lot to do with that, yes, but I've always felt pulled toward the earthly lifestyle, even before I knew exactly what my parents' jobs entailed. They both worked for the Betterment of Humans Department back on Astranoxus, and they took me on my first trip to Earth when I was barely nine.

I remember how I sat in awe as we approached the blue planet, my face pushed up against the windows, soaking in the views.

Looking back, I realize my parents took a huge risk by having me tag along. I didn't have my degree in Earth Protocols yet. Heck, I hadn't even started those studies. Same for the Introduction to Wise and Undetectable Disguises course. So yeah, I applaud my parents for taking those risks just so I could see what Earth was like with a front row view instead of relying on video and images and holograms alone. VR is a great tool, but nothing beats a firsthand experience.

The comms radio crackles to life, startling me. The fact that they are contacting me means this is serious.

I grab the receiver and speak. "Code name Ray Smith. Reporting."

"This is Officer Reeva."

Uh-oh.

"I'm using a high-powered communications line for this call. I trust that you know this costs us a lot of resources?"

I swallow. "I do."

"I received a Code-71 violation alert from your sector. Tell me it isn't true."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath in. "I'm sorry, it was an honest mistake and—"

"An honest mistake? You already had to move out of Sector Five after an unfortunate incident caused by your clumsiness, and now this? I'm starting to

question my decision to send you to the blue planet. Maybe you're better off working at one of our home bases."

"No, please, I swear I will sort this out."

"You better. This is your last warning. Fix your mistake or you'll be retrieved from Earth."

The comms machine falls silent again. I realize there won't be any further communication from Astranoxus. The fact that Officer Reeve thought this call was important enough to even use the insane amount of costly resources needed to reach me in this realm of reality tells me he means business this time.

I won't be able to contact them myself, or rely on my parents' influence or my credentials. I need to set things right myself, as fast as I can, or I'll be banned from Earth for who knows how long. Maybe even forever. My stomach contracts at the thought of having to leave this place.

There's only one problem. In order to set things straight, I need *her* to come with me. The beautiful human female who saw me tumble down from the roof and who I accidentally got in this mess with me.

How am I going to convince her to help me? She will never believe me when I tell her who and what I am. Even if she does believe me, she still won't travel with me to the base, right? If my training taught me anything, it's that humans are wary of strangers—often rightfully so.

I open the files I received and studied before being stationed here, and click open Josephine's information. I scan all the details and mentally note what I need to remember to up my chances of a successful mission. It won't be easy but there's a slim chance of her trusting me.

What a mess. It's all my own fault, but still... it's not fun to deal with.

I need to get some sleep if I want to start setting things straight tomorrow, so I lock the doors and change out of my disguise. Being able to revert to my normal form is always such a relief. There's nothing more comfortable than being in your own skin, right?

Now all I have to do is pray to the gods of the stars and the galaxies to make sure that tomorrow goes as smoothly as it needs to go, for both my and Josephine's sake.

Chapter Three

Josephine

Something's off. I've been behind the register for an hour, and no one has so much as entered the store yet. We have slow days, sure, but this is the slowest it's been since I started working here. It must be the weather. Who wants to go out in this heat? But then again, people need to eat and drink and use the bathroom, right? So why is no one buying groceries or toilet paper today? And what about my manager? He hasn't shown up either, so I had to open up the store myself when I arrived. Luckily, I have a key to the place.

I haven't even seen Charlene yet. Is she still mad about me strangling her loaf of bread? I did apologize to her. What more could I have done? Fine, maybe I should've offered her a free loaf, but I wasn't thinking straight yesterday. I'll make sure I'll tell her when—if—I see her.

I stare at the empty parking lot. What on earth is going on? Is there a special event today that I don't know about?

This mystery is driving me crazy, and I can't let it. If I don't have anything to do my thoughts will wander off, and thinking about my misfortunes is the last thing I want to do right now. Getting scammed is bad enough without the critical voice in my head constantly reminding me how stupid I was to fall for it. All that overthinking just leads to more anxiety.

If no one wants to go grocery shopping today, I'll have to busy myself in other ways. Enough with the guilt. I roll my chair back and head to the storage room to get a box of candy bars. The display near the register needs refilling. Normally, this is my colleague's job, but she hasn't shown her face yet either.

After refilling everything that needs refilling, posting a few pictures online of recently made book sleeves, and updating my online store, I steal another glance at the clock on the wall. Another hour has passed. The parking lot is still deserted, save for some tumbleweed rolling by. The silence is kind of eerie. I feel like I'm the last person on earth.

I grab the newest Pottery Barn catalogue from the magazine stack in the break room and lean against the coffee counter at the front of the store. I

aimlessly flip through it, salivating over furniture I'll never be able to afford. When I arrive at page twenty-three, ice-cold chills run over my body. This page is an exact replica of Ray's living room. I knew his setup was too perfect and too familiar. The only question is... why on earth would he decide to replicate this entire page? It feels like something a mentally unstable person would do. He sure gave off some weird vibes yesterday.

Or, the voice of reason in my head argues, Ray's the kind of person who doesn't like thinking about interior design. Maybe he hates the thought of having to come up with a nice-looking living room setup all by himself. He probably thinks of furniture as nothing more than functional, so copying this page is hassle-free and uncomplicated. It sure beats having to go to store after store until you find matching rugs and pillows to go with your couch.

My heart skips a beat when I see a male figure cross the street. The guy makes his way to the parking lot and heads straight for Feeding You.

Finally! A customer!

I throw the Pottery Barn catalogue aside and hurry back to my seat behind the register. I sit up straight, ready to welcome this lone person with a big smile.

Right before he walks in, I recognize him. It's way-too-perfect Ray with the catalogue-inspired living room. Mister I-forgot-to-eat-my-dose-of-Captain-Crunch-today.

That must be why he's here. To buy more cereal.

"Josephine. How are you today?" he asks.

I shrug. "A bit bored, to be honest. I haven't seen a single soul all day."

A look of worry crosses his face. "I'm afraid that's to be expected."

"What do you mean?"

"We need to talk."

Huh. "I take it you don't need any groceries then?"

He shakes his head. "No, we've got more pressing things to discuss. It's best if we go someplace where we can sit down. Maybe in your break room?"

"I can't leave the register unattended for more than a few minutes. If someone comes in, I need to be here."

He offers me a weak smile. "That won't happen."

This guy is unbelievable. Does he have to talk in riddles all the time? "Look, Ray, I appreciate your visit, even though we're practically strangers. I also respect that you want to talk to me, but I can't leave the store unattended.

There's no one to fill in for me. None of my coworkers showed up today. I wish I could tell you why, but it's a mystery."

"I can tell you why. It's my fault."

"Your fault?" I ask with a frown.

What did he do, kill everyone?

He nods. "Yes, my fault. So, break room then?"

I reluctantly get up and lead him to the break room. He pulls one of the plastic chairs back from the table and sits down. I follow suit. I wonder what it is that he's so desperate to tell me. Just in case it's something weird or dangerous, I take my phone out of my pocket and keep it firmly clasped in my hand under the table. It's good to have a way out if need be.

He squares his shoulders and tugs on his tie. That's right, his tie. He's wearing a suit in this heat. There's not a single drop of sweat on him, though. I wish I could say the same about me.

"Do you want a glass of water? A bowl of Captain Crunch, maybe?" I offer.

He clears his throat. "That won't be necessary. Thank you, Jo, short for Josephine."

"Please call me Jo. Or Josephine. Not... both. It's weird."

His eyebrows fly up. "Oh, I see. I apologize."

"No worries. Now please tell me what's so important that it can't wait until I'm off work."

He adjusts his body, causing the plastic chair to make creaking noises. The air between us is loaded with tension. Add my anxiety about what he's going to say to that mix, and I'm not kidding about desperately needing a deodorant.

"You're right. I owe you an explanation. And an apology too. I'll tell you why right now, but first know that I have nothing but honest intentions, okay?"

Geesh, this guy is good at building tension. He should be a thriller author.

"Okay," I say. "Just spit it out, Ray."

He pulls the lips of his mouth inward, then blows the air out. "I know having your new neighbor visit you at work and demand a private conversation isn't common protocol for humans."

Humans? My grip on my phone tightens. I should've never agreed to this. If he kills me, no one will hear me screaming.

I lean back in my chair to create some distance between us. "Do you need

me to call someone? It seems like you're suffering from the heat."

"I'm not suffering. My body can withstand this heat perfectly. Unlike you humans." He frowns. "Are you okay? Not too hot?"

I hold my hands in the air. "I'm sorry, but this is getting a bit too weird for me. *You humans?* What's that supposed to mean? If it's money you're after, joke's on you. I'm broke."

"Josephine, please, you need to understand."

"Understand what?"

He sighs. "I made a giant mistake yesterday. I was calibrating one of my devices and I accidentally caused a rift in time and space. I'm afraid you and I are stuck in between worlds. That's why the store is empty today—and will stay that way until we fix this."

My jaw drops to the floor as I finally get it. Ray has escaped from a mental institution and thinks he's some time-yielding wizard. Why do these things keep happening to me? Why can't I ever meet a normal guy who doesn't try to scam me or who isn't delusional?

"Josephine?" he prompts me.

"I need to go."

"But I'm trying to explain," he says, an edge of desperation to his voice.

I scrape my chair back. "I'm afraid I'm needed elsewhere."

"There's nowhere to go. Like I said, we're stuck here. Everyone else is back in the real world. I get that it's difficult to understand as a human, but —"

"As a human?" I cut him off. "Why do you keep saying that? You're a human too, Ray."

"No, I'm an alien," he says, deadly serious.

I don't know whether to laugh at how crazy he sounds, or cry at how far gone he is.

"If you let me go, I promise you I will get you the help you need."

"I don't need help. I'm telling you the truth."

He's clearly not going to budge. I need to get out of here in a way that doesn't raise his suspicions, so I can call 911 without him killing me first.

"Okay, why don't we go around town and check if what you're saying is true? It's almost lunchtime, which means the store closes for an hour. We'll swing by One More Bite. If the diner has no costumers, I'll believe you."

"Sure, why not," he agrees.

Relief washes over me. The diner is always packed to the gills at

lunchtime. Someone will help me as soon as we get there, and then everything can go back to normal.

Chapter Four

Ray

I stupidly thought convincing Josephine of the truth would be easier than this, but she doesn't seem to believe a word I'm saying. Why can't she accept the proof that's right in front of her eyes? We're stuck here, and everyone she knows is out there, in the real world. The sooner she comes to terms with that, the sooner we can begin our journey to the base. Once we get there, we can fix things.

"One More Bite is just around the corner, Ray. Are you sure we're going to find the place empty?" Josephine asks with raised eyebrows as if she expects me to take back everything I explained to her.

"Most certainly so. I mean, the diner is probably packed, yes, but not in this reality. For us, it's empty."

She offers me a weak smile. "Okay."

I know she doesn't believe me and I can't blame her when considering the science behind her denial. She's probably in shock, which is one of the common reactions to stressful situations. I looked it up in the UGH BE REAL manual—the Ultimate Guide to Human Behavior: Expectations, Reactions, Exceptions, and Labels.

We round the corner and One More Bite comes into view. Josephine comes to a sudden stop in front of the deserted diner, and I bump into her.

"Sorry," I say.

All color drains from her face. "Sorry for bumping into me or sorry for involving me in some elaborate joke?" Anger shoots from her eyes. "Where is everyone? Are there hidden cameras here? Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not. I swear."

She pokes her finger in my chest. "You are messing with me. None of this makes any sense!"

Uh-oh. She's about to lose her marbles. I gently take her by the arm so I can lead her to a bench before she faints or harms herself, but she jerks it away.

"Don't touch me." She slumps to the ground, right here on the sidewalk,

and puts her head between her legs.

“What are you doing?” I ask her.

I don't recall reading about this kind of reaction, but then again, the UGH BE REAL manual is more than three thousand pages long. It's a lot to process and remember, even for an intelligent alien like me.

“Trying to breathe.” She chokes on the words. It's a shame I can't console her. I want to, but she sees me as the enemy.

“Breathing is a great idea. Humans die without oxygen.”

“Stop pretending that you're an alien!”

She shouts the words so loudly that a murder of crows flies away. Perhaps the fact that there are still animals in this reality will cheer her up?

“We're not completely alone, you know,” I tell her.

She lifts her face from between her knees and gives me a hopeful look. “We aren't?”

“All the animals are still around. At least, birds and cows and such. I don't know about pets, to be honest, but I can look that up for you. Doesn't that make you feel better?”

Her eyes narrow and her nostrils flare. Point taken. That tidbit of information definitely doesn't make her feel better.

“You need to come clean and tell me the truth.”

“Okay. I'm an alien,” I try once more.

“Aliens don't exist.”

I sigh. I could show her my real self, but I doubt shedding my disguise will put her at ease. It would probably scare her off for good and then we'll never get out of this alternate reality. Besides, doing so would go against every regulation and law I have to abide by.

“Why won't you tell me why you're doing this to me?” she pleads.

Her soft cheeks are wet with tears. My heart breaks seeing her like this. The last thing I wanted to do was make her cry.

I suddenly remember something I read about humans being soothed by a hot beverage called coffee, and an idea forms in my mind. “Why don't we grab a cup of coffee and talk about this?”

“Are you even listening to yourself? You first fabricate some lie about us being alone in some alternate dimension and then you suggest going to the coffee shop? You do realize there will be people there, right? Or do you have more hidden cameras set up there?”

I offer her the warmest smile I can muster. “Why don't you follow me and

find out?”

To my relief, she gets up, but then she walks in the opposite direction with angry steps. I hurry to catch up with her. Even though she’s practically running from me, I manage to keep up with her strides.

“Leave me alone, Ray. I’m calling in sick for the rest of the day and going home.”

“Home? But we need to go to the secret base as soon as possible.”

She stops and closes her eyes. Her hands are balled into fists, and she lets out an annoyed sigh. “Enough. Not a word about secret bases or aliens or time warps or whatever crazy stuff roams freely inside your head.”

“But it’s—”

“Not. A. Word. Goodbye, Ray.” She turns on her heel and speed-walks away from me.

I know she doesn’t want me to, but I follow her anyway.

“I live in the same building, remember?” I say before she can yell at me again. “I’m allowed to go home too.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Whatever.”

“When are you calling your boss? I promise you he won’t pick up,” I say.

“That’s none of your business,” she says through gritted teeth.

We spend the rest of the walk home in silence. At least it means that Josephine doesn’t snap at me again. I hate it when someone gets mad at me, even though I probably deserve it this time.

When we arrive at our building, her soft green eyes land on a cat. She scoops the animal into her arms and takes the purring furball inside with her.

Her front door shuts with a loud bang, and all I can think about is how time is not our friend right now. If Josephine doesn’t come to terms with what’s happening real quick, then I might not be able to right my mistake.

Ever.

Chapter Five

Josephine

Buster circles my legs and purrs, knowing all too well that I'm the only one around here who occasionally takes him inside and feeds him. I grab a can of food from the cupboard and use a fork to empty it into the cat's bowl.

"Here you go, Buster. Salmon, your favorite. It's paw-licking good. At least, that's what the commercial claims," I say as I put the bowl of food down. "What do you think about Ray? Should I be worried about him?"

I pet him on the head and sigh. Of course, he doesn't answer my questions. Why would he? He's a cat. Has it really come this far that I feel the need to consult a cat about my life? If I'm not careful, I might end up as one of those crazy cat ladies you read about in the news sometimes. I can already see the headlines. *Old spinster dies surrounded by fifteen cats. Her body was in an advanced state of decomposition when she was found.* I shudder, but then shrug the thought away. I guess there are worse ways to die than being surrounded by cats. As long as they don't feast on my dead body, I'll be fine—or at least, whatever's left of me will be.

I plop down on the couch and get the paper stub with the information for the Halloween fair out of my uniform pocket. I need to book a booth at the fair so I can sell my book sleeves there.

I open my laptop to compose an email to Richard, who is responsible for all vendor bookings, but my email system doesn't load.

It doesn't take me long to figure out that my internet isn't working. Great. Why does this always happen at the worst possible times? The cut-off for bookings is tomorrow. If I can't get that email out soon, I'll have to kiss goodbye to another money-making opportunity. There won't be another local fair until Christmas.

My heart skips a beat when I remember I still haven't called in sick. My boss is going to be pissed if I don't notify him soon. The parking lot could be swarming with customers by now. I type out a quick message, saying I'm not feeling well—technically not a lie—before throwing my phone on the couch next to me.

I'm still fuming thanks to Ray's little prank. I can't pinpoint what his motives are. One thing is certain, though—if he ever pulls a stunt like that again, I'm calling the cops on him.

I check my phone to see if my boss has replied already, but all I get is a red notification saying *Message not delivered*. I try once more, but it bounces back again.

Huh. Weird.

I open the Neighborhood Watch app to see if anyone else doesn't have cell phone service, but there's nothing but a blank page. Dread fills my stomach as I open app after app after app, and they all come up blank.

Blank apps. Blank social media timelines. No internet. No cell phone service. No... people.

It almost feels like the world has been erased.

Or like I'm alone on the planet... exactly what Ray insists is the truth. A trickle of panic-sweat runs down my back.

I race to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face to help me process everything. What if he's right after all? It would make sense, to be honest. The town is deserted. We didn't see a single person on our walk home. I didn't even spot any cars. Ray's name is so generic that it seems like he chose it to blend in perfectly. He's too good-looking to be real and he says weird things like *I'm honored to make your acquaintance*. Plus, he copied his apartment's interior from a random Pottery Barn catalogue page.

With trembling fingers, I check my phone again. Still nothing. No service, no messages, no functional apps, no notifications... A big fat nothing is all I'm getting.

I think I'm going to be sick.

I run to the toilet and throw up. The sound draws Buster into the room. He looks at me with what I'm sure is disdain. Then he sits down and licks his paws as if the world has not been turned upside down by an alien.

An *alien!*

I throw up again. The fact that I'm even entertaining the thought that this whole alien thing is true is laughable, but scary as hell.

I get up and gulp down an entire glass of water. Buster rolls on his back and stretches his body out.

"I'm sorry, I'll have to pet you later," I tell the cat. "I've got to run."

I head upstairs and bang on Ray's apartment door.

He opens the door within seconds. "Ah, Josephine. I've been expecting

you. Welcome.”

I burst inside and sit down on his too-perfect-to-be-real couch. “You better start explaining everything to me right now before... before...”

“Yes?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Before you regret ever meeting me.”

“Can I perhaps offer you some tea to calm you down?”

“No, you can’t,” I snap.

His eyebrows knit together as he takes a seat on the couch too. Man, why does he have to look so good? It’s hard to hate someone with a face like his.

“Okay, what do you want to know? I’ve already told you everything.”

“No, you haven’t. I need to know if this alien thing is true and if it is, how the whole alienating us from the world mess happened.”

He purses his lips. “It’s true. When you saw me on the roof, I had been tinkering with a new device but things went wrong. Everyone who was around at the moment of impact—you, me, that cat—is affected.”

“Affected how?”

“We’re all alienated from the world as you know it.”

I tap my lips with my index finger. “What about everyone else? Where do they think I went? Or am I living in two worlds at once right now?”

He shakes his head. “No, you’re here, not there. Everyone you know will think you’ve disappeared.”

I pinch the space between my eyes. This is bad.

“I’m sorry for alienating us, Josephine. It wasn’t my intention. And I’m in a lot of trouble for it. Officer Reeva is fuming with anger. Should that be any consolation to you.”

I scoff. “It’s not. As far as I’m concerned, you’re alienated from now on. I can’t be here, you know. I have a life to get back to.”

He nods enthusiastically. “Of course! We can fix this.”

What a relief. “We can?”

“Yes. All we have to do is travel to one of our bases. It’s not that far, about one hundred miles to the south. Of course, something messed up other devices, so we might have to walk if we can’t get a car to start.”

“One hundred miles!” I shout. “In this insufferable heat?”

“Oh right, the heat. I’m afraid that’s my fault too.”

I groan and mutter some curses under my breath.

Ray sighs, his shoulders slumping. “I did my best to right this, but I can’t do it alone. What more can I do than my best?”

“Your best?” I spit out the words, clenching my fists at my sides. “To quote Sheldon’s mom, ‘some people got a pretty poor best.’”

His brows knit together. “Who is this Sheldon guy, exactly?”

“You don’t know who Doctor Sheldon Cooper is? The famous physicist from The Big Bang Theory?”

He shakes his head and scratches his gorgeous chin. “The Big Bang Theory, huh. I’ve read all the literature on that particular subject, but I’m afraid Doctor Cooper doesn’t ring a bell. What kind of discoveries did he make about The Big Bang?”

“You are joking, right?”

He looks dumbfounded. “No, why would I joke about science?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “The Big Bang Theory is a television show, for crying out loud. Sheldon Cooper isn’t real.”

“Oh.” He blinks in surprise. “Well, I guess I still have some things to learn about life on Earth.”

“Like how not to get people stuck in between worlds, you mean?”

“For example,” he nods, his expression growing serious. “But I’m sure we’ll probably get out of this deserted world once we reach the base.”

My jaw drops to the floor. “Probably? I’ve had it up to here with you, Ray. First you get us stuck and now you’re not sure we’re ever getting out?”

His silence says enough, and I can see the uncertainty in his eyes. Dread fills every fiber of my being. What if I’m stuck here with no one but Ray? Not for a while, but... forever?

I clutch my stomach, feeling queasy. “I think I’m going to be sick again.”

Chapter Six

Ray

Josephine has been locked in my bathroom for half an hour already. I don't know what she's doing in there, but it doesn't sound like she's enjoying herself. If I didn't know any better, I'd think there's a cleaning robot in the bathroom who choked on a big piece of metal and is trying to expel it from his collection tray.

I'm flooded with relief when I finally hear the door unlock. She walks out, looking as pale as that extra-soft toilet paper I bought the other day. Soft Puppy Paws, I think the brand was called.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She slumps down on my couch. "I could use that cup of tea right now."

I hurry to the kitchen and prepare her a cup. By the time I put the hot drink on the coffee table, her cheeks have pinked up again.

"Prove to me that you're really an alien and not a lunatic," she says.

Josephine's request hangs in the air, a long moment of silence between us. How can I prove I'm an alien without breaking any official laws in the process? Beads of sweat form on my forehead while she studies my face, giving me a "prove it or lose it" look. I try to weigh the risks of revealing my true nature against the growing trust I need to build with her. I realize I have to do or say something, but I'm drawing a huge blank here. Why are humans so complicated?

"I'm afraid that showing you my real self would be a violation of Article 81. I'm already in trouble for alienating us. The last thing I want to do is give my superiors even more reasons to pull me back from Earth. This is my last chance."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Then find another way. I'm not buying this whole *I'm an alien* spiel until I've seen proof."

"Of course."

I rack my brain for inspiration. With an over-the-top wave of my hands, I produce a small disco ball of light. It dances around the room like a tipsy firefly. Josephine's eyes are as wide as saucers. I turn it up a notch and morph

the disco ball into an even bigger one. A few seconds later, I cut the cosmic show and drop my hands, the ball disappearing from the room as if it was never there to begin with.

Josephine stares at me, her jaw so far open that I'm afraid a bug will fly right inside.

I flash her a satisfied grin, feeling a hint of triumph. "So? Do you believe me now?"

She arches an eyebrow. "You've got some great parlor tricks up your sleeve, that's for sure. But it still doesn't prove you're an alien. For all I know, you could be a magician gearing up for a Vegas extravaganza."

I can't help but shudder at the thought, recalling the images of sheer debauchery that popped up whenever my teacher delved into the topic of Vegas during my Earth studies. "No way. Vegas doesn't appeal to me."

"Really? Not even the drinks? The slot machines? The all-night-long buffets?"

I frown, my curiosity piqued. "They have all-night-long buffets?"

"You bet. Anyway, I'm not here to discuss all-you-can-eat pizza joints or sushi buffets. I'm still not convinced you're an alien, Ray. You do realize how preposterous you sound claiming that you are, right?"

"But I *am* an alien."

"So you keep telling me, but you don't even look like one. If you're going to annoy people, like me, at least put some effort into it and make it believable."

"Listen," I start. "I get that it sounds absolutely insane. You probably expect a green-skinned being with big tentacles and dark eyes when you think of aliens."

She nods. "Yeah, like Martians."

"The thing is, aliens don't fit one single mold. We come in all shapes and sizes. We have different alien races. Thanks to my mission on planet Earth, I'm made to look like a human unless I show you my... true colors."

"True colors, huh? Should I prepare for something outlandish like fluorescent hair and purple skin?" she mocks.

"I'm afraid I can't disclose that information," I tell her.

She rolls her eyes at me. "Enough with the holier-than-thou attitude, Ray. Gosh, do you always follow every rule to a T? An imaginary rule in this case, but still."

"It's not imaginary."

She shoots me a piercing glare and throws her hands in the air. “Enough already. I’m out of here, Ray.”

“Wait,” I shout, frantically trying to come up with something tangible so she’ll finally believe me.

She jumps up from the couch. “You’ve got exactly three seconds before I bolt.”

“Please, just listen to me.” Panic edges my voice as I scramble for something. Anything.

“One. Two. Thr—”

A lightbulb turns on in my head. I remember the tiny gadget I’ve got safely tucked away in my pocket. I pull it out in a swift motion and reveal the shimmering metal ball that fits perfectly in the palm of my hand. It emits a soft, otherworldly glow. I carefully set it on the coffee table, right next to her cup of tea.

Josephine’s lost for words as she watches the gadget hover a few inches above the table.

“What is this?” she asks a full minute later.

“A piece of alien tech. It’s called a Lunar Gazer. With this tiny ball, I can map the stars and constellations and identify cosmic phenomena. It’s super handy when traveling to other parts of the galaxy. It can do other star-related things too, but that will take us too far for now. Time is ticking away, remember? Anyway, I know this isn’t me revealing my true self, but I do hope this will convince you that I’m not pranking you or playing games.”

She draws in a breath and massages the space between her eyes. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, but only because this gravity-defying device seems completely legit.”

“Then can we finally go to the secret base?” I plead.

“Why?”

“Because time isn’t exactly on our side here, Josephine.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “What does that even mean?”

I try to explain while I avoid looking into her angry eyes. “Your absence will trigger unintended consequences. Once your earthly life starts unraveling... I’m sorry, Josephine, but chaos will ensue.”

I can tell she’s fighting to maintain her composure. “Chaos?”

“People will either think you’ve disappeared or are...” I swallow. “Dead.”

“But when I return, everything will go back to normal, right?” she asks, hope lacing the edge of her voice.

“Maybe. The longer it takes us to reach the base and reset the device, the greater the risks. Small changes can have enormous ripple effects. Even the tiniest thing could cause a significant disruption. Your real life could be erased.”

“Erased?” Her voice trembles with fear and anger.

“Don’t worry, the chances of that happening are rather slim,” I reassure her.

She peers at me. “Rather slim? So there is a chance that I won’t exist anymore?”

“Tiny, but yes, there is a chance. I mean, you will still exist, but no one will remember who you are. It’s not a big deal if you think about it. Wouldn’t you rather live a completely new life than be dead?”

She lets out a frantic laugh, scaring even me, and I don’t scare easily. “Not a big deal? I have a life, Ray! Not to mention family and friends. My goodness, you are insufferable!”

She paces back and forth in my living room, her frustration simmering beneath the surface like a volcano on the brink of eruption. It hurts me to know that I’m the cause of her anger, but it was an honest mistake. I don’t tell her that, though. The last thing I want is for her to unleash her full fury on me.

“Sooo,” I try a few minutes of deadly silence later. “Shall we go?”

Josephine’s eyes shoot daggers at me, but she nods. “I’m getting Buster.”

“Buster?”

“The neighborhood cat. Somehow, he got trapped here with us, and there’s no way I’m leaving the poor creature behind.”

I don’t think bringing a feline on this journey will do us any good. Cats are described as stubborn creatures who do as they please, but I’m afraid I can’t possibly tell Josephine that after alienating her from her life. “Fine. We’ll meet back here in six-hundred seconds. So, in ten minutes.”

“Ten? You mean thirty minutes.”

I nod, admitting defeat. “You’re right. I did mean thirty minutes.”

“I hope you step on a Lego while I’m packing.”

I sigh as she forcefully slams the door shut, causing my neatly arranged dishes to rattle. I have a feeling this is going to be a long journey.

Chapter Seven

Josephine

If someone had told me this morning that I'd be packing a bag to travel to a hidden base in the desert with an alien, I would have told them to check in with a healthcare professional, yet here I am, throwing underwear and toiletries into a duffel bag.

Ray spun a convincing story, yes. Even though everything points in the direction of him being an alien, I still find it hard to wrap my head around that fact. I even went knocking on all the other doors in our building, but none of my neighbors answered. I guess they must've all been out and about when Ray set off that stupid device of his.

Great. Now I'm jealous of everyone who isn't in this mess. They are all out there, obviously living their merry lives, while I'm stuck here. With a hot alien. Ugh.

I angrily chuck a book on top of my clothes. At least reading will give me something to do while we're on the road. There's no way I'm going to hold lighthearted conversations with Ray. The faster our ways can separate, the better. I'm so mad at him! I just hope this journey will only take a day or so. Seriously, I've never wished for anything this hard before, not even when I was fourteen and Johnny Depp was rumored to be vacationing in Scottsdale. I wished and hoped and prayed and begged to go there so I could catch a glimpse of him, but my parents wouldn't let me. They said my Pirates of the Caribbean obsession had to stop at the borders of Tumbleweed Ville.

Good grief, my parents. They live in sunny Florida now, but what will happen if I don't answer when Mom calls me like she does every Sunday? I don't want them to worry.

I throw one extra book and one extra pair of clean underwear into my bag, just in case. As far as I'm concerned, this is going to be a fast and easy trip. We'll drive there, reset whatever needs resetting, and then I can get back to my familiar life. If people ask me where I was, I'll tell them I was horribly sick and unable to even pick up the phone. That's totally believable, right?

I grab some food for the road and zip my duffel bag closed before calling

out for Buster. When he doesn't show, I stand on my tiptoes to grab another can of cat food from the top shelf and tap it with a fork. Sure enough, Buster comes striding inside like a king. I shove some cans of cat food into my bag and walk over to him.

He sits down by his bowl, waiting for me to deliver the goods. I'm smarter than he is, though, and before he can protest, I scoop him up in my arms and head out the door.

I can hardly believe my eyes when I see Ray waiting for me outside. He's casually leaning against the weathered door of a run-down car in the scorching heat and heck, if it isn't the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. He might be an alien, but his beauty is equally out of this world. He has this captivating blend of unearthly charm and the down-to-earth allure of the hot boy next door—*my* door.

The relentless sun makes his defined jawline and dark, ruffled hair stand out like a piece of art. If he were a real human, I'm pretty sure he'd be all over social media flaunting those looks of his, not to mention batting his eyes at every girl that crossed paths with him. Every sane woman would swoon for him, and I can't even blame them for it. When he lays those eyes of his on me, I...

Stop it, Jo. Seriously!

I hate him! I can't forget he's the reason I'm stuck here, no matter how hot he is. What good does a pretty face do when it's paired with infuriating behavior?

"Your hair's a mess," I tell him in a nonchalant tone when I arrive at the car.

He opens the trunk for me with a puzzled look. "Is that a problem?"

I shrug and throw my duffel bag inside, next to a giant pack of water bottles. "You tell me."

Without bothering to hear his response to my ridiculous remark, I pop open the passenger door, let Buster into the car, and slide into my seat. It's weird how being angry at someone can make every little thing they do get on your nerves. Even him breathing wrong irritates me, but it's okay. At least hating him is easier than admitting that maybe, just maybe, this unexpected adventure might not be the worst thing in the world. As long as I avoid staring at him and his gorgeous dimples for too long, I should be able to maintain my unwavering stance of not liking him.

"Ready to go?" Ray asks as he clicks his seatbelt into place.

“Yes, but only because I don’t have a choice. Neither does Buster.”

“I’m sorry about the cat having to come along. You could leave him if you want.”

I angle my body toward him and stare him down with an incredulous look. “Leave him? Don’t let Buster hear you say that. Goodness gracious, Ray. Have some empathy. Buster could die if we abandon him.”

Ray gives him an uncertain look, almost as if the cat scares him. Buster yawns and stretches out on the back seat. I guess he doesn’t have an ounce of interest in our bickering.

“Let’s get on the road,” my alien nemesis says.

“Please. I’d like to stick to my routines, so we should eat in about two hours if that’s not too much to ask.”

His eyes cloud over. “Right, food. We’ll figure something out, I guess.”

“As long as your idea of figuring something out isn’t forcing me to catch and eat a rattlesnake,” I say.

“I doubt that will be necessary. In fact,” he continues, “the desert is filled with roadrunners. They are incredibly efficient predators, so if we do need to eat rattlesnakes, they will catch them for us. That saves us some trouble, right?”

All I can do is look at him with my jaw dropped, as I’m lost for words. How could he think I was being serious? There’s no way in the world I’d ever catch a snake, let alone eat one.

“Just start the car, Ray.”

After three failed attempts, the ragged car finally sputters to life. It groans and creaks as Ray tries to maneuver it out of its parking spot, almost as if the car is protesting and wants nothing more than to be left alone to die in peace. I sympathize with it. Except for the dying part of course.

“Don’t you have a magical device to fix this car?”

Ray shakes his head. “I wish.”

“Where did you even find this rusty thing? It looks like a relic from the days of yore.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that bad.”

I glance around the car’s interior and scrutinize the upholstery with its torn seams and exposed foam. It’s a miracle this thing still manages to run. “Not that bad? There are literal cobwebs on the dashboard.”

He swipes them away with a flick of his wrist. “There, all fixed.”

I groan. How can he be this chipper when my life as I know it is at risk of

disappearing? The gravity of the situation grabs me by the throat. It seems like ages ago that I was at Feeding You, strangling Charlene's bread. What I wouldn't give to be there now, watching the hours slowly pass and hearing the soothing sound of the beeping laser. To sit right under the air-conditioner and breathe in cool air instead of Satan's breath like we are now.

"I assume this thing doesn't have AC?" I ask.

"No, sorry. As I expected, all cars that have some sort of tech inside are rendered useless. This old car was the only one I could find that still works."

"Great." I rummage through the glove compartment and find a torn map from the nineties to fan myself. "Can't we at least roll down the windows? I feel like we're in an oven on wheels."

"I don't think rolling down the windows will help as the air outside is brutally hot. I apologize for that mistake as well."

I rake a hand through my hair. We've only just started driving and already it's clinging to my neck. "Right, I almost forgot this heat wave is your fault too."

Ray manages to give me a weak smile. I'm sure he's as uncomfortable as I am, but I can't feel sorry for him. If I have to suffer the consequences of his clumsiness, then he should too. I hope he's sweating in places that are hard to reach.

"Can I explain why the weather is out of control?" he asks as we travel along through the desert.

I turn my head, looking outside. "Sure. It's not like I can stop you from talking."

"Okay, so, I was working with the QND—the Quantum Nexus Device. I use it for conducting my research about the fabric of space-time and even the nature of reality itself. We're trying to gain insight into the fundamental laws governing the universe. That's part of why I'm here on Earth. Anyway, I didn't realize the QND emits unusual energy surges that tamper with the weather."

I frown. "Why don't you just stop using the QND?"

"Oh, I did, but the weather remained the same."

"And the device that alienated us?" I ask.

As much as I want to avoid talking to the hot alien next to me, I need to know what I'm dealing with.

"That's the QDM—the Quantum Dimensional Manipulator," he says in an excited voice. "The device can manipulate the fabric of time and space and

allows the creation of controlled rifts or dimensional portals. While I was using it yesterday, it malfunctioned, and it sucked us both into a parallel dimension. Buster as well, because he was within a ten-foot radius of the QDM when it happened.”

“A ten-foot radius? That’s all it took?”

“Yup,” he says in a proud tone. “Pretty impressive, huh?”

I swivel my gaze to him. “So if I had arrived home a minute earlier or later, I wouldn’t be in this mess?”

Ray’s expression turns solemn. “That’s right. It’s a matter of perfect timing—or imperfect, depending on how you look at it.”

I slump in my seat. “Didn’t you say all animals were still around? That means Buster would be here regardless of his proximity to your device.”

“Not really. Birds? Sure. Cows? Yes. But pets seem to have a different kind of reaction to the QMD.”

I flick poor Buster a look. He’s stretched out on the back seat, blissfully sleeping with his paws twitching sporadically. The gentle rise and fall of his chest is in stark contrast with the racing rhythm of my own heartbeat. It’s going way too fast, and it’s got nothing to do with Ray’s impossibly good looks. It’s frustration and anger and fear that has my pulse pounding in my ears, and Ray’s to blame for all of it.

I let out a heavy sigh and turn my attention back to Ray. “What’s our plan, Mister Alien? Where is this hidden base of yours?”

He shifts in his seat, the uncertainty in his eyes as clear as today’s sky.

“Ray? You do know where it is, right?”

He has the audacity to shrug at my question. “Sort of.”

“Sort of? What kind of stupid answer is that?”

An annoyed look crosses his face. “I’ve got my ways, Josephine. I’ve been studying Earth for a long time. You’ve got to start trusting me.”

“Trust you? You can’t even be trusted to give me a straight answer.”

There’s an unmistakable flicker of anger in his eyes, almost as if my irritation has pushed him to the edge of his limits. If he thinks I’m going to apologize for not trusting him, he’s got another think coming. A good, long, hard think. Seriously, what’s his deal anyway? He’s the one who messed everything up, not me.

I’m not giving in. At least... I don’t want to, but what if I annoy him so much that I do push him to his limits, and he explodes with anger? Who knows what other devices he’s got stuffed in those pants of his? For all I

know, he could obliterate me in an instant.

It takes every ounce of willpower I have to smile at him. "I'll trust you," I lie.

"Good, because we're going to need another way to get there," he says as the car's engine blows out its last breaths and comes to a complete standstill in the middle of a small desert road after one last, dramatic sputter.

Great. Car trouble that needs to be fixed in the blistering heat. Just what we need. Ray better have a solution for this, because I'm about to lose my marbles.

Chapter Eight

Ray

Smoke billows from the engine, in ominous and thick clouds. This doesn't bode well for our trip to the base. I pretend to work on the car while Josephine waits at the side of the road with Buster. I don't have it in me to tell her that this car is beyond repair, even though it's the truth. To be honest, the car's demise was only a matter of time. I'm surprised we even made it this far.

None of that matters now, of course. The real problem is that we're stranded in the desert with limited options while the sun relentlessly beats down on us.

"What are you trying to find in there? The door to Narnia?" Josephine calls out to me.

"I'm sorry, Josephine."

She sighs. "It's Jo."

"Right, you told me before. Jo, short for Josephine."

"Just call me Jo. Tell me what's going on with that rusty wreck on wheels."

Her annoyed tone shuts me up. How am I going to break the news to her about our dead car? I fumble with a rag I found in the trunk and wipe my hands clean, stalling for time. All it does is postpone the inevitable, so I close the hood and throw the rag down before joining her at the side of the road.

"There's no easy way to say this, but the car isn't an option anymore. At least we got ten miles out of it. That means we've only got about ninety miles to go. That's good news, right?"

She fixes me with a steely glare. "I don't think you know what good means, Ray."

I shake my head. "I do. I absolutely realize the gravity of this situation. All I'm trying to do is make you smile and stay positive, okay? I get that you're angry at me, but please, accept the situation we're in. Isn't working together better than working against each other? Seriously, the way you're acting is kind of infuriating."

“You don’t get to be mad at me. You are the reason this happened. We’re stuck in this godforsaken desert because of your stupid gadget with the unpronounceable name and your reckless experiments.”

“I told you it was a scientific experiment. There was nothing reckless about it,” I shoot back. “I didn’t plan for any of this to happen.” I can feel my true self pushing against the edges of this human body with a surge of anger. I’ve got to get my feelings under control before something bad happens.

Jo crosses her arms over her chest. “Well, maybe if you had conducted those scientific experiments in a more careful way, we wouldn’t be stranded in the middle of nowhere with no idea of how to get to our destination.”

“I admit that I am the reason, yes. But that doesn’t change anything about the predicament we’re in. I’m trying to fix this, but your constant complaining doesn’t help one bit.”

Her face contorts with fury. “Oh, I’m sorry if my complaining about being alienated from my life inconveniences you, Mister Hot-Shot Alien. Maybe if you had thought about the possible consequences of your actions, I wouldn’t have to complain because everything would have been fine!”

I can feel myself snap and spit out the words. “You know what? Maybe you’re right. I should’ve left you in your boring, mundane, routine-filled life.”

Jo’s eyes well up with tears, anger seeping from her pores. “Don’t you dare turn this around on me, Ray, and don’t you dare ever comment on my life like that again.”

Neither of us seems to want to back down. I ball my hands into fists, trying to take a few deep breaths before my true self takes over. The last thing I want to do is hurt her.

“I know you’re angry with me and you’re having a hard time wrapping your head around all of this, but we need to call a ceasefire. What good is arguing in the blistering heat going to do, huh? We need to get over ourselves and deal with this situation, which is, yes, horrible.”

I can see a tiny portion of her anger ebb away.

“What’s it going to be, Jo? Are you with me or are you against me?” I ask her.

She stares me down without uttering a word, giving me ample opportunity to really look at her. Despite the anger in her eyes, I can’t help noticing how beautiful she looks. Her disheveled hair, windswept and the color of ripe chestnuts, frames her face in wild disarray, giving her an untamed

appearance. The rich brown of her hair contrasts with the vibrant hue of her emerald eyes, and a sun-kissed glow highlights her pink lips and high cheekbones.

I quickly avert my eyes. If my superiors knew that I was checking out a female human and liking what I saw, they'd drag my ass back to Astranoxus before I could blink. One of the rules I need to follow on this mission is not to develop feelings for a human—ever.

I wait for her response in complete silence until she finally begrudgingly nods. “Fine. You’re right. Angry or not, we’re in this together. I will try to put our differences aside and help you find a way to get to the base. That doesn’t mean we’re friends or that I forgive you, though.”

“Fair enough. Truce?” I extend my hand to her.

She hesitates for a moment, but in the end, she sighs and reaches out to shake my hand. “Truce.”

The moment her hand touches mine, a surge of pure, hot energy courses through me, almost short-circuiting my synapses. I gasp in surprise. I’ve never felt anything remotely like this. Jo seems to feel it too. She quickly pulls her hand back, as if she’s been burned.

“What was that?” I ask her.

She averts her eyes and shrugs, pretending she doesn’t know, but I can tell she *does* know. What is she not telling me?

“It doesn’t matter. We should focus on getting to a town and finding some food and shelter. We can figure out the rest later.” She marches over to the car and retrieves the dog-eared map from the passenger seat. She folds it open and points to a name on the map. “According to this ancient thing, there should be a town about six miles from here. I think it’ll take us about three hours to get there, so we better get a move on.”

I nod enthusiastically. “Perfect. I’ll get our stuff out of the trunk.”

I’m relieved Jo’s finally turning around and isn’t mad at me anymore. I’m sure her anger will rise again if I say or do another stupid thing, but for now, I’m savoring every second of this truce.

“We should mark the car’s location on the map, just in case we need to get back to it at some point,” Jo says, her anger clearly replaced by determination. “And we should put Buster in your backpack. There’s no way the cat is going to walk six miles.”

I look at the cat. Am I really going to have to carry the feline with me like he’s some sort of king? What if he pees on my stuff? I know better than to

utter those words, so I just say, “Sure.”

Now that I’ve finally got Jo’s trust and her anger has ebbed away, I’m not risking anything.

I empty the pack of water bottles that I put in the trunk earlier into my backpack, put Buster inside, and hoist it over my shoulders. With a shared sense of purpose, we set off in the direction of the town indicated on the ancient map.

It better still be there after all these years, because we can’t risk wasting any time. We walk in silence, the heat almost unbearable, but neither of us comments on it. We’ve both got immensely important things on the line here. Jo’s life as she knows it is slowly unraveling, while this is my last chance to stay on Earth and complete my mission.

The weight of our individual burdens hangs in the air as a silent reminder of what’s at stake here. Still, despite the seriousness of our predicament, I can’t help but steal glances at Jo and wonder what that energy surge was when we touched hands.

If it is what I think it is, then I’m in deep trouble.

Chapter Nine

Josephine

We've been walking for two hours and I'm on the brink of surrendering myself to the unrelenting elements. Any second now, the heat will have me chasing a mirage, killing myself in the process. Every step forward feels like a battle against the scorching air which saps the strength from my bones. Please, someone, make it stop! This heat is not just uncomfortable. It's dangerous and it's pure torture.

Buster's head hangs out of Ray's backpack, his paws clutching the edge of the opening. The cat is asleep. Again. I don't understand how he's coping, but I'm glad he is.

I peek at Ray out of the corner of my eye. There's still not a trickle of sweat on his hot alien body. How unfair is that, exactly? Here I am, sweating my skin off and practically melting, while he looks perfect. It's infuriating, that's what it is.

I steady my gaze back on the road in front of us and let my thoughts wander. It feels weird to walk here instead of following my normal routines. I would be eating dinner by now if I were in the real world. Then, a piece of fruit as dessert. After that, I'd do the dishes, read for half an hour and then watch some television while snacking on a chocolate bar or a bag of potato chips.

None of that is on the agenda today. Heck, I don't even know what's going to happen five minutes from now. In a way, it's freeing. I've never been on an adventure like this, let alone met an alien.

When Ray touched my hand before, it felt as if butterflies erupted in my stomach and burst out of me. I've never felt anything like that before. Normally, I'd take it as a sign of attraction, but that can't be right. First, I'm not fond of Ray. Am I? And second, he's an alien. How could I be attracted to an alien, for crying out loud? What if he has... tentacles?

The thought is so silly that I snort.

Ray swivels his gaze to me, his curious eyes locking onto mine. "Something funny?"

I shake my head. I can already feel my cheeks flush. He can't know I think he's as hot as today's sun. "It's nothing. I was just thinking about this unpredictable situation we're in."

"Oh, okay."

I try to push thoughts of Ray's perfect body away, but I'm unable to shake the feeling that we share an undeniable connection. I know I've been hard on him, but if I put my anger and frustration aside, I do realize Ray is kind and charming. I'm not an idiot. Would it have been better if he'd shown me those qualities without alienating us? Duh. But I guess bygones are bygones.

"Jo," Ray says in a steady voice, yanking me away from my thoughts about him. "I know you have every reason to be skeptical about me, but maybe asking questions would help."

I nod. There are a few questions I'd love to ask him. Like the tentacle thing, but I keep that one to myself. "Why don't you tell me more about where you come from?"

"Of course. I'd love to. I was born on Astranoxus, a beautiful planet in the outer regions of the Stony Crevice Galaxy. As the name says, our galaxy is littered with stone-like remnants of an interstellar explosion. The debris has been there for ages."

"I can't even begin to imagine where your planet is located," I say, wiping the sweat from my face.

He grins. "That's okay. We're not fond of others knowing our exact whereabouts."

"What does it look like? Your planet? Does it resemble Earth?"

"It's different. Colors are more vibrant, tech is more advanced, nature is extraordinary... And we all live in peace."

"If things are so perfect over there, why come to Earth? We don't exactly have the best track record of harmonious living. Sometimes, I even think our world is beyond saving."

His eyes soften and he smiles, those dimples of his in full view again. What a showoff. "You know, your world doesn't need saving. What it needs is love and understanding. That's how it can be saved."

I lift an eyebrow. "And the inhabitants of Astranoxus are going to help us with that?"

He laughs and holy cow, there's that energy surge again. "Us? No way. I'm sorry, but we can't help humans with that. It's something you guys will have to figure out for yourselves. Not that we don't want to. We simply can't."

Your species would never accept our existence. That's why we have all of these rules and laws to comply with. We can't let anyone so much as suspect that we're extraterrestrials. It would put our entire population's existence at risk."

We pause for a moment so I can add another layer of sunscreen to my skin. If I'm not careful, I'll end up with a severe sunburn. I decide to also wake up Buster and pour some water into a bowl for him. It'll be good for the cat to drink and stretch his paws before resuming our journey.

"How many of you are stationed here on Earth? And why?" I ask before taking another sip of my water.

Ray hesitates for a moment, as if he's debating how much he can reveal to me. "Like I told you before, I'm working with the Quantum Dimensional Manipulator to study universal laws. We want to know if they are truly universal."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugs. "Well, what if the laws of physics and reality as you understand them aren't the same everywhere? What if they vary from one galaxy to another? That could open up new possibilities and new technologies beyond our wildest dreams."

"Wow, that's impressive."

His face darkens. "Yes, but please realize that the universe has a delicate balance. The consequences of these discoveries could reshape not only our world but yours too."

I let his words sink in. Ray's explanation is both exciting and terrifying. I don't want a single thing to change. Well, except for maybe my finances, but that's only natural considering the sorry state of my bank account after—

You know what? I'm done spending energy on my stupid scammer ex. Then again, maybe Ray can help me out.

We put Buster back into Ray's backpack and start walking again.

"Hypothetically, if someone stole from me in a truly appalling way," I begin, my words laced with a tinge of bitterness, "would there be any possibility of getting back at the sleazebag? I could give you everything I know about him, including a fake picture and messages you could derive the IP address from. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

He gives me a confused look. "That's oddly specific for something hypothetical."

"But is it possible?" I ask, hope searing in my chest.

Maybe I'm not over what happened at all. So sue me. Revenge can be cleansing, right? I need to let go of my anger at the guy before it eats me alive. At least, I think it's a guy. With all the lies tied to the scam, I can't even be sure of that part.

"Someone hurt you, didn't they?" Ray asks.

His eyes are a mixture of anger and something I can't quite decipher, as if he's mad that someone wronged me.

"Hypothetically, I fell for someone who pretended he was my dream guy. I opened up to him after weeks of sending emails back and forth. I thought we had a real thing going. I bared my soul to him," I say, nearly choking on the words. "And then he took my savings and ran."

"Wow."

"Could we get back at him?"

Ray's expression is thoughtful as he processes my blatantly obvious not-so-hypothetical request. After a few moments, he nods. "I can help you with that, Jo."

"Can we make it twisty and dark?" I ask in a way-too-excited voice for something that's supposed to be hypothetical.

He laughs. "Why not make it fun? Revenge doesn't have to be serious, right?"

"Fun how?"

A mischievous glint dances in his blue eyes. "Oh, I have something amazing in mind."

"Spill the beans. Please."

"Have you ever heard of something called The Infinite Message Loop?"

I shake my head. "No, what's that?"

Ray leans in as if he's sharing a well-guarded secret. He's so close that I can smell him, and man, oh *man*, it's divine. I'm so caught up in sniffing his scent like an animal that I almost don't hear what he's telling me. I steady my gaze on the road in front of me. That way, I'm forced to listen to Ray instead of getting drunk off his heavenly scent.

"The Infinite Message Loop is a brilliant way to keep your scammer occupied and frustrated beyond measure. I will create an automated email bot that sends him a never-ending stream of messages. It'll only take me a minute."

"A minute? That's all it takes?"

"I've got alien tech, remember?"

The corners of my mouth lift into a smile. “Awesome. Then what?”

“Every message he gets will seem like a potential victim, luring the scammer in with fake stories and promises of easy money.”

My eyes widen as the genius of Ray’s idea hits me. “He’ll think he’s about to score big, so he’ll invest all his time in those messages?”

Ray nods. “Exactly. Except it will be a barrage of messages, not just one. That scammer of yours won’t know what hit him. He’ll have to sift through countless messages, each one more absurd than the last. And it will be virtually impossible for him to distinguish real victims from the fake ones.”

“He’ll waste his time and energy on all those leads, thinking he’s about to make big bucks. Ray, you’re a genius. It’s like scamming a scammer.”

“You bet. He’ll be so busy sifting through the fake messages that he won’t have any time to scam a real person. It’s like giving him a taste of his own medicine. I’ll write the bot in such a way that it’s impossible to stop and will track the scammer everywhere he goes, even when he creates a new email address to do his scamming with.”

I smile, feeling relieved already. “Brilliant. Are you sure all of that will only take a minute? It sounds like a lot of work.”

“Positive. But of course, this is all hypothetical.”

I give Ray a heartfelt smile. “I know you know it isn’t. Thank you. I mean it.”

“I’ll get started on it as soon as we’ve found a place to spend the night. Won’t be long now,” he says, pointing to a spot in the distance.

The familiar shapes of buildings gradually come into sight. Their outlines grow closer with every step we take, and I feel a surge of relief wash over me. We’ll finally be able to escape the scorching sun, eat something, and hopefully refill our water bottles. I won’t have to resort to cooking rattlesnakes and I won’t die in the desert after all! This newfound hope puts a spring in my step, and I quicken my pace.

Ray squints, his vision probably ten times better than mine given the fact that he’s an alien and all.

“Uhm, Jo?” he says slowly, his tone uncertain. “I don’t think that’s a town.”

I look in the direction he’s pointing and squint too, trying to make out the distant shapes. Gosh, I should finally make that eye doctor appointment. All I see are some blurry outlines. “What do you mean?”

Ray’s voice carries a mix of surprise and disbelief as he says, “I don’t

know what happened to the town on the map, but that there is definitely not it.”

Man, this alien and his riddles. “Then what is it, Ray?”

He grins. “Something far better.”

Chapter Ten

Ray

As we approach the structures in the distance, I can hardly believe my eyes. Sprawled in front of us like a ghost of entertainment past is an old, abandoned amusement park. I've dreamed of visiting one of these ever since I was a kid and went through my parents' textbooks about life on Earth. I don't even care that this one is old and abandoned. Maybe I could get some of the rides to work.

"Is that an amusement park?" Jo asks, only now realizing where we're headed.

I nod. "We're what, sixteen miles from your hometown? How did you not know there was a ghost town with an abandoned amusement park here?"

"I know, it's unbelievable." She bites her lip. "Maybe I should go out more often, but it's hard. I have my routines and work... Visiting my parents usually involves getting into an Uber and following a direct route to the airport. My bestie married an Australian guy and moved there, so we hardly ever see each other." She trails off, suddenly appearing self-conscious. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm telling you this. It's embarrassing. You think I'm a freak, right?"

I laugh and shake my head. "Are you kidding me? I'm an alien living on Earth. Your limited social interactions don't even register on the freaky scale compared to that."

She laughs at my answer. "Do they teach you to be charming in Earth class, Ray?" she teasingly asks.

"No, that I was born with," I joke.

We reach the entrance, and I marvel at the size of the gate. Big, rusty letters hang from the top, reading "Desert Vista Funscape."

Recognition flashes in Jo's eyes. "I *did* know this was here. My parents told me about it once. It closed down right after I was born. Since no one ever bought the park or the land, it's just sat here for almost three decades, withering away in the desert."

"What about the town we saw on the map?"

“I thought Desert Vista was the name of the town. Honest mistake.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Does that mean I’m not the only one who makes mistakes?”

She shoots me down with a look that says “don’t even think about it.”

“Let’s not go there, Ray. Not if you want to keep the truce between us.”

“I won’t mention it again,” I say, my hands raised in the air. I pull on the straps of my backpack. “Here’s my plan. We go in, find a place to spend the night, get some food, then work out a plan for tomorrow. And maybe, if I can get them to work, we can go on some rides.”

“And fall to our deaths because the joints of all these rides have rusted? No way.” Jo takes a step forward. “First, shelter. Then, food. Then... We’ll see. Come on, let’s get inside and give Buster some more water to drink.”

We both put our weight against the gate and push it open with a creaking sound. Stepping inside the park’s terrain fills me with feelings of exhilaration. We venture deeper into the park, the rusted remnants of once-vibrant rides looming overhead. I soak up every second of it.

I catch Jo stealing glances at me, her lips curving into a playful smile.

“What?” I ask her.

She shakes her head as if she’s trying to suppress her amusement. “Nothing. It’s just... You look adorable, like a kid who’s stepping foot into an amusement park for the first time ever. In a way, I guess that’s true for you. This is your first time, right?”

I nod, the smile on my face only growing bigger. “It is. We have a lot of fun things on Astranoxus, but nothing *this* fun. I can’t wait to experience the thrill of a rollercoaster ride.”

“There are less painful ways to die, if that’s your plan,” Jo remarks.

“I’m not planning on taking any risks. I’ll assess everything beforehand.”

We head further into the park, looking for the staff buildings. They’re bound to have a spot where we can create a makeshift bedroom. We pass a kids’ rollercoaster and an arcade hall, then take a left.

“So you guys don’t have amusement parks, huh. What kind of entertainment is there on your planet then? How do you relax after a grueling day of Earth studies?” Jo asks.

I smile. “One of my favorite places to visit after a long day is the Floating Gardens.”

“The what?”

“Floating Gardens. They are filled with exotic, bioluminescent plants that

float in the air. You can watch them from anti-gravity platforms. It's truly mesmerizing."

Jo's eyes shimmer with intrigue. "It sounds awesome. Too bad we don't have that around here."

As the words leave her lips, I'm struck by an idea. Without hesitating, I reach into my pocket and pull out one of my favorite gadgets—the Holo-Projector. It shimmers with an ethereal glow, casting a soft light around us.

"Close your eyes."

She obeys, her eyelids falling shut, and I carefully place the gadget in her hand. "Now, open your eyes again."

Her emerald gaze meets mine, then she lowers her eyes to the Holo-Projector and gasps in awe. The crystal in her hand has transformed into a miniature holographic representation of the Astranoxian Floating Gardens. Exotic, bioluminescent flora float gracefully in the air, their radiant colors dancing and blending in a mesmerizing display.

Jo's eyes widen with wonder as she watches the holographic garden, her fingers trembling slightly as she reaches out to touch it. "This is incredible," she whispers.

All of a sudden, a strong pinch of longing for my home planet hits me. As I watch Jo, I can almost hear the soft hum of the gardens and the soothing rustling of the plants' leaves. I miss my home planet, but I also don't want to return. Not immediately anyway. I've got so much work to do on Earth, work that I'm super passionate about, and I won't let a flicker of nostalgia get in the way of my lifelong dream of doing missions on Earth.

I turn off the gadget and slide it back into my pocket.

"Thanks for sharing that with me, Ray."

"You see? I'm not that bad after all, am I?"

She rolls her eyes in mock irritation. "Fine, I guess you're okay."

We come to a standstill in front of what we both assume are the staff buildings. It only takes me a minute to get the door unlocked and we head inside, using my Lunar Gazer to fill the building with light.

"We hit the jackpot," Jo exclaims excitedly.

She runs to a vending machine against a wall in what must have been the break room.

"Oh my goodness, look at these candy bars," she says. "Some of them aren't even sold anymore. Do you think we can break it open? I'm starving and the only food I packed is some toaster bread and an opened package of

stale crackers. Oh, and cat food, but I'm not touching that unless it's a matter of true life and death."

I study the machine for a moment. We could try and break it open, but that's both dangerous and hard to do. I narrow my gaze on the coin slot and notice a small keyhole next to it. I put my backpack down, let Buster out, and rummage through its contents until I find something suitable for picking a lock. I insert a long, thin, metallic instrument and manipulate the internal mechanism until I hear a soft click.

"Aha," I say, feeling proud. "I did it."

Jo lets out an excited shriek as the vending machine's front panel swings open. "This is like a treasure chest filled with candy bars. Look at all these vintage snacks."

She grabs as many bars as she can carry and spreads them out on the table. "What do you think? Are these still edible?"

I look at the wrappers. Some of them are faded, but most look surprisingly okay. "It seems that they've been stored in a proper way, and candy bars don't spoil that fast, but I guess the only way to find out is by opening them and checking each one."

"Checking how?"

"I guess how they smell, and possible discoloration?"

Jo shakes her head. "Discoloration doesn't affect the safety of a candy bar. Trust me. Also, don't ask me how I know this."

We tear open wrapper after wrapper and make a collection of acceptable candy bars. Then, we divide them between the two of us. I've never eaten a candy bar before, so I don't care which ones land on my pile. Jo on the other hand has clear preferences when it comes to selecting her snacks. It's kind of—what's the word again?—endearing.

"If some people could see me now," she chuckles, "stuffing my face with thirty-year old candy bars that an alien freed from a nineties vending machine. It's crazy."

"What is? The fact that you're eating decades-old food or the fact that you're hanging out with an alien?"

"Tough call," she says with a wink. "Although, what's even crazier is that some of these still taste really good."

After finishing off four candy bars, she opens a can of cat food and gives it to Buster. The feline looks as starved as us. Not that I'm as starved as Jo. Us aliens need way less food than humans.

As I watch Jo interact with the cat and unwrap another candy bar, a warm feeling spreads through my body. I can even feel it seep into the form of my true self. What is happening? Why am I feeling all light and jittery whenever I notice how Jo's eyes crinkle at the corners when she laughs or how her lips curve into an infectious smile?

This feeling is nothing like I've experienced before, and I must say, it's overwhelming. I decide to look it up in one of my many manuals, but not before I create the email bot to get back at Jo's scammer like I promised I would.

I'm only helping her out of kindness. It's the right thing to do. After all, I made a promise to her. I've got absolutely no ulterior motives whatsoever. I mean, that would be insane. I know better than to get involved with a human.

Way better.

Right?

Chapter Eleven

Josephine

Raiding the vending machine we stumbled upon earlier has taken my mind off my problems for a while. The worries about getting to Ray's secret base or how he got us into this mess have disappeared from the forefront of my mind. For now at least. I'm stretched out on the couch in the old break room, pretending to read the book I packed, when I'm actually checking Ray out.

He's tinkering on a weird device that I guess is like his computer or something? Who knows. I've never seen an alien or their tech before meeting Ray. I still find it hard to believe he himself is an alien. He looks so convincingly human. So hot. So born-on-this-planet normal.

So infuriatingly clumsy. Just now, he tripped over the leg of a plastic chair. With all the advanced tech and knowledge at his disposal, you'd think he'd be able to avoid something silly like tripping over a chair, but apparently, that's a wrong assumption to make.

I put my book down and grab the map I found in the ragged car. We're on foot now, and I honestly don't see how we will reach the base. I track the vast expanse of desert ahead of us. It seems too big of a distance to cross.

Does Ray honestly expect us to walk fifteen miles a day for five days straight? I can't do that. Not physically. Not mentally. I can't. Two years ago, I got the brilliant idea to register for Tumbleweed Ville's 5K charity run. I trained for ten days before I realized that it was a huge mistake. I'm simply not cut out for it. Running makes everything hurt, I get cranky after half a mile, then become desperate, then I cry. It's not a pretty sight and not something I'm proud of, so I choose to instead believe in knowing and honoring my limitations, not pushing them.

Ray springs to his feet and directs his beaming smile at me. "I'm all done with the Infinite Email Loop programming, and I've also checked and calibrated all of my devices. Want to know the good news?"

"Of course."

He grins. "The base is only seventy miles from here."

"And that's supposed to be a good thing because...?" I ask.

“Because it’s less than what we originally thought,” he says in an enthusiastic tone.

I frown. “Seventy miles is still way too daunting of an undertaking.”

“We don’t have a choice.” He sits down next to me. “We can do this, Jo. I believe in us.”

I sigh. “At least someone does. I’m not so sure anymore after that rusty excuse of a car breaking down, but you’re right. We have to continue.”

“Before we get some sleep and go on our way tomorrow, we should check out some of the rides this amusement park has to offer.”

I bite my lip while I think about it. Ray looks so excited about trying out the rides, and it’s not like we’ve got anything else to do. We’re stuck here until morning. But I do worry. What if Ray fixes one of the rides and it breaks down? I’ll be stuck in this reality forever if he plummets to his death from a great height.

“Fine, but on one condition.”

His eyes sparkle. “Of course.”

“We only go on rides that don’t require us to be elevated. That means no rollercoasters, no drop towers, and no Ferris wheels.”

His shoulders slump. I almost feel sorry for him, but I can’t risk him getting hurt. I have a life to get back to.

“Fine,” he says after a moment of silence. “We’ll play by your rules.”

“Look, Ray. I just don’t want either of us to get hurt. If—when—we return to the real world, we can visit a modern, working amusement park and go on a rollercoaster ride there, okay?”

He grins. “Thanks, Jo. I mean it.”

I get up and put my shoes back on. Buster is fast asleep, so I don’t bother him. “Come on, let’s get out there before I change my mind.”

Ray follows me outside and picks the bumper car ride to try out first. He kneels down next to the operating box. The muscles in his arms flex as he works. Not a bad sight at all, if I’m being honest. I’m getting my own share of entertainment just from watching him work.

With the precision of a skilled technician, Ray reaches for another tool and begins adjusting some of the wires, resulting in a brief shower of sparks. “Oh, man,” he shouts, pulling his hand back.

Smoke billows from the operating box, and I arch an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you made another mistake, Ray.”

He smiles sheepishly at me. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“And the other way?”

“Is kind of the same,” he admits before snapping the toolbox shut and getting up. “I guess no bumper cars for us tonight.”

“We could do something else,” I say, feeling truly sorry for him.

“Like what?”

He sounds like all hope of having fun is lost forever now that he’s fried the bumper cars’ control panel. I look around. Surely there’s something we can do?

“We could try another ride?” I suggest.

Ray shrugs. “We shouldn’t bother. These rides are so old that even I cannot bring them back to life.” He sighs. “Do you mind just walking around the park? I could go alone if you don’t want to join me.”

“That’s okay. I’ll come with you,” I quickly say.

Part of me truly wants to keep Ray company, but the other part of me is terrified to be left alone in this abandoned, dark amusement park. Who knows what might lurk in the shadows? Technically, we’re alone in this reality, but I don’t want to take any chances just in case we’re not completely alone. Better safe than sorry.

I match Ray’s strides and shove my hands in my pockets. He looks like a kid who’s disappointed about not being able to go to Disneyland. Despite the fact that a small part of me is still furious at him for alienating us from the rest of the world, I do feel sorry for him.

“So, Ray,” I start. “This would’ve been your first time going on a ride?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Any other first times you want to experience while you’re disguised as a human?”

It’s only after asking the question that I realize how wrong it sounds. I don’t want to give him the wrong idea. Then again, I sincerely doubt innuendo is something Ray knows about.

His eyes light up. “Yes, lots of things actually. I’ve always been fascinated by your planet and its people. I can’t quite put a finger on why, though. Humans are far more complex and their feelings run way deeper than ours. At least, that’s my perspective. So yeah, if I had to pick a few things that I would love to experience, it would be swimming in the ocean, kissing someone, and riding a bike.”

“You’ve never ridden a bike before?”

“No. We don’t have them on Astranoxus.”

I hesitate before asking my next question. “And you’ve never been kissed?”

“I can explain why. I’ve been so caught up in my Earth studies that I never had time to pursue someone romantically. I’m one of the youngest cadets to make it to an Earth mission, something I’m extremely proud of. But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about finding a mate.”

I arch an eyebrow. “A mate?”

“You know, a girlfriend. It’s essentially the same thing. We just use different terminology back on Astranoxus.”

The air between us seems to shift, and Ray clears his throat. “We should head back,” he says, a hint of unease in his voice. “I need a moment in private. I can’t wear my human disguise all the time. My true form requires regular maintenance, or it starts to degrade. It’s kind of like when humans are bedridden, and their muscles start to weaken from lack of use.”

“Of course,” I say. “I should get some sleep anyway. I’m knackered and it’s already five minutes past my usual bedtime.”

“Living on the edge, huh?” Ray says with a wink.

All things considered, I guess I am.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re right back where we started. The break room looks exactly as we left it, which is a relief. It means there truly is no one around, right? Buster is still asleep on one of the chairs. Ray excuses himself and heads out, leaving me alone with Buster and my thoughts. I check my watch. Normally, I’m already in bed by now. I realize I’m a grown-up and bedtime shouldn’t matter that much, but I love my routines. It helps me cope with the unpredictability of life. At least sticking with a routine gives me the feeling that I have a small part of my life under control.

I rummage through my duffel bag and get my bag with toiletries out. I head to the staff bathrooms, which are located at the end of the hallway, and brush my teeth. I can’t remember the last time I brushed my teeth in a place other than my own bathroom. Staying home is comforting to me, but I do have to admit that going on an adventure like this is kind of fun. If I ignore the possibility of my life slowly disappearing, of course. I can’t wait to get back to the soothing sounds of my cashier’s laser at Feeding You, and to resume my book sleeve side gig, but this trip is a nice and temporary distraction from my everyday life. My parents keep telling me to add a dose of unpredictable adventure to my days. They should be proud of me for doing this. Of course, when they talk about adding some adventure, they mean

picking something other than my go-to order at the local diner or not insisting on a specific cleaning routine, not going on a trip with an alien. Still, I'm doing *something*, and that has to count, right?

I rinse my toothbrush and put it back in my bag. When I pass one of the rooms in the corridor, I stop at the sight of a light flash.

I peek inside and gasp before retreating. Ray has shed his human disguise. I can't let him see me, but I am curious to check him out, so I tiptoe back to the door and position myself at such an angle that he can't catch me spying on him.

Although... is it really spying? I'm only gathering intel on the guy who's taking me on a cross-desert trip to an alien base. Anyone would do the same in my position. This is completely fine and so not a breach of privacy.

Okay, maybe it is, but who could blame me? I've never seen an alien. I'm not letting this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity slip.

I peek inside the room again, careful not to make a sound. He's right there, in the middle of the room, and it's more special and intense than I could have ever imagined.

His body shimmers with an out-of-this-world iridescence, almost like he's a living constellation. He's taller and even more muscled than his human form, with defined legs and arms. His hands look almost the same, except for his fingers, which seem to be tendrils. Not the icky kind, thank goodness, but the sophisticated kind.

It's a breathtaking sight. Why did I ever believe aliens looked horrible? It seems laughable now that I've witnessed this. Ray's alien form is nothing short of stunning.

I'm so fascinated that I almost forget that I shouldn't make a sound or a move, and that Ray deserves his privacy.

I reluctantly step back, leaving him to have a moment of solitude and do whatever he needs to do to maintain this mesmerizing form of his.

As I silently retreat to the break room, I swear I have stardust in my eyes and a spring in my step. My heart still races with excitement, and I can't help but smile to myself. I finally fully believe everything Ray's told me up until this point. He's an alien. All of this is true.

Which also means that we're truly alone out here, with time ticking away. I'm buzzing with excitement while feeling equal amounts of terror.

I pray that we can get to the base on time before my life as I know it is done for.

Chapter Twelve

Ray

When I wake up, Jo is gone. A dose of fear grabs me by the heart, causing it to skip a beat. I've become quite used to having her around, despite her snarky comments about my clumsiness and the mess we're in. Maybe she took the feline outside so he could relieve his bladder?

I wipe the sleep from my eyes and get up. Jo slept on the couch last night, whilst I made a makeshift bed from wooden pallets and blankets I found in the storage room.

Before heading outside to look for her, I power up my portable communications system, but I get nothing but static. I didn't expect it to work, but I did hope for a miracle. Officer Reeva clearly stated that this is my last chance, and I'd love to know how much time I have left to right my mistake.

I head outside, the heat immediately enveloping me. I shouldn't have messed with the weather, but in my defense, it was a harmless mistake. That doesn't take away from the fact that I have to deal with the consequences now.

It takes me five minutes to locate Jo. She's riding a rusty bike in circles on the main square. Every now and then, she extends her legs and lets the pedals rotate freely while tipping her head back and looking up at the blue sky. A heartfelt smile lights up her beautiful features, and her hair is windswept, adding to her carefree appearance.

She looks happy.

"Ray!" she exclaims as soon as she spots me at the edge of the square.

She puts her feet back on the pedals and rides over to me, coming to a standstill right in front of me. She leans her arms on the handlebars and flashes me a smile. If there's one thing I'll never grow tired of here on Earth, it's got to be her smile.

"Good morning, Jo. Did you sleep well?"

"I did, Mister Alien. And look! I found some old bikes. Now we don't have to walk to the base."

I laugh as I imagine myself trying to get across the desert on a bike. “Did you forget I don’t know how to ride a bike? I’m afraid it isn’t an option.”

“Oh, come on, Ray. Just because you don’t know how to do it now doesn’t mean you can’t learn.”

“Although a dream of mine, learning how to ride a bike looks complicated as well as something we don’t have the time for right now.”

Jo shakes her head. She’s not having any of my excuses. “I can teach you in an hour. Tops. Please? I can’t face another day of walking.”

Her big eyes and pouting lips are almost impossible to resist.

I clear my throat. “I don’t know.”

Without waiting for my decision, she jumps from the bike, puts down the kickstand, and makes a beeline for one of the abandoned shops next to the square. Leaning against the weathered façade are three more bikes. She grabs one of them and brings it to me, firmly placing the handlebars into my hands.

“See?” she grins. “You’re already holding a bike. Learning how to ride it can’t be that hard, can it? Just follow my lead and you’ll be fine.”

I hesitate for a moment. It’s true that biking is at least three times faster than walking, but I’m not sure I can master this new skill in an hour. All this simply to avoid having to go on foot. Personally, I don’t mind the idea of walking. It’s Jo who’s so opposed to it.

Her eyes lock onto mine, and I realize I can’t say no. I’m the reason we’re stranded here, and we already lost the car. The least I can do is ensure she can travel how she sees fit. If that’s on a bike, then who am I to say no to her?

I reluctantly get on the bike, my legs wobbly, and almost tumble off.

“Wait, take it step by step,” she laughs. “Or pedal by pedal in this case.”

Her mood is in stark contrast with yesterday’s, when I was sure she wanted to strangle me. I don’t know what changed overnight, but I’ll take it. A happy Jo is better than an angry one.

“Okay, so what should I do to make this go smoother?”

“First, put your foot on the ground for balance,” she says. “Then, push off with both feet and put them on the pedals. Keep your weight centered and look straight ahead. Riding a bike is all about balance.”

I do as she says, but it appears that balance isn’t my strong suit. Jo laughs and gives me an encouraging nod. “It’s okay. At first, it will feel as if the bike is taking you for a ride instead of the other way around. Try again.”

She runs next to me while I try to get the bike under control, encouraging me and cheering me on. It only takes me fifteen minutes to be able to remain

upright.

“Look, I’m doing it,” I shout at her.

Unfortunately, I look over my shoulder instead of at the road ahead of me, and I lose control of the handlebars. I fall down, my instincts kicking in. My real arm shoots out of my human disguise, and I firmly plant it on the ground so I don’t smack against the concrete.

Crap. That wasn’t supposed to happen. I scramble to my feet hoping that Jo didn’t see, but the moment our gazes meet, I know she did.

“Forget what you just saw,” I say, panic at the edge of my voice.

She grins. “What? That you fell? I already know how clumsy you are, Mister Alien.”

Heat makes my heart explode. She definitely saw me, but she knows how dangerous showing my real self to her could be for me, so she’s acting as if nothing happened. As if seeing an alien arm is no big deal.

All with one purpose: to protect me. Gosh, Jo is everything I never knew I wanted in a woman. I try to swallow my feelings away, but it’s hard. Near impossible. I feel as dizzy as I felt the first time I traveled through shimmering galaxies as a kid, my nose pushed against the thick glass of our space explorer.

Except this isn’t a family trip or a work mission. This is my life. This is real. This is... what falling in love feels like?

As the realization hits me, I throw the bike on the ground and run away so I can hide behind one of the buildings. I need to regain my composure before my alien self bursts through the boundaries of this human body I’m living in. If that happens, I’m obliged to report it to Officer Reeva, who will then immediately abort my mission.

He would force me to leave Earth.

He would force me to never see Jo again.

I put my head between my knees and try to take deep breaths, like Jo did when she was in shock outside the diner the other day. How is it even possible that I’m falling for a human? A woman I only met a short while ago? All the literature I’ve read about human relationships made me believe that love at first sight was rare, but what if it isn’t?

“Ray?” Jo’s warm voice calls out to me.

“I’ll be right there,” I reply.

I take another deep breath in. I can do this. I can get us to the base, repair the damage, and travel back to Tumbleweed Ville without Jo or my

supervisors knowing about my feelings for her. This will be my secret.

Besides, I've been through worse challenges than this. How hard could it be to ignore these feelings? I'll be fine.

Won't I?

Chapter Thirteen

Josephine

After forty-five minutes of practicing, including Ray running off for who knows what reason, we're finally on the road again. Buster is in a basket tied to the front of my bike while Ray offered to take our luggage on his. Thankfully, we still have enough water bottles left to survive the heat.

Ray seems different. Less formal, maybe? I can't put my finger on it, but it's as if he's finally letting his walls down a bit.

I still can't get the image of him in his alien form out of my head, no matter how hard I try. I've never seen such a perfect and yet strange body. And then this morning, I saw a flash of his real self, but decided not to say anything.

This whole ordeal started out with me hating Ray's guts, but the more time I spend with him, the more I realize I like him. Heck, if I were insane, I'd even think I'm falling for him, but I'm not. Falling in love with an alien is so far out there that I can't entertain the idea while taking myself seriously.

I glance sideways and catch Ray with a smile on his face. He clearly enjoys riding a bike. Despite his clumsiness, he got the hang of it pretty fast. I've got to hand it to him. He might not win any awards in the handiness department, but his determination to master a skill or explore a new experience more than makes up for his clumsiness.

That, and his determination to get us to that godforsaken base.

"Ray?"

"Yes?" he replies without taking his eyes off the road.

He might be able to travel on a bike without falling off, but only by looking straight ahead, it seems.

"The base we're traveling to... who put it there? And why is it so freaking far away?"

He laughs, giving me a great view of his dimples. "That's a great question. First of all, isn't it obvious why it's far away?"

I shake my head. "Enlighten me. Figuratively speaking, of course."

"Good one," he says with a grin. "The base had to be placed in the middle

of nowhere to diminish our chances of being found. Now, it's not your ordinary building. The base is a bunker and only accessible with alien tech, so the chances of it being entered by a regular human are slim. Still, never say never. If some tech whiz or military brain got wind of this, the whole world would try to break into the base. We can't let that happen."

"Fair enough. So, it's a safety thing."

"Yup. And the one who put it there is someone higher up with more powers than I have. Trust me when I tell you that not a soul knew about this secret operation."

I wonder what this magical bunker in the desert will look like. I'm not fond of confined spaces, especially not when they're located underground. As long as there are no creepy critters or bugs, I should be fine, right? I mean, Ray's with me. If he can't protect me, then no one can.

Those are worries for tomorrow anyway. We're splitting up the remaining seventy miles into two days. I don't have a sporty bone in my body, let alone the stamina to bike for an entire day in this heat.

"We could play a game to make time go faster," I say.

And to distract me from my ass getting sore. This is a serious workout, especially since the bike is old and not comfortable at all.

"What do you propose?" Ray asks.

"I don't know."

This is so typical. I propose something and then I don't know how to go about it.

"Come on, just tell me the first thing that comes to mind. Go!"

Ray's enthusiasm causes my mind to blank on me. It's too much pressure, which is silly, I know. People have way worse things to deal with than coming up with a fun game to kill time, yet it feels like I'm carrying the weight of the world on me.

"Jo?" he prompts.

"I'm sorry, I can't think of anything."

He frowns. "Does that happen often?"

"My brain works perfectly fine. I'm not sick or anything, but I suffer from this thing called anxiety. Some days, I feel as if I can't function properly. Thinking about the magnitude of life is often too much for me to bear. That's why I love arts and crafts. It anchors me. It makes the world less daunting."

A soft smile spreads over his face and his dimples tease me with their presence. "What kind of art do you make?"

“I sew things. It makes me happy,” I confess. “I was going to sign up to sell my things at the Halloween fair later this month, but I never got around to it.”

“Why not? You don’t have to be afraid to go out there and show the world what you’ve got to offer, Jo.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“What? It’s okay to feel nervous about it.”

“It’s actually because of you, Ray. I couldn’t sign up because we were already alienated, not because I’m afraid. I go to that kind of fair all the time.”

And by all the time, I mean three times a year: the Halloween fair, the Christmas fair, and the spring fair. All in Tumbleweed Ville.

“Oh,” Ray says, understanding sinking in.

I put extra force on my pedals. The sooner we arrive at the base, the better. What if all the good tables at the fair have already been claimed and they put me in a corner somewhere? No one ever ventures there. Typically, people stop halfway through their shopping to grab a drink or a snack, and then they forget about the second part of the fair. Speaking of snacks, I wonder if Charlene will sell her homemade pumpkin spice cupcakes this year. Hmm, I could kill for one of those right now. The firm, yet moist texture. The orange sugar pumpkins she creates and places on top of every cupcake. If I weren’t so parched, I’d be salivating right now.

We ride our bikes in silence. Ray’s agility and confidence in his biking skills grows with every mile we travel, and by the end of the day, I’m pretty sure he’s mastered it. He can even ride with only one hand on the handlebars.

He pulls on his brakes, and we slowly come to a standstill. The sun is already setting, casting long shadows over the vast desert.

“We should find shelter soon.”

I nod. “True, but I don’t see anything suitable. There’s only land and barrel cacti and sage and trees.”

He points to a blurry shape in the distance. “What about that rock formation over there?”

“Sure, we could check it out. Anything is better than setting up camp by the open road.”

As we get closer, I can see that the spot Ray pointed out is actually perfect. How is he able to see this far? I still don’t know if he’s got otherworldly laser-sharp vision or if I should call an optometrist to check my eyes.

Nestled between three tall trees and several shrubs is a clearing, flanked by a half-circle of stones. I lift Buster out of the basket and put him on the ground. He stretches his feline body and yawns before jumping onto the rock formation, eyes and ears trained on our surroundings.

Ray opens his backpack and gets a huge plastic cover out. As he unfolds it, circles of blue, yellow, and red catch my eye.

“What is that?” I ask.

“I found it in the storage room of the amusement park. It’s a tarp, right? We can attach it to some trees and create a patch of shade.”

I snicker. “It’s actually from a game named Twister, but I guess we could use it as protection from the elements. Smart thinking.”

He grins. “I have my moments.”

I have to hand it to Ray, it’s clever, even though he had no idea the plastic sheet he’s holding isn’t a tarp, but a Twister map.

While he tries to secure the thing to some tree branches, I spread out one of Ray’s throw blankets. He brought two, both from the new Pottery Barn collection. No surprises there. As soon as I’ve positioned the cream-colored one on the ground, I unpack the box of half-eaten and stale crackers as well as my loaf of bread and some leftover candy bars. Then I open a can of cat food for Buster, who attacks it as if he hasn’t eaten for days. Poor thing.

Ray finishes attaching our makeshift Twister roof and sits down next to me.

“Well, dig in,” I say, motioning toward the meager dinner options and the last water bottles.

I unwrap a candy bar and break it in half, then put it between two pieces of bread. It sounds weird, but necessity knows no law.

After dinner, I make a bed from my duffel bag and Ray’s second throw blanket, which I gladly accept. He swears he won’t be cold tonight thanks to his alien DNA. Despite the heatwave, the nights still get chilly.

Buster snuggles against my legs and purrs, his eyes falling shut. The patch of sky visible from where we’re sitting is nothing short of breathtaking. I’ve never seen such a clear sky with so many stars before.

Ray points to the sky. “See that? That’s the Orion constellation and the Orion Belt. Oh, and look over there.”

I squint, but only see a faint smudge.

“That’s the andromeda.”

As Ray points out more stars and constellations, my body relaxes, and I

can soon feel myself drifting off to sleep. Spending the night outside in the desert would have seemed like a crazy idea a couple of days ago, but now... I don't know. It feels comforting and nice. I never thought experiencing new things could make me feel this calm.

Tomorrow, we will reach the base, and all of this will be over. I'll be able to get back to my job, my routines, my crafts. Things will be right back to where I left them.

Only... I'm not sure if that's what I want anymore.

Chapter Fourteen

Ray

Last night, I might have watched Jo as she slowly fell asleep. Was it because she was exhausted or because I was boring her? I'm hoping for the former. Anyway, it wasn't a creepy thing. I just wanted to see what she looks like when she's dreaming, and wow, does she look amazing while she's in slumberland. I normally tend to stay far away from any human interactions during my missions on Earth, but Jo is someone I want to be close to.

I read an entire chapter on human relationships in my UGH BE REAL manual while Jo was asleep. According to the literature, humans reveal their feelings for each other either by doing something romantic or by flat out telling the other person how they feel. I wonder if I should tell Jo she makes me feel something I've never felt before. On the one hand, she has a right to know. On the other... what's the point? It's not as if these feelings can ever lead to a commitment between the two of us. I'm an alien and she's a human. That's like trying to mix mercury with chlorine. It's dangerous.

Jo stirs and turns, her eyes slowly opening and adjusting to the morning sun.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" I ask her.

She rubs the sleep from her eyes and nods. "As good as a person can sleep in the desert." She shifts her weight and winces. "I'm pretty sure I lay on a rock all night."

As her eyes catch mine, her hand flies to her hair. "I probably look like a complete mess. Sorry about that."

"No, you don't. If you must know, you look perfect."

"Stop it, Mister Alien," she says with a laugh. "I know what I look like in the morning and it's definitely not something I'd describe as perfect."

"I would. You know what else is perfect? Today's our last day. We should reach the base in a few hours."

Jo smiles softly. "I'll be happy to get back to the real world, but part of me will miss this, Ray. I never thought I'd admit this to you, but I've had fun with you."

I grin and get up. “See? Hanging out with me isn’t so bad after all, huh?”

Her eyes grow wide, and she holds her hand in the air. “Ray, stop.”

“What? Can’t I have this one moment of you praising me?”

“No, it’s Buster!”

Her words reach me a split second too late. I step on the still-drowsy feline with full force, and the cat shrieks. It claws at my foot before running off in wild rage. Or is it not rage but fear?

“Oops.”

Jo’s eyes are back to shooting fire at me, just like when we started this whole adventure. “Oops? You scared Buster away by hurting him! God knows where he’s running off to. We should go after him.”

She throws her blanket on the ground and grabs her shoes. I’ve never seen someone tie their shoelaces in such an angry manner.

“Go after him? No, that’s not a good idea. We have to get a move on if we want to reach the base in time. Time is not on our side, remember?”

“Oh, I remember all too well, Ray. That, and the fact that it’s all your doing. I’m not leaving Buster behind. He won’t survive.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Aren’t felines made to survive in the wilderness? I thought they were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. You know, catching mice and birds and all.”

Jo throws her hands in the air, her voice laced with frustration, which is most certainly because of me. “Buster’s domesticated. He won’t be catching anything! He’s used to me feeding him gourmet salmon every day, for crying out loud. And even if he did manage to get food, where will he find water?”

I shrug, not knowing what to say. She’s making some good points, but we can’t delay our journey for a cat.

“Where are you going?”

She walks away with angry steps. “To find my cat. I love him and I would never leave him to die out here. Maybe you don’t understand the human concept of love, but it’s important.”

I run after her, trying to catch up. “Wait, Jo, I do know about love.”

She gives me a sideways glance and rolls her eyes. “If you did, you would never even think about leaving a pet behind.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m not an expert in earthly love yet, but I’m alive and I have feelings too.”

“Oh yeah? Could’ve fooled me.”

In a moment of desperation and inexplicable longing, I grab her by the arm

and spin her around. “I do have feelings. For you, to be more precise. I know it’s insane and it’s even forbidden, but I can’t help it. You have a strange effect on me. Like, when we talk, I can’t help but smile. And when I hear you laugh, my stomach does this weird thing, but weird in a good way, you know? Hearing you talk about your life fills me with such joy that I sometimes can’t seem to think straight, which is truly weird for me, as I normally always know what to think or say.”

Jo’s expression changes from anger to surprise as she stares at me, her eyes wide with astonishment. I’m afraid I’ve ruined things even more instead of making them better. She blinks, seemingly lost for words. Time feels like it’s come to a complete standstill. My eyes dip to her soft-looking lips, their pink color calling to me. I instinctively inch closer.

“Ray, I... You’re an alien,” she says as if she’s trying to convince herself of that very fact.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. I just wanted to be honest with you. Why don’t we forget about this, and I’ll help you look for Buster.”

She shakes her head. “No, I mean, yes please, we need to find Buster, but...”

“You can tell me.”

“Did you mean what you just said? About having feelings for me?”

I nod. There’s no use in denying it.

She wets her bottom lip with her tongue. Thinking about what it would feel like if it were my tongue doing that to her lips sets my skin on fire. Heat barrels through me, and it’s got nothing to do with me tampering with the weather and everything to do with Jo. I reach for her hand, and she gladly extends it to me.

Our fingers interlace. We both take a step closer to each other, as if we’re perfectly in sync. Her eyes sweep over me, making me feel seen for the first time since being welcomed into this world. It’s as if she’s the one welcoming me into *her* world, and I gladly accept.

If I kiss her now, there will be no turning back, only consequences. I don’t care. I want this. I need this. I crave this.

I crave... *Jo*.

She blows out a soft breath of air, almost like a sigh, and then she leans in. Her mouth touches mine, and I welcome the taste of her, together with a crackling jolt of electricity that makes me dizzy in an impossibly good way. Her fingers fly up to my hair while she pushes my lips open with her soft

tongue. I've seen a lot of stars and constellations in my life, but nothing comes close to the breathtaking magnitude of this kiss.

We let go for a split second, only to gasp for air, and then our mouths find each other again. My hand is on her back now, and she presses her body against mine.

"Ray," she whispers in that soft voice of hers. "Oh, my goodness, Ray."

My name on her lips drives me crazy. It takes every last ounce of willpower to push my alien form to the background, but I can't. It shoots out of this human disguise whether I want it or not. I'm kissing Jo and I don't think I've ever been happier. Her hands trail over my arms, taking in the true me, and then she shrieks.

At first, I think it's a shriek of passion, but when I see the terror in her eyes, I know it isn't.

"What's wrong?"

She winces. "I've been bitten. My leg. Something's not right."

"Bitten by what?"

Tears form in her eyes. "I'm afraid to look, but it hurts like hell."

I glance down and my heart skips a beat. Slithering away from Jo's leg is a snake, and by the looks of it, it's a poisonous one.

I hold her steady in my arms and lock eyes with her. "Jo, listen to me. Whatever you do, don't panic. I've got you, okay?"

"I'm feeling dizzy," she says, slurring the words.

I don't know whether it's caused by the poison or her fear, but what I do know is this: we need to get out of here and find help.

Now.

Only... there's no one in this reality to save her, and that's all my fault.

Chapter Fifteen

Jo

I can't pinpoint what's happening. Am I still alive? Am I dreaming? Why can't I open my eyes? I'm trying, but it's too much work. I'd rather sleep.

"Stay with me, Jo. We're almost at the base and I can get you the help you need after I reset everything."

Hmm, is that Ray? I think it is. Did I dream about him being an alien or was that real? It must be, because my body still remembers the way his lips felt on mine. Kissing Ray was amazing. Much better than I had dared to dream. Is that why I'm feeling drowsy?

"I don't want to lose you, Jo."

"Buster?" I croak.

"The cat is fine. Please, stay with me."

I scrape all of my energy together and direct it at my eyes. I finally manage to open one of my eyelids. It seems that Ray is carrying me in his arms. My hair whips in the wind, and my leg hurts like crazy. Are we running? Why didn't I know my alien could run like this?

So many questions. They're making me tired. I should sleep for a while. Yes. Hmmm, that'll help me.

"We're almost there." Ray's voice is distant, even though he's holding me against his alien skin that looks like a galaxy.

It's dark with countless twinkling stars, but not translucent. It's a miracle. Something extraordinary to marvel at.

The world around me blurs in and out of focus whenever I try to open my eyes. The pain in my leg is still present. Oh, that's right. I got bitten by a snake. The way I'm feeling must be some sort of allergic reaction. Or maybe it's a normal reaction to the snake's poison traveling through my bloodstream.

I rest my head against Ray's shoulder, the rhythmic thud of his heart against my ear calming and anchoring me. He speaks again, but his words are nothing but a distant murmur.

Then, after I don't know how long, he gently puts me on the ground. The

sound of beeping devices and doors opening reaches my ears. Is that the laser from Feeding You that I hear? Are we back at work?

Before I can ponder this any further, Ray sweeps me up into his arms again. A thick, metal door falls shut behind us. Ray runs down a seemingly never-ending flight of stairs. His extraordinary strength is a revelation to me. There are so many things I don't know about him yet. Why didn't he run like this for the past couple of days? It would've saved us a lot of trouble. We pass through a long corridor, then more doors and stairs, until he finally lays me down on a soft couch. Wow, these pillows feel amazing. I could sink into them and get swallowed whole by the universe. A pitch-black vastness slowly creeps up on me, and I so want to let go and take the plunge, but Ray keeps preventing me from that with his words.

"Stay with me, Jo," he repeats. "Resetting this won't take that long."

I want to cry, but I can't even muster up the energy to form any tears. I'd do anything to get rid of this excruciating pain. How long is this going to take? Knowing Ray and his clumsiness, he'll make a mess of it, and then I'll be toast.

The clattering of his tools gives me a splitting headache. One thing is certain, though. One way or another, this will all be over soon.

A lightning strike bathes the room in a bright light, only for a flash, but long enough for me to see that Ray is looming over me. He better keep his promise and save me, because I don't think I've got a lot of time left.

I don't want to die right when my life is finally beginning to mean something.

"Help."

The word leaves my mouth right before everything goes dark.

Chapter Sixteen

Jo

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The sound of steadily paced beeps pulls me from a deep slumber.

“Where am I?” I mumble, my eyes still closed.

When no one answers, fear grips my heart. What if I’m in a coma and they’re about to pull the plug on me because I’m not able to move or talk and they think I’m as good as dead? The beeping sound increases with every passing second.

Okay, take a deep breath in, Jo. Relax. This is so not the time to have your anxiety take over.

I breathe in for four seconds, hold it for two, then release. Good. I’m starting to feel more at ease.

I pry my eyes open and try to focus them on the blurry shapes around me. Cream-colored walls come into view, then the end of a bed. I wiggle my toes and my legs both still work. What a relief. I turn my head sideways. There’s a machine making beeping sounds, which must be a heart monitor.

I’m pretty certain I’m in the hospital. I feel around until I find the call button, and push it.

Someone will show up, right? I’ve got to be back in the real world, because I doubt Ray has any surgical or nursing skills.

It takes a few minutes, but then the door finally swings open.

“Hello, Josephine. It’s good to see you awake,” a nurse with a purple pixie cut says. She gives me a smile and lets her gaze sweep over the heart monitor before turning back to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Bad.”

“That’s okay. You’ll feel better soon. It was a close call—the snake poison had almost reached a vital organ. But don’t worry, you came in just in time.”

“I’m not dead?” I ask.

She laughs. “No, honey.”

“Where is Ray?”

“Who?”

I swallow. “My alien.”

Concern washes over her face. “Your alien? As in extraterrestrial?”

Gosh, how am I going to explain this one? I better fabricate a lie. I don’t want them to send me to the mental health ward. “No, that would be crazy. I mean my Alienware.”

She frowns. “Alienware? As in the famous computer gaming brand?”

I nod, realizing the ridiculousness of my lie.

She lifts an eyebrow before shaking her head. “You need some rest, hon. You’ll feel way better afterwards and then you can get back to gaming. Is there anyone we can call for you?”

“I’m not sure. How about the person who brought me here?”

“I’m afraid no one was with you, honey. You showed up at the emergency room entrance all alone. To be honest, the ER docs were surprised you made it here considering the state you were in.” She shrugs. “But that doesn’t matter, right? Miracles happen every day.”

Wow. So Ray dumped me at the hospital without even bothering to wait and see if I made it? I thought he had feelings for me. I sink into my pillows and fake yawn. Right now, all I want is to be alone with my thoughts.

The nurse leaves me to get some rest, but it takes a while before my eyes become heavy again. I’m worried about Ray. Where is he? And why did he leave me like that? He’d better not ghost me.

I drift off and only wake up again when the sun is already low on the horizon. I blink a few times to focus on the room. A person is sitting close by, knitting a sweater.

“Welcome back to the living,” she says as she notices me stirring.

“Charlene? How did you know I was here?”

The old lady points a knitting needle at me. “My niece works here. She excitedly called me last night with a story about a girl who suffered a snake bite and yet made it all the way to the ER by herself. Said it was a miracle. When she described the girl, I knew it was you and that I had to come and help since you have no one to take care of you.”

Ouch. Way to be gentle about it, Charlene.

“Thank you. That’s sweet of you.”

“I already talked with your doctor. You should be able to be discharged tomorrow morning. I’ll come pick you up and give you a ride home.”

“Are you sure?”

She gets up, puts her knitting needles in her bag, and waves my remark away. “Don’t be silly, girl. It’s a fifty-mile drive back to Tumbleweed Ville. How else are you getting home?”

“But what about you?”

Her face lights up with a mischievous smile. “Oh, I booked myself a night in a nearby hotel. They’ve got a wellness area and everything. I’ll be enjoying the heck out of this unexpected trip.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Charlene.”

“You could try not to strangle my groceries anymore,” she says with a wink. “In all honesty, you bring joy to my days, Jo. You’re always at the register at Feeding You, so patient and all smiles. Whatever happens, I can always count on you to make me feel seen. And for that, I thank you and I’m returning the favor.”

Gosh, it’s so sweet that one of my customers cares about me like this. I always thought my regulars were friendly because I sometimes secretly hand out coupons to them, not because they genuinely care about me.

“Thank you,” I tell the old lady.

She levels me with a stare. “Next time you take a couple of days off to go roaming the desert on your own, please notify me.”

So Charlene thought I went on a short break on my own. It’s a perfect excuse to explain my absence. I do hope my boss will feel the same way. Losing my job would be catastrophic.

“Anyway, I’ll be heading to that jacuzzi now. See you tomorrow,” she says.

“Goodbye, Charlene,” I say with a laugh. “Wait, one more thing.”

“Yes?” she asks, turning back around.

“Did you happen to see my neighbor? Ray?”

She shakes her head. “No, but I did talk to your landlord at the puzzle club this morning. Apparently, the guy has disappeared like smoke in thin air. Oddly peculiar.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks for letting me know. Have fun tonight.”

“Bye, Josephine.”

After she leaves, I look out the window. The sun has set, leaving pink and orange streaks in the sky. I wonder what Ray is doing and why he left his apartment. A vise turns in my stomach as I think about the possibility that he’s left me for good and I might never see him again. What if he changed his

mind about liking me and has flown off to Astranixis, Astraxones... To whatever the name of his planet is? Maybe getting me to safety was the last thing he did before heading back home. His real home, not our apartment complex.

And if any of that is true, then I won't ever see him again. It's not as if I can board a spaceship to travel to his planet.

I fall asleep with my face wet from crying.

Chapter Seventeen

Ray

“We raised you well, son. I thought you knew better than to get humans involved in your mission.”

“Yes, Dad.”

My screen freezes for a second. I guess that’s what happens when you’re in the desert trying to videocall your father who lives on another planet.

“I don’t think Officer Reeve will be mild this time,” he bristles.

“I know, Dad, and I’m truly sorry.”

“Sorry? Too little too late, Ray. You know the rules and you broke them. What if this female tells her fellow humans about you? A lot is at stake here, son.”

I shake my head. “She won’t.”

A deep frown creases his forehead. “If things go south, she’ll have to be eliminated.”

“Eliminated?” I ball my hands into fists. “Stop it, Dad. No one is eliminating Jo. If need be, I can erase her memory, but I won’t let anything happen to her, okay? Jo’s a sweet, kind, innocent woman who wouldn’t hurt a fly. In fact, she’s been hurt way too much herself and I swear I will do anything I can to keep her safe. I’ll deal with Officer Reeve, Dad. Don’t worry.”

His anger seems to soften, and he sighs. “Please don’t tell me you’ve developed feelings for this human. It sure sounds like it, judging by the way you’re defending her.”

“In her defense, she didn’t do anything wrong. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That’s hardly a crime, right? And certainly not grounds for... elimination.”

“Nice try evading the question, but I’m not falling for it, son. Be honest. Do you like this human?”

I play with the Lunar Gazer in my hand, unsure about how honest to be with my father. Getting involved with a human goes against everything he’s taught me. Not because he’s a rule-worshipper. I mean, he is, but the only

reason he's so strict is because he doesn't want to see me endangering my missions or my life.

"Well?" he insists.

"Yes. I like her. A lot. I promise you I tried everything in my power to stop these feelings from consuming me, but I couldn't."

Dad gives me a soft smile. "I get it, son. When I met your mother, nothing could stop me from pursuing her. And in all honesty, from the moment you told me you wanted to be an Earth scientist, I've been afraid that something like this would happen." He pauses for a moment, deep in thought. "Look, son, I'll try to convince Reeva not to prosecute you for your mistakes, but it won't be easy. You should prepare for possible consequences like..." He winces. "A work task. Cleaning and such."

"You mean scrubbing the units at the Transit Base Station near Earth?" I ask, my stomach contracting at the thought of cleaning toilets there.

The ones at the Base Station are the most repulsive ever. Apparently, the temporality of a transit base is enough to make aliens not care about how they leave the facilities. They only pass through anyway, and it's a well-known fact that the base is cleaned by criminals. Most aliens feel like the cleaning isn't punishment enough. They want to add to it by making it extra nasty for them.

My father clears his throat. "It beats having to eliminate your friend or being locked up, right?"

I nod. "Yeah, I know."

"We'll talk again later, son. Now get your ass back here as soon as possible so we can salvage this situation."

"Thanks, Dad. See you soon."

"Signing off."

I turn off the comms receiver. My chances of ever seeing Jo again are nearly nonexistent, but at least I'll be able to keep her safe.

I think back to how I managed to reset everything at the base and drop her off at the nearest hospital in time. After that, I made myself scarce. I went back to Tumbleweed Ville and cleaned out my apartment. Officer Reeva knows about me showing my true self to Jo and about our trek through the desert. I should've known the governing forces have their ways of finding out these things. In future, I won't be foolish enough to think I can keep secrets from them.

I let my thoughts wander back to the day I met Jo. Or at least, saw her. She

didn't notice me then, but I did. She was talking with one of our neighbors while emptying her mailbox, and even then I felt an extraordinary pull to be near her. The way she smiles with her entire face, the way she cares for Buster—who I saved and returned to her apartment—the way she sings to herself when she thinks no one is around to notice.

I noticed.

Every little thing about her is beautiful. Even the way her nostrils flare when she's angry.

A tear rolls down my cheek as I step into my vessel and calibrate the panel to return home. I cast one last glance at the gorgeous desert landscape and then I'm out of here.

Bye, Earth.

Bye, Jo.

I wish it didn't have to end this way.

Chapter Eighteen

Jo

“Thanks for shopping with me, and Happy Halloween,” I tell the girl who just bought two of my book sleeves.

She puts them in her tote bag. “I can’t wait to use these for all the books I’m getting for Christmas. At least, that’s what I hope. What better gift than the gift of stories, right?”

I nod. “You better believe it.”

“See you around,” she says with a smile before heading to the next booth.

Tumbleweed Ville’s Halloween Fair is in full swing, and I couldn’t be happier with the turnout. After making it back here, I managed to plead my case with the committee, and they accepted my late sign-up. I’ve been working like crazy these past few weeks to have as many products as possible. They’re selling like hotcakes, and I’ve already gotten five custom requests as well. To say my bank account is extremely happy is an understatement.

Don’t get me wrong, I am too, but there’s an alien-shaped hole in my life. After I got back, I told my manager I’d gotten so sick that I was delirious and ventured into the desert, resulting in a snake bite. He accepted my excuse without any further questions, thank goodness. So yeah, work and my side gig are both going well, but I would love to see Ray again.

I’ve spent a lot of nights crying myself to sleep. The realization that I will never be near him again is too much to bear. I have to move on with my life.

The good thing is that I am feeling better about not following my routines to a T, so at least Ray helped me with that part of my life. And thankfully, the weather returned back to normal too, so I’m not a sweating mess anymore.

After the fair, I’m going to help out at Feeding You. Every year at Halloween, we offer free soup to anyone who needs it—or just wants it after walking around town for hours while trick-or-treating with their kids. It might not be much and it won’t help end world hunger, but it does help the locals who are in need, so yeah, I don’t mind spending my night like that.

It’ll also keep my mind off Ray, which is a major plus.

I manage to sell almost every single book sleeve by the time the fair closes. My success puts a spring in my step.

All around town, there are creatures and monsters—fake ones, of course. I walk by excited kids who are running toward decorated houses, their candy buckets swinging from their little hands. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of an alien, and for a split second I think it's Ray. It's not, though. The guy in the alien suit turns out to be Clive, president of the puzzle club. I should've known. Clive's suit is green and bulky and doesn't even come close to resembling Ray. The aliens living on Astranoxus look completely different with their galaxy-like skin and muscled frame.

I almost run into a witch because I'm too busy staring at Clive, the fake alien. I excuse myself and keep my gaze on the road ahead to avoid any other accidental run-ins. I wave at Charlene who's talking to someone across the street. Then, I leave Main Street, pass the coffee shop, then head to Feeding You, where my colleagues are talking and laughing in the parking lot. Before joining them, I go into the break room to change into my costume. I made it myself and am really proud of how it turned out.

"Wow, nice. What are you? A garden?" my colleague Jill asks when I return to the parking lot.

"Yup," I say, spinning around so she can get a good look at all the details.

The design itself is pretty simple. Nothing more than a green dress with long sleeves, but I added some extra details. I printed out a few pictures of bioluminescent plants on transfer paper and then ironed the designs onto the dress, turning it into a vibrant and cohesive whole. I took my inspiration from the floating gardens Ray told me about.

I sigh. Those days we spent together in the desert seem like a distant memory. Sometimes I wonder if it even happened at all, or if it was nothing but a hallucination caused by the snake poison.

The influx of trick-or-treaters and people wanting a bowl of pumpkin soup keeps us occupied enough that I don't think of Ray for the remainder of the evening. I dole out soup and armfuls of candy until the last kids have returned home with buckets full of treats. Then I shove the remaining candy bars into my own bag, tell my colleagues goodnight, and head home. These will taste great while I'm on the couch with my feet up.

When I get home, I feed Buster before finally sitting down. I tear open the wrapper of one of the candy bars and dig in. I'm mid-bite when there's a knock at the door. It's past eleven already. Isn't it a bit late for trick-or-

treaters?

I decide to ignore whoever is in the hallway, but they knock again, so I get up. When I open the door, I nearly choke on my candy bar. Standing in front of me is *him*. I blink a few times, but he's still there. He's really here.

"Ray?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"Can I come in?"

I frown. "Am I hallucinating?"

He laughs and there are those dimples of his. Man, how I've missed drooling over them. "No, I'm really here, Jo."

I open the door further and Ray slips past me.

"You're back," I say as I lock the door again and turn to him.

"I am." He takes a step closer to me. "I've got some explaining to do."

I nod. "Yeah, you do."

"I'm sorry that I left without a word. I broke the rules. Important rules. I had to go back to try and salvage things. If that hadn't been necessary, I wouldn't have left."

I arch an eyebrow. "So you left because of some rules that you broke?"

"I did. I couldn't risk things getting more complicated. I was afraid I'd do more damage if I stayed. The mission had already suffered enough thanks to my mistakes. Unfortunately, I couldn't stop them from aborting the mission anyway, turning my worst fear into reality."

"That was your biggest fear? Your mission getting aborted?"

His eyes flash with confusion and sadness. "That's not true, Jo. I don't even care about my missions anymore. My biggest fear is losing *you*. It's being called back to my planet and never seeing you again. And that's exactly what happened. At least, temporarily, even though I didn't know it at the time. My heart broke into a million pieces when I stepped onto the ship that took me back to Astranoxus, Jo. I thought I'd never heal from it. I couldn't forget the way your soft green eyes light up when you laugh or how good your hair smells or how amazing your skin feels against mine. I moved heaven and earth to get back to you. I'd rather *die* than lose you, Jo."

"That's a bit dramatic, don't you think?"

He locks eyes with me, and my stomach flip-flops. "This isn't a joke. I mean every single word. I stand by it. Forever, across every galaxy there is."

"Every galaxy, huh? That's an enormous statement."

"Jo, stop. I mean it. I love you."

My breath hitches in my throat. He loves me? For real? "You do?"

“Yes. I love you more than anything in the whole universe. And the universe is big, trust me.” He winks.

“Oh, Ray, I’ve been dreaming of hearing you say those words ever since our first kiss. If we’re being honest here, I have to tell you something too.”

“Yeah?”

I shift my weight and smile. “I love you too, Mister Alien.”

His thumb trails across my cheek and travels all the way down to my mouth. He pulls my bottom lip down, and wow, if it isn’t the sexiest thing a guy has ever done to me. I put my hands around his waist and pull him against my hips. Then I close the remaining distance between us and plant my mouth on his. Our kiss is soft and long, sending heat to every cell in my body. His warm lips explore mine with passionate urgency. We’re so in sync that it feels as if our bodies were made for each other. He takes my hand and pins it next to my head. I lean against the closed front door, not even caring that the doorknob is pressing into my back. My neck is exposed, and he takes this opportunity to plant soft kisses there.

I suck in a breath of air. My eyes fall shut as I soak up every delicious inch of Ray. It physically hurts to let go of him, and I don’t want to, but he pulls back mid-kiss.

“What’s wrong?”

He grins at me. “Sorry. I almost stepped on Buster again.”

“You’re so clumsy,” I laugh.

“I know, and I apologize for it.”

I shake my head while I lead him to the couch. “Don’t. You’re my klutz. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I quickly grab the remaining candy bars from where I left them on the couch and throw them on the coffee table.

“I’m so happy I made it back here,” Ray says.

“Me too, but there’s one thing I don’t understand. You said you moved heaven and earth to return to me. What happened exactly? How did you get back here?”

“After they found out I got a human involved who saw my true self, I was sentenced to a work task, but I couldn’t cope with never seeing you again. That’s what I meant when I said my biggest fear became a reality. They told me I could never return. My father tried to pull some strings, but they didn’t budge and said their decision was final. I urged him to do something. Begged him even. His hands were tied, though. There was nothing my parents could

do for me. Then, after weeks of scrubbing disgusting toilets at a transit station, I got word that a deal might be possible after all.”

“How?”

“After processing the data I collected during my mission, they realized I had discovered something of huge importance. You can’t keep punishing someone who’s responsible for a scientific breakthrough, right? So I bargained with them, and they agreed to let me return to Earth and continue my research.”

“Wow, I can’t believe we almost got separated for good.”

Ray takes my hand in his. “I won’t let that happen again, Jo. Ever. Technically, I’m still on probation and I will need to state my case with the Earth Mission Committee to be able to keep seeing you, but that won’t be a problem. My Dad hired a shark to defend me.”

I arch an eyebrow. “There are sharks on Astranoxus?”

He laughs. “No, I mean a shark of a lawyer. He found out that there are two precedents. Both were aliens who married humans. It shouldn’t be too hard to convince them to grant me the same exceptions.”

“Married, huh?”

His face flushes and he shakes his head. “That’s not a requirement or anything. Just an example.” His eyes find mine, causing my breath to shake again. “But you becoming my wife one day is a possibility that lights up my life with the glow of a thousand stars.”

“Oh, Ray,” I sigh.

He pulls me into his arms, and I settle my head against his chest. I listen to his heartbeat while he softly caresses me with gentle strokes. This is the best ending to Halloween that I could have dreamed of.

This right here, cuddling with my very own hot alien, is all I want to do every night for the rest of my life. And the practicalities of being in an intergalactic relationship? We’ll figure those out as they come along.

Epilogue

Ray

Two years later

The back door swings shut behind me as I traipse down the porch stairs to our giant backyard. Our house boasts views for days, something I'll never get tired of. Jo and I bought an old farmhouse on the outskirts of town last summer. The property has a huge patch of land attached to it, leading into the desert. We often venture out there in the evenings to look at the stars.

I can't wait to see my parents again next week. I've missed them like crazy. They'll be landing in exactly seven days, three hours, and fifty-two minutes, in an isolated area nearby. Obviously, they'll be using their invisibility shields so that their vessel can't be detected. I won't do anything that puts my life with Jo at risk.

Next week will be the second time ever that they see Jo in real life. The first time was last year, when Jo and I got married in the most romantic ceremony I could ever have conjured up. She's dying to visit Astranoxus herself one day, but that will have to wait for a bit. Traveling to another galaxy isn't exactly a smart idea for a pregnant woman. That's right, Jo's pregnant and I couldn't be happier to become a father. We don't know what the baby will look like yet, but I'm hoping he or she won't resemble an alien. Creating a disguise for a baby would certainly be a tall order.

I've been busy putting down a new floor in the nursery and painting the walls. Not without a hitch, of course. My image as a klutz is still alive and kicking, but the room turned out perfect, if I do say so myself.

I still work on my research during the day and do some occasional consultancy work at high-tech companies, while Jo spends her days reading books and sewing. She's also started a nonprofit organization that helps people suffering from anxiety. Oh, and she still works at Feeding You three afternoons a week. She says the routine at the grocery store puts her at ease.

As for me and my disguise, I only ever use it when we have to go out in

public. Since our farm is so isolated and completely fenced off, I get to be myself when we're at home. It feels liberating not having to be confined to a human body all the time.

"Hey, you," Jo says as she joins me outside with a cup of tea.

I wrap my arms around her and kiss her.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, placing my hand on her belly.

"Like a balloon that's about to explode."

I laugh. "You look amazing, Jo."

"Thanks, Mister Alien. I do feel great. I can't wait to meet our little one."

"Me neither."

She smiles. "Do you think he or she will be as clumsy as you?"

"Hopefully not, or we'll have to make a lot of trips to the emergency room," I say with a chuckle.

"That's true. So, are you ready to go and look at the stars together?" Jo asks, putting her cup down on the garden table.

I nod and interlace my fingers with hers. "Yes, please. My Lunar Gazer is all charged and ready to go."

"Perfect." She stands on her tiptoes and kisses me. I'll never grow tired of feeling those warm, soft lips of hers on mine. "I love you, Ray."

"I love you too, Jo, more than words can say."

She smiles at me, and off we go into the desert to look at the stars shining in the night sky before heading to our bed and falling asleep together. Life on Earth can be so simple, yet so absolutely perfect.

Acknowledgements

Writing a book about a hot alien falling for a human was a first for me, but I loved every second of it! I never could have done it without the support and help of some people, though.

A big thanks to my fellow Monster Mash Romcom Madness authors: Ash Keller, Gigi Blume, Lindsey Jesionowski, Ellie Hall, and Anne William. Writing about these cute “monsters” with you guys was a blast!

To my editor, Serena. I couldn't do this without you! I can always count on your expertise and kind words to make my books that much better.

To my friends and family.

To my lovely readers, superfans, and bookstagrammers. You are the reason I get to keep doing this and I'm extremely grateful for that. I promise to keep you laughing and swooning with all my other romcom releases!

And last but not least, as always, to my wonderful husband, who is the human embodiment of a swoon-worthy book boyfriend. I love you.

Author's Note and Free Book

Thank you so much for reading *Alienhated!* If you loved this book, I'd be honored if you would consider leaving a review or recommend this book to a romcom-loving friend.

If you want to check out my other feel-good books, go to www.sophieleighrobbins.com.

Want to connect? You can find me on Instagram, where I share all kinds of bookish and behind-the-scenes stuff: www.instagram.com/sophieleighrobbinsauthor.

Click [here](#) to subscribe to my newsletter and receive a free romcom! You'll also stay in the loop about my new releases, giveaways, and book recommendations.

Also by Sophie-Leigh Robbins

Snowflakes and Sparks (Old Pine Cove #1)
Love to Prove You Wrong (Old Pine Cove #2)
In For a Treat (Old Pine Cove #3)
Old Pine Cove: The Complete Collection

Falling for Prince Charming (That Wilson Charm #1)
Falling for Doctor Drop-Dead Gorgeous (That Wilson Charm #2)
Falling for Mister A+ (That Wilson Charm #3)

Snowed in With You

The Best of You

Take a Hike

*For a full list of my books, please visit my website at
www.sophieleighrobbins.com.*