

CHAPTER ONE

FERRIX STOOD BACK, watching Kat and Rae as they helped Caprice with her bags, a care package she'd put together for their trip back to Erion. His jaw hardened at leaving Earth without taking Kat with him. A stack of bakery boxes in Caprice's arms teetered dangerously, threatening to topple over and fall to the floor.

Rae reached forward to grab the pile of boxes. "Let me help you with that before you drop it."

Caprice rolled her eyes. "I've got this!"

Rae laughed, shaking her head at her sister. "Famous last words."

Kat laughed too and the sound rang through the foyer. She caught him staring at her and their eyes locked. He sensed the wariness in her gaze but also the curiosity. She was

beautiful, kind, and intelligent--everything he ever wanted in a mate. The mating markings on his chest pulsed when he looked at her, and he knew what it meant. He had crossed twenty light years to find his fated mate. The likelihood was astronomical, but it felt like a cosmic inevitability.

Ferrix remembered the day they had met. Kat, short for Katherine, had been practically naked, which didn't help matters. She had clutched a towel wrapped around her and another wound around her wet hair piled on her head. Her gaze had swept over Ferrix as if she might devour him, and his pants had grown far too snug around his groin. Her lips had pursed, and her head had tilted to one side. When she had licked her lips and frowned, he had wondered what they would taste like and imagined it as he sniffed the air, inhaling her scent.

Now, he **saw** the conflict in her eyes. She was attracted to him, but she was also afraid. He smelled her fear, and it made his heart race. He didn't want to scare her, but he couldn't deny his desire.

Kat shook her head. "You're going to drop it!"

The boxes were shifting precariously when Xavi's hands snaked out from around Rae,

and he quickly grabbed the top package before it toppled over.

Caprice winked. "Thanks, handsome." Then she gazed at Rae sympathetically. "Do you want me to help you finish packing?"

"No, but thank you. I'll be fine. I'm almost finished. Nin said to bring anything sentimental and clothes."

Nin nudged Caprice's arm. "You can help me carry things out to the ship."

"I want to help too." Ferrix grabbed the bags from Caprice, anything to distract himself and keep his mind off of leaving Kat behind. Her eyes shimmered with regret, longing, and shadows of an emotion Ferrix couldn't sense when he scanned her thoughts.

"I think I've got it covered," Xavi muttered before focusing on Caprice again. Caprice smiled back as she followed him to the backyard.

Nin trailed behind them. "I really appreciate you helping. This will take a while, and we want to be ready to leave as soon as we return from our excursion into the city for those Philly Tacos that F.U.C.K.D.E.E.P says we must try at least once."

F.U.C.K.D.E.E.P stood for First Universal Conscious Knowledge Desk Early Edition Program, but the artificial intelligence that op-

erated their ship was wrong more times than it was right.

“And, of course, mates for Xavi and I,” Ferrix said, but his voice lacked enthusiasm at the prospect of taking anyone back to Erion other than the curvy woman standing before him.

Kat appeared even less pleased when Ferrix mentioned his intentions, but she didn’t say anything as she grabbed the large suitcase Rae had packed. Ferrix followed Kat as they made their way to the cloaked ship in the backyard.

When they reached the spaceship, his brother Nin tapped the digital display attached to the band around his wrist. “F.U.C.K.D.E.E.P uncloak the ship and open the hatch.”

The ship’s side door slid open with a hiss, revealing the interior of the vessel. The ship’s inside was dimly lit, with a soft white light emanating from the ceiling. The walls were a sleek, dark grey. Ferrix couldn’t pry his gaze away from Kat even when Nin invited everyone inside. They all piled into the spaceship, which appeared larger on the inside than on the outside. The interior was spacious, with plenty of room to move around. Comfortable-looking chairs and couches were scat-

tered around the ship, a large galley area, and a dining table. At the front of the vessel was a control panel with a large viewscreen.

Caprice's eyes lit up. "Wow, is this like a Tardis?"

"Tardis?" Xavi responded with a quizzical brow raised.

Caprice shrugged. "The Tardis is a mythical ship that travels through time on a television show called Doctor Who."

Xavi shook his head. "I do not know this Doctor Who you speak of."

Caprice laughed.

Ferrix watched his brother as he pressed a few buttons on a dashboard with many lights and controls. They glowed a bright blue throughout the dimly lit space. A computerized voice began to speak, and Nin turned toward the holographic display that materialized. The display showed a star map with a blinking red dot representing their current location. Nin traced his finger along the map and followed their route to arrive on Erion. It would be a long journey to get home.

"What are you doing?" Rae asked.

"I'm programming coordinates into the ship. When we get back, we can leave immediately."

Nin took off his sweat-stained shirt, re-

vealing his muscled chest and broad shoulders. He headed down the stairs toward their sleeping quarters. Caprice and Xavi began storing the food in a high-tech galley, their movements efficient and practiced. Rae grabbed her suitcase, which Kat had left near the entrance, and lugged it down the stairs, her arms shaking with the effort. Kat stepped toward the open hatch door. The heavy metal door creaked as it swung wider.

Ferrix's eyes lingered on Kat's body. He took in her every curve and how her hips flared out and waist dipped in. He wanted nothing more than to touch and kiss her, to make her his own. But at the same time, he was terrified of her rejection. He wanted nothing more than to see her eyes light up when she told him she loved him, but he wasn't sure if he would ever hear those words.

He stepped closer to her, blocking her path. "Stay with me, Kat."

She bit her bottom lip as she avoided his gaze. "And do what? Where would I stay? What would I do? You don't know things about me, and I can't leave my business behind or..."

He knew who she was thinking about because the images were apparent in her

thoughts. Ferrix gripped her shoulder, and her body went rigid. He rubbed it to soothe her, but she wiggled away from his touch. "You would stay with me."

She shook her head, and her hair swayed around her shoulders. "You don't understand. I can't go with you. My entire life is on Earth, and I want to live it to the fullest."

A knot formed in his throat. "You are my life."

Shadows flickered in her eyes. Kat waved her finger between them. "How can I be your life? You don't know me."

Ferrix growled as he took a step closer to her. "I know enough. I know you're my mate, and we're meant to be together."

Her eyes glistened. "No, we're not. This is crazy, and I can't just go with you."

"Yes, you can." He reached for her hand, and her fingers interlaced with his. The instant they touched, his markings lit up, and his heart beat a ragged rhythm.

Kat swallowed, and her eyes widened. "What's happening?"

Ferrix was conflicted. The odds of finding a mate were astronomically low, but he couldn't help but feel drawn to this woman. The last time Ferrix heard of a human mating with an Olethian was before his time, but he

couldn't shake the feeling that this was meant to be. All of Nin's research pointed to human females being compatible mates. Earth was her home and all she'd ever known. He was an alien, and it wasn't fair of him to ask this of her. But he couldn't let her go. He tried to think of a way to make her understand they belonged together.

Kat sighed. "Ferrix, there's something that I have to tell you. I haven't told anyone. Not even Rae or Caprice. I can never be with you..."

Ferrix searched her eyes. "Why? Why can't you be with me?"

Kat took a deep breath. "It's because I don't know how much time I have left before—"

A thunderous, booming female voice cut Kat off. "Let go of her, you fucking alien!"

Ferrix turned. Ruth, the woman from the HOA who had complained about Rae's patchy lawn yesterday, stood in the doorway and held a blaster aimed at him and Kat. He hadn't noticed her coming aboard the ship because he was so distracted by Kat. It wasn't like the ancient warrior. Now she held a gun aimed at the woman he loved. Ferrix dropped Kat's arm, holding his hands out in a non-threatening gesture as he stepped toward the

woman. Ruth's grip on the blaster tightened, and Ferrix saw the fear in her eyes. She was going to shoot him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Don't move, or I'll shoot!" The blaster shook in Ruth's hands as she screamed.

Ferrix's heart raced as footsteps rushed towards them. He had to protect Kat at all costs, but he was terrified of what would happen if Ruth fired her gun. All his plans for the future would be destroyed, but he couldn't let anything happen to Kat. He put himself in front of her, using his body as a shield.

CHAPTER TWO

KAT'S EYES bulged as Ruth held the blaster, pointing it at Ferrix and her finger squeezed the trigger. Nin appeared at the top of the stairs, and Rae caught up a few seconds later. There seemed to be unspoken communication passing between them from their pair bond. Ferrix and Xavi stood with their hands outstretched in the universal sign of we mean you no harm. Ferrix was still angled with his body in front of Kat protectively. His stance was wide, and his muscles were tense, coiled like a spring ready to snap into action. His eyes were hard, flinty chips of reflective ice. His jaw was clenched so tight she could see the muscles ticking. He would fight and die for her. She knew it with absolute certainty. It was the last thing he should do, considering

the secret she was about to tell him when Ruth barged in and pointed the blaster at him.

Like thin sheets of ice, blue energy blades extended from his fingers, making a whoosh-crack sound. The edges flickered, each spark jumping off of his fingertips. They crackled with the energy of a thunderstorm, a charge ready to be unleashed. Kat couldn't help but stare. It was otherworldly and beautiful, but it was also deadly. The light from the energy contrasted with the darkness of the spaceship, and it hurt her eyes, but she couldn't look away. It was like a piece of the sky had been ripped open and spilled out its contents.

A blue vein on the left side of Ruth's neck was pulsing, and the blaster was shaking in her hands. Bright, hot energy flowed from it in a steady stream. Nin nodded towards Rae. She stepped forward with her hands up in the air. Ruth's eyes bulged when Rae moved forward. Ruth swung around, pointing the blaster at Rae instead. Rae's face paled, and it looked like she would faint, but she lifted her chin, seeming to find her strength.

Kat's heart was pounding in her chest as she watched Ruth shake. The blaster in Ruth's hand was aimed straight at them, and Kat wondered how she could keep it steady.

Rae spoke slowly, keeping her voice calm and steady. "Ruth, it's me, and I'm not going to hurt you."

Ruth's head snapped around, and her eyes widened in shock. "Oh my God, what did he do to you?"

"What? I'm fine. Why would you think he did something to me? He didn't do anything."

Ruth's eyes darted rapidly between Nin and Rae. Her face was red, and her breathing was short sharp gasps. "Oh, my fucking god! You're not the real you. Oh, my God. You're not you! You're with them, and you're a fucking alien!"

Kat sighed deeply. This woman was unfucking-believable and the worst busybody in the whole town. Even with as many people that populated Media, Pennsylvania, Ruth managed to butt herself into everyone's business and make a nuisance of herself.

"Calm down now, Ruth." Nin's voice filled with stillness and calm as he slowly stepped forward. His hands were held out in a placating gesture. "No one has done anything to Rae. It's really her."

Ruth panicked, shrieking louder. "No, she's not! She's an alien! You're one of them. You're all aliens!"

"I'm not an alien," Rae snapped. Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides. "I swear to God, Ruth. I'm not an alien. Look at me!"

Kat rolled her eyes and stood behind Ferrix with her arms crossed. "Why would Rae be an alien? Just because her shit-for-brains ex-husband treated her like she was from another planet doesn't make it true. You're fucking insane, Ruth!"

"Shut up, you bitch!" Ruth's eyes grew even larger as she stared at Kat.

Caprice came up behind Rae. "What's going on?"

Ruth jumped at the sound of Caprice's voice, and the blaster fired. The shot echoed through the spaceship's cabin, and Kat grabbed onto Ferrix for support. His body was warm and strong, and she was safe for a moment. Kat heard buzzing in her head, and everything moved in slow motion. Ruth raised the gun, and Rae tried to stop her but wasn't fast enough. Nin jumped in front of Rae and took the blast instead. He hit the floor hard, growling in pain as electricity coursed through his body. His body convulsed, and his teeth were clenched. His eyes were wide, wild like an animal, and his hair stood on end.

The putrid scent of singed flesh filled the air, and her stomach pitched from the odor.

“Nin!” Rae dropped to her knees next to him, reaching for him, but Ruth yelled at her to stay back.

“Don’t touch him!” Ruth warned. “I’ll kill him if you make one wrong move.”

Kat clung to Ferrix, terrified of what Ruth might do next. She’d always thought the woman was a little nutty but never knew she was capable of anything remotely like this.

Kat was powerless as tears flowed down her best friend’s face, and Nin writhed on the floor next to her. His eyes were closed, but the muscles in his neck strained. His breathing was heavy and ragged. Kat’s heart broke at the sight of his body lying on the floor, so helpless and vulnerable. Rae seemed frozen in place, too scared to move because Ruth would blast Nin again if she tried to help him. The air was thick with the rustiness of blood, and the only sound was Nin’s harsh breathing.

But then the sound that came from Ferrix was one that Kat had never known before. It was a deep, guttural growl that reminded her of a wolf, but it was louder and more feral. “You shot my brother!”

Kat grabbed his shoulder to keep him from

lunging at the crazed HOA woman who shot Nin. The last thing Kat wanted was for Ferrix to end up like his brother, who was struggling to breathe. Nin's face was pale, and his lips were tinged with blue.

Rae rose to her feet, moving in a fluid, supple motion to stand in front of Nin. Her protective gesture made Kat's heart ache.

"Stay back, Rae!" Nin reached for her, but she slipped through his fingers.

Rae clenched her jaw. "Not a fucking chance."

Ruth stepped back and squeezed the trigger again, but nothing happened. She looked down in confusion at the blaster in her hand. Ferrix pulled out of Kat's grip, stepped forward, and grabbed the blaster out of Ruth's hand. Ruth was still screaming at the top of her lungs and started beating her fists on Ferrix's chest. He grabbed her arms and pulled her against him, his arms wrapping around her. Ruth struggled against him, but Ferrix lifted her off the ground as though she weighed nothing.

"Put me down, you alien piece of shit!" Ruth screeched.

Ferrix held her tight. "I would not recommend that."

"No! Get off of me!" Ruth yelled. "Help! Help! Alien! I'm being abducted!"

Kat shook her head. "She's fucking nuts. I knew she was a bitch, but you never told me your HOA lady was such a fucking fruitcake."

Ruth continued to struggle and scream as Ferrix carried her away.

"Believe me, lady. You're the last person I want on this ship." Ferrix's grunt was laden with distaste.

"Put me down." Ruth writhed in Ferrix's arms. "Put me down, asshole!"

Ferrix's muscles flexed against his skin, a six-pack sculpted in stone, as he held the woman in his arms. He moved with long strides, and the motion sent the woman's body up and down. Her arms flailed in the air. Her legs kicked at him with each step, but Ferrix carried her out of the hatch.

"As you wish." Ferrix tossed Ruth on her ass rather unceremoniously.

She splayed across the grass, still yelling and screaming. Her hair was in disarray, and her face was red. She looked like a wildcat, ready to scratch or bite. Kat almost laughed at Ruth with her skirts hiked up around her waist because it contrasted with the snotty, prudish charade she put on for everyone in the neighborhood.

Then Rae ran toward Nin, dropping to her knees beside him. Rae put two fingers against his neck and checked for a pulse. Rae's knowledge of alien anatomy was limited, so Kat had no idea if it would do any good. Kat moved to where they were huddled on the floor. Rae glanced up at Kat, her eyes wide with fear.

Kat's hands flew to her mouth. "Is he dead?"

"No, but he's not breathing very well."

Caprice knelt next to them. "Is he going to be okay?"

Rae's voice cracked. "I don't know, Caprice. We have to do something to save Nin." Then Rae bit her lip, and tears welled up in her eyes. "I can't. He needs his symbionts to heal him, but he's not bleeding internally."

Kat's lips parted, and she breathed out a shaky exhale. "How do you know that?"

"I don't know, but I do. I think it's our pair bond." Rae placed her head near his chest. "Wait. I think he stopped breathing."

Rae put her hands on either side of his head and pressed her lips to his. Rae exhaled and breathed into his mouth to force air into his lungs, giving him mouth-to-mouth.

It worked on humans, but whether it would work on an alien was something Kat

had no idea about. She wasn't sure if it would have the same effect on an alien or if it would even work at all.

Nin choked and coughed, and then he pushed Rae away. "No."

Then he spat up blood and started coughing again, hacking and choking. The coughs kept coming, shaking his whole body. They echoed in the cavernous spaceship, bouncing off the bare walls. He managed to get a grip on himself, and the coughing subsided. He sank to the floor, weak and trembling, his chest heaving with the effort to breathe.

Kat heaved a sigh of relief when Nin stopped coughing and rolled onto his side.

Rae was sobbing by this point, but Nin managed to smile at her. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" Rae asked, her voice hitching on a sob.

Nin grimaced. "I'm tougher than I look."

Rae shook her head. "You're sure you're not hurt?"

"Positive." Nin grabbed her other hand and placed it against his cheek. "I will be fine. I healed myself with symbionts."

Kat raised an eyebrow. "How did Rae know?"

"This was the first time since we were pair bonded. Usually, it's my conscious thoughts that Rae can scan, but she was able to tap into my unconscious mind when we were in danger," Nin explained.

Ruth was still screaming and kicking at Ferrix in the grass outside the ship. She'd scrambled to her feet, her eyes wild and hair flying, and screamed at the top of her lungs, loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. Nin struggled to rise from the floor. His face was pale and sweaty, and his breathing was still ragged and uneven, but Rae managed to help him to his feet. He leaned heavily on Rae.

Kat cracked her knuckles. She stepped forward, her eyes hard and cold. "We have to make her shut up."

"I would." Nin coughed again. "But I'm afraid we don't hit women where I come from, not even the truly mindless ones."

Sirens blared, and the flashing red and blue lights of a police cruiser drew Kat's attention. Kat wasn't surprised one of the neighbors called the police because Ruth was screaming bloody murder. Her shrill cries pierced the air, and Kat had half a mind to put her out of her misery. The uncloaked space-

ship in the backyard would get them all arrested. Kat's heart pounded as she thought about being cuffed and them capturing the men. They would be thrown into some secret government compound, never to be seen or heard from again. She dug her nails into her palms, the pain a welcome distraction. She had to get out of there.

"The cops are coming," Rae whispered. "Ferrix, you'd better get in and lock the door."

"Goddamn it!" Kat's voice was tight, like a wire about to snap. "Stay if you want, but I'm out of here. I'm not going to jail, that's for fucking sure!"

Ferrix ran inside the ship and wrapped his arms around Kat. His grip was tight and desperate as if he were trying to hold on to her for dear life. Kat struggled in his arms, trying to break free.

"You have to go. You need to get out of here!" Rae screamed.

Caprice stood frozen in fear. Kat was still trapped in Ferrix's arms; her body pressed flush against his. She could feel the stiff muscles of his chest and stomach, the heat of his body searing through her clothes. She struggled to break free, but he was an unmovable rock. His grip was like iron, holding her close. She could feel his breath on her skin and smell

his musky scent. His eyes were like molten lava, searing into her soul. Kat was trapped, helpless, at his mercy. She twisted against him, but it was no use.

“You both have to leave before it’s too late! There’s a gate in the back fence--if you hurry, you might make it,” Rae said.

Fear was a thick, suffocating feeling that made it hard to breathe. The air was charged with electricity, making the hair on Kat’s arm stand up. Another police car came to a screeching halt in front of the house. They would be arrested even if she wasn’t sure what for other than a noise complaint. Her mind spun with insane thoughts. She didn’t want to see her best friend Rae in trouble or Caprice. Kat struggled in Ferrix’s arms as the police ran up the driveway toward the ship. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she heaved like she was going to vomit. Kat would be arrested, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

In horror, Kat’s mouth formed a perfect ‘O’ as Xavi leaned backward, and his hindquarters nudged a button on the dash where Nin had punched in coordinates earlier. The ship thrummed and glowed with a soft white-blue light. Its hatch door began to slide shut, leaving Ruth screaming next to the pool. The

light was blinding, and it felt like the ship was vibrating. The door was getting closer and closer to shutting. Kat twisted in Ferrix's arms again, needing to break free.

The police drew their guns and ran into the backyard as the hatch slammed shut. The light pulsed in time with the thrumming, and the thrum grew faster and faster, the light brighter and brighter until it nearly blinded Kat. With one hand, Kat shielded her eyes from the light and tried to pry herself out of Ferrix's grip with the other. She could see the outline of his mouth moving, but she couldn't hear what he was saying over the din of the ship. The light was so bright it was like needles were stabbing into her eyes. She squeezed them shut and tried to turn her head away, but Ferrix's grip was ironclad. The ship shook and rattled. Kat thought she would be sick. She tried to cry out, but no sound would come out.

The light was too bright, and it was getting harder and harder to breathe. Her heart raced, and Kat thought she would pass out. Her vision started to tunnel, and she felt herself becoming weightless. Kat tried to escape Ferrix's grip, but it was no use. The spaceship moved up, hovering a few feet above the

ground, then it rocketed into the sky and vanished from sight in a blink. Kat was pulled away, and then she was gone. The last thing she saw was the ground getting smaller and smaller as she lifted into the sky.