

Above them the sky was full of stars, the cross-section of the Milky Way slashing through the diamond-studded dome overhead. There was no moon tonight to detract from this heart-stopping view of the heavens; no lights from nearby towns; no fire built against the cold. It might be just the two of them, the only humans on Earth, looking up at that magnificent display of creative power.

"It's beautiful up here. Quiet." Though Rafe's voice was nothing more than a soft murmur, it seemed loud in that place.

"Mmm." It was a while before she said what she said next.

"Just think of all those stars," Charlie said. "Maybe all those other worlds circling them. Wouldn't it be wonderful to go there? To see what's out there in all that wide space? What would it be like?"

Beside her, Rafe tensed. "Don't you imagine long ago the tribal people in Africa stood on the western shore and looked across the ocean wondering what was on the other side before the slavers came for them? Be careful what you wish for."

She sat up to look at him. Even in the darkness she could see his features had hardened, his jaw clenching, his lips compressing as in pain.

"Well, that was quite a jump." She tried to keep her tone light. "What are you talking about?"

"There's a scientist—Stephen Hawking—ever heard of him?" When she nodded, he went on. "He said once that you should pray Earth never does encounter alien beings. They will almost certainly be more advanced than you and out to do you harm."

She noted the use of "you," not "we" or "us." Her pulse kicked up, and she shivered inside her warm jacket. Had she spent the evening with some kind of UFO nut?

She smiled, trying to distract him. "You sound like you have direct experience, *Klaatu*."

He didn't smile back. "Don't need experience to agree with the guy. Maybe I just don't like the idea of something snatching us up off this sweet little planet."

"But there could be good aliens, couldn't there?" She was optimistic enough to believe it. Of course, there would be differences in alien civilizations—of culture and language. Of technology. Of biology, certainly. But there would always be good and evil, in any society. "Like E.T. Or Superman?"

His brows came together in a frown. "Not the kind of aliens I'm talking about. I don't think."

"Maybe not," she said, conceding the point.

He caught her hand and tugged, pulling her back down to him. She went, but only so far as her elbow; his change of mood had made her wary.

But her free hand had come to rest on his chest. She could feel his breath move in and out, a little quicker than it should. She could feel his heat, and his heart pounding under her palm. They had suddenly become close, intimate, though distances of mind and temperament still separated them.

"I'm sorry. Aliens aren't my favorite subject." His gaze caught hers. "You didn't bring me all the way up here to talk about little green men, did you?"

She studied what she could see of his face in the dim light—his strong jaw; his cheeks smooth now though they often were shadowed with stubble; his gray eyes watching her and reflecting the starshine from above. His lips were full, his mouth slightly open in invitation, as if he knew how badly she wanted to kiss him.

"I'm not sure why I brought you up here," she said, and every shuddering beat of her heart called her a liar.

His hand slid behind her neck to pull her even closer. "Aren't you?"

She no longer had the will to resist taking what she wanted. She bent her head to his mouth, felt his firm lips under hers. And what started as a tentative taste exploded into hunger as he rose to meet her, his hands framing her face, his tongue inviting her into the warm welcome of his mouth. She pursued him in search of more of the taste of him. That taste, wild and earthy and indescribably sweet, made her heart thrash against her ribs, her blood heat in her veins. A kiss hadn't made her feel like this since . . . never. And because thinking about it was taking her out of the moment, she stopped thinking altogether and kissed him harder.

Rafe groaned and shifted beside her, wrapping both arms around her to pull her on top of him. With every breath, her sensitive breasts pressed into his chest and the longing for him to touch her grew. She could feel the rigid length of his erection at the juncture of her hip; she took the measure of him with a slow grind that only increased the hot ache at her core.

She broke off the kiss with a gasp, desperate for a breath, and tried to regain control of her body. "Oh, my God."

The corners of his mouth turned up as he repeated the slow grind she'd just given him. "It suddenly got *much* warmer out here. Another kiss like that and I think we might just set fire to this whole mountain. Want to?"

Her throat went dry and her heart thudded so hard in her chest she thought surely he'd be able to feel it. She wanted to set that fire with him. She wanted to see him lose control. She wanted to feel him—in her hands, in her mouth, in her body. She wanted to come apart with him. More than once. Over and over. She could have all of that. All she had to do was say yes. And she wanted to say yes more than she'd wanted anything in her life.

But that shouldn't happen. It *couldn't* happen. Finally, reality rose up and smacked her in the head.

She rolled off him and sat up with a sigh. "What I want and what I should do are two different things."

He sat up to face her. "You're worried about the Old Man. If it makes any difference, he wants us to be together. He was pushing me to ask you out."

"What?" She swiveled to look at him. He was serious! Not that it helped. She shook her head. "Nice to know, but the problem is bigger than that. He's my client; you're his guardian. What happens if things get awkward?" *And things are bound to get awkward.*

Rafe exhaled and took a long look at the stars before he answered. "Look, I'll admit what happens after is not something I usually worry about. But I understand how this situation is different. This is my father we're talking about. You want to be professional."

She nodded with relief. Rafe understood. It wasn't the whole explanation, but it was the easiest explanation for why she was turning down what might be the hottest sex of her life.

But Rafe wasn't finished. "One thing you'll find out about me, Charlie: I'm not much for rules. I always find a way around them if the goal is important enough. Now that I've had a taste of you, I only want more. No stupid rule will stop me. Only *you* can tell me no."

His expression showed not the least hint of a smile. There was no tenderness there, only grim sincerity. The speech he'd given might have been the longest string of words Charlie'd ever heard him put together all at once. She didn't know what to think. All this had been hiding behind that gruff exterior?

She started to ask him what he would do if she said no and ended it, right here, right now. But she couldn't do it. She didn't want to do it. God help her, she only wanted more of him, and it was all she could do not to take it.