

Gabriel Cruz had spent time dirtside on most of the planets clustered around the galaxy's busier jump nodes. He'd pulled a few tours on some of the worlds of the distant Outer Reaches. His job required plenty of travel and a familiarity with many of the galaxy's exotic locales and bustling centers of commerce, the slums and the luxury resorts, the slave markets and the sex trade. Gabriel hadn't seen it all, but he'd seen a lot of it. And he could still find much to admire in a summer morning in a temperate climate zone on the planet its inhabitants called Earth.

The yellow sun was shining out of a flawless blue sky as he got out of the car and followed Rayna up the sidewalk toward Ethan's house. It would be hot soon, but Gabriel didn't mind the heat. He hated the cold of ships and space stations and dank colonial outposts, always balancing the scarcity of resources against the needs of many. Here he could smell the rich earth, the vegetation growing in it, the asphalt and the car exhaust. He could hear the birds singing, the neighbors mowing lawns and taking out the garbage. For one minute, he could pretend his life was like anyone else's. Gabriel took that minute. Then he took a deep breath and went up the steps into Ethan's house.

A young man in the white uniform shirt of a Metro Nashville PD officer stopped them at the front door with the usual bluff and bluster. Gabriel could see Ethan start toward them from the office inside on the right, but FBI Special Agent Alana Matheson was quicker.

She waved them in from a desk in the smaller office to the left, dismissing the uniform. "It's all right, Officer. They're friends of the family." She nodded as she came to join them. "Morning, folks."

"Agent Matheson." Gabriel was intrigued by the way her grass-green eyes locked on to his. They studied him, as if they'd never quite encountered anything like him before. He didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted by the thought, but he recognized he had that much in common with the FBI agent. He'd never seen local law enforcement like her before either.

Slightly unnerved, he said the first thing that came to mind. "Have you been here all night?"

She smiled, her fatigue showing. "No, I did get a little sleep. Don't think your friend got any at all, though. He's looking pretty slammed." She indicated the office where the doctor was talking with Rayna.

Gabriel noted the signs of weariness in Ethan's body that went beyond the obvious need for sleep and healing, his bone-cracking tension and heart-rending pain, his desperation. He felt his own chest tighten in sympathy. He turned back to Alana to see her watching him.

"How long have you known Ethan Roberts, Mr. Cruz?"

He held her gaze to see what her reaction would be and was delighted to see the color rise in her face in the seconds before he answered her question. "Not long. Sam and Rayna are mutual friends. They asked me to see if I could be of help."

"In what way?"

“You might say I specialize in recovering what is lost.”

“As in missing persons.” She gave him that thorough once-over again. “I’m aware you’re a private investigator. Has Roberts hired you to find his wife and son?”

Gabriel smiled. It hadn’t taken her long to find his data plant.

“As I said, Sam and Rayna asked me to help. I’m not being paid.”

“Mr. Cruz, I hope I don’t have to tell you that interfering with a Federal investigation is against the law.”

Somehow he found her warning intensely sexy. “I have no intention of interfering. I’m simply here helping a friend recover something he’s lost. In this case, starting with his memory of what happened yesterday at the river.”

Alana’s gaze narrowed. “Are you also a psychiatrist of some sort, sir?”

“No.”

“A hypnotherapist?”

“Not really.”

“Then how do you expect to be able to help?”

He shrugged. “I have my ways. Some people would consider them somewhat . . . unconventional.”

Her lips curved. His breath stopped.

“Really. Okay. Maybe I should sit in on your meeting today, see for myself.”

He almost laughed. He hadn’t planned on this, but he could see no real harm in it. He would leave her behind long before he got to the point where the chase got dangerous.

“Why not?”

Her smile widened, revealing white, even teeth, and she waved a hand toward the office. “After you, Mr. Cruz.”

“Thank you, Agent Matheson. And, please, call me Gabriel.”

“Might as well call me Lana,” she murmured as he passed her. “We’re going to be very close friends from now on.”