

Chapter One

Raven's muscles ached, but it was a good ache. As he stood beneath the stage lights, sweat pouring down his lean, muscular torso, Raven gasped for breath, desperately trying to refill lungs emptied by his exertion. Still panting, he gave a low bow to the screaming audience and flinched as a rose smacked him in the face.

Fucking thorns.

Despite his stinging flesh, he flashed the crowd his megawatt stage smile. The one he'd perfected as a four-year-old dancing sensation.

Raven waved a hand, indicating the other dancers, and as the audience continued clapping, he made a discreet exit off the stage.

"You were amazing." A starry eyed ingénue said to him as he passed, batting her long eyelashes at him. Why she bothered he didn't know. It was a universally known fact that he liked men. Unless she was one of those women who thought they could be the one to convert him to the other side?

"Want to go out for a bite to eat?" She asked, confident now that she'd caught his attention

Yep, she was one of those.

"Sorry, my sweet, I'm exhausted. I'm going to change and get to bed."

"Sure." Her face was crestfallen and Raven reined in his nurturing instinct to try and make her feel better. Experience proved that encouraging relationships with women now led to awkward situations later.

There was still a restraining order out on that last one.

He patted the girl on her back and all but ran to his dressing room. Once safe behind a locked door, he threw himself down on the couch.

"I need a vacation." Raven said, staring at the ceiling. For twenty years Raven had danced. First as a prodigy fighting to get noticed, then as a young star struggling to get the best roles, and now at the age of twenty-four he was the most sought after dancer in the galaxy. He could write his own price for any show he wanted, but right now he was just tired.

Bone tired.

Although this last production had been technically and physically challenging, Raven knew he'd lost some of his fire. The critics and the audience never noticed, but Raven felt something lacking on the inside. Maybe he was losing his passion for dance? Maybe he was sucked dry.

Raven tried to envision a life without dancing but drew a blank.

What would he do if he didn't dance? Choreograph? Direct? Raven didn't know what he'd do, but he did know that he needed a vacation from both the dancing, and the reporters that followed him from planet to planet hoping to catch a picture of him. It didn't help that he was voted the most beautiful bachelor in the galaxy by the top three galacticnet agencies every year since puberty. Even after all this time Raven was still shocked by the amount of fuss made over his appearance. There was too much glorification over his genetic makeup when dancing was his true talent.

Idiots.

A quick shower and a fresh set of clothes, with the addition of a concealing cap and dark shades, transformed Raven from a shining star to the average man on the street. Checking to see that the path was clear, he made his way through the side gate and, with a lighter heart, walked away from the theatre and down the deserted sidewalk. Raven could feel some of the stress from the evening slough off his body the further he got from the theatre.

The dance show had ended late in the evening so there were few stragglers around. Earlier shows always had some groupies at the doors but this one was late enough that everyone already went home.

Humming a tune from the show, Raven headed down the sidewalk towards the bright lights.

Maybe he could get a drink and find some company for the evening. Although his body was tired, he was too hyped up from dancing the last show of the season to settle down for the night. Hopefully, he could find some discreet friendly company to help him wind down. Once his body was relaxed maybe his mind would stop spinning about his future.

He was within view of some promising bar signs when the sound of someone sobbing grabbed his attention. Curious, Raven followed the noise.

“Hello.” The sobbing grew louder as he approached the dark alley. He generally wasn’t an idiot who blithely walked into dark alleys but the crying sounded like a child. “Hello.” He called again.

Raven peered into the darkness, the dim streetlights barely reached the mouth of the alley and he could just make out the shape of a small figure curled up on the ground. Unable to stop himself, he rushed over to the child stumbling over something as he went.

“Hey, hey, none of that now. What’s wrong?”

The young girl looked up. The meager light reflected on a small oval face shiny with tears.

“My nana is gone.” She said in a voice that was so heartbroken Raven had to blink back moisture forming in his own eyes. It took Raven’s vision a moment to adjust to the dark and realize that he’d stumbled over a body on the ground.

Unmoving.

“Shh sweetheart, I’m here.” Raven cooed. “I’ll take care of you.” He took off his hat and glasses so the little girl could see him and not be scared of a faceless stranger. He set them on the ground as he rubbed a hand across the girl’s back in a soothing gesture.

“You’re Raven.” The broken voice whispered in awe.

“You know me?”

The little girl nodded. “We saw your show. You were amazing.”

“Thank you.” Raven said, reaching for his communicator. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Trisha.” The little girl said.

“Nice to meet you Trisha.” Raven said in a soft voice. He pushed the emergency button to call the local authorities. After he explained the situation he was assured that someone would be dispatched immediately.

“Someone’s on the way to take care of you.” He assured her.

The next few minutes were the most nerve racking of Raven’s life. Raven had never had anyone rely on him before. It was always the other way around. It felt strange to take care of someone else. Strange, but good. He was glad he had come along to help the little girl. He didn’t know what happened to her nana but it wasn’t his job to figure that out. In fact his part of this whole ordeal was going to end as soon as planetary security came to pick her up.

“Security.” A deep voice boomed into the darkness.

“Over here.” Raven shouted.

Raven was momentarily blinded as a high-beamed light flashed across his eyes. He held up a hand to block the glare.

“Stand up and put your hands where I can see them.” A voice said behind the light.

Raven slowly raised his hands, turning his head to keep from being blinded.

When the light finally pointed downwards, Raven gave a sigh of relief until a security officer came over to search him.

Efficient hands patted him down impersonally and the officer stepped back once he was satisfied that Raven posed no threat.

“I need you to come back to the station and answer some questions.”

There went his dream of getting a hot night of sex.

Raven nodded his intention to cooperate and allowed the man to lead him to one of their vehicles. As he ducked his head to get into the back of the hover car, a scream ripped through the air.

“I want Raven. No, no, no.” Her hysterical screams got louder and louder until a security officer raced over to the vehicle Raven was being loaded into. He pulled the little girl by her wrist behind him. “I’m going to have her ride back here with you.”

Raven slid onto the back seat and scooted over for the little girl. For the first time Raven got to see what a pretty thing she was, even with her blond ringlets flattened against her head, and her face blotchy from tears. Cleaned up and smiling she probably shattered little boys hearts all over the place.

Raven was surprised when she scooted closer, rested her head on his chest, and wrapped her thin arms around him. He could feel silent sobs shaking her slender body. Two security agents slid into the front seat of the hovercar and gave a brief look at them before taking off.

Muttering nonsense words, Raven stroked the golden head, trying to figure out where along the way his night of debauchery turned into a baby-sitting assignment.