

LIFELIGHTS

BOOK 1

ALINA VOYCE



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alina Voyce is the author of The Lifelight Series of books. She is a wife, the mother of two teenagers, and has lived in East Yorkshire, England, for her entire life. She's proud to call that area of the world 'home'.

Alina has always been creative. She's an author, an artist, and bakes and decorates cakes for family and friends. She uses all of these talents to help her release the pictures that her mind conjures up, and combines her creative streak with a passion for music and a keen interest in the world around her.

The stories she writes are a mesh of ideas generated by who she is and who she imagines herself being as part of the plot. As an introvert, she is a natural observer and has always been fascinated by the people she meets on a day-to-day basis. There are so many talented people out there, so many lifestyles, and so many points of view....

For more information about Alina Voyce and the Lifelights, please visit her Web site:

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ALINA VOYCE

This book is dedicated to Phil, Amy, Stephen, and the members of the R. C. (past and present).

With heartfelt thanks for your love, support, patience, and the occasional ‘talking to’ – administered as necessary.

Love y’all.

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CHAPTER 1

Caught by the breeze from the open window, the crystal ornament twisted; prismatic flashes of sunlight dispersed across walls and ceiling.

Mara Austin watched them, fascinated, as she turned out the last of the cakes. The colours were vibrant, almost alive, mimicking the crystal's movements.

Jennie, the owner of The Tea Cosy café and Mara's boss, backed through the kitchen doorway carrying a tray of fresh bread and sandwich fillings. She looked cool and clean—the complete opposite of Mara.

The scents of baked sugar, vanilla, and cocoa still clouded the oven-warmed air.

Pausing, Jennie drew in a deep breath and winked at Mara. “Hmm, smells good, darling,” she said, with obvious relish.

Mara grinned at her. Jennie made working at The Tea Cosy a pleasure. Her genuine interest in people and impressive, near encyclopedic knowledge of Beverton, her historic hometown, created a unique atmosphere. Ever friendly, she easily persuaded the café's customers to sit awhile, eat more than they intended, and most importantly, keep coming back. Business was booming, and Mara wondered if the owners of the franchise coffee shops in the town centre knew what they were missing.

“Yep, won't argue with you there; but you're still not getting any samples,” she replied.

“Aw, come on, not even a jam tart?” Jennie said, sticking out her bottom lip.

“Definitely not, I take my role as diet defender seriously. Anyway, you're enough of a tart as it is without adding to the problem.”

Jennie gaped at her. “I can’t believe you said that. Where’s the respect?”

Mara snorted and narrowly resisted rolling her eyes. Jennie never failed to tease, pouting and cajoling in an attempt to snaffle a still-warm treat before their customers got to them. That said, she knew how lucky she was to be working here. Even if her boss, and friend, *did* suffer from occasional bouts of stress-related temper and treated personal barriers as a minor inconvenience, the fact that The Tea Cosy was situated far from the overcrowded high street made it all worthwhile.

Turning the door sign to ‘open’, the two of them were soon rushed off their feet as the demand for full English breakfasts flowed seamlessly into orders for morning coffee. The café’s till calculated the bill totals with satisfying regularity, even if Jennie did reckon it’d be quicker for Mara to do it herself.

She had a point. For some reason, mathematics came easily to Mara. If she’d had the confidence, she’d have loved to explore that side of her character further. Numbers weren’t just symbols to her. She actually enjoyed working with them—something Jennie considered ‘weird’. Girls, apparently, were meant to like shopping, not number crunching.

It was 10:30 a.m. before the first break of the day arrived, a chance for them to sit across from each other and catch up. Jennie constantly chatted as Mara listened in silent admiration. The last four years had lowered her defences, but she doubted she’d ever drive a conversation with the same enthusiasm as Jennie.

It was difficult to tell, and never discussed, but she guessed that her friend was about ten years older than her. She was much taller than Mara’s vertically challenged stature and possessed a natural, slender beauty. Not that she drew attention to the fact. Her elegant features were showcased with nothing more than minimal make-up and a simple ponytail, paying witness to the confidence that seemed to come to Jennie as easily as breathing. Add in an innate thoughtfulness that never failed to surprise, and there was little wonder that Mara valued their friendship.

Reaching under the table, Jennie drew out a long, brightly wrapped present and an envelope. She pushed them across to Mara, meeting her look of shock with a sly smile.

“I’ve told you before, I’ve got a good memory. Bet you thought you’d got away with it didn’t you?” Jennie said, “Happy Birthday, Mara.”

Mara stared at the present, blinking back tears. She should have expected this. Jennie always did remember.

“Go on then, open it. I’ll let you save the card for later, but don’t do what you usually do with presents and stare at it for ten minutes. We don’t have time this morning,” Jennie teased. “After all, Tommy Tourist will be back before you know it, and Pious Pete and the rest of the Church council are booked in for lunch.”

After struggling with the tightly knotted ribbon, Mara carefully peeled back the wrapping paper to reveal a necklace nestled within layers of tissue. It was something she would have picked for herself.

“Oh, Jennie, it’s beautiful,” she said.

“I thought so,” Jennie agreed. “Come on, let me put it on for you and see what it looks like. I thought it was perfect for your colouring.”

The necklace scintillated against Mara’s pale skin as Jennie fastened it in place. She strained her neck, eager to catch her reflection in the mirror across the room. Sparkling blue beads, in varying shades, were strung onto a darker blue cord. They picked up her eye colour exactly and brought out the blue tones within her thick, black hair.

“Thank you, Jennie,” she said. Their hug felt somewhat awkward but meant as much as the gift.

The moment ended as the café door opened. Jennie went to get an order pad, leaving Mara to clean up their break-time debris.

A man walked in, tall and lean, with dark brown hair. One glance told Mara that he was business class rather than tourist, the perfectly tailored suit being the biggest giveaway. For a moment, she thought she recognised him; maybe she’d seen him around town? Picking up the tray, she made her way back to the kitchen.

“Did you see that gorgeous man?” Jennie said, fanning herself with their customer’s order slip as she came into the kitchen. “I didn’t think they made them like that anymore.” She giggled. “He’s enough to make my knees go weak.”

“No, can’t say I did,” Mara replied. “But then, I didn’t get a good look at him. I was too busy clearing up. I don’t think I’ve ever met a man who weakens my knees.” She paused to give it serious thought. “Well, unless you count that time Grandad came back from the loo without checking he was decent—*that* made me weak-kneed, not to mention nauseous. I was waking up in a cold sweat for months.”

Jennie looked stunned. “Um, too much information, Mara. Don’t forget, I knew your grandad and that mental picture you’ve given me is just... wrong.” She shivered. “Post-traumatic stress disorder still doesn’t let you off the hook, though, and you really have to see this man for yourself. You, darling, can take his order out.”

“Ha, you’re only saying that so it gives you time to touch up your makeup. Fancy your chances with this one, do you?” Mara retreated when Jennie threatened her with a tea towel. “Hey! No need to get violent, I’ll do it. But I warn you now: men in general don’t impress me.”

Taking the tray that Jennie held out, Mara smirked at her. She knew it was pointless to argue, and anyway, she was curious.

Expertly balancing the tray on one hand, she carefully placed the tea and cake in front of their customer. She felt uncomfortable, as if he knew exactly what she was doing, and she couldn’t get a good look at him, either. His face was angled away from her, bent towards the newspaper he was reading. *The Times*—it made sense, with a suit like that.

The photo on the front page caught her attention. It showed a wind turbine, something she’d always thought of as elegant, architecturally speaking. According to the headline, petrol prices were on the up again. Mara wasn’t sure what that had to do with the picture - unless they’d managed to invent a car that ran on thin air?

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The man barely acknowledged her presence, and her pathetic attempt to ogle him wasn't helped by her vision blurring over. Her eyes began to burn, and she immediately scrunched them up in an attempt to rectify the distortion. All she managed to see was an out-of-focus face that seemed to shift around oddly in front of her.

Thankfully, the irritation was fleeting and was almost gone by the time she returned to the kitchen. From that point onwards, all thought of the new customer disappeared as the lunchtime rush began.

* * * *

Locking the door of The Tea Cosy, Mara turned to wave at Jennie as she drove past. Glancing at her watch, she cursed under her breath: late again.

At this time of day, Beverton's tourists had long since abandoned the Minster and the rest of the town's medieval treasures. The streets were unnaturally quiet—except for the clamour of Mara's ride home. Breaking into a run, she tore along the pavement, slipping on cobblestones worn smooth over the years.

No matter how close the bus stop, the timing was all too easy to misjudge. Thank God the bus was such a relic, announcing its approach with plumes of black smoke, followed by the occasional cough from its exhaust. She'd easily miss it otherwise - frequently.

The bus driver greeted her in the same way he'd done for the last four years, his mood ever cheerful and infectious.

"Good evening, pretty girl. Work okay today?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Mr. Thompson—yours, too?"

A rotund man, who appeared well past retirement age, he shrugged, giving a noncommittal grunt as he took her fare. "It ain't over yet," he said.

Mara took a seat. Tired muscles relaxed against the worn fabric. Leaning her head against the cool glass of the window, she stared out.

The white sign that read 'Thank you for visiting Beverton' passed by, suburbia giving way to Mother Nature. Even in the dim evening light,

the beauty of the Yorkshire Wolds was indisputable. Misty, chalk-strewn fields, an artist's dream, hedgerows crisscrossing the landscape, adding to the impression of a giant patchwork quilt.... The bus's racket faded into nothing more than background noise as the journey morphed into an oasis of calm, a precursor to the comforts of home.

* * * *

It was already 7:00 p.m. when Mara dawdled up the driveway to her cottage, admiring the sunset. Trees in the near distance were silhouetted against swathes of pink, orange, and turquoise blue. Their darkened, leafless branches reminded her of lead, spread out across a glowing stained-glass window.

Once through the front door, she kicked off her shoes, leaving them where they fell as she turned to lock out the world. She didn't bother with the lights as she hung up her coat. The Lifelights would arrive in a moment, flying towards her from every corner of the cottage.

The darkness was transformed with effervescent light as vivid balls of energy, about the size of a two pence piece, moved towards her. Always in groups of four, red, blue, green, silver, or gold, their colours glowed.

They teased her with gentle, heated touches, fizzing against her skin, re-energising weary nerves. Arms outstretched, love swelled inside her as the minutes slipped by. It felt so good to be home.

Bending, Mara retrieved the carrier bag that Jennie had given her and headed into the kitchen with the Lifelights beside her. It was on days like this, special days, that she was most thankful for their presence. They were the closest thing to a family she had.

Jennie had excelled herself. The bag contained red wine, homemade lasagne, a green salad, and a chocolate cake, complete with fudge icing. A candle and the number twenty-two, marked out in white chocolate drops, adorned the top... delicious.

Tears once again threatened, even as Mara smiled. She touched the necklace that she'd refused to take off. Jennie had spoiled her.

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Lighting the candle, she made the customary wish as she blew it out again and went to put her feet up. The Lifelights fussed, arranging themselves around her, along the arms and the back of the sofa. Some nudged at her hands, pushing them aside so they could nestle in her lap.

“You’re persistent tonight, aren’t you?” she whispered, reaching for the envelope Jennie had given her earlier. She expected the usual bawdy card, deliberately picked—in the hope of causing maximum embarrassment or perhaps a hastily smothered, wicked laugh.

A moment later, Mara cursed as pain sliced across her right index finger. She inspected the wound with an annoyed scowl. Paper cuts stung far more than their size warranted. Instinctively, she sucked on the wound.

“Mara.”

Mara jolted in her seat as the man’s voice whispered out, the tone low and urgent. Freezing in position, her heart raced with sudden fear, her gaze darting to every corner of the room.

“Mara... you’re hurt.”

The voice wasn’t going to be ignored.

The Lifelights shifted, their lights flickering, as if they, too could hear it. Mara sat bolt upright, looking around the room. Long moments stretched out. She knew there was no one there; she could hear *exactly* where the voice came from. It was in her head.

“Answer me, Mara.”

Were the Lifelights finally communicating with her? The idea kicked Mara’s pulse rate higher. Adrenaline spiked as shivers of excitement slid along her spine.

‘It has to be,’ she thought. ‘At last.’

Closing her eyes, she drew in a slow, steadying breath before focusing her attention on the Lifelights again. Their movements appeared unusually graceless, their colours flashing. They’d never behaved like this before.

“I’m fine, thank you. It’s a small cut. It will soon heal,” she said, trying to swallow saliva that wasn’t there. She held her finger up to study the

paper cut, pretending that she didn't feel silly talking to herself. "Who are you?" she asked—perhaps, *too* casually, all things considered?

"A friend," the voice said. The pitch of it was softer now, definitely friendlier.

"I don't have many friends," Mara whispered, before she could stop herself.

"Oh, I think you do. You just haven't opened your eyes to them yet," the voice replied.

It sounded amused, she thought, aware of an indistinct accent. It was more than just a voice though; she could *feel* it. The words were layered with a confusing mass of emotion that brushed against her mind, and her skin tingled... as if responding to a physical touch.

"What do you mean?" she asked, not knowing what else to say. She was aware that she enjoyed the sensation of his voice, yet was completely freaked out by it at the same time.

"Only that you needn't be alone anymore... that part of your life is over, Mara," the voice said. *"I've found you again."*

CHAPTER 2

Mara wrestled with the café's temperamental lock, shivering as rain soaked through to skin. Her supposedly waterproof coat was useless against the current deluge.

The key was refusing to turn, a failure no doubt exacerbated by her inability to fully concentrate on the job at hand. A disturbed night's sleep, filled with fitful, vivid dreams, still hovered at the edges of her thoughts.

Gripping the metal more tightly, with cold, nearly numb fingers, she tried again. At last, she felt movement, followed by the welcome click of internal, shifting tumblers.

Once inside, she warmed through quickly. She left her coat to steam itself dry next to the radiator as the oven flared to life. Instinctive routine took over; tension-filled muscles relaxed as she measured, sifted, mixed.

Time was on her side this morning. The last of the cakes were in the oven, presenting an opportunity for some non-kitchen work. Taking a seat in the Victorian-style dining room, she began the next task: folding napkins around silverware. Her eyes flicked around the café's interior as she worked, checking for other jobs.

The atmosphere of old-world luxury was something Mara always enjoyed. Dark, wood-panelled walls, rich, soft furnishings, and shining brass transported her to another era. At least, it usually did. Today, her mind had other ideas, and all of them were focused on the voice in her head.

The condiments were full, the tablecloths spotless, the menus in place, and the blue and white china shone invitingly on the fitted oak dresser. There was nothing left to do, and she still couldn't decide

whether the voice was friend or foe. If it was the Lifelights, fine, but that last comment... worried her.

Mara glanced at the clock above the till. It was almost time to change the window sign to 'open', and Jennie still hadn't arrived. That in itself wasn't unusual, but today it made her nervous.

As if on cue, the door swung inwards, but no leggy blonde stepped through the opening. A tall, lean figure appeared, wrapped in a rain-soaked mac. The copy of *The Times* he carried looked equally soggy.

Mara's vision blurred as her eyes began to burn. Grabbing one of the napkins, still piled on the table, she ducked her head and dabbed at the tears spilling down her cheeks. *Oh no, not again.*

"Please excuse me; I'll be with you in a moment," she said. Pushing back her chair, she turned awkwardly towards the kitchen.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

The man's voice was accented—American? It was also horribly familiar. Mara cringed, her eyes closing in automatic defence. *No... that's not possible.*

Hands touched her shoulders and a rush of heat flowed down her arms. It pooled in the palms of her hands, burning for a moment, before transforming into prickling sensation.

"Do you still not know me, Mara? Open your eyes. See me."

Stunned, Mara allowed herself to be turned. Her thoughts were chaotic. How could she fight something like this? It felt alien, yet right; scary, yet somehow comforting. His voice was more than words and inflection. Need and determination swept in behind it—strong emotions that flooded her mind and confused her. The voice hadn't been the Lifelights then.

So who is this?

At first, his face was nothing more than irregular patches of light and shadow, shifting in and out of focus. Except for his eyes: they were blue-grey and... recognition sparked, forcing its way out of her subconscious.

Her vision cleared, and she understood why Jennie had reacted as she had.

His warm skin tone mocked the English climate, stretched across sharply angled cheekbones, nose, and jaw. His hair, too, seemed out of place, almost decadent. He wore it longer than most, the ends brushing against the shoulders of his coat. Its chocolate-brown strands were dishevelled, raindrops clinging to them.

She did know him... from somewhere. They'd met before, but she couldn't remember the details. *His name is...?*

"*Sebastian,*" the voice in her head whispered.

Sebastian? Yes, that was it. Silent laughter reached out, a shiver of movement that wrapped itself around her.

She found the directness of his gaze disturbing. Maybe it was the subdued light, but for a moment, she could have sworn that something sparked, deep within them—silver? It swirled around dilated pupils before sinking from sight.

The lights in the café dimmed, flaring again as Mara pulled away. *Things like this don't happen. Not when I'm here, anyway.*

"*Are you sure about that?*" the voice asked.

Mara nodded, registering that the voice seemed to be growing more adept at answering her thoughts. Unbidden, visions of the Lifelights rose up. That worried her. She tried to blank her mind and think of something else. No one could know about the Lifelights, they were her secret. Like the voice in her head, they shouldn't exist.

She pondered on that: two supposedly impossible connections—centring on her? It was too unlikely to be true... but fascinating. Her maths-loving brain immediately compared it with being struck by lightning—twice, which would make the probability around 1 in 490,000,000,000. No wonder it didn't feel right. She had to be dreaming or sick; maybe both.

Laughter echoed inside her head, its owner not bothering to hide his amusement.

Anger flared. *He thinks this is funny?* Mara opened her mouth to retort but stopped when the café door opened again and Jennie appeared, struggling with the usual tray of bread.

The man moved, taking hold of the door. Opening it wide, he waited until Jennie was clear. It gave Mara the release she needed. Stepping forward, she grabbed the opportunity with both hands.

“Jennie! Look at you, you’re soaked. Here, give that to me.”

The look of surprise that crossed her friend’s face was almost comical, but Mara didn’t care. Hastily, she snatched away the tray and headed for the kitchen. Placing it on the work surface, she let her hands flatten against the cool, practical steel. Bending her head, she breathed out a sigh of relief.

Shrill beeping shattered the silence, and Mara jumped. The cakes were done. Taking them from the oven, she stared at them blankly for a moment. *What is it I need to do next?* Oh, yes, the fillings.

The voices in the other room were a distraction. Jennie was clearly audible, chatting away, with a deeper voice answering her.

Shaking off the urge to eavesdrop, Mara continued with the morning routine. First, she moved over to the coffee percolator, placing fresh grounds into the filter and checking the water level, before flicking the switch to ‘on’. As her fingers brushed against the glass jug, it felt surprisingly warm. She frowned, hoping that it wasn’t a wiring fault. She’d need to keep an eye on that.

Deciding on buttercream for the cakes, she reached for the ingredients and then set about combining them... carefully. Even so, small clouds of powdered sugar escaped from the bowl to flavour the air.

Jennie came through the kitchen door and crossed over to the sink. After washing her hands, she began to prepare sandwiches. Mara watched her out the corner of her eye.

Normally, the two of them worked in easy, companionable silence, but today Mara’s nerves were jangling.

“Anything you want me to do?” she asked.

Jennie didn’t turn around, but Mara could see her smiling as she reached for another baguette. “Well, when you’re ready, you can go and take Mr. Oran’s order.”

“Mr. Oran?” Mara didn’t like the squeak of unease in her voice and hoped it had gone undetected.

Jennie turned to look at her. “Yes, Mr. Oran. You know, our new customer—the one you let in a few minutes ago? He’s very friendly, not at all standoffish. I did wonder, after yesterday... but I was wrong. He’s an American, did you know? Over here on business.” Jennie paused for breath, staring at her hard, before asking “Is something wrong, Mara?”

“No, nothing’s wrong, I just thought you’d taken his order already. I heard you talking.” Mara squirmed, unused to Jennie looking at her so intently.

“We were just having a little chat. Mr. Oran wasn’t ready for me to take his order. He suggested that I get on with my jobs and send you out in a few minutes.”

“Why would he do that?” Mara regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth, watching with dismay as Jennie’s eyebrows rose in tandem.

“Why wouldn’t he?”

That, Mara realised, was a good question, and one that she had no answer to.

With an apologetic grin, she shrugged. “Sorry, he just makes me nervous. Take no notice.”

Much to her relief, Jennie smiled back. “No need to apologise. I have to ask though: are you sure it’s nerves you’re feeling and not just your insides melting into a puddle? You must have noticed how yummy he is, or were you too chicken to check out his assets?” She waved the baguette she was holding, her eyes alight with mischief.

Mara looked pointedly at the baguette, “If his asset’s that size, I think even you’d be chicken.”

Jennie’s mouth dropped open, her eyes widening with surprise. “Ooh, Mara Austin, that’s *so* not like you. Go wash your mouth out with soap!”

Heat rushed into Mara’s cheeks. Hurriedly, she turned around, ignoring the laughter behind her.

Once the buttercream was finished, she realised that the cakes were

still too warm to assemble. Damn. Though she hesitated, she knew there was only one option now.

It was time to find out what Mr. Oran wanted.

He was reading his newspaper when she entered the seating area. As she drew nearer, he lowered it, folded it into a neat oblong shape, and slid it onto the table. His face was solemn as he watched her approach.

Standing a little further from him than she usually did when taking an order, Mara looked down at the order pad and gripped her pencil tightly. If she wanted to get through this, it was time to play ostrich.

There's nothing to be anxious about. He's just a customer.

She steadied her nerves by concentrating on breathing calmly and keeping any hint of a tremor from her voice.

"Are you ready to order now, Mr. Oran?" Not too bad, but her voice was quieter than normal, with a slight husk to it. She'd have to work on that.

Her question was greeted with a sigh. "Aren't you even going to look at me, Mara?"

How does he know my name again? The saliva in her mouth seemed to have evaporated, making swallowing difficult. "Do you want a few more minutes to decide, Mr. Oran?" *Stay professional.*

"No. I do want you to look at me though."

The order pad became the most fascinating thing that Mara had ever seen. She wondered who'd come up with the idea of spiral-bound notepads; it really was a clever idea. Then she stilled, her gaze shifting as a hand came into her line of vision. It brushed against hers before stroking along the blue plaster wrapped around her index finger.

Heat flooded the area, followed briefly by the same prickling sensation she'd felt earlier. Her pencil wobbled and fell to the floor, and she watched, enthralled, as the plaster was peeled back to reveal... nothing at all.

"Does that feel better?" the voice enquired, the comforting tone sweeping through her mind.

Slowly, Mara looked up into the blue-grey eyes staring directly at her.

Time crawled by as she found herself considering multiple possibilities, each one more bizarre than the one before.

For several moments, her mind was in chaos.

Taking a small step back, she forced herself to focus on the order pad again. “Are you ready to order *now*, Mr. Oran?” she whispered.

A chuckle sounded, and the hand that held hers dropped away. Every muscle in her body tensed, ready for flight, but she stayed in place. *This must be what a deer feels like when it’s caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.*

“Yes, Mara, I suppose I am. I’d like tea, please, and some toast with marmalade.”

Bending to retrieve her pencil, Mara scribbled down the order. *That’s it, act normal. Keep calm and carry on.* As quickly as she dared, she turned on her heel, her stomach roiling with nerves.

“Good grief, are you okay?” Jennie was instantly concerned when Mara entered the kitchen and immediately propped herself up on one of the worktops. She was shaking again. “What’s the matter? You’re white as a sheet. Are you feeling sick?”

Looking down at her right hand, Mara suppressed the bubble of hysterical laughter that threatened to escape. No, she wasn’t sick, and now she literally didn’t have a scratch on her. Not that she could tell Jennie that.

She needed an escape plan.

After a brief tussle with her conscience, Mara raised a hand, deliberately rubbing it across her forehead in a soothing motion. It wasn’t all an act; her head *was* throbbing.

“Actually, Jennie, I do feel a bit sick,” she whispered.

“Oh, Mara, what are you saying?”

Ignoring the voice in her head, which she’d decided for her sanity’s sake couldn’t be real anyway, Mara allowed her eyes to plead with Jennie. She didn’t want to face this now. She needed the Lifelights.

“You do look pale,” Jennie said. “Perhaps you should go home.”

Mara nodded in relieved agreement. “I think you’re right. Will you be able to manage on your own?”

“I’ll be fine,” Jennie said. “I managed, sort of, before you came to work for me. Don’t you worry about *that*.”

“Well, if you’re sure. I really don’t feel right.”

Jennie nodded in understanding. “Are you okay getting home?”

“Yes, there’s a bus shortly. I’ll ring you if I’m no better by tonight; otherwise, I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks, Jennie. Oh, and here’s Mr. Oran’s order. I really am sorry for leaving like this.”

Taking the order pad from her, Jennie wrapped a comforting arm around Mara’s shoulders as she began walking her towards the café door. “Like I said, don’t worry about it. Just concentrate on getting yourself better.”

They had almost made it to the door when Mr. Oran’s voice halted them. “Is something the matter, ladies?”

Mara instinctively froze, but Jennie turned to him with a friendly smile. “Nothing we can’t handle. Thanks for asking though. Mara’s feeling ill, so is going home. I hope you won’t mind waiting a few more minutes for your breakfast order?”

Reaching for her coat, Mara refused to look at their one and only customer as she shrugged herself into it. It was a shock to hear Mr. Oran’s chair being pushed back and to find him standing only inches from her. His height and proximity were intimidating.

His voice, when it came, sounded concerned. “No, of course not,” he assured Jennie before turning towards Mara. “Do you need a lift anywhere? I don’t need to be at the office for another hour or so; I could drop you off at home if you’d like?”

Mara continued to avoid his eyes, shaking her head. Her body stiffened. His suggestion was absurd. *Do I look that stupid?* Number one golden rule of women’s safety—stay away from strangers’ cars.

Unfortunately, the fact that she could hear Mr. Oran’s amusement, whispering across her mind, proved that in certain areas, he knew her intimately. It was a sobering thought.

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Luckily, Jennie also knew the number one golden rule of women's safety. For the first time, suspicion edged her expression as she stared at their newest customer.

Mr. Oran appeared not to notice. His reply was as deep and smooth as ever. "No problem ladies, but if you ever do need my help, Mara, take my business card." He paused. "Please, feel free to ring the number on it at any time. As you've probably gathered, I don't usually take notice of social boundaries. I find them too restrictive. I'm aware that my offer of a lift might seem strange to you, but it was meant as a goodwill gesture only."

Jennie's jaw visibly dropped at that. Apparently, Mr. Oran hadn't been as oblivious as he'd seemed. He couldn't have played the situation better if he'd tried.

Mara blew out a breath, impressed, as she realised that her friend had just switched allegiance. She felt something being pressed into her hand and looked down to see a thick, creamy white business card resting in her palm.

A glance at Jennie confirmed that she was still focused on Mr. Oran, enraptured at finding someone who shared her views on society's rules. Feeling strangely upset at being left out of the conversation, Mara slid the card into her pocket and left them to it.

It was time to make good on that escape plan.

* * * *

Much later, as Mara relaxed on her bed with the Lifelights crowding around her like concerned relatives, she looked at the business card properly.

A swirling silver and black logo emblazoned the front of it, together with the words 'ORAN INDUSTRIES'. It went on to give Mr. Oran's name as Sebastian Oran, Chief Executive, and stated that the company was the market leader in alternative energy research. The company's address, telephone number, fax details, and Website address were listed on the back.

Well, some of her questions were answered, she supposed. Still, it didn't explain how she could hear him talking to her—in her head.

That was something she would dearly love to know the reason for. Failing that, however, she was going to do exactly as Sebastian Oran had suggested and do a little checking on him.

"You could always ask me directly for the answers."

She scowled, as the ever-patient voice invaded her thoughts. "Go away," she snapped.

His only response was deep laughter that teased her mind, making her want to smile in return. Not that she would. Whatever else Mara's life had made her, it had made her strong.

Losing her parents at the age of three had started that process; losing her grandparents four years ago had finished the job. As long as she had the Lifelights though, nothing and no one was going to push her around.

"I heard you, you know. Our meeting wasn't an accident. I knew about you long before we met in person. Remember me, Mara."

"I think I asked you to go away," Mara said.

"How can I go away when I'm not actually with you?"

"Okay, let me rephrase that. Shut up. Do you understand me now?" Her hand thumped the quilt top and the Lifelights fluttered away in alarm.

There was no answer. It seemed that Mr. Oran had indeed understood and was doing as she asked. Gradually, the Lifelights settled around her again, and Mara could concentrate on the task she'd set herself.

It was time to do some research on her unexpected, unwelcome, telepathic 'friend'.

CHAPTER 3

“Good morning, Oran Industries.”

It was well after lunch. Mara hadn’t used the telephone number on the business card. She’d done as much online research into Oran Industries as she could before ringing the head office number given on their Website. She glanced at her bedside clock in surprise when the phone was answered. She’d forgotten about the time difference.

“Good morning, I wonder if you could help me. My name is Mara Austin and....”

She didn’t get any further as the professional-sounding woman on the other end of the line interrupted her. “Ah yes, Miss Austin, I was told to expect your call. If you would just hold for a moment, I’ll put you through to Mr. Oran’s office.”

Mara hadn’t expected *that*. Her heart started to race. There was a second’s pause, then another voice, equally professional but more mature. “Good afternoon, Miss Austin. This is Alexa Munroe, Mr. Oran’s Personal Assistant. How may I help you?” Here was someone who had no problem with the time difference.

That voice though... temporarily, Mara’s own deserted her. *Why does Alexa Munroe sound familiar?*

Flustered, scrambling to redirect her thoughts, Mara jumped into speech. “Actually, I was after any information you can give me regarding Mr. Oran.”

Silence reigned, and the words *stupid, stupid, stupid* rushed through Mara’s mind. Had she really expected the man’s PA to hand over personal information to *her*?

Alexa Munroe's reply, after that brief hesitation, was smoothly delivered. "Of course, Miss Austin; as you are aware, Mr. Oran is currently in England, but he's asked that I give you my every assistance. If you'd give me your e-mail address, I can forward the information you need immediately."

This wasn't what Mara had expected, but she supposed that she should be grateful.

"Oh, well, that would be wonderful, Ms. Munroe." She gave Alexa her e-mail details and then thanked her for her help before disconnecting the call. For several moments, she simply sat there, staring at her phone. *What, exactly, was that all about?*

Something tugged at her mind, testing boundaries that she'd been previously unaware of. Alexa's voice, just like Sebastian Oran, had blindsided her. It felt like... *déjà vu?*

True to Alexa Munroe's word, the information Mara wanted on Sebastian Oran hit her inbox minutes later. She was shocked to discover that it contained an in-depth biography, with several personal documents attached, giving her details of his date of birth, education and employment, residence particulars, and marital status.

In a short space of time, sitting with her laptop balanced on the bed in front of her, Mara knew more about Sebastian Oran than she did about anyone else, barring herself. He was 34 years old, had been born in Italy, to an Italian mother and American father, and had his permanent base in the United States, both home and business. Oran Industries was his career baby, built from nothing into a global enterprise. From his education records, Mara also knew that he was highly intelligent, and from the articles she had independently sourced, it appeared that he was widely respected, both by the business community and the charities he supported. He was also single, making him a magnet for the gossip columns, though from what Mara could tell, he gave them little to write about.

This was the same man who'd started eating at The Tea Cosy? It didn't make sense. Surely the café wasn't somewhere he'd normally spend time?

“Why are you so reluctant to see what is obvious, Mara? It’s quite simple. I’m here because of you. You are the sole reason that I came in to The Tea Cosy.”

Mara stiffened and then shivered. She wondered if she was ever really alone now.

A strange sensation buzzed through her. It took a moment for her to realise what it was, and that it wasn’t all hers. Confusion, laced with impatience.

“You know me; have known me for a long time. I have waited years for this connection to re-form, so that I can speak to you like this. In time, you’ll be able to do the same, be able to control the link, but you can never break it. The years I’ve waited for you have not been easy, Mara.”

Mara dropped her head into her hands as the words swirled through her mind. Oh God, what had she got herself into? This must be a mistake. Except for the Lifelights, her life was as unremarkable and unexciting as breakfast cereal. What could a man like Sebastian Oran possibly want with her?

“Why do we have this connection, though?” she whispered. “Why me, and why now?”

Her question fell into silence, the hush of expectation stretching out across several seconds; her heart beats overloud. Then Sebastian’s voice returned. *“You have such a narrow view of the world, Mara. Your memories are incomplete, your current perception of reality flawed, but this will change. You are maturing, your body beginning to realise its true potential. Soon, your mind will follow its example. There is no need to be frightened.”*

“But I *am* frightened.” The admission slipped out of her as she flopped back against the pillows and stared at the Lifelights, now clustered around her and the laptop. Their glow was subtle in daylight but still a comfort to her.

“No, you’re not, Mara. This has been a shock to you, yes, but don’t confuse that with fear. You will remember. You need time, that’s all.”

She allowed herself a small smile. *That’s the understatement of the decade.* She’d be old and grey before she accepted the sound of his voice in her head.

Laughter permeated every corner of her mind, and she briefly wondered if Sebastian Oran was ever miserable. *“Old and grey, Mara? I haven’t seen you like that for a while—and even if I wanted to, I cannot wait that long. Our gifts bind us together. The attraction we feel is not an option.”*

Mara tensed. *Attraction?* Nope, she wasn’t touching that word or the ‘old and grey’ comment. Instead, she latched on to the other shocking suggestion. “Gifts?” she queried.

Again, he laughed. *“Forgive me; you’re not ready to hear that. Just accept that you’re different and that I’m here. The rest will come.”*

Sound rumbled its way through tensed vocal cords, emerging as a low growl. “Easy for you to say, you’re not the one with an annoying, *strange* man running around your head.”

“True, but I do have an extremely stubborn woman in mine.”

Mara couldn’t stop the smile that curved her mouth, as his irritation filtered through to her. “And whose fault is that, Mr. Oran?”

“Not mine, I assure you. It was your mind, crying out to me, that started this... and please, my name is Sebastian. Call me by it.”

Mara scowled at that, aware that his irritation had shifted into arrogance. She glared at the image on the screen in front of her. It showed a smiling ‘Mr. Oran’ at some charity event or other. She shut the laptop with a snap. It was bad enough having him in her head talking nonsense without having to look at him.

“*Sebastian,*” he reminded her, before the connection faded.

* * * *

She was in a bad mood for the rest of the day. The Lifelights, as usual, responded to her mental state, crowding around her as she struggled with her thoughts. They touched her constantly, sending tingles sweeping across her skin with each contact. Their attention made her feel cherished, but her stress levels continued to rise.

The atmosphere in the cottage felt oppressive, as if charged with the same muscle-tightening emotions that rolled through Mara. It was an

idea that gathered credence as the day progressed. She began to receive tiny electric shocks, like static discharge, as she moved around her home. The crackle and mild pain of each pulse did nothing to improve her mood, and in the end, she avoided anything metallic.

In the evening, Jennie phoned to check on her. Even the telephone spat out electricity. Glaring at her throbbing fingers, Mara still admitted that she was feeling better and reassured her friend that she'd be at work the following day.

Several hours later, back in bed and trying to get to sleep, Mara confronted the truth. The Lifelights had always been her security blanket. Yes, they were strange, inexplicable even, but she accepted their presence as natural, just as her grandparents had. It had never occurred to her to question what they were or why they were in the cottage.

Because of the Lifelights, she had an open mind when it came to supernatural abilities. The thought of telepathy didn't faze her. Sebastian Oran, on the other hand... did.

Why is he so focused on me? Does he know about the Lifelights?

She hoped not. The Lifelights were special secret.

So now what? Sebastian wasn't going to give up, he'd said as much. Mara frowned, glad that she was going back to work tomorrow. At least the café was neutral ground.

Debating her options, Mara wondered if she should do as Sebastian suggested and try to get to know him better. She had a sneaking suspicion that it was the only way she'd get to the truth of what was happening to her.

"Happening, to us," the annoying eavesdropper commented.

Mara plumped up her pillow. "Go away Sebastian. I'm tired."

"I can never really leave you, Mara. I've told you this already. Sleep well though, and dream of me. I'll see you in the morning."

Oh, wonderful.

Mara's grouchy reply, "That's what I was afraid you'd say," was met with a quiet chuckle.

ALINA VOYCE

After a while, her eyelids grew heavy.

Her dreams were rife with Lifelights, electric shocks, and blue-grey eyes.

CHAPTER 4

Stones skittered underfoot as Mara dashed down the cottage's driveway. This was ridiculous. She'd lived with supernatural 'lights' since the age of three and was currently dealing with the attentions of an American telepath. So why couldn't she grasp something as basic as setting her alarm clock?

On the plus side, she couldn't hear the bus yet. Hopefully, it was running late this morning.

As she neared the road, the reason for the lack of polluting noise became clear.

Relief poured through her. Thank goodness for Mr. Thompson, the world's best bus driver.

Her ride to work was parked opposite the driveway, with its engine switched off.

Finding an extra burst of speed for the last few yards, Mara arrived at its open doors, breathless and flushed.

Once there, she came to a shocked halt. *Of all the devious...*

"Good Morning, pretty girl." Mr. Thompson interrupted her train of thought, smiling down at her from behind the steering wheel. Every morning, his greeting was the same.

What wasn't the same as other mornings was the tall, tailored figure leaning casually against the ticket machine, looking as if he had every right to be there.

Sebastian Oran.

She stared in consternation from one man to the other. Her brain had

yet to form a coherent sentence, let alone get one as far as her mouth.

Mr. Thompson began speaking again. “Mr. Oran was just explaining about your new travel arrangements, young lady. Have to say, I’m going to miss seeing you on here, but I can’t say that I blame you either. It’s going to be a whole lot comfier travelling in *that* beauty.” His eyes crinkled, and his mouth turned up into the familiar smile that Mara loved. He nodded his head towards the front of the bus.

After glaring at Sebastian, who pretended not to notice and continued to smile innocently, she turned her head to look through the bus’s windscreen.

Parked a little way ahead, hugging both verge and tarmac with its fluid, low-slung design, a lustrous black car screamed for attention. The early morning light highlighted every precise, sculpted curve.

Despite herself, Mara blinked. How had she missed that?

“But....” Her traitor of a brain still wasn’t giving her anything sensible to say.

Sebastian took immediate advantage. Turning towards Mr. Thompson, he shook his hand. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Thompson. And please, don’t worry; I’ll take good care of your ‘pretty girl.’”

He raised his hand to wave to the other passengers, who seemed unconcerned by the delay to their journey. Amazingly, several waved back.

Mara struggled to form a protest, but a moment later, she was pushed firmly backwards. Sebastian steadied her as she stumbled on the uneven grass verge and then stepped to one side, taking her hand in his.

She wasn’t brave enough to cause a scene.

Raising her hand in a reflexive wave, Mara watched with growing horror as the bus pulled away. It disappeared around the next bend in the road before the reality of her situation truly hit home. It was just the two of them now, standing beside a deserted country road.

The thought that she should be screaming at this point, or running, *did* cross her mind—but she found herself doing neither. Considering the surreal quality of the last two days, maybe that wasn’t so surprising?

How had Sebastian put it? ‘You needn’t be alone anymore, I’ve found you again.’

The words didn’t sound like a threat—they were merely a statement of fact. Sebastian Oran believed that he had every right to be here with her. What was even more bizarre was the fact that she found herself wanting to agree with him.

That was what kept her here, with her hand in his. No matter how many personal safety rules she was breaking, it was her gut reaction to this man that kept her beside him. She just hoped she was right... and didn’t end up as a headline in the morning papers.

Turning, Mara tilted back her head so that she could look directly into Sebastian’s face. “Okay, you win. What’s next?”

His arrogant satisfaction filled her mind as he released her hand. He curled his arm around her shoulders, and a jolt rippled through her muscles as she registered his touch; the bunched fibres flexed beneath his touch. Trepidation, excitement, and confusion fought for supremacy inside her.

She wasn’t experienced with men, not at all, but she wasn’t stupid either. Through Jennie, she’d experienced relationships vicariously, acting as a sympathetic agony sponge on more than one occasion. Though they’d been one-sided, she’d learned enough through their girly chats to recognise the truth of what Sebastian had said the evening before.

The attraction between them was real, she just hadn’t a clue what to do with it.

For a moment, she allowed herself to consider what it would be like to throw caution to the proverbial wind. How would it feel to explore what was between them? The possibilities... her breath sped up. *Wait, what am I thinking?*

“Interesting thoughts.”

Mara glanced at Sebastian, which was a mistake.

He has mesmerising eyes. Flashes of silver light raced, vortex-like, around intense black pupils. They pulled her deeper into the man himself.

She found herself leaning towards him, fascinated and curious.

Then he blinked, and she stilled. What was she *doing*?

“You begin to see, I think. You are ‘my’ Mara.”

Mara allowed the impact of the words to flow through her. As with the Lifelights, it was the emotions that Sebastian triggered, together with a confusing mass of awareness, that had the strongest effect.

She became aware of her blood, hot and alive, coursing through her veins. It was as if champagne flowed alongside corpuscle and plasma, fizzing and bubbling its way around her body. It rushed from organ to organ, raising her temperature further and expanding her emotions and senses, until all reason had been pushed aside, leaving her lightheaded.

Whoever Sebastian Oran was, he couldn't, wouldn't be ignored.

Mara had always known that a part of her had died with her parents. A piece of her soul had gone AWOL. For the first time in nineteen years, she dared to wonder if she'd found it again. Because, for whatever reason, Sebastian was important to her—she could *feel* that. Was *he* her missing piece, a man who refused to take 'no' for an answer?

Need. Hope. It had been a long time since she'd felt either of those.

Though she recognised that she would never have survived without the love she'd received from her grandparents and the Lifelights—that was all she'd done. The thought of finally starting to *live* was tempting.

Sebastian capitalised on her stillness. She could feel him in her mind, almost intrusive, examining the thoughts that held her captive.

He stepped closer, tightening his arm around her shoulders, before bending his head slowly towards hers. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her, but instead, he pressed his mouth close to her ear and breathed out slowly.

Delicious warmth cascaded across the sensitive nerves of her neck and down her spine. Then he spoke.

“To answer your question, Mara, next I drive you to work. Then we talk, this morning, this evening, for as long as we need to and by whatever means possible. You have questions. I understand that. Your

concerns need to be addressed. However, know this, we have a bond, one that will only grow stronger. The outcome of our meeting, our future relationship, is already determined.”

Mara shivered.

She found his voice disturbing. It tugged at something in her mind, the pitch and cadence strangely familiar. It comforted her... warmed her.

He pulled away, waiting until she gave him a nod of understanding. His fingers brushed along her shoulder and down the line of her spine. Then his hand pressed against her back, steering her towards the side of the car.

She stopped only when her hand touched the cold metal of the door that he held open for her. Her inbuilt fear of getting into strange cars, drilled into her over the years, was strong. It warred with an equally strong urge to do what Sebastian wanted. In that moment of hesitation, her brain unexpectedly threw out a question.

“What sort of car is this? I don’t think I’ve seen one like it before.”

Sebastian stroked his hand along the top of the door, his expression somewhat smug. He covered her fingers with his.

“Do you know, I’m not quite sure... yet. Why don’t we find out? Of course, as with most things, the make is insignificant. It’s the hidden potential that’s exciting.” His gaze linked with hers, “Don’t you agree?”

With a shrug, she decided that it really didn’t matter. Swallowing her remaining nerves, she allowed herself to be guided into the passenger seat. Sebastian waited patiently while she was settled, then closed the door with a soft thud.

And Mara found herself in another world.

She’d never been in a car as luxurious as this. The seat beneath her hugged her body, moulding her small frame. She liked it, and that surprised her. Personal fears notwithstanding, she’d always believed she was the wrong sex to appreciate cars.

This was something different though, and she began to see what Sebastian had meant. The car felt *alive*, humming with potential,

even without the engine running. Excited anticipation filled her. *Another first*, she thought.

Seating himself next to her, Sebastian threw out a smile, the silver in his eyes sparkling. “Are you ready for this?”

Her heart picked up its pace. “I think so. This is going to be something special, isn’t it?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he turned towards the dashboard. With a touch of his hand, the car’s engine started.

“Oh yes, Mara, with you on board, it’s going to be spectacular. Didn’t you know? Cars are like men; they can’t help showing off in front of the ladies.”

That was all the warning she got.

The power of acceleration forced Mara deep into her seat as the countryside around them flashed past. The tarmac disappeared beneath them with ever increasing speed, and tiny flashes of light decorated the dashboard. Sebastian’s movements were unhurried, confident, and precise, steering the car around each bend with ease. Mara’s heartbeat quickened with every twist and turn.

She relished the experience, astonished that she could, as exhilaration eclipsed fear. This was a car like no other. This was a car she could come to covet.

Even though he took the longest possible route between Mara’s home and The Tea Cosy, they still completed the journey in record time, pulling up in front of the café a good ten minutes before she usually arrived.

She exhaled, letting out her breath with a soft ‘whoosh’.

When she turned towards him, Sebastian was clearly pleased with himself. “So, come on, spill the beans. What kind of car is this really?” she asked.

He grinned, “It’s an Oran Industries prototype.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “Oh, *come on*, Sebastian. Even I know that companies keep their prototypes securely under wraps. If this car really was a prototype, it would have been locked up and tested to destruction in some secret lab, not racing round the English countryside.”

She held up her hand when Sebastian looked as if he was going to argue, before continuing. “And don’t tell me it’s ‘okay’ because you’re the boss. Regardless, I won’t believe you.”

“But it’s the truth!” Sebastian protested. “I’m not just the Chief Executive at Oran Industries, I also have a hand in the designing and testing of some of our products.”

“Uh-huh, and I’m a secret billionaire!”

Mara began to get cross, wondering why he’d bother lying to her about this.

“But I’m not lying. Just because you won’t believe me, doesn’t mean I’m not telling you the truth, my Mara.”

His eyes were amused.

Mara scowled in response. “Stop calling me ‘your’ Mara and *stop* with the mind talking. Keep out of my head, Mr. Oran, and keep your thoughts to yourself.”

“Oh Mara, please don’t start that again. I thought you’d got over being bothered by this?”

“I had, sort of, but if you aren’t going to talk sense, then you needn’t bother, with either your mouth or your mind.”

A smile curled at the corners of his mouth. “Okay, Mara, you win this time. But if I show you what’s under the hood, will you at least *try* to keep an open mind?”

She remained suspicious but decided it would be churlish to refuse. Grabbing her things, she opened her door, swung her legs around onto the pavement, and stood up.

Already out of the car and standing by the passenger door, Sebastian had extended his hand to help her out, but she ignored his offer.

Shrugging, he turned to open and secure the bonnet before casually walking away over to a nearby lamppost. He leaned against it, arms folded and eyes watchful.

Mara turned her attention to the car. Contrarily, she found herself irritated by the fact that he’d moved so far away, and she found herself frowning.

But then her attention was caught by what she saw in front of her. Amazingly, it was something she recognised, having covered the pros and cons of electric motor versus the combustion engine in science at school. Her frown deepened as she looked across at Sebastian. “But... I don’t understand?”

“I said this car is a prototype, Mara. I didn’t say that what’s under the hood is the prototype. I also didn’t mention that this particular car will never be on general release. It will be made in limited numbers and tailored to the needs of specific customers.”

Mara was uncertain of the significance of that last piece of information, but something told her it was important. She decided to concentrate on the first part of what Sebastian had said.

“But your company deals with alternative energy; the fact that this car runs on electricity is testament to that. This motor doesn’t look any different to the others I’ve seen though, so if it’s not that, then it must be a new way of...”

Her eyes widened, as something in her brain clicked into place.

She quickly made a circuit of the car, her eyes running over its smoothly sculpted lines. “Where’s the recharge point for the battery?”

Sebastian didn’t reply. Instead, he stretched out a hand and studied it carefully.

“Are you going to apologise, Mara?”

He deserved one. She’d all but called him a liar. With a concerted effort, Mara tried to make her apology count. She thought rather than spoke her reply, attempting to push the words out from her mind.

“I suppose I do owe you an apology, Sebastian.”

He stilled, his eyes rising to stare at her in disbelief, and then he grinned, warmth spreading through his blue-grey eyes as he bounded across the space between them. He’d picked her up before she had a chance to avoid him, swinging her around. By the time he set her down again, she was cradled against him. Taken by surprise, her eyes tracked the movement of his left hand, fascinated. He raised it to her face and gently stroked it along her cheek.

Everywhere his fingers touched, her skin tingled in response. His expression held pride as words flooded her mind.

“Apology accepted, my clever girl. I was wondering when you’d speak to me like this. I knew you could do it if you tried.”

Mara drew in a deep breath, aware that his stare had become intense, and made her decision. She was twenty-two... old enough to handle this—hopefully.

Mentally following the movements of his hand as it rubbed its way in soothing sweeps across her back, she forced herself to speak.

“So, it’s not the engine that’s prototype. It’s the fuel.”

Sebastian gave a grudging nod. “*Yes.* It’s the fuel that’s prototype, and since the fuel isn’t part of the car, I can use it without fear of anyone discovering our secret.”

His hand caressed her, his expression once again turning smug. Wait, did he just pull her closer?

Mara could feel herself slipping towards total panic. She could accept that there was something between them, could even consider letting go of her inhibitions, but it was another thing altogether to actually do it.

Sebastian moved his other hand to her chin, tilting it upwards. She could see the silver light in his eyes. It made her feel strange... overheated.

Her breath began to shudder, and she castigated herself for her cowardliness, but... she couldn’t do this. She’d be brave another time. Just not right now. After all, they were standing outside The Tea Cosy, not the best place to explore their attraction to each other. They were in public, for crying out loud.

She took a physical step back and concentrated on keeping to the subject.

“How can a fuel source be separate to the car? It doesn’t make sense; the motor needs something to power it.”

“Indeed it does. Unfortunately, that’s the information that’s secret and ‘prototype.’ I couldn’t possibly tell you how it works. Not unless I

kidnapped you to keep you from telling or....” Sebastian stopped abruptly, his smile turning calculating and a little wicked.

Mara knew she shouldn't ask, but she couldn't stop the words, “Or what?”

“Or you could always try prying my secrets from me through pillow talk. What do you think? I might be so overcome by you that I won't be able to help myself. Potentially, I could tell you everything you want to know.”

This sudden, uncharacteristic suggestion from the ever-controlled Sebastian Oran came as a shock. After a moment of stunned silence, Mara moved. Something was stirring inside her, daring her.

Keeping her mind as blank as possible, she smiled up at him—deliberately sweet.

Her eyes gazed into his as she raised her left foot before slamming it down onto the top of his. The force behind it caused him to jump back, an expression of shock flashing out at her.

She grinned back, following the move with a quick, hard, shove to his chest. She wasn't sure if she'd caught him off-balance or simply by surprise, but it didn't matter.

He staggered.

Turning on her heel, Mara marched over to The Tea Cosy's door and rummaged for her key. She successfully wrapped her fingers around it and shoved it into the lock as she heard the car being secured and felt Sebastian come up behind her.

He crowded her into the wood panelling, his hands landing on either side of her.

“That was uncalled for, ‘my’ Mara, you should apologise again.”

The café door swung inwards, and Mara gave a heartfelt laugh of relief as she stepped across the threshold. Spinning around, she felt a strange, bravery enhancing *something* rushing through her.

She was enjoying herself!

With space between them once again, she turned to grin at him, unrepentant. “No, I won't be apologising. You were moving way too fast, Sebastian. You deserved everything you got.”

He watched her, his eyes assessing and brighter than ever in the café's dim light. Then he too grinned, his face taking on a mischievous expression. This was a side of him that Mara hadn't encountered before. It suited him.

"Okay, have it your own way. You have to admit though; it might have been fun. Think of all those corporate secrets you've missed out on. Ah well, perhaps you'd better get on with your work then. I'll sit here and watch you bake. I have at least an hour spare. It will give me an idea of how things will be... when we're together."

"In your dreams," she thought, trying to glare, whilst ignoring the urge to laugh—and the inner glow, slowly spreading through her.

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