

Made to Order Chapter One

“Think of it as a rite of passage. They’re taking you seriously when they try to assassinate you.”

Tosha smiled grimly. “Thanks for cheering me up. Give those long legs a rest, won’t you?”

“Sorry. I forgot your stiletto heels era is over.” Jeff slowed his pace with a chuckle, allowing her to catch her breath.

She thought about telling him she could run a mile in stilettos, had been doing so since she was thirteen, but that would bring back the days she was trying to leave behind. Not that the press would ever allow her to do so. She’d always be “Untamed Tosha” to the paparazzi, despite her tailored suits, silk ties, and shined oxfords that looked no different from Jeff’s daily business wear. They were the male and female versions of executive perfection, their outfits nearly identical but for his red and her blue ties.

Tosha Cameron had come a great distance in four years, greater still in the last year since her father’s death, which had left her the owner and CEO of Life Tech Industries. To most, she was still the wild child, the party girl whose escapades overshadowed the work she’d done to redeem herself.

Tosha shoved aside the angst that awoke when she turned reflective. Her expensive black shoes tapped an accompaniment to Jeff’s heavier thudding as they crossed the cavernous shuttle bay of CyberServe’s space factory. With Life Tech Industries, she had a multi-trillion-dollar company to run, a board to keep happy, employees to feed and house. And now, assassins to thwart.

Lowering her voice so their wide-eyed guide wouldn’t hear, Tosha murmured, “Are you sure this is the way to go? Peace was reached less than thirty years ago on Earth. Plenty survivors remember these things.”

“No kidding.” It was Jeff’s turn to look grim, the lines etched deep at the corners of his eyes. Most of the scar on his jaw was hidden by his graying beard, but it peeked out where it came close to his cheek. *Got that when I danced too close to a cyborg*, he’d told her when she was a little girl already unafraid to ask questions. Jeff referred to his past on Earth, where he’d been born, as the Cyborg Ball. His years fighting in unceasing rebellions against the corporate armies that battled each other for control over dwindling resources had led to many dances with cyborgs. For fifty years, the man-machines had been the rival corporations’ preferred soldiers. They’d damned near danced Earth to death.

“Sorry. No one knows about the wars better than you.”

They left the bay and entered a corridor. Worn carpet. Bare walls, with doorways slitting them at regular intervals. CyberServe was a new startup, long on potential, short on credit. Tosha wondered what this part of Alpha Space Station had been before the engineer-heavy company had moved in.

“Mr. Beauchamp hopes you don’t mind meeting him where we store the units.” Their guide’s spidery fingers adjusted a tie that wasn’t black enough to hide the darker spot of a stain.

“That’s fine. I appreciate viewing the product right away.” Especially since this was a private matter she was seeing to on company time.

“Um, well, it isn’t the finished product, you understand. They’re the raw materials. The product chassis, so to speak.” The guide, most likely an engineer or mechanic when he wasn’t playing escort, cleared his throat and adjusted his tie again.

“Of course.” Tosha and Jeff exchanged a smirk.

Tosha hadn’t asked how CyberServe had come to Jeff’s attention. He was a numbers man, Life Tech’s CFO, buried in ledgers and accounts. Hell, he’d helped build Life Tech into the behemoth it had become, working alongside her father for years to take a small medical manufacturing plant into the largest supplier of bio-printed organs and metal-alloy limb replacements. Life Tech was bigger than big when Earth’s every square inch had seen war and much of space beyond Station Epsilon on the other side of Mars remained a lawless frontier.

“Here we are.” Their escort, whose name Tosha had already forgotten, ushered them into a room more cavernous than the parking bay.

Tosha stopped short a few steps into the storage bay. She gaped at the bodies hanging by the hundreds—maybe thousands—from the ceiling. Rows upon rows, like slabs of beef in a butcher’s shop.

She swallowed and focused on the metal glints peeking from several bodies. Not corpses. Cyborgs, salvaged from Earth’s warehouses.

It still looked like a madman’s abattoir. She glanced at Jeff.

His gaze moved over the macabre display, mouth and eyes pinched with controlled emotion. Tosha wondered what he saw as he stared at the monstrosities. The bloody past? The terror of being a vulnerable human? Did he feel triumph that his former foes appeared ravaged, that they hung inert, impotent? Or was there only pain and hatred that he’d lost so much to them?

Tosha stared up at the nearest row, at the large, muscled bodies designed to strike fear into a target city or town with their impervious appearance. From what she’d read, the warfare between competing corporations, which vied for absolute control over Earth’s resources and people, had been just as much mental as physical. A cyborg army marching down the streets, each component over six feet tall and bristling with musculature, would have been terrifying indeed. Yet men like Jeff, often starving from the endless embargoes, had dared to “dance” with such imposing beasts. Using ancient or improvised weaponry, they’d fought state-of-the-art manufactured soldiers. And they’d won in the end.

She touched him. “Are you okay?”

His lips twisted into a snarl. The arm under her hand thrummed with energy. He jerked, as if he’d snatch free of the contact. Then he relaxed, and calm settled over his somehow harsh yet attractive features. A slow, satisfied smile pulled at his lips.

“Everything’s great.” He patted her hand. “Everything’s exactly as it should be.”

She grinned at him. “The enemy put in its proper place?”

“Damn straight, Skippy. Let’s hear the sales pitch.”

They nodded to their waiting escort, who’d wisely kept his mouth shut as they absorbed the shock. He twitched his tie, smiled and bobbed his head uncertainly, and led them through the rows of inert forms to the room’s center, where a podium and Alexander Beauchamp the III waited.

It was hard to focus her attention on CyberServe’s owner and CEO, due to the figures standing on the stage behind him. Somehow, Tosha forced herself to do so. Beauchamp was perhaps five years older than her, in his mid-thirties, all angles and pointed joints. His white coat hung badly on stooped shoulders. He was balding, his hopeful smile hovering beneath his long, crooked nose. No doubt he’d go for a full body contour and refacing if his venture panned out. There were no successful homely men within the Interplanetary Trade and Commerce System, commonly referred to as the ITCS.

The woman next to him was buxom with fashionable purple-tinged silver hair. She hadn't been totally contoured, but had hit the highlights to voluptuous appeal. Her suit, while nowhere as expensive as Tosha's, was nicely made under her technician's white coat. Her tie was purple to match the ends of her layered hair.

"Welcome to CyberServe, Mr. Cameron, Mr. Rourke." Beauchamp offered a slightly trembling hand. "I'm Alexander Beauchamp. This is my head engineer, Lillian Kwolek."

"Mr. Beauchamp. Mr. Kwolek. It's a pleasure." Tosha greeted them warmly, envying Kwolek the freedom to indulge in the latest styling trends. Her own black hair was arranged in a conservative chignon. She'd have traded one of her twice-monthly body contours to get away with something more daring. Respectable corporate norms were stifling.

Kwolek nodded, as cool and professional as Beauchamp was hectic with hope. "We're delighted you're considering purchasing a unit for your personal security needs. CyberServe cyborgs are recycled from the old Earth wars, but they're upgraded with the best modern technology. Programming options are state-of-the-art, allowing you to tailor your unit exactly as you see fit. It can be as utilitarian or as personable as you desire."

The word *desire* hung with neon colors in Tosha's brain. The cyborgs, each under a spotlight's glare as they stood motionless on the platform, were naked. She blinked to note three were equipped with lifelike sexual organs. The fourth had apparently been outfitted similarly, but the collagen xenograft material that remained was in shreds.

"I never realized cyborgs were anatomically correct."

"Oh, yeah, um..." Beauchamp flushed.

"What better way to demoralize your enemies than an automaton wielding a fully functioning cock?" Jeff growled.

The hair rose on the back of Tosha's neck. "You don't mean—"

"I do mean. Male and female victims alike. And their sacks? Capable of thawing frozen sperm within seconds. They could add insult to injury nine months later, should the current ruling corporation refuse embryo transfer."

Tosha swallowed hard. Beauchamp and Kwolek appeared as sickened as she felt. Like her, they were probably starkids, born on space stations or long-range ships. Few starkids visited Earth.

She gestured at the lineup. "Any idea if any of these took part in such crimes?"

"Almost all records, both from their memory banks and the central operations hubs, were erased when the FPC government seized control of Earth," Beauchamp said.

"Didn't matter. The FPC executed anyone directly involved with the cyborg armies." Cold satisfaction oozed from Jeff's voice. Tosha thought his sole regret was having escaped Earth before the Free People's Coalition, known as the FPC, finally defeated the last corporate kingpin and established a democratic government.

"It's astonishing the cyborgs weren't dismantled when they were ruled illegal on Earth." Tosha eyed each in turn.

"After decades of fighting, the planet's in shambles. Its resources barely sustain what's left of the population. Everything's for sale, past be damned. Including these monstrosities."

Tosha was glad to have remained ignorant of the horrors of a Terran life. She'd been born eight weeks early on Space Station Nu, at the far edge of the galaxy's settled area...a region with its own dangers from pirates and criminals eager to avoid justice. As soon as she and her mother Kiara had been well enough to travel, they'd fled to Space Station Epsilon, in civilized territory halfway between Nu and Earth.

She knew few people who'd lived on her ancestors' planet. Jeff had so many horror stories, she was comfortable in her ignorance. The independent ITCS was perilous with companies dispatching assassins to intimidate or eradicate rivals, but at least there was no open warfare. The Secure Defense Department saw to that.

Tosha's reluctance to choose a cyborg for a bodyguard mounted, but as Jeff had pointed out, it was damned hard for a successful business owner to know whom to trust with his life. Assassins regularly infiltrated private security companies.

"Tell me what we have here," she sighed.

Beauchamp and Kwolek were at her side in an instant, eager to impress. "These four were chosen because they're in the best shape of what Earth sent us. We can have any of them report for duty within a week. On the far left is SIF-3806, the earliest cyborg model." Beauchamp licked his lips. Tosha wondered whether it was because of the bay's dry air or because the SIF was as shapely as a porn star.

"It was originally an infiltrator and spy unit," Kwolek specified.

"Good thing I don't have serious esteem issues. She's stacked and stunning," Tosha joked.

"It had to look good to get close to the right people in order to carry out its function of information gathering and assassination."

Beauchamp was quick to change the subject. "This model might be to your liking if you prefer a female presence. With our exclusive full programming package, she could protect you, along with behaving as a confidante who'll keep all your secrets. Our human emotion protocol design is ahead of any other artificial lifeform behavioral tech. Models indicate the cyborgs might achieve actual sentience with the advanced programs in our full package."

"Full package, huh?" Tosha bit back a smile at the bait.

"My business plan includes programming tiers, starting from the bare bones needs of the client to all-inclusive access of our entire library, with new updates provided for the life of the purchase. Or the customer can buy a unit and purchase single programs as their needs change." He beamed.

Kwolek nudged him, and he blinked, his expression blank. "You forgot the special offer for Mr. Cameron."

"I did?" He turned a blistering red. "I could have sworn—I didn't tell you that as our first customer, you'd be getting the all-inclusive with whichever unit you choose?"

"It must have slipped your mind," Tosha said, her tone smooth. The poor guy was embarrassed enough without her laughing at him. "Most generous, Mr. Beauchamp."

"It's in the hope you'll endorse CyberServe once you've had your own cyborg for a few months. If a major client such as yourself is happy with a unit—"

"An excellent proposal, Mr. Beauchamp. Tell me about this next model."

It was the cyborg with his manly bits ripped off. Now that she knew what had been done with those manly bits, Tosha could imagine someone taking some measure of revenge.

"CCM-121162. Originally built to capture and contain those its masters preferred kept alive. You notice the streamlined body? It was fast on any terrain. It would make a good tennis partner, if that's your sport." Kwolek eyed it with appreciation.

"Our next candidate is PSM-3437. These were the cleanup guys and builders, used to clear rubble and erect structures used by human area commanders. Rarely implemented for combat, so there's that." Beauchamp beamed hopefully.

"Those were also the guards and wardens for captured prisoners used to gain ransom. Or they tortured captives for information on the resistance."

Beauchamp cleared his throat nervously. "Of course. The initials indicate prison and security, the PSM's main function."

"They were the corporations' most intimate tools to terrorize on an individual basis, if you get my drift." Jeff stared at the blushing Beauchamp until the poor man's gaze skittered away.

Kwolek smiled with easy nonchalance. "I work with a PSM daily to test my newest programs. He's a lamb."

"Well, this guy's a brute." Tosha gaped at the last potential candidate.

He was huge, at least six-feet-five and all bulky muscle where it hadn't been torn off, allowing the metal chassis to show. One lens was missing, showing a baleful orange eye. The other was tawny brown, still intact. His rugged features were brutishly masculine, terrifying.

Tosha was almost afraid to look between the behemoth's legs, but curiosity won out. It was big, but far from the battering ram she'd half-feared she'd see. Perfect, in fact. Too bad it was attached to such a frightening creature.

"The face of the wars. The Wall is the most recognizable of the cyborgs." Beauchamp also gawped at it with awe.

"The Wall?"

"The collective nickname for the ground fighting force. This beast is TWM-22121. Imagine a battalion of these guys marching into your city. Fully shielded and armed, programmed to steamroll over any resistance, he could have taken out a dozen human fighters by himself."

"More," Jeff muttered.

Tosha sidled close to him. "Are you sure you want to see any cyborg on a daily basis? After all, I'll be bringing my protection to the office with me."

"You need the best. If CyberServe has their shit together, and I think they do, a cyborg will be the ticket." Jeff drew up tall and offered her a reassuring smile. "I've dealt with worse circumstances. I can handle looking at these ugly bastards if it means taking care of you."

"Okay." If Jeff was certain, then she should be too. She regarded the cyborgs in turn.

The SIF was beautiful. Any would-be assassin would be surprised to find himself facing off with the elegant stunner. Which was why Tosha crossed her off the list almost immediately. It would be far better to warn off as many enemies as possible with a show of power right off the bat. She wanted a bodyguard whose very presence shouted "don't fuck with me."

The CCM was toned, a decent but far from intimidating presence. Or maybe it was because he was missing his manhood. Tosha wondered if she'd ever be able to look at him without visualizing his tattered crotch. She mentally filed the unit away as a *maybe*.

The PSM had more presence. Yet Jeff's assertion that the model had been most tasked to carry out personal violence made her stomach churn. It was silly to strike him from her potential list since such programs had been deleted, but she couldn't quell the disgust he inspired.

The CCM's lone competition was the TWM. If Tosha wanted to intimidate her enemies, he certainly fit the bill. No one would doubt the bruiser meant business.

Beauchamp had called him "the face of the war." A potential PR nightmare if she had to deal with those who'd been through those terrible decades.

"What's a full-face skin graft go for?" she asked Jeff.

"From our company?" He mused only a second before rattling off a substantial but reasonable amount. He gazed at her approvingly. "It would be a good move, all things considered."

His praise rolled off her because an idea had just blazed with brilliance in her mind. "Mr. Beauchamp, where are you getting replacement parts for your cyborgs?"

“Do you mean the metal endoskeleton?”

“All of it. Molded body shaping, organs, skin.”

“We’re contracting with a few manufacturers to start with. We’ve been getting bids from everyone, including your company. In the long run, it would be great to take care of it ourselves, once we get the capital.”

“What about partnering with a medical-technology company long term? That is, if its CEO is pleased with her trial run of your product.”

Beauchamp and Jeff gasped simultaneously. Kwolek squealed, losing a few coolness points in Tosha’s estimation. But she earned a gold star for merchandise enthusiasm.

Tosha held up a hand. “I need to evaluate the cyborg before making an actual offer. Finance has to crunch the numbers, Marketing has to research how lucrative it would be for Life Tech to branch out from our purely medical mission statement, and so on. But if you’re interested—”

“Yes, Mr. Cameron! Absolutely. I’m grateful you’d consider such a thing.” Beauchamp looked ready to simultaneously blast off and pass out. “Tell me what you need, and consider it done.”

“We’ll start with anticipated material costs per unit,” Jeff said. “Then your sales projections and—we’ll go over it all after we finish with this business.”

Tosha winced at his tight tone. “Sorry I sprang this on you without warning. It shot straight from my brain to my mouth.”

“In my experience, those are usually the best ideas.” He forgave her instantly. “It’s worth a preliminary investigation.”

“A lot of hurdles.” Tosha regretted having spoken out so impetuously. She’d worked hard to curb spontaneous impulses.

“The first is which of these you’re taking for a test drive.”

“The big boy. I’ll take the Wall.”

She grinned up at her lifeless acquisition. For all her apologies, she was excited about the potential to branch out Life Tech’s product line, to put a personal stamp on her father’s company.

Cyborg security was only the beginning. Based on Beauchamp’s assertions, the sky was the limit on the work such automatons could perform for humankind’s benefit. Tosha Cameron, former wild child and scandal-ridden party girl, would be on the revolution’s ground floor.