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Star Struck

Written by Jane Lovering

Published by Choc Lit

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Star Struck

Jane Lovering



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First published 2011 by Choc Lit Limited

Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK

www.choclitpublishing.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-906931-69-8

Prologue

Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away ...

The huge, helmet-headed alien moved forward, gas hissing slightly from the respiration packs on its back, but the man in the ripped shirt stood unmoving under the glare of the desert sun. He barely even blinked as the lumbering form came closer, merely held out his arms; one hand hovered close to his blaster-rifle, and his trigger finger twitched ominously.

Behind them both, out of sight, out of range, Jack watched, bleary-eyed, feeling as though the back of his skull had been unscrewed and inexpertly replaced. All his muscles ached in the kind of concerted unity that meant things had been very, very bad recently and, although he vaguely understood what was going on, he couldn't for the life of him remember what he was supposed to be doing about it.

Suddenly the alien stumbled, lurched forward under the weight of the gas tanks, and its momentum carried it onwards and downwards until it hit the ground at the feet of the armed man, where it sprawled, helmet askew, grunting with the force of the impact.

The armed man threw his head back and laughed at the sky.

There was a sudden cry of 'Cut! For fuck's sake!' and a third man burst onto the scene, large and angry in a worn T-shirt. 'Christ! Gethryn, you could at least help the poor bastard to stand up!' But Gethryn just put both hands out in a helpless gesture, bending forward under the weight of his laughter and the now helmetless alien, revealed as a skinny guy with an encroaching bald spot, was forced to scramble to his feet via his knees, finally being helped to stand by two flustered girls who had to let go of their clipboards to assist him.

Jack watched warily, half a moment from helping. Behind his eyes pinpricks of light swung; gravity had no meaning other than to give 'down' and 'up' some kind of notional value, which his stomach was ignoring, and his ears registered a vague thrumming from some seriously heavy-duty engines somewhere off to his left. *This isn't good. In fact, this is so far out the other side of good that it's probably circling hell.*

'Hey, Iceman!'

That's me, thought Jack. *Yeah. Fairly sure that's me. What does he want me to do? God, my head hurts.*

Angry-man walked over to him, clearly suffering a serious case of artistic strop. 'You're gonna have to do something about him, Ice. We can't keep shooting the show like this, and, you know, he was four hours late onto set today. I had to shoot the battle scene first and that's kinda thrown the timing out for tomorrow. Ice? You listening?'

Urgh. 'Yeah, yeah, I'm listening. Look ... um ... Scotty ...' *Please let that be his name ...* 'I'll deal with it, okay?'

A pause. Angry-man ... Scotty (probably) stared into his eyes for a second, then dropped his gaze to the dusty desert beneath his feet. 'Okay, boss, if you say so. Just, you know, make it soon, eh? Before we get cancelled?'

Cancelled. That's bad, I know that much. God, wish I could think straight. He squinted into the sunlight at the team of people behind Angry ... Scotty's shoulder. Bustling, busy, all moving with the precision of a machine, and here he stood like a loose cog. This was *his* machine, and it was going to break down if he didn't fix it.

I'm a waste of a watch-strap. A hopeless, guilt-ridden drunk – I'm being offered everything that could mean something to me and if I don't sort myself out I'm going to lose it all.

Chapter One

‘What do you want most in all the world?’

Usually my answer to this is ‘to wake up gradually’, but this clearly wasn’t the answer Felix had in mind. He’s one of those congenitally cheerful people, full of energy and enthusiasm, like a spaniel. That talks. On amphetamines.

‘Right now, Felix, I want you to go away. To Australia, preferably, but anywhere a long way away will do. Somewhere where they punish people who are jolly in the mornings. Close the door behind you.’ I turned over and pulled the duvet higher around my ears. He might be my best friend, but jolting me out of blissful sleep was no way to go about showing it. ‘I mean it.’

‘Ha. Come on, Skye. Really. The thing that you most want, ever.’ He bounced around a bit. At least, I think he was bouncing; I still had my eyes closed, but the furniture was clunking and ornaments kept falling over.

‘Still you, to go away.’ I humphed myself around in the bed and winched open my eyes. ‘You are contravening the Geneva Convention, you know, breaking into my house and waking me up.’

‘Darling, you are no fun.’ He sat on the edge of the bed, which made me feel like a hospital patient, and a rattling sound told me he’d picked up the little brown bottle from my cabinet. ‘I’ve told you about these sleepers – emergencies only.’

‘I had bad dreams,’ I muttered.

‘The doctor said occasional use only.’

‘Yeah, well, I’ve got an occasional table and I use that pretty much all the time.’

Felix gave me a hard stare. 'But still ... Anyway, why aren't you working? I thought you'd got a load of people wanting your –' he coughed pointedly – 'research skills.'

'Research is a real job you know. It's not like I'm running some kind of porn hotline, anyway my Internet is still down. Five days and counting, I'm going to ring them today and ...'

'And what? Be ineffectual at them? Skye, you need to ...'

'You know about those people who suddenly turn on their best friends?'

A pause. 'Yes?'

'I was being subtle. I'm sort of waiting for you to take the hint. Look, just say what you came to say, Fe, then go, all right?' I was beginning to regret giving him a key now. It was supposed to be on the understanding that he only used it if it was *absolutely vital*, but he'd developed a very loose interpretation of *absolutely vital* lately. It had apparently been *absolutely vital* that he came in last week while I was hanging out the washing; when I got in from the garden he'd been half-way through my toast and marmalade and had made me jump so hard I'd nearly wet myself.

'Here goes then ...' I couldn't see him past the shoulder of duvet, but the mattress wobbled as he breathed heavily in a useless attempt at suspense. 'I've got tickets to the *Fallen Skies* convention.'

I'd been so sure he was going to tell me that he'd finally, *finally* got a long-term part in one of the soap operas he was continually auditioning for, that I'd got the words 'That's terrific' already lined up on my tongue. 'That's terrific,' I said, so as not to waste them, and then, '*what?*' I sat up so suddenly that my head sang, and was confronted by Felix in a bright red velvet jacket and luminous green trousers. 'Ow. Can you not have some sort of warning device for when you're being trendy? You look like someone cut the middle

out of a set of traffic lights.'

'Is that all you can say?' Felix huffed. He leaned forward and stared at me, his hazel eyes a bit wild in his boyish face. Combined with his punky haircut and unshaved cheeks he looked like a Botticelli angel after an all-night party and a lost hairdressing bet. "'*That's terrific?*" I'm telling you that I've got,' and he pulled two cardboard oblongs from his overly tight pocket, 'tickets to the convention for your favourite TV programme *in the world*, which features the deliciously bad Gethryn Tudor-Morgan and, by the way, this outfit is *designer*, totally on-trend, and you just tell me it's *terrific?*'

My heart was pounding, not just from the exertion of disentangling myself from the bedcovers, and my lips were stuck to my teeth. Was he suggesting what I thought he was suggesting? But he *knew*, he of all people *understood* how it was for me ... 'You smell of perfume,' was all I could come out with, nearly non-sequituring myself to death. 'Into girls again, are we?'

Felix stood up, the dimness of the room making his skinny shape appear to loom over me. 'Oh, come on.' He tapped the tickets against one long leg. 'Just think, if my metronome stuck at hetero fifty per cent of the gorgeous people out there would be disappointed.'

'More relieved I'd have thought,' I muttered. He was acting normally. Well, as normally as was normal for Felix, which wasn't very. I must have misread his intentions. He was ... boasting. Yes, just boasting. My eyes followed the tickets, which unfortunately meant staring at Felix's thigh. I was afraid if I looked away the tickets might vanish, disappear back into his pocket never to be seen again. 'Where did you get those from? I thought all convention tickets sold out the day after release? I know *Fallen Skies* isn't exactly *Doctor Who*, but, even so Fe ...'

Felix grinned a Machiavellian grin and tapped the side of his nose. 'Aha. Ask no questions. Suffice it to say, I met a man who knows a man.'

'You meet lots of men,' I said sarcastically. Not really believing, I held out a hand. Slowly, obviously relishing the moment, Felix laid one of the tickets on my palm. 'Bloody hell. Fe.' The blue-tinted card bore the *Fallen Skies* logo of a single jagged peak and a low horizon and looked genuine. I rubbed my thumb over the embossing which didn't, as had memorably once been the case with tickets Fe had 'obtained', smear off onto my skin.

'It's in October. Three months to prep yourself if you want to go?'

My heart skipped and then double-timed like an overwound clock. Did I? Well, of course I *wanted* to, but, you know, I wanted to win the lottery and paint the kitchen and maybe, finally, do something about my terrible hair but ... 'I can't. You know I can't. I mean, I would ... if I could, but ...' Was he doing this to taunt me? To try to force some kind of reaction from a body only recently weaned off so many anti-depressants that it had been a wonder I could even cry at *Bambi*? I'd watched it with Fe last week, just to check. 'Anyway, it's a long way away, isn't it?'

'It's only in America, Skye. They won't let them hold it on Mars. Health and Safety or something. It's five days of *Fallen Skies* – just think about that. Five days. Total immersion.'

I thought about it. About leaving my lovely little Edwardian terraced house, with its view over the ridged mound of grassy earth which led to the base of York's city wall. Where, from my bedroom window, I could see all the various strata of building, starting with the Roman and passing through the Anglo-Saxon and fourteenth century to a block of Victorian repair work squigged on the top like a bit of

incompetent icing. Comforting. Permanent.

And then I thought about Gethryn Tudor-Morgan. Captain Lucas James of the Galactic Fleet, the best pilot in the B'Ha sector, hero of the recent Shadow War, and wearer of the least number of clothes in any given episode. Tall, golden-blond, rangy and *sinfully* good looking. I'd fallen for him before the first ad break of the series, and had remained faithful ever since. But. Even so ...

I looked over at the poster on my bedroom wall where Captain Lucas James stood, one hand shading his eyes from the glare of a CGI double sun, the other hand clasped around the grip of a blaster rifle. His hair rippled behind him in the wake of a fixed-wing jet blasting up into the star-strewn sky, his mouth half-curved into a grin of happy anarchy and all visible muscles bulging. My insides, as ever, liquidised.

Felix watched me with his eyes narrowed. This made his cheeks even pudgier; now he looked like a choirboy having impure thoughts. 'He is gorgeous,' he said, as if noticing the poster for the first time.

'Yeah, well.' I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and stood up, my oversized nightshirt flapping around me. 'I know my limitations, Fe.' *Ugly, ugly Skye* ...

'Ah, Skye.' Felix put his hands on my shoulders. 'You're not *that* bad, y'know. I'd do you. If you weren't my friend, obviously,' he added quickly, as I glared.

'Fe, you'd do *toads* if they didn't keep getting away.' I raked a hand through my hair. It too was suffering this morning, scrubby and tousled at the back and lank at the front and yet it was the least of my appearance-related worries. 'Oh. And you're still here. I'm going to call the UN. Have you crated up and locked away.' The smell of drugged sleep hung heavy around me, sweet and fuggy. I rubbed at my face with numb fingers and felt the creases and folds of my skin. 'I

might even make that NATO, if you're not gone in ten seconds.'

'Mmmm, men in uniform.'

'Bugger off.'

'Okay, well, I'm not hanging around to be insulted, not at,' Felix glanced at the luminous bedside clock, 'eight o'clock on a Wednesday morning.' He looked around at the walls of my little room, where they could be seen between my grandmother's amateur watercolours of bluebell woods and strained-looking kittens. 'Suppose you're going to need room for another poster, once the new guy starts. Where are you going to put it? Or, you could take down some of those godawful paintings, although, knowing your grandmother, she probably glued them to the walls.'

I looked around as well. None of my late relative's paintings were *that* terrible, but I had to confess that I'd stopped noticing them years ago. 'What do you mean, the new guy?' I stretched and made to lift my nightshirt over my head in the hope that my imminent nakedness would scare Felix from the room.

'When the T-M leaves. They're replacing him with some Yank, used to be in one of those American soaps where everyone's banging their sister.'

My head went suddenly fuzzy. 'What?' I let the hem drop and sat suddenly on the bed. The brass frame creaked in sympathy. 'Why? How? I mean ... the whole show revolves around him.' And what would I do without my weekly glimpse of the man who'd helped save my sanity?

'Yeah, he's quitting his contract at the end of the current series. So I guess they'll be writing him out.'

Carefully I breathed. In, out. Remember what they told you, manage the panic, don't let it get away from you. 'How do you know?'

‘Read it online. You’ve really got to get that Internet connection sorted, you know. You’re missing all kinds of interesting gossip, the Beckhams have ... oh, never mind, guess you’re not interested enough.’

‘I *am*. I mean in the other stuff, not the Victoria and David thing. It’s just ... yes, I miss my Internet, but ... all that dealing with people ... I’m not so good these days, Felix, you know that. You *understand*.’ I’d half-hoped that he’d offer to make the calls for me, but he’d insisted that it was better for me to do it, that it would be a step towards recovery for me. Yeah, right, and I could have signed up for *Come Dine with Me* while I was at it, a TV appearance and my inadequate cooking would get me the full set of humiliating experiences in one go. ‘And it’s all confirmed? Gethryn’s really leaving? You know what *Fallen Skies* is like for rumours.’

‘Yep. And this one’s true. Means that this convention is going to be his last.’ Felix squinted out of the window and shifted himself from foot to foot, then turned to give me a manic grin. ‘So? How about it? Your last chance to actually meet the guy. Or you could, y’know, stay in your room, just absorb the atmosphere. Maybe see him out of the window.’

The house throbbed around me, one second too big, the next too small and pushing half my furniture onto the pavement. That poster shot into full focus, Gethryn becoming huge, those deep brown eyes seeming to smile straight into mine. There was a small worn patch over his mouth where I kissed the poster before bed every night, and I prayed that Felix didn’t know about that.

‘I need to think.’

‘Well, you’ve got until seven. I’ll drop by after work, and if the answer’s no then I’m putting these on eBay.’ Felix rotated once more then headed for the door, still standing open from his earlier entrance. He was just about to step out when he

came back and yanked the ticket from my hand. It needed considerable force, and I think, in my shaken and shocked state, that I might have bitten him. ‘Want anything while I’m at the shop?’

‘When I’m short of oversized jeans and funky belts I’m sure you’ll be the first to tell me.’

‘Maybe. Maybe I’ll just let you fester in last year’s fashion.’ A short pause, and then he said, with his back to me. ‘It would be good for you, Skye, change of scenery and all that. You never know, it might help.’

A second of clamour in my head again, and then I touched the wall, the lovely, comforting, solid brick wall. ‘It won’t, Felix. You know it won’t.’

‘All right, maybe “help” was the wrong word. But getting away might give you a break from everything. Put things in a different perspective.’ A moment while he swayed his skinny body in the doorway, waiting for me to shoot him down, and then, ‘Okay, lover, I’m off then. See you tonight, yeah?’ There was the tap and slide of his boots on the stairs and then the definite bang of the front door.

The wall felt dusty under my fingers. My grandmother, who’d left me the place ‘to take care of’, must be absolutely rotating in her grave. I blew, and the dust motes took off, lazily swirled around and then resettled on different surfaces. I ought to clean, I knew. But somehow I didn’t have the energy; there were always other things to be done, other claims on my time. Like work. Even with the Internet down there was reading to do and notes to make.

My job these days was not as high-profile as Felix’s, which, as he worked in a shop at the sharp end of the gay clothing industry, involved the movement of more leather than a cattle drive. In fact, my work was so low-profile as to hardly stick up at all. But it paid and I didn’t have to mix with people

who would stare, which was all I really asked of work these days. Gone were the hours spent poring over *The Stage* for open auditions, obsessing over whether I was too tall, too skinny, whether my nose needed trimming. Now I was a freelance research consultant – basically a fancy name for someone who looked up things that other people couldn't be bothered to. Currently I was working on researching the life of an infamous pirate, the history of knitting patterns and had two outstanding commissions for a mustard company. No water-cooler gossip, no chance of a selection for stardom, but it was the only job I'd ever had where clothing was optional.

I sorted out my pile of books and prepared to continue work for the author who wrote piracy-porn, taking notes and making sketches of sixteenth-century fashion. I'd stuck Post-Its on the relevant texts and was poised to start skim reading when a new message pinged into my phone, with the characteristic chime that made me want to hide my mobile under something big and wet.

From: Fe Brand

Come on Skye, u no u want 2.

I typed straight back.

From: Skye

I told you I'm thinking about it. And stop using text speak, you're not twelve.

From: Fe Brand

Yeh, yeh. Cme on, don't u thnk its tme u got out of tht wheelchair?

From: Skye

You've got predictive text stuck on again. Wheelchair?!

From: Fe Brand

It's a metaphorical wheelchair you pilchard. An emotional one. You don't have the monopoly on grieving and all that crap, and if I can get on with my life after what happened, then so should you. So, what the fuck, let's go to America!

Serious stuff. So serious that he'd abandoned his jokey, half-text-speak, and mentioned things we didn't talk about in real life. Things so raw and overwhelming that we pretended they'd never happened. I dropped the phone and my fingers began twisting around one another, plucking at my nails. The skin around them was nearly healed, but ugly white scars streaked each fingertip.

From: Fe Brand

And stop doing that shit with your fingers.

I smiled without meaning to. Felix knew me so well. But then, we'd known each other for ... how many years? Ten? More, maybe, by now, but I'd stopped counting. Stopped even thinking about him as a person, as a man. He was just Fe, irritating as an itchy bum. So much like Faith that I hadn't been able to look at him for the first six months after the accident without seeing her looking back from behind those hazel eyes. I'd become so accustomed to the feeling that it had worn away without my noticing, until one day he was just Felix again.

From: Skye

Whereabouts in America?