

## CHAPTER ONE

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Help me.”

The woman’s plaintive voice grabbed my attention immediately. One of my primary programming functions was the salvation of human life.

The quivering fear that wormed through me was something new, though. I’d never felt that before.

Bioroids registered fear on some level. We had to interact with that emotion in order to respond to the self-preservation encoding that was part of the personality indices, but we didn’t have visceral reactions to it. Bioroids didn’t feel like I felt now.

My eyes snapped open and I saw a familiar room that I knew I’d never seen before. Thick, brocaded curtains covered tall windows. Just enough light filtered around the curtains that I could make out a large entertainment console on the wall opposite the bed, a small breakfast table, and a love seat.

It was a hotel room, not a bedroom then.

That bothered me even more. I’d never spent any time in hotel rooms except on stakeouts. I was a detective, designated

Drake 3GI2RC by my manufacturer, Haas-Bioroid, Inc. assigned to the New Angeles Police Department. I was one of the few bioroids to achieve that posting.

A warm feeling crept through me at that achievement. I recognized the feeling as pride, an emotion that was supposed to be dampened by my programming. All of my emotions had been dampened when I'd been brought on-line. They were there, but always kept at a distance so I could focus on efficient and effective operation parameters. My personality had been divined from a human donor's neural channeling. I felt certain this feeling was some lingering emotion left over from my neural software, something that I had no control over.

But there were problems.

I didn't take pride in what I did.

I didn't stay in hotels.

And I didn't sleep.

That bothered me most of all. As a bioroid, I didn't need to sleep. I intermittently went off-line to the *office* inside my head to re-evaluate circumstances or work problems, but I didn't sleep. In my seven years of life as a bioroid, I'd never had occasion to awaken.

I tried to remember where I had been before I'd found myself in the hotel room. I couldn't. My chest felt tight, and something akin to the nudge of fear preserving my interest in my continued survival thumped through me.

The feeling was wrong. There was no direct stimulus for it. Not only that, but my chest *couldn't* feel tight. My chest was stainless steel, formed in a generally human shape, and it didn't move. I was a finely tuned machine with a carefully cultivated human-like intellect and none of a human's weaknesses.

The feeling was imaginary. I had a creative mind, yes. Without that creative thought process, I couldn't problem solve. Without it, I couldn't figure out the motivations of human men

and women who killed each other for reasons that I understood on an intrinsic level brought about by my training, but I couldn't sympathize with.

In the last seven years, my imagination had never betrayed me. "Help me."

The voice came again, stronger this time. I replayed it through my audio receptors and tried to pinpoint where it came from. The pitch suggested it came from nearby, but there was no accompanying echo trapped within the room.

Someone moved beside me. An arm slithered around my neck.

Surprise galvanized me into motion. I'd never slept with anyone in my whole life. I lived in a small apartment. It was where I went when I was off-duty. There, I read case studies, information I could use in my job as an investigator, and reviewed active cases. I didn't make friends.

I plucked the arm from my chest and studied it. The limb was obviously feminine: slender and possessing painted fingernails. A few beauty marks showed darker brown against the golden glow of her skin. The arm felt warm in my fingers.

Then I noticed my hand, and that it wasn't mine. This hand was strong and callused, with scarred knuckles.

Bioroids were constructed with human features, but those features could never pass for human. They're too sharp, too symmetrical, too *artificial*. Haas-Bioroid, Inc. had deliberately created the faces of the units they manufactured to give the semblance of being human, but never to be confused with a human.

I blinked, another thing that I didn't do, and my hand changed, became the one I was familiar with. Like a bioroid's face, a bioroid had hands that appeared human. We had simple, barcoded fingerprints and the near-human tissues secreted just enough oils to identify us and the things we touched.

To mingle with humans, a bioroid's hands had to be sensitive. A bioroid masseuse couldn't use cold, insensitive metal or ceramic

hands to massage a human. We had to have hands that could pass as human in texture and temperature.

Unfortunately, to do that a bioroid's body had to maintain a hydrostatic condition that necessitated fluids pumping through them on a regular basis. Since the rest of a bioroid's arm was metal and articulated joints made from springs and hinges, tubes had to run to the hands from an implanted pump. Those tubes immediately marked a bioroid as such and drew more hostility and fear from un-accepting humans than the stiff faces.

I rolled my head to my left to survey the woman next to me. I reached up for the small light on the nightstand next to the bed. When I turned it on, the weak yellow light lifted her from the darkness.

I ran the identification template I'd compiled for working with the New Angeles Police Department. She was in her late thirties, black hair past her shoulders, 170 centimeters in height, 56.8 kilograms, and looked to be in good physical condition. There were no distinguishing scars.

I was sure I didn't know her, yet, there was something familiar about her.

Delicately, I shifted her hair from her face with a finger so I could see her features more clearly. My touch, light as it was, woke her. Her eyes opened and she smiled up at me.

"What do you have in mind?" Her voice was a pleasant baritone, made slightly deeper because she'd just awoken.

Her eyes were different colors: her left was green and her right was blue. I filed that away in my template, as knowledge of the medical condition that caused the aberration came to my mind.

Heterochromia was a condition caused by a lack of melanin. In the woman's case, the heterochromia was full-blown, resulting in completely different colors of the irises instead of just a partial mismatch. Genetics, disease, or injury could attribute to the mismatch.

I didn't know how to respond to her question. I didn't know whether to treat the woman as a supervisor, a co-worker, a victim, a perpetrator, or an informant. Those were my primary categorical breakdowns for interaction with others. This woman was an unwelcome enigma in my life.

I could feel discomfort at things that didn't belong. That, too, was part of the neural channeling that helped me perform my job as a detective. I certainly felt it now.

Unexpectedly, the woman leaned forward, ran her hand behind my head, and kissed me. I felt her lips against mine and the warmth of her body against me. She was naked beneath the covers. I knew that now.

I let her finish the kiss because there was nothing in my programming on how to deal with this. Bioroids were sexless in form and function. Only our personalities maintained any kind of gender selection, though the body construction was altered to fit the personality for the sake of human sensibilities. We were designed to fit in with humans and to meet certain roles.

I knew I was male, but not in the sense that the woman obviously sought. I had no real reaction to the physical contact except to take her body heat—97.8 degrees Fahrenheit—and to note that her overall physical condition was athletic. Her heartbeat was elevated and rising, but within acceptable norms. She smelled like lilacs and salt. I don't breathe, so I didn't inhale her scent, but I had olfactory sensors that allowed me to scent things. A sense of smell was important in my job.

Confused, the woman drew back. "What's wrong?"

Uncertain how to proceed with the interrogation, I considered asking questions. I could hardly tell the woman what was wrong without knowing where we were and what we were doing together. Or who I was.

What I most wanted to do was report to Haas-Bioroid to have a diagnostic test done. Something was wrong and that

thought gave me pause. Bioroids sometimes got scrapped when they started having problems. I knew I didn't want to be one of those. Self-preservation was a tricky thing to install in a bioroid. As long as my deficiencies didn't cause harm or offer potential harm to a human, I was supposed to stay functional.

Yet, I knew I wouldn't tell anyone of my present condition until I knew for certain that it would not end in termination. As I said, the coding is very precise.

A hurt look filled the woman's mismatched eyes and I experienced regret over that. The feeling wasn't very strong because I knew the hurt she took upon herself wasn't due to anything I had or hadn't done. The hurt belonged to her because of her expectations of me.

I wasn't who she thought I was. I didn't know what I was doing there. I debated telling her that, but I didn't know what effect that revelation would have on her. Preserving a human's safety was also a tricky thing. Physical well-being had to be balanced against mental well-being. The physical had to come first.

A device pinged on the nightstand.

I swiveled my attention to it. The device was compact, a square with a gel viewing screen that fit comfortably in my palm when I lifted it for inspection.

On the screen, vid views shifted rapidly, showing men coming up a stairwell. They wore dark clothing, light coats that fell to their calves, and hard looks. As I watched, one of the men pulled a hood from inside his coat and tugged it over his face. Once the hood touched the collar of the armored vest he wore under the coat, the memory fiber activated. The hood became hard and sleek. At that point, it was more armor than fashion. Despite having his eyes covered, he moved without hesitation and I knew the hood had vid circuitry embedded in it. The available vid was probably a 360-degree view. I had that as well, even though my eyes set forward in my face. Not all of my vid equipment was in my eyes.

The other man did the same with his hood. Both of them drew large handguns from shoulder holsters. I immediately identified them as Norinco 12.7mm Lei Gongs. The English equivalent was a Thunder God. The Lei Gongs were Chinese manufactured, hard and heavy. They were not passive weapons, not designed for non-lethal use. They were man stoppers.

“What’s wrong?” The woman peered over my shoulder. Her mismatched eyes widened in sudden understanding. “They’ve found us, haven’t they? We’ve got to get out of here.” She threw the bed clothes from her and got up, frantically searching the room for clothing and pulling it on.

Questions filled my mind, but I shoved them aside. Obviously, the woman felt threatened by the men. I had to respond to that. Preservation of human life was foremost in my programming, but there was something more added to my motivation. I *wanted* to keep the woman safe on a level I had never felt.

I rolled from the bed. I saw my body as it has always been: hard and metallic, a construction of clever joints, plates, and mechanisms. I had no qualms about my own safety. I was nearly indestructible by human standards.

I didn’t know what the woman saw when she looked at me, but she didn’t see a bioroid. That was confusing. Instead, she looked at me fearfully as she pulled on slacks and reached for a shirt.

“Why are you standing there? Get your gun.”

I started to ask her where it was, then I knew. I lifted the mattress and exposed the IMBEL M1911 Colt .45 ACP in a shoulder holster. The Brazilian-made black pistol gleamed wetly of oil and I smelled the tang.

“Hurry.” She was almost dressed.

I glanced at the vid cube in my hand and realized that someone—perhaps the woman—had hacked into the hotel’s sec systems, and the result of that was what I was seeing now.

I could only assume it had been set up to watch for the men now heading up the stairs.

The pistol pushed me into a quandary. As a bioroid, I couldn't carry lethal weapons. I was limited in the damage I could do to a human, or to preserve myself. Humans came first.

But I *could* secure a weapon at a crime scene. I told myself this was a crime scene, and I felt only slight resistance as I picked up the weapon. Perhaps it wasn't a crime scene at the moment, but it was definitely going to become one. My hand closed more firmly around the pistol.

"Here."

I turned just in time to catch the clothing the woman threw at me. The khaki pants and pullover shirt weren't mine, but they, too, seemed familiar. I pulled them on, then stepped into combat boots near the bed that I assumed were mine. Everything fit perfectly.

I was operating on instinct now. My programming would say that such a thing didn't exist in me because everything had been overwritten, but I'd had feelings—Shelly, my partner, called them "hunches"—about cases and people I'd dealt with before. *Instinct* was also, at its most basic level, a template constructed of prior experiences.

This was instinct on some level, but I had never had any experiences like this.

The woman went toward the door.

"No." I spoke calmly, looking at the vid cube. "They're in the hallway." I pulled on the shoulder holster, though I knew I'd never be able to use the weapon.

"Then what are we going to do?" Her voice was tight and I knew she was afraid.

I felt badly for her. No one should feel that afraid. I had so many questions I wanted to ask her, even as my mind raced to find a way out of our predicament, but my programming

wouldn't permit me. First, I had to save her.

"The window." I nodded toward the curtains.

"We're ten stories above the street."

"There's no other way. The sec door will only hold them for a moment." If they didn't have a key. I chose not to mention that. Instead, I took her by the hand and pulled her after me. "Trust me."

That response was part of my programming, too. In dangerous situations, I was prompted to tell humans that, though I knew most of them wouldn't. Bioroids were still too different, too easily recognized as a potential threat, because we were more fearless and more resilient than humans. Any animal tended to fear a stronger predator.

A bioroid firefighter could charge into a burning building and be able to withstand the smoke and the heat that a human couldn't. A bioroid detective could take a bullet that would kill a flesh and blood detective, and continue to act as a shield for a potential victim. I had done that twice in my career. I had earned commendations, but those had not mattered nearly as much as the protection of the humans.

The woman followed me, though, and I believed most of that reason was because there was nowhere else to go. The hotel room was a suite, but there was only one way into the rooms.

On the vid cube, the men had reached our hotel door. One of them produced an e-card and slotted it through the sec lock. The admittance light blinked red, not green. The man keyed in adjustments on the e-card, then prepared to try again.

The window wouldn't open. It was set into the wall, probably to prevent suicide jumpers.

I pulled the IMBEL from the shoulder holster and had to fight against my programming. The weapon was already secure. There was no further reason to touch it.

Except that I needed the weapon. I drew the pistol back and hammered the butt into the window. The first blow only splintered the glass. Fracture lines spread in spider webs from the point of impact. I drew back the pistol and hammered again.

This time the glass gave way. I'd expected the pieces to fall outside, but a gust of wind blew them back over me. Even with my enhanced reflexes, I was barely able to cover my face with my arm in time. The woman was safely out of the way. The shards fell like glittering rain at my feet.

I re-holstered the weapon and gazed out the window. Several skyscrapers filled the street. Most of them were taller than the hotel. Bright stars littered what I could see of the black sky. Below, neon lights filled the street and hoppers flew above the pedestrian traffic.

We were in a metropolis. My mind worked constantly, taking in facts and details as it always did. Nothing looked familiar to me, though I felt certain that I had been here before.

I shoved my head and shoulders through the window and studied the building. The structure consisted of large stones mortared in place. All of the stones were uniform in size and there was sufficient space in the cracks for me to manage purchase.

I turned to the woman.

She shook her head and tears glittered in her eyes. "I can't. I can't go out there."

"You can't stay in here. If they find you, they're going to kill you." I said that and I knew it was the truth, but I didn't know where that certainty had come from. I couldn't verify the information. In my job as a detective, every fact had to be verified. What I experienced now ran counter to that.

Something thumped against the door.

I glanced at the vid cube. The men had evidently given up trying to get in with the e-card. One of them drew back a foot to kick again.

*Boom.*

I looked at the woman. “That door isn’t going to hold. If there are two of them out there, you can bet there will be more.” I wasn’t certain how I knew that, but I knew what I told her was true. “Trust me.”

I wished I knew her name. Little things like that helped when dealing with humans. They put a lot of stock in their identities. So much importance is tied to a human’s name.

“Don’t let me fall.” She approached me with trepidation.

“I won’t.” I set down the vid cube. With my assistance, she climbed onto my back, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. I knew something was wrong because she felt heavy. In addition to being durable and fast, bioroids are strong. I didn’t feel as strong as I normally did. I shouldn’t have noticed her weight at all, but I did. Not only that, but I felt the warmth of her flesh against me.

I knew I could carry her, though. I threw a leg over the window and climbed out. She clung to me more fiercely and tucked her head into the back of my neck. I smelled her again in spite of the winds that whipped around the building. She was lilac and salt.

Cautiously, I climbed down the side of the building. My hands and feet moved effortlessly, finding the cracks and crevices I needed. The wind made it harder to hang on, but I managed. The stones bit into my fingertips and brought more pain that I’d ever felt before.

My body was constructed to effortlessly manage pain. Pain was an operating parameter, a built-in system of checks and balances so I would not harm humans or other property that I interacted with. I ignored the pain and kept going.

I heard the door give way in the hotel room we’d just left at the same time I reached the window of the room beneath me.

“They’re not here.” The man’s voice was muffled by the hood that he wore, but I still heard him.

“They’ve got to be here. Search the closets.”

“Look. The window’s broken.”

In a crab-like position, my hands dug in tightly and my left leg bent up to above my waist, barely able to maintain my grip, I drew back my right leg and kicked my foot through the window. Glass exploded and fell into the room.

I climbed down further, got a foot on the sill, and turned immediately sideways to put the woman inside the room. Above me, I saw a pair of hooded heads peer out of the room we’d just left. A fraction of a second later, they pointed their pistols down at me.

I shoved myself into the room, letting gravity do part of the work. Heavy-caliber shots blasted through the night and the muzzle flashes briefly lit up the darkness outside.

I fell and the woman fell with me. I was the first to my feet and I helped her up. The room was dark for just a moment, then someone turned on a bedside lamp.

On the bed nearby, a young couple looked at us in shock. The woman wrapped her arms around the man as he faced us. “What are you doing here?”

Both of them wore tattoos over their entire bodies. They looked like corp material, mid-level execs, with carefully colored hair and lean bodies.

I held up my hands. “We aren’t going to hurt you.”

“Get out of this room! Get out of this room, *now!* I’m calling security!” The man reached for the comm-pad beside the bed.

I thought security was a good idea.

The woman didn’t. She grabbed my arm and pulled me into motion. “We’ve got to go. They’ll have paid the hotel security people off. We won’t be safe.”

I took her word for it because I didn’t know. I followed her lead and we ran for the door. I got there first. We went through the door and into the ornate hallway.

Stairwells were at either end of the hall. An elevator bank was somewhere in the middle of the floor according to the signage. I headed for the stairwell our two attackers had come up, thinking there would be no one else in there if everyone coming up that way was already here, and that there was a greater possibility of their being another team in the other stairwell.

I rushed through the door, my left hand on the woman's arm, dragging her after me. I had to go more slowly so she could keep up. I headed down immediately, leading the way at a pace she could maintain. We managed two flights of stairs before two hooded men stepped into view from below.

Neither of them hesitated to draw their weapons and fire. The woman screamed behind me as I knocked her back on the stairwell above the men. Bullets cut the air over my head and thudded into the stairwell from below. I knew the men wouldn't hesitate to round the stairwell to come after us and I knew we didn't have a chance if we tried to run.

Before I knew what I was doing, I drew the pistol from the shoulder holster and leaned over the edge of the stairwell to take aim. My programming went haywire, resisting the impulse to fire the weapon, but I couldn't stop myself and I didn't know why.

I couldn't take a human life.

With cold efficiency, I sighted the men's heads as bullets continued to chip at the stairwell. Vibrations ran through the steel and cement structure. One of the steps near the woman's head exploded as the heavy rounds shattered the cement. She screamed again.

I knew the powered hoods would turn a bullet. They'd been designed to deflect injury unless hit full on, and most faces have a lot of curves and planes. The hoods' construction added to that deflection ratio. But even if the bullet didn't penetrate, the hydrostatic shock of the round striking the armored head

couldn't prevent the brain taking damage. The injury would involve a concussion at the least, and permanent brain damage at the worst.

I fired without hesitation, two shots to each target. All four rounds found their marks. I'd never practiced with a handgun before. There was no need because my programming prevented me using one. I didn't know if the success was attributable to my bioroid reflexes or because I was lucky. Luck was simply a mathematical progression...even the first time.

Both men fell and stayed down, their weapons dropping from lax hands.

I got the woman up and got her moving. She was barely able to stand, let alone run, because she was so scared. But she was too scared not to run, too, and I kept her moving.

When I reached the men, I placed a hand on them to read their vitals. One man's pulse was weak and thready. The other man was dead. Evidently, the bullets had caused enough brain damage to stop his autonomic nervous system.

I waited for my programming to shut me down. That was how it was written: if I harmed a human, my body would lock down and keep me prisoner until Haas-Bioroid or the police collected me. I would be forced to keep recording the event for legal reasons. But, in effect, I would be a prisoner inside myself.

That didn't happen. I was still mobile. My curiosity fired immediately and I was captivated by the incongruity of my situation. This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to be able to use a lethal weapon, and I wasn't supposed to be able to take a life.

I would have stayed to try to help, but I heard footsteps thudding against the stairs above. Not only that, but more were coming from below. Evidently, whoever was pursuing us had a small army to do so.

I knelt to the unconscious man. I couldn't touch the dead

one again. I had no problems touching corpses—that was often required in my job—but I couldn't bear to touch the one I had killed. That would have made everything more real.

And, I no longer believed any of this was real. I was trapped in some kind of programming glitch that had invaded my neural channeled personality and was wreaking havoc with my memories. No, not memories. This was my imagination at work. None of this was a memory. This glitch, whatever it was, was mining fears that evidently piggybacked on the programming I had. It was the only explanation I could conceive. I was stuck in a random problem-solving scenario that was the result of a case.

I had no other answer.

I took the unconscious man's comm from his neck. It was a button-sized device that adhered electromagnetically below his left ear. I shoved it into place below my own left ear, not knowing if it would work. In truth, the device didn't have to be behind my ear. I could access it through touch alone. However, my programming made me emulate human action most of the time to better fit in. A human would have put the device behind his left ear, so that's what I did. Noises vibrated along my jawbone and became words in my auditory sensors.

“—on the seventh floor. He has the woman with him.”

“Affirmative. We're coming up from the fifth. We'll sandwich them between us.”

Going down the stairwell was no longer an option. I forced myself to pick up the unconscious man's weapon and was both relieved and discomfited by my ability to do so.

I'd heard my partner, Shelly Nolan, read to her children on occasion when I'd visited her. That hadn't happened often. Her husband didn't care for bioroids in general, but he accepted me, perhaps because I was Shelly's partner and he depended on me to keep her safe when he couldn't. I didn't know what

to make of his offer of friendship, so I had just accepted it as a further contract to protect humans, his in particular.

Though I would never have told Shelly, I enjoyed those times seeing her with her children. She was a good detective, and a good mother. One of the stories she had read to them came to mind now. I was Alice in Wonderland, and somehow I had fallen down the rabbit hole.

I rose with both weapons in my hands. For a fleeting moment, an image of someone else's features reflected in the small window on the stairwell door. I only caught bits and pieces of those features, like a scattered jigsaw puzzle, and none of them seemed to fit. I attempted to replay the sight of them inside my head, something I had done effortlessly before anytime I'd tried.

Except that I couldn't do it now.

The woman pounded on my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I went through the door, listening to the net of armed men grow tighter around us. From their comm chatter, I knew that they were in both stairwells, clustering like cockroaches.

I ran for the center of the floor, toward the elevator banks, the woman at my heels. When I reached the elevator banks, doors opened on one of the cages. I lifted my weapons and halted so suddenly the woman bumped into me.

Four people stood within the cage. All of them looked frightened to see me. None of them wore the faceless black hoods or reached for weapons.

I gestured with the pistols. "Out. Now."

They hurried out, hands wrapped protectively around their heads, like that would do something to stop a bullet. One older man shielded an older woman with his body and snarled curses at me.

I ignored him and shoved a foot against the elevator door to keep it from closing. I glanced at the woman. "Inside. Come on."

She darted inside and I started to join her, but before I could enter, the elevator across the hall from us dinged its arrival and the doors opened to reveal a pair of the hooded men. They had their weapons at the ready.

I didn't know which of us started firing first, but the sudden roll of thunder filled the hallway. Bullets chopped through the elevator doors. My aim was better than theirs and I watched them driven backward as the bullets thudded into their armor.

Something hit me in my left side and pain flashed through me. I paid no attention to it because the pain was just a warning, nothing more. The impact drove me back inside the elevator cage and I let it. I yanked my foot back and slapped the close door button with my elbow.

I reloaded my weapons, which had blown back empty. Unexplained dizziness swept over me and I ran a diagnostic over the gyro stabilizers that controlled my equilibrium. I felt more stable. But the pain in my side didn't fade as I'd expected it to.

The elevator cage dropped toward the first floor.

The woman stared at me. "You're hurt."

I shook my head, but I looked down all the same and felt my side. My fingers came away covered in red blood. That made no sense at all. My body had no blood in it.