

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Project Alpha

Have  
*Mercy*  
N.J. WALTERS

## **Have Mercy**

*N.J. Walters*

*Second in the Project Alpha series.*

Earth 2133

Logan is an Alpha—a genetically enhanced assassin—who has escaped from the lab that created him. He is now outside the Gate, a high-tech shield that protects the enclosed city from the contaminated and lawless land outside. Shot while evading security forces sent to eliminate him, Logan's only goal is survival.

Mercy Dockins is a healer. Her world is shaken to its foundations when a stranger is brought to her near death. As she heals him, her body and soul respond to him, overwhelming her with sexual desire. With little more than a look and a touch, passion flares out of control, consuming them both.

But this stranger is dangerous to not only her well-being, but also to the safety of everyone she loves. And he has brought the security forces right to her door.

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Have Mercy

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# *HAVE MERCY*

**N.J. Walters**

*Dedication*

For my husband, the hero in my life.

## **Chapter One**

### *Earth 2133*

Logan hunkered down behind the metal skeleton of some sort of vehicle, an ancient relic of a bygone era. The rusted remains didn't give him much protection, but it was better than nothing. He stared at the building in front of him and swore under his breath. Someone had found his current hideaway.

He had a dozen of them scattered across the outer city. It was inevitable, of course, that someone would stumble across one of them. Not only was the security police searching for him, but the outer city was also populated with bands of people who lived and survived in this desolate place. Sure, someone was bound to find one of his safe places eventually. That didn't mean he had to like it.

He let his eyes glide over the surrounding area. It wasn't an inspiring sight. Wars, natural disasters and disease had transformed the planet more than a hundred years ago. When the dust settled, the world was left divided into two sections. The rich and privileged lived inside the Gate—a high-tech shield that protected the enclosed city from contamination from the outside. It was climate controlled and almost impenetrable—the ruling class lived inside the safe confines. Everyone else resided in the outer city in poverty, filth, disease and lawlessness.

He'd lived inside the Gate up until a few months ago, a living experiment of the Piedmont Corporation and the Ruling Council. He was an Alpha. More precisely, he was Alpha Two. He'd been hatched in a lab and brought up under the tutelage of scientists whose goal was to make him strong and impervious to pain. Thanks to genetic enhancements, his senses were more acute than a normal man's, his reflexes faster, his body stronger, faster to heal. A microcomputer, which was part of his brain, allowed him to learn at an incredible speed, to calculate odds and make decisions in the blink of an eye.

In short, he'd been bred to be the perfect assassin, a killing machine with no equal. Intelligent, ruthless and adaptable, Logan, and the other Alphas, had been a weapon of the Ruling Council.

But then things had started to go wrong.

The microcomputer in his brain, which was supposed to allow the scientists at the Piedmont Corporation to manipulate him, had come under Logan's control. It hadn't happened all at once but was a slow process. It had taken him years of constant practice to finally gain complete command of his own mind.

Logan was an Alpha, which meant he didn't take orders well. In a world divided and constantly at war, he'd become a liability, a very dangerous one.

Orders had come down from General Caruthers—the bastard who'd controlled his actions for years, sending him out to assassinate political enemies and those who spoke up against his power—the Alpha Project was to be terminated. That meant he and the other remaining Alpha, Tienan, were slated to be destroyed.

It would have happened too, if not for the help of Kathryn Piedmont. A brilliant scientist and daughter of one of his enemies, Kathryn had treated him with respect and kindness. For the first time in his life, he'd felt like a real person. She'd risked her life to save both him and Tienan.

He'd loved Kathryn, in his own way, drawn to her kindness and inner beauty. He'd made love with her one memorable night, but they were not to be. Still, that night had left him with a yearning to have a woman of his own. Someone to love him. Someone he could love and trust in return.

It was naught but a fantasy. His path was one of death and destruction.

He and Tienan had chosen to fight against the injustice. Their goal was simple—Destroy the Piedmont Corporation and bring down the Ruling Council and the Gate. No small task, but one to which they were both dedicated. There was nothing else for them. They had no home, no family. They knew no other life than fighting and killing.

He missed Tienan. As a rule, Alphas didn't get along well with other Alphas. They were bred to be leaders, not followers, and they often clashed when put together for long periods of time. The scientists at the lab had kept them separated for the most part. He hadn't even met another Alpha until he'd reached his teens. By then he was much too strong and too advanced to train with even the most elite members of the security force. That's when he'd met Tienan.

They were the same height but Tienan was leaner than he was. Prettier too, or so Logan had liked to tease him. Tienan had dark hair, olive skin and classic good looks. Logan had blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin, his features best described as craggy.

They'd become sparring partners and then friends. He might not officially have any family, but Tienan was his brother. Over the years they'd sweat and bled together. Finally, they'd escaped together.

For safety's sake, they'd split up once they were in the outer city, meeting once every week at a predetermined location. Tienan hadn't made the last check-in and Logan was worried.

Now this.

As he watched, Logan spied several men moving around inside the building he'd chosen as his own. He had supplies stored in there that he didn't want to lose. Food, weapons, blankets and other necessities were scarce. His eyes narrowed as he left the relative protection of his hiding spot and crept closer. Giving his enhanced senses full rein, he surveyed the area. He could hear the intruders rummaging around and talking to one another.

The stench of unwashed bodies and garbage assailed his nostrils. That was one of the drawbacks of having an acute sense of smell. He blocked out the unpleasant odors and concentrated on his uninvited guests. They seemed to be a random group who'd just happened to stumble on this place. His bad luck.

Sliding his hand into his pocket, he drew out a piece of chalk and drew a large X on the side of the building. It was a signal to Tienan that this place had been compromised.



Slipping the chalk back into his coat pocket, he turned his back on the building and headed to another one of his safe places. He'd come back in a day or two and see what supplies, if any, were left. With any luck, they wouldn't find everything he'd stashed away.

He was close to the Gate and had to be extra cautious moving through the streets and alleyways. There had been a lot of activity these past few days. Much more than usual. With Tienan missing the scheduled rendezvous, Logan was concerned. He figured Tienan must still be alive or the security force would have decreased their patrols instead of increasing them.

It was time to lie low for a few days. Decision made, Logan shouldered his pack and loped down a deserted alley, heading away from the Gate and the inner city. It was a good time to explore the north edge of the outer city. He hadn't been there yet.

Ever cautious and aware, he sank back into the shadows as several groups of people hurried through the streets, carrying all their possessions and pushing wagons. Probably on the run from the damn security police. He'd seen this particular scene played out many times in the past months and it never got any easier to watch.

Sure, there were criminals roaming the outer city. He'd come across men who would kill their own mothers for a crust of bread or gut a man for the boots on his feet. But there were honest folks too. People with families and children who were just trying to survive as best they could. It was for them Logan fought. And if he happened to eliminate a few of the nastier criminals along the way...well, he wasn't going to lose any sleep over it.

Making his way to another one of his nearby hideouts, he stuffed some extra food and clothing in his pack, secured a roll of blankets to his back and headed north. He walked all day, stopping only occasionally to drink from his canteen. His stomach growled, a stark reminder that he hadn't eaten since early this morning.

He glanced up at the sky. The sun was sinking and would set within an hour. He'd find a safe place to spend the night and then he'd eat. He took a moment and simply

enjoyed the feel of the light breeze against his cheeks. After spending most of his life imprisoned in the sterile environment of the lab, Logan reveled in every sight, touch, taste, sound and scent. Being in the outside world was still a delight to his senses. Even after several months.

The air was thicker here, not as clean. The world was darker, the city often covered in a combination of smog and fog. Sometimes it settled low and stayed for days. Then it would lift and the sun would shine.

Logan loved the sunshine. He could lie on an abandoned rooftop for hours, soaking in the warm rays. He'd gotten a sunburn the first time he'd done it. Thankfully with his healing abilities, his skin had been back to normal the next morning. Since then, he'd been a bit more cautious, but he couldn't resist the lure of the sun.

Then there was the sunset. When the sky was clear and the sun sank in the evening, the horizon would turn various shades of orange and yellow and sometimes red. It was spectacular. He'd never seen a sunset until a few months ago. Intellectually, he knew what it was, had learned about it while locked away inside the lab, but he'd never experienced the splendor in person.

He'd take the rough danger of the outer city over the pristine world inside the Gate any day. Out here, life was precarious but he was free. Inside the Gate, the Ruling Council and the General controlled everything. Sure, the air was pure and there was ample food and clean water, but it came at a cost.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Logan immediately sank into the shadows, crouched low and studied his surroundings. Burned-out buildings and tumbled-down houses sat side by side with empty lots of cracked pavement. He heard the faint scuff of a boot. Then another. Someone was out there.

Then he heard the metallic clink of metal on metal and the familiar sound of a gun being cocked. Logan didn't move, barely breathed as his mind quickly calculated his best escape routes and his chances of survival. As the seconds ticked by, he was able to

make out more sounds. This was more than one or two men with antique hunting rifles or guns they'd liberated from security patrols.

His suspicions were confirmed when he caught a glimpse of several uniformed men skulking through the empty lot in front of him. Security police. Caruthers' men. An entire unit from the look of things.

He had to move. And fast. If he stayed where he was there was no way they'd miss him. His brain quickly calculated the best route for him to take. Without further thought, he exploded from his hiding space and raced toward an alley. Darkness was falling fast, which was in his favor. He'd almost made it to the opening of the alley when a shout rang out.

"Over there!"

Logan pushed harder as gunfire erupted around him. Bullets pinged off the brick building beside him. He felt a sharp sting in his arm and another in his leg. Ignoring the pain, he dug deeper, finding a reserve of energy, using the burst of adrenaline rushing through his body to force himself to push on. If he stopped he was dead.

Or worse.

If they captured him alive he could look forward to days, weeks or even months of torture at the hands of General Caruthers. His and Tienan's escape had been a slap in the face to the General. You didn't cross him and live. He'd want to make Logan an example to all his enemies.

Footsteps pounded behind him. Something hit him high and hard in the back. He stumbled, but picked himself up and kept going. Blood was pouring down his leg and arm. He ignored it. There was no time to stop.

He breathed as slow and deep as possible as he ran, pushing himself as hard as he could. His lungs burned. His heart pounded. Sweat coated his body, soaking through his clothing. He ignored all discomfort. Survival was all that mattered. He glanced at the buildings as he flew by them, checking his location on the run. Turning sharply, he got back on course, heading north.

He had no idea what was up that way, but the security police rarely ventured too far from the inner city. Even for them, the outer city was a dangerous place at night. As if in answer to his pleas, the sun finally sank below the horizon.

Logan now had the advantage. Even in the growing gloom, with his superior eyesight, he could see where he was going. The security police could not. Ignoring the pain in his limbs and the fatigue pulling at him, he kept going, dodging in and out of buildings and down streets and alleyways. He needed to find somewhere safe to hide so he could tend to his injuries.

As he ran, the night began to blur around him. Sweat beaded on his forehead, rolling down his temples. The salt made his eyes sting. He blinked, but the world didn't get any clearer. His brain knew he was close to passing out. His body wouldn't quit.

He could no longer hear any footsteps behind him. Logan sighed with relief and that second of inattention made him stumble. He barely caught himself before he ended up facedown on the ground. It was getting hard to stand with each passing minute. His left leg was weak and threatened to buckle beneath his weight.

Dragging himself a few more steps, he stumbled again. This time he couldn't catch himself in time. The ground rose up to meet him as he slammed forward. Pain shot through him, making it hard to focus. He clenched his teeth, breathing through the worst of it.

He noted somewhat clinically that he was cold, his body wet with a combination of sweat and blood. Logan was weaker than he'd ever been in his life. He was a phenomenally fast healer, but even he couldn't survive if he lost too much blood.

Digging his good hand into the ground, he pulled his body forward. The remains of an old shed were a few feet away. He had to get there. If he stayed out in the open, he was dead. Of course, he was leaving a trail of blood behind him that even a blind man could read. But even the less-than-perfect protection of the dilapidated shed was infinitely better than passing out on the side of road.

Concentrating all his energy, he pushed onward. It felt like hours had passed when he finally dragged his body behind the dubious shelter of the shed wall. Sighing with relief, he laid his head on the ground. He'd rest for a minute and then tend to his wounds.

Voices woke him.

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know."

Logan felt someone nudge his leg.

"There's an awful lot of blood." The first speaker sounded like a young boy.

"Mercy." The second speaker sounded a bit older, also male. Logan wanted to tell him that there was no such thing as mercy. Not in his world.

He must have passed out again. When he woke this time, he was no longer on the ground. The air around him was warm, not cold and dank. He kept his eyes closed as he listened, trying to get an idea of where he was. A fire crackled nearby, adding the aroma of wood smoke to the pleasant smell of cooked meat.

The longer he was awake, the more aware of his surroundings he became. He was lying on something soft and he was totally naked but for the blanket covering him. He was also strapped down, his wrists and ankles anchored to whatever he was lying on. His left arm and leg ached, but he ignored the discomfort, concentrating on trying to figure out where the hell he was.

He opened his eyes a crack and stared up at a wooden ceiling. He was obviously a prisoner, but of who? And where was he?

Letting his eyelids fall closed again, he racked his brain, trying to stir his memory. The last thing he remembered was the sound of two young men talking about him. He had a vague memory of soft hands and an even softer voice. A woman?

Frowning, he tried to shift his position. His back throbbed, more of a dull ache than an acute pain, and he remembered a bullet catching him high on his shoulder. He

frowned, wishing he could flex his muscles to find out just how bad the damage was. He didn't think it was too serious, but it was impossible to tell for sure strapped down to a bed.

The air in the room shifted. He felt someone moving toward him, heard the light shuffle of shoes against the floor. A sweet scent tickled his nose. He tried to place it but couldn't. A hand rested on his forehead. It was soft, feminine and...familiar.

His cock stirred, a sure sign that he was no longer looking death in the face. He yearned to push his face closer toward her hand, to feel her touch on his forehead, his chest and much lower. His erection pulsed in agreement. Curiosity got the better of caution and Logan opened his eyes and stared into the face of his captor.

He was wrong. He'd died and gone to heaven. A blonde-haired angel with pale blue eyes smiled down at him.

Then his angel spoke. "Good. You're finally awake."

## **Chapter Two**

Mercy Dockins tried not to stare at the naked man lying in her bed. She'd been trying not to stare at him for hours now. For all the good it did.

He wasn't totally naked. There was a blanket covering him. But it might as well not been there at all. The stranger oozed power and masculinity like no other man she'd ever encountered. She'd seen every inch of his body when she'd operated on him, removing one bullet from his body and stitching two other wounds where bullets had clipped him. Even injured and near dead, there was a vitality, a sense of danger about the stranger.

Who was he?

He certainly wasn't familiar to her. But that wasn't surprising. Tim and Evan had stumbled upon him while out scavenging for supplies. Poor Tim. At thirteen, he'd already seen more than his fair share of death and destruction. They all had.

They'd thought the stranger was dead. There had been so much blood. Even Evan, who thought himself an adult at seventeen, had paled when he'd related their story. It had come as a shock to them both to discover the man was alive. Unable to leave him to his fate, the two boys had bandaged his wounds the best they could, loaded him into their wagon and dragged him back to the compound beyond the northern border of the outer city.

It had taken them the rest of the night to get back here pulling such a heavy load. They'd arrived just as dawn was breaking with their unusual cargo in tow. Mercy winced when she thought about how hard the trip must have been on an already injured man.

It was a wonder the stranger hadn't died on the way here. But he hadn't. He'd also survived surgery. She'd removed a bullet from his upper back. Luckily, it had missed

his spine, lodging in his upper left shoulder instead. The bullet had chipped a small piece of bone, but other than that, there had been no major damage. He'd bled heavily from his left arm and leg, where he'd been grazed by bullets, but was in surprisingly good shape. With time, rest and proper care, he should recover.

He hadn't stirred as she'd dug into his skin, searching for the bullet. Nor had he flinched as she cleaned and stitched his other two wounds. He'd remained unconscious all during the day and throughout almost the entire night. Dawn wasn't far away. For a man who'd had major surgery and been at death's door only twenty-four hours ago, he was doing amazingly well.

Thankfully, he didn't seem to have much of a fever. Not yet anyway. Only time would tell if he'd avoid infection. He was staring up at her, his vivid blue eyes almost mesmerizing. His blond hair was cut short on the top and sides, but was longer in the back, exposing the rough features of his face. He had a strong jaw, full lips and high cheekbones. He wasn't handsome, not exactly. *Compelling* was the word that popped into her brain.

She should have been in bed trying to sleep. Instead, she'd spent the past six hours sitting in a chair by the fire, gazing at his face, wondering about the man behind it. He was strong and fit. That much she'd discovered when she'd cut off his bloody clothing to get at his wounds. His body was sculpted, thick with muscle.

But it was his hands that had caught her attention. They were broad and large, with calluses on the sides and on several of his fingers. She'd spent hours speculating what they would feel like against her skin. Slightly rough and very stimulating.

She felt her cheeks getting warm as her breasts swelled, pushing her nipples against the heavy cotton of her tunic. Mercy wanted to look away but couldn't remove her gaze from his penetrating gaze. The low pulsing that had thrummed deep in her womb from the moment she'd laid eyes on him got worse, turning into an ache. Her panties were damp. She felt restless and needy.



For a twenty-six-year-old woman who'd been a practicing healer and in charge of an entire household and a group of orphans since she was eighteen, it was disconcerting to feel this out of control. She'd seen naked men before. Being the only healer in the community, it was impossible for her not to see naked bodies.

The male anatomy held no secrets for her. But not once in all her years had she ever reacted to a man's body like this before. He made her feel hot and achy, wanting things she hadn't thought about in years. This stranger pushed her off balance, made her lose her sense of self, and she didn't like it. Not one bit.

Sure, she'd had sex before. But that was years ago, back when she was young and stupid and believed she would marry Kyle Brewer. When Kyle left her for another woman, she'd tucked her dreams of a marriage and children away and made all the members of her community her family, focusing on their needs, their survival. That was when she'd started taking in orphans. They needed mothering and she needed someone to nurture and love. The arrangement had worked out well for all of them.

Practical was her middle name. She didn't indulge in flights of sexual fantasy and wasn't about to start now.

"How do you feel?" Needing something constructive to do, she checked the bandages on his leg and arm. They were fine. Just as they were the past five times she'd checked them. She'd done a good job of sewing up his wounds if she did say so herself.

"Where am I?" His voice was rough, slightly hoarse. His lips dry and cracked.

Lifting a wooden cup half filled with water, she held it to his mouth. "Drink." His lips pressed together and she thought for a moment he'd refuse. "If I wanted to hurt you, I've had plenty of opportunity to do so," she reminded him.

He studied her face. Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it because his lips parted. Mercy slid the brim of the cup to his mouth and tipped slowly. He gulped the water, draining the entire amount.

"More," he demanded.

She shook her head. "No yet. Not until we see if you can keep that much down. I removed a bullet from your upper back. Looks like a couple more bullets grazed you. I stitched up a wound on your arm and another one on your leg." The one on his arm had been the worst of the two. It was a deep gash that had bled profusely.

He shifted restlessly, his massive hands opening and closing. The tendons and muscles in his wrists tensed, testing the restraints. She knew the bindings weren't hurting him. She'd checked them several times herself to make sure. But there was no way she could release him. Not yet. She had a houseful of children depending on her and they had no idea who he was. It paid to err on the side of caution. "We strapped you down because it was safer for me to do the surgery. Plus, you're a stranger."

He nodded, his eyes narrowing. "Where am I?" he repeated.

She cocked her head to one side and studied him. This was a man used to being in charge, to being obeyed. Even injured and tied down to a bed, he exuded a sense of power and command that was extremely difficult to deny.

Mercy sat down on the edge of the mattress, swallowing a curse as her tunic shifted, rubbing against her distended nipples. The tips of his fingers were almost touching her leg. She could feel the heat emanating from him. Frowning, she leaned forward and placed her palm on his forehead again. The motion brought her so close to him, she could feel his breath on her face.

Hastily, she jerked her hand back and sat up straight, ignoring the damp persistent throbbing between her thighs. "You're warm but not overly hot. I'll keep a watch on infection."

"I'm fine." His eyes slid over her face, down her shoulders, pausing at her breasts for a moment before moving lower. It felt like a physical caress. She shivered and cupped her elbows in her hands. Realizing what she was doing, she dropped her hands down by her sides, straightened her spine and stared at him.

Needing some distraction from the incredibly magnetic stranger, she decided to see if she could get some answers from him. "You're just beyond the edge of the outer city. We call our little community Hope. Where are you from?"

"Hope." He said the word slowly as if rolling it around in his mind. He shifted slightly and the blanket slipped down to his waist, exposing a large expanse of heavily muscled chest.

Mercy tried not to look, but it was impossible. She'd had her hands on him while she'd performed surgery, but it wasn't the same. Then, all she'd been concerned about was saving his life. Now she wondered how his skin would feel beneath her fingers while she touched him. He shifted again and the muscles rippled.

She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry. Her palms itched to stroke his hard flesh. To trace every delineated line on his torso and follow them as they disappeared beneath the covers. Her eyes followed the thin line of dark blond hair that bisected his abdomen. The blanket was tented just below his waist. He was aroused.

Her gaze flew back to his. He was still watching her, but his eyes were now filled with a sexual heat that ramped up her body temperature by several degrees. The man was injured, strapped to a bed and he was aroused.

"I can smell your heat." His low voice scraped over the nerve endings of her body, making them tingle. Because of that it took her a second to realize just what he'd said.

"What?" That was impossible. Wasn't it?

He shook his head, his gaze dropping to her chest. Mercy barely resisted the urge to cover her breasts, but that would only confirm his suspicions. She laughed, but even to her own ears, it was strained. "You must have a fever. You're obviously hallucinating."

He ignored what she said, continuing on with his mesmerizing voice. "I can smell the cream seeping from your pussy. You're hot and wet." He licked his lips and Mercy almost moaned at the answering pulse between her legs. Oh god, she was getting wetter with each passing second. She pressed her thighs together but it didn't help. The ache only increased and he wasn't done yet.

“I can see the outline of your nipples against the fabric of your top. They’re hard and ripe. Are they pink or beige?” He paused. Mercy shook her head, unable to find her voice. She knew she should get up and leave the room, but her legs wouldn’t listen to her brain. “No matter,” he continued. “Either way, I’d say you have large nipples, perfect for licking and nibbling.”

She jumped as the tips of his fingers brushed her thigh. Breathing was difficult. Her chest hurt. There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room. The house was quiet. The only sounds were the low crackle of the fire and their rough breathing. It created an air of intimacy, of expectation.

“Your breasts are full. I like that.” He smiled at her and she almost swallowed her tongue. His features were craggy at best, but when he smiled, he was gorgeous. Rugged and all male. The knowing smile on his face made her want to either smack him or kiss him.

It was a toss-up at the moment which impulse would win.

“After I feast on your breasts, I’d shift my attention lower, mapping out every curve, every hollow. Your skin looks incredibly soft.”

Mercy sat there, totally in his thrall. Her pussy was clenching hard. She squeezed her thighs tighter together and her clit throbbed.

He gave a low rumble in his chest that reminded her of the purr of some large cat. “I’d spread your thighs wide and lick every slick fold of your pussy. I bet you taste sweet and spicy.” He licked his lips and her inner muscles clenched even harder. She was close to coming and all he was doing was talking to her.

Mercy made a sound of distress in her throat. She had to get out of here, had to get away from him.

“Shhh,” he soothed. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave you hanging.” His eyes were like molten fire as he stared at her lap. “I’d eat your cunt until you scream with pleasure. Then I’ll do it again. I want your cream on my hands, in my mouth, on my face. Only then would I fuck you. Hard and fast.” His eyes were dilated, his skin slick with sweat.

“And you’d take every inch of my cock into your wet heat and squeeze it so damn tight I’d want to come. But I wouldn’t. Not yet.”

Mercy was breathing hard now, her breasts rising and falling with each lungful of air, her nipples scraping against the fabric of her tunic. Her channel contracted as his words ratcheted up her arousal another notch. She squeezed her legs together and moaned at the exquisite sensation that went from her pussy to her breasts and back again.

“You’d scream for more and I’d give it to you until you came again.” He was panting hard now, his chest rising and falling with each breath of air he sucked deep. “Come for me.” His fingers brushed her thigh again. “Come.” His stern tone brooked no denial.

Mercy gave a cry as she followed his command. Her pussy clenched hard and her entire body shook as she came. Wrapping her arms around herself, she sobbed as her inner muscles clenched hard and cream flowed from her slit. Collapsing, she sobbed as she tried to breathe, tried to think.

When she came back to herself, her face was pillowed against his chest. His heart was pulsing against her cheek, the pounding rhythm matching the one still beating between her thighs.

She’d had an orgasm in front of a stranger. He hadn’t even touched her. All he’d done was talk to her. Embarrassment warred with anger and shame. How could she ever face him again?

Placing her hand on the bed, she pushed up, needing to get some space between them. Because even though he was a total stranger, she wanted to bury her face in the curve of his neck and breathe in his unique male scent.

Shoving her fingers through her short hair, she tried to compose herself. Her hand was trembling but that couldn’t be helped. Her body was still thrumming with the aftershocks of her astonishing orgasm.

She stood, wavering slightly. Her legs felt weak but she locked her knees. There was nothing she could do about what just transpired. She'd shown him she was weak where he was concerned. That would have to change. Starting now.

Bracing her legs apart, she glared down at him. The blanket was tented even higher, a stark reminder that while she'd come, he hadn't. Mercy refused to feel guilty about that. She hadn't asked for the orgasm, it had just sort of happened.

"Where are you from?" His skin was flushed and a light sheen of sweat coated his torso. She expected him to be smug about what he'd just done but his face showed nothing but concern. For her?

Now she was really grasping at straws. He didn't even know her. Why would he care? This was probably no more than a ploy to soften her up so she would release him. She'd been stupid. But no one could say she wasn't a fast learner. Now that she knew his game, it wouldn't happen again.

"The outer city."

Exasperated, she propped her hands on her hips and then almost groaned as her still-tender nipples brushed against her tunic. "I knew that. I meant specifically."

He shrugged. The blanket covering him slipped dangerously low. "Here and there. Nowhere in particular."

Mercy frowned. This wasn't good. Obviously, he was hiding something from her. She'd leave him alone for a while and let him think about things. He was at her mercy. The pun almost made her smile. Almost. Turning on her heel, she strode toward the door.

"Wait."

In spite of her best intentions not to, she stopped and glanced over her shoulder. He looked tousled and too sexy for her peace of mind.

"What's your name?"

The enormity of what she'd just done came crashing down on her. She'd had an orgasm in front of a stranger who didn't even know her name. Shame threatened to overwhelm her but she shoved it back. Tilting her chin up, she met his gaze. "Mercy. Mercy Dockins."

A slow smile crossed his face. Damn, he was handsome when he smiled. She kept going toward the door, breathing a sigh of relief when her hand closed around the handle.

"Hello, Mercy Dockins." His low, sensual voice sent a shiver down her spine. "I'm Logan." She nodded but didn't look back.

"Welcome to Hope." Mercy stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind her, leaving him to his thoughts. Leaning against the panel, she took a deep breath. Her limbs were still quivering and she felt like a mess. What she needed was a hot bath and time to think.

She glanced out the window and sighed. The sun was close to rising. Her hot soak would have to wait. A sponge bath would have to do. The kids would be up soon. If she hurried, she had enough time to get cleaned up and start breakfast before the first one woke and tumbled down the stairs in search of food.

Logan groaned the moment the door shut behind her. *Mercy*. He wished she'd lived up to her namesake and had shown him some mercy. His skin was on fire. His cock was so hard he was surprised he hadn't come. It had been a close thing but he'd wanted to watch Mercy as she'd orgasmed.

He'd never seen anything as erotic in his life as Mercy, her head tipped back, eyes glazed with passion and her lips parted on a cry of completion. His hips had pistoned off the bed, his cock clamoring to be buried in her supple sheath, squeezed tight with each pulse of her orgasm.

Swearing, he ran complex mathematical problems in his head to keep his balls from exploding. It would take him hours to come down from the edge he was on. Not even the pain from his wounds could drive back the sexual desire pounding at him.

*Mercy.* He said her name in his mind, testing it. She was small in stature, but there was no denying she was all woman. Her breasts were full and firm, her hips slender. Her short blonde hair framed an ethereal face. Her skin was pale, her lips a luscious pink. He smiled as he thought about her chin. It was stubborn. More than once, she'd automatically tilted her straight little nose into the air, looking down at him. This was a woman used to being in charge.

She'd orgasmed, but she hadn't liked her loss of control. Was shocked by it if he was reading her correctly. Hell, he was shocked by it too. He hadn't set out to make her come. She'd thrown him off stride from the moment he'd laid his eyes on her. Something about her called to him on a deep level. It was as though she'd been imprinted on every cell in his body. Created specifically for him.

*Mercy.* His body cried for her. His soul yearned for her.

Impossible. Yet it was so.

And she wasn't immune to him either. She'd responded almost immediately to the sound of his voice. Her body shaking and little whimpers of need coming from the back of her throat as he whispered what he wanted to do to her. His cock jerked and Logan bit back another curse. Thoughts like this weren't helping him with his not so small problem.

Whatever the reason, there was a connection between them. One that couldn't be denied. What it meant, only time would tell.

Logan decided to focus on the more pressing problem at hand. He was bound to the bed he was lying on. The first thing he had to do was get free. He'd been held prisoner for too many years by the Piedmont Corporation to be able to tolerate it now. He was an Alpha. He would not be anyone's captive. Not any longer. He'd rather be dead.

He tightened the muscles in his right arm and wrist and gave a hard yank. The binding held but the wood creaked. It might hold a normal man, but he was anything but normal.



It had definite possibilities. Logan tugged at the restraint again and was rewarded with another creak. He weighed his options in his mind and knew he had no choice. There was no way around it. It was going to hurt. But that wasn't going to stop him.

He blocked out the pain in his wounded arm and leg. Disregarded the ache in his upper back. Ignored the throbbing of his cock. Focusing all his energy, he flexed the muscles of both arms, gritted his teeth and pulled.

Wood buckled as he applied more and more pressure. Hissing out his breath from beneath clenched teeth, he used the adrenaline surging through his veins, pumping up his muscles, giving him added strength.

*Crack!* Wood snapped and his right arm came free. *Crack!* His left arm flew forward.

Logan sat up in bed, sweating profusely as he gulped in a breath. He was weaker than he'd like. Obviously, the blood loss and surgery were still affecting him. What he needed was food and rest.

He glanced at his arm and muttered a string of profanities at the sight of the blood staining the formerly pristine bandage. He'd probably ripped a stitch or two, but it couldn't be helped. Thankfully he was a fast healer. Once he got some food into him, he'd start to mend even quicker.

Jagged pieces of wood were still attached to the bindings. It took him some time, but he eventually managed to get his wrists free. He tossed the thin straps aside. Leaning forward, he untied the bindings wrapped around his ankles. When he was done, he swung around to the side of the mattress and let his feet fall to the floor.

Dizziness assailed him and his vision dimmed. He closed his eyes and wrapped his fingers around the edge of the bed, hanging on as a wave of nausea passed over him. Sheer willpower kept him from passing out.

Breathing through his nose, he forced his body to relax. After a few minutes he felt marginally better. He opened his eyes again and was grateful when his vision remained steady. Logan got his first good look of the room in which he was being held.

It wasn't overly large but it wasn't exactly tiny either. A small flame danced in the fireplace that sat in the center of one wall. A blackened pot was suspended over the flame. His stomach growled as he found the source of the food he'd smelled earlier. Seemed that Mercy hadn't planned on starving him. Although she might have changed her mind after what happened between them.

Beside the bed sat a small table with a large wooden bowl in the center. A bucket beneath the table had some water in it. A smaller bowl sat on the edge of the hearth. Continuing his examination of his surroundings, he turned his head in the other direction. Through a small window he could see the sun rising.

He frowned. How long had he been here? A day? Two?

The walls were bare and so was he. Standing, Logan let the blanket fall away. Totally unconcerned with his nudity, he carefully walked to the table. He was steady on his feet but didn't want to push himself until he'd tested his limits.

There was a chair but he refused to sit, trying to force some of the strength back into his legs. Leaning against the table for support, he poured a quantity of water into the bowl, picked up the cloth that was beside it and began to wash. The cool water felt marvelous against his overheated flesh. He either had a mild fever or his body was still flushed with sexual arousal. He figured it was probably a byproduct of arousal as his body was engineered to easily fight off any infection.

His cock was still standing at attention. Logan ignored it. He had more important matters to deal with. His cock could wait until he had Mercy naked and spread beneath him.

It would happen. He had no doubt about it. The sexual connection, the sheer chemistry between them was too explosive to deny. And Logan didn't know the meaning of the word quit. He'd have Mercy, and when he did— He broke off his thoughts and swore under his breath as liquid flowed from the tip of his shaft and his balls tightened.

Shaking his head, he finished washing and tossed the wet cloth into the bowl. It wasn't easy but he ignored his erection as he checked out the pot suspended over the fire. It appeared to be some sort of stew. The handle of the spoon was hot, so he wrapped the wet rag around it and dished up a small bowlful.

Leaning back against the table, he lifted the bowl and sniffed. It was a rich stew made from potatoes, carrots, onions, turnips and a few other vegetables he couldn't readily identify. Whatever they were, they smelled delicious.

His first sip was tentative. He blew on the liquid surface as he brought the bowl to his lips and tipped it. It was tasty. Two bowls of stew later, he felt steadier, more alert, and his erection had all but subsided.

Placing the now empty bowl back on the table, he pondered his next problem. Clothing. Not that it would matter if he were naked. It would be easier if he was dressed but it wasn't a necessity. One way or another, he wasn't staying in this room. He needed answers.

A dark shadow beneath the bed caught his eye. He pushed away from the table and padded back to the bed. As he peered in the space beneath the mattress, he smiled. Reaching in, he tugged out his pack and his boots. His blankets and canteen were still strapped to the bottom of his pack. His weapons were gone but that was to be expected. It didn't bother him. He'd rearm himself in no time.

Logan dressed quickly, pulling on a pair of brown leather pants, a dark brown shirt and his boots. He shoved the pack back under the bed and headed for the door. It was time to find Mercy and get some answers.

## **Chapter Three**

Mercy was standing at the woodstove in the kitchen, stirring a large kettle of oatmeal, when she sensed a disturbance in the air. There was no sound, nothing out of the ordinary to alert her, but the light hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Slowly, she released the ladle, letting it rest against the side of the pot. In what she hoped was a casual move, she took a step to the side. Several large knives rested on the chopping block. She wrapped her fingers around the handle of the largest one, using her body to shield her actions.

The wood in the stove crackled and the water in the kettle hissed. Mercy tucked the knife down by her side as she turned. If it was one of the children playing, she didn't want to frighten them.

Before she had the chance to turn all the way around, strong fingers gripped her wrist, exerting enough pressure to keep her hand by her side but not enough to hurt her. Mercy knew who was behind her. Impossible. She'd left Logan weak and wounded, tied to a bed.

"What now?" His tone was mild. He was so large his body seemed to surround hers. Not for the first time in her life, she cursed her small size. He was a big man, about a foot taller than her. That didn't mean she was helpless though. Not by a long shot.

Tilting her head back, she looked up at him. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. The color of his eyes seemed brighter, like the sky on a sunny day. His gaze flickered from her lips to the V-neck of her tunic.

He shifted closer and his erection brushed against her back. She felt hot, her skin flushed. It was just because they were standing so close to the stove. It had nothing to do with the orgasm she'd had earlier. At least that's what she told herself.

Ignoring the way her nipples puckered and her pussy clenched, she reached behind with her free hand and found his hard length. He let out a low groan but his hand never loosened from around her wrist.

Licking her lips, she let the backs of her fingers glide up and down his erection. It pulsed against her hand, growing larger by the second. Mercy let her hand slip lower to the vulnerable sac hanging just below his cock. One hard squeeze and she'd be free.

Before she could get a good grip, she was spun around so she was now facing him. He captured her free hand and shoved it behind her back. Holding both her wrists in one hand, he plucked the knife from her grip and tossed it onto the counter. So close, yet it might as well have been miles away.

She was at his mercy.

Her heart pounded as fear began to seep into her consciousness. What did she know about this man? Nothing. He was incredibly strong, obviously resourceful and sexy as sin. Given the number of scars on his body, he was no stranger to violence. Just because she'd saved his life didn't mean he wouldn't hurt her. She wasn't naïve enough to believe that even for a second.

Plastered against his chest, she could hear the strong beat of his heart. It wasn't racing like hers, but kept a steady rhythm. He was still aroused, his erection pressing hard against her belly. Her pussy softened as her nostrils were filled with his masculine scent. This wasn't like her at all. This man affected her like no other. And it scared her.

He scared her.

"Please." She wasn't certain what she was asking him for – to let her go or pull her closer. Shutting her eyes, she took a deep breath and examined the situation. He could have hurt her already if that was his plan.

Logan dipped his head down, his lips nuzzling the curve of her ear. "I'd love to please you." His rough voice scraped over her nerve endings leaving them raw.

"Let me go." She could hear the raw desperation in her voice as she struggled against his hold, trying to free herself.

“I don’t think I can,” he whispered. She could hear the puzzlement in his voice, as if he were as surprised at their attraction as she was.

His teeth nipped at her earlobe before slipping lower to sample the sensitive skin at the curve of her neck. Mercy gasped and then moaned as it sent rivers of pleasure streaming throughout her. A sense of inevitability swept over her but she fought it. She wasn’t slave to her sexual needs. Had never allowed herself to be swayed by a man before and wasn’t about to start now.

But, oh, it was difficult. His clever teeth nibbled their way to her mouth, capturing her bottom lip and tugging gently. Her knees went weak and her head began to spin. He traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue, asking for entrance. She tried to deny him, tried to stay strong, but he wouldn’t allow it.

Capturing her bottom lip between his teeth, he bit. Not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to sting. Mercy gasped and the moment her lips parted, he swept inside. His tongue twined with hers, taking what he wanted and asking for everything in return.

Mercy felt herself slipping beneath his spell and fought it. It was bad enough she’d had an orgasm with little more than him talking to her. If she succumbed to his touch she could lose herself totally. And she had too many people depending on her to allow that to happen.

She tried to catch her breath but Logan kept kissing her. Long and slow and totally thorough, his kisses left no part of her mouth untouched. He cradled her head with his large hand, tilting it to one side for a better angle. The kiss deepened and Mercy was lost in his taste, his touch.

Her breasts ached. They felt swollen and tender even though he hadn’t touched them. The throbbing between her thighs was getting worse. She’d never experienced sexual need like this before. The few times she’d had sex in her life it had been pleasant. Nothing had prepared her for this.

Raw, elemental and life-altering. That's what sex with Logan would be like. If she gave herself to him, she'd never be the same again. And when he was healed, she'd be left picking up the pieces of her broken heart.

His hand rubbed circles at the small of her back. Such a small thing yet so intimate. He hadn't touched her in an overtly sexual way but he might as well have been stroking her breasts for hours her nipples were pulled so tight. The crotch of her panties was damp and her folds were slick with cream. Kissing Logan was like an hour of foreplay with another man.

A thump sounded above her, bringing her back to earth in a hurry. The children. It was only then she realized her hands were free and had been for some time now. Her fingers clutched the back of his shirt, holding him to her. Now she brought her hands around front, slammed them against his chest and pushed him away. At the same time, she turned her head, tearing her lips from his.

He let her go and she took a step back, desperate to collect herself. Logan was breathing heavily, his fists clenched by his sides. His cock was still fully erect and pressing against the front of his pants. The hard bulge looked rather uncomfortable.

Not her fault. She hadn't started this. Well, she had, but only to help her get away. She'd planned to squeeze his balls until he let her go, not kiss him senseless. Because there was no lying to herself. She'd been as much a participant in their kiss as him. No one had forced her to twine her tongue with his. No one had made her suck on his tongue when he'd plunged it into her mouth.

Mercy raked a hand through her short hair. Her mouth felt slightly swollen. She could still feel the sensation of his teeth tugging on her lips. A shiver went down her spine. "Well," she began, "that certainly can't happen again."

He cocked his head to one side. "Why not?"

The smell of something burning caught her attention. "Damn it," she muttered. She spun back to the stove and grabbed the ladle, cursing again as the hot metal seared her fingers. Breakfast would be ruined if she weren't careful.

Strong hands plucked the ladle from her hand, tossing it aside. "Hey," she objected. "I need to stir that before it burns any more than it already has."

Logan ignored her protests, dragging her toward the sink. A bucket of cool water sat beside it. Logan plunged her hand into the water. The cool liquid immediately soothed her slightly burned fingers, drawing out the sting. "Stay there."

Bemused, she watched as he grabbed a towel and went back to the pot. Wrapping the towel around the handle of the ladle, he stirred the oatmeal. "It's a little burnt, but not ruined." Setting aside the ladle, he used the towel to protect his skin as he lifted the handle and moved the pot to the other side of the stove. It would stay warm there but wouldn't get direct heat.

"What's going on?"

Mercy's gaze shot toward the doorway. Evan stood there, hands on his hips and a scowl on his face, looking very adult. He was about four inches shorter than Logan and hadn't filled out yet, but he was still a very angry male. Mercy sighed. Evan felt responsible for the younger ones and for her, even though she didn't need anyone to look out for her.

"I'm fine."

"She hurt herself," Logan interjected as he strode back to her side, lifted her hand from the bucket and examined her fingers. "They're a bit red but not seriously burned."

Evan eased into the room slowly, edging his way toward the closet where she kept her father's old rifle.

Even though Logan hadn't even glanced toward Evan, his next comment was directed toward the younger man. "You don't need to go for a weapon. If I'd wanted to kill Mercy she'd already be dead." His tone was matter-of-fact and totally emotionless, leaving Mercy with no doubt that Logan had killed before.

Ignoring Logan, Evan swung open the closet door and grabbed the rifle from the gun rack. He pointed it at Logan. "I don't think I'll take any chances."



Before Evan had finished speaking, Logan had one thick forearm banded across her neck. The knife from the counter appeared in his hand. She had no idea when he'd palmed it. He must have taken it when he'd gone back to the stove.

"Now what are you going to do?" Logan asked the younger man softly. "You going to shoot me and risk hitting Mercy?"

Evan swallowed. His eyes darted from her to Logan to the knife held in front of her. A bead of sweat formed on his forehead. The rifle began to shake in his hands. "Evan," she began, but Logan tightened his hold on her, letting her know that he wanted her to stay out of this.

Surprisingly enough, she wasn't afraid. Logan wasn't hurting her. If he wasn't holding a knife and hadn't uttered his threat, it might well be considered an embrace. Logan was making a point, one he'd made several times since he'd woke. He wasn't going to hurt them.

At least not physically. He was still a major threat to her peace of mind.

"What are you going to do?" Logan asked again. He took a step forward, urging her along with him. She could have scratched and clawed at his arm and face. She could have kicked him, fought him. And he knew it. This was all about teaching Evan and her a valuable lesson.

They were only two feet apart when Logan suddenly spun her to one side, grabbed the barrel of the rifle and pushed it upward. He jerked the weapon forward, yanking it easily out of Evan's grasp. The knife had disappeared again, tucked in the waistband of Logan's pants. Once again, Mercy hadn't seen him tuck the knife away. The man was incredibly fast.

Stepping between the two men, she put a hand on each of their chests. "That's enough."

Logan stared at Evan. The boy stared back, his hands fisted at his sides. "Don't ever aim a gun at a man if you're not prepared to kill him," Logan instructed. Walking back

toward the closet, he put the rifle back on the gun rack and closed the door. He turned back to Evan and held out his hand. "I'm Logan."

Evan looked long and hard at Logan's hand and Mercy held her breath, waiting. Reluctantly, Evan gave it a quick shake before turning to her. "How'd he get out of bed? Thought we were keeping him tied there until we knew more about him."

Mercy shrugged. "I guess he didn't like being tied up." A thought occurred to her. "Is the bed still there or did you destroy it?"

Logan gave her a quick grin. "The slats on the upper end will need to be replaced. I can fix them if you have the wood."

Evan's eyes grew larger as he realized Logan had gotten free using sheer brute strength.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs and seconds later six children raced in, coming to a swift halt when they saw Logan. They all stared at the stranger in their midst. Suddenly Tim stepped forward, tilting his head back so he could look up at Logan. "You didn't die after all."

Logan chuckled. Reaching out, he ruffled the younger boy's hair. "No, I didn't die. Thanks to Mercy."

"And Tim and Evan," she added. "They were the ones who found you and brought you back."

"Thank you." He nodded to both boys. "I'm in your debt."

"What's his name?" Gretchen was the youngest of the children at five and was at the age where she had a million questions every single day. Her brown eyes were sleep filled and her long braid was messy, telling Mercy that she'd done her hair on her own. Gretchen was also at the age where she wanted to do everything for herself.

"It's Logan," Evan told her.

The other children nodded, watching Logan with wide eyes. Mercy, needing to get things back on an even keel, started giving orders. "Beth, you and Benjamin set the

table." Bustling back to the stove, she didn't spare Logan a glance. "Evan, bring in the milk from the pantry. The rest of you take your places around the table."

Feet scuffed against the floor and children chatted and giggled as the morning routine unfolded. It sounded like a normal morning, but it was anything but normal. Logan was behind her, watching her. She could feel his gaze on her.

"We're ready." Evan placed the jug of milk on the table, leaving her with no excuse to linger any longer.

Grabbing the kitchen towel, she grasped the handle of the large pot. Before she could lift it, Logan was behind her. "Let me." Taking the pot from her, he carried it to the center of the table.

Tim wrinkled his nose. "You burnt the oatmeal." Evan gently cuffed Tim on the back of his head.

"Be thankful you have anything to eat."

All the children sobered. Orphans, all of them, they knew what it was like to lose everything, to be alone and hungry.

"That's enough." Mercy grabbed the ladle and began to spoon out oatmeal. "It's a little burnt but not too bad. Add some extra milk and it will be fine." Logan was still hovering behind her. "You sit there." She pointed to a chair at the foot of the table.

Logan cocked one of his eyebrows at her command, but he took the seat she assigned him. His eyes were constantly moving, taking in everything going on around him. Mercy took her seat at the head of the table. She'd thought it would be easier to have him sitting as far away from her as possible. She was wrong.

Having him at the opposite end of the table meant she had a clear view of him. Sighing, she clasped her hands together and said a quick prayer of thanks. When she was done, she picked up her spoon and started to eat, all the while conscious of Logan's eyes watching her every move.

Logan dug into the bowl of oatmeal, still hungry despite eating two bowls of soup earlier. He needed fuel in order to heal. Oatmeal was a good start. He didn't feel guilty about eating their food. He planned to make certain their larder was more than full before he left. He could hunt and forage with the best of them.

The dark-haired girl sitting to his right was staring up at him. She'd told him her name was Beth. And the boy, Benjamin, seated directly to his left looked enough like her to be her brother. Logan had never been this close to a child before, let alone an entire group of them. They were fascinating. They chattered as they ate, talking about lessons and chores.

"Do we have to have lessons today?" a young man asked.

"Yes, Jonathan," Mercy answered as she helped the smallest girl with her breakfast.

"But couldn't this be like, a holiday or something?" another boy offered.

"No, Matthew." If Logan hadn't been watching her as closely he might have missed the twitch of her lips. He liked the fact that she was amused by them and not annoyed. It said a lot about her as a person.

"After we're finished eating, you'll all do your chores before we settle down to an hour of lessons. You need to learn how to read and write and do your sums." They all groaned but nodded.

"I can help." Logan wanted to get the lay of the land and the best way to do that was to get out of the house and check out the surroundings.

Mercy nibbled her bottom lip. Logan's cock jerked. He knew just how tasty that bottom lip was. He wanted to do a bit more nibbling himself and not just on her mouth. Something wet touched his fingers and he glanced down at his hand. Blood. He must have done more damage to his stitches than he'd thought.

He wiped his hand on the thigh of his pants but nothing, it seemed, got past Mercy's all-seeing gaze. "What have you done?" Pushing her bowl aside, she got up and came down to the end of the table.

Beth whimpered when she saw the blood and Mercy bent down and gave the girl a quick hug. "He's okay. He just tore his stitches." She glanced at Evan. "Why don't all of you start chores? Leave the dishes. I'll take care of them after I check the stitches in Logan's arm."

Nodding, but obviously reluctant, Evan gathered the other children and herded them out through the back door, leaving Mercy alone with him. The door shut with a solid bang. She took a deep breath and he couldn't help but notice the way her breasts pushed against the tunic she wore. Her movements brisk, she reached for his shirt. "Let's see how much damage you've done."

## **Chapter Four**

Mercy tried not to notice Logan's impressive chest as he shrugged out of his shirt. She managed that, but it was impossible to ignore the heat rolling off him. Then her gaze fell to his arm and she gasped with dismay. The bandage wrapped around his upper arm was red with blood.

"Don't move," she ordered as she hurried off to the pantry to gather supplies. The long, narrow room just off the kitchen contained cupboards, shelves and drawers filled with supplies of all kinds. There was also a trapdoor in the floor, which led to a root cellar where they stored vegetables and other perishable items. Sticking a pair of scissors, bandages, a needle and some thread, as well as a tin of healing balm into the pockets of her tunic, she went back to the kitchen.

Logan was still sitting at the table, waiting patiently. The man had to be in pain but you'd never know it by looking at him. He was alert, his body erect and ready to fight at a moment's notice. Mercy had never met anyone like him in her entire life.

Reaching up into the cupboard, she took down a battered tin bowl and filled it with warm water from the kettle. It had been boiled earlier so she knew it was sterile. She set the kettle back over the fire so the remaining water would boil again. Satisfied that she'd have boiling water by the time she needed it, she dug several clean cloths out of a drawer and carried all her supplies to the table.

He was making her nervous, watching her every step without speaking. His blue eyes tracked her movements as she reached into her pocket and dug out the scissors. He raised a questioning eyebrow and she scowled at him, throwing his own words back at him. "If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Touché."

Sliding the bottom blade of the scissors beneath his bandage, she cut. Even though she was as gentle as possible, it had to hurt. His arm muscles tightened but he made no sound even though she knew it had to be pulling on the wound.

She tossed the scissors aside and slowly peeled back the bandage. Three of the stitches were torn. Muttering about mule-headed men, Mercy dipped one of the cloths into the water and cleaned away the blood. Most of it was dried, but there was still a slow trickle in one area.

“You’re healing amazingly fast.” In spite of his mishap, the skin around the broken stitches was knitted together. “Almost impossibly fast.” She frowned as she examined his arm. Logan must have the constitution of an ox to be up and around so soon. In all her years as a healer, she’d never seen anything like it.

“I told you I was a fast healer.”

“So you did.” Mercy dipped the cloth into the water again. Blood mixed with the water, tingeing it red. Wringing out the cloth, she folded it and pressed it against his wound. “Hold this,” she ordered.

His fingers grazed hers as he put his hand over the makeshift bandage. Mercy ignored the sensual tug deep in her womb as she drew the needle and thread out of her pocket. “I have to set a few more stitches. It’s going to hurt this time because you’re not unconscious.”

Logan shrugged, seemingly unconcerned about the pain to come. “How long have I been here?” Stretching out his long legs beneath the table, he leaned back in his chair, looking totally relaxed.

Mercy went back to the stove and removed the kettle. Steam flowed from the spout and the water inside was rippling. “Tim and Evan carted you through the front gates just before dawn yesterday. When were you shot?”

“Just past dusk. I must have been unconscious for hours.” He frowned and she was filled with the need to smooth away the wrinkles between his eyes. To distract herself

from that thought, she placed the needle and thread in a shallow bowl and poured boiling water over it.

“The boys said they found you not too long after dark. It took them a while to get you into the cart and pull it home. I was worried about them.” Biting her bottom lip, she poured the hot water down the drain until only the needle and thread were left in the bowl.

Worried. Now that was an understatement. She’d been terrified for her boys. They went out into the city every now and again to scavenge what they could – kitchen items, tools, clothing and occasionally food or medicine. It was amazing what could be found in the ruins of the city. They were always careful not to take anything that seemed to belong to someone else. There weren’t many folks living in the north so the pickings were good. Most of the communities she knew of were to the south and west.

“They should have left me there.” She whirled around at his blunt statement. “The men who shot me are probably still searching for me.”

What kind of people did Logan associate with if he thought the boys should have left him to die? The first thing that sprang to mind was criminals. Her breakfast curdled in her belly. The faster Logan was healed and gone, the better for all of them.

She ignored the pang in the region of her heart. Logan was going to go. Sooner was better than later. He was a man with a violent past. He wouldn’t fit in their quiet community.

Shaking herself, she concentrated on the task at hand. Mercy pushed up her sleeves and lathered her hands with soap, working the lather around all her fingers before rinsing. After drying them with a clean towel, she went back to Logan. She set the bowl with the sterilized needle on the table and reached for the damp cloth, pleased to see that blood hadn’t seeped all the way through. That meant it was slowing or stopped.

Peeling back the cloth, she frowned as she studied the wound. She could probably get away with setting two stitches, but decided to do three to be on the safe side. His skin was knitting together amazingly fast. Picking up the needle and thread, she



stepped to Logan's left side to get a better angle and carefully inserted the needle into his skin.

It was difficult to work with him alert and watching her every move. She glanced at him and wished she hadn't. He wasn't watching her hands. He was staring at the front of her tunic. The man had a one-track mind. Even bleeding, he was aroused.

"Are you always like this?" she snapped, her nerves fraying with each passing second.

"Like what?" He raked his right hand through his hair, leaving it standing on top of his head in small spikes. It should have made him look silly but didn't diminish his appeal in the slightest.

"Horny." She clamped her lips together, wishing she'd kept her mouth shut. She sensed the change in him immediately. He went from fairly relaxed to hyper-alert in the blink of an eye.

The muscles in his torso rippled as he shifted in his chair. Her eyes were immediately drawn down to his sculpted abs. The bulge in his pants was impossible to miss.

"No."

She frowned, for a moment not remembering what she'd asked him. When she did, she said, "Oh." She felt like a young woman around a boy she had a crush on, which was stupid. She was a grown woman. An independent woman. And she detested feeling stupid and out of control. "Must be me," she added flippantly. *Femme fatale* she wasn't. With her short stature and pale looks, she didn't attract a lot of male attention.

"It is." Her eyes flew to his face. Logan was dead serious. There was no amusement lurking in his gaze, no smile teasing the corners of his mouth.

He cupped the back of her head with his good arm and drew her down to him. With him sitting and her standing, the distance was short. His breath teased her mouth just before their lips touched.

Mercy swallowed back a moan. It was even better than she remembered. During breakfast she'd almost convinced herself that Logan's kisses weren't as spectacular as she'd thought. It was due to the fact that he'd caught her off guard and it had been so long since she'd been kissed.

She'd been lying to herself. Logan's kisses were decadent, a treat to be savored. An indulgence to be enjoyed. His lips slid over hers, encouraging her to let him in. His tongue slipped just inside her mouth, teasing.

Unable to take it any longer, Mercy plunged her tongue into his mouth. He was hot and moist and tasted like sin. She brought her hands up to his face. Logan jerked back a sexy grin on his face. "You need to be careful with that."

Mercy looked down at her hands, appalled to see the needle in it. She'd almost jabbed him in the face. The man turned her into a complete incompetent. He'd barely touched her and she forgot everything she was doing.

Scowling, she averted her face and went to work on his wound. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Stitching up an unconscious man was a lot different from doing it to one who was wide-awake and watching. Even though she'd tried to be gentle, there was no getting over the fact that she was sticking a sharp object through his flesh.

She snipped the thread and tossed the needle back into the bowl. Digging out the tin of salve from her pocket, she pried it open and scooped some of the mixture onto her fingers and smearing it over the wound. The soothing smell helped Mercy center herself.

"What's that?" Logan motioned to the tin when she glanced at him. He wasn't even sweating. She was damp from head to toe and he looked totally relaxed. Just for a brief moment she considered grabbing the needle and poking him with it again. It didn't seem fair how he was able to retain his composure while hers went out the window.

"A healing salve. I made it myself."

He glanced at his arm, admiring the neat row of stitches. "You do good work." He lifted his gaze back to her.

She wrapped a clean bandage around his arm. When she was done, she picked up a towel and wiped her hands. More to give herself something to do than anything else. "Be careful this time," she admonished.

Logan nodded as he flexed his arm, testing the tightness of the bandage. "As long as you don't tie me up again it shouldn't be a problem."

Heat flushed her cheeks. "Turn around. I want to check the wound on your back."

Logan reached out and took her hand, bringing it to his lips. He placed a kiss on her palm and one on her inner wrist. The stubble on his jaw brushed her skin like a rough caress. "Thank you."

Totally flustered, she jerked her hand away, barely resisting the urge to rub it against her tunic. She felt branded by his touch, her body on fire for him. "You're welcome."

He gave her his back and she took a deep breath and went to work. She peeled back the bandage and was shocked to find the skin totally knitted together. The bruising around the area was completely gone. She touched his skin. It was supple and warm. She could remove the stitches if she wanted to. Fear skittered through her. She licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry.

As if sensing her unease, Logan tilted his head back to stare up at her. "What's wrong?"

"Your back is almost completely healed. You don't even really need the stitches any longer."

Logan nodded as if she was confirming something he already knew. "I told you I was a fast healer."

No one was that fast. "Who are you?" she whispered. "What are you?"

Pain flared through Logan at her words, worse than any brought on by his injuries. He shot out of his seat, whirled around and caught Mercy by her upper arms, dragging her against him. "I'm Logan and you're mine." He didn't know where the last part

came from. It didn't matter. He felt the truth of the words all the way to his bones. Mercy had been made for him. She belonged to him, with him.

Needing to reestablish a connection, to mark her as his, he slammed his mouth down on hers. He tasted her, a strong, sensual woman—spicy and sweet. She tasted slightly of the oatmeal she'd eaten for breakfast and Logan wanted to devour her whole. The kiss was all-consuming, dissolving the pain of moments before. She lifted her hands to his shoulders, putting pressure on them, but not quite pushing him away.

He ignored her token refusal, teasing her lips with his tongue. If she really didn't want him, he'd back away. But he knew better. He'd seen her taut nipples outlined against her tunic, smelled her arousal as she'd tended his wound. It was an incredible aphrodisiac to have her hands on his skin, wanting to heal him. It made him feel as though he belonged.

Mercy gave a soft moan and her lips parted. Logan surged forward, groaning as her tongue met with his, their breath mingling. He was well aware that anyone could walk in the back door at any moment and catch them. He also knew that Mercy wouldn't like that.

His cock pulsed in rhythm with his heart, both organs pounding hard and fast. Logan knew it had only been a couple of hours since he'd woken and first seen Mercy, but it felt like a lifetime. He'd waited as long as he could. Been as patient with her as he could manage. He knew she wanted him. That was all the permission he needed. It was time to claim his woman. Swooping down, he lifted her off her feet.

She gave a cry of protest but he swallowed it, refusing to release her mouth. He deepened the kiss as he carried her to the far end of the kitchen and into the pantry. The room was long and narrow but it offered some privacy. There were beds upstairs but, at this moment, they might as well have been ten miles away. He needed Mercy. Now.

Logan kicked the door shut with his heel. Mercy belonged in his arms, fit there perfectly, as though she'd been made specifically for him. His computer-enhanced brain

wondered if that were even possible. Could the Piedmont Corporation have done something to engineer this attraction?

He almost stopped kissing her. Almost. Even as his brain posed the possibility, he rejected it.

*Impossible!* The odds of the Corporation having anything to do with this attraction were astronomical. This had to be innate, biological, a force of nature.

Satisfied, he gave himself over to the passion and need that kept growing within him, consuming him. He wanted to bury himself in Mercy's hot, tight cunt. Lose himself in her heat.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he peppered her cheeks, her nose and her stubborn chin with kisses as he lowered her feet to the floor. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, holding him tight, as though she didn't want to let him go. He liked that.

There would be questions to answer. Mercy wasn't the type of woman who would be satisfied with anything less than the truth. But that would come later, after he'd cemented their physical relationship.

He was an Alpha. He trusted himself and his instincts. And right now they were screaming that this woman was his. He belonged here with her, wherever that was. Yes, he had to fulfill his mission with Tienan. That was a given. The General had to die and the Gate had to come down. But for the first time in his life, he had a plan for a future beyond that.

Tugging on the hem of her tunic, he dragged it upward. "Let's get rid of this."

Mercy hesitated. He knew she wanted him. She might not like the fact that she craved his touch, but she couldn't hide her physical reaction to him. Her nipples were puckered and her cheeks were flushed. He could smell her rising desire as she creamed her panties.

He ruthlessly used her attraction to him and set out to get what he wanted. And right now, what he wanted was Mercy, naked and begging. He nipped at the sensitive

curve of her neck, catching her flesh between his teeth and biting gently. When she moaned, he laved the small sting with his tongue. "Raise your arms, angel."

Her fingernails dug into his biceps, the small pain an aphrodisiac. He almost howled in triumph when the pressure eased and her small hands fluttered upward. He dragged the tunic over her head and tossed it aside. The light in the pantry was dim, but there was more than enough from a small window high on the far wall to enable Logan to see every inch of flesh he'd just uncovered.

Pale as cream. He ran his fingers down her arms as he studied her. Mercy's skin was soft and light. The curve of her waist was narrow. He frowned as his hands wrapped around it. She was almost too thin. Knowing Mercy, she probably gave the bulk of the food to the children. He didn't know much about her past but he knew she was a generous, giving soul. A true angel of mercy. After all, hadn't she taken him in, tending his wounds?

Most people would have let him die. Not gotten involved.

She started to cross her arms over her chest, but he stopped her, catching her hands with his and holding them down by her sides. "You're absolutely lovely." That was the only word he could think of to describe her. His voice was hoarse with passion. He'd never seen anything quite as beautiful as Mercy.

Her breasts were full for such a small woman. Her nipples were red as berries, puckered tight. Growling low in his throat, he lowered his head. He nuzzled the swell of her breast, letting the stubble on his beard brush against her soft skin. She arched forward, offering herself.

His muscles tightened in anticipation. Pre-cum seeped from the head of his cock. The pressure on his shaft was enormous. But he ignored it, needed to taste Mercy's skin more than he needed to come.

He lapped at her distended nipple and was rewarded with a soft moan. She slipped her fingers from his and tunneled them through his hair, tugging him closer.

Closing his eyes, Logan sank to his knees in front of her. With the difference in their heights, he was at eye level with her magnificent breasts. He cupped them with his hands. The pale mounds filled his palms. He gently squeezed, massaging them as he leaned forward, captured a sweet nipple and sucked.

Mercy groaned, her hips undulating in an erotic rhythm. The scent of her arousal increased and he knew her pussy would be hot and wet. He wanted to do everything he'd told her earlier. He wanted to suck her until she came. Fuck her until she screamed.

He went back and forth from nipple to nipple. Laving, sucking, flicking them with his tongue. Mercy was making erotic little sounds that set his blood on fire. He felt hotter than a blast furnace.

He had to see all of her. Sitting back on his heels, he ran his fingers up the length of her legs. Mercy was all woman, soft and curvy. But there was no mistaking the muscle there too. She was strong. The combination almost left him lightheaded. His hands were actually trembling as he reached for the buttons of her pants. He glanced up at her. She was watching him, her pale blue eyes focused on his hands.

He undid the buttons, one by one, revealing a swath of pale skin. Mercy was breathing hard, her breasts jiggling with every breath. But she didn't stop him.

The band of her panties came into view. They were plain white cotton. He'd never seen anything quite as sexy in his life. Hooking his thumbs into the fabric, he dragged pants and underwear down over her thighs.

A neat covering of blonde hair covered her mound. It glistened, damp with her arousal. Leaning close, he nuzzled her pubic hair. It was soft and smelled of her arousal. Honey and spice.

"Logan." Her voice was strained.

Not wanting to give her time to change her mind, he pulled off her boots and dragged the rest of her clothing aside. Naked, she leaned against the door of the pantry and let him look his fill.

Even her feet were sexy, small and well formed. Her ankles were trim, her calves and thighs strong and supple. She had full hips and a tucked-in waist. Mercy was a short woman but her body was in perfect proportion. He adored her full breasts, her slender neck and her incredible eyes.

There was heat in those eyes now. But there was uncertainty too.

Logan shouldered her thighs open, spreading the folds of her cunt wide with his thumbs. "I'm going to eat you until you come." He swiped his tongue over one side of her labia. Mercy sucked in her breath, giving a small hiccup just before she moaned. She went up on her tiptoes but he followed her.

"Mmm, you taste delicious." He teased her clit, circling the tight bud of nerves with the tip of his tongue. Her hips jerked toward his face. "That's it," he crooned. "Let me taste your sweet pussy."

Her breasts were heaving, the nipples even tighter than before. "Touch yourself," he encouraged. "Pretend my hands are yours. Pinch your nipples. Roll them between your fingers."

Her eyes widened and she hesitated briefly but her hands slowly slid upward, over her belly to her breasts. Logan sucked her clit between his lips, laving the little bud with his tongue. Mercy cried out, her hips pumping back and forth.

He released her and blew on her hot flesh. Tilting his head back so he could watch her, he urged her onward. "Touch your nipples, Mercy. Do it for me."

She nodded slightly. He could see the pulse pounding in her neck. Her skin was flushed, slick with sweat. Using her thumbs and forefingers, she plucked at her nipples, tugging the elongated buds. Her gasp of pleasure turned into a moan as he lapped at her clit.

"That's it," he praised. "Don't stop. I'm going to eat your cunt now and you're going to come."

Logan dipped the tip of his finger past the entrance of her sheath. She was tight, the muscles squeezing his finger. He closed his eyes, breathing deep. His balls pulled up



tight and his cock rippled. Logan tried to think about a cold shower, several complex scientific formulas, how to build a bomb. Anything but Mercy, who was making soft mewling noises in her throat. His control was hanging by a thread but he needed Mercy to come first. She was so damn tight, he wanted her totally aroused and wet before he took her.

He pushed his finger deep, feeling her inner muscles wrap around it, wet and tight. Knowing time was running out, he lapped at her slick folds before focusing on her clit. Her cunt clutched at his finger. Knowing he had to prepare her to take his cock, he pushed a second finger into her channel.

It was a tight fit. Mercy groaned and squirmed but her body adjusted, accepting him. Logan spread his fingers. Not that they were very far apart. But it was enough. He pulled his fingers almost all the way out of her pussy before driving them deep.

Mercy cried out, her hips jerking. "Logan." His name reverberated around him, a thin scream as her body started to shake. Her inner muscles tightened, a rhythmic pulse that signaled her orgasm. Her cream coated his fingers as he finger-fucked her until he'd drawn out her orgasm as long as he could.

He could no longer wait.

Tearing at the ties of his pants, he yanked them open. His cock sprang out, large and hard and damp. His cock head was so red and engorged with blood it was almost purple.

Climbing to his feet, Logan grabbed Mercy by the waist and shoved her high against the door. He held her beneath her thighs, supporting her as he angled his body closer. The tip of his erection nudged at the opening of her heated passage. He circled it, coating the head with her cream.

"Look at me," he demanded. He wanted to see her eyes when he took her.

Mercy's eyelids fluttered open. They were pale and dazed, filled with sensual satisfaction. His chest swelled with pleasure. He'd given her that. And he was about to give her even more.

He slipped the head of his cock inside her, sucking in a breath as her vaginal muscles tightened around it. "You're mine." His fingers tightened around her thighs, holding her in place. "You were made for me, Mercy."

She shook her head. "This is just sex."

Logan pushed inward, driving his cock deeper into her hot cunt. The damp heat enveloped him, welcomed him. "This is more than sex." He was angered by her refusal to acknowledge what was between them.

Mercy captured his face between her hands. "You're a stranger just passing through. There's chemistry between us. Let's leave it at that."

"Let's not." He thrust hard, burying his cock in her pussy. He heard her gasp, felt her tremble and was afraid he'd hurt her. He was so big and she was small and delicate. "Am I hurting you?" He started to pull out but she wrapped her legs around him, crossing her ankles at the small of his back.

"Just a bit. You're rather large and it's been a while for me." Mercy brushed away a lock of hair that clung to his forehead. "You're not staying here. We both know that. Let's just let this be a time out of time."

Logan shook his head. Determination pushed out his anger. He was an Alpha and he was staking his claim. Mercy would just have to learn to live with it. He was smart. It might take him some time but he'd convince her they were meant to be together. In fact, he'd dedicate himself to convincing her. Starting now.

He flexed his hips, pulling his cock out a short ways before driving back in again. Her hands slid to his shoulders and down his back. She accidentally touched the healing wound on his back. Logan felt no pain, but Mercy jerked her hand back as though she'd burned it.

"Your back. Your injuries." She squirmed in his arms, trying to get him to release her.

Logan leaned his chest against hers, trapping her between him and the door. “My injuries are fine. My cock, on the other hand, hurts like a son of a bitch. You need to do something about that.”

A tiny laugh escaped her. She gave him a soft smile and ruffled his hair. “Is that so?” Her inner muscles tightened around his shaft. The little vixen had done it intentionally.

Too far gone to answer her verbally, he did so with his body. Logan began to fuck her. Short, hard thrusts of his cock. His balls drew up tight. They were so full, ready to burst.

He knew he wouldn’t last longer than two or three more thrusts and desperately wanted Mercy to come with him. Supporting her with one hand, he let the other one slide down the front of her body and over her mound until he found her clit. The small bud was standing at attention, pushed out of its protective hood. He brushed it with his finger as he continued to fuck her as hard and fast as he could.

Her breathing was erratic, her legs tightening around him.

“Come with me.” Logan wanted her complete surrender. Demanded it.

Mercy clung to him, her ankles digging into the small of his back, her fingers squeezing his shoulders as she arched against him. Her tight channel fluttered around him, the muscles rippling before squeezing hard.

Logan watched her face. Her eyes closed, her head tilted back, exposing the slender column of her neck. She bit her bottom lip before she cried out his name. His cock exploded. His balls tightened, sending spurts of his seed shooting from his shaft. Her inner muscles continued to milk him, taking everything he gave.

Totally spent, Logan leaned forward and buried his face in her neck.

## **Chapter Five**

Mercy couldn't get her breath. Her pussy was still pulsing around Logan's cock, which was still buried deep inside her. She'd had two orgasms. Two! The man was a sex machine. For a woman who'd found it hard to have an orgasm before now, they seemed incredibly easy to come by around him.

His face was buried in the curve of her neck, the stubble on his jaw stimulating the nerve endings in her skin. She was going to have beard burn for sure. In some places she didn't even want to think about.

Her breasts were smashed against his chest, her nipples still tight and her breasts tender. She still couldn't believe she'd touched herself. Not in front of him. Alone in her own room at night was one thing. In front of a man was quite another experience. She'd felt self-conscious at first. Then sexy and powerful.

Logan had been true to his word. He'd eaten her until she'd come. She'd never experienced anything quite like that before. His clever tongue and lips had been everywhere. And his fingers... The man had amazing hands.

Her hands slipped from his shoulders, which were slick with sweat. They both needed a bath. At least a sponge bath. The smell of sex permeated the air around them. Her pussy contracted. Logan groaned and shifted. His cock slipped out a few inches, teasing her swollen passage and making her moan.

Logan kissed her neck, working his way up to her ear. He found her earlobe and tugged. The man certainly did like to nibble on her. It was wonderful but it couldn't last.

Like a bucket of cold water tossed over her, reality intruded. Logan immediately sensed the change in her and leaned back to look at her. He brushed her hair off her forehead and bent down to put a chaste kiss there. "You okay?"

Sighing, she nodded. She was anything but okay. She'd just had sex with an incredibly sexy stranger. That was the height of stupidity. Not only that, they hadn't used any protection. Chances were she wouldn't get pregnant, but that wasn't a certainty.

The image of a blond-haired baby with vivid blue eyes like his father popped into her head. And surprisingly enough, she wasn't as distressed as she should have been. Logan was leaving. If she did get pregnant she'd have to bring up a baby on her own. Just one more for the brood, a voice in the back of her head told her. A blessing. A gift.

She shook the image away. It was time to get practical. Once again, Logan had touched her and she'd forgotten about everything else around her, including his injuries. Not that she needed to be worried about them. It had only been a little over twenty-four hours since she removed a bullet from his body but he was almost completely healed. The pinkish scar on his back looked like a wound that was several weeks old, not one day.

Mercy released her legs from around his waist, letting them slide down his flanks. She needed some space. He'd distracted her with sex but the time had come for answers.

She pushed at Logan's shoulders. He sighed but he pulled his softening cock from her sheath before lowering her feet to the floor. Mercy was thankful to have the door behind her for support.

Logan hitched up his pants and redid the ties. His shirt was still in the kitchen so he was as dressed as he could be. She, on the other hand, was totally naked, her clothing strewn all over the floor.

Feeling awkward now that the flush of sexual completion had passed, Mercy grabbed her tunic and yanked it over her head. It came down to her upper thigh, offering her some protection from Logan's heated gaze. She shook out her panties and stepped into them, dragging them over her legs. She waited until she had her pants on and her boots tied before she questioned him again.

“Why do you heal so fast? It’s not normal.”

Logan’s gaze slid away but not before she saw something in his eyes she never expected to see—hurt. She chewed on her bottom lip. Why would her question hurt him?

He straightened to his full height, towering over her, and dominating the pantry. The room was long but not wide, and Logan’s shoulders almost touched the cupboards on either side. “Why does it matter?”

It mattered because she wanted to know everything about him. “I’m a healer. If there is anything you’re doing that might help others, I want to know.”

He frowned. “A healer?”

“Yes. My great-grandmother was a doctor and herbalist. She learned from her mother who was a survivor from before the Great Change.” That was the way they all referred to the world the way it used to be over a hundred years ago. When the world’s population was in the billions and there were things like skyscrapers, television and almost everyone owned a vehicle. She’d seen pictures of it, but her mind couldn’t even begin to comprehend such a place.

None of them knew what, if anything, existed in the world beyond the limits of the outer city. The community of Hope sat on the very edge of their known world. Some men had gone into the great unknown to explore. But to date, none of them had ever returned. Whether they were all dead or if they’d found another community and settled there, no one knew. Personally, Mercy hoped they’d found a better place. It made sense that there were pockets of people living across the world. She only hoped their corner of it was safer and more hospitable than this one.

Mercy sensed his interest in her personal history, so she continued, hoping it would encourage him to share some of himself with her. “All the women in my family are healers. I grow a lot of my own herbs and make my own remedies.”

“The salve you used on my wounds. You made that?”

Mercy nodded. "Yes. I make all kinds of concoctions for various ailments. Teas and tinctures for headaches, fevers and the like. I'm even a midwife."

"Is that how you ended up responsible for so many youngsters?"

Sadness pressed down upon her. "No." She shook her head. "Their parents were killed by the security forces. I take in as many of the kids as I can find. Too many of them get lost in the outer city."

He brushed his hand over her head and cupped her nape. "You can't save them all."

She shrugged. "I do what I can." She'd shared. Now it was his turn. "Back to you," she began.

"Someone is coming." He stiffened, his body going on alert as he cocked his head to one side and listened. Mercy frowned, not hearing a sound. He relaxed and sent her a small smile that made her toes curl. "It's just the children."

The children! Ohmigod. The children! She couldn't let them find her in the pantry with Logan. The younger ones wouldn't think anything of it. The older ones were a different story altogether. And Mercy didn't want to have to answer any questions. "We have to get out of here."

Whirling around, she tugged the door open. Not bothering to see if Logan was following, she strode straight to the sink, grabbed a damp cloth and scrubbed it over her face. She knew her skin was still flushed and her lips felt slightly swollen but there was nothing else she could do.

She could hear footsteps and voices approaching the house. Time had run out. She barely had time to make sure all her laces and buttons were fastened correctly before the back door opened and Evan surged inside, a hunting rifle in his hands and the rest of the children close on his heels.

"Nathan just stopped by with news from the outer city." Breathless, Evan's gaze flew from her face to Logan's. His eyes narrowed as he focused on her face. He turned to glare at Logan, pointing the weapon at him.

Nathan was one of their neighbors and one of the men in the community who dealt with the outside world, bartering their goods and skills to get what they needed in return. Mercy knew that whatever news Evan had gotten pertained to Logan and it wasn't good.

"What's going on?" Mercy demanded. "What did Nathan say?"

Evan never took his eyes, or the weapon, off Logan. "The entire security force is searching for someone." He paused for effect. "An Alpha."

Mercy felt herself sway. An Alpha! She'd thought them just a myth. A bogeyman parents sometimes used to frighten their children into obeying them. Alphas were cold-blooded killing machines. Conceived in a lab, they were trained from childhood to kill. The master they served was General Caruthers, the most ruthless member of the Ruling Class and the head of the military.

Evan nodded as though he was reading her mind. "Apparently, he was severely wounded in a skirmish with the security police. Took several bullets. Or so they thought." The younger man looked pointedly at the bandage wrapped around Logan's upper arm. "They haven't found his body yet, but they're looking."

The implications were impossible to ignore. "No." Her gaze flew to Logan. She wanted him to deny it, to reassure her it was all a mistake. The man she'd just shared her body with, the man she was quickly losing her heart to, couldn't be an assassin. He just couldn't be.

Logan stared at her, his face set like stone. She could see the truth in his eyes. "No," she whispered again.

He nodded. "Alpha Two, to be exact."

That explained why he healed so fast. They'd all heard the legends and rumors about the Alphas' healing abilities.

"You have to leave. The security police are looking for you. We don't want them here." Evan took a threatening step toward Logan, the rifle still held firmly in his hands.



Mercy thought the situation was ludicrous. Logan had already proved he could disarm Evan if he wanted to. He'd also proved that it would take more than a gunshot to stop him. As an Alpha, Logan was a trained killer. He could easily snap Evan's neck like a twig if he chose to.

"Does anyone know Logan is here?" Mercy held her breath, wondering what the children had told Nathan.

Evan shook his head. "I told the kids to keep it quiet. You know that Tim and I covered his body with a couple of old blankets when we brought him in so no one knows." Evan leveled the weapon at Logan's chest and tried to look intimidating as he directed his next comment toward his adversary. "I figured it was better to keep it a secret in case you died. Easier to get rid of the body with no questions asked."

"Smart move." Logan ignored the fact that there was a weapon trained on him. He sauntered to the far end of the table, plucked his shirt up and put it on.

The large expanse of flesh disappeared, for which Mercy was eternally grateful. She had a huge enough problem on her hands without having to see Logan's muscular chest, to remember how her breasts felt plastered against the hard planes of muscle. Everything she had worked for was in danger.

Mercy gathered herself. She had a lot to deal with right now, but first she needed to defuse this situation. There was no telling what might happen if Evan took it in his head to start shooting. He was an excellent shot, but it was one thing to shoot at a target from a distance, quite another to kill an unarmed man standing right in front of you. It would test anyone's nerves, let alone a seventeen-year-old's.

Gretchen was trying to stifle the fact she was crying and the rest of the children were frightened. They were all looking to her for direction.

"That's enough, Evan. Put down the weapon." Ignoring his wounded look, she gathered Gretchen close to her, giving the child a hug. "It's all right, Gretchen."

"Police," the child whispered.

Mercy's heart ached for the child. For all of the children. They all had very intimate knowledge of what the security police could and would do to them if they managed to breach the barrier around their compound. "The security forces rarely come this far north. When they do, we fight them off. You know that." She rubbed her hand up and down the girl's spine, trying to infuse her with false comfort. They rarely came this far, but they would if they thought Logan was here. Of that, Mercy had no doubt.

"Tim, why don't you take the children to the schoolroom and get them all started on their lessons for the day." He scowled at her and for a moment she thought he'd refuse to do as she asked. Tim could be as stubborn as a mule when he wanted to be. At thirteen, he considered himself almost an adult. She breathed a sigh of relief when he nodded.

"Okay." He came over to her side and took Gretchen's hand. "I'll read you a story from that book you like."

Just like that, Gretchen smiled. Mercy thanked God for the resiliency of children. She ruffled Tim's hair and sent him a smile of gratitude. "Thanks, Tim."

He glanced over his shoulder as he left. "Call if you need me." All the children shuffled out of the room, all of them sending fleeting looks at Logan. Everything from curiosity to outright fear etched on their young faces.

When they were gone, there was no longer any excuse not to look at Logan. She'd managed to avoid his gaze since he admitted he was an Alpha. She swallowed hard, still trying to reconcile the man, the lover with the clever mouth and hands, with the reality of the killer he really was. Logan wasn't unfeeling, a monster. Not like the stories said Alphas were. He was very gentle with her. He was very aware of his strength and tempered it when touching her.

Mercy shivered. Her body certainly remembered his touch. Yearned for it. Any man capable of making love to a woman in such a way couldn't be a killer. Could he?

Logan stood next to the chair he'd sat in while eating oatmeal with the children. That was only an hour ago. How fast things had changed. Her head spun with the implications and she swayed slightly. "I have to sit down."

She'd been awake for almost two days now with only a few short naps in between. Between being worried about Tim and Evan when they'd gone scavenging, she hadn't slept that night. Then there was the surgery and staying awake most of last night, watching her patient.

Logan was beside her in an instant. "Are you okay?" She could see the genuine concern in his eyes. Emotion welled up inside her and she had to blink back tears. When was the last time someone worried about her? She was the one who took care of everyone. The one who worried.

She nodded and tried to smile but knew she fell short when Logan frowned. "I'm fine. Just tired."

Evan stood on her other side, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "No wonder. You haven't gotten much sleep these past two nights." The rifle was still clutched in his right hand but at least it wasn't pointed at Logan any longer.

She understood Evan's hostility toward Logan. It was more than Logan being an Alpha. She sensed the younger man felt threatened by Logan's presence. She patted Evan's hand. "I'll be all right. I just need a cup of tea to set me right."

Logan strode to the woodstove, opened the door and stoked the fire. After adding a couple of chunks of wood from the supply next to the stove, he closed the door. He moved the kettle from the back of the stove to the front, directly over the heat. "Shouldn't take too long to boil. Where do you keep your tea?"

Evan stepped away from her. "I'll do it." Sending Logan a warning look, he went to work, placing the weapon within easy reach.

Logan returned to her side and crouched beside her. He caught one of her hands between his, rubbing it. She hadn't realized she was cold until he touched her. Logan was always so warm.

"I'm sorry." His words were barely a whisper but she heard them as clearly as if he'd yelled them.

Her heart clenched. What was he sorry for? Having sex with her? Touching her? Making her care about him?

She nodded, not quite knowing how else to respond. Evan returned to the table and placed a mug of tea in front of her. Reluctantly, she slipped her hand from between Logan's large ones and wrapped them around the hot mug.

"Sit down." Both men complied. Evan slipped into the chair on her left, while Logan stood and took the one on her right. Satisfied, for the moment, Mercy turned to Evan. "Did Nathan say anything else?"

The young man shook his head, cradling the rifle in his arms. "Just that we all needed to be on alert."

"How well are you fortified here?"

Evan bristled at Logan's question. "Why do you want to know? Maybe you're a spy for the General."

Logan's face lost all expression, his eyes growing cold. For the first time, she really saw him as an Alpha. There was no doubt in her mind he could kill someone without flinching, had killed many people, in fact.

A cold shiver went through her. Mercy remembered her granny referring to the sensation as someone walking on her grave. She hoped it wasn't prophetic.

Lifting her mug, she took a sip of tea. She swallowed carefully and set the mug on the table in front of her, cradling it between her hands.

Facing Logan, she asked him the one question she needed to know the answer to. "Are you here to kill us?"

Logan closed his eyes for a moment, bitterness coating his throat. That she could ask that of him hurt him in ways he could never have imagined. Unlike his friend and fellow Alpha, Tienan, Logan had always been sensitive. Too sensitive according to the

scientists at the Piedmont Corporation. He was the reason the program was finally scrapped. Emotions got in the way of getting the job done.

He opened his eyes and stared at Mercy. She was sitting there calmly, drinking her mug of tea like she didn't have a care in the world. His eyes narrowed and the world suddenly popped back into focus. Her skin was deathly pale and her knuckles were white, they were wrapped so tight around the mug. No, she was anything but calm.

Compassion and hurt swirled in her pale blue eyes. He hadn't expected to see compassion. Wasn't even certain it was for him. Her pain wounded him. Deeply. He'd never wanted to hurt her.

"No. I'm not here to kill you." His voice was rough and he had to clear his throat before he continued. "I'd planned to tell you who I was before I left."

"I see." She twisted the mug around in a circle. "Why are the security police searching for you? Don't you work with them? Or for the General?"

Logan glanced at Evan, who was watching with keen interest. As much as the boy disliked him, Logan knew he was keenly interested in his answer. It was brave of Evan to face him with a weapon after what had happened in the kitchen early this morning. Unlike then, he knew the younger man wouldn't hesitate to shoot. Not this time.

"The less you know the safer you are," Logan began.

Mercy shook her head. "After everything we've done for you, we deserve to know."

Logan nodded. He'd expected no less from Mercy. She was small in stature but she had a spine of steel. She had to in order to keep all these kids together, safe and fed. She'd also dug a bullet out of him and stitched up two other wounds. He knew that couldn't have been easy, that it took steady nerves and plenty of confidence. Mercy never flinched at doing what had to be done. He hadn't known her long but he knew that much about her.

But underneath the tough exterior was a soft heart. He liked that about her. She was so gentle with the children. The way she talked to them. Touched them. He wanted her to look at him like that.

He wanted her to love him.

There was no lying to himself. He was too intelligent for his own good. In a few short hours, he'd somehow fallen in love with Mercy. She filled the empty spots within him and soothed the darkness of his soul. Being with her, making love with her, had been the best experience of his life.

If he had any chance in hell of being with her, even for a short time, he had to give her the truth. He knew he couldn't stay here much longer, couldn't risk her or the children. Not with the security police practically knocking on their door.

Building a life with Mercy was little more than a fantasy, a dream. Unattainable. If he couldn't have that, he wanted one night in her bed. One night that would have to last him for the rest of his miserable existence. Logan knew the light would go out in his soul when he was forced to leave her behind.

She might turn from him when she learned the truth about him. If she were a smart woman, she'd kick his ass to the door immediately. He was banking on her kindness, her generosity. It might be wrong, but he was more than willing to use it against her if it meant one full night in her bed, in her arms.

He wanted to spend hours touching her, stroking her skin, breathing in her essence. For the first time in his life, he wanted to spend an entire night with a woman, wrap his arms around her and hold her close to his heart through the dark hours of the night. He wanted to feel her body nestled against his. Softness against hardness. Male against female. For once in his damn life, he wanted to feel as though he belonged somewhere. Even if it was only for one night.

Taking a deep breath, he began.

## **Chapter Six**

Mercy watched as myriad emotions flitted through Logan's eyes—anger, sadness, and finally resignation. It amazed her that she could read them so easily. There was a connection between them that was undeniable. Even now, she wanted to reach out and touch him. He looked so alone, so apart from the world. What had his life been like? He'd once been a little boy like Tim, like all her boys. Who had taken care of him?

She could sense Evan getting impatient, but for once, he restrained himself and waited. He still held his weapon. She couldn't fault him for that. He was just being protective of her and the children.

Logan sat as still as a statue, his face like stone. The only spark of life was in his eyes. Even though he seemed lost in thought, she knew he was aware of his surroundings. There was a sense of alertness about him, as though he was used to always being on guard and aware. She supposed it came with being an Alpha.

Logan let out a resigned sigh and began to speak. "Project Alpha began in a lab thirty years ago at the Piedmont Corporation. I don't know how much you know about it." He paused and looked at her, ignoring Evan totally.

She shrugged. "Not much. Just the usual rumors. I wasn't even certain Alphas were real."

"Oh, we're very real." His voice was soft and filled with remembered pain. "Or we were."

Logan raked his hand through his hair, leaving the short blond strands standing on end. It should have made him appear more boyish. It did nothing to diminish the toughness that surrounded him. If anything it emphasized it.

“There were thirty of us to begin with. I heard rumors that about half were terminated about a dozen years ago. I can’t be certain. They didn’t let us interact with one another very often.”

Mercy barely stifled her gasp of dismay. Logan talked about those men being terminated as another person might talk about the weather. He was totally detached.

It came to her in a flash. He’d had to be. That was the only way he’d survived. But it had left a mark on him. She could see it in his face, the almost imperceptible tightening of the muscles around his eyes and in his jaw.

“We trained constantly – physically and mentally. I have a microcomputer in my brain that allows me to think faster and learn quicker than a normal man. My senses are heightened. I’m strong and I’m fast.”

Mercy nodded, encouragingly. It was no wonder he’d heard the children coming long before she had. “You also heal faster.”

“Yes. But it comes with a price. My life expectancy is shorter than a normal man’s by several years.” He gave a self-deprecating smile. “The scientists had hoped we’d live longer. They considered it a design flaw.”

Logan was quiet for a moment before speaking again. “I was raised in a lab, a prison, really. Where and when I slept, ate, trained was all regulated by the scientists to encourage peak efficiency. The goal was always to get faster and stronger. We all got so strong as we reached our teens that we had to start training with one another. That’s when I met Tienan. There’s not a weapon that I’m not expert in. My body is a weapon. I know more ways to kill a man with my bare hands than you can even imagine.”

Mercy heard Evan suck in a breath, but she couldn’t take her eyes off Logan. He was staring at his hands. The same hands that had touched her so gently. The same hands that had caressed her and brought her extreme pleasure. Yes, Logan could kill but there was so much more to him than that. He’d done what he had to in order to survive. She couldn’t fault him for that.

“What happened as you got older?” she asked.



He flinched slightly and raised his head, staring straight into her eyes. "The General sent us out on missions once we hit our early teens. Some Alphas died. Others were terminated for failure to complete assignments. All of them were within the Gate. Most of them were political assassinations, meant to send a clear message to any and all who opposed him or the Ruling Council."

"Why did you go back?" Evan blurted. "Once you were out of the lab, why did you go back?"

"The microcomputer in our brain was hardwired to make us return." Logan shrugged. "Plus, we were kids and had nowhere else to go. Knew no other life. Until I started going on these assignments, I had no idea what the world looked like outside the walls of the lab. I lived for those few hours in the outside world. There was so much color. So much to see and experience."

Mercy's hand flew to her mouth but she couldn't manage to suppress her gasp of anger, of pain. They'd been children. *He'd* been little more than a child. The physical and psychological torture he'd suffered hit her full force. She'd gone hungry and been afraid many times in her life but at least she'd always been free. Logan had been a prisoner his entire life.

"What changed?" She needed to know. Whatever happened, it had to have been huge.

"We were scheduled for termination. Tienan and I were the last two Alphas left—Alphas One and Two. I was a failure, you see." Mercy hated the coldness in Logan's voice as he talked about himself in such a detached way.

"I was deemed too emotional. I actually thought about what I was doing. Questioned it. That displeased my masters." Logan seemed to go inside himself then, seeing a scene only he could see.

"Plus there was the small matter of Tienan and me figuring out how to circumvent their control of the microcomputers in our brain. Once we did that, they had no way to keep us in check. The Corporation had finally advanced enough in their design of

artificial life to create the prototype of a robot. A cyborg. The perfect killing machine. One without pesky human qualities like emotions. The Alpha project was deemed a failure and it was time for Tienan and me to die. They didn't count on Kathryn Piedmont."

Jealousy spiked through Mercy. It was the way Logan said the other woman's name. With respect and obvious affection. "Kathryn Piedmont? Any relation to the Piedmont Corporation?" Her voice was sharper than usual and she felt Evan looking at her. She didn't care. She had to know about this other woman in Logan's life.

Logan nodded. "Smithson Piedmont's daughter. The first person to treat me like a real human being and not a lab experiment. The only person to object to our termination. My first friend beyond Tienan."

Mercy swallowed down the lump of emotion that threatened to choke her. "What happened?" It hadn't been good, that's for certain. She could sense Logan's pain.

He shrugged. "With her knowledge of security and the layout of the lab and our brawn, she broke us out of prison. Hid both of us in her home. But the bastards found us. Almost killed us. We escaped. Kathryn is gone."

Mercy wanted to know more but sensed this subject was closed. "When was that?"

Logan's eyes took on a sharper focus as he allowed the memories to fade. "Months ago. Since then, Tienan and I have been finding our way and learning how to survive in the outer city." One corner of his mouth kicked up. "In between that, we've been harassing and killing as many members of the security force as possible. We are the last of our kind. We have no family. No friends. Our only goal is to destroy the General and bring down the Gate. Or die trying. Their only goal is to kill us."

Silence descended on the small group as Mercy and Evan tried to process everything they'd just learned. Logan sat there quietly, dealing with the ghosts of the past he'd unearthed.

He reached out as if to touch her but withdrew his hand, letting it drop back by his side. "The last thing I want to do is cause trouble for you. I'll leave now if you want me to."

Mercy's heart clutched and her soul screamed in denial. She didn't want Logan to leave. Ever. Somehow, someday, she'd fallen in love with him, which was stupid considering she barely knew him.

Yet, he'd touched her heart. And that was before she knew his story. It was amazing to her that Logan was a man of principles and honor, a man of gentleness and humor. Considering how he grew up it was a miracle he wasn't a crazed killer. He'd had more than enough time and opportunity to kill them all.

Logic dictated that she question everything he'd told her. She shouldn't trust him. He was an Alpha, a killing machine. Yet, she trusted him with her life, with the lives of the children. As crazy as it seemed, every instinct she had confirmed that he was telling her the truth.

He was healed. There was no reason for him to stay. Only that she wanted him to stay. Desperately. Hurried sex in the pantry wasn't enough. She wanted to see him totally naked. Wanted to lie on a bed, skin to skin, and feel every hard inch of him pressed against her. Wanted to touch him, to taste him, to have his thick cock buried inside her.

He had to go. He *would* go. She knew that. He had a mission and wouldn't stop until it was done. She sensed that Logan's strength of will was unshakeable. As an Alpha it was in his blood, his DNA. He had to finish what he started.

Then there were the other members of the community to consider. They wouldn't want to harbor such a dangerous man in their midst, to bring the wrath of the Ruling Council and the security force to their doorstep.

But no one knew he was here except for the children. He could stay for one more night. Mercy wanted the chance to spend time with him. Damn, if she was being honest

with herself, she wanted one entire night of hot, mind-blowing sex. She might never see him again and, now that she'd had him, she knew there was no other man for her.

If she was facing a lifetime of celibacy, she wanted the opportunity to have one night. Long hours of touching and stroking, of having his cock plunge into her tight channel, bringing her one incredible orgasm after another. She had no doubt he could do it, would do it.

Her pussy spasmed as a trickle of cream slipped from her core. Her breasts ached and her cheeks felt flushed. It was difficult not to squirm in her chair. Evan cleared his throat, jerking her back to reality. She resisted the urge to slap her hands over her cheeks. What was she thinking?

Logan sat at the table, waiting patiently for her decision. And it was her decision. She understood that, just as she understood what would happen if he stayed.

She glanced at Evan. The rifle was now lying on the table in front of him. He'd obviously decided that Logan was no spy, no friend to the Ruling Council. "No one can know he's here."

Evan nodded. "I won't tell and neither will the kids."

Mercy turned to face Logan. Reaching out, she slipped her hand over his. He turned his hand and closed his fingers around hers. "Stay. Give yourself another night. To heal," she added.

Desire flared in his eyes but was quickly banked. "One night." He glanced at Evan. "That okay with you?"

"If it's what Mercy wants."

Mercy could hear the double meaning in Logan's question and Evan's answer. She refused to apologize to anyone or feel ashamed for wanting to spend the night with Logan. She loved him. Right or wrong, it didn't matter.

She withdrew her hand from Logan's and picked up her mug. Her tea was cold. Setting the mug aside, she pushed away from the table. "That's settled then."

Logan was numb by the time he finished telling Mercy his story. Even though it was only the bare bones of his existence, it still brought him back to that place and time, plunged him into memories best forgotten. One problem with being an Alpha was having perfect recall. He would never forget the faces of the men he'd killed. Never be able to leave the harsh years of training, of being examined, poked and prodded by a series of scientists behind him. Of being treated as an experiment and not as a person, until he'd almost believed them.

He'd thought his humanity lost until Kathryn Piedmont had come into his life. Tienan seemed more at peace with his lack of emotions. Personally, Logan thought that Tienan just hid them better than he had. Since escaping, Logan had reveled in the ability to be able to simply feel. He could smile or frown, laugh or get angry without someone monitoring him and writing a report.

The sheer freedom was exhilarating. It was also scary as hell. Logan knew he was different and those differences meant he needed to maintain some kind of control over himself. If not, people could die. Innocent people. And he couldn't live with their blood on his hands.

He glanced down at his hands, both palms resting on the scarred wooden table. They had a lot in common, his hands and the table. They were both functional, but battered by years of use. Broad and calloused, his hands were darker now than they'd been when he'd escaped the lab. All these months of enjoying whatever available sunshine there was had left its mark.

His hands could fix the most intricate of machinery. They could also kill a man. There were times he was certain he could still smell the coppery scent of blood permeating his flesh. It amazed him that a woman like Mercy would allow him to touch her. Of course, she hadn't known his secret then. Hadn't known he wasn't really human, but something more.

One night with Mercy. Long, dark hours to taste her sweet flesh and touch every inch of her soft skin. That's what he wanted. But he wasn't likely to get it. Mercy was

everything he wasn't. She saved people's lives. He was a brutal killer. She was goodness and light. He was mired in darkness. But, god, how he wanted to be enveloped in her light, her beauty, if only for a few hours. Those memories would sustain him the rest of his life.

The choice was hers.

Logan expected to be shown the door. They'd already bestowed more kindness on him than he'd had a right to expect. They'd saved his life, risking their own safety in the process. An act totally unheard of in Logan's world.

Cold gripped him when Mercy had slipped her hand from his. He wanted to grab it and hold tight. He held his breath, waiting for her decision.

"That's settled then." She pushed away from the table, the legs of her wooden chair scraping against the floor.

The pounding of his heart almost blocked out the sound of her voice. But he'd heard her. The extent of the gift she was giving him was overwhelming. For a moment, he thought he might disgrace himself and break down. He'd never in his life felt more like crying than he did at that moment. A tremendous sense of relief enveloped him. Mercy was giving him a night in her bed.

His body surged to life. Lust drove out the voices of the past, silencing the memories battering his brain. Logan swallowed hard and pushed away from the table. "Thank you." Inadequate words to tell her how much this meant to him.

As though she understood, she gave him a smile. It was soft and intimate and meant just for him. His cock twitched, hardening with each passing second. He had to get control of himself. Just because he was staying, didn't mean he could yank down her pants, turn her over the table and fuck her from behind.

Bad move. His cock jerked in agreement. Logan raked his hand through his hair, ruffling the already rumpled mess. His skin felt tight, stretched too far over bones and sinew. He had to do something or he wouldn't make it until tonight.

"What can I do?"

Mercy frowned and glanced at Evan. Logan knew the younger man was watching him but didn't care. He couldn't control his reaction to Mercy. Didn't want to. It was real and vital and made him feel alive. More man than monster.

"What do you mean?"

Logan shrugged. "I can earn my keep. I can fix just about anything. Or I can help with physical labor." He crossed his arms over his chest to emphasize the size of his biceps and was pleased when Mercy glanced at them. He knew she wasn't immune to him, wanted him. Maybe not as much as he wanted her, but that was okay. He wanted her more than enough for both of them.

Mercy's pupils dilated and her cheeks flushed. She nibbled on her bottom lip and Logan almost groaned. His pants were uncomfortably tight but he refused to be ashamed of his physical reaction. It was honest and real.

"No one can know you're here." Evan's voice broke the magnetic pull between Logan and Mercy. Her eyes darted away and she grabbed her mug and carried it to the sink.

Logan turned his attention to Evan. "I don't care where I work as long as I have something to do."

The younger man glanced at the bulge in the front of Logan's pants and grinned, meeting Logan's surprised gaze. "I think I can find you something to do." He turned to Mercy. "I'll take care of this."

"Are you sure?"

Logan could sense Mercy's apprehension and immediately sought to reassure her. "I'm sure. Everything will be fine. I'm good at staying out of sight."

Evan grabbed up his rifle in his left hand and indicated the back door with a jerk of his head. "Let's go."

Logan followed, stopping long enough to lean down and kiss Mercy. He couldn't resist sampling her full lips. She tasted sweet and exotic. Logan pulled back, satisfied to

see the glazed look in Mercy's eyes. Her lips were parted and her breathing was ragged. "Until tonight," he whispered. Her eyes widened and she nodded.

"Don't do anything to pull your stitches." Her voice was breathy, her tone intimate. Her concern a balm to his battered soul.

"I won't," he promised.

Evan was waiting at the door. The sun was high in the sky, causing Logan to squint. He stopped long enough to get his bearings and catalog his surroundings. It was as natural to him as breathing.

"Do you know anything about cows?" Evan asked.



## **Chapter Seven**

Logan was tired by the time he headed toward the house later that afternoon. But it was a good tired, brought on by vigorous physical activity. It wasn't as intense a workout as training but it used a lot of the same muscles.

He chuckled to himself, shaking his head. Evan's plan had obviously been to work him into the ground so he'd be too dead tired to even consider doing anything with Mercy, other than sleeping.

He could have told the boy he was wasting his time. That was not going to happen. He could be half dead and still find the energy to make love to Mercy. Logan admired the boy's spirit and ingenuity. For a seventeen-year-old, Evan was very mature and responsible.

They hadn't talked much, beyond instructions on what to do, but the younger man had told him he'd been with Mercy since he was nine. She was the only mother he ever remembered. Logan took it as the warning it was. He respected Evan for wanting to protect Mercy. Hell, if he were half the man he should be, Logan would leave. Protect her from himself, his darkness, his bloody past.

Logan had learned quite a bit today working alongside Evan. The younger man was extremely good with the animals, from the smallest to the largest. There were several barns, not far from the house, which housed a small flock of sheep, three cows, four pigs and a dozen chickens.

Evan explained that they grew hay and a variety of grains to feed the animals, as they couldn't let them out to graze away from the compound. Otherwise they'd be stolen. Animals were valuable. They meant food on the table, and the wool from the sheep and the hide from slaughtered animals had a variety of uses.

The compound itself was like a small town, housing several hundred people. Mercy's small corner of it was well-tended. There was a vegetable patch behind the house, along with an herb garden surrounded by a high stone wall. To keep the animals and the children out, Evan had informed him. There was no doubt the place was impressive. And it was all because of Mercy.

Evan was quick to point out that everything he'd learned had come from her. She'd learned from her mother and so on. Logan noted the absence of men in the picture. It was small of him but he was glad there was no man in Mercy's life. As impossible and as selfish as it was, he wanted her to belong to him.

Logan faded into the shadow of the chicken coop, not moving a muscle, as several men walked past, heads bent as they spoke in hushed, worried tones about the increased activity just beyond their gates. Not good. When he left tomorrow, he'd lead the security police away from this place. It was too beautiful to be despoiled by them.

When the men had disappeared from sight, Logan studied the house where Mercy lived with her brood. It was a sturdy, two-story structure with heavy shutters attached to the outside of the windows, which could be closed for defensive purposes. The doors were solid oak, reinforced with metal. The building itself was nothing spectacular. The paint was a faded gray with bits of blue still clinging to several pieces of trim. It looked old and tired. But attempts had been made to make it more cheerful. A tub of flowers sat on the steps that led to the small porch. Seemingly fragile, yet sturdy, blooms added color to an otherwise barren landscape.

Mercy was like those flowers—a bright splash of light, of color in his dark, barren world.

The crops from the fields had been harvested and stored for the coming months but Evan had shown him two small greenhouses on the south side of the house where Mercy grew a variety of vegetables. They were almost totally self-sufficient.

While they'd mucked out stalls and tended animals, Evan had explained how they made their own clothing, soap, candles, medicine, just about everything they needed.

What they didn't have could be scavenged from the ruins of the outer city or bartered for with some of the other remote communities.

They'd founded their own Eden in the midst of destruction. It might be a battered and slightly worn Eden but it belonged to them. Logan admired them even as he envied them. But wishing he could stay and be a part of this wouldn't make it so. He had another destiny to fulfill and Mercy had hers.

If he could protect this place for her and the children then he would have served a purpose far greater than any the Ruling Council and the General could have planned for him.

And if he managed to live through the coming war, maybe... He shook off his thoughts. It did no good to think about what-ifs and maybes. He had to concentrate on the job ahead. That was the only way he knew how to survive. If he let himself be distracted, he would die for sure.

The back door of the house opened and Logan watched as the smallest girl—Gretchen—skipped down the stairs. She was a tiny thing but full of energy, her long brown hair braided into a long tail that jumped with each skipping motion. She stopped and peered around the yard, a frown on her tiny face.

Logan glanced around the yard. There was no one else about. Each family had their own plot of land and it took long hours of backbreaking work to survive. With the added manpower on the walls of the compound keeping an eye on the situation in the outer city, people were busy with their own affairs.

He headed toward Gretchen. When she saw him step out from the shadows, she jumped, startled by his appearance. Logan froze, not wanting to frighten her further. She smiled as soon as she recognized him, turning her plain face into a thing of beauty. Waving at him, she raced toward him as fast as her little legs could carry her, kicking up dirt with each step. She skidded to a halt when she reached his side and peered down into the bucket he was carrying.

“Good,” she nodded her approval, making her braid dance over her shoulder. “Mercy said to tell you to hurry. She needs milk to make supper.”

Logan couldn’t help but smile. With freckles dotting her small nose, she looked like a clever fairy or sprite that he’d read about in a book once. “Is that so?”

She nodded emphatically, grabbed on to one of his large fingers with her hand and tugged on it. “Come on. Mercy said she’d make hot cakes.”

He followed the child toward the house. “That’s good?”

She peered up at him and gave him a look that said she didn’t think he was too bright. Logan couldn’t help himself, he started to chuckle. In his entire life, no one had ever looked at him like that. There was no fear in her eyes, just pleasure at sharing his company.

“It’s very good. We don’t get them very often. But Mercy said it was special ‘cause you’re here.” She paused and pulled on his finger until she was certain she had his full attention. “Could you stay? Then every day would be special and Mercy would make all kinds of treats.”

The child’s logic almost broke his heart. Pleasure suffused him that Mercy was making something special for dinner. Just for him.

“That’s enough, Gretchen.” Mercy stood at the door, a hand shielding her eyes against the setting sun, a smile on her face.

The child gave a dramatic sigh and trudged up the stairs and into the house. Mercy tugged on the girl’s braid as she passed and Gretchen squealed with laughter as she hurried inside. “Sorry about that.” Mercy reached out for the bucket, but he kept his grip around the handle.

“Tell me where you want it.” That easily, the sexual tension was back. It had never really left, instead simmering at a slow boil throughout the day. All those hours of backbreaking sweat were for nothing. His cock was as hard as stone.

He wiped his boots on a mat that sat just outside the door, taking his time to make certain they were clean, desperately trying to distract himself from his raging need. It didn't help.

And Mercy felt it too. He could tell in the way her cheeks flushed and her pupils dilated. Her tongue briefly touched her bottom lip before disappearing into her sweet mouth.

His chest expanded on a deep breath and he caught her unique scent mixed with something sweet. Honey, maybe. His fingers ached to touch her but he didn't dare. If he laid one finger on her, he was lost. He'd have her stripped naked so fast it would make her head spin.

Logan slowly forced his raging desires back under control. It wasn't easy, though, not when every instinct he had was screaming at him to claim her. He planned to do just that. But not now. Not with the children only steps away.

His tension conveyed itself to Mercy. Her eyes never left his face as she swallowed and motioned him into the kitchen. "On the counter."

Logan thought his head might explode as he imagined Mercy, naked, sitting on the counter, her legs spread wide as he pumped his cock in and out of her tight cunt. Sweat beaded on his brow, trickling down his temple. He set the bucket on the counter with a hard thud. The milk sloshed around the edge but didn't go over the rim.

"Where can I wash up?" A dousing with cold water might help give him the control he needed to get through supper. He doubted it but at this point he'd try anything.

Mercy pointed to the staircase beyond the kitchen. "The same room you were in last night. I took a pitcher of water up there earlier. It should still be warm."

She reached her hand out to him but he took a step back. Her hand fell back to her side. Confusion and then self-consciousness snuck across her face before she looked away.

Logan didn't want to leave her feeling uncertain. He leaned forward, his breath brushing the curve of her ear. "If you touch me, I'll fuck you right here, right now."

Mercy gasped, her gaze flying to his. He nodded. "Unless you want an audience, I can't touch you until tonight."

"Okay. Fine. Umm..." Mercy glanced around the kitchen, looking anywhere but at him. "I need to finish cooking supper."

Logan didn't want to leave her but forced himself to leave the kitchen. He needed to get cleaned up after a day of hard work. His long strides ate up the stairs. He paused halfway up and listened to the chatter of the children. They were downstairs in what was obviously the schoolroom. Something about the happy sound of their voices made him smile.

He hurried up the rest of the stairs and down the short hallway to his room. The sun was sinking but there was more than enough light that he didn't need a candle. The bed was neat, the blankets smoothed over the mattress, leaving no sign of the mess he'd left there this morning. He doubted the wooden slats on the bed were fixed, but he could sleep on it. Not that he planned on doing much sleeping tonight.

Closing the door, he shot the metal bolt across it. He didn't want anyone walking in on him while he was washing.

As promised, there was a large pitcher of water sitting next to an empty bowl. Logan stripped off his shirt and tossed it aside. Bending down, he yanked his knapsack from beneath the bed and dug out his last clean shirt. It was faded and worn like the rest of his clothing but at least it didn't stink of animal odors and sweat.

He got rid of his boots and shucked his pants. His cock was standing straight up, demanding attention. Ignoring it for the moment, he padded on bare feet to the table and poured water into the basin. Mercy had left a sliver of soap, a washcloth and a towel as well. She'd also provided him with a straight razor and a mirror. He scrubbed his hand over his chin. The stubble rasped his fingers. He'd definitely make use of the razor.

Logan wet the cloth and soap, rubbing them together to create a suitable lather. Starting at his face, he washed away the day's worth of sweat and grime. Mucking out

stalls and dealing with animals was dirty work, but it was honest work, and somehow appealing. It had been a surprise to discover that he'd enjoyed tending the animals, had found it strangely relaxing. Their needs were basic and they demanded little. Plus, there was a calming rhythm to the work.

He lathered his face again and picked up the razor. A few strokes and his chin was smooth, the hint of a beard gone from his face.

Logan dumped the bowl of soapy water into an empty bucket that sat beside the table and refilled it with clean from the jug. Picking up the soap again, he rubbed it over the washcloth. When he was satisfied with the lather, he stroked the cloth over both arms, careful of the bandage. He hesitated, shrugged and tossed the washcloth aside long enough to peel off the dressing. The wound beneath was pink and healthy. The stitches Mercy had set earlier this morning had held perfectly. He'd be able to have them removed in the morning before he left.

Deciding to make a sweep of it, he removed the bandage on his left thigh. The wound looked good, the skin knit together leaving only a scar. He was lucky the bullets hadn't shattered any bones. Satisfied, Logan grabbed the cloth and went back to work. He washed his torso and what he could reach of his back.

The cool water felt good against his skin. Being clean was something he no longer took for granted. A shower had been part of his daily routine at the lab. But it had become an impossible luxury since he'd been living in the outer city. Clean water was at a premium and was spared for more important things like drinking and cooking.

The soapy cloth drifted lower, his hand bumping against his cock. There was no way he could sit at the table with Mercy and the kids with a hard-on like this. It was impossible to miss, not to mention damn uncomfortable.

Dumping the cloth beside the bowl, he grabbed the soap and rubbed it against his palms until he had a good lather. He reached for his swollen shaft, wrapped his fingers around it and squeezed tight. Closing his eyes, he imagined it was Mercy's small hand gripping him. Her hand pumping up and down in long even strokes.

Logan groaned as he work his hand up and down. Harder. Faster. As he did, his fantasy changed. Evolved.

He pictured Mercy naked, her short hair tousled around her face as she knelt in front of him. He gripped her head between his hands, guiding her sweet mouth toward the head of his cock. Her breath was warm against the tip. Her lips parted, her tongue darting out to swipe around the bulbous head.

Logan's heart pounded, his breathing quickened. His hand became a blur as he worked his hand up and down his shaft.

She leaned forward, her hot mouth enveloping his cock. She couldn't take all of him but she took what she could. Sucking and licking as he guided her. Her mouth slid over his cock, her teeth grazing the ultrasensitive skin. One of her small hands gripped the base of his shaft, pumping while the other one cupped his heavy sac, squeezing gently.

"Fuck!" Logan came hard and fast. His seed spewed over his hand and onto his belly as he continued to pump. He kept his eyes closed, desperately trying to hold on to the fantasy. Finally, he opened his eyes. He felt sated and empty at the same time. Cheated.

Growling under his breath, he grabbed the cloth and cleaned himself up. "Idiot," he berated himself. Still, he couldn't deny he felt a modicum of control now that he'd given himself some relief.

When he was done, he finished washing and quickly yanked back on his pants and boots. He put on his clean shirt and dragged his fingers through his hair. He was as ready as he'd ever be. Tucking his backpack and belongings back beneath the bed, he headed back downstairs. He had one night with Mercy and didn't want to waste a single second of it.

Mercy automatically went through the motions of cooking. It was a good thing she'd made hot cakes many times before or she'd be in trouble. Her concentration was shot.



All day long, anticipation had been building deep inside her, like a long-dead volcano stirring to life, getting ready to explode. She'd gone about her daily chores by rote. She'd taught the children, cleaned up after the morning meal and done various household chores. She'd made lunch, sending sandwiches out to Evan and Logan.

The afternoon had been filled with more work. She'd made several tinctures and rolled bandages for her medical supplies. She'd stopped work early, making time to actually heat water for the small tub she used as a bathtub. It had been an indulgent luxury but one she'd needed. She'd even added some lavender buds to the bath to soothe her nerves. It had helped some. But then Logan had come through the back door, setting her nerves tingling all over again.

The children were chattering and setting the table. Mercy gave silent thanks to Evan who was directing them. She didn't hear his footsteps on the stairs, even though she'd been listening for them, but she knew the moment Logan stepped into the kitchen. A shiver snaked up her spine and her skin prickled.

She glanced over her shoulder and, sure enough, there he was. His broad shoulders filled the doorway, his head almost touching the top of the frame. His hair was damp and standing on end. The shirt he was wearing was clean, the short sleeves exposing his strong forearms and thick biceps. He looked sexy as sin and good enough to eat.

She wondered what he thought of her. She'd changed too and was wearing her best tunic, one her mother had embroidered for her before she'd passed on. Tiny flowers rimmed the neckline, making her feel pretty and feminine.

Logan looked at her, his nostrils flaring, his stormy blue eyes growing darker. The smell of something burning and a cry of dismay from Tim had her jerking her attention back to the stove. She shoved the spatula under the smoldering hot cake, flipping it over. The edges were burnt, but it wasn't too bad. She'd make sure this one found its way onto her plate.

"Everyone sit down. I'll have supper ready in just a minute." The normalcy of putting dinner on the table calmed her somewhat. But underneath the mundane task, a

river of passion bubbled and stirred. She felt it as she served up bacon and hot cakes, a real treat topped with some of the precious honey she'd bartered for. Usually, she reserved the honey for medical purposes but tonight was special.

The children exclaimed over the meal, tucking it back eagerly. They all but licked their plates clean. Their response pleased her, but it was Logan's reaction she wanted. He ate slowly, savoring every bite. Several times, he closed his eyes and a small smile curved his lips.

Mercy was pleased. She'd wanted to make tonight special for him. For both of them. The children chattered over the meal, asking questions, making comments. Logan took it all in stride, even leaning down to listen to Gretchen, who had been insistent she sit next to Logan, as she asked him a question.

A heavy weight crushed her chest. This was what she'd always wanted, what she'd dreamed about on long winter nights when the wind howled, battering at the house and slipping in through the cracks to freeze fingers and feet. They felt like a family with Logan on one end of the table and her on the other, the children between them.

Tears threatened, but she blinked them back. She wasn't going to ruin tonight with tears. She was lucky to get this one night together. It was time to count her blessings, to enjoy what she did have and not mourn what she couldn't have.

Her love for Logan was a miracle to her and she'd never regret giving herself to him. If a child resulted from it, she'd count herself doubly blessed. Settled in her mind, Mercy relaxed and enjoyed the meal.

When all the food was consumed, it was time for cleanup, evening chores and getting the children ready for bed. It took longer than usual to get them settled. They were still excited by the special meal and Logan's company.

Finally, after what seemed to Mercy like forever, all the children were tucked into the beds. Evan was the last to say goodnight, giving Logan a pointed stare as he went up to his bedroom. Logan returned it, not flinching. Mercy locked the doors and gave the stove one final check. Logan was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

Without a word, she took his hand and led him upstairs. She sensed his surprise when she passed the room he'd been in the night before and continued on to her room. Mercy wanted to make love with him in her bed. That way, when he was gone, she could relive the memory.

If that was all she'd have of him, she wanted to make certain it was a memory for all times. He closed the door and threw the bolt, shutting the world outside. They were finally alone.

## **Chapter Eight**

Logan wanted to stop time, to freeze this moment forever. Someone had built a fire in the hearth, giving the room a romantic glow. Mercy stood beside her bed, a welcoming smile on her face as she reached for the buttons of her tunic. Three long steps brought him to her side. "Let me."

He brushed her hands aside and slowly slid each button from its hole, exposing the soft flesh beneath. The backs of his fingers skimmed the curve of her breasts. Mercy's chest expanded as she took a deep breath, pushing the plump flesh more firmly against his hands.

His breathing was none too steady. He'd spent the first thirty years of his life being in control of every situation he'd found himself in. That was the only way he'd survived. This one small woman made a mockery of it simply by standing there. Logan knew he could either fight what he felt for her or accept it.

Fighting it wouldn't change a thing. He could spend all night holding Mercy, doing nothing more than looking at her and stroking her skin and it would be enough. Everything about her pleased him, from her gentleness with the children to her incredible strength and innate goodness.

Logan was an Alpha. He was quick and smart and almost always right. It changed nothing to lie to himself, to deny the obvious.

He loved Mercy Dockins.

He, Alpha Two, a man with no last name or family, wanted her with every fiber of his being. Blood stained his hands and his soul, but he wasn't ashamed. He'd done what he'd had to in order to survive. But Mercy didn't deserve that kind of darkness in her life.

“Logan?” Her soft voice shattered his bleak thoughts. He might not deserve her, but he wasn’t strong enough to turn away from this one night with her. After all he’d been through in his life, he deserved this one memory of her to keep in his heart forever.

“You’re so beautiful.” The pads of his fingers skimmed up her slender neck and over her cheekbones. Her skin was soft, supple. He traced her bottom lip with his thumb. Her lips parted, her tongue darting out to touch his flesh, to taste him.

His cock jerked at that small touch. If Mercy had spent the last hour stroking his shaft, he wouldn’t be any more aroused than he was now. One touch was all it would take to set him off.

That couldn’t happen. He wanted to caress every inch of her delectable body. Taste it. Memorize it. “Lift your arms.” She raised them without question, which pleased him. Catching the ends of the tunic, he tugged it over her head and let it fall to the floor.

He’d seen her naked this morning in the pantry but this was different. That had been in the heat of passion. This was deliberate, an invitation. Logan cupped her breasts in his hands, feeling the weight in his palms. Her nipples were already erect. He tugged at the buds with his thumbs and forefingers.

Mercy made a small mewling sound of pleasure. Her breasts swelled in his hands, her nipples elongated. He had to taste them. Leaning down, he circled one tight bud with his tongue. Her fingers slid through his hair as she pulled him nearer. Closing his mouth around her nipple, he sucked and lapped.

Mercy arched against him, her fingernails biting into his scalp in an erotic caress. Every muscle in his body was tight. His balls hung heavy between his thighs. He gave one final tug with his mouth before lifting his head. Mercy’s eyes were closed, her lips parted. Her pouty little nipple was damp and red. She was ripe for the taking.

“Let’s get the rest of this off.” His voice was low and rough as he went down on one knee in front of her and lifted her foot, removing her shoe and sock. Then he did the same with her other foot. Even her bare feet were sexy. Her toes curled into the cool, wooden floorboards.

She was naked from the waist up but made no move to cover herself. She was offering herself to him with nothing held back. Logan's heart swelled at the gift she was giving him, the trust.

He wanted to be worthy of such a gift. He would bring her so much pleasure she'd never regret this night. Logan swiftly got rid of her pants and underwear, shoving the bundle of clothing aside.

Fully dressed, Mercy was a sight to behold. Totally naked, she defied description. She wasn't tall, but her proportions were perfect. The curve of her hips, her slender thighs and her magnificent breasts made his mouth water. He longed to touch her, to taste her.

And her skin... It was so incredibly soft. Softer than anything he'd ever felt in his entire life. And his hands were calloused and hard. Gently, he urged her to sit on the edge of the bed. She lowered herself to the mattress, all the while watching him, her pale blue eyes and white-blonde hair shining in the firelight.

His clothing felt restrictive, so he ripped his shirt over his head. He kept his pants on, afraid that if he took them off, he'd toss Mercy onto her stomach and fuck her until they both screamed with pleasure. Sweat broke out on his forehead at the thought of his stomach slapping against her rounded ass as he slammed into her hot pussy again and again. It would be over before it even started.

Her pleasure came first.

His hands circled her slender ankles. Her skin was warm and the muscles of her calves rippled as his hands moved upward. Scooting closer, he sat between her legs, spreading them wider with the bulk of his body. Her thighs parted, exposing her pussy to him.

"You're already wet." He could hear the wonder in his own voice as his hands slid up the inside of her thighs, widening them even further.

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper, but he heard so much need in that one tiny word.

Desire roared through his veins. He inhaled and his head filled with her sweet scent—spicy cream and honey. He remembered her taste, hot and exotic. His cock pulsed, pressing against the front of his pants so hard it actually hurt. Logan used the pain, focusing on it in order to gain some much-needed control.

Leaning forward, he kissed the insides of her thighs before nuzzling the neat, damp curls covering her mound. They were as blonde as the hair on her head. Very sexy.

“Logan.” His name fell from her lips. A plea. A promise.

“Fuck yes,” he growled. He spread the slick lips of her labia wide with his thumbs. They were swollen and red as blood pumped to her pussy in preparation for what was to come. He licked up one side and down the other, making certain not to miss the sensitive bud at the apex.

A low, thin cry escaped her. She drew her legs up, placing her heels flat on the mattress and arching her cunt toward his mouth. *Yes!* The word pounded through his veins as he stroked one long finger into her sheath. *Yes!* It echoed in his brain as her inner muscles gripped it tight, squeezing it. *Yes!* It rocketed through his soul as he sucked her clit between his lips and began to flick it with his tongue.

Mercy gripped his hair, tugging him even closer. Satisfaction roared through him. He wanted to give her an orgasm so large she’d never forget it or him. He slid his finger from her cunt. It was slick with her cream. He rubbed it over the puckered rosette of her ass, probing for entry.

The tip of his finger pushed past the tight muscles guarding the opening and she sucked in her breath. “Relax,” he crooned. “I won’t hurt you. You can take my finger.” He pushed it a bit deeper. The muscles tightened and relaxed.

Logan rimmed the opening of her cunt with his tongue. Mercy’s hand fell from his hair and she gripped the covers on the bed, fisting them in her hands. Her hips jerked upward, driving his tongue deeper. Mercy whimpered, her head thrashing from side to side.

He pulled back, needing to look at her. She was beautiful in her passion, lost to it, her skin glowing in the firelight. It was time. She needed to come. He needed to make her come.

This was only the beginning.

He captured her clit with his mouth, sucking hard. At the same time, he inserted his thumb into her pussy and pushed his finger farther up her ass. Her inner muscles clamped down hard around both. Her lips parted on a thin scream. Her cunt spasmed, signaling the start of her orgasm. Cream spilled down his hand, coating it in her wet heat as she came. He worked her with his mouth and fingers, watching her come undone, enjoying her pleasure until she couldn't take any more.

Carefully, he removed his thumb and finger. She gave a small cry of displeasure as he sat back. One of her legs slipped from the mattress to dangle over the edge. The other was bent to one side. She smelled of sex. He wanted his scent mixed with hers.

Standing, he opened his pants. It wasn't easy with his huge erection pressing against it. Logan kicked off his boots and shoved aside his clothing, needing to be naked.

Mercy's eyes fluttered open as he shoved his arms beneath her thighs and lifted her legs. "That was just the beginning, sweet Mercy." He put one knee on the bed to balance himself as he fitted the head of his cock into her cunt. It closed around him like a velvet glove.

Closing his eyes, he sucked in a breath. This would be fast and furious. Then he'd settle into really making love with her. Her hand brushed his belly and he jerked his eyes open. She offered him a welcoming smile.

Logan surged forward, burying his cock in her cunt in one long thrust.

Mercy was totally out of control, a creature of instinct rather than thought. The orgasm Logan had given her had left her feeling sated yet unsatisfied. She'd loved the feeling of having his fingers in her pussy and in her behind at the same time, while his tongue had toyed with her clit, making it throb even harder. Her orgasm had hit her



hard and fast, but it wasn't enough. She needed Logan's hard, hot shaft buried deep inside her.

Even though she'd just come, desire was already surging through her veins, making her nerve endings tingle. When Logan lifted her legs and spread them, her heart jerked in anticipation. He slid his cock into her sheath and thrust deep, and her body eagerly welcomed him.

His hands were hot beneath her thighs as he pulled her upward until her hips were off the bed. The angle made his shaft feel even larger, the penetration deeper. His cock head brushed a sensitive spot inside her each time he pulled out and plunged forward. Mercy moaned and Logan pumped harder. Faster.

His eyes were burning with a dark blue flame that set her body on fire. His hair stood up in spikes on the top of his head where she'd tugged on it. She wanted to touch his chest, his shoulders, his arms. She wanted to kiss him, to lose herself in his unique taste. But all she could do was hang on tight to the covers. The way he held her took away all her mobility. He controlled how fast or slow he fucked her, how shallow or deep his thrusts.

Right now it was fast and hard, as though he couldn't wait any longer. Neither could she. "Logan." She meant to shout his name but it came out as a tortured groan. She arched her hips toward him, urging him forward.

"Mercy." He gritted her name out and thrust hard. Once more. Again. Heat coiled low in her belly. Logan's head jerked back, tendons clenched in his neck as he plunged deep one final time. She felt the hot spurt of his release and it set off her own. Her vaginal muscles clenched his cock as spasms tore through her.

Logan's shaft rippled again. He groaned and then fell forward, burying his face in the curve of her neck. She felt surrounded by him, filled by him. Long minutes later, he levered himself off her and slowly withdrew. Her legs were sprawled wide on the mattress, but she was too tired to be self-conscious.

She felt the bed dip and rise as Logan stood, heard the sound of his feet as he padded to the washstand. Water splashed into the bowl. Mercy drifted on a wave of contentment, which ended abruptly when a cool cloth was inserted between her thighs.

“You don’t have to do that.” Her voice was a high-pitched squeak as she struggled to push away from him. It was silly to be embarrassed by this after what they’d just done together but Mercy couldn’t stop her cheeks from getting warm.

He ignored her feeble struggles. Mercy had to admit that the cool cloth felt good against her swollen flesh. When he was done, Logan strode back to the washstand and dumped the cloth in the bowl. Mercy admired the flex of his ass as he walked.

Then he turned around. His thick shaft, which should have been soft after just having an orgasm, was hard again. Logan saw her looking at his erection and one corner of his mouth kicked up in a sexy grin.

“I told you this was just the beginning.” He urged her up on the bed so that her head was resting on the pillow. Logan stretched out on the mattress beside her, propping himself up on his elbow. With his free hand, he cupped one of her breasts, sliding his thumb over the distended nipple. “This time we take things slow.”

Energy surged through Logan. He’d just come but his cock was hard and ready again. Now that the edge was off, he wanted to spend the next hour just caressing her delectable body, keeping her on the verge of coming without letting her actually slip over. He wanted to hear her sweet voice begging him to take her. He needed her to want him as much as he wanted her.

Her hand touched his chest, her fingers combing through the small patch of hair in the center. His entire body jerked when she touched his nipple, fingering the small brown disk. “You like that too.” He could hear the wonder in her voice. Mercy obviously hadn’t had many lovers.

Jealousy surged to life within him at the thought of some nameless, faceless man in her bed. He shoved it aside. He had no right to feel that way. He was leaving in the morning. All he had was tonight.

“Logan?” Her palm was soft against his cheek. He closed his eyes and buried his jealousy. At this moment, he was the only man in her bed. He planned to bring her so much pleasure that every man who entered her bed after tonight would be compared to him. And found lacking.

He turned his head and kissed her palm, letting his tongue touch the center. She gasped and then giggled. The sound was utterly enchanting and he found himself smiling.

Logan rolled until he was on top of Mercy, resting on his forearms to hold the bulk of his weight off her smaller frame. The position nestled his cock against her soft belly. He leaned down, enjoying the sensation of her nipples pressed against his chest. Mercy rubbed her foot up and down his calf. The small caress had his cock pulsing against her stomach.

He nuzzled her neck, nipping the sensitive skin at the curve of her shoulder. Mercy gasped, her hands gripping his biceps. Her short hair allowed him access to the delicate shell of her ear. He rimmed the edge before dipping inside. She rewarded his efforts with a low moan.

Liquid seeped from his cock, dampening her belly. He pressed his erection tighter in an attempt to keep himself from coming. He should have had more control. He’d just had an orgasm. But what he felt for Mercy defied what should and could be.

Growling, he caught her earlobe between his teeth and tugged, careful to apply enough pressure to arouse and not hurt. The last thing he’d ever want to do is harm Mercy. His senses were all on alert, gauging her reaction. Her short fingernails scored his skin as she gripped his shoulders.

Taking his time, Logan worked his way down her neck, planting open-mouthed kisses against her skin. He licked her collarbone, marveling at the fragility of the woman beneath him. Her bones were delicate but she was strong. There was muscle, long and lean, in her arms from years of hard work.

He nuzzled her breasts, enjoying her gasps and moans of pleasure as he licked and sucked and toyed with her nipples. First one and then the other. By the time he started down her rib cage, Mercy was panting for breath, her heart thundering against his cheek.

Time lost all meaning as he touched her. The fire crackled in the hearth, flaring up occasionally only to settle down to a low flame once again. Outside, the wind whistled and a tree branch brushed against the house. Wood groaned as the older house cooled and settled for the night. Inside this safe cocoon, only he and Mercy existed.

With reverent hands, he traced the curve of her breasts, her hips and her thighs. He tasted her salty flesh, teased her cute bellybutton with his tongue. Mercy writhed beneath him, tugging on his arms, whimpering with need as he stoked the fires of her desires.

Logan kissed a path all the way to her feet. Kneeling between her thighs, he lifted one delicate foot and kissed the arch. Mercy moaned and laughed at the same time. He smiled. His woman had some ticklish spots.

He turned the laugh into a long gasp as he nipped at her toes before sucking the big one into his mouth. Mercy lay back on the bed and let him do as he pleased with her. A light sheen of perspiration covered her skin, making it shimmer in the firelight. Her nipples were puckered little berries. Logan licked his lips, wanting to taste them again. He'd never get enough of her.

He kissed her ankles, caressed her calves and thighs. Her legs widened the closer he got to her pussy. Mercy's hips undulated in a sexy circle, inviting him to touch and taste. He did just that.

Logan sprawled between her thighs, pressing his cock against the mattress to keep from coming. He felt half drunk with the scent and taste of Mercy. He lapped at the slick folds of her labia, nibbled on her clit.

Mercy was whimpering, her head arched back, her hips pushed forward. He'd kept her on edge for the past hour, teasing, caressing. It wouldn't take much to make her come. It was time.

He raised his head and blew on her heated flesh. She gasped, licking her lips as her hips surged upward. Logan drove two fingers deep into her cunt. "Come for me, Mercy. Come now."

There was no hesitation. He felt the ripples immediately as her cunt gripped his fingers. A low, thin wail escaped from between her lips as she came, her hips jerking up and down. Moments later, she collapsed, her head lolling to one side.

Logan crawled over her body until he was covering her. Mercy gave a low sound of pleasure, rubbing against him. He waited, staring at her beautiful face until she finally opened her eyes. "Now it's my turn."

Mercy was totally wiped out after her last orgasm. Nothing, not even her earlier experiences with Logan, had prepared her for what had just happened. She had no idea how long he'd caressed her body, playing it like a master. All she'd been able to do was lie there and take whatever he gave her.

Her skin was extremely sensitive, as though all her nerve endings were exposed. She felt raw and tender, yet she wanted more. "What have you done to me?" She really didn't expect him to answer. Was surprised when he did.

"Only what you've done to me." He climbed off her and rolled her onto her belly. His arm slid beneath her stomach and he pulled her up until her knees supported her. The position had her head resting on her pillow and her hips in the air. She knew he had a clear view of her pussy, could see how wet and swollen she was. She didn't care. Her inner muscles clenched hard, wanting his cock buried in her again.

There would never be another man for her. They would all fall short of Logan. And not just in bed. There was a strength of will about Logan that was very attractive. He was a man a woman could depend on. If he gave his word about something, it was as good as done.

His hands caressed her ass, bringing her back to the present. He knelt between her thighs, spreading them with his own. The coarse hair covering his legs brushed against her skin, reminding her of the differences between them. He was all male. Logan made her feel like more than a healer, a mother, a teacher. He made her feel feminine and desirable.

The tip of his cock probed at her entry. Mercy pushed her ass toward him, encouraging him. He groaned as he surged forward. She was tight, her inner muscles swollen and tender, and it hurt. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to relax. As if sensing her struggle, Logan stilled, letting her get used to him. Her slick channel rippled around him, contracting and relaxing.

Mercy gasped, sucking in a lungful of air, her cheek resting against the pillow. The air around her was thick with the smell of sex. She could feel the heat of Logan's body as he leaned over hers, peppering her spine with kisses. His large hands cupped her hips, his fingers digging into her skin. She sensed his desperation, his need to move.

Her body hummed with desire, with needs only Logan could assuage. Mercy moved her hips forward and then pushed them back. His cock slid in and out, only an inch or so, but it was enough to send sparks shooting from her pussy to the tips of her breasts.

Logan banded one arm around her waist. His free hand cupped one of her breasts. Then he began to move. No long strokes this time. Only short, hard jabs that made her lose her breath. His balls smacked against her pussy with each powerful thrust. Logan dominated her, controlling her desire, pushing her past her limits.

He tweaked her nipple with his fingers. The arm around her waist loosened and his hand slipped between her thighs, finding her clit. All he did was touch it and she came. Her body shook and shivered as Logan continued to hammer into her cunt, prolonging her orgasm.

After what seemed like an eternity, he came. Wet heat flooded her core. She pushed her ass back against him, wanting every last inch of him, everything he had to give.

Mercy's legs gave out and she collapsed onto the mattress. Logan followed her, his cock still buried inside her.

They lay like that for a long time. Finally, she felt his cock grow soft and he pulled out. She couldn't move but she did whimper. She ached from head to toe. Her breasts and her pussy were both sore but she didn't want Logan to leave her.

"Shh," he soothed. "I'll be right back." Once again, he went to the washstand and brought back a cloth and cleaned her up. This time, he lifted her, pulled back the covers and climbed in bed beside her, yanking the covers over them.

"Sleep," he told her. He kissed her forehead as she snuggled against his solid chest, resting her hand over his heart. "I'll wake you in a little while." More exhausted and content than she'd ever been in her life, Mercy slept.

## **Chapter Nine**

Mercy's movements were slow as she filled the kettle and set it on the woodstove to boil, but she had a smile on her face. Last night was like a dream. True to his word, Logan had let her sleep for a while. She'd awoken to his hands caressing her breasts, her body hot with the fever of need.

He'd made love to her several more times, stopping just as the sun was rising. Mercy didn't know where he'd found the stamina. She'd sensed the desperation creeping into their lovemaking the closer it got to dawn. Neither of them spoke of it but it was there between them, a dividing line between their one night together and the morning when Logan was leaving.

He'd pledged to destroy the Ruling Council, kill the General and bring down the Gate. She knew he wouldn't stop until he'd done just that. As much as she wanted to ask him to stay, she couldn't. His goal was noble, one that would benefit everyone. Plus, there was the small matter of the other people who called Hope home. They would be suspicious of Logan. It wouldn't be easy for him to fit in and be accepted here. It might even come to violence.

Mercy caught her bottom lip between her teeth, chewing on it as she continued to ponder all the obstacles before them. There was a very real chance that the General, or his men, would discover Logan's whereabouts. No matter how hard they tried to keep it a secret, the fact remained that people gossiped. That could bring the full force of the security force down on the community and destroy them all.

She hugged her arms around herself, trying to get warm. She'd been cold ever since she'd slipped out of bed and away from Logan's embrace. He'd been awake when she left, but he hadn't spoken. And neither had she.



Her spine tingled and she sensed his eyes on her. It was amazing how in tune she was with him in such a short time. She glanced over her shoulder and, sure enough, Logan stood in the doorway, his shoulders almost touching the sides, his stormy blue eyes watching her.

She tried to smile but failed miserably and turned back to the stove to stir the oatmeal she was making for breakfast. It was the same meal she prepared every morning, but it was plentiful and nutritious. She'd be here tomorrow doing the exact same thing. Only tomorrow, she'd be alone. She stirred and tried to pretend that she wasn't close to tears.

It was hard to act like everything was fine when all she wanted to do was go back to bed, pull the covers over her head and pretend he didn't have to leave. But she didn't have that luxury. There were children to feed, meals to be prepared and chores to be done.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was a low rumble just beside her ear. He was standing behind her now. Close, but not touching her.

She shrugged. "Good, but sore."

"I was too demanding." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. He didn't sound apologetic, more pleased than anything.

"I didn't exactly tell you to stop." The exact opposite in fact. Several times, she'd pleaded with him for more. *Deeper. Harder.* Her cheeks got warm just remembering.

Logan smiled as though he knew exactly what she was thinking. Disconcerted that he could read her so easily, Mercy turned away and stirred the oatmeal. "Your knives are on the table." He'd had two wickedly sharp knives strapped to his body when they boys had brought him in. Mercy had thought it prudent to hide them. But if he was leaving, he needed them.

He glanced over to the table and without a word went to examine his weapons. After checking each one, he strapped one knife to his waistband and the other to his right thigh.

"When are you leaving?" She was proud of the fact that her voice was level and calm, even though her heart was breaking.

"After breakfast." He strode to the window and glanced outside. "Once everyone is at their chores."

"How will you get past the sentries on the wall?"

He turned, all signs of her indulgent lover gone. Logan was all warrior now, his eyes narrowed, his features set in stone. "That won't be a problem."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs saved her from having to respond. She supposed it wouldn't be a problem for Logan, not with his enhanced senses and abilities. It was silly of her to worry about him, yet she couldn't stop herself.

"Is breakfast ready? I'm starving." Evan stomped into the kitchen, shooting both her and Logan questioning looks.

Mercy nodded. "Grab a bowl."

Evan grabbed a bowl and held it out, waiting as Mercy filled it. "So." His cheeks turned red, but he didn't turn away from her. "How are you this morning?"

She tilted her chin up, refusing to feel ashamed of what had happened between her and Logan. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason." Evan shot another glance at Logan before sitting down at the table. "When are you leaving?"

Logan pulled out a chair and sat. "As soon as everyone is busy with morning chores."

Evan nodded. "I can distract the guards on the perimeter of the wall while you get away."

"That's not necessary. I don't want you anywhere near me in case something goes wrong."

Voices and more footsteps halted their conversation as the rest of the children poured into the kitchen. The next thirty minutes were spent dishing up breakfast and

listening to the children plan their day. It was over way too soon. Mercy wanted time to stop so Logan wouldn't have to leave. But it was impossible to delay the inevitable.

The children excused themselves and headed upstairs to clean their teeth before they started their morning chores. Mercy poured heated water into a basin to wash the dishes. She was very aware of Logan watching her.

"Mercy," he began but was cut off when a shout from the outside caught their attention. Someone pounded on the back door.

Mercy raced to the door and flung it open. "Security police approaching the gate. Two squadrons." She recognized Edward Jones, even though his head was bent as he gasped for breath. There was no mistaking his bright red hair. "I've got to warn the others." He ran off, shouting as he went. A bell began to peal an alarm in the distance.

Evan raced back downstairs with the children close behind him, their faces pale. Mercy strode toward the pantry and walked straight to the end. She bent down and yanked up the trapdoor to the cellar. "Down you go, children. You know the drill."

Gretchen was crying, clinging tight to Beth's hand, but she went swiftly and quietly. Benjamin, Jonathan, Matthew and Tim all followed. "Remember, you don't come out until either myself or Evan comes for you. There's plenty of food and enough water to last you a week. Be careful with the lantern. Tim, you're in charge."

With no time to reassure them any more than that, Mercy closed the door. She turned to find Logan gone. Before she could wonder where he was, he was back, his pack slung over his shoulder.

"Do you have any weapons?"

"Here," Evan answered Logan. He was at the closet, yanking out the rifle he'd pulled on Logan only the day before. Mercy was shocked by how much had happened in such a short time. But there was no time to think about that. The lives of the children were threatened. It was time to fight.

Logan flung open the top of a heavy metal trunk stored at the back of the closet. He whistled low under his breath. "Not bad."

There were several handguns, a couple of rifles and plenty of ammunition. "I take things in trade for medical services. The other communities we barter with are always looking for more of my healing salves and potions. Occasionally, I'll treat someone from the outside, someone who comes with a reference from someone we know and trust." She believed in being prepared. Grabbing a rifle, she stuffed several boxes of shells in her pockets.

"Your services must not come cheap. Not many folks I've seen have this kind of firepower."

Mercy shrugged. "There aren't many doctors available. I've had men and women come from all over for treatment." The three of them left through the back door. Mercy spared a final glance over her shoulder but then looked away. The children were protected. She could only pray they'd all be safe.

Gunshots echoed in the distance as they hurried toward the high wooden and stone wall that surrounded the community. The closer they got to the wall, the more people began to stare at them. At Logan. No one knew him. They would all believe, and rightfully so, that he'd brought the security police to their doorstep.

One man stepped forward. Peter Berg was a large man with shaggy black hair and a bushy black beard. He was also the undisputed leader of their community. Right now, he was staring in disbelief at Logan. "Who the hell are you?"

Mercy jumped in front of Logan, holding up one of her hands. "Take it easy, Peter. His name is Logan. He was injured and I took him in to tend his wounds."

Peter's eyes narrowed. "You took in a stranger without asking the council of elders?" He raised his gaze to meet Logan's. "You're the reason they're out there, aren't you?" Anger tinged every word.

"Yes." Logan didn't bother to deny it. "I can slip outside the wall, circle around and come at the security police from behind. Once they see me, I'll lead them away."

Logan could see the shock in the other man's face. His eyebrows rose so high they were almost lost among the hair covering his forehead. "What makes you think you can

get by them? And why would you do it? They'll kill you for sure." Suspicion was deep in every word the man spoke.

"I don't *think* I can get by them. I *will* get by them." More gunshots echoed. A man cried out in pain. "We don't have time to discuss this."

Peter cradled his rifle in his hands. Two men stood behind him, their weapons trained on Logan. He wasn't worried, had already planned how he'd disarm them if it became necessary.

"I'm making time." Peter turned his head and spit on the ground, never taking his eyes off Logan. "How do we know you won't betray us to the security police, tell them all about us, our strengths and our weaknesses?" He glanced briefly at Mercy. "There will be repercussions for this, Mercy. You've endangered all of us."

Logan acted so fast his movements were a blur. It wasn't a conscious thought on his part, but total instinct. He wrapped one hand around Peter's neck, lifting the large man in the air. His feet dangling, he began to choke. With his free hand, Logan held his rifle aimed at the group behind them. "No one threatens Mercy. No one."

A soft hand rested on his arm. "Logan. Let him go. Please," she added when he hesitated. He glared at the man dangling from his grip. Peter's eyes were bulging and his face was turning purple. He was trying to pry Logan's fingers away from his throat, but with no success. Logan opened his hand and dropped him. Peter fell to the ground, coughing and choking.

A large group of men and women had gathered around them. Logan fell back to stand in front of Mercy and Evan. The air crackled with fear and mistrust. Logan could smell it. Everyone held their weapons at the ready, not certain if their enemy was inside the wall as well as outside.

Peter finally climbed to his feet, rubbing his neck. "Who the hell are you?" His voice was hoarse and rough.

"My name is Logan. But you can call me Alpha Two if you'd like."

Peter's eyes practically bulged out of his head. Murmurs rose to a roar as his words reached the crowd. "Impossible," Peter whispered.

"Very possible," Logan corrected. "Now I'll slip outside and lead the security police away. They'll never know I was here unless you tell them."

"Why would you do that?" Peter asked.

"To protect Mercy and the children. I won't have them suffering for their kindness." It was a warning and Logan knew that Peter recognized it as such.

Peter nodded. "Fine. Just go."

Mercy was standing beside him, her presence both a blessing and a curse. He was humbled and proud that she would stand beside him against her own people. Yet, he was angry that he had to leave. He'd had a glimpse of a better life and now it was being ripped away from him.

Part of him wished he'd never laid eyes on Mercy Dockins. Another part of him was eternally grateful. He'd been fighting for a concept before. Now he was fighting for something real. Family. They might never know it, but Mercy and the children had become a part of him and he would do everything in his power to protect them.

"Thank you. For *everything*." His kept his voice low, not wanting the others to hear him.

Mercy's cheeks turned pink and she glanced down at the ground. "You're welcome."

He nodded at Evan and turned to go. He'd taken eight steps, each one harder than the last, when he heard her call his name. "Logan." It was a whisper on the wind, but it halted him in his tracks. He heard the patter of her footsteps on the ground, the brush of fabric as she hurried to his side.

Her scent immediately filled his nostrils—soap and woman and hope. That was Mercy. He inhaled deeply, hating himself for being so weak. He needed to be gone from

here. Before he could speak, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight. Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him down.

He didn't resist. Couldn't deny either of them. Their lips met and his arms banded around her. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, tasting her one final time. His woman. He never wanted to let her go.

The murmur of voices and the sound of gunfire reached his ears. It was past time for him to leave. One muscle at a time, he forced himself to release her. He lifted his head, staring down at her face. Her lips were moist from their kiss, her pale blue eyes filled with pain and tears. He didn't want that for her.

"Take care of yourself." His words were totally inadequate for what he felt in his heart.

Mercy reached up and laid her hand against his cheek. "You too." She paused and went up on her toes to press her lips to his one final time. "I love you."

Logan was stunned. His heart pounded and seemed to swell. His chest ached. His computer-enhanced brain failed him and he couldn't think of what to say or do.

Mercy loved him.

It wasn't possible. She didn't really know him. He was a killer without conscience. It was sex. Just the night of hot sex making her think it was more. It wasn't real love. It couldn't be because, if it were, he'd never find the strength to leave her.

"Mercy." He started to speak but was interrupted when a loud blast shook the compound. He dove, taking her to the ground, covering her smaller body with his larger one. Debris rained down on them. Logan glanced at Evan, relieved to find the boy lying in the dirt near them, his hands covering his head.

There was no time to talk, no time left for him to escape. He'd stayed too long and now they were all in danger. Logan stood and dragged Mercy up beside him. "Go back to the house and protect the children." He didn't wait to see if she obeyed him as he raced to the wall.

Logan took the stairs two at a time as he made his way to the walkway at the top of the wall. Hunkering down beside Peter, he glanced over the top of the wall, using his advanced vision to select targets. He raised his rifle and aimed, taking two quick shots. Two bodies fell to the ground.

Peter glanced at him. "I guess you're on our side."

Logan nodded. The other man's voice was slightly hoarse, but he was able to talk. "You can't let any of them escape. We can dispose of the bodies and the Ruling Council will never know for certain what happened to their troops. They don't know I'm in here for sure. After this is over, I can go back to the outer city and be seen in several different locations. You and your people will be safe." Mercy would be safe. Evan and Tim and the children would be safe.

Peter scrubbed his hand over his beard. "You seem to know what you're doing. We've never faced this many of them at once. If you're really an Alpha, you've got skills. What do you suggest?"

Logan understood what a huge concession it was for the man to ask for his help, especially since he'd almost killed him a few minutes ago. It also showed that he believed Logan when he said he was on their side. And, like any good leader, Peter was willing to use whatever resources he could to protect his community. Logan respected that.

"We need to organize your people." Over the next two hours, Logan went up and down the wall, directing people when and how to shoot to maximize their ammunition and take out the enemy. They were suspicious of him, but they listened. It helped that Peter was right beside him, adding suggestions and backing what Logan told them to do.

Shots rang out as everyone on the wall returned fire. All around him people were shouting instructions to one another, the only way to be heard over the ear-splitting din. Others screamed in pain when they were hit. Smoke filled the air, making it hard to breathe at times.



Still the people fought on. Logan was impressed by how coordinated they already were. They worked easily as a group and it was obvious they'd trained and drilled for this.

"Your people are good," Logan told Peter as they rushed back along the wall toward the main entrance.

"I know." There was a hint of pride in Peter's voice. "They're good folks. Steady. Reliable." He paused and forged onward. "Especially Mercy. She takes care of everyone. I wouldn't want to see her hurt."

"Neither would I." That's all Logan had to say on the subject. It hurt too much to think about leaving her.

"Speaking of Mercy..." Peter's voice trailed off and Logan followed Peter's gaze down to the far west end of the wall. Kneeling there, shooting through a gap in the wall, was Mercy.

As if she sensed his gaze on him, she pulled her rifle back in, turned her head and stared at him. She tilted up her chin in a defiant gesture, nodded once, and then went back to shooting. Logan didn't know whether to go to her and hug her or turn her over his knee and spank her. He wanted her safe. He should have known that her need to protect the children would override all else. He didn't like it, but he understood it.

Plus, when he was gone, she'd do whatever she wanted. And that included taking her place on the wall to defend herself and her community. Thankfully, Evan was beside her, keeping a watchful eye. But who was watching Evan? This worrying about other people was exhausting. Up until now it had been himself and Tienan and they could both take care of themselves.

A loud blast sent people and wood flying. Women screamed. Men groaned as pieces of the wall became projectiles, piercing flesh. Several men toppled off the wall and fell to the ground below. The security police had blown the entrance. "To the front gate!" Peter bellowed.

Frantically, Logan searched for Mercy and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her and Evan scrambling down the stairs to the ground. Logan followed quickly down another set of steps. He had to get outside. That was the only way he'd be able to pick off the security police and disable whatever weapon they'd used to blast the main entrance. They had cannons, but they only used them close to the Gate, preferring to keep them for defense. Perhaps it was dynamite or some sort of grenade launcher. Logan couldn't be sure until he found it.

"I'm going outside," he yelled at Peter.

Peter nodded his understanding. "Be careful," he shouted back. Logan fired off a shot as he raced for cover behind a large boulder, hitting a member of the security force before the man could even discharge his weapon. A bullet flew so close to his skull, he felt his hair flutter. Ignoring it, he raised himself up and took another shot. His ammunition was running low. That meant it was time to liberate a few weapons from the enemy.

Like a ghost, Logan crawled across the ground, stalking his enemy. He used the natural cover of the trees and shrubs to inch his way closer. There weren't many building remains left here for him to hide behind. Any usable material had been salvaged years ago and put to good use.

The fighting raged around him as the people of Hope battled the security police. The stench of gunpowder and blood burned his nostrils. Someone had started a fire at the wall and it was quickly taking hold.

Anger surged through him. The General and his troops had taken everything from Logan. But they'd made a huge mistake when they'd targeted Mercy. A dead calm settled over him. Time seemed to slow and his senses grew even more acute.

Logan chose his individual targets. Silent as a wraith, he worked his way to the back of the troops and began slitting their throats one by one. He tucked two guns in the back waistband of his pants and slung a rifle over his shoulder, before stashing four more away beneath a tree.

One member of the troop broke and began to retreat. Logan couldn't let him escape. Holding the blade of his knife in his hand, he took aim and threw. The blade sank deep in the back of the man's neck at the same moment the back of the man's head blew out. Logan dropped to the ground. That shot had come from in front of the retreating man. Were there even more security police than they thought?

*No!* Logan saw the slight movement in the distance. Two. Three. Four. He stopped counting. There were men and women coming up from behind and they weren't wearing uniforms. They were surrounding the security force. By the time the troops realized what was happening, it was too late.

The ensuing battle was bloody and swift. They all knew the price of leaving even one of the men alive. They couldn't take the chance of the General finding out exactly what happened to his troops.

By the time it was over, the ground was scorched and bloody. It would take time and effort to clean up the area and hide the evidence of such a battle. Logan swiped the back of his hand over his brow. It came away sticky with sweat and blood. His body had been nicked in several places by flying debris, but he wasn't seriously injured and he was alive.

Now that the enemy was dead, the two groups were both hanging back, neither quite trusting the other. Logan stood, walking toward the group who had come out of nowhere. He could feel the people of Hope watching him. Logan kept his weapon pointing toward the ground but his finger stroked the trigger.

A man stepped forward. Logan came to a halt a few feet from him and frowned. They were both around the same size and had similar builds. They were also both blond, although the stranger's hair was longer. He looked familiar somehow, but Logan couldn't quite place him. There was something about the way the stranger moved. The way he held himself.

"I'm Logan."

The corner of the man's mouth turned upward. "Of course you are." He shook his head. "Alphas can't seem to stay out of trouble."

Every muscle in Logan's body coiled for attack. He waited.

The man just shook his head and held out his hand. "Tienan's mentioned you."

Logan was cautious, but he took the stranger's hand and shook it. Again that sense of familiarity washed over him.

"My name is Adrian, but you can call me Alpha Ten."

## **Chapter Ten**

Mercy was busy tending the wounded. She'd lost sight of Logan amidst the smoke and fighting, her heart almost stopping when Evan yelled that he was outside the wall. She wanted to run and find him now that the battle was done, but there were too many people depending on her. She wasn't capable of leaving them bleeding and hurt while she sought out Logan.

Evan disappeared. She assumed he'd gone to let the children out of the cellar and reassure them that everything was fine. Mercy wasn't sure if that was a lie or not. They had a lot of work to do. Already a group of able-bodied men were dragging away the dead for a quick burial. Another group had already started repairing the wall and their main gate. They couldn't afford to leave themselves vulnerable.

She hated this part of life—the fighting, the killing. But she knew they had no choice. That, in and of itself, made her sad. They would scavenge the battlefield, taking any weapons and ammunition they could find. Tools, food, clothing and boots would also be taken. Everything that could be of use would be salvaged. The rest would be burned or buried with the bodies.

For now, she had to focus on the living. There were some casualties, friends she'd never see again. Tears welled in her eyes but she blinked them back. The wounded needed her. Those people she could help. The rest, she would mourn later.

She tried desperately not to think about Logan, reassuring herself that he was fine. He was an Alpha, after all. But she, more than anyone, knew that he bled like everyone else. He might be faster, stronger and smarter, but he was still just a man. Her man.

Mercy ran from one wounded person to another, directing men to carry several of them to the small building that acted as their infirmary. She'd have to operate as

quickly as possible. Several women who she'd trained to deal with minor injuries would tend to the other wounded.

One hour bled into the next and time lost all sense of meaning. By the time she had the last of the wounded sewn up and resting in bed, her back ached, her eyes were sore and she felt lightheaded.

Peter's wife, Mary, came up to Mercy and put her arm around her. "You should go home and get some rest. Check on the children. I'll keep a watch on the patients."

"Are you sure?" Mercy desperately wanted to go home. The children had to be frightened by what had happened. Plus, she was hoping that Evan would know what happened to Logan. Not knowing was almost killing her. She's pushed it out of her mind all day, knowing she'd never be able to function otherwise. But now that her work was done, she needed to know.

Mary patted Mercy's arm, giving it a gentle squeeze before releasing her. "I'm sure. You've been working nonstop for hours. Try to get some rest."

"You'll call me if there's any change in the most critically wounded?"

Mary nodded. "Don't worry. I've already worked out shifts with some of the other women. There will be at least two of us here all night. If any of the patients' conditions change, someone will come get you."

Mercy rolled her head on her neck, trying to work out the kinks. She was way past tired and well into totally exhausted. She should be asleep on her feet, but she knew there was no way she'd rest until she knew what had happened to Logan. She didn't dare ask Mary if she'd had any news about him. Mercy hadn't forgotten that his presence had caused this fight. There would be a reckoning for that.

"Thanks, Mary." Mercy did one final round, checking on her patients before leaving. They were all resting comfortably. When she stepped outside, she was surprised to see it was dark. She had no idea what time of the night it was. Breakfast seemed like it was days ago instead of hours.

The compound was still buzzing with activity. Men were already hard at work making repairs. Torches lit the night, aiding them in their labors. Mercy kept her head down as she trudged toward home. She should be hungry. Instead, all she felt was empty. Numb.

The house was dark but the back door was unlocked. Mercy let herself in, bolting the door behind her. She crept upstairs and walked down the hall, checking on the children as she went. They were all asleep. Gretchen had crawled into bed with Beth, but that wasn't surprising after the scare they'd had today.

Her vision blurred and Mercy rubbed her eyes, surprised when her fingers came away wet. She was crying. Swiping her sleeve over her face, she hurried to her room. A low fire was burning in the hearth and someone, probably Evan, had dragged the wooden tub upstairs and filled it with water. A plate with some cheese, bread and an apple sat on a low table next to a pitcher full of water.

For some reason, the thoughtfulness of the gesture destroyed the last vestige of her control. Sinking to the floor, Mercy buried her face in her hands and let the tears flow. She heard no sound, but suddenly someone was behind her, touching her shoulders, lifting her. Her gaze flew upward and she met a pair of stormy blue eyes. She was hallucinating. Had to be.

"You're not really here." She reached up and touched his face. He seemed real.

Logan captured her hand in his, bringing it to his lips and kissing all her knuckles. "I couldn't leave. Not yet. Not without seeing you again." He turned her hand over, placing a kiss in the center of her palm. "Peter knows. So much has happened in the past few hours." He shook his head. "We can talk later. Right now, I need to take care of you."

He carried her to the side of the tub, set her beside it and began to strip off her clothing. Mercy didn't have the energy to stop him. And truthfully, she still wasn't totally convinced that she hadn't dropped off to sleep somewhere and was having a wonderful dream. If that was the case, she didn't want to wake up.

Logan whisked the tunic over her head and made quick work of the rest of her clothing. The warmth from the fire felt good against her chilled skin. Logan watched her, his gaze gliding over her from head to toe. Her body warmed instantly, generating heat from within.

He lifted her easily and set her in the tub. The water was perfect. Hot, but not too hot. She groaned and Logan smiled. "I've been adding hot water to it all evening. I had no idea what time you'd get home." He knelt beside the tub, yanked his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. His pants hung low on his hips. The firelight flickered over his chest, emphasizing the hard planes of his belly.

Mercy's mouth went dry as she watched him. He was very real. Hard and tough, but oh so gentle with her. He caught her looking at him and she glanced away, trying to remember what they'd been talking about before she got distracted. "You knew I'd come home?"

Logan brushed a lock of hair from her forehead and nodded. "I knew you'd have to check on the children." Dipping a bar of soap in the water, he rubbed it against a washcloth. "They're all fine. Evan fed them and reassured all of them. Gretchen was a bit more upset than the rest." He frowned. "But she seemed okay by the time she went to bed."

"You saw them." She was both shocked and charmed that he'd worried enough about the children to check on them.

"I didn't think you'd mind." He set the soap aside and rubbed the soapy cloth over her arms.

"Mmm." She couldn't think with Logan running the cloth over her arms, down her neck and across her collarbone.

"Relax," he whispered. "Let me take care of you."

It was wrong. She knew it was. She shouldn't depend on Logan. He would be gone soon and she'd be left alone to deal with life and all its problems. It might be weak, but



she didn't care. Logan was here with her now. People had died today. She could have died and so could he. Now was the time to celebrate life.

Logan dropped the cloth into the water and picked up the bar of soap. He rubbed it between his hands until a frothy mound of bubbles formed. His hands mesmerized her. They were so strong, so capable. She'd seen him almost choke a man to death with one hand. She'd also felt the gentleness of it against her skin. Logan was such a complex man.

His eyes never left her face as he slid his hands over her breasts, plumping the mounds in his palms. She moaned and slipped lower in the tub. There wasn't that much room and her breasts still bobbed above the waterline. Logan rubbed his thumbs over her distended nipples, covering them with soap. Mercy tipped her head back against the rim of the tub and let the erotic sensation rush over her entire body.

He plucked at her nipples sending ribbons of heat from her breasts to her core. She was damp between her legs and it wasn't all due to the bathwater. She arched up, wanting more of his touch.

Logan let one of his hands slip down the center of her torso. He dipped a finger into her bellybutton. It tickled and made her smile. Her smile quickly disappeared as his hand crept lower. His fingers combed through her pubic hair and kept going, parting her slick folds.

She automatically spread her legs, giving him access. Water sloshed against the sides of the tub. Her breath caught in her throat when he stroked his thumb over her clit. The tight bud of nerves ached to be touched again. Mercy moaned and arched her hips, sending a small wave of water rushing over the rim.

"Tell me what you want." His voice was rough with passion.

Mercy licked her lips. "You," she whispered.

He continued to play his finger over her swollen folds, but avoided touching her clit. "Where do you want me?" His voice whispered over her skin like a physical caress. "Where do you want me to touch you? Your clit?" He brushed lightly over the bud,

making her gasp with pleasure. "Or maybe you'd like my fingers in your hot cunt, stroking in and out. Touching you deep." He rimmed her opening but didn't go any farther.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" he countered, still keeping up the maddening caress. He was going to make her tell him what she wanted.

"I want your fingers in my cunt. I want you to touch my clit and my breasts. I want it all." Her demand turned into a moan as he drove two fingers into her sheath. The soap allowed him to slide easily, but it was still a tight fit.

"Like that?" he teased, as he crooked his fingers upward and slowly dragged them to the edge of her opening. He hit her sweet spot, sending shivers over her body.

"Yes," she hissed. Mercy arched her hips upward and sighed when his fingers sank into her hot depths again. He felt so good inside her. He caressed her breasts with his free hand, moving from one to the other, gently tugging on her nipples. Between her thighs, he worked his fingers in and out of her pussy, occasionally brushing his thumb over her swollen clit.

Mercy wanted it to last forever, but she was too needy. Having Logan here with her was a gift. After spending last night wrapped in his heated embrace, her body knew what it wanted. She cried out and Logan covered her mouth with his. His tongue pushed past her lips, swallowing her cries as she came.

Her hips jerked and she grabbed the sides of the tub with her hands as her orgasm crashed over her. Her mind went blank. There was only Logan's hands on her. Only pleasure. All the horrors of the day vanished as her body convulsed, her inner muscles gripping his fingers as he worked them in and out, drawing out her orgasm.

His touch changed, getting slower and gentler. Soothing. Mercy sighed and lolled in the water, content just to look at Logan. His face looked harsh, yet handsome in the firelight. His muscles were bands of steel beneath his bronze flesh. He was like some

ancient pagan god come to life. And she was more than willing to sacrifice herself to him.

Logan carefully withdrew his hand from between her thighs. He gave her breasts one final squeeze before sitting back on his heels beside the tub. His eyes smoldered, his face etched with longing as he watched her. Already her body was humming with desire. She pushed herself up out of the tub, letting the water sluice from her body.

Logan slowly stood, gazing at her from between hooded eyes. His erection tented the front of his pants. Mercy reached out and placed her hand over his cock and squeezed. He swore under his breath, making her smile.

“You have entirely too much clothing on.” She rubbed her palm over his hard shaft from base to tip.

Logan wrapped his hands around her waist and plucked her from the tub. Not giving her time to dry off, he tossed her onto the bed. She bounced back up on her knees, wanting to watch as he stripped off his clothing. He yanked off his boots and had his pants off in seconds.

Mercy licked her lips and held out her hand. Logan took it and knelt on the bed beside her. “Lie back,” she ordered him. He raised one eyebrow but stretched out on the mattress.

With all that delectable male flesh spread out before her, Mercy wasn't quite sure where to begin. His cock jerked toward her and she smiled. She knew exactly where to begin.

Logan held his breath as Mercy smiled at him. It was a smile filled with mischief and feminine power. He was at her mercy. He smiled at his own joke. It quickly disappeared when she placed her two hands on his chest. Her skin was much paler than his, and softer. Yet they were hard-working hands. Competent and strong. She glided them over the hard planes of his chest, skimming lower. His muscles rippled as she stroked them. He could lie here forever and let her simply touch him.

No, not forever. Just for tonight. This was a gift. A reprieve. He truly expected to leave today, but fate had deemed otherwise. But he'd have to leave tomorrow. He couldn't risk bringing more security police down on Mercy and her community.

"Stop thinking," she ordered. "I can practically see the wheels turning inside your head."

She might as well have asked him to stop breathing. An Alpha was constantly thinking. Planning. He didn't know how else to be.

Mercy's hands skimmed over his hips, moving lower. She rubbed and kneaded the muscles of his thighs. If she was trying to get him to relax, she was going about it all wrong. With her hands so close to his cock, all he could think about was her small, strong fingers wrapped around it, pumping hard.

"You're still thinking," she accused as she trailed her fingernails up the inside of his thighs.

His hips came off the bed. "I can't help it. The microcomputer in my brain never stops."

"Hmm." She leaned down and blew softly on his shaft. The warm breeze caressed his hard flesh. He gripped the covers at his sides to keep from grabbing Mercy, flipping her onto her back and driving into her. He could tell this was important to her. And truthfully, he wanted her to touch him everywhere.

He closed his eyes and simply absorbed the sensation of having Mercy's hand on his body. He cataloged every touch, every detail. He wanted to be able to remember all of it for the long, lonely months and years that stretched ahead of him.

"I guess it's up to me to distract you." That was all the warning he got. Her tongue touched the tip of his cock, stroking over the slit and licking off a bead of pre-cum. Logan dug his fingers deeper into the covers. Fabric ripped and his hips arched into her touch.

Mercy swirled her tongue around his cock head, letting her tongue rim the ridge just below. Blood pounded through his body, rushing to his cock. The blue veins pulsed as he grew even harder. His balls drew up close to his body.

She pulled back slightly and smiled up at him. "You taste good. Salty and musky and male." She looked like some woodland nymph from a book he'd seen when he was still a boy. Her short blonde hair was tousled and her lips were plump and kissable. Her body was slender, but her breasts were substantial. They bobbed with each breath she took. Her slim legs were folded beneath her as she knelt beside him. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

She lowered her head again and he held his breath. Her rosy lips parted and he felt her moist breath on his cock just before she closed her mouth over him. Logan groaned as she took him deeper. He barely resisted the urge to thrust.

He released his stranglehold on the bedclothes and tangled his fingers in her hair, holding her close, guiding her. She let her teeth graze his shaft as she pulled all the way back to the head. She made a small noise of pleasure as she curled her tongue around the crown before sliding down his hard length once again.

"Fuck." There was nothing else to be said. No words could describe the sensation of her hot, wet mouth working up and down his cock. He lost all ability to think. All he could do was feel.

It was more than just sex. He'd had sex many times during his years in the lab. The scientists at the Piedmont Corporation had deemed it a necessary part of his health program. But nothing he'd experienced had ever led him to believe he could feel like this.

Mercy was everything to him. She was the air he breathed, his reason for being. There was nothing he wouldn't do to protect her. Nothing.

Her fingers wrapped around the base of his cock, keeping a rhythm with her mouth that was driving him mad. He wouldn't last long. She slid her free hand beneath his

thigh and touched the sensitive place just behind his balls. Logan gritted his teeth and hung on. He didn't want to come. Not yet.

She cupped his balls and squeezed gently and Logan knew his time had run out. "I'm going to come." He wanted to give her the chance to pull away. His fingers tightened around her scalp, but he forced them to relax. He wanted to come in her mouth but only if she wanted it.

He waited to see if she would pull away. Instead, she tightened her grip and sucked harder. Logan tilted back his head. The cords of his neck strained as he tried to keep from yelling. He chanted her name over and over. He wasn't sure if he was simply calling her name or begging for her to finish.

His balls tightened. His cock rippled and jerked as he came. Mercy made a choking sound but she didn't stop. She sucked and swallowed, taking everything he gave her until he had nothing left.

Logan sighed and loosened his grip on her hair. Mercy rested her head on his stomach, her fingers soothing now, rather than arousing.

"Thank you." The words were inadequate for what she'd just given him, but they were all he had and he gave them freely.

Mercy licked her lips, tasting Logan. She loved the way he lost control. Her scalp stung from where he'd gripped her so tight, guiding her mouth up and down his shaft. His cock was softer now, but no less impressive. The bulbous head was dark and moist. The blue veins running up and down his length were still visible, but not quite as prominent as they were when he was totally aroused.

The way Logan held her, his whispered words of thanks, filled her heart with love and longing. He hadn't had enough love in his life. She knew he was leaving, but that didn't stop her from loving him. Love was undeniable. His leaving would hurt regardless of what she did. So she might as well give them both something special to remember.

She knew he cared for her. That was evident in the way he'd bathed her, the way he touched her. Even now, his fingers were gently combing through her hair, as though he couldn't bear to not be touching her. She understood. She needed that connection too.

She ran her fingernails lightly over his shaft and it jerked. She stilled. He was getting larger again. Aroused. She didn't think that was possible so quickly. But Logan had proved on more than one occasion that he was more than a normal man in many ways.

Wrapping her fingers around his shaft, she gave it an experimental pump. Sure enough, it swelled beneath her hand.

"If you don't want to end up beneath me with me fucking you for the next hour, you'd better stop."

As threats went, it fell short of its mark. Smiling, Mercy pumped her hand up and down his shaft again.

Logan let out a growl. The room seemed to spin. Mercy blinked and found herself flat on her back with Logan looming over her. His heavy thighs shoved hers open and she felt the head of his cock probing for entry to her body. "I warned you." His voice was hard, his face taut with desire.

"So you did." Mercy wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled his face down until their lips were almost touching. "An hour, you said."

The corners of his mouth turned upward in a smile of masculine pleasure and promise. Mercy shivered as his hips surged forward and he buried his cock deep inside her welcoming heat.

"An hour," he promised, as he peppered her face with kisses. "Probably more. I plan to fuck you until neither of us can walk straight."

Their lips met and, true to his promise, Logan made love to her for hours. Exhaustion finally overtook her just as dawn was breaking.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Logan sat on the edge of the bed and watched Mercy sleeping. He didn't want to wake her. Not yet. The longer she slept, the more time he had with her. Plus, she'd only been asleep for a little less than two hours. There were shadows beneath her eyes and her body was covered in red marks and small bruises. He'd been too rough with her.

Shame filled him as he touched a light bruise on her neck. At the same time, it warred with the pride that surged through him that she was wearing his mark on her flesh. It would let other men know she belonged to him.

He pulled his hand back, swearing softly at himself. He had no right to feel that way. He was leaving. There would be other men in Mercy's life.

Rage pumped through his veins at the thought of another man touching her, kissing her, loving her. Mercy was his woman. Jealousy and possessiveness were new emotions to him and he didn't know how to deal with them.

A soft hand touched his face and he jerked. "Hi." She looked up at him, a sleepy smile on her face. She looked like a woman well sated and pleased. That calmed the demons within him. At least for the moment.

"It's time for me to leave."

Mercy nodded and flung back the covers. She climbed out of bed and padded to the washstand, seemingly unconcerned about being naked in front of him. Although he knew she wasn't quite as nonchalant as she appeared. Her cheeks were flushed and she wouldn't quite meet his gaze.

She washed swiftly, shivering as the cool water stroked over her skin. He berated himself for not thinking to heat water for her. Needing something to do, he walked to the hearth, crouched down and stirred the embers. Within seconds, he had a small blaze



crackling. He added several chunks of wood and pulled the mesh wire screen in front of it to stop any stray sparks from hitting the floor.

“Why don’t you try to get a few more hours sleep?” It would be easier for him to leave without her there to watch him.

Mercy grabbed some clothing and quickly dressed. “I have chores to see to. And the children will be wanting breakfast when they wake.” She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on her boots. “What happened yesterday? After?”

Logan walked to her side and shrugged. “We buried the dead and started repairs on the wall.”

“I know that.” Frustration was evident in every word she spoke. “I want to know who those other people were.”

Logan sat next to her. The mattress depressed slightly and Mercy’s body slid closer to his. He inhaled her unique scent—the soft perfume of her soap and the unforgettable smell of the woman herself. “They were members of the Resistance. They’d followed the security forces all the way through the outer city. They rightly figured something was up because troops rarely come this far north.”

“You’ll be leaving with them today.” It wasn’t a question.

“I have to. It’s not safe for you or the children if I stay.” Mercy’s hands were clenched tight in her lap. He covered them with his hands. “Look at me.”

She raised her head, her eyes luminous with unshed tears. “I want to go with you.”

His heart almost stopped and hope surged, only to be squashed by practicality and reality. “You can’t. It’s not safe. And then there are the children.”

Mercy bit her bottom lip. “It’s not fair. I love you.” She held nothing back, letting him see every emotion swirling inside her.

Logan dropped to his knees in front of her and buried his head in her lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight, unable to speak for several minutes. She touched him gently, rubbing his shoulders and running her fingers though

his hair. No one had ever touched him the way she did. Mercy treated him like he was special. Like he was a man. Not a killing machine to be used or feared.

He raised his head and stared at her beloved face. "I don't know what love is, Mercy." Her blue eyes looked so sad it made his heart ache. "I don't know how this happened so quickly, but you're like a drug in my blood. I want to be with you, to touch you, to smell you. Just being near you makes me smile. I want to be with you always. Simply watching you sleep fills me with pleasure. Nothing is more important than protecting you. Nothing."

Logan felt his heart swell as she touched the side of his face. He reached up and held her palm tight to his cheek. Taking a deep breath, he plunged onward. "If that's love, then I love you." Her lips parted on a gasp and a tear trickled down her cheek. Logan groaned. "I don't know exactly when or how it happened, but I love you, Mercy. Don't cry, baby." He felt helpless to stop her tears. He wanted to make everything right for her but he didn't know how. "Please don't cry."

She ignored his entreaty and the tears continued to fall. Her eyelashes were damp, black spikes that framed her luminous eyes, making them appear even larger. "I love you too. Oh, Logan," she cried, throwing herself into his arms. "Why is this so impossible?"

He gathered her close to his heart and simply held her. "I don't know."

They stayed there for long, silent minutes, parting only when the sounds of other people moving in the house reached them. Mercy swiped at her face and wiggled in his embrace until he released her. She went to the washstand and splashed cold water on her face.

He could see her gathering strength, pulling it around her like a cloak. Once again, he was astounded by her courage. She turned to him and offered her hand. "We'd better go downstairs."

Logan stood and walked toward her, wrapping his hand around hers. Hand in hand they went down the stairs and into the kitchen to face the crowd already gathered there.

Mercy couldn't look at Logan. If she did, she'd burst into tears. He loved her. It was a curse and a blessing. There was no doubt in her mind that he loved her as deeply as she loved him. He wasn't the type of man to say something he didn't mean. But he was still leaving her. He thought her safety depended on it, so he would do it, regardless of the cost to himself or her. He would protect her at all costs.

All the children were there, along with Peter and his wife, and a stranger. Mary smiled at her. "I'm going to take the children over to my house for a bit. We're going to have breakfast and then they're going to help me make an apple pie."

Gretchen ran to Mercy, throwing her small arms around her. Mercy picked up the little girl and hugged her. "That sounds like fun." Obviously, Peter and the stranger wanted to talk to Logan and her.

"I'll bring you a piece of pie. And one for Logan too," the little girl promised.

Her throat was tight, but she managed to reply. "Thank you, Gretchen." She didn't have the heart to tell the child that Logan wouldn't need a piece of pie because he wouldn't be here.

"Come along." Mary ushered the children out through the door, but not before they all stopped to give Mercy a hug on their way. Evan stayed behind.

The door closed and Mercy, needing something to do, went to the cupboard and pulled down a mug and a can of tea. She made her own using herbs from her garden. This morning, she chose chamomile, needing something to calm her. "Does anyone else want some?"

They all declined. The kettle was already hot so it didn't take her long to make her tea. With nothing left to delay her, Mercy went to the table and sat, cradling her mug between her hands. Logan took the seat beside her.

She looked at the stranger, tilting her head to one side. He looked familiar somehow. His gaze was intelligent and direct. There was a sense of command, of power about him. She pushed her mug aside as it came to her. He reminded her of Logan.

As though he knew what she was thinking, the stranger nodded. "I'm Adrian." She'd heard that name often before. Mostly when others came to trade with their community. This was the leader of the Resistance.

"You're like Logan, aren't you?" The question popped out of her mouth before she could stop herself. That wasn't the sort of question one usually threw out there. Alphas were remorseless killers who did the bidding of the Ruling Council of the inner city. Or so they'd been told. She knew better now. Proof it was a lie was sitting right next to her.

Adrian inclined his head. "I'm an Alpha." He glanced at the other members of the room. "That's not something I want known to one and all. Logan said you could be trusted." There was steel beneath those words, along with a promise of retribution if anyone betrayed his confidence.

Like Logan, she sensed there was a harsh story behind why he was here. But he wouldn't be sharing it any time soon. She nodded. "I won't tell anyone, but it's kind of obvious to me. Once you know one, it's hard to miss."

One corner of Adrian's mouth turned up slightly. "I take your point." He gave Logan a pointed look. "Logan and Tienan have created a whole new set of problems. Which leads us to what happened here yesterday."

Peter nodded and took over the conversation. "That's the worst run-in with the security forces we've had here in a long time. We're so far to the north they don't usually bother with us. We'll get the occasional patrol, usually chasing a small group who's gone to the outer city to scavenge. Other than that, they've mostly left us alone for years."

"You can thank me for that," Adrian interjected. "My group had kept them too busy for the past decade to even allow them to think about spreading their tentacles so far north. They've managed to push to the west and east, but not to the north."

Peter nodded. "I figured as much." He scrubbed his hand over his beard and sighed. Mercy noted that he looked tired. He'd probably been awake all night overseeing repairs and checking on the wounded. "But we still have a problem."

"This was my fault." Mercy spoke up, drawing four sets of male eyes her way. "I took Logan into my home when he was wounded." She turned to Peter. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I was afraid for Logan's safety. He was a stranger..." Her voice trailed off. They were suspicious of strangers, and rightfully so. Look what disaster she'd brought down on the community by her actions.

A weight dropped onto her thigh, startling her. Thankfully no one else noticed her reaction. Heat soaked through her clothing and into her body as Logan's hand gave her a squeeze, letting her know he was here to support her.

"No." Evan pushed away from the wall and propped his hands on his hips. "It was my fault. Tim and I found him, but it was my decision to bring him back here."

"You couldn't leave him there to bleed to death," Mercy countered. "I'd taught you better than that."

"This is getting us nowhere." Logan slid his hand up and down her thigh. It was meant to be a comforting caress, but it was quickly turning into something more. Her breasts swelled and she had to fight the urge to press her legs together to ease the growing ache.

"There's enough blame to go around. I should have left the moment I woke from my injuries. I didn't, and the security force came looking. There's no point in laying blame. We have to deal with what is."

"I agree with Logan." Adrian leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes shrewd. "They suffered a large loss but they don't know it yet. This was probably a long-range patrol. Right now, if they know anything at all, it's that the patrol is missing."

"So what do we do?" Peter rolled his shoulders before propping his elbows on the table. "It will take days, maybe weeks to finish the repairs on the walls. In the meantime, we're vulnerable to attack." It was obvious that he felt the weight of his

responsibilities. Mercy felt sorry for him and more than a bit guilty about her part in this.

“We leave,” Adrian continued. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table, his gaze intent. “We take the fight to the Gate.”

“That’s insane.” Peter shook his head. “You’re asking to get killed that way.”

“What’s the alternative?” Logan gave her leg a final squeeze before releasing it. She felt slightly bereft without his touch. “Wait until they decide they’re interested in you? Until the General and the Ruling Council decides it wants to push this far north? What do you do then? Fight? Abandon your community and run farther into the unknown out there in the world? The contamination is probably worse out there. At least when the Gate was built, the area around it got some of the benefits in terms of clearing away some of the contaminants and pollution. We don’t know what’s out there, but we do know what’s here.”

Peter heaved a sigh. “I know you’re right, but we’re a small community with families, children. What can we do against the power and might of the Ruling Council?”

“You can fight. There are many pockets of people, like you, within the outer city and to the east and west. Alone, none of us can do much. Together, we can defeat them and bring down the Gate. Everyone should have the same privileges they do. They have easy access to food, clothing, medicine, water and fresh air.” Mercy could feel the waves of intensity flowing from Adrian as he spoke. He was mesmerizing in his conviction. It was no wonder his people followed him.

“What would we have to do?”

Adrian pinned Peter with a steely gaze. “Prepare for war. Stockpile food and ammunition. Get whatever medical supplies you can. Be ready to send a squadron to fight if we call on you.”

Peter nodded. “I have to talk this over with the elders. Our community is run by consensus.”

Adrian nodded. “We’ll set up a way to communicate.”

"I'll do it." Evan's voice was firm, his resolve evident. In that moment, Mercy knew he'd left boyhood behind and was truly a man. "If you'll have me, I'll run messages back and forth."

Adrian glanced at Logan who inclined his head slightly. "Good enough," Adrian agreed. "I'll give you several places around the outer city where you can drop off and pick up messages. If I can, I'll try to meet you in person every few weeks." He pushed back from the table. "It's time to go. My people are waiting and I've got more scattered throughout the outer city. You coming?" he asked Logan.

Although she already knew his reply, it still hurt. "Yeah, I'm coming." Logan stood.

Mercy jumped to her feet. "I want to go with you." All the men stared at her like she had two heads.

Logan shook his head. "It's too dangerous for you. And what about the children?"

"I'm a healer. I can help." Her heart was breaking at the thought of leaving the children, but it would shatter entirely if she lost Logan. "Mary will look after the children."

Logan cupped her face in his hands, rubbing his thumbs gently over her cheeks. "I won't risk you."

"But I love you," she whispered.

He lowered his forehead until it was touching hers. Behind her, she heard the other men shuffling uncomfortably. She didn't care. This was too important to her. "Mercy." He said her name and nothing more. She could sense the hardening of his resolve. She swallowed hard and blinked back her tears. She wouldn't cry, not in front of everyone.

She pulled back, keeping her expression as blank as she could make it. Facing Adrian, she offered him a slight smile. It wasn't much, but it was the best she could do under the circumstances. "Sorry about that."

He was watching her intently. "Actually, I wouldn't mind it if you wanted to come to the outer city on occasion to help with the sick and wounded. We have a doctor but he's usually overworked and undersupplied."

"No." Logan's voice was harsh, his face set like a thundercloud. There was no doubt how he felt about Adrian's idea. "You can't be seriously considering this." He grabbed her shoulders, pulled her up onto her toes and shook her.

Mercy gripped his wrists for support as she scowled at him. "I am. If it means I get to see you, then that's what I'm going to do."

"I won't see you if you come to the outer city." His voice was cold. Remote.

Pain shot through her heart, searing her soul. He was pulling away from her because he loved her, she reminded herself. It might not seem like it, but that was Logan. Protect her at all costs.

"I'll do it anyway." And she would. There was no way she could stay here in her safe cocoon any longer. Not when there were men, women and children suffering and she could do something about it.

She looked at Adrian who was watching them with interest. "I can come for several days every month, a week if I can swing it. I won't desert my community." She turned to Peter. "That's assuming I'm still welcome here."

"You know you are," Peter began. "Folks are upset about what happened, but they all knew it was only a matter of time before the security force came sniffing around. It's been so quiet for so long, we've gotten lax and lazy."

Mercy wasn't as sure of her welcome, knew it was mostly due to the fact that she was the only healer the community had. People with medical skills were in short supply. There were other communities to the west and east that would welcome her if it came to that. And she already knew the Resistance would take her in.

Logan's fingers tightened around her shoulders and she winced. He swore and released her, raking his fingers through his hair. "You're going to do it, aren't you?"



She nodded and he heaved a sigh. "I guess that means I'll be coming back here at least once a month and escorting you to wherever the Resistance camp is."

Hope surged through her. "Really?"

Logan dragged Mercy into his arms, banding them around her, holding her close to his heart. "Nothing is more important than your safety. Nothing." He released her long enough to turn and glare at Adrian.

The other man raised his hands in mock surrender. "I understand. Your buddy, Tienan, is much the same way around my adoptive sister, Silence." He lowered his hands, his mood turning serious. "You're an Alpha. You can't fight your nature. You know that Mercy is your woman."

Logan nodded, unwilling to fight it any longer. "So where does that leave me? I want to fight. I vowed to bring down the Gate. To destroy the General and the Ruling Council at any cost."

"You're an Alpha, use your brain." Adrian shook his head. "Your emotions are making you totally illogical. This community needs to learn better defense strategies. They're well-armed, but not versed in actual battle tactics. Train them. Live with them, with Mercy. Escort her into the outer city once a month. You can connect with Tienan and fight with us while you're there. We can use all the help we can get, but you know that two Alphas can't live together for long, let alone three."

The solution was so simple he didn't know why he hadn't thought of it. That was a lie. He did know. Adrian was right. His feelings for Mercy had him off kilter, not thinking logically. He pulled her back into his arms, not quite ready to see her reaction to Adrian's suggestion. Would she even want him here after he'd all but thrown her love back into her face?

She rested her hands on his chest and pushed. He reluctantly released her. Delaying the inevitable, Logan turned to Peter. "Will your people agree to that?"

Peter looked undecided for a moment and then nodded. "They'd be stupid not to. The security force will be back. That's a guarantee. Next time with more firepower and

troops. We need to be ready. I'll talk to them." He nodded at Mercy before turning to Adrian. "I'll see you before you leave. I'm going to have a quick meeting with the elders to get this matter settled."

The door was barely closed behind Peter when Logan turned his attention to Evan. The young man was watching him, a slight smile on his face. "How do you feel about me being here? You've been the man of the house up until now."

Evan shrugged. "I'm okay with it as long as you teach me how to fight. I want to be able to kick your ass if you make Mercy cry."

The warning had been given and received. His respect for Evan continued to grow. "Fair enough."

"What really matters," Evan continued, "is what Mercy wants." He glanced at Adrian. "I'd like to talk to you more about how this whole messenger thing will work."

Adrian and Evan started toward the back door. "I want to talk to you before I leave," Adrian called to Logan over his shoulder. "Don't be long."

The door shut behind them. Logan still didn't look at Mercy. He took a deep breath and met her gaze. She stared up at him. Watching. Waiting. Her eyes were luminous but there were no tears on her face. He didn't know whether that was a good sign or not. "What do you think of the idea?"

She licked her lips. He followed the long stroke of her tongue and felt his cock leap in response. "I don't want you to feel obligated. If you want to leave, you can."

For a moment, Logan couldn't breathe. He felt as though all the life had been sucked from his body. Then it surged back as a wave of determination shattered his despair. He was an Alpha. He wasn't a quitter. Mercy was his woman. If it took him the rest of his life to get her to admit that, then so be it.

He cupped his hand around the back of her neck, drawing her closer. "Obligated." He shook his head. "I'm the one that should be saying that to you." He leaned down and touched his lips to her forehead. "You are the only woman for me, Mercy. You are

the air I breathe, my very reason for existing. The only reason I wanted to leave was I thought it would protect you.”

He kissed her cheeks and the tip of her nose. She sucked in a breath and her cheeks turned a charming shade of pink. She wasn't unaffected by him and he was ruthless enough to use that attraction to help bind her to him. “I couldn't think of any other way to keep you safe. My only excuse is that all the unfamiliar emotions you've brought out in me have muddled my normally logical brain.”

“So it's my fault, is it?” The corners of her lips twitched.

“Absolutely. I didn't have these kinds of problems until I met you.”

Unable to resist any longer, he touched his mouth to hers. Her lips parted on a sigh and he took full advantage, slipping his tongue inside. She stood in his arms, not resisting but not truly participating either. Desperation fired him and he slanted his mouth across hers, deepening the kiss.

She gave a cry and threw her arms around his neck. Tongues stroked and breath mingled as he tried to eat her whole. She tasted like life, like everything good in the world. He ran his hands down her slender back, cupped her ass in his palms and lifted her against his erection.

Mercy gave a soft moan, lifting one of her legs and hooking it over his hip. The action brought her mound snug against his swollen cock. He tore his mouth from hers and buried his face in the curve of her neck, gasping for breath.

“Will you have me?” He needed to know before this went any further. There was an aching void within him that only she could fill. If she denied him, he wasn't sure what he'd do. Only that he'd find some way to change her mind. She loved him. Or she had, before he'd practically tossed it aside.

“Oh, Logan.” She caught his face between his hands and peppered his jaw with kisses. “Of course, I'll have you. I love you.”

He almost fell to his knees the relief was so great. Instead, he lifted her into his arms and started toward the stairs. "What about Adrian?" she asked as she threaded her fingers through his hair.

Logan swore. "He can wait. The details can wait. But this can't." He carried her into her bedroom, tossed her down on the mattress, following her down. He covered her slender body with his, loving the way her softness gave way to his hardness.

Mercy smiled up at him and he was lost. Clothing was tugged away and discarded until they were both naked. Logan proceeded to make love to her. Adrian and the rest of the world were forgotten for now. There was only the two of them, hands clutching, bodies entwined. The war was coming, but this was a moment for connection. For them. For love.

## About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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