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LARA SANTIAGO

The Wives Tales

The Miner's Wife : The Executive's Wife : The Lawman's Wife

The Executive pays a fortune to wed, the Lawman pays a pittance to marry, and the Miner fights an enemy for his bride. Three women auctioned off in separate venues to genetically bred strangers are uniquely destined to discover love in unusual places.

"With intriguing plots, sassy heroines, scrumptious heroes, and scorch-your-fingertips sex, Lara Santiago's Wives Tales books should be on every reader's must-have list."—Leslie Kelly, Award Winning Author

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

The Miner's Wife

In the year 2076, the Tiberius Group invades all aspects of society, taking over and implementing a new plan for the good of all U.S. citizens, especially the females. Hannah Brent is sent via cryo-freeze tube on a cargo spaceship to a moon orbiting Mars. There, she is auctioned off to a Thorium-Z miner.

Thomas 'Brutal' Blackthorn only needs a wife temporarily for sexual release purposes until he finishes mining his claim. Then he'll be rich enough to marry the wealthy heiress waiting for him on earth. He didn't expect the fiery Hannah to conquer his heart.

Brutal turns out to be the first man in Hannah's life to have any respect for her or her desires. He allows her to follow her dream even at his own expense. Will she ever want to leave him, since theirs is only a temporary arrangement?

THE MINER'S WIFE

The Wives Tales

Lara Santiago

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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Dedication

To my family for their unlimited support and understanding.

And to my Dad, the librarian who always surrounded himself with books and taught me it was the best way to live.

My first book is for you, Daddy. I miss you lots.

Lara Santiago

The Miner's Wife
By Lara Santiago
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Prologue

"I want to see the fresh meat," the tall man said to the loadmaster of the recently docked space transport ship.

"So does everyone else. The auction's in four hours. Come back then," the irate loadmaster said and started to turn away. *Damn miners*, he thought, *always so eager to get a glimpse of the merchandise. Or fondle it, more likely.*

"I'll pay." The tall man quickly flashed a disposable credit device with a sizable amount displayed.

The loadmaster's shoulders drooped slightly. He ran a forearm over his eyes, smearing the dirt and sweat from his brow onto an already grimy sleeve. The tall man didn't move. He wore an expression of arrogance the loadmaster hated, but money was money.

He sighed and looked again at the credit device with longing before speaking, "I have to check the other cargo bay. I'll be gone for ten minutes."

The tall man smiled, as if he had known the whole time that the loadmaster would give in to his bribe, and promptly tossed him the credit device.

"Don't be here when I get back or I'll call the authorities," he warned, catching and pocketing the credit device.

"Of course."

"And no touching the merchandise."

"Right," the tall man said. He then turned and approached the first cryogenic unit containing a brunette female with a very curvaceous figure clad only in lacy underwear.

The units were open, but the stock hadn't been revived yet. The loadmaster paused only momentarily to consider the bother of being ten or more minutes late getting the cargo off the spacecraft for the auction. Ah, well, it was worth it, he reminded himself, fingering the credit device in his pocket.

"Damn arrogant miners," the loadmaster said and shook his head, muttering to himself as he stepped into the next cargo bay.

* * * *

The tall man looked over his shoulder at the retreating loadmaster. He smiled and then purposely ran his forefinger down the chilled cheek of the brunette in the first cryogenic unit. *No touching the merchandise, my ass*, he thought and smiled at his own defiance.

He considered the brunette serenely posed in the cryo-unit. She was pretty and had a nicely stacked figure, but he didn't care for her face. Too pouty. The man moved to the next unit, which held a very petite, young Asian woman. No. Far too childlike. He made his way down the row of cryogenic units, ticking off each woman in turn until he got to the one second from the last. She was young, but not too young. More importantly, for his particular tastes, she was a natural blonde, a rarity in this industry. She was also very angelic looking. Fragile almost. She was perfect. The tall man would only bid on this innocent looking creature whenever they brought her out during the auction. That was, if he decided to take a mail order bride at all.

Of all the transport ships he had checked out, this was the first time a woman came even close to fulfilling

what he wanted ... or desired. His selection was based on not much more than gut feel, but this girl just had a certain look he found vastly appealing. Her honey-colored hair was neither curly thick nor completely straight but somewhere in between waving down just past her shoulders. Her eyes were closed, but he made a bet with himself they were light in color. Her oval face sported lightly tanned skin and freckles on her pert little nose, but her mouth, which was her most delectable feature, stole the show on her lovely face.

Those full lips made him take a step closer. He wanted to kiss her, but instead, he leaned in closer to whisper in her ear, "I'm going to make you scream for me." And he fully intended to do just that, *if* he decided to bid.

The tall man smiled, well satisfied the money he spent to preview the women available this trip had been worth it, especially since he'd finally found a worthy contender for the role of his temporary spouse. He did not want to bid on one woman and then have a better one come along later. He hated surprises like that and was glad he had taken the risk of a bribe.

Whistling to himself for a job well executed, he walked down the path to the exit in plenty of time before the loadmaster saw him and called the authorities.

He glanced at a table next to the hatch door as he was about to disembark from the cargo transport. A paper document sticking out of a half-opened burlap and leather bag caught his eye. Paper documents were rarely used. Probably fake.

The tall man glimpsed the sender's address as he strode by, and it stopped him cold. He snagged the letter from the sack and read the addressee section. He tore it open and read the short missive, heedless of the loadmaster's imminent arrival. His heart nearly stopped in his chest.

Unbelievable! He looked around surreptitiously and tucked the letter in his jacket pocket before leaving the ship.

The letter changed absolutely everything.

Chapter One

"I can't believe I have to marry some strange Thorium-Z miner to stay out of jail," Hannah mumbled to herself as she sniffed, trying not to let the other women in the transport craft see her tears. They would only make fun of her, just like they had on the whole damn journey. She experienced peace from her wretched circumstances only while she slept in the cryo-unit. But the wild dreams on this journey during her cryogenic slumber disturbed her. The most vivid one was of a deep masculine voice with a repeated phrase still echoing in her mind, *'I'm going to make you scream for me.'*

It had become almost a chant in her idle mind since waking up on the ship. It troubled her because of the hint of dark sexual desire it drove in her. She didn't expect sensual yearning to be any part of her immediate future.

The vivid nightmares of her last month on Earth, which resulted in her new status, colored her memory. Hannah shivered, remembering what she was doing here. She was about to be auctioned off to some grungy miner, and it wasn't her fault either. She wanted to scream this until someone listened, but so far, no one had. Basically, she was about to pay the ultimate price for being a woman.

Hannah wished she had the capacity in her soul to just slit her wrists and be done with it. But she didn't. She of the glass-is-half-full theology would always believe there was hope for her—until her very last breath. Some days, she hated being such an optimist.

Today was one of those days.

Then a voice to Hannah's right shouted at them, breaking her morbid reverie.

"All right now, ladies. Line up by the hatch door in an orderly fashion. Once yer outside the ship, head for the door at the end of the hallway. It'll take ya to the back of the auction building."

"Moo," Hannah said under her breath. The women here were no better than livestock brought in for the slaughter.

Hannah Brent didn't kid herself that anyone cared about her trials. Everyone on this transport had a financial sob story, but she was the only one who hadn't run up a mountain of bills she couldn't pay. Not for clothing, jewelry, shoes, or anything. Her husband had gambled and lost a fortune in a single night.

The next morning, the police had knocked at her sister's door where she had been staying, with a warrant for Hannah to appear as collateral in her husband's trial. Foolishly, she thought collateral meant witness. After she had dressed quickly, the officers escorted her to the police station to greet her idiot husband ... now *ex*-husband. The louse.

She looked down at the white knit cotton blouse and matching skirt she wore, wishing, and not for the first time, she had chosen differently. If she had known she was going to be incarcerated, she would have picked a more practical color, something other than white. She felt it was a tad ironic to be a forced mail order bride dressed all in white.

An hour after the police had collected her, she was ensconced in an interrogation room at the police station. Ten minutes after that, a Tiberius medical body scan showed she and her husband hadn't consummated their marriage.

Her husband had hatefully informed them she was frigid and refused to sleep with him, which was a lie. But she had not been allowed to speak. When she tried to, they taped her mouth shut. The bastards! So

they let her ex-husband have an annulment if he would agree to sign her over as payment for his gambling debts.

"No problem," he'd said excitedly, whipping out a pen for the paperwork.

Hannah had screamed, "No!" through the tape secured across her lips, but to no avail.

She had been summarily sold into mail order bride slavery, ironically enough, to pay her idiot ex-husband's gambling debts, thus keeping *him* out of jail. After he'd been given the formal annulment, he had practically skipped out of the jail building a free man. They hadn't removed the tape from her for hours because she had screamed herself hoarse in rebellion and tried to strike anyone within a five-foot radius who dared to try to touch her.

She had been forced to trade one bad husband she hadn't chosen for another she didn't want, simply because she was female. The Tiberius Group had recently forced some new laws into existence. They had a whole bunch of fresh new 'rules' for women now. And they all sucked.

Hannah poised and readied herself to become the unwilling mail order bride of some miner—a stranger who resided on excavation station number seven on an environment-controlled asteroid, which circled Mars, a zillion miles from Earth and her family. It was all because of her ex-husband ... and her vile biological father. It was unreasonable, but no one cared about her problems. She was utterly alone.

"We'll bring you in one at a time. After the auction price has been paid, you'll be given over to your new fiancé. Together, you'll go to the minister who will perform the ceremony." The loadmaster continued ticking off the procedures for this, her endless personal days in hell.

I don't need no stinking husband, Hannah thought and closed her eyes. The first one had been such a loser; she didn't want to ever marry again. After what her father had done to her mother while Hannah was growing up, she'd never wanted to get married in the first place. She had wanted to teach. But her dreams were now derailed in favor of a new world order, courtesy of the Tiberius Group. They were powerfully evil men who wielded an insane amount of power. They had devised a new, radical social living style for the country—and most especially this new method applied to its females.

"Once the ceremony is over, you'll be bound to the Thorium-Z miner for a minimum of six months, but not to exceed two years." The loadmaster droned on while consulting his digital clipboard now and again for what Hannah guessed was clarity in this barbaric system.

Hannah wondered what a Thorium-Z miner might look like. The vivid picture of a mid-nineteenth century miner forty-niner in California popped into her fertile mind. She'd seen it in a history book once. They looked dirty, smelly, and wholly unappealing to Hannah.

"Yeah, yeah, we know the drill. Let's go and get this over with," a tall red head whined. "I'm hungry and I know I don't get fed until after the ceremony."

"Keep your panties on, Celeste. Dusty had to go out and tell 'em all we're one girl short," the young loadmaster named Buck said.

Hannah inwardly shuddered again. For all her problems, at least she'd survived the trip here. The other mail order brides who'd taunted her back on Earth were much subdued after one of the cryogenic units had failed. Neither loadmaster, Dusty the older one nor Buck the younger one, had been able to revive the girl in the first pod. Her name had been Allison. She had been a brunette beauty and one of the unattached women. Hannah was also unattached. That meant no specific miner had requested her.

The snooty women in the other cargo bay were all about to marry the miners they had corresponded with, exchanged photos with, and who had selected them specially. They were part of the *premium* cargo.

No one had selected Hannah especially, and she quelled the urge to break into tears again at the rejection she felt for that slight, which was stupid. Like she cared what a bunch of Thorium-Z miners thought of her. She wasn't going to cry because she didn't win a popularity contest here, but on some level, it hurt to know she was thought of as a lesser person even in this disgusting place.

"Maybe some of them miners will fight over us, seein' as how we're the last cargo for a while," gushed a rough-looking bleached blonde who looked like she'd endured a difficult life up to now. The expression 'rode hard and put away wet' slid unkindly into Hannah's mind.

"Well, Dusty's tellin' 'em that, too," Buck said with a slight smile. "There might just be a fight or two today."

"Get in there and tell Dusty to hurry up. I'm staaarving."

"Quit yer bitchin', Celeste. You've been here often enough, you should know the routine," Buck said, shaking his head and seemingly dismissing her. He sauntered over and grabbed a dilapidated leather satchel off a table in the room outside of the hallway where they waited.

The other bad news for the soon-to-be-disappointed miner not getting married today was that no more transport ships with mail order bride cargo were coming anytime soon. The Tiberius Group had halted all further transports until they could review the mail order bride procedures and ensure they conformed to the new laws. Plus, they probably wanted to negotiate a cut for themselves in this legalized flesh-peddling industry, she thought irately.

For Hannah, it didn't matter in the least. The same fate would have befallen her on Earth. Either way, she was being bought for someone else's pleasure.

A grungy miner's wicked pleasure.

Fear snaked its way down Hannah's spine again. She would be here no less than six months at the mercy of whichever miner ended up with her. Her incarceration length depended on how high the bidding went for her. The higher the bid, the longer she stayed. Thankfully, the maximum time was two years. Hannah decided that to be thought of as undesirable in this venue was perhaps not a bad thing after all.

"Pick a number," Buck said, startling her. He held out the open dirty leather satchel for her selection. Hannah reached in the bag with as much enthusiasm as if grabbing for a poisonous snake. She should be so lucky.

Hannah felt around in the bag and encountered what felt like wooden discs, certainly not real wood, but she retrieved one, and the loadmaster moved on. It had a number etched in the center. Lucky number seven. Unfortunately, she didn't feel so lucky today.

Buck then shuffled the irate women into numerical order in front of the door to the building where the auction would take place. The rest of them waited in the hallway connected to the ship they had arrived on. It was sort of like waiting on the jet ways at airports back on Earth to enter or exit airplanes.

However, instead of being on her way to take a fun trip or being greeted by loved ones upon her return, she was getting a grungy Thorium-Z miner for a husband.

Dusty returned from the building and started a low, earnest conversation with Buck.

Hannah heard Dusty say in an irate tone, "I didn't tell 'em yet. I figure the news will go over better if I have a girl standin' with me." Then they started whispering, and she couldn't hear any more.

After several minutes, the two loadmasters seemed to come to a decision, and Dusty ushered the first mail order bride for consideration into the building.

Hannah looked down at the wooden disc in her hand, testing the sharpness of the soft edge. Dull as dirt, she registered with a sigh. Even if it were razor sharp, she'd never use it to take her own life.

"Would you look at that!" came a boisterous voice through the slit of the door to the building. "I'm bidding everything I have on you, sweet thing."

Hannah moved a step ahead towards the door to the auction building. Brides from number two through the end of the line all automatically took a step forward to fill in the space from the first woman's departure into the auction house, as if they were all in a dream. Five more until she was put on the block to be bid on. How humiliating. How could this be happening to her? Girl number two was then called in as the next lot, and the four women ahead of Hannah moved forward, leaving a space in front of her.

However, she found she couldn't make herself take the step forward. This was wrong. Suddenly, Hannah didn't feel very well. Fear would do that, she supposed. She let her mind wander to what her 'new' husband might look like but could only conjure the picture of the ugly miner from two centuries ago. What if the new man in her life was smelly and ugly? What if he wanted to put his grimy, calloused miner's hands on her body? The next flash in her mind was a vile, sordid vision of the conjugal rights her new husband would demand from her.

"Move it!" said the girl standing behind Hannah in line. But she couldn't move it. She couldn't move at all. She couldn't think. She couldn't see. She reached out to grab the wall to steady herself but missed it, her body suddenly weightless. She felt herself slide towards the floor. Black dots consumed her vision. And then she only saw blackness.

Chapter Two

"The auction is about to begin," said a twangy voice trying to sound formal, which was a complete waste of effort in a mining town barroom, Brutal thought.

"Bring out the all the girls," said a rowdy voice from the back of the room. Thomas 'Brutal' Blackthorn agreed with Mr. Rowdy. He was ready to start the bidding. It was already going to take all damn day just to get a woman ... he meant a 'wife.'

Dusty, the auctioneer for today, glanced around the room once, heaved a deep sigh, and promptly left the stage as if in a huff. He returned a few minutes later with a petite Asian woman dressed like the sordid porno version of a schoolgirl complete with pigtails and knee stockings. Together they walked across the expanse of the small stage as hoots of appreciation and hollering ensued. She was led to the space next to the podium for auction. Brutal thought she looked bored. Not surprising. The women here knew how the auction worked.

Most brides sold themselves into this life because of an addiction to expensive shoes, fine clothes, and unaffordable jewelry. Most just wanted to do their time quickly and return to their credit cards back on Earth. They would take the cash they earned from marrying miners for a short time and then come right back for more. No better than prostitutes for current fashion.

Brutal wouldn't prostitute himself for anything as shallow as fashion, but he understood the reason why. It was perhaps similar to the motivation for his living on this harsh planet in a backbreaking job—the dream of a better life on Earth. However, he worked hard to better himself and wanted so much more out of life than simply fashionable attire.

Brutal had experienced a couple of other auctions when he first arrived here four months ago. He foolishly decided at the time that he wouldn't need more than a month or two to reach his mining goal and secure enough cash to live the good life. He was mistaken.

The landowners he rented his mine from had been less than forthcoming about the rate at which ore could be retrieved here when he signed the contract to excavate. But he was up to the task as long as he had an outlet for his pent-up testosterone. He needed a woman, thus the reason he was giving up a day at his mine to obtain a regular sex partner ... he meant a 'wife.' He needed sex. And he needed it soon.

Today, said his horny libido forcefully.

The original expeditionary party who founded the society on this asteroid almost two decades ago had decided quickly to outlaw whorehouses and drinking establishments right off the bat. They wanted a civilized operation, and to that end, built in lots of social rules early on. No drugs, no gambling, no drunkenness, no loose women or prostitutes.

The word 'no' was pretty much the standard answer for everything here.

The founding expedition members knew the value of the Thorium-Z as a replacement for fossil fuels, which was in abundance on this moon circling Mars. But they didn't want to own a rowdy, corrupt town in space. So if a miner had a woman living with him here, he had to be married to her. A few miners brought wives with them, but the majority opted for temporary wives. Probably not what the owners had in mind originally, but things changed over time.

The miners who had come to work way before Brutal got here found a few loopholes in the laws laid down—the most important being that a marriage didn't have to be permanent. They decided that

marriages could be annulled, or couples could be divorced after their service was no longer required, or if the bride's previously established 'time' was up. The minimum sentence ... he meant marriage ... for a mail order bride here was six months, the maximum two years.

"Okay, listen up, you miners. I need to make an announcement before we begin these here proceedings. This is important, so pay attention," the senior loadmaster for the transport craft said irately. "Now, all the men who had attached wives will still get their selected women, unless you don't want her anymore. See me if that's the case."

"Get on with it, Dusty. I'm horny," said the rowdy voice from the back of the room. Laughter burst from most of the other occupants along with other grunts of approval.

"Well, keep it in your pants. There's a slight problem with the unattached females on this run."

"I know what it is," said the same rowdy voice. "They're horny, too, so get on with it." The room burst with loud laughter once again.

"One of the unattached females ... didn't make the trip," Dusty said to the laughter dying down. "We weren't able to revive her from cryo-freeze. That means there is one less female up for auction today."

Brutal flinched inwardly. He needed to take a woman home today. It was imperative. At this juncture, he'd be unable to continue if ... no, he wouldn't even consider the option of *not* going home with a woman ... he meant a 'wife.'

"So someone's going back home with a chunk of wood between his legs today then," Mr. Rowdy said in disgust.

"When is the next transport, Dusty?" another voice inquired.

"Well, that's something else I need to tell ya about. The thing is, there ain't no scheduled bride transports, at least not at this time." Loud groans and grumbling ran through the crowd of men.

"Now, wait a minute. It don't mean they won't send one later on, but there's gonna be some changes 'cause a new group's in charge back home." Dusty went on to explain briefly the Tiberius Group's takeover and the new plight of women at home.

Interesting turn of events, Brutal thought as the auction finally began. He wondered what other changes were going on back in the U.S. since his arrival here.

As the parade of mail order brides were brought out, auctioned off, and dwindled quickly, Brutal felt the first stirrings of true panic. Twenty-five men had appeared today to bid on the available twenty-four mail order brides in the auction. The first twenty-three had been bid for quickly and contracts were already being drawn up.

Brutal and one other man remained to bid on the final woman available. The bidding thus far had been higher than usual for these events because of the supply and demand issue. Brutal was about to bid against his arch nemesis, Erik Vander. Erik had the distinction of being the only other man at this mining colony who was taller and heavier than Brutal.

"All righty then," Dusty said. "Here's the final woman up for auction today. Now, she ain't much to look at right now, on account of her fainting earlier and one of the other girls throwing water all over her to wake her up, but she cleans up nice. You can take my word for it."

"Get on with it," Erik's chilling voice cut through the din of conversation from the others watching the

drama.

"Since all the attached women have been claimed, there's only one girl left for the two of you remaining. Do either of you want to back out?"

The room was completely silent until Erik said clearly, "Hell, no!"

Brutal merely glared at Dusty, certain the negative response was evident in his eyes, but he shook his head slowly to remove all doubt.

"Buck!" Dusty yelled over his shoulder. "Bring her out."

The final mail order bride shuffled out to the podium, her face pointed to the floor. Her shoulders slumped in what could only be described as utter mortification.

She was quite a bedraggled-looking little creature with wet, stringy blonde hair hanging over her eyes. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Brutal figured she was hiding the size of her breasts under the sodden, see-through blouse and skirt she wore. *Too bad*, he thought, but then anticipation rose quickly in him at the pervasive visual of her in his bed without her garments. She looked like she'd just emerged from a pool of water. He would have loved to see that.

Someone must have thrown five gallons of water on her. Brutal glanced around the room and saw the smirking face of one of the previously bid-on females. He also wished he had witnessed the catfight resulting in the soaked girl dripping before them now.

"Make her uncross her arms," Erik said, breaking Brutal's trance. "I want to see her tits."

"Eat shit and die," came the muttered curse from the girl, which was heard by everyone in the pin-drop silence of the room.

"Now, missy, don't insult the man who might just be your lord and master for the next two years," Dusty admonished her before turning to the room again.

Brutal hid a smile. He loved feisty women. Erik, he knew, liked women who were downtrodden. This would be his fifth temporary wife, if he succeeded, which he wouldn't because Brutal wasn't going to allow that to happen. He was already planning the best way to peel off the sopping wet white blouse and skirt clinging to her trembling body. Then he would help her warm up.

"Now, we have a provision for this unusual circumstance, believe it or not. We can flip a coin, or you two can fight until one of you is incapacitated. That means unconscious or dead," Dusty explained.

"Fight," both men said in unison, and each began peeling off his outer constricting clothing.

"Ask the girl which one she wants," shouted the rowdy voice from the back of the room.

"It don't matter which one she wants," Dusty said in an exasperated tone. At the same time, the blonde girl uttered a resounding, "Neither!"

"Rule number one," Dusty said, ignoring the ensuing outburst, "either of you two may, at any time, surrender your interest in the female. Rule number two, the two of you will fight for the right to marry this female until one of you is unconscious or engages rule number one as explained. Do you both understand?"

Brutal and Erik both nodded.

"First, I deserve to see what I'm fighting for," Erik said and strode two steps over to the female, grabbing both of her arms and pulling them away to view her breasts through the translucent shirt. She kicked him in the shin. Erik quickly tightened his grip on her forearms. He then twisted them up, making her cry out and fall to her knees.

"Just the way I like to see my woman," Erik smiled callously, "on her knees, crying."

"Enough." Dusty stepped between them. "Do that again, Erik, and you lose."

Erik grunted once and released her, retreating with sardonic amusement on his cruel face.

Brutal wondered if this very last mail order bride would root for him to win now that Erik had shown her his good side. She remained kneeling on the floor with her head down and didn't look up.

"I'd like to know the name of the woman I'm fighting for," Brutal said in an even tone. Her head moved slightly, but she didn't look at him.

"My name is Hannah Brent," she finally said, raising her eyes to meet his momentarily before she looked back at the floor.

Brutal stepped over to her and squatted down. "If you want Erik, I'll step out of the fight right now," he said and watched her head snap up as she glared at him.

"Stomp his ass, and I swear I won't give you any trouble," she whispered in a trembling voice.

"As you wish. I hope you're worth the effort, Hannah." Brutal inhaled deeply of her scent before he stood to face Erik.

So Brutal readied himself to fight Erik, the biggest, meanest miner on the off-world planet, for the right to marry a woman temporarily. He'd fought bigger, meaner men in his colorful past and beaten them easily. It was no competition. Brutal felt confident this battle was already a victory for him, even though both men were spurred on by lust.

Brutal even more so now because he had gotten close enough to inhale her delectable fragrance while crouched next to her. And she smelled incredible, not perfumed up like the others. Possibly due to the unexpected shower she had received, but he caught her natural scent and the light fragrance of her hair.

Need sex today, his libido commented, also responding to her scent.

Brutal wanted her. Soon. Now. He hoped he could wait until he got her back to his mine to take her for the first time. Conjugal rights were the primary reason he was marrying. Just like every other miner here.

"I'm going to knock you on your ass," Erik mocked.

Brutal didn't bother to respond. He pondered his best strategy to ensure he stayed on his feet before crushing Erik as quickly as possible. He and Erik circled the room twice before they just rammed into each other.

Brutal was at a disadvantage in weight and height but had the edge in natural fighting ability. He'd been a very good fighter in his younger days. In addition, he had been bio-genetically engineered to always win. He never once doubted his ability—or the inevitability of the outcome.

Erik was big, and he fought dirty, too, but Brutal knew the outcome would be in his favor. And he was right. They traded punches for a few minutes as Brutal toyed with him and pretended to be giving the fight

his all, but he wanted this fight over with quickly. She waited for him. He dodged a punch to his face, ducking down before bouncing right back to tag Erik in the stomach once with a solid jab. Then three vicious punches in quick succession to Erik's face sent him staggering into a table before Erik put a hand up on the wall to steady himself.

Brutal followed with lightening speed and pinned him to the wall. He then simply pinched a nerve in Erik's neck, rendering him unconscious in seconds. Erik slumped to the floor in a heap. Brutal stepped away, brushing imaginary dust off his clothing. He was now ready to collect his prize.

"And the winner is Brutal," Dusty exclaimed formally.

Brutal looked up and into the horrified eyes of the woman he had just won the right to marry in a mostly fair fight.

"Your name is ... Brutal?" she said in a voice laced with fear and promptly dropped to the floor in a dead faint—again.

Chapter Three

"Is there something wrong with you?" Hannah heard as she roused from her second collapse since being revived on the cryogenic ship. She opened her eyes to the face of the man about to be her new husband. He stood over her, his arms crossed in an angry stance-a man who'd just pummeled a guy three inches taller and fifty pounds heavier.

And his name is Brutal, said a very anxious internal voice.

She focused her eyes on his face, looking for a hint of serenity in his attitude and seeing none, found he wasn't hard to look at either. The harsh tanned planes of his face appealed to her on a dark and dangerous sexual level. He was a foot taller than she was with a wide chest and rippling muscles pretty much everywhere. His deep brown eyes simmered with intensity as he watched her. He was no grungy miner forty-niner, thankfully. His slightly wavy dark hair was in need of a trim, and the circle of whiskers around his mouth and chin intrigued her. Would it tickle when he kissed her? Would he kiss her?

Watching the two contenders for her hand in temporary marriage, she'd been frightened to death Erik would win. Part of her second fainting trip to the floor had been from pure, unrelenting relief.

Looking at Brutal now, Hannah suppressed a shiver and wondered why she'd been relieved. She watched with rapt fascination as her future husband laid his opponent, Erik the Evil, on the ground after a fairly short battle. Brutal was then declared the winner. He stepped away from Erik's slumped body and gave her a positively searing, possessive look from head to toe.

He might as well have screamed, "Mine, mine, mine."

Hannah was about to officially become his fiancée. Five minutes or so later, she'd be his temporary wife. He could do with her as he pleased for at least a year, as had been previously decided by the two loadmasters before the fight had begun.

She felt his gaze burn down her body from across the room. She shrank down a little. If he were to abuse her, she would never be able to stop him. Short-lived relief had been replaced with panic. Then she'd blacked out, again. How embarrassing. At least the catty, mean girl hadn't been allowed to soak her awake this time.

"Yes, there *is* something wrong with me," Hannah murmured. "I'm being forced to marry someone to pay for a gambling debt I didn't incur."

Hannah looked to Brutal for some measure of compassion but didn't get any. He just shook his head and stepped away from her supine form on the floor. He strode over to the table where Buck waited with paperwork for him to sign, paperwork sealing her to him.

"Now, missy," Dusty began patiently as he helped Hannah to sit up, "we been over this a hundred times already this trip. It don't matter what happened up to now or how you came to be here. The fact is, you're here, and you gotta marry this man or else."

"But look how big he is. If he wants to hurt me, I won't be able to stop him," she whispered, hearing the whine in her own voice.

"Well, now, Brutal *is* a fighter. That's a well-known fact, but I'm sure you'll work something out."

"His name is Brutal. What does that tell you?"

"It's just a name, missy. Personally, I think you're better off with him than with Erik."

"Why?"

"Cause you woulda been Erik's fifth wife in three years if he'd won," Dusty said in a confidential tone.

"Great. I got the rock instead of the hard place. I feel so much better now," Hannah muttered contritely, allowing Dusty to help her to her feet. Brutal had a document in his hands as he approached them. Dusty gave her a don't-be-stupid look and walked away.

"You better not leave her alone, Brutal. I'd hate to charm my way into her pants and have you forced to kill her for infidelity, as the new rules for women on Earth stipulate," Erik said salaciously from behind her. She jumped towards her husband-to-be at the sound of Erik's sardonic voice.

Brutal put both of his arms possessively around her, tucking her close. *My, he is warm*, Hannah thought, feeling his fevered skin even through her clothing. In five minutes, she'd be completely dry if she were to stay wrapped in his arms.

"She's my future wife. She'll be with me always," Brutal replied matter-of-factly, shrugging.

"She'd better be. This isn't over, Brutal. Maybe I'll just come to your mine for a conjugal visit and take what I want," Erik purred, giving Hannah a leering once over. Hannah couldn't help but let a quiver run unstopped down her body. Brutal answered with a comforting squeeze.

"You can try," Brutal said, smiling in challenge, "but I'll just kick your ass again."

Hannah glared at Erik. "I won't let you touch me, you bastard."

"No, *I* won't let him touch you. What's mine is mine. Next time, Erik, I won't just render you unconscious," Brutal threatened as he squeezed her once before she could take a deep breath to say more. She glanced up at Brutal, sending him a harsh questioning frown at his firm hold around her waist. He merely raised his eyebrows and drilled a 'behave yourself' look in return. He wanted her acquiescence. Yeah, yeah, he was the new lord and master and the only one allowed to beat up evil men.

"At least for a year," she whispered more to herself as she prepared to participate in the ceremony marrying her to yet another stranger, the second one in as many months. At least this one was not the ugly, smelly miner from her previous vision. Brutal smelled great, and he was attractive in a big, muscular, dark, scary sort of way.

The couple ahead of them was Celeste and a balding, short miner named Iggy. After the ceremony, the groom, in his haste to lay claim to his wife, hadn't waited for any privacy to consummate the marriage. He'd marched Celeste over to the nearest table and bent her over it, flipping her skirt up and then taking her voraciously from behind as a circle had formed around them to watch. The impromptu sex halted only for a short time as everyone obligatorily watched the next marriage take place ... Hannah and Brutal's.

Hannah was horrified at the sight and looked away, her cheeks warming in embarrassment before she stepped up for her vows.

Marriage vows. What a joke.

Brutal grabbed her to him securely, probably thinking she was about to hit the floor again. His warm body infused her with strength, surprisingly enough. They stepped up to the official minister together, arm in arm.

Hannah would have been even more upset about the copulating couple if Celeste had been even remotely distressed about it. But she wasn't. She seemed to have expected it, as if she was bored with the whole affair and was simply waiting for her next meal. If Celeste had been carrying a nail file, Hannah had no doubt she would have used it to shape her claws throughout the very public sexual display.

* * * *

"You are now man and wife," the officiating marriage broker said. "Would you like to kiss your bride—or otherwise seal the bargain?"

Brutal couldn't help but look over at the grunting Iggy, who had resumed immediately after the marriage broker said, "—wife."

He took in Hannah's round-eyed, appalled look, which was directed at the public copulation. He hoped she didn't faint again. Her eyes moved over to focus on another vacant table across the room. She glanced at his face, her thought as clear as if she had spoken it aloud.

Brutal shook his head. Before she could pass out again, he quickly leaned in, grabbed the back of her head one handed, and kissed her mouth long enough to realize she tasted as good as she smelled. As horny as he was, he was still not an animal. He could wait. He'd never wanted to share women before and wasn't about to start now. He wouldn't get any thrill out of the miners here watching him fuck her in public. He broke the kiss, swallowed his lust, and headed for his vehicle to take her to his mine dwelling.

Brutal would have to protect his investment and live at the mine. Originally, he had thought he might put her up in the hotel at this space station and visit as needed, but he couldn't leave her here now with Erik on the rampage. He'd spent more than he expected on a wife. Instead of six months together, she had to sign on for a year. Now, *that* gave him a thrill. Having Hannah, available in his bed, for an entire year.

Once his intent to leave registered, several miners were vocally disappointed not to have a two-ring show going, but Brutal didn't care. He would be dick deep in a female in less than an hour. Just the thought of that made blood rush to his groin. He felt himself thicken into fuck mode.

Time to go home to bed, my sweet Hannah, he thought. His lust roared through his fevered body. Brutal grabbed her arm to haul her out of the building faster before he gave in to his lust and changed his mind about the vacant table.

Hannah hesitated and resisted slightly at his touch.

"Move now, or do you want to reconsider the open table across the room?" Brutal practically growled. She lowered her eyes and stopped fighting him. He led her easily to his motorbike.

* * * *

Brutal took her to his mine on a high-powered motorized four-wheeler. It moved pretty fast, and he had enjoyed her clutching to him on the trip home. Upon his arrival several months ago, he set up his primary residence there and made it fairly comfortable. He was sure it wasn't her Barbie-dream home, but she was here for only one reason anyway.

The unexpected close quarters combat with Erik had drained him physically. He needed rejuvenation. She was lucky he didn't like an audience, as the unoccupied table had looked good to his long-deprived and very vocal libido.

Brutal wasn't going to apologize for what he wanted to do with her, but he knew he was different. He couldn't wait to hear her come. Loved that sound from a woman, especially the first time they were together. A woman's pleasure was a powerful rejuvenation tool for the genetically engineered.

They entered his land, which was gated and fenced for property boundaries. The gate automatically opened for his vehicle. He drove down a gravel lane towards the mine opening a hundred yards ahead. Once through the opening, the strings of lights attached to the walls and ceiling blinked on. He had a motion detector set for the lights. It was handy for security when visitors showed up, too.

The lit cave ran another hundred and fifty yards at a slight downward angle until it ended at two air-locked doors. Brutal parked the four-wheeler at the smaller door, shut off the engine, got off the vehicle, and quickly grabbed a leather bag from the back basket.

Hannah stepped off the four-wheeler and followed him. He put his hand on a scanner next to the door and his face in a retinal detector above it. The big metal door made a few noises and then opened slowly.

"First things first. Take your clothes off. Your mouth inflames me every time I look at it. During our marital kiss, I almost lost complete control. A day fucking you will rejuvenate me. I've gone too long without." He started unbuttoning the blue shirt under his leather jacket.

Her dismayed gaze stunned him. Didn't she understand how this worked? Didn't she know she would enjoy it, too? Didn't she know how desperate he was?

"Don't worry, my temporary wife. If you don't enjoy the experience, I will only get half the rejuvenation charge."

"Meaning you'll spend two days raping me instead of one. Big deal." She crossed her arms and turned her back on him. He strode over to her and turned her around.

"It doesn't work that way. I'd watch my tongue if I were you. I don't rape. That's why I married you. Besides, I stomped Erik's ass like you asked me to. I thought that bought me no trouble from you."

"Fine. Whatever. Just get it over with. I won't fight you," she said in a deflated tone.

"Perfect. Take your clothes off. Now."

Hannah gave him a sour look and slowly began to unbutton her blouse.

Brutal's temper was pricked, but then he remembered reading the papers he signed to become engaged to her. Her first husband was listed by the company as having sold her into the mail order bride company to pay off some gambling debts. Brutal questioned her ex-husband's lack of judgment in getting rid of a gorgeous girl like Hannah.

Brutal couldn't imagine selling a woman who looked like pure sexual delight, which she did, but whatever. Her ex was a fool to have let her go for any reason. For a man to relinquish a woman like Hannah ... well, he would have expected a much larger bride price, one in which he would not have been able to afford. Brutal was not a fool.

By her surly attitude, he guessed she hadn't had a good experience with her ex-husband in the conjugal rights department. Perhaps her ex had mistreated her. Perhaps he hadn't been a good lover. Perhaps she'd never experienced an orgasm with him. Or ever? No, that was just too much to hope for.

Perhaps he should get on with showing her that he was capable of providing pleasure for her as well. She was in for a treat because Brutal knew he was an excellent lover. Because he was bio-genetically engineered, sex was an important tool for him, to charge up the batteries, so to speak. He had been programmed for such when he was engineered back at the lab on Earth where he'd been raised. It was why sexual activity was fuel for him, but only if shared one on one. The more he cared about his partner, the bigger the charge.

Brutal took great pains to make sure his lovers experienced ecstasy as well because he got such a vibrant charge out of it for himself. A total power rush of rejuvenating energy enveloped him upon hearing a woman he touched scream in delight from being thoroughly satisfied.

Very unlike the women Brutal had paid to fuck in his past. Paid prostitutes were a very poor substitute for gratification. The paid women were doing a volume business and didn't ever want to take the time to enjoy it. 'Get in, get out, next!' was how they operated. He'd only lowered himself to that level when he'd gone too long without. He drove himself to the brink of death to avoid it.

Acquiring a mail order bride had been an inspired idea. They both got something out of the arrangement. She would get money to start over. He would get laid regularly, adding to his work strength, power, and stamina in the mine, thereby completing his goal sooner.

Even with Hannah's excessive price, he would recoup the bride price in extra strength within a month. The rest was just bonus. His original six-month plan, which had then shifted to a five-year plan, had now turned into a two-year plan with this temporary marriage. And in the end, they wouldn't be stuck with each other for a lifetime.

Hannah had stopped unbuttoning her blouse and turned her back to him, presumably to complete the task, but her fingers had stilled. She hung her head in defeat, or perhaps to bear up to have sex with a stranger.

Brutal didn't know anything except that her time was up. His barbarian brain was taking over more and more of his rational mind.

Now.

Take her right now.

Just bend her over the table and take her, his lust-filled mind screamed.

He took a deep breath and came up behind her, ignoring the ardent voice in his head. Instead, he slowly put his mouth on the sensitive spot at the base of her neck. She jumped slightly.

"Need some help?" he murmured, kissing a path up and down her neck. Hannah didn't stop him when his hands slipped up the front of her blouse. He finished helping her unbutton it. He couldn't wait any longer. *Take. Woman. Now.* Lust reverberated in his brain. *Bend her over the table. Flip up her skirt and introduce yourself.*

It was already going to test his patience not to pretend she was a paid-for female and just take her over and over until sated.

For their first time, he would bring her with him over the edge of oblivion. He could almost feel the wash of rejuvenation it would bring. Much better that she climax just before or during the experience than for him to come first. His fingers skimmed up her torso as he nipped and tongued her shoulders and neck as he pulled the shirt from her as slowly as he could.

Brutal felt her relax against him as her arms fell to her sides. His fingertips had reached the underside of her lace-enclosed breasts. He took a hearty nip on the cord of her neck as he palmed her breasts and pinched both peaks.

Her sharp intake of breath at the sudden sensation filled him with need. His cock reared, and he pressed it against her soft buttocks. He pushed her towards the table edge with his thighs. Before her legs connected with the furniture, she turned clumsily around in his arms to face him. Her hands landed on his

shoulders, almost pushing at him. Her face turned up and her eyes showed a plea she didn't voice.

"What?" His voice sounded more harsh than he intended. *Take her! Take her now*, his mind drilled. *Bend her backward over the table!*

"Please—for the first time..." She stopped talking and just stared at him. Did she think he could read her mind? Even if he weren't in a berserker sex-loaded frame of mind, he still would not be able to read her thoughts.

"What?" he repeated practically in a blood-lusted shout, taking a step closer so their bodies touched. *Exquisite. Soft. Female in proximity. Take her. Take her now!*

"For the first time, will you ... do it ... as you face me ... and not from behind?" she blurted out, then closed her eyes.

"Why?" Brutal paused. Even his barbarian brain wondered why and paused, too.

Her eyes peeked open. "Because I don't want the first time to be like ... like the woman at the bar. You know, on the table."

"You might find that you like it—on the table, bent over in capitulation," Brutal teased her and smiled as she responded.

"I don't think so," she said with all seriousness.

He nodded. "Fine. For this first time, and only this first time—no fucking the new wife from behind against a table." Surprisingly, his new little wife was shy and apparently inexperienced in alternate sexual positions, considering that she had already been married. Her ex-husband must have been terrible in bed.

Brutal would teach her later on how good it could feel for her from behind. He was certain she would enjoy it once he demonstrated to her what he could do with his hands as he plowed into her while she braced herself over a table. And it wouldn't be like the freak show at the auction house either.

Perhaps he'd show her tomorrow.

Hannah peeled her soft white shirt away, and he saw her lace-covered breasts begging to be played with and sucked on and...

Perhaps later today he'd introduce her to the table.

For the here and now, however, Brutal grabbed her to him and pressed his substantial erection into her belly, and then he planted his hungry mouth on her timid one. He hugged her tighter to his frame. Hannah slipped her arms tentatively around his neck.

Brutal ground his erection against her soft body. This was going to feel so incredible, he thought. He grabbed her up by each of her thighs and opened her to him as she held on. He rubbed himself against her parted legs through the clothing they still wore. She seemed skittish and broke the kiss to look questioningly into his eyes.

"I won't hurt you, Hannah. You'll enjoy this. I swear it," he told her earnestly as he gazed into her eyes, willing her to believe him. She merely watched him warily. He'd just have to prove it to her. He leaned closer and kissed her mouth chastely once to prove he could be gentle, at least for a second or two longer. He wanted her to trust him. She nodded and leaned in to him to kiss him in return. This time, her tongue entered his mouth tentatively, seeking his. He paused, the blood rushing through him in a primal

pulse.

Take her. Take her now! He ignored his raging libido in favor of a slow seduction.

Brutal carried her around the partition to the bedroom area of his small dwelling. The lights were dim in this corner, but he could still see what he wanted.

He had a huge bed, since he was a huge man. He put her down and undressed her as slowly as he could-not very-he hoped she knew how to mend cloth. Then he quickly undressed himself.

Leather wouldn't tear, so he had to disrobe himself the old-fashioned way. He picked her up and put her naked body on the bed then lay down next to her. If he climbed on top, it would be over too soon.

Brutal kissed her and let his hands roam over her body. He felt one of her arms across his shoulders. She began playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

After a few minutes, he kissed a wet path down her throat and ended with his mouth on her breast. He stroked his hand down her body and rested his sizeable fingers between her legs. He stopped suckling her nipple long enough to whisper huskily, "Touch me, Hannah."

"What?"

"Put your hand on me."

"My hand is on you," she whispered.

"Grab my cock."

Chapter Four

Hannah wavered at his crude request, but he was insistent. When she hesitated, he grabbed her closest hand and placed it unerringly on his throbbing member. She tentatively wrapped her hand around his hot, impressive shaft while wondering how he would ever fit inside her. Then she lost that thought when his fingers began strumming her below in an unfamiliar yet delightfully rhythmic way.

A warm, delicious feeling enveloped Hannah. Brutal's mouth landed on her breast again, sucking her nipple so insistently, she moaned reflexively and tightened her hand around him. He moaned seductively in response, and she felt his enormous sexual organ move in her hand.

It gave her a certain feeling of power in her powerless world. So she clenched her hand around him again, and then again. In return, he growled deep in his throat and stroked her harder and faster with his fingers, sucking on her nipple more intently until she was sure she would die from breathless sensation.

Brutal had scratchy facial hair trimmed in an oval around his mouth and chin. His mouth was currently wrapped around the better part of the center of her breast. It was very hypnotic to watch.

Was she allowed to watch?

A warm sensation flooded down between her legs set to the rhythm of his mouth pulling on her very sensitive peak. She looked down at the decadent display, watching him strum her. His hand worked between her legs, his head moving to her other breast, his mouth drawing on her nipple, and her world tilted.

Hannah opened her mouth to take in more air. As the exquisite feeling of her first-ever climax came over her, she screamed.

How could she not?

Then she sucked in more air and screamed again as the sensation carried her to a dreamlike state. Her new husband made a satisfied noise against her breast. He released his mouth from her nipple after several minutes and stared intently into her eyes. He leaned up and kissed her cheek.

"Was that your first orgasm?" he whispered in her ear. "It felt like it to me."

Hannah opened her eyes but couldn't catch her breath. She managed a slight nod. He smiled with a look of wicked pleasure. As they stared at each other, she in awestruck wonder, he in satisfaction of a job well done, he removed his hand from between her legs. His fingers were covered in the wetness she'd expelled during her screaming orgasm. He willed her to stare at him as he then stuck those moist fingers into his mouth and sucked the essence from them. She watched wide-eyed as he licked each finger slowly and deliberately, smiling again in wicked pleasure at her.

"Mmmm," he moaned and shifted, breaking their gaze so he could kiss a path down her belly. "I'm going to need some more of that."

Hannah knew what he intended to do and could only watch in her boneless and thoroughly satisfied state. He lifted her legs, bending them at the knee. He watched her again as he ran his whisker-covered chin down her inner thigh. She knew what he was going to do next, too. She didn't know if she would live through the experience. She hoped she would.

Brutal teased her, kissing that very sensitive bud lightly and then running his chin up her other thigh. She watched as he settled his mouth against the apex between her legs and reached his long arms up her

torso to pluck at her pebbled nipples. He licked her several strokes as if to lap up the creamy moisture from her release. His tongue swirled over her clit. She was about to climax ... again.

Everything Hannah thought she knew about sex had just been erased. Her view now radically changed in only a few minutes here tonight, by a virtual stranger. She hadn't known women were supposed to enjoy sex, too. She knew it only as a duty.

Hannah looked down to see the top of his head moving between her legs. She could feel his lips firmly wrapped around and sucking on the most sensitive piece of flesh she possessed. The sensation was superb. She heard him moaning as though enjoying a fine meal, and then stars exploded behind her eyes. She inhaled, moaning in pleasure, and screamed again.

How could she not?

Hannah's legs reflexively clenched together as if to trap his head, which was attached to his very splendid mouth, which was doing brilliant things to the lower half of her body. It took Hannah much longer to recover from the second climax. She lay on her back in a stranger's bed with her legs spread wide. The aforementioned stranger's head was locked between her thighs. She was in a completely sated, boneless state having just experienced two of the most body-rocking, exquisite sensations in her existence. She wondered how in the world she ended up here.

Hannah whimpered in pleasure. She sensed more than saw his movement. He shifted his body towards her. It was his turn, and he had earned it. He deserved an award because he was right. He'd sworn to her she would enjoy it. And she had.

Twice.

Hannah looked up in time to see him grab his immense member and place it at the now very drenched opening of her body. It was time to pay the piper, and he had earned her cooperation. She should probably do something besides just lie here and wait for him, but she couldn't move. What he had done to her made her weak and soft and satisfied.

Hannah knew what would happen next. She'd gone to a health class. Brutal ought to have her as much as he wanted for as long as he wanted. The thought of what waited ahead made her quiver in anticipation. Yes, he ought to have her for making her feel so incredibly good. Her new husband slipped the tip of his penis inside her. She could feel her pulsating vaginal muscles automatically try to accommodate his substantial girth. She hoped he was not about to be disappointed. He should feel as fabulous as she did right now. She watched as he closed his eyes, grabbed both of her thighs with his hands, and rammed himself inside her to the hilt.

Hannah could only scream again at the sensation she felt.

* * * *

As Brutal plowed inside her tightness for the first stroke, he heard her scream again, but it didn't register immediately what had happened. He moaned at how utterly wonderful she felt.

But she screamed as he breached her maidenhead, his cock sliding fully inside to the hilt. She sucked in a breath as a low keening sound came next, but not quite in pleasure this time.

It took three solid to-the-hilt strokes before that vital information made it through to his lust-saturated brain. He finally stilled in utter shock, completely embedded in his new temporary wife who had just turned out to be a virgin.

God's wrath, what had he done?

Mindless with want after her second orgasm because she screamed in seemingly newfound bliss both times, he had felt that fresh, wonderful, invigorating sound all the way to his core.

The first sound of pleasure torn from her lips reverberated to his soul. He knew it had been her first climax by the utter electrical charge he got in his gut as her back arched in passion. It was like a pre-orgasm for him. She'd screamed her second climax, too. Another lift for him, and she tasted good, too. He'd smiled in smug satisfaction of a man who had pleased a woman not expecting to be gratified.

Brutal couldn't wait to plunge inside and feel her clamping on him. He entered her with only the head of his cock at first to see how snug her entrance was. God's wrath, she was tight, but she was slick from her earlier pleasure, too.

Take her. Take her now. His impatient libido had waited long enough for satisfaction.

Brutal paused to center himself to fully take pleasure in the sensation of ecstasy he was on the brink of enjoying. He'd taken a deep breath and driven home his first thrust, aiming to press all the way to her womb with his first sure stroke. He'd then wanted to repeat the motion until sparks showered out of the end of his dick inside her sweet, wet passage while her vaginal muscles clamped repeatedly on his shaft in combined satisfaction.

Instead, he'd savagely taken her virginity, plowing into her like a berserker, never once considering it would be her first time.

How could that be? She'd been married, for God's sake. Brutal had seen the papers. His eyes popped open to see her tear-filled ones. He was trembling, on the brink of a massive release, but he stilled his movement and lowered his body to hers. Her arms came around his neck as she pressed her face against his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked quietly, trying to hold himself from impaling her mindlessly.

"I didn't get a chance," she whispered.

"I wish you'd taken the time, Hannah."

"I didn't know how to tell you," she said in her quiet voice, caressing his senses with her innocence.

"God's wrath, woman, I wish you'd found a way." He pressed his forehead to hers as his cock throbbed inside her. He moaned deeply, trying to find some control.

Virgin or not, he needed to come. *Soon. Now. Finish this!*

"What was I supposed to say?" she sobbed. "My ex-husband thought me so repulsive, he failed to make an effort to have sex with me even once. He found the nearest gambling hall instead to quench his passion."

"I'm sorry. If I'd known, I wouldn't have..."

"What? You wouldn't have bothered either?" And she unleashed a torrential flood of tears. He felt those tears on his throat.

"No, I would definitely have bothered. I just would have entered in such a way as not to hurt you. I could

have—oh, God—I need to...” He couldn't finish his sentence because he needed to finish fucking her. His cock throbbed inside her again, straining in need for completion of the act. He groaned and tried to pull out, but couldn't and settled himself to gain control.

"You don't have to stop, Brutal,” he heard her quiet voice. Then she sniffled a couple of times to calm down. She remained quiet for a moment and then whispered, “Please, it's okay. You aren't hurting me. It just feels ... different. You fill me up.”

His embedded cock actually throbbed a thank you as he nodded in kind. “I'll go slowly.”

"Okay ... if you want.” She kissed his throat tenderly, and he felt her tongue slip out and lick him. He throbbed within her again, on the utter brink.

"If I could have what I want, I'd pound into you so hard, you'd submerge to the floor through the mattress on this bed,” he growled.

"Okay,” she said, then tilted his face down to hers and kissed his mouth chastely. Her tongue flicked out and slid along his lips. She actually licked him twice more before he opened his mouth and devoured her.

Brutal moved inside her exquisite tightness. After three strokes going as slow as he could, he picked up speed. She moaned again. He kissed a path to her throat and back to her lips again. He kissed her mouth as he felt her hips arch toward his, connecting and meeting him as he thrust inside her. *Superb.*

Brutal finally and exquisitely thundered his release, growling against her lips. He felt her clamping on him, milking his seed out of him. A rush of power washed over him, the likes of which he'd never felt. He wouldn't need a whole day with her to recharge. One or two more times ought to do it.

Once he came down from his orgasmic high, the doubt seeped in. He had never been so turned on, so completely satisfied, or so wretchedly guilt-ridden for having enjoyed himself so much. If he'd ever had a more satisfying experience, he didn't remember it. Or it had just been replaced by an incredible new memory.

Brutal regained his senses pretty quickly. He was still embedded deeply inside her, his mind working ten thousand miles an hour. A virgin who'd never had an orgasm before. An unexpected gift Brutal would never have expected. Nor would he ever forget.

Chapter Five

"Are you hurt?" Hannah heard Brutal say as his still rapid breath caressed her neck. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, of course not," she responded quickly. She could hardly focus on speech. She felt good. No, she felt great, better than she had in months. Who would have thought sexual activity would make her so utterly and deliciously content?

"God's wrath, woman, you're certainly full of surprises."

"So are you. Who would have thought sex would be such a good idea?"

Brutal chuckled lightly. "I would have."

"Feeling all charged up, are we?" she teased.

"I feel very satisfied, but let's discuss you. I thought because you'd been married that ... you know ... I didn't know..."

"Let it go. I don't want to explain the humiliation of my last marriage to you." Hannah lost her after-sex glow quickly in memory of the past several weeks, which put her here, in a stranger's bed for his pleasure. Okay, for hers, too.

"Fine, but in my opinion, he was an idiot. You are definitely worth it. The fight. The price. All of it." Brutal lifted himself off her, slid out of her body, and rolled to his side.

"Great. I'm glad you feel like you got your money's worth," she said sarcastically and turned away from him.

"Don't be that way, Hannah."

"I said I wouldn't be a problem. I never said I would be the happy little homemaker. I'm not going to be the contented little wife, you know."

"I expect you'll be whatever I want you to be," Brutal said harshly. Apparently, the afterglow was gone for him as well.

"Oh, yeah, that lord and master speech again?"

"What's up your ass?" he asked.

"I shouldn't be here. I didn't do anything to deserve this," she lamented.

"This? Complete and utter sexual gratification at the hands of a master? No, you didn't deserve it at all, but I did."

"Don't kid yourself about what is going on here!" Hannah railed at him. Total and utter satisfaction aside, she was still virtually a prisoner, and she didn't deserve this existence.

"If this is your definition of not giving me any trouble, we need to crack open a dictionary," he said harshly.

"You read my file. You know why I'm here. It's not fair."

"Fair or not, I needed a regular sex partner. A temporary mail order bride seemed like a good idea to me. I'm reconsidering my options right now, Hannah."

"Well, too bad. You're stuck with me now, Brutal." She turned back over and sneered at him even though she didn't think he deserved it. She was just mad about her own circumstances.

"And your mouth should be doing something besides yammering. Do you want to kiss me, or should I think of something else to occupy those luscious lips you possess?" His eyes drilled hypnotically into hers.

Hannah took a deep breath and lowered her eyes. As angry as she was, Brutal hadn't done anything wrong. Not really. He didn't deserve her wrath. She took another deep breath and slid closer to him. She looked up into his chocolate brown eyes. She refused to apologize but hoped her lips conveyed her regret when she kissed him with all the sincerity she could muster.

Brutal responded in turn by taking her on yet another satisfying, sexually climactic journey, then another, and then more journeys all night long.

* * * *

The next day, Brutal made her breakfast. He was fully charged up and ready to spend the day carving out his future in the mine. He watched Hannah covertly as they ate in companionable silence. She had on a short robe and her hair was pulled up into a ponytail, making her look even younger this morning. Even more beautiful, if it was possible.

He was still very curious about her past, but not enough to invite her wrath by asking her about it. He got up from the table, planning on packing up what they would need. But then she removed the breakfast dishes to the sink. She returned with a dishrag and suddenly bent over the dining table to wipe it down, the silky robe tightening across her ass when she reached to the far side. The material framed her lush *derrière* perfectly, and his mouth went dry.

Brutal found himself suddenly in need of her once again. One could never be too charged up, and besides they had time. He approached her silently, then pinned her easily against the table with his hips. She didn't stop him or resist in any way. His arms came around her, stilling her movements. He removed the rag from her hand and tossed it to the sink before placing his hands next to hers on the table, effectively trapping her against it.

"Remember yesterday when we talked about capitulation with regard to this table?" He placed his mouth on her exposed neck.

"Vaguely. I have slept a little since then," she replied in an amused tone. But then she also leaned and twisted her neck forward to give his mouth easier access. Then her body melted back seductively into his, causing his dick to immediately rear to life against her butt. He moved a leg in between hers, spreading them further apart. He ran his hands up her arms, which were still locked at the elbows resting on the table.

"Let me refresh your memory." Brutal slid a hand inside her robe to stroke a bare breast. When he pinched the tip, she drew a sharp intake of breath and arched her back into him. He peeled her robe back over her shoulders to expose her breasts completely but left her arms trapped in the material. He kissed his way to her shoulder and palmed her bare breasts, stroking her with utter care, listening as the tempo of her breathing increased.

He stopped playing with her chest only long enough to pull his t-shirt over his head and unzip his pants, freeing his now fully erect cock. He placed his hands on her outer thighs and pulled the hem of her robe up to expose her luscious ass. He raised his hand to the center of her naked back, pushing her gently

forward and into the optimal position for what he had in mind. His other hand came around the front of one of her legs to play with her clit. He wanted to assure himself she was ready to play this morning. She was dripping already. He moaned at the realization she was as aroused as he was. He continued to finger her as she trembled in response.

"Hot and wet. Very nice. I see you *are* ready to surrender to me today."

Hannah didn't say anything. She merely moaned. He didn't make her wait. He wrapped his arm over one of her shoulders so he could capture and play with her breast. He moved his hand from between her legs long enough to grab his cock and direct it between her oh-so-ready lower lips already drenched in readiness for him.

He pierced her slowly at first in deference to all the times he'd taken her the night before, but she was not inclined to wait patiently and rocked back to take his whole length at once.

The sensation of being fully embedded in such a tight, wet place sent a bolt of lust up his spine. The next two rapid strokes in unconscious reaction were perhaps uncalled for, but she only groaned and matched him stroke for stroke. He latched his mouth to the back of her neck, plucked at her nipple and fingered her clit as he pounded into her from behind. The resistance of the table only added to the pleasure enveloping him.

"Oh, Brutal," she cried out suddenly. He felt her inner muscles clamp down hard in release on his thrusting cock. He lasted only a few more strokes before growling his own climax. Gasping harshly, he relaxed and bent over, pinning Hannah to the table.

"So that's what capitulation feels like," she panted. "You were right. I do like it."

Brutal laughed and kissed her shoulder. "Keep in mind I'm going to remember this moment the next time you bend over in front of me."

"So noted."

Afterwards, he led her to the shower. He washed and massaged her from head to toe. And then he took her, for good measure—from behind as she bent at the waist. He loved to hear the scream of her climaxes.

Brutal figured with Hannah as his sexual refueling station, he could easily work for eighteen hours at a stretch. It would make long days for her deep down in the mineshaft, but he couldn't leave her alone. He didn't trust her not to run, and more importantly, he didn't trust Erik not to make good on his threat to rape her at the first available opportunity.

Brutal dressed in his standard insulated blue button-up shirt and black leather pants. He had a leather jacket to wear, too. He had bought a few sets of similarly insulated clothing for Hannah before the auction. He selected a matching shirt and slacks in a medium size for the bride he brought home. Luckily, the clothing fit her very well, perhaps because he'd been thinking of her when he bought them.

Hannah didn't do too much physical work on her first day down in the mine, but she didn't complain or whine either. She just wandered around and studied the mine and its rocky formations, generally puttering around as he worked all day.

She distracted him once or twice when she bent over and presented him with a delectable view of her backside, giving him several salacious ideas.

The first time he cleared his throat repeatedly until she finally turned around in question. She then smiled

and immediately straightened up with an almost apologetic smile and shrugged her shoulders. If it wasn't so cold down here, he might consider some sexual escapades. It was well below freezing, not the place for extended exposure of naked skin.

Frostbite on your privates would be a real bitch.

After nine hours, Brutal stopped wielding his ax and told her it was time for lunch. He had packed something for them both earlier. Later on, he'd show her what he expected as her contribution to their daily living.

"You'll want to bring a bed roll down here and sleep while I work tomorrow," he said offhandedly as they sat down to eat.

"Why?"

"Because I intend to work eighteen-hour days."

"That's insane."

"Maybe so, but it is a fact of your new life, a husband who works hard. I'll outline your chores once we get back tonight. You'll have to do most of them while I sleep."

"My chores? I thought I fulfilled my one and only chore on my back or bent over," she said caustically.

"You get to share cooking and cleaning duties, too," he said matter-of-factly.

"But what if I work down here, too?" She took a bite of sandwich.

"That would be helpful, but I don't think you can handle the capacity I can. This is backbreaking work for regular people. I can do it easily because I was bred for it."

"Bred for it?"

"Bio-genetically engineered." Brutal watched to see if she were bigoted about the genetically enhanced.

"Is that why you're so good in bed? Were you bred for that, too?" she asked, her eyes wide.

He smiled at her awe-filled voice and responded with pride, "Yep."

"Hmm. Interesting. I've never met anyone who was engineered." She sounded intrigued, not disgusted in the least.

"That you know of anyway."

"I'm sure I would have remembered."

"Not everyone shares the information. As a matter of fact, I've never shared it willingly."

"Why not?" she asked with innocent sincerity. Hannah certainly didn't have the same attitude as his ex-fiancée, Charlotte, in this matter, Brutal thought and then quickly willed that notion away.

"Some people are not as accepting of genetic engineering in humans as others. Some feel it goes against God and nature. Most people who find out are wary of someone like me."

"I think it's like every other designation of people. There are going to be good people and bad people. I think you're good."

"Thanks, I guess. Eat up, Hannah. I still have lots to do here tonight," he said, changing the subject.

"Right. So, do you have documentation and testing samples from where you're digging?"

"How do you know about that?"

"I had some college classes in geology."

"Good to know."

"I can help you, Brutal. I could do a mine evaluation for you and locate the best places to find Thorium-Z here."

"Already done, but thanks for taking an interest."

"Still, I'd like to look. It will, at the very least, keep me occupied and out of your hair while we're down here."

"Well then, when we get back, I'll show you where I keep my charts and test results. Maybe you won't distract me so much."

* * * *

Several hours later, once they had arrived back at the dwelling, Hannah took all his charts and information on the mine and read for the rest of the evening. Completely immersed in the documentation, she took several pages of notes while Brutal cooked dinner for them. This pattern remained the same for the next several nights as well.

"You actually have to work while you're living here, you know," Brutal said as he gave her a large bowl of stew on the fifth night in a row, "and you have to cook, too."

"Unfair. I worked in the mine today." She took a bite of dinner, closing her eyes in sumptuous approval of the meal. Brutal was a fabulous cook.

"You looked around and watched me work," he huffed.

"I was studying the igneous rock formations."

"Really?" He sounded completely unimpressed. He sat and dug into a large bowl of the stew as well.

"Yes, and now that I've had a chance to study all your documentation thoroughly, I have a suggestion."

"What's that? You pick up an ax and help mine so it goes faster?"

"No, I think we should start mining closer to the surface. I think there's a greater chance of finding more of the ore you seek."

"And what makes you think so?"

"You need to mine where the mantle of the planet meets the outer layer of crust. It's only about three kilometers down the shaft. You can tell because the color of the stone changes. Statistically, that is where the richest deposits of Thorium-Z are located. Typically."

"How do you know? You're a physical fitness trainer." At her surprised glance, he said, "Yeah, I read your personal file. So what?"

"Physical fitness was only what I minored in. My major was geological studies as they pertained to Type-C planets containing similar compositions as the sun. We're on a Type-C planet, by the way," she said, crossing her arms with superiority.

"Really?" he said, his voice laced with disbelief, and perhaps a touch of sarcasm. The cad.

"I swear."

"So what? Everyone on this planet knows that."

"Oh, yeah. *All* the women who traveled to this godforsaken rock had scientific backgrounds and knew the composition of the planet they were about to visit? I don't think so," she responded with her own sarcasm.

"But you don't have a degree in this field of study, correct?"

"No, but—"

"Stop," he interrupted her. "You don't have a degree, so why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm right. Why is it so hard to believe I've had formal geology training?"

"I would have had to pay ten times your asking price if you were a degree-carrying geologist."

"I was three classes away from completing my degree before the Tiberius Group took over. They told me it was better for me to go off and get married to someone my *father* chose for me. Want me to tell you again how great that was for me?"

"No, thanks. The earful you gave me and Dusty just before we got married was enough."

"We aren't married," she groused and promptly pushed back from the table, stood up, and turned away from him.

"Oh, yes, we are, and I have the papers to prove it. So, are you changing the subject to our marriage for a reason because I could use a sexual fix tonight." He moved closer to her in that cat-like, silent manner he had, startling her when he brushed the hair from her shoulder and planted a kiss there.

"I'm not changing the subject." Her tone was still petulant, although a tendril of want spiraled its way down her spine with sultry memories from all the sexual satisfactions she had experienced in the past several days.

Damn her traitorous body.

Hannah felt the heat from his body caress her as his lips danced from her shoulder to behind her ear. He felt hot to her touch, like he always ran a fever. Maybe this was because he'd been genetically engineered and all. Whew.

Sexy, she thought then shook it off. She was making a point. Unwilling to be sidetracked from her original train of thought, she stepped away and started speaking quickly, "Why can't we just look at a cross shaft closer to our living quarters?"

"Why? Because it's a waste of time. Maybe you just want to spend more time with me than just a year. Are you already addicted to my lovemaking, Hannah?" He moved closer to her. Hannah had no doubts about his ability to seduce her.

Brutal was, in fact, stupendous in bed. *Stop! He's making you change the subject again*, her rational mind intruded.

"It isn't a waste of time. I know what I'm talking about. And for the record, the longer it takes you to earn the money you seek, the longer I'm stuck here. I'd rather be with my family back on Earth, thank you very much." Hannah was almost convinced. She missed her family, but being with Brutal wasn't exactly a hardship.

"You are not a geologist."

"But I almost was, and more importantly, I'm right. Can't we just take a day and check it out?"

"No. I refuse to waste time."

"But—"

"No buts, except for yours, which I'm about to seduce."

"If I have sex with you, then could we look at a cross shaft closer to the mouth of this mine?" she asked, trying to keep the desperation out of her tone.

"You can't use sex as a tool to get what you want."

"Why not? You do."

"Yeah, but I paid for the privilege."

"Oh, I'm paying for the privilege, too, believe me!" she stated caustically.

"Don't press me, Hannah. I'm not in the mood for a woe-is-me lecture tonight."

"Please, couldn't you just trust me once?" she pleaded as she turned into his arms. "One time, Brutal. Couldn't you just give me one time, please?"

"I could trust you once. I just don't want to waste my time in the mine. It's lots of work. I don't want to get behind, at least any more behind than I already am from taking a day to get married and a one-day honeymoon."

"I swear to you, Brutal, it isn't a waste of time. I promise," she said earnestly. Brutal watched her closely as if to gauge her seriousness.

"There is a cross shaft already cut somewhere between the third and fourth kilometer marker down the shaft. Tomorrow on the way down, we can stop and look at it. Will that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Yes, that would be perfect. And you'll see. I'm right."

"Are you? Perhaps if you had sex with me, I'd be more fully convinced."

She smiled with enthusiasm and launched herself onto him, wrapping her legs around his hips. He caught her around the thighs with a grunt just as she fastened her all-too-willing mouth to his. She sucked on his lips a couple of times before thrusting her tongue into his mouth. This earned her another grunt of approval. He tightened his arm around her back to hold her while he kissed her in return.

She was so focused on his delicious mouth and tongue making love to hers she didn't realize he'd carried her into the bedroom until he tried to put her down. She whined and clung to him as her feet hit the floor

beneath her.

He tore his mouth from hers long enough to say, "Don't you even want to get undressed?"

She planted her mouth on his and one-handedly tried to unbutton his pants. She couldn't do it because the tremendous hard-on he was sporting blocked her effort. It was a wonder he didn't lose consciousness as his baseball bat sized erection filled with fluid to satisfy her every time.

Brutal pulled away, breathing hard as he undressed quickly, but he never broke their searing eye contact. She also stripped at warp speed, popping a button off her shirt in her eagerness.

She backed up a step and felt the edge of the bed against the back of her legs. She sat and scooted backwards, motioning him to follow. He climbed on all fours over her, collapsing on top once her head hit the pillows. His mouth landed on hers again as he kissed her with a wild, needy ferocity she reveled in.

Moments later, she felt his long, thick shaft enter her with that same wild, needy ferocity that his kiss still distracted her with. Soon, his stroking tongue against hers matched the rhythm of his hips pounding pleasure into her body. She came and moaned into his mouth at the same time he released with a grunt and an extra, powerful thrust. She tried to remember which one of them was supposed to be convinced about something, but she couldn't think about anything beyond this moment as she basked in the aftermath of her gloriously satisfied body.

Chapter Six

The next morning, on their customary one-hour morning trip to his regular site, traveling at a whopping twenty-five miles an hour, Brutal stopped at the cross shaft after about fifteen minutes.

"Here it is," he said, shutting off the tram they were riding on.

"Perfect. Did you cut this cross section?"

"No, it was cut by the last miner to work this claim."

"I wonder why he didn't continue here. This is the optimum spot on your entire property."

"He died suddenly."

"Oh," she said quietly. "Why didn't you continue here then?"

"This was an initial cross section he cut at first. He didn't find anything, so he cut way down to where I am now. It took him five years. He died before he ever saw much Thorium-Z, only enough to keep him going day to day."

"Did he leave the mine to you? Is that why you came here?"

"No, the other miner didn't own the claim outright, just as I don't. A corporation on Earth owns it. I bought the right to mine this stake for three years with a two-year additional option if I end up finding anything. The corporation gets twenty percent of everything I dig up."

"Why did you pick this particular mine?"

"I did some research and paid an independent geologist who would only tell me that, of all the claims available on this planet, this particular one would yield the most Thorium-Z."

"A geologist to the rescue."

He laughed mirthlessly. "Not so far," he said and brusquely led her inside the short cross shaft. It was only seven feet tall, so Brutal had to watch his head as they moved through the passage. It was only cut about fifty feet before it ended in a flat wall of jagged rock.

Hannah looked around along the way, stopping to chip out places every so often.

"You should be mining here, Brutal," she finally said. "You won't find a more optimal place to dig."

"Well, great, I'll think about it. In the meantime, let's get going. I have a long day ahead of me."

"That's it? You'll think about it? But—"

"No buts. Let's go. I said I'd think about it."

Brutal was not at all convinced. Hannah spent the entire day trying to talk him into beginning an excavation at the cross section until he wished he hadn't said he'd think about it.

Back at the dwelling that night, Hannah marched immediately over to his desk and started rummaging through the documents there in an effort to convince him.

"If you'll just let me show you—"

"Hannah, it doesn't matter—" Brutal started to say until he saw her pull out a private drawer with something inside he didn't want her to see.

Of course, she saw it anyway.

Hannah picked up a bunch of documents, and along with it, a certain letter, which fell out of the pile at her feet. Before Brutal could stop her, she scooped it up and stared at the return address. He snatched it out of her hand and slapped it back in the drawer. Then he locked the drawer, trying to ignore the look of hurt now registered on her face.

"Okay, I'll look at your documentation," he said in a completely hopeless effort to avoid a conversation about the letter.

"Who is she?"

"What do you mean?" He knew full well what she meant, damn it. He should have hidden the letter more securely. He could kick himself.

"Who is that letter from? I saw her name, Brutal. Charlotte Stanfield. Oh, and down in the drawer, I noticed another one with Mrs. Thomas Blackthorn and a smiley face inside a heart."

"So?"

"I was led to believe *I'm* Mrs. Thomas Blackthorn at this moment in time. Don't I have a right to know what other women you're corresponding with?" Hannah asked in a not quite jokingly tone.

"No. If we were in a permanent arrangement, then there wouldn't be any other correspondence from other women."

"I see," she said frostily.

"I doubt it," he murmured, wishing now he'd had the foresight to burn the letters from Charlotte.

"I'm going to bed," Hannah said in a quivery voice.

"I'll join you."

"No, thank you. Maybe your letter will keep you company tonight. I'm not in the mood." She turned away from him and disappeared into the sleeping area.

One minute later, he heard her sobbing quietly. Brutal shook his head, wondering how his life had become so complicated so quickly. A week ago, he'd been in complete control of his emotions, if not his libido. Having a woman around changed things. The simple dynamic of his dwelling was now fraught with drama over some letters he should have destroyed. It was his own damn fault!

Hannah didn't need to be jealous about Charlotte Stanfield. But then again, it ultimately protected him from having Hannah get too attached to him. That would be bad, wouldn't it? Better for Hannah to think he had someone waiting for him when her year as his mail order bride was over.

Brutal thought back to when he saw Hannah for the first time, peacefully sleeping in the cryo-chamber cylinder hours before the auction. He had known she would be important to him the minute he'd laid eyes on her. Did she remember hearing him while she slept? He'd done more than just run a finger down her cheek. Did she remember what he'd whispered in her ear?

'I'll make you scream for me,' he'd told her a few times. And he had made her scream. A delicious,

innocent screamer currently occupied his bed. Too bad he was ousted for the moment.

The day he'd married her, Brutal had panicked when Hannah hadn't shown up until the last lot for auction. He had worried she was the one who hadn't revived. He didn't know what happened to the brunette, but he did remember her.

Mostly, he remembered the letter he snatched from the postal bag on the way out of the air lock. It was from *her*.

Charlotte Stanfield.

The woman he had left behind on Earth. The woman who was supposed to have joined him long before several celibate months had elapsed to be his permanent wife. But it turned out Charlotte had her own agenda, which didn't include him anymore. It probably never had, but she did like to play games with other people's lives.

Once she'd declared her undying love for him, she'd then quickly gotten rid of him by convincing him to sell his soul to this godforsaken mine where she would soon follow, and they could be married. Then she had teased him each mail call with letters explaining one excuse after another about why she just couldn't leave Earth to be with him quite yet. With each mail call, he had hoped Charlotte would just show up, but she hadn't.

The missive she had sent directly before the one he'd found on the cryo ship had said she couldn't possibly join him for another year as her dear sister was getting married and she needed to help with the elaborate wedding plans, but she promised to write faithfully. Like her fucking letters would appease his deprived cock for a year.

Brutal couldn't wait for her another year. He wouldn't, because he needed sex. He had already waited longer than any man with his condition would ever expect for her to come to him. So he had conceived of the get-a-mail-order-bride plan. He would acquire a temporary wife for a year, make his fortune, and be free of said mail order bride in time to head back for Earth a rich man to again woo the wealthy, respectable Charlotte Stanfield. At least until the said mail order bride had turned out to be spunky, gorgeous Hannah.

Brutal had read Charlotte's latest missive on the cryo-ship hurriedly before entering the auction. All his plans altered irrevocably with that letter. He was so glad he'd snagged it. Otherwise, he wouldn't have received it until after the auction. What if he hadn't married Hannah? What if he'd foolishly let Erik have her? He might have eliminated himself from the group of bride-seeking miners.

The additional news of no future scheduled mail order bride ships would have forced him into a difficult corner. If he hadn't fought for Hannah, he would have forfeited all of the considerable backbreaking effort already put into his mine. He'd have been forced to Earth for his genetically engineered sexual needs, which was at times, a big pain in his ass. Technically, he could last for around six months even though the lusty brain in his cock was fairly irate after one. Without Hannah, he would have lost everything invested here.

But fate had intervened, making their match inevitable.

Brutal hadn't been as desperate to marry until he'd read the letter from Charlotte informing him she had found someone else and was no longer making plans to join him. He wouldn't allow his feelings to be hurt. Charlotte hadn't meant as much to him once her true attitude regarding genetic freaks was exposed.

Hannah didn't think he was a freak. Her attitude bordered on awestruck over his engineered body. He

had already convinced himself she was falling for him. He didn't know if that was good or bad. Quickly, he decided it would be bad if she got attached before the year was over. He only got to keep her for the one year and wondered why that suddenly seemed like not nearly long enough.

From the direction of his bedroom area, he registered silence. Hannah had stopped crying, but then he heard her sniff a few more times. He should go comfort her, probably.

What in the hell was he doing with a temporary wife anyway?

The obvious answer came when a wickedly satisfying sexual memory of his first time with her danced across his barbarian brain. Oh, yeah, he remembered now. He'd been horny. And she'd given him so much more than expected in this temporary marriage bargain.

Brutal wasn't used to sharing emotions with others. On some level, he knew having a wife, even a temporary one, would test new boundaries for him. He was also intrigued to learn what it would be like to share space with another. He found it agreeable on many levels.

Day to day, it was nice to have someone around to converse with, and especially to have sex with on command.

Brutal realized perhaps he was the one getting attached to Hannah, and he shouldn't. She had a sweet smile, which hid an intelligent mind. She was interested in his mining efforts. How many of the other women auctioned off gave a shit about mine output and how they could increase capacity? None.

He decided that for someone who wasn't falling for her, he already missed her, and he needed to stop it. Hannah wanted to go home to her family at the first opportunity. He didn't blame her. She had been sorely abused by the new system of social graces on Earth. She deserved his cooperation after the year was over, not a declaration of love.

Now that her father was dead, only her brother would be able to sell her into her next marriage. The thought of another man listening to her scream her release made him gut sick. Brutal wondered, and not for the first time, what it would be like to spend the rest of his life with Hannah.

It was unfair to compare her to Charlotte, the woman back on Earth he'd sacrificed everything to come here for. He had come to earn Charlotte Stanfield's hard-to-win regard by working and becoming rich. Now that she had dumped him for someone else, Brutal wondered why he was still so determined to be successful on this planet.

In one simple word ... Hannah. She made it worthwhile. She made him want to earn *her* respect and esteem. There was nothing left for him on Earth now. No one was waiting for him to come back. No family who longed for his return, ready to open their arms and embrace him. Hannah was technically his only family.

Brutal selfishly decided to keep Hannah as long as he could. He was finding it difficult to picture his future without her. Perhaps he should contact her brother and find out what kind of permanent bride price he would be asking for ... *God's wrath!*

What was he thinking?

Hannah didn't want him. She was only here because she had no choice but to be here. No one had helped her, and no one, including her brother, had tried to save her from the mail order bride servitude.

Besides, they had a deal. An arrangement that was to last for a year. He wouldn't stop her from leaving when her year was up. And he *would* let her go when it was time.

Brutal couldn't help the pain he felt around his heart at the thought of no more Hannah. He would be losing someone extraordinary, and more than that—someone special to him.

Brutal would be losing the only woman in existence who had ever given him her virginity. The purest and most personal gift imaginable. He would never forget it for as long as he lived. It was absurd for a man like him to feel this way. Living with a woman had turned him soft and domesticated. He should go fuck her and get his macho, barbarian attitude back, but his heart wasn't in it.

Brutal didn't hear her crying any longer. Or any sound at all. He strolled to the sleeping area and watched her sleep. He could still see tears trailing down her cheeks and wondered why he was being such a bastard.

What did it matter if they spent even a day or two at the cross shaft to satisfy her curiosity? Not much. He would do it. He would do it for her because she deserved one request. But he wasn't going to tell her about Charlotte. He didn't want Hannah to see how livid he still was about Charlotte's betrayal. He'd been a fool to believe a woman like rich, pampered Charlotte could ever love him.

Chapter Seven

Hannah knew she was dreaming when she saw her sister. The vast space between them was never far out of her conscious mind, or her dream mind, as it turned out. At least dreaming about Sophie enabled her to pretend she was home again.

For just a little while.

After seeing Sophie's face, her dream turned dark. Hannah relived the day when everything changed, the day the Tiberius Group made their bold move and women suddenly had different rules to obey. It had been surprisingly easy for them.

The U.S. had been following a trend of increasing social conservatism for the past several decades. More women were going the marriage and children route, and upon finishing high school, the majority of women not even opting to go to college.

Hannah wasn't one of them. She didn't want to get married because of what her father had done to her mother.

"Women should get married, stay at home, have children, and leave the work force to the men," the Tiberius Group said.

"That's why unemployment is so high," they'd said.

"All the problems of the U.S. would be solved if only women would admit their place was at home," they'd said.

The Tiberius Group had then infiltrated all aspects of government, law enforcement, institutes of higher learning, and the majority of all Fortune 500 companies, for a start.

Hannah had been denied entrance to her senior-level college physical fitness class at the university where she'd been studying. She was only three classes shy of completing her bachelor's degree when she had been instructed to wait at home for further information.

"Women don't need to get college degrees," the representative from the Tiberius Group told Hannah several days later. They were seated in her college dorm room because she was no longer allowed outside without the accompaniment of a male relative. Unfortunately, her brother Jonathan was out of the country.

"What am I supposed to do?" Hannah asked the Neanderthal seated before her.

The Tiberius representative gave her a tolerant look as if she were five and didn't understand how the world worked. "All you need to do is wait here in your home for your father to come and find a husband for you."

"I don't want a husband," she told him, "and I don't have a father. Never have."

"We have located your father for you," he said brightly. "He'll be here by tomorrow morning, and all will be well for you."

Hannah thought her nearest male relative would be Jonathan, her younger brother. But no, the Tiberius group had scraped the bottom of someone's shoe and found her biological father at a bait-and-tackle shop in California.

"As a matter of fact, yesterday your father found a wonderful husband for your sister Sophie."

"Sophie has a husband?" Hannah hadn't been able to get a hold of Sophie after being denied access to her class and then imprisoned in her dorm room.

"Yes, she is a very lucky woman. Her husband paid a lot of money for her at the corporate auction," the representative said meaningfully, as if being prize sow in a pig auction was grounds for jubilation. Hannah didn't think so.

"Who's her husband?" Hannah asked fearfully. She knew Sophie was secretly in love with someone already, someone she wasn't supposed to be in love with, as a matter of fact. The top executive at her place of work held her spellbound. He was so secret and unavailable that Sophie hadn't even told Hannah his name.

"A man your father found suitable, Hannah. That is all you need to concern yourself with, and he'll find someone suitable for you as well," the condescending Tiberius representative said.

Hannah had been worried about her own circumstances by the time Sophie had been auctioned off to the highest bidder in a private corporate auction.

But her sister was a permanent bride, bought and paid for by a senior-level executive at the company where Sophie had been employed as an executive business analyst—until the Tiberius group came.

"I still don't want a husband, and if you still insist I must have one, then I want my brother to pick him out for me," Hannah said for all the good it did her.

"I'm sorry, Hannah. Your father takes precedence."

"Why?"

"A father knows what's best for his children, especially daughters," the representative said with superiority.

"My father deserted my mother with two toddlers while she was six months pregnant, but not before he helped himself to all the money she saved from working her ass off for fifteen years," Hannah informed the representative in a near shout. "My father has no idea what's best for anyone except himself, and especially not for the daughters he hasn't even seen in over twenty years."

The representative gave her that insipid, tolerant look again. In his eyes, she was still child-like in her lack of understanding.

The mandatory donation to the new National DNA database made it easier for them to locate her father. And hadn't the two daughters he abandoned before they could even talk enriched his life undeservedly? Her father was the worst kind of opportunist, as he had shown their mother decades ago. Hannah wasn't sorry he was now dead.

The representative didn't comment on her father. Instead, he pulled out a phone and started talking to someone, dismissing her as if she were no more important than an annoying fly buzzing around his head.

Once off the phone, he turned to her as though she hadn't ever said a word. "Women simply need a man to take care of them. It is the way the world should work and will work," he actually said this to her with a straight face.

"Don't do this," Hannah said, knowing full well the zealot in front of her would never change his mind.

"It's the natural order of things," he said in parting.

The bastards.

Hannah learned later when her father had shown up on her doorstep that he'd gotten a record-setting amount from Sophie's new husband, minus the auctioneer's fee, from the highest bidder in a corporate auction held at Sophie's former place of employment. How humiliating *that* must have been for her sister! Men who had been her peers and employees were able to bid on her as if she were a piece of meat.

Her father, Dennis Hoskins, had then shown up the next day. He packed up Hannah, and they had gone directly to Sin City, Las Vegas, the gambling Mecca of the world. Her last name Brent was her mother's maiden name. Her father spent the first several hours with her whining about this, perturbed that she didn't carry his name. She felt he didn't deserve any recognition.

Her father took the money from Sophie's wedding dowry and blew it in less than two weeks playing big man around Vegas. It could have given him a comfortable lifestyle for at least five years or more if he had been prudent, but the word conservative wasn't in his vocabulary. It only included phrases like "It's a sure thing," and "I'm on a hot streak," and Hannah's personal favorite, "I just can't lose on this bet."

He almost doubled his money the first few days there after a three-day gambling marathon. Hannah was backhanded when she suggested he stop after winning so much money. Then soon after, she made the audacious and completely inappropriate request for him to stop gambling. He lost the very next roll of the dice at the craps table, and then seriously started losing his ill-gotten gains. That turned out to be her fault, as well. Her father decided she wasn't a good luck charm any longer when he started losing and relegated her to the hotel room for the remainder of their time there.

Hannah, trapped in her hotel room daily, had eventually called her sister on the sly as she had seen Dennis come back with less and less money each day. She had resorted to stealing money from him while he slept at night. It was the only reason they had any money for food once her father had gone through the entire stake from his eldest daughter's new husband.

When her sister had invited them back to her home in Kansas City, it had been a Godsend because they barely had enough money for food, let alone the transportation there. Sophie arranged for the tickets to be available at the airport. Hannah had told her not to send cash.

Then they had an unfortunate, and as it turned out, fatefully long layover a couple of hours away from Sophie's house. In the last leg of their journey, her gambling-addicted father had cashed in their airfare tickets that Sophie's very generous husband had graciously provided them. Unfortunately, her father wasn't good at waiting. He decided all of a sudden that he felt lucky and had used the absolute last few dollars they had to gamble big on a long shot at the dog track. She watched helplessly as Dennis Hoskins took the entire amount and bet on a dog that had the same name as his first childhood pet.

"A sure thing," he'd said.

"He couldn't lose," he'd said.

"It was fate," he'd said.

"And the winner is..." Not her father's bet. It didn't pay off.

"What a shocker," she'd said and had been summarily backhanded again for her sassy mouth.

So her worthless father married Hannah off to a man who *had* won the race, which was how she ended up with her first husband, Reggie something. He was looking to travel with a wife and father-in-law as

cover to escape some bookies he owed a lot of money to. He had just won big at the dog track and didn't want to pay back the money he owed yet, at least not until he had an even bigger stash. Even when addicted gamblers won, it was never enough, Hannah observed in the short time she had spent with her father in Las Vegas.

Her father had convinced Reggie that, for a nominal dowry fee, he would let Reggie marry Hannah if he would also fund their trip to Sophie's house. He further convinced Reggie that, once at Sophie's, they could easily skim more money from his other daughter's rich husband. Reggie thought it was a smashing idea, especially after he thought he'd seen one of the bookie's thugs roaming around the track.

So they went to marry Hannah off to Reggie something.

When Hannah crossed her arms and refused to say, "I do" to a total stranger, she'd been smacked in the face yet again. It hadn't mattered anyway because the racetrack justice of the peace quickly informed them her consent wasn't needed, only her *father's*.

Then they'd gone like beggars to her sister's house, trailing a stranger her father had forced her to marry. Sophie, meanwhile, unaware that Hannah's wedding had taken place, had planned a big dinner party to introduce Hannah to a man her husband thought highly of from work, a man Hannah suspected she would have easily married to escape her father, given the chance.

Paul, the man Sophie's husband had picked out for her, was a very sweet man. He was a mid-level accountant at the company where Sophie's husband worked. Unfortunately, Hannah had already been married off only hours before and was currently unavailable for Paul, the accountant.

Her father and 'husband' hadn't even waited to finish dinner that they had arrived late for in favor of going out on the town to celebrate the 'nuptials.' Sophie and her husband were nice enough not to embarrass her further by suggesting perhaps Hannah should be included in any nuptial celebration as the two gamblers ran out of Sophie's house.

Hannah was grateful to be alone. If she had a place to go, she would have run away that night. In retrospect, she should have run anyway, but she was broke and essentially alone. Women traveling alone garnered too much attention. In fact, they weren't really allowed to travel alone without permission from the men who owned them. She simply would have been tracked down and hauled back.

Hannah refused to ask Sophie for any more money. It smacked too much like something her father would do. She spoke only briefly to her sister that night, her wedding night, before hiding in the guest room and crying herself into emotional exhaustion. She then slipped into bed, unaccompanied—on her honeymoon.

The next morning, Hannah had woken, still alone, to lawmen knocking on the door of Sophie's house. Once at the police station, she learned her father was dead, which surprised her, but not as much as when they told her she was sold off into mail order bride hell. They immediately put her into handcuffs because her louse of a husband, a stranger she had only been married to for less than twenty-four hours, had managed to run up a substantial gambling debt overnight.

The gaming thugs who were owed had just killed her father outright for failure to pay, but her husband had a wife with which to barter his life. She became his get-out-of-jail free card. Reggie told the Tiberius government police, after a body scan showed she was still untouched by him sexually, that she was a frigid bitch who refused to submit to his carnal whims.

Which was a lie. The bastard. Hannah tried to tell them her story and version of events. "What happened was..." she'd started to explain, only to be shushed and her mouth taped.

Then she had been shuffled out to a truck, placed on a cargo ship, and put into a cryogenic freeze for a month, only to arrive in time to snag Brutal Blackthorn as a temporary husband.

And he was the very best husband she could have ever hoped for in this place, or any place, truth to be told. He cooked, he cleaned, and he took care of most of the heavy work, including the mining. And he was reasonable, to a point.

He still didn't want to talk about her geological conclusions regarding the mine where he slaved each day. But then, why would he?

Hannah was just supposed to be some temporary piece of ass that only came to this planet because of credit card debt. Everyone on the spacecraft and on the planet here had been right. It didn't matter whether it was fair or not. It was just life. It wasn't Brutal's fault she was here, far, far away from Earth and missing her family.

If Hannah were truly honest with herself, she would admit she was actually jealous. *That's right. Jealous with a big, green, capital J.* Brutal only wanted Hannah for a year because he already had someone waiting for him back on Earth. Charlotte.

A selected female. A premium-cargo-type of female. Hoity-toity Charlotte Stanfield. Fucking bitch selected female. Selected by Brutal to be his permanent wife. Not Hannah. She hoped Charlotte, Brutal's next wife, would appreciate him.

Oh, yeah, that hurt.

Hannah wanted Brutal to be happy with his choice of permanent wife. He deserved to be happy. She could have done so much worse if Erik had gotten her. A shudder ran through her at the thought of losing her virginity to a cruel man like Erik. She'd probably be dead by now.

But in the end, the reason Brutal was working so hard here on this planet was for ... another woman ... Charlotte of the expensive stationary.

Hannah woke up suddenly from her nightmares. She couldn't help the tears once again flowing down her cheeks. This time, though, it was at the thought of not being allowed to stay with Brutal permanently. She looked over at the other side of the bed. He was sound asleep on his back. He didn't even snore. And he was so very attractive, not in the classic sense of beauty as defined by the society she used to live in, but in her eyes, he was kind, and he had treated her well. She hated to admit she was falling in love with him, a man she couldn't keep.

She slid closer to his warmth, snuggling up in case her nightmares came back. She vowed to enjoy her limited time with him. She would be the model temporary wife. No more tantrums.

Chapter Eight

"Why are you so stubborn and bull headed? You aren't giving me a fair shot!" Hannah railed when Brutal dared suggest they concede defeat at the cross section after only a few hours.

"I told you this was a waste of time in the first place. I gave you four hours. Now, I need to go down to where there is actually some ore to mine," Brutal retorted.

Last night, he'd been willing to give her a day or two, but the more time they spent not finding anything here, the more antsy he became to get back to his regular site.

"But—"

"No, we're done." Brutal dropped his pick ax and turned his back on her. He had merely stopped to let her see for herself that the crosscut cave was a monumental waste of time. Only Hannah wasn't convinced. In fact, she saw possibilities everywhere. She yammered non-stop for the first hour about the cross section having the perfect conditions for a large deposit of Thorium-Z.

"What would it take to convince you to mine here for three days?"

"Three days! Nothing short of a gun to my head will convince me. Now, let's get going. I can still get twelve hours down at the other site." He took a step towards the mouth of the cross section.

"Brutal, please," Hannah said in a small, anguished voice.

Something in that tormented tone stopped him dead. She was serious. Hannah wanted to do a full excavation of the cross section. It would take a minimum of three days to fully explore it. Five days would be more realistic if he believed, as she did, that it contained a big deposit ... and yet, he didn't.

Brutal turned back to face her. "Would you be willing to sign on for an additional year with me?" He didn't know what possessed him to ask her for an additional year at that particular moment. Probably because he figured she'd never go for it, and he could stop this argument before it got ugly. Or because the lusty little brain below his belt had piped up.

"What?"

Her eyes widened as he spoke, "You heard me, Hannah."

"You want me to sign on for an extra year of sexual bondage to you in exchange for three days in this cave?" Her tone had turned incredulous, but he could tell she was considering it. Surely she'd never agree to his demand, he thought skeptically.

"I can be reasonable. Shall we say a week? Seven days to fully explore this cross section." Brutal moved closer. "And in return, you sign on for an extra year with me of ... sexual bondage. What do you say?"

"I ... I..." she stammered as he stepped into her personal space, towering over her in the dim light of the cave.

"Have I finally rendered you speechless?" he mocked.

"No, but—"

"Put your money where your mouth is, Hannah. Do you believe this cross section is the mother lode or not?"

"Yes, but—"

"We can go to town right now and draw up the papers and be excavating where you stand as early as tomorrow morning," he purred. His libido kicked in again right then, and a streak of lust hammered through him. He had wanted her last night before she ran off to bed pouting, but he had decided the wiser course of action would be to leave her alone for a night.

It had been difficult.

"Why do you want me for an extra year? Isn't Charlotte waiting for you back on Earth?"

"That's none of your affair," he said coldly.

"I'm your wife—"

"Only for sexual bondage purposes—" he began.

"Is Charlotte going to wait for two years?"

"—and you're changing the subject. You don't need to worry about Charlotte," Brutal finished clearly.

Charlotte was no longer his concern. Hannah was. Brutal had been so preoccupied with Hannah this past week, he hadn't even thought about Charlotte. Losing her and enduring her betrayal hadn't been as traumatic as it would have been if he hadn't acquired Hannah during the auction, Brutal realized.

Hannah was so completely opposite of Charlotte, it was like comparing night to day. Brutal had decided that he much preferred nights with Hannah to days with Charlotte.

"All right then, I agree to your ridiculous demand," Hannah stated emphatically, breaking his reverie.

"What?"

"You heard me. Let's go into town and sign new papers."

"Why is this so damned important to you?" he asked her, shaking his head.

"Because I'm right, and I'll prove it to you. And I'm adding my own stipulation on to the new papers."

"What stipulation?"

"When I'm right, you release me no matter how much bondage time I've served. When we discover the vein of pure Thorium-Z, you'll be able to mine it quickly. You'll be able to earn a thousand times what you normally would sifting through the crap at your regular site," she said forcefully.

Brutal actually felt a punch in his gut at the thought of losing her before a full year of sexual gratification with her was up. Or was it more than that? His libido wavered at the demand she made, a weakness he patently refused to acknowledge.

"Fine, but let's just keep this bargain between the two of us," Brutal said. If she were correct about the large vein here, he didn't want word to leak out.

"Why? Afraid you'll lose your piece of ass now that you have me all broken in?"

"You overestimate your significance to me." No, she didn't. "I just don't want any hint of a big vein to leak out to the other miners."

"Why? This is your stake for as long as you're here. No one can mine the claim but you, right?"

"Unless I'm dead. I don't want to be fighting off the scum who live here until I've pulled out every gram of ore from this godforsaken mine."

"Do you swear to abide by it?"

"Do you?"

Hannah held out her slim hand to him. "Let's shake on it."

"I've got a better idea." Brutal grabbed her hand and pulled her the final step to press into his body. He then fastened his mouth on hers to seal the unlikely deal they'd just made.

* * * *

Hannah couldn't believe she'd just gambled a year of her life. Maybe she was more her father's daughter than she was willing to admit. And why would Brutal agree? Why would he want her for more than a year anyway with a woman waiting for him? Her mind reeled at the possibilities and opportunities before her as she shared a decadent kiss with her husband to seal an unholy bargain.

His tongue stabbed into her mouth yet again eliciting a tingling buzz of sensation below. The rough and velvety texture tangled with hers, stroking and swirling around leisurely as if they had all the time in the world to taste each other. Brutal's lip-licking, sensuous, French kisses made her want to faint in ecstasy. His arms tightened around her back as his mouth continued its determined course. She wanted to pull him to the cave floor regardless of the freezing temperature.

In the end, Brutal was the one who finished the kiss. He buried his face in her hair, breathing hard.

"I'll need some supplies," Hannah said after a few moments of her own heavy breathing, still trying to recover from his passionate assault on her lips. It was below thirty degrees in the cave, but Brutal's body was like a furnace. If ever she needed warmth, she just stepped closer to him.

"Let's go to town then," he said, still holding her close. "I need some things anyway."

"Thank you, Brutal," she said sincerely. For all his arrogant warrior ways, he was the first man to actually give her a chance to prove she was capable at her chosen profession, the profession she'd likely never get a chance to experience otherwise.

"When we get to town, stay close to me. Don't trust anyone," he cautioned, patently ignoring her gratitude.

"Of course," she responded, stepping away from his warmth.

Brutal led the way as they went out to the tram, rode back to the large airlock, and closed off the mine. Once through, they hopped on his four-wheeled vehicle and went back to the mining town under the dome of the space station.

Hannah certainly had a different attitude from the last time she came into this place from the cargo ship. She was looking forward to going there to buy supplies for her endeavor. Brutal burst her balloon a little when he informed her he would purchase the goods in town for her. She was a piece of property, and she didn't have any money anyway. He asked her what she needed, and she ticked off five essentials and a couple of luxuries.

Brutal parked in front of the only supply store in the mining encampment. Hannah was reminded of the

towns she'd seen in history books of the California gold rush. The moon on which this mining operation existed was Terre formed to support human life. Huge processors had been set up to supply the oxygen and nitrogen atmosphere the miners could exist in.

Thorium-Z was used as the fuel source to power the processors. It was clean burning, and little was needed to power the atmospheric processors. Hannah knew this from reading all of Brutal's documents, but the encampment looked like an 1850's gold mining camp. Thorium-Z was mined like gold in the days long past. It was backbreaking work for most men. Perhaps that was why she'd been so sure her husband would look like a grungy miner forty-niner. Instead, he looked like pure sex bottled in leather.

They entered the supply store together, Hannah staying right on Brutal's heels. She looked around for Erik, the only rational fear she harbored, but didn't see him. Hopefully, he was back at his own mine pouting alone. Hannah shivered for no reason.

While Brutal bartered and argued with the shopkeeper for all the supplies he wanted, Hannah wandered around and looked at the things available in the store. She saw more girly stuff than she would have imagined. There were dresses, shoes, perfume, hats, and even a small library of books from which to choose, but nothing Hannah held dear. She wanted mining supplies.

"Do you want to get Brutal's mail while they're busy arguing?" asked a soft female voice, startling her.

Hannah turned around and saw a woman behind the counter at the opposite end of where the men were locked in a heated verbal battle over the price of mining tools.

"Sure, why not?" Hannah moved further away from the men to stand before the tiny, dark-haired woman. Her nameplate said "Carla."

"This came today on the transport." Carla handed Hannah a letter with a familiar looking handwriting. "It's funny not to be having an auction today. I guess only mail and mining supplies will be the cargo from now on until the Tiberius Group decides about the mail order bride business."

"I guess," Hannah responded but had stopped listening. She held in her hands another letter from Charlotte Stanfield. It was postmarked a week ago, the day she'd gotten married to Brutal. An ominous sign, Hannah thought, staring unblinkingly at the expensive stationary. Her heart actually ached while pounding out a dismal dance in her chest.

"Does it hurt?" the dark-haired woman asked Hannah in a near whisper.

"Yes," Hannah responded in a wounded tone, not thinking. It hurt like hell to be falling in love with a man who had another woman waiting for him back on Earth. "I mean ... What?"

Hannah looked up into the expressive eyes of the shopkeeper's wife. She had a wide-eyed look, which she then directed down the long counter at the two men still in animated negotiations.

"Brutal's so big. I wondered if it hurt—you know, to have sex with him." Carla then fairly leered at Brutal. Speaking quietly, she added, "All the women here want to know."

Hannah couldn't believe it. Carla, the shopkeeper's wife, had a lust-filled crush on Brutal. Apparently, lots of women did. Wasn't Hannah just the luckiest temporary wife on the planet? All the mail order brides here wanted to fuck her husband. Great.

"The answer is no. Brutal would never hurt me," Hannah said, but then reversed her private opinion, feeling the weight of the letter in her hands. She wanted to read the contents almost more than she wanted to prove she was right about the cross section of the mine.

"All the women here wished he would bid on them, but he never bid on anyone until you," Carla said wistfully, continuing her leering perusal of Brutal, who was completely oblivious to her sultry regard.

"Is that right?" Hannah said off-handedly, wondering how she could sneak this home to read it before handing it over.

"Yes, lots of them were mad, too," Carla whispered, still watching Brutal with lust evident on her thin face. Hannah expected drool to drip out of her gaping mouth.

"You don't say," Hannah remarked, turning her back to the men and their escalating argument. She slipped her finger under the seal of the letter, took a breath, and then broke it in half.

Oops, she thought. I accidentally opened the letter.

Carla, the shopkeeper's wife, had her eyes fully on Brutal, so Hannah felt safe in flipping up the envelope flap and then accidentally pulling out the single sheet of stationary.

'My darling Thomas,' it began.

Thomas? Oh, yeah, his real name. Hannah decided she preferred Brutal. She continued reading the missive quickly, trying to listen with one ear to the men at the end of the counter while keeping one eye on Carla to keep from getting caught.

'You must come back to Earth at once, darling. Daddy wants me to marry a horrible, degenerate man. I've been able to put him off for now, but you must contact me. Please, Thomas, you must come for me. I need you now.'

With all my love and devotion, Charlotte.'

Hannah winced at the pain in her middle. Pain like she had just been sucker punched in the gut took her breath. She slipped the letter back into the envelope and held the flap so the shopkeeper's wife wouldn't see that she'd violated the confines of the mail.

Hannah tucked the letter inside her jacket and wondered how she would ever be able to give an opened letter to Brutal, especially when he was so adamantly opposed to her knowing anything about his love, Charlotte. She was no longer patiently waiting for him back on Earth. She wanted him to come back home *now* ... desperately. She needed him.

Hannah took a moment to pout, and then the rebellious part of her brain took over. She wanted her chance. *So, too bad, Charlotte, she thought. You'll have to keep Daddy at bay for a little while longer, you pampered little princess.* Brutal was hers for another year, or at least until she could prove the mine was the mother lode.

Hannah wanted her opportunity. Seven days. That was all she needed. Surely Charlotte could wait for seven damn days. Then she and Brutal would both be free to return to Earth. It only hurt her stomach for a moment or two at the thought of giving Brutal up for his next impatient wife. Okay, so it hurt for longer than a moment or two. It hurt like a bitch.

A fucking, impatient bitch named Charlotte.

Chapter Nine

Once they returned from the supply store, Hannah took her jacket off and hung it up, pretending to be casual. She also pretended the letter she was hiding, which had fairly burned a hole in her pocket all the way back to the mine, didn't matter.

But it did. It made her want to cling to Brutal and never let go. An interesting concept had festered in the wake of the shopkeeper's wife sharing the salacious information regarding all the other mail order brides coveting that which was hers and hers alone. Brutal.

Well, he was hers only until he found out about Charlotte's heartfelt plea for his return. Hannah didn't want to go down the path of depression just yet. One more week. She deserved one week after all she'd endured.

She watched as Brutal secured their purchases on the mine tram for the next day. She glanced with interest as he moved easily with the supplies slung over one shoulder. She loved watching him move. Seeing him swing that double-sided pick ax everyday as his muscles worked bunching and contracting was delicious enough to make her glad she was a woman for once. He told her they would rest up tonight for an early start in the morning. Meanwhile, she was contemplating several seduction scenes buzzing around in her over-aroused mind. The longer she thought about them, the more convinced she became she couldn't continue until she tested all the possibilities.

Brutal shrugged off his leather jacket while she watched him. She knew her mouth was hanging open in appreciation of him. Was there ever a man who had ever looked so good in leather? No, she thought not.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Like you've never seen me before." His hands rested on his hips, and he nodded his head forward in question. His tone still sounded a little annoyed at the argument he'd had with the shopkeeper over the supplies, she suspected. Time to soothe the savage beast who was her husband, at least for the time being.

Hannah strolled forward and didn't stop until she stood directly before him. Her head tilted completely back. She didn't break eye contact as he stared at her questioningly.

"I was wondering," she paused a moment to build her courage, "if you would let me take control if we went to bed right now?"

His eyes darkened. Did he understand her intent?

The heavy-lidded perusal he laced her with said he did. She put her hands on his hips and pulled him forward until their lower halves touched. The intensity of his chocolate-eyed regard made her insides melt and want to surrender to him. She smiled at the huge bulge she felt rising against her stomach. She had his attention, all right, but would he let her ride him like she longed to do?

"You want to be on top?" The tone of his voice had lowered an octave. She licked her lips in anticipation of his mouth on her body. Maybe the position wasn't so important after all. Maybe she simply craved his touch.

"Yes."

"And you think I'm going to turn you down?"

"I'm not sure." His heat-filled stare left no doubt they were about to have carnal knowledge of each other in the next charged moment, but the dominate position was still up in the air. Now that he was pressed up against her where she could immerse herself in his scent and warmth, the position of being on top became less important than just wanting to be satisfied. The position didn't matter at all two seconds later as she took another deep breath of him. His warmth fairly tanned her skin. Just getting naked with him became paramount.

"Lead the way," he invited huskily. "And for the record, you don't have to ask permission ever again. I'm yours whenever you want me, however you want me, in any position you desire."

A rush of breath she hadn't realized she was holding pushed out of her lungs. She grabbed his hand and led him to the bedroom.

Once there, he stood stoically while she undressed him, one piece at a time until he was gloriously naked and his proud sex jutted out waiting for her next command. Hannah undressed herself quickly while he watched, practically licking his lips. She waited for his amusement, but it never came. She directed him to the bed and requested him to lie on his back. He complied, placing his hands behind his head as if to watch curiously for what she would do next. She stood at the foot of the bed for only a moment before crawling up to cover his body with hers.

Before she lost her nerve, she straddled his hips, the ridge of his erection resting on her very slick entrance. She leaned forward to kiss his muscular chest while she slid her warm, wet opening up and down his massive sex. She trembled suddenly in need as her clit stroked across the tip of his penis. Her heart pounded madly against her ribcage in desire. She stroked herself across him a few more times and heard herself moan. Brutal unlaced his hands from behind his head and slid his fingertips into her hair. He pulled her forward to kiss him. She pushed closer into his lips, dipping her tongue into his mouth aggressively as the shift in her body put the very tip of his sex in position to enter her drenched passage.

She wrenched herself from his mouth and plunged down, impaling herself on his massive, thick, and ready shaft. The sensation of his penis overfilling her anxious wet heat sent a rush of air out of her lungs followed immediately by her sharp intake of breath as her body tried to accommodate his substantial girth.

She placed her hands on his chest for balance and then rose up and slammed herself down on him again. And again. The pressure within was exquisite. When she chanced to open her eyes, it was to see Brutal's shining ones watching her. His heat-filled regard made her wild. She held his steady gaze as she rode him. When she leaned forward slightly, she was able to scratch the itching demand made by her anxious clit.

She groaned upon finding satisfaction in rubbing herself against him until the orgasm took her by surprise. Brutal watched her climax and she saw it reflected in his eyes. A satisfied smile crossed his face at her release. His hands went to her hips in the next moment as undulating waves of pleasure wracked her internally. He held her hips in place as he surged up for several strokes, his gaze still smolderingly and passionately directed at her. She got to see his climax as well. His eyelids dipped twice as he growled when he came slamming upwards into her completely satisfied and still clenching passage.

Brutal reached up and pulled her into a bear hug, his long arms wrapped around her as if he'd never let her go. She wished for it to be true. She could be happy forever in his warm, strong arms.

* * * *

Brutal was exhausted at the end of the first day in the cross section. He knew Hannah was, too, but she fairly glowed with anticipation of living her dream of being a geologist.

As they lumbered painfully into the living quarters, Brutal decided he didn't even want food. First, he wanted a shower, and then he wanted sleep. But Hannah was all juiced up. She grabbed his face with two hands and kissed him like she hadn't seen him for a week. He knew where this was going to lead and smiled inwardly. Hannah was full of surprises, as it turned out.

After they had returned from getting the supplies the day before, Hannah had been in an odd mood. She had barely spoken to him on the trip home. He'd been thinking about the heated argument with the crook that sold supplies in town. Brutal knew the shopkeeper overcharged him, but unfortunately, he was the only game in town for mining supplies.

Once he'd bought everything they needed, Brutal turned to make sure Hannah was close by. He was waiting for Erik to jump out and grab her at any moment. She stood pensively at the end of the counter with the shopkeeper's wife. Had they been talking?

Carla watched him like a cat eyeing cream. He made a note to ask what she had talked to Hannah about, but then completely forgot when they arrived back at their quarters, and Hannah had immediately wanted to have sex. Brutal hadn't expected it. Having Hannah initiate the amazing sexual encounter the night before was all the sweeter for him. He'd been trying to get her to try other sexual positions, and she had chosen one of her own. She climbed on top of him and rode him until they were sweaty, sated, and more than completely satisfied.

It also had rejuvenated him to full capacity for today.

Now, at the end of their first day, even as tired as she had to be, Hannah had that same look in her eye. It was the one from last night, which meant she was in the mood yet again. Playing geologist was apparently a potent aphrodisiac for her and certainly no hardship for him.

"Let's go take a shower, Brutal. We're filthy," she said between lustful kisses across his mouth.

"Right now? Don't you want to eat something first?"

"No."

"Lead the way, my anxious wife."

Hannah stripped him with the ferocity of a wild animal. Once they were both naked, she led them to the shower. First, she rubbed her body with soap while he watched, and then she rubbed her body all over him. She soaped him head to toe, spending copious amounts of time making sure his cock and balls were completely clean, too. After water sluiced over both of them, removing the suds, Brutal found he was as rock hard as the first day he'd taken her. Like he had been celibate for six months and not just a day.

Brutal would never, in a thousand millenniums, forget the gleam in her eyes as she pressed kisses down his throat. She didn't retreat either. She continued kissing a path down his chest, her hands resting on his hips.

When she kissed him just above his belly button, she also slipped down on her knees in front of him. He made an inhuman noise somewhere between a growl of disbelief and a howl of jubilation when he felt her lips around the tip of his penis. He looked down to see her slip his cock into her luscious mouth, forcing him to brace his arms against the shower walls for balance. All the while, hot water blasted his back.

Brutal knew she had never done it before, but that didn't make it any less erotic to watch. And he watched her. She was careful. Deliberate. She put him all the way in as far as he would fit and then withdrew, sucking until he thought he would lose his mind in pleasure.

He could always last for hours before shooting his load, but one innocent, little temporary wife was about to turn him into a minuteman missile. Brutal felt her suck him back into her mouth again. He realized he had closed his eyes to keep from letting loose.

"Hannah?" he managed to say. He put a hand on her head to pull her off. But God's wrath, he didn't want her to stop. She was going to get a really big surprise in a second.

"Hannah!" He was about to burst. She stopped and slid her mouth off him slowly and looked up at him, smiling. He smiled back, like a lovesick puppy, he was certain. She pursed her lips and kissed the end of his rock-hard cock.

"It's okay, Brutal. I know what I'm doing. I saw a movie once," she said with utter confidence and put his substantial erection right back in her mouth. And sucked him.

Once he was as deeply embedded as possible, he felt her hands slip around to his ass and grab hold. He felt her fingernails digging in, pulling him closer and further into her mouth until he couldn't take the seductive power of it any longer. Back and forth she sucked, harder and harder with each thrust, taking him deeply into her mouth. Her tongue darted all around his sensitive, plum-sized head as the suction from her mouth increased.

Steam swirled around him, hot water pounded his back, and Hannah was sucking his cock like a pro. He wanted to watch her, but he knew he couldn't. If he looked down at her luscious, wide mouth on his shaft, her wet hair ticking his thighs, it would be over. But God's wrath, it would feel so great to just let go.

His head dipped forward. His eyes opened, directed by his voracious libido. She pulled him inside her mouth, and that was his last coherent thought.

Brutal understood what true nirvana was when he released his wad, howling while she swallowed every drop from him. Not that this was the first time he'd ever had a blowjob. Not even the first time a woman had swallowed his cum, but it was so unexpected from her, a virgin geologist on her first try.

It was absolutely the best he had ever experienced.

Brutal fell to his knees in front of her, clutched her to him, and resisted the urge to tell her he was falling in love with her. No need to give her a weapon like that.

Instead, when he stopped trembling and got enough of his strength back, he pulled her to her feet and soaped her from head to toe, massaging every place on her body in reciprocation.

He placed her hands against the wall of the shower and turned her away from him. He slipped his hands around to her breasts to play. She bent slightly, backing her butt into his already stiff again cock. He slipped a hand from her breast down her belly and fingered her until she screamed her release. She was so wet. Creamy moisture dripped from between her legs, and he decided he needed a drink of her.

He pulled her away from the tile and positioned her exactly where he'd been when she'd taken his cock in her mouth. He adjusted the shower so warm water kneaded her back, and he knelt before her. Her eyes widened as he grabbed her by the ass and buried his face in her curls, groaning his pleasure at her utterly intoxicating taste.

Brutal licked her creamy center until she vibrated in need, and then he took her clit between his lips and sucked on her until she climaxed again. At some point, she had twined her fingers into his hair. He kissed a path up her belly to suck on a nipple. He held her steady when her legs gave out from under her. The

water started to cool, so he rinsed her off and carried her to their bedroom.

Once in bed, she climbed on top of him and promptly fell asleep draped all over him as though she were afraid he might get away in the night. Not likely. Brutal clutched her to him, stroking her hair and body and wondering what he'd done to deserve Hannah. He was a lucky bastard.

In the days to follow, Brutal discovered that a charged-up, motivated Hannah was a sight to see. Every night for the first five nights after spending a grueling day in her cross section of the cave, she had done exactly the same thing.

Hannah rushed him to bed every night until he didn't know if he were more exhausted from mining or from *her* insatiable sexual demands. He recharged every night, and the frequent rejuvenation process almost made him tired. Almost.

After the sixth night with nothing to show from her mine, she began to show her concern. They didn't make love that night. The morning of the seventh day, Hannah said little before they left, and he didn't provoke her.

Brutal wasn't going to be a sore winner, but he was going to collect on the debt. He planned to take her to town and get it in writing on the morning of day eight. It was a dirty trick, but he didn't want to let her go. He planned to woo her. He wanted to marry her, permanently. He didn't expect her to agree unless he spent the extra year persuading her. And he intended to do just that. Whatever it took.

* * * *

For all the hard work they did over the seven days in the cross shaft, the Thorium-Z weight count they'd managed to get out by the beginning of day seven amounted to about eighty grams, which translated to about what they needed to output in an hour to merely keep up with the day-to-day expenses.

Brutal's regular mine had been yielding a minimum of one hundred pounds a month, and most months he got a hundred and twenty pounds. And he was being so nice about it. Never once all week did he hurl insults at the low production. Never once did he say a cross word about her theories. Never had Hannah worked so hard for so little in return.

In hour seventeen of day seven with no hope in sight of the huge deposit she felt in her bones was here, Hannah decided not to give up. She would simply beg Brutal for one more day. They were close. They had to be. She wasn't wrong. She simply couldn't be.

"I know this mine has been stubborn, Brutal, but I still believe in it."

"Well, you have fifty-seven more minutes to prove it," he said. Hannah listened closely, but he didn't sound like he was gloating. Yet. He would be in fifty-seven minutes. How could she convince him to give it another few days?

"I think we might need just a little more time—" she started out.

"No," he cut her off. "I gave you a week. I'm already going to have to kill myself to make up for losing a week's worth of output from the other site."

"Please, Brutal..."

"Don't 'please Brutal' me, Hannah. I admire your tenacity, but this mine isn't going to yield anything, no matter how hard you wish for it to be true."

"I'm not wishing it. I went to school for this. I worked hard to learn it. I can feel it in my gut, Brutal. One

more day."

"No."

"I'll sign on for another year," Hannah offered. It stopped him. He put down the pick ax he'd been wielding and fixed a disbelieving gaze on her.

"What makes you think I want another year with you?" he asked matter-of-factly. His stare burned to her soul. He was giving her that big, bad wolf glower he got sometimes. It was blatantly sexual and never failed to have an impact on her. She wanted him.

"Why did you want the second year you're about to get?" she countered with a yeah-I-want-you glare of her own.

"I like making you scream," he said with a sardonic chuckle.

So did she.

But back to the topic at hand, she wanted—no, she *needed*—one more day. Before she could open her mouth, he said, "No."

"You are *so* stubborn," Hannah said, realizing she had lost, and she owed him a second year. She turned her back on him.

"And you're a poor loser," Hannah heard him mutter.

* * * *

"No, I'm not," Hannah said passionately, turning back to him. "I'm right. I know I am. Can't you feel it, Brutal? We are *so* close."

He *had* felt a certain expectant vibe in the air from her conviction and passion that she was on the trail of a big find, but it hadn't panned out, and time was up.

A deal was a deal.

Brutal knew she would have expected him to let her go if they had found the mother lode of Thorium-Z.

"No, I don't feel anything but how tired I'm going to be trying to make up for a week of wasted work. Besides, you still have forty-four minutes by my calculation. Are you giving up?" he teased.

"No, I'll never give up," she said solemnly and resumed chipping away the center of the flat surface with a small pick ax.

Brutal let her work out her anger hammering away at the mine until they'd gone past the eighteen-hour mark by half an hour.

Then he called it.

"All right, it's over. Stop."

"No."

"Hannah, you gave it your best shot. I've never seen anyone work as hard to accomplish anything, but you have to know when to quit."

"But if I quit, then I'm a failure," she said and burst into tears.

"That's not true," he said quietly with as much sincerity as he could offer while she sobbed. Brutal had admired her endless spirit all week. She fought hard for what she believed in.

"Yes, it is." She slumped to the ground and cried a river. He let her get her frustrations out for a few minutes before approaching her. He squatted down, and she threw her arms around him. He felt her hot tears on his throat.

Brutal picked her up and carried her still sobbing to the tram and back home again. He put her in the shower with him and tenderly shampooed her hair and scrubbed her body. Hannah allowed him to wash her without comment, but she did snuffle a little.

Afterwards, he made them something to eat as she sat in her robe and stared into space. At least she had stopped crying. Her tears bothered him more than he was willing to admit. He knew what despair felt like, having endured it himself regularly in his life, and he hated to see her beaten down like this.

Often the world was not fair, and perhaps Hannah needed to learn this lesson. Or perhaps she didn't. Perhaps she knew exactly how the life-is-not-fair lesson worked.

Brutal led her to bed, expecting her to keep to her own side of the large space, but she surprised him. As soon as he got beneath the sheets and settled on his back, Hannah slipped over to him and climbed on top of his body. His hands went to her back to massage the muscles there. Her head rested on his shoulder, and one of her hands trail up to his face. He was about to say something comforting when she moved her face to his and began kissing him ferociously.

"Love me, Brutal," she said between urgent kisses.

I do, he thought as he gathered her in his arms, but he still couldn't find it in himself to say the words out loud to her. He had said them to Charlotte, only to have them flung back in his face later on. It was harder to make the same mistake again.

"You're beautiful, Hannah. I'm so lucky to have you," he murmured, kissing her hair. Soon she slid her luscious body over his seductively, making him as hard as the rock he mined.

"You're wrong, Brutal. I'm the lucky one."

Without warning, she lifted up and impaled herself on his ready shaft until he was balls deep, stretching her womb. She pulled back up part way and slammed down on him again. Soon, she was aggressively pounding up and down as if to wrench an orgasm from him. He didn't want to come alone, but when he tried to touch her, she refused to allow it. Was she further punishing herself?

Hannah pinned his hands above his head to make her point, never slowing the rapid pace of her body, allowing his to pierce hers repeatedly. Once satisfied that he wouldn't try to pleasure her, she slid her hands to his shoulders and dug her fingernails into his skin.

Brutal watched her. The determination on her face was rigid. She wanted to fuck him, so he let her. It was perhaps a way to gain some measure of control on her part after being beaten by the mine.

Brutal allowed all the sensations he was experiencing to envelop him. Her damp hair tickled his chest. Her short fingernails pierced the skin on his shoulders. Her slick, vaginal passage sucking on his cock as she crashed her tight entrance above him over and over made for an exhilarating experience.

She was so tight as he filled her that he couldn't hold off much longer. He heard her rasping breaths, and

then a tiny scream erupted from her and she stiffened, arching slightly as she wrenched an orgasm out of herself. He felt her clench up and down as she continued her assault. He couldn't wait.

I love you, Hannah, he screamed in his mind.

A tidal wave of sensation surrounded his groin and he spewed inside of her as he growled his utter satisfaction. After several moments of bliss, Brutal tried to breathe normally again. He chanced a look at Hannah. She had a slight smile playing across her lips as if she'd conquered something important.

Whether she knew it or not, she *had* conquered something important. His heart.

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Hannah couldn't help but try once more. The night before, she had been angry and had poured her frustrations out by aggressively fucking Brutal. He hadn't complained, of course, but it had been cathartic for her. He had been sweet enough to let her do with him what she wanted. He'd already told her she didn't ever need to ask permission, but last night had been different for her. She loved him so much, but didn't know how to tell him, or if she even should since she didn't get to keep him. This thought set her attitude for this morning at very petulant.

She just couldn't face going back to Brutal's regular dig site when she still believed fervently that her cave was better.

"Brutal—" she began cautiously.

"No," he responded without looking up from his breakfast.

"I didn't even say anything yet."

"I don't have to be psychic to know you are about to beg me to go to your cave once more."

"I don't want to give up." She tried to keep the whine out of her tone.

"You don't have to give up, Hannah."

"I don't?"

"No, but it doesn't mean I'm going back to dig there anymore. I need to mine at my regular site."

"Then you're going alone. I can't stand to watch you waste your time when I know a veritable gold mine is in that cave," Hannah flung out the ultimatum she had only thought of moments ago. She was prepared to fight until he agreed.

"Do I have to carry you? I *will* throw you over my shoulder barbarian style and haul your ass down the mine."

"Why? You don't need me down there." She pouted.

"I want to keep my eye on you."

"Just leave me here. I don't want to see you. It's not like you can fuck me down there anyway. I'll just stay here."

"You are the most stubborn woman."

"Gee, I wonder where I learned that from."

"You are going, and that's final." Brutal jerked on his leather jacket and reached for hers.

"No, I'm not."

"Hannah, so help me God!" Brutal grabbed up her jacket to fling at her, and the opened letter from Charlotte dislodged from her inner pocket and fluttered to the floor between them. The one she had opened last week at the supply store. The one she hadn't gotten around to hiding in a better place. Damn it.

The expensive stationary was recognizable, of course, even as it landed face down. There was a heart scrawled on the back flap surrounding the broken seal of wax on the letter.

"What was that letter doing in your jacket, Hannah?" Brutal asked in a cold, chilling voice. Her jacket now crumpled between his hands, forgotten.

"Oh, did I forget to mention I picked up a letter for you when we were in town last week?" She managed to keep the quiver out of her voice. "Silly me."

Brutal stood like a statue, a war of expressions fighting for recognition on his chiseled face. He twisted her jacket, bunching it between his fingers, still staring at the letter on the floor.

She had debated this whole past week about whether to give him the damn letter at all. Hannah just didn't want him thinking about Charlotte as she worked like a slave in the cross section of the mine. She knew it was childish, but she had wanted Brutal all to herself.

Hannah especially didn't want him to take one look at the pleading letter and divorce her. He couldn't leave her, could he? They had to spend at least a year together, right? Or was that just wishful thinking on her part?

Oh, who was she kidding? All he had to do was sell her to someone else or lie and tell the officials she had done something shameful, like failing to spread her legs to his satisfaction.

"You neglected to mention you were reading my mail behind my back." He stared down at the obviously broken wax seal of the letter. A tic had formed in his cheek as his jaw clenched. He glanced at her jacket twisted in his hands as if seeing it for the first time. He hung it back up on the coat rack.

"I'm not sorry," she said.

"Aren't you?" he remarked, but he didn't seem too surprised.

"It's a letter from Charlotte, as you can clearly see. I opened it, and I read it, too. She is begging you to come back and marry her," Hannah said defiantly. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, she thought wildly.

"I see. And you did this because...?" He still wasn't looking at her. His hands now rested on his hips judgmentally.

"Because—all right, fine. I was jealous of her. I admit it. Are you happy now? I finally ended up married to someone not horrible. I just wanted to know how much you meant to her. I wanted to know what kind of woman you would kill yourself in this environment for, seeing as how it isn't me." Hannah ended her tirade on a sob.

"I told you, she's none of your business."

"But—"

"No buts. Why couldn't you leave it alone?" Brutal grabbed the letter without looking at her and stalked out. He looked angrier than she had ever seen before, like he might enjoy killing her with his bare hands. She shuddered at her own foolish thoughts. Brutal wouldn't hurt her no matter how much she deserved it.

And this time, she probably did.

He paused at the door. "I won't be back until late. Lock the door. I'll knock tonight," he said before he slammed the portal door shut.

"I'm sorry," Hannah called out to the closed door. He hadn't heard her. She slumped to the floor and allowed herself a good, pitiful cry. It would never be the same between them. She had just bought herself two years of purgatory.

Purgatory with the man she loved, who loved someone else.

Life was so unfair.

* * * *

Brutal stomped out of his quarters and over to the door leading to the mine. He opened the letter and read what Hannah had known for a week.

"...with all my love and devotion, my ass," he muttered to himself as he made his way through the air lock to the mine and over to the tram.

He traveled for five minutes before it occurred to him that Hannah didn't know his true feelings regarding Charlotte. It finally occurred to him he'd never said anything that would make her think the relationship between him and Charlotte was over.

At first, it had been a comfortable defense for him so he could dismiss her in two years, but now he didn't want Hannah to leave. He loved her infuriating ways. He admired her undeniable thirst to force a mine to yield what she wanted because she insisted she was right.

He enjoyed every minute of every day they had spent together. He wanted her desperately. And he loved her, as he'd never loved any other woman before.

Brutal took a couple of minutes to consider things from Hannah's point of view. She said she was jealous of Charlotte. He had never given her any reason to doubt that Charlotte was the reason he was here killing himself. She was emotional about the failure at her mine. It occurred to him she hid the letter because she wanted her chance to prove she was right about her theory without having Charlotte to think about.

Brutal actually smiled at her still begging this morning for another day. He was planning to surprise her and give her one more day. He had planned to ride down silently on the tram as if it were any other day, and not even say anything until they got to the cross section. She would have been so happy.

Intercepting his mail was unconscionable. He read the letter from Charlotte again. Charlotte had never intended to marry him. She had only used him as a ploy to goad her father.

Brutal had been wholly unsuitable as husband material, but she had assured him her father would concede and allow his courtship, if Brutal were to acquire a substantial sum of money, the initial reason he was here busting his ass.

The letter he had received the day he married Hannah had been from Charlotte informing him she had found someone even more unsuitable. She was releasing herself from their agreement, a pact, she informed him heartlessly, she had never planned on keeping anyway due to his background. Besides, there was a bartender who really made Daddy furious, so she was moving on and told him to do the same.

'I know you love me with all your heart, Thomas, but I could never love or seriously consider marrying a genetic freak like you. Of course, I never planned to join you at the mine. I thought you would come to understand this eventually. Yet, each week you sent another missive asking me to come to that godforsaken mining planet. You may stop waiting for me. I have a certain

standard of living to maintain, which you will never be able to fulfill. You need to try to move on,' she'd written in her last, hateful missive, the one Hannah had seen in his desk. That letter had led him to an unexpected bargain with Hannah and the right to her body for another year. He smiled at the realization he now had two years to convince her to care for him.

Brutal *had* moved on—very easily—to sweet, stubborn Hannah. Thankfully, this letter didn't mention anything about her last eye-opening letter.

My, how Charlotte had changed her tune when things didn't go her spoiled, bratty way. Now, it was time to ponder Hannah's response. She had been jealous? Did she care for him? Perhaps he needed to find out.

Just then, Brutal arrived at the cross section cave. Hannah's mine, as he called it now. He stopped the tram, taking a deep, cleansing breath and letting it out again. He looked at the hole Hannah had insisted for over a week was the mother lode. She was so certain it had a huge vein of ore in it. It was only fifteen minutes by tram down the shaft. It would simply be too good to be true for a substantial vein to be located so close to the mouth of the mine opening, wouldn't it?

He thought of the night before. He reminded himself he'd planned to give this hellhole one more day to produce. The argument this morning, which led him leave her alone, was fast fading. Hannah was jealous of Charlotte. Did that mean she was falling for him? He sighed, chuckling to himself at her stubborn attitude this morning, and shut off the engine on the tram.

One more day, for Hannah.

Brutal entered the shallow cross shaft and looked at the wall Hannah had been focused on the day before. He picked up the ax and swung with all his might at the very center of the surface. He hit dead center and a shower of stone sent grit backbiting into his exposed skin.

It was very unusual for the rock to shatter in such a manner. Brutal looked up at the depression in the stone. He squinted at the hole.

What the hell!

In the very center of his first pick strike for the day; he saw a lighter color of stone emerge. *Thorium-Z!* Brutal picked up the ax and started swinging like a berserker. He chipped all around the lighter stone. After only half an hour, he had uncovered a five-foot diameter hole of solid Thorium-Z.

The largest find to date.

She had been right! Brutal hollered out loud. Although part of him wanted to rush and get her, bring her back and apologize over and over for not believing in her theory, he needed to accomplish something more. If he spent just a few more hours here, he would be able to bring a big chunk back for her to see.

A big, Thorium-Z colored surprise.

Hannah was going to be so excited. Brutal couldn't wait to see her face.

* * * *

Hannah heard Brutal knock at the door after being gone only an hour. Had he forgotten something? Was he back to throw her over his shoulder and carry her down the mine barbarian style as he had threatened earlier?

A lick of excitement careened down her body at the thought of being slung over one burly, muscular

shoulder. She should take every opportunity with him. Would they have time for a quickie? Would he still be angry with her? Should she be scared to open the door to him? Hannah headed towards the airlock with trepidation, then shook her head. Brutal would never hurt her. If she knew nothing else, she was certain of that fact.

Hannah was convinced he wouldn't start now. She turned the lock and swung the door open.

"Did you miss me...?" Hannah started out, but the words died on her lips as she stared at the large form filling the doorway.

Oh, God, no. Erik.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm going to fuck you until you bleed," Erik Vander said as he stormed through the portal door to their quarters. His big hand shot out, catching her completely unaware as he punched her in the chest. The blow knocked her on her ass. She struggled to suck air back into her lungs from his wicked, unexpected blow.

"Get out!" she wheezed with all the bravado she could muster.

"Oh, I don't think so, my precious whore." He slammed the door shut. It bounced, hitting the frame so hard it vibrated back open about an inch.

"Brutal, help!" she screamed, wishing for a miracle she knew wouldn't come.

"He can't hear you, bitch. I heard the tram. It's just you and me and an overdue fuck party." He advanced towards her as Hannah scrambled to her feet. She skirted around the dining room table as if it would stop him.

"You're wrong. He'll be back any minute."

"I say you're lying, you cunt," he spat out and lunged over the table at her. "Besides, it won't take me long to get my fill of you."

"Oh, so you're quick on the draw, huh? That's too bad. Brutal can go for hours," Hannah taunted him, perhaps imprudently. She was on her own with Erik the Evil for as long as she could last. Probably not long, but she wasn't going down without a fight.

Hannah dodged his grasping hands as he dove over the dining table at her. The plate from breakfast went crashing to the floor. She danced away and made a beeline for the portal door. If she could just get to the mine entrance door, she could open it and lock it from the other side. The door had a coded keypad.

"You're mine!" he screeched. Erik tackled her face down before she got within five feet of the door. His tremendous bulk flattened her and knocked the breath out of her again. Damn it!

He grabbed her by her hair and hauled her up as she tried in vain to suck air into her lungs. She twisted and elbowed him in the solar plexus with all her might. He grunted but was otherwise unaffected by her blow, so she kneed him in the balls. That made him let go of her hair at least, but he was now between her and the door.

Hannah turned, searching for a weapon of some sort. Brutal probably just used his bare hands, so she didn't think he had any weapons. *Kitchen. Knife.* She ran without thinking.

She made it as far as the dining area when Eric slammed into her, pinning her to the table. She had been kidding herself. She only lasted as long as she had thus far because she had been a physical fitness minor in college. She knew a few moves, like the infamous groin kick, but without help, she was done.

In about five minutes, she probably wouldn't care. She already hurt everywhere. Erik had no compunction whatsoever about hitting a woman. He bent her over the table where Brutal had fed her last night and this morning. He had cooked again after her miserable final day of failure at the mine.

Hannah wished she could turn back time. She wished she hadn't been so hardheaded about her theory and gone with Brutal today. He *did* need to work, and she had thrown the equivalence of a tantrum. Not well done of her. And now, an additional pitfall to her pride, she knew Brutal wouldn't be back for many

hours.

Erik grabbed her neck and pressed her face against the table. He pulled her stretchy pants down to her knees. The cold air on her ass gave her incentive to fight harder. She used her feet, now hampered by her clothes, and tried to kick at his legs. He easily dodged her, and it seemed to inflame him even more.

Then she heard a zipper. She closed her eyes. After he violated her, she would be the one blamed for the infidelity. She opened the door to him. There would be no leniency for her.

Even if Brutal didn't want her dead, the marriage officials would demand she pay for more of 'her' sins. She didn't even know if her life could be spared. Would Brutal want her dead?

"Brutal will be here any minute. He'll kill you!" she panted out one last futile effort to at least stall him longer.

"No, he won't. You and I both know he won't be back for hours. I've been watching. Once I'm done with you, he'll be forced to kill you for cheating on him. I've read up on the new laws posted in town by the Tiberius Group."

"Oh, you can read?" Hannah asked. He grabbed her hair and slammed her face down on the table. Ooh, yeah, that was going to leave a mark. Like it mattered.

"They call this rape, you bastard, even in the new world order that hates women. And Brutal would never kill me."

"You opened the door when I knocked, bitch. Then you came on to me. I tried to stop you, but I am only a weak man. I couldn't help myself." She felt his fetid breath on her cheek and an alarming bulge against the back of her thigh.

"If you do this, I will not stop until you are dead," she said coldly.

"Then maybe I'll just save Brutal the trouble and kill you myself when I'm through with you. It shouldn't take too long to get my fill." She sensed him fumbling around behind her. A single tear slipped down her cheek. Hannah closed her eyes and braced herself.

I'm so sorry, Brutal. I love you, Hannah sent out a mental thought full of her anguished regret.

"Get off my wife!" The very best four words she'd ever heard strung together in her life thundered behind her from the door.

Brutal was back! Thank God. A miracle.

Erik stepped back grinning and made the mistake of releasing her. Hannah turned, noted the evil grin, and punched him solidly in the groin with her adrenalin-powered fist. He fell to his knees. She quickly pulled up her pants one-handed and gave him a sidekick to the head while he was distracted holding his battered nuts from her first punch.

Erik reached for her, a grimace on his face, but she easily jumped out of his range. Hannah scrambled over to Brutal and hid behind him. She ran her hands over her husband's back, not really believing he was there. He had just saved her.

"So, do we fight for her again, Brutal?" Erik asked, trying to laugh even though the area between his legs surely must ache.

Brutal pulled a gun from a holster Hannah had never seen him wear before. Where did that come from?

"No, this time I'm going to shoot you, then I'll call the mine owner's authority and tell them you broke into my private quarters," Brutal said quietly.

"Only a coward shoots an unarmed man," Erik sneered.

"Oh, I'll make sure you have a weapon by the time the authorities get here, Erik. Thanks for your concern," Brutal sneered back.

"Listen, just between us men, she wanted it. She's a slut. She'll do anyone."

"You fucking liar!" Hannah started to come around from her secure place at Brutal's back to kick Erik in the nuts again. Brutal held out his arm, stopping her from advancing.

"Are you truly going to kill me over a mail order whore?"

"It's as good a reason as any to kill you," Brutal said, sounding much too calm to suit Hannah.

"Before you shoot me, I have some news which concerns you."

"News? I doubt it." Brutal took aim.

Erik started talking fast. "A transport ship came in today. I heard some big lawman from Earth was asking about you around town."

"So?"

"So maybe I have some information to give him."

"You don't have any information," Brutal scoffed.

"I do. It's regarding you and a certain bribe to the loadmaster on the mail order bride craft the day you got married. You know, the one where one of the whores didn't make it? You kill me and he'll arrest you."

"If you had information, you'd have already spilled your guts."

"Not if I can have what I wanted in the first place," he spat. "I want to taste her, Brutal. Let me have her just once, and we'll call it our little secret."

"Get out, Erik. I'm tired of you. Next time, I'll kill you on sight," Brutal promised. "Don't come back."

"You're making a mistake."

"I doubt it. Now, get out."

Erik limped through the door, and Brutal locked it behind him.

Hannah had stopped listening to the conversation when she heard Erik say a transport ship had come in. She pondered the possibility of whether Charlotte had sent any more letters to Brutal. Her eyes watered up as if all was lost.

Hannah put her face in her hands and cried. It was so unfair to be in love with a man who wasn't hers to keep.

"Don't cry, Hannah." Brutal put his arms loosely around her as she sobbed.

"I'm so sorry." Hannah threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his throat. "I'm sorry about the letter, and the mine, and everything."

"I know," he whispered. "It's okay. I'm also to blame."

"No, you're not. It was all me," she sobbed.

"I shouldn't have left you alone. I swear it won't happen again. That was why I came back."

"No, it was all my fault. I let my guard down and opened the door. I didn't even look. I thought it was you coming back to drag me down there with you. I'll shut up now. I promise to go with you and mine wherever you say." *Anything to keep you here with me and not off to marry Charlotte*, she thought.

Perhaps it was a good thing they hadn't found the mother lode after all. Otherwise, Hannah would be gone. Brutal could get rid of her to be with the woman he wanted.

"Really?" He sounded skeptical.

"I swear," she said, raising a hand and two fingers in salute.

"All right then, let's go."

* * * *

Brutal could barely contain his grin as they traversed down the shaft on the long ride to his former mine. When he got to her mine, he stopped. He couldn't wait to see Hannah's face when she saw the find.

"What are you doing?" She had a funny sound to her voice. It was that hopeful voice again, the one he realized he missed from this past week of furious mining in the cross shaft.

"We left some tools here. We need to get them before we head down," he said matter-of-factly. He was about to burst with giddy excitement. What was wrong with him anyway? It was because she'd worked so hard and come so close to never realizing her dream. He knew how that worked.

"Oh." The dejected tone was back. *But not for long*, he thought.

Brutal and Hannah stepped off the tram to enter the cross shaft mine. Before they stepped inside, Brutal grabbed her up into a ferocious bear hug.

"You worked so hard in here," he said with regret in his tone.

"It doesn't matter, Brutal. I appreciate the opportunity. No one else would have given me the chance you did."

She then wrapped her legs around his waist and planted her lips on his in a ferocious kiss. He made sure to face her away from the wall of Thorium-Z he had uncovered earlier.

The range on his meter told him it was more than fifty feet deep, because that was the max reading on his Thorium-Z-meter. Brutal carried her inside, kissing her as if it would be the last time.

Maybe it would be. After she saw the find, things would be different. She'd be able to pay off her debt in five minutes and be on the next transport back to Earth.

"Hannah? I want to show you something," he said between ferocious lip locks with her. She wasn't

paying any attention to the mine around them.

"Is it big, wide, and satisfying?" she asked, laughing.

"I believe you'll think so." He positioned her so she could see the wall of ore he'd uncovered before leaving to fetch her. He placed her on her feet. She stared up into his face so trustingly.

"Turn around, Hannah."

She laughed and shook her head. "No way, I'm not freezing my butt off so you can get your rocks off down here."

Brutal laughed in return. "Maybe we could do a little mining in here and work up a sweat."

Hannah sobered up. "That is so sweet of you, Brutal, but I won't waste any more of your time."

"Turn around, Hannah," he said again and nodded to the wall behind her. She finally turned to look, then glanced back at him and smiled. He got to see the recognition register on her face. He wasn't disappointed.

Hannah's eyes popped wide open, as did her mouth. Then she did a double take, and a small sound erupted from her throat, a sound of disbelief. She turned back to him, eyes wide and full of tears.

"How did you...?"

"You did it," he said with pride. "I tried to pass the place and couldn't do it. You were so sure, and you'd worked so hard. I was going to let you have another half day when we left this morning, but—"

"But I was being a brat. Oh, Brutal!" She turned to face the wall of Thorium-Z. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful!"

He looked at her face and said truthfully, "Yes, I have. Your face when I make you scream for me."

Hannah turned and gave him an odd look. "I dreamed someone said that to me on the flight here."

"I whispered that in your ear when you were still in your cryo-tube."

"You saw me before the auction?" she asked. "I figured Erik was lying."

He shook his head and smiled at her. "I waited for you. I was only going to bid on you, whatever it took."

"Really? What else did you do to me while I was sleeping?"

"Nothing. That was why I asked for your name. I was hoping to endear myself to you."

Hannah didn't respond. She smiled, shaking her head in amusement. She turned to look at the find again. Brutal stepped up behind her, pressing himself up against her backside before whispering in her ear, "Get to work. You know you want to."

They spent the next twelve and a half hours mining and accumulated more Thorium-Z than Brutal had seen in total since he had started mining on the planet. They had already agreed to store the find deeper in the cave and keep it a secret until they were ready to sell the entire load.

Brutal became more melancholy as the Thorium-Z mounted, knowing Hannah had earned her freedom

after about the first two hours. He wondered if she'd stay long enough to finish mining all of what was here or if she would be on the first transport out. If one had arrived earlier today, it meant he could have as little as three more days with her before she was able to go.

Brutal didn't want her to leave. He was almost willing to admit he loved her. She would probably laugh at him and leave anyway, so he remained silent.

"Aren't you tired?" Brutal asked her a few hours later.

"Yes, but it's a good tired," she responded sprightly and kept working.

"I'm hungry. Let's go home, woman," he groused.

"I know you're right, but I just can't seem to stop."

"I'll make you dinner," he offered, trying to entice her.

"So does that mean, you'll make dinner for me, or I am dinner?" Hannah teased him.

"Either works for me, but I'm done here for today, Madam Taskmaster."

"Wimp. All right, we can leave, but we're coming back early in the morning. Agreed?"

"Whatever you want, Hannah." He hoped she wouldn't realize she was actually free to go once they sold the output for today. They got on the tram, not speaking during the entire fifteen-minute trip back to the air lock. They looked like coal miners.

Brutal couldn't wait until he got her into the shower. He couldn't wait to make love to her tonight. She would be high on life for being vindicated at her mine. She'd want to celebrate all night long.

Lust streaked across his weary body and perked him up at the thought of their night ahead. He opened the air lock and stepped through, turning to take her hand but missed it when the punch from a big, meaty fist caught him off guard and sent him flying.

Chapter Twelve

Brutal was surprised by the sucker punch. He'd been watching Hannah's grimy, rejoicing face. The fist to his jaw, an occurrence so rare that Brutal almost didn't know what to do, laid him on the ground. So he came out with a vengeance. He pulled his gun and took aim.

Luckily, he was able to catch himself in time before he fired. Otherwise, he would have hit Hannah. She screamed and threw herself into the intruder's arms. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't in pain or in protection of him. She sounded pleased. It would have devastated him if she'd screamed the same way she did when she climaxed. Thankfully, it was a different kind of scream. It sounded happy.

Brutal watched as the intruder pulled a gun on him in return. Hannah threw her arms around the strange man's neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. A stab of jealousy hit him with an impact more forceful than the punch he'd just endured.

He sat on his butt in his own damn home, gun in hand, now unable to return fire because Hannah was wrapped like a monkey around the stranger. The primate in question then looked over her shoulder, smile in place, until she saw him on the ground.

Then she frowned. Finally. What the hell was going on here?

"No, Brutal, don't!" Hannah unwrapped herself from the man, dropping to her feet in front of him. The man had on a helmet with the visor raised. Brutal could only see his eyes, eyes seething with hatred. At him. Why? Brutal took the opportunity to stand up and face this new threat.

"Hannah, step back." The intruder muscled his way in front of her.

"Brutal, it's my brother," Hannah said. "Put your gun down."

Neither man lowered his weapon.

The intruder removed his helmet one handed, letting it fall to the ground, and displayed a grim face. He placed his arm around Hannah again. The other was firmly gripped on his weapon still pointed in Brutal's direction. The tall stranger looked down at her dirty face before fixing his glare on Brutal again. "You forced my sister to work in your mine with you. Are you some sort of sadistic slave driver?"

"No, I'm her husband," Brutal quipped.

"What else is she required to do for you?" her brother asked, his tone menacing. Brutal could see him tighten his grip further on the gun he held.

"Nothing I'm going to share with you."

"I'm taking her with me," Hannah's brother stated emphatically.

"She's my wife. You don't have the authority to take her away from me." Brutal's weapon hand twitched.

"Be nice, boys." Hannah turned to her brother. "Where have you been, Jonathan? Did you talk to Sophie? How did you find me?"

"I was out of the country on business. I was only allowed to speak to Sophie on the phone, and I had to chase halfway across the galaxy to find you. Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?" The intruder gave Brutal a glare. Man to man. Still, he didn't lower his gun.

"No, he saved me. Put your gun down, Jon."

"No," and her brother took aim.

"Call him off, Hannah." Brutal repositioned his own gun on her brother's head.

"Jonathan Alexander Brent! Take your gun off my husband. Now!"

"Hannah..." Her brother's voice conveyed impatience, making Brutal soften for a moment. It was the tone he'd often used with her himself.

"Impasse," Brutal said.

"What?" Jonathan Brent's eyes narrowed, but Hannah also looked with question.

"We are at an impasse. Neither of us wants to lower our weapon, and yet both of us have to. Are you willing to risk Hannah's life in a gun battle?" Brutal asked his opponent.

"No, are you?"

"No, but I'm a better shot. I could kill you even if Hannah were still wrapped around you. Can you say the same?"

"Yes, I can."

"Both of you, stop it!" Hannah released herself from her brother's grasp even as he tried to keep from relinquishing her. Brutal relaxed for a moment.

"Hannah, are you crazy? This man can't be trusted!" her brother ground out.

"How do you know?" When he didn't respond, Hannah stepped in front of her brother with her back to him and finally looked at Brutal. She reached out, putting her hand on her brother's gun arm and attempting to lower it.

"Hannah, step back," Brutal said.

"No, I won't let you kill each other. You both mean too much to me."

Brutal took one look at her eyes tearing up and lowered his weapon to the side with a long-suffering sigh. Her brother did the same. But they still glared at each other.

"Let's go inside," Hannah suggested and pushed her brother to the door of their quarters. It still looked like an interloper had broken in and tried to rape her earlier in the day. The dining room was a mess, and the living area wasn't much better.

"Did you two have a disagreement earlier?" Jonathan stepped over a plate.

"No," Hannah said but didn't elaborate further.

* * * *

A few hours later, after she and Brutal had showered separately, and Hannah had made something to eat, the three sat in the living area to talk.

"How did you find me?" she asked her brother.

"It wasn't easy. I had to come on another pretense. There was a death on the cryogenic spacecraft that

brought you here. I'm investigating the death for a private party."

"Is it her family?" she asked with sympathy.

"No, for the corporate insurance. Someone is out the money she would have brought for the match," her brother responded in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Naturally," Hannah said with disgust. What had she been thinking?

"What in the holy hell happened to you, Hannah? Good God Almighty, when the Tiberius Group took over, I was caught out of the country on a job," her brother started out.

Hannah knew he didn't actually expect her to answer because he was venting. "I didn't even know Dad was alive. I expected to come back to have two sisters to marry off. Instead, both were already married. One wasn't even on the planet anymore, and the other warned me away from her house. I only spoke a few words to Sophie.

"Her new husband was peeved about something our dad did with regard to money or gambling. I didn't get the whole story. She said he'd been in league with your husband, so I expected the worst when I got here."

"Wrong husband," Hannah murmured.

"What?" Jonathan scrunched his eyebrows in puzzlement.

"Her first husband sold her into the mail order bride business to absolve his gambling debt. I paid the debt," Brutal interjected on her behalf.

"Could you leave us alone to chat for a couple of minutes, maybe?" Jonathan asked Brutal, giving him a surly glare.

Hannah knew Brutal didn't want to leave them alone, but he surprised her by agreeing.

"I'll be outside," he said and left them in the quarters alone.

"I have money, Hannah. I can pay the debt for you."

"Jonathan..."

"How fast can you pack and be ready to go?" he demanded.

"I'm indebted to him, Jon. It's more than just money. And besides, I don't think money will be an issue."

"Then what's the issue?"

"I love him."

"No, you don't. It's not possible. How long have you known him? All of three weeks?" her brother scoffed.

"He didn't do anything wrong. He's been decent about everything."

"Unh-huh? So he didn't force himself on you? I find that very hard to believe."

"Well, it's true." Hannah felt a blush of warmth in her face at having to explain anything to her brother about her sexual activities with Brutal.

"And who gave you the shiner on your face? I can tell it's from today. Did he hit you?" He put his hand on the butt of his holstered gun again.

"No, he didn't. He saved me from someone."

"He should have kept you from getting a shiner from 'someone' in the first place. Hannah, you aren't thinking straight. You're going with me."

"No, I want to stay..." Hannah paused, thinking about Charlotte. With the Thorium-Z find, they could both be free. Brutal could marry his love Charlotte, and she could settle down with a man her brother selected for her back on Earth. The thought made her frown.

"But?" Jon asked pointedly.

"But I'm only his temporary wife. He has someone waiting for him back on Earth."

"Of course, he does." Her brother rolled his eyes. "Hannah, I need to get back. The transport leaves in two days. You and I are going to be on it. I'll have your marriage to Thomas Blackthorn annulled."

"How? I mean, it's not like I'm a virgin anymore."

Her brother's facial expression shifted immediately into a mask of retribution-seeking fury. She imagined he wished he hadn't heard the word virgin or the part about 'not any more' with regard to his sister.

"I'm supposed to bring him in for questioning, Hannah. He is the number one suspect in the death of that girl on the cryo-ship. If he's convicted, then you'll be free. The marriage can be annulled."

"That's crazy. He didn't do it," Hannah said sincerely.

"I have a witness who saw your husband enter the cargo hold before you were revived. I have another witness who said your husband bribed his way onto that same hold of the ship several hours before the auction. He was left alone with all the women for an undetermined length of time."

"So what? I already knew that."

"After he left, they couldn't revive her. She was dead, Hannah. It could have been you."

"He didn't do it. He wouldn't. I know him," she said dismissively.

"You don't know him," Jon said forcefully. "Besides, it doesn't matter now. There is going to be a warrant issued for his arrest if he doesn't come willingly. He's going with us."

"Now?" Hannah said wide-eyed. She didn't think forcing Brutal into town against his will was a very good idea.

"Yes, call him. We're all going into town together. Help me take him in quietly."

"Help take me *where* quietly?" Brutal's voice sounded from the door. How long had he been listening? He probably had bionic hearing wired in that big, brawny, genetically engineered body of his. Hannah was sure she had a guilty look on her face when she turned to him.

"Brutal, there's going to be a warrant issued for your arrest in the death of that girl from the spacecraft!"

"Hannah, shush!" Jonathan pulled his gun again. Hannah rushed to Brutal's side before her brother could grab her, refusing to believe he was involved.

"What am I being accused of?" Brutal took Hannah in his arms, turning her away from the threat of Jonathan's gun.

"Wrongful death and willful destruction of property." Jon then reached behind him and pulled a set of handcuffs off his belt as he maintained the gun on Brutal, who still held his protective stance covering her.

"Unless you're planning on wearing those bracelets yourself, Lawman, you might as well put them back on your belt. They aren't going on me."

* * * *

In town at the mining authority official headquarters, and also part-time bar, a group of miners had assembled for the inquiry. The crew from the spacecraft that had brought Hannah was also in attendance.

Dusty and Buck were there as well as one of the loadmasters she hadn't met. Hannah looked around the bar as memories of the last time she was in this room assailed her. She held fast to Brutal, both of her arms wrapped securely around one brawny arm. If this were to be her last day with him, she was spending it soaking up his warmth and scent. She didn't know what her brother might do to separate them once the inquiry was over. Then there was the Thorium-Z tucked away waiting to be sold, which gave reasonable doubt as to a further relationship with him in her near future.

Brutal didn't seem to mind her being sucked up close to him, thankfully. Jon, on the other hand, wore a perpetual scowl every time he glanced in their direction whether they touched or not. So she touched while she still could.

In a seeming huff to get away from their embrace, Jonathan strolled over to speak privately to Dusty and Buck once the three of them approached the area reserved for this particular inquiry. He gave Brutal a meaningless look of warning before stepping away to speak to the loadmasters.

Erik the Evil was also present and evidently gloating for some unknown reason. He kept looking at Hannah, licking his lips and leering. Brutal looked ready to shoot him.

Jon obviously hadn't let Brutal wear his gun into town but had finally agreed to at least bring it along. It was currently strapped to her brother's hip. Otherwise, she had no doubt they'd both still be back at the mine arguing about it.

Her head fell onto Brutal's solid upper arm just below shoulder level. She heaved a sigh, wishing for things she wasn't ever going to get. Every breath she took was filled with Brutal's mouth-watering and intoxicating masculine scent. She took several deep breaths to secure it in her memory, although it was just an excuse to smell him. It wasn't likely she'd ever forget. She wanted Brutal with all her heart and soul, but she hoped when the time came, she'd be able to let him go.

She would likely be required to do so once this stupid inquiry was over. They would cash in on the Thorium-Z find at the mine, he would release her to her brother, and eventually he'd go back to Earth, too, a wealthy man able to marry rich princess Charlotte of the expensive stationary.

Not wanting to dwell on Brutal's next wife, she happened to glance at the table across the room where Celeste and Iggy had staged their public copulation as Hannah had said, "I do," to Brutal a short three weeks ago. It seemed like a lot longer than three weeks since she had learned that sex was, in fact, very good. Especially in the masterful hands of her gorgeous, genetically engineered husband. Hannah smiled at the memory.

"You certainly have a much different look on your face than the last time you saw that table," Brutal whispered, barely audible.

She laughed out loud before she could stop it and twisted to look up into his amused face. An unspoken bond between them transpired, and she fondly remembered their tryst on the dining room table, even though she'd pretended to bend over in capitulation. In fact, the very thought of that particular 'surrender' made her cheeks warm in fond memory.

Then just as quickly she frowned, realizing for the first time she might never have the opportunity to experience making love to him again. It made her heart hurt.

He nodded as a melancholy look covered his face as well. He winked at her reassuringly as if he understood her errant, unspoken thoughts. How was she ever going to allow another man to touch her as he so expertly had?

She didn't voice her thought but wanted to say, "I suspect you've ruined me for all other men, Brutal. I hope you're satisfied."

Just then the assembled participants of the inquiry panel were called over to address the issue of the day. Hannah remained at Brutal's side.

* * * *

Hannah walked in step with him over to the group assembled for the inquiry into the death of the brunette beauty who had died mysteriously three weeks before. While having Hannah pressed up to him was not unappealing, Brutal didn't want her brother to kill him. On the other hand, he should enjoy what time he had left with her. Her brother would just have to get over it for now.

Jonathan and the assembled parties gathered around in the room where Brutal and Hannah had been married only a few short weeks ago.

"We found your DNA on her, Brutal," Dusty said apologetically, beginning the inquiry. "When her body was processed back on Earth was when it was discovered."

"Kill him," Erik said.

"Shut up!" Hannah interjected immediately. Brutal had to hold her down. She was a feisty little thing when riled. He was glad she was on his side.

"I'll admit I bribed my way on to the ship to take a look, but I only ran my finger down her cheek," he said. "I didn't do anything to cause her death."

"That's in line with what the evidence showed," Dusty said. "But you were the only one to go in prior to the auction."

"How do I know that? Any number of miners could have paraded in both before and after I left," Brutal said in his own defense.

"Nobody else witnessed any others entering or leaving the area," Dusty said with regret. Brutal suspected he didn't want to blame the man who had given him the bribe in the first place.

"What killed her?" Brutal asked.

"Someone messed with the unit. One of the coolant tubes was detached on purpose. Someone didn't want her to wake up," Buck said.

"What motive could I possibly have? I ended up having to fight for the last available female, the only one I wanted," Brutal said the last part under his breath, but one look at Hannah, and he knew she had heard

him. She smiled and squeezed his arm even tighter, if that was possible.

"Was his DNA on the tube?" Hannah asked.

"No," Dusty said. "It would burn the skin off his fingers if he touched the bare tube."

"Well, then you can look elsewhere," she said emphatically. "His fingers are fine."

"Arrest him and take him back to Earth. You can prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law there," Erik said, moving into the circle. "He's your only viable suspect. Justice demands you do this immediately."

"Why are you even allowed to voice an opinion in this matter?" Hannah asked, sending a positively malevolent glare his way.

"Because I have a huge interest in the outcome of this inquiry. You should have read the fine print of the marriage documents more closely, Brutal," Erik said in satisfaction. "We had to fight for this whore weeks ago, but if within thirty days you are parted for any reason and you lose your rights to her, well then, I win that fight by default." He turned to Hannah with a lust-filled stare. "Once Brutal is arrested, you'll become my property, and I'll have you on your knees sucking me off before he's even dragged from this room, bitch."

Brutal didn't know if what he said was true or not, but he decided he didn't care to find out. In one fluid move, he stripped Hannah from him and grabbed Jonathan Brent's gun from his holster. Less than one second after that, he had Erik pressed against the nearest wall. Jonathan's gun was securely fastened underneath his chin, the safety already snapped off. His finger pressed dangerously on the hair trigger of the weapon.

"But if I just blow your brains out right now, Erik, it solves that problem along with so many others I've let you get away with to date."

"Mr. Blackthorn, I would sincerely appreciate it if you'd please lower my weapon from him," Brutal heard Jonathan say. Then he heard the click of another safety snicking off, followed by the poke of a gun barrel against the back of his head. It was probably his own damn gun.

"Sorry, I can't do that—Mr. Brent," he added sarcastically. And he wouldn't. He should have killed Erik back in his mine dwelling, but he hadn't wanted Hannah to witness him murder someone. Now it seemed unavoidable.

"Do you sincerely believe I will allow any harm to befall my own sister?" Jon's tone dripped with disdain. Brutal watched as Erik registered Hannah and Jonathan's relationship with the widening of his already horrified eyes. It was never a good idea to get on the bad side of a Lawman for any reason. But sexually insulting a close relative, especially a sister, was at the very top of the list, second only to insulting a Lawman's mother.

"Well, I know if I pull this trigger, you won't have to be troubled. First and foremost, I want to ensure my wife's safety if I'm unjustly taken into custody."

"Unfortunately, there are all these troubling witnesses to the crime. Or are you saying you really did kill the woman in the cryo-unit and you have nothing to lose at this point?"

"You know I'm not. I had nothing to do with her death. I can't allow myself to be arrested in error. I won't risk it."

"Brutal?" Hannah's frightened voice wrapped around him, making him pause. "You don't have to kill him. I don't want to lose you because of a vile piece of wasted humanity like him. I know you didn't kill that girl, and we'll just prove it right now."

"How?"

"Well, whoever did it would have used gloves, and there would be a burn mark from the tube, right?"

"That's right, whoever did it *had* to use gloves," Dusty said distractedly. "The tube was minus 100 degrees centigrade. The gloves used probably *would* have a burn mark on them."

"Well, then let's talk to all the miners present on the day of the last auction and look at their gloves," Buck said.

"The guilty party won't willingly submit to his gloves being looked at unless he's stupid," Dusty said disgustedly.

"Why don't you just look at the film footage?" Jonathan Brent asked.

"What film footage?" Erik Vander asked in a shocked tone. Brutal felt Erik's body stiffen as if in surprise. "There are no cameras in the load areas."

"How do you know?" Brutal asked suspiciously and kneed him in the thigh. "If there is film, I want see the footage, too. It will prove me innocent."

"Dang me. I forgot all about the new camera installed," Dusty said excitedly. "I'll get the ship captain to pull the film."

Erik Vander suddenly moved and tried to fight, but Brutal held him fast against the wall. "There are no cameras in the loading dock. I know because I checked the area with a bug sweeper myself when I was there..." Erik caught himself and clamped his mouth shut.

"When were you there?" Brutal asked in a lethal tone and lowered the gun, dropping it to the floor at his feet so he could grab Erik with both fists and hurt him with his bare hands.

Erik didn't answer but sent a damn-I-guess-I'm-caught look to Brutal. Brutal responded by pulling him off the wall and landing three very satisfying punches to his face. Erik slid to the ground in an unconscious heap. He turned to see Jonathan with his gun still raised and pointed at his head.

"Feel better?" Jon asked and deliberately lowered the pistol and re-holstered it.

"Actually, I do. Now, you can go pull the film and see for yourself I'm innocent, since I'm sure you still don't trust me."

Hannah threw herself into his arms, wrapping around him with her face pressed securely into his neck. Apparently, she was already satisfied of his innocence.

Over her shoulder, Brutal watched her brother's body tense up at their close embrace. He may have won the battle, but the war was far from over. It was clear Jonathan Brent did not want him for a brother-in-law. With Hannah's record-breaking Thorium-Z find, he didn't really have a hold on her any longer. He'd promised to let her go back to her family if she was right. She'd been about as right as she could be regarding her cross shaft mine.

Dusty came back a few minutes later with the film footage from that day. Erik's bug sweeper had missed

the camera. It clearly showed him detaching the hoses.

Jonathan had him cuffed before he regained consciousness. As they stood him up, Hannah asked, "Why did you kill her?"

"I wasn't trying to kill her. I only wanted to use her once before the auction. The last time she was here, she felt she was too good for me," he sneered. "She wasn't."

After all the paperwork was filled out and Erik was securely in the brig awaiting the journey back to Earth, Jonathan invited Hannah and Brutal to dinner. They decided to eat in the hotel restaurant where he was staying until the flight departed.

"Why don't you go up to my room, Hannah, and get freshened up? I brought some of your clothes. They are hanging in the closet. Brutal and I will wait for you in the bar."

"I'll be right back," Hannah said, her expression wary.

Brutal watched her turn to go, but then she just as quickly turned back and threw her arms around his neck. He in turn crushed her to his chest and ground his mouth on hers. She opened for him so he could kiss her like he wanted to. He stroked his tongue against her sweet soft one methodically like it would be the last time he would ever get to taste her, because it might be the last time. After she went upstairs, he would explain to her brother about the marriage contract between them and the additional agreement he had established in a weak moment, thinking it would buy him another year with her.

Meanwhile, Brutal sensed her brother's annoyance and blew it off. After a very sensual lip lock, which lasted several long, satisfying moments, he breathed deeply of her unique scent before he released her. She slid down his body until her feet were underneath her. He wanted to say the words to her he swore he would never say to another woman, 'I love you, Hannah.' It should have been easy, but he found he couldn't do it. He smiled at her instead.

"Be right back," she said, smiling in return. He nodded and turned to Jonathan when she was gone.

"I don't care what your arrangement with her is," Jonathan said sternly. "She's going with me back to Earth when I leave. Are we clear on this, or do I need to persuade you of this fact?"

"You had best keep her safe once she's back on Earth with you then."

Jon looked surprised that Brutal gave in without a fight.

"I will release her into your custody. Tell Hannah I'll give her thirty-five percent of the stake we found. Don't force her to marry..." Brutal trailed off his sentence. Her brother would find a suitable man for her, even though the very thought made him seethe with a fury he'd never endured before.

"Not staying for dinner?"

"No. Have a safe journey." Brutal retreated to his mine alone, leaving Hannah in her brother's capable care. He exited the hotel quickly before she came back. There was no need for a tearful good-bye, especially not from him.

* * * *

Hannah risked life and limb to visit Brutal at his mine. She had to sneak out of her room at the hotel in town. Then she'd rented a four-wheeled conveyance, telling the man it was for her brother.

It was strange coming back to the mine as a guest. Her flight was scheduled for later in the day, but she

wanted to see Brutal alone one last time. She stepped off her ride and headed for the door. He answered it before she even knocked.

"Hannah, what are you doing here? Are you alone?" He peeked around her shoulder to see for himself if anyone was behind her.

She shook her head. "No, it's just me. I wanted to say good bye, Brutal, without my brother hovering around watching us with a perpetual frown on his face."

Brutal's hands went to his hips as if he were supremely perturbed with her. "Well, I'll have to take you back then. Even with Erik put away, it isn't safe for you to be out here all alone."

"You sound like my brother."

"Does he know you're here?" he asked incredulously.

"Not exactly," she admitted quietly.

"God's wrath, Hannah." His voice sounded gruff like he was angry, but he didn't seem that angry. "Guess I'll have to take you back right now then, won't I?"

"No, wait. Did you miss me, even just a little bit?" she asked him hopefully.

"It was only two nights."

"So, did you?"

"I missed you all right. My bed is lonely without you thrashing about at night," he said brusquely.

"I never thrashed about once."

"I just hid the bruises from you."

"Brutal, I have to know before I leave..." She stared up into his dark eyes. *I have to know if you love me*, she wanted to say.

"What do you need to know?" His luscious chocolate brown eyes caressed her face.

She chickened out at the last minute and asked instead, "Do you forgive me for what I did with your letters from Charlotte?"

"I do," he said, sounding very sincere. "Now, I have a question for you. You said you loved me the other day. Was that true?" All of a sudden, he pulled her into his arms, squeezed her, and then kissed the top of her head.

"When did I say that?"

"I believe it was when Erik was behaving badly, right before I spoke up and distracted him so you could punch him in the nuts."

"I said that out loud?" She hadn't realized she'd spoken those words burning with regularity in her mind. At the time, she'd been slightly distracted.

"Perhaps it was merely the circumstance of the moment."

"Oh, yeah, I remember now. My brother taught me how to fight dirty." She smiled in satisfaction.

"Good for him, although your brother probably wants me dead, too."

"Undoubtedly."

"Is it true?"

"That he wants you dead? Perhaps, but I won't let him hurt you," she said coyly.

"No, that you love me. Is that true?"

"I don't want to keep you from what you wish."

"You still owe me a year, Hannah."

"I do not. You're rich because of me. And what about Charlotte?" Hannah raised her head and sought out his gaze.

"I told you not to worry about her. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm ready to fulfill the bargain. You can leave. You earned it."

"But..."

"But what? You're free to go, Hannah. So go."

"I need to know if you love Charlotte. I really need to know, Brutal. Please tell me the truth."

"I don't know why my manly pride is so obstinate where Charlotte Stanfield is concerned, but here's the truth. The day I married you, I got a letter from her releasing herself from our engagement. She informed me she never intended to marry a bio-engineered freak like me anyway. She was just trying to rile her daddy. So I washed my hands of her, married you, and knew I'd never think about her again."

"What a bitch," Hannah said.

"Well, anyway," he chuckled at first and then turned serious. "I obviously didn't hold you to the extra year because you found the richest Thorium-Z mine in the history of this planet. So you don't even have to stay for the original contract. I just want you to be happy. I already released you to your brother. I gave him thirty-five percent of the projected stake to hold for you."

"That's it?"

"What? You want a bigger cut?"

"No, I don't care about the Thorium-Z. How can you just release me like I mean nothing to you?"

Brutal tried to form the words she wanted to hear. He wanted to say them, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. Perhaps he needed to hear them from her when Erik didn't have her bent over a table. Or perhaps he was just a fool. Let her go. She deserved a better life than one forced on her by circumstances beyond her control.

"Yeah, I can. Good luck, Hannah. And thank you."

"But—"

"No buts, Hannah. I'm not even going to seduce yours."

"Why not? I love you, Brutal. If Charlotte doesn't stand in my way, then I want a life with you. Can you

honestly say I mean nothing to you? Nothing at all?"

"I thought you wanted your life on Earth back. I thought you wanted to choose your own husband."

"Why would I want that? I have a husband. Listen, Brutal, I wanted to be right about the mine, and I was. So you will, of course, have to listen to me gloat about it from now on. I mean, who else would? I truly don't want to go anywhere without you. I wish..."

"What do you wish?"

Hannah closed her eyes. She was about to bare her soul and didn't want to see a look of pity on his face if she were mistaken. "I wish we were married permanently. Forever. I do love you. Don't you care for me just a little?"

"I don't know, Hannah. That means I'd get to be your lord and master for all eternity. I might get tired of you after a couple hundred years or so."

Her eyes popped open to his smile.

"I love you. Will you marry me forever, Hannah?" he asked.

"I will. Do you want to seal the bargain by taking me over the next table you see?"

"Maybe, as long as your brother isn't in the same room."

"Coward."

"Is that how you're going to treat your lord and master?"

"Only for the first couple of hundred years."

"Then we have a bargain, Madam Taskmaster," Brutal said before he devoured her mouth to seal their final deal.

The End

LARA SANTIAGO

Lara Santiago always loved to write. However, her pragmatic, analytical side got the upper hand at an early age and informed her she should be getting a ‘real’ job and not pursuing a creative writing career.

She joined the Air Force and spent her four years of service in Blytheville, Arkansas working nights in Supply issuing aircraft parts to guys working on the flight line. Her husband discovered her there and married her to continue getting his aircraft parts quicker than all the others.

Lara soon earned a degree in the field of Logistics—a word she thinks is very sexy. No logisticians will ever be the bad guy in any of her novels.


After the military, Lara spent many practical years working at a ‘real’ job, allowing her analytical side total free rein. Then one day, the characters banging incessantly inside her brain simply couldn't be silenced any longer. She bought a laptop with the sole purpose of writing a book to allow her creative side to express itself and to let all those characters out. Her motto ... so many characters ... so little time.

To those interested, Lara's practical, analytical side is now stuffed in a dark hole and only allowed out once or twice a month to pay bills.

When she isn't hunched over her faithful laptop, now with half the letters chipped off in her zeal to write as fast as possible, Lara enjoys reading, catching up on all her recorded television shows, and watching movies. Oh, and occasionally, she cooks for her family, too.

She hopes her readers enjoy her stories and looks forward to hearing from them—but only if they refrain from insisting she make anyone in Logistics a bad guy.

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