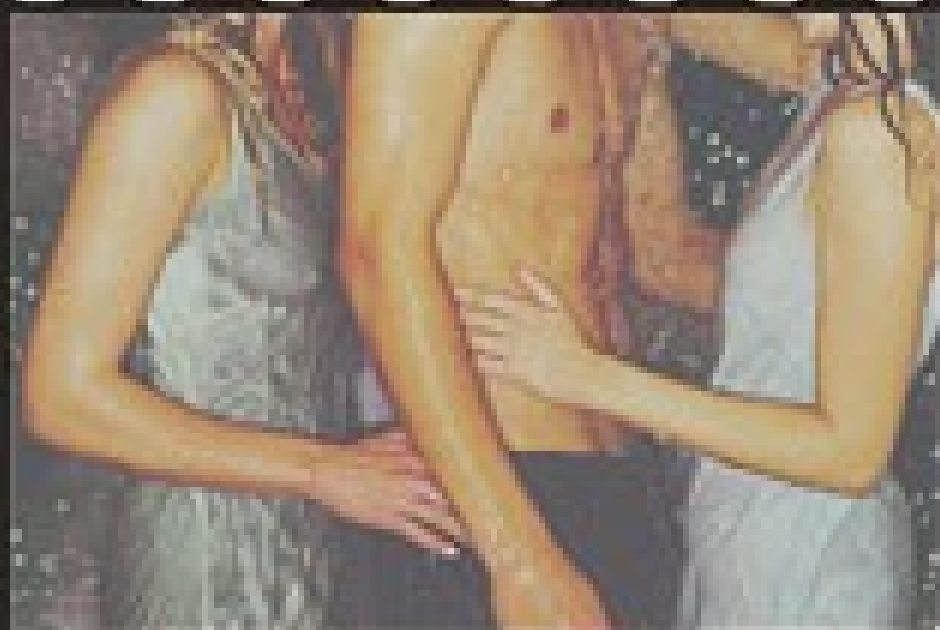


# RATED X-MAS



## CHRISTMAS NOIR

BARBARA KARMAZIN

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## Chapter One

It was a plain manila envelope. There was no return address.

Shannon licked her suddenly dry lips. Every piece of mail that came to her house was automatically scanned by her security system for explosives, drugs, poisons, DNA, and infectious bacteria. There was no reason for her to be suspicious or feel afraid.

Her name and address had been hand-printed on the envelope in large block letters.

Shannon opened the envelope and upended it. Twenty holo-photographs spilled out onto her coffee table, shimmering 3D reproductions faithful to the last detail. Twenty perfect images of Meredith.

The first image showed Meredith lying on her back upon a white fur rug with her arms stretched over her head. A bright fire blazed merrily in the fireplace behind her. Mistletoe hung on the mantelpiece. Long blond hair fanned out behind her head. Her cerulean blue eyes glowed with love and laughter. A faint blush highlighted her pale skin. Gentle shadows caressed Meredith's sweet, uplifted breasts, pert nipples, the lush curve of her hips, and the silky soft curls nestled at the base of her erect cock.

The rest of the images were horror personified, a grotesque, blood-splattered rape of Merry's slashed, twisted, disemboweled body. She lay perfectly centered in a pool of congealed blood. Fear had distorted her face into a mask of agony.

*Oh, god! Not Merry!*

She'd looked so happy yesterday evening when she called on the vidphone and said she was going out on a date.

Shannon's heart pounded against her chest. Tears spilled down her face. *Poor, beautiful Merry. She never had a chance.*

A single sheet of plain white paper lay beside the images. Two words in solid block printing filled the center of that paper. YOU'RE NEXT.

Whoever sent this envelope knew exactly how her security system scanned all incoming mail deliveries.

Shannon swiped at the tears that kept blurring her sight. She focused on the security monitor images playing across the opposite wall. No windows in her house. Too much of a security risk. Snow blanketed the ground, transforming the city streets into a winter night's fairytale with glittering icicles dangling from trees and shrubbery.

A picket line of angry men and women walked past the sealed gate entrance to her home. Snowflakes whirled around their tightly wrapped coats and scarves. They'd trampled the snow into an ugly gray slush under their booted feet. They remained the mandatory ten-meter distance from the gate. Their holographic signs flashed biblical verses from Genesis about God creating man in his image.

Shannon raked her hands through her hair. "God created man in his own image. In God's image, he

created him; male and female, he created them.”

Of course, the protestors took those verses out of context.

In her mind, when she read those words, it meant God was a hermaphrodite. How else could both man and woman be created in God’s image, unless he had the attributes of both sexes?

To the men and women on that picket line, Shannon, Meredith, and all the hermaphrodites who chose to live within this enclave were abominations. Gaining equal protection under the law for herms had been only the first step in a long, gradual campaign for acceptance in normal, everyday society. Should she retreat from New York City and establish a new enclave in one of the orbital habitats?

Shannon shook her head. Retreating would only encourage this murderer.

She’d been one of the lucky ones, born into wealth with loving parents who’d refused to have her altered at birth. About one in every five thousand children was born with ambiguous genitals. In 2062, for a city the size of New York, that came out to ten thousand intersexed people.

Unfortunately, too many of those children were surgically altered at birth to reflect either a female or male sexual identity. Those herms not surgically altered often faced sexual abuse from their families, and many became prostitutes because of this abuse. Getting the equal rights amendment for intersexed people passed in the World Congress meeting was only the first step in her legal battle for herself and others like her.

It didn’t matter if she had full-scan vidcams cleverly disguised in simple trims and moldings around all her buildings, and privacy screens activated at all windows. It didn’t matter if there were motion pads at every access, palm and DNA ID locks, and top-of-the-line alarm droids.

Meredith had used the exact same security setup for her apartment, and now she was dead.

During the last decade, technology wizards had transformed image creation into an esoteric art form on the web. What if someone had faked those images and sent them in an attempt to panic her?

She couldn’t stick her head in the sand and hope the images from this envelope were fakes. “Computer.”

“Yes, Ms. MacNal?”

“Connect me to the police department in full audio and visual mode. I have a murder to report.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Detective Tannamae Jones arched her eyebrows at her partner, Fergus DeSoto, while their aircar circled the building. The parking protocol was programmed into the computer controls. All she’d had to do was state the name of the street and building and let it find the best parking space available. “Pretty high-class digs here. The only herms I knew when I grew up in Vietnam were prosts.”

DeSoto stretched his arms over his head and flashed her one of his sexy grins. Six-five and all muscle, half Scottish and half Puerto Rican, with dark red hair and gorgeous caramel brown skin, he could turn her body into pure raging hormones with just one look. The midnight-blue casual shirt and slacks he wore accented his build without binding. It was the perfect combination of style and comfort. “The times, they are a-changing, *mi cariña*. Herms have equal rights now.”

She shrugged. Yes, the times had changed. A hundred years ago, her great-grandparents had fought on opposite sides. Now, *she* existed. Half African-American and half Vietnamese.

The aircar settled down on the rooftop beside six more police cars. Tannamae and Fergus exited and strode across the tarmac. Puddles of half-melted slush and snow splashed against their boots. A uniformed officer -- a tall, broad-shouldered woman with dirty-blond hair -- stood guard at the emergency exit access door. The holoic ID on her uniform pocket read "Officer Browning."

Officer Browning lifted a portable scanner and aimed it at Fergus and Tannamae. Two quick blips from the device confirmed their IDs. She tapped the golden metal button of the comlink clipped to her left earlobe and spoke. "Detectives DeSoto and Jones have arrived."

Tannamae pulled a pair of surgical gloves over her hands, slipped shoe gloves over her boots, and waited for Fergus to don his regulation crime scene duds. "Where is the victim?"

Browning jerked her thumb at the door. "Penthouse apartment. This gives you direct access through the kitchen."

The short staircase took them past a basic security cam setup to a solid titanium-alloy door wedged open with a chair. Two droids whirled back and forth on cushioned track feet, scanning for fingerprints, DNA, hair, fibers, and other evidence.

White ceramic-tiled floor and gleaming silver countertops greeted them. Two plates of uneaten food and two full wine glasses rested on the teakwood table between matching chairs. Two candles had burned out long ago.

Fergus went first and eased open the living room door. They stepped inside. The smell of blood and feces hit her first. Blood splatters on the wall, sofa, and floor detailed a violent struggle. The techs had already sprayed fluorescent markers on the blood. Every drop glowed bright red.

Two more uniforms and four techs waited outside the open door of an adjoining bedroom.

Tannamae and Fergus circled the living room without stepping in the blood, then entered the bedroom.

The victim had been positioned in the middle of the blood-drenched bed with her intestines draped over her legs and her amputated cock jammed into her open mouth. The murderer had posed her with sliced-off breasts in her cupped hands.

One of the techs stepped forward, a short, blond man wearing full surgical suit and half facemask. "The scene's already been recorded. We got all the angles and did the trajectory layouts and splatter analysis. The coroner has already declared her dead and is waiting for you to release the body for autopsy."

Tannamae sighed and exchanged a weary stare with Fergus. It didn't matter how many times the techs had recorded the scene or how well they'd gathered evidence, nothing beat actual physical observation by the detectives on duty. "Everyone vacate the area," she said. "We need to be alone now. After we finish making our own recordings and observations, we'll call you on the comlink to remove the body."

Shannon landed her aircar on the rooftop of the Herm Foundation office building. She scowled at the security vidcam images on her dashboard showing yet another group of picketers at the ground floor public entrance. Droid guard units patrolled the pedwalks and kept them away from any physical contact with her employees. With only two more days until Christmas, they should have more pleasant plans for their holidays than wasting their time waving signs and shouting ugly slogans.

A blizzard was predicted for this afternoon. The extra misery factor of trudging through the storm should dampen their enthusiasm. She grinned at the thought of them stumbling half-frozen through the snowdrifts.

Shannon exited the aircar. The anti-theft alarm system automatically went live when she locked the door. She strode across the rooftop. A fat snowflake landed on her cheek and melted in a warm trickle. She lifted her face to the sky and spun around in a circle. *Yes!* Let the snow come and drive away the protestors.

Finally she stopped, went to the private elevator entrance, and placed her hand on the ID panel. It glowed under her hand and the door slid open. Merry had looked so happy in the first image. How long had she experienced the joy of feeling loved and cherished by another, even if it was a lie?

The elevator slowed to a stop. The door opened and Shannon entered her office. She tossed her coat on the couch, went to the desk, reduced the exterior vidcam images of the picketers to one small corner of the wall screen, and pulled up Meredith's job schedule for the week. Two red flags glowed on emails from the Social Service departments at Memorial Hospital and City Hospital. Merry's basic administrative duties and files could be divided among her co-workers, for now.

Shannon opened the emails. Parent consultation interviews were scheduled at nine and ten tomorrow morning. Both mothers had gone into labor this morning and the ultrasounds had already confirmed the ambiguous sex of their babies. Too late to schedule another worker to take those interviews.

She would have to conduct those interviews and see if she could convince the parents to move into the hermaphrodite-housing enclave. Young herms growing up within a community of well-adjusted adult hermaphrodites limited the potential psychological damage of their sexual identities.

She clicked on the office interior communications system and programmed it to send a full audio and visual transmission to every employee in the building. Green lights flashing across the top of the screen signaled that her programming had taken effect.

She folded her hands in her lap and gazed into the vidcam's lens. "I'm sure you've all seen and heard this morning's top news story. Meredith Jackson was brutally murdered yesterday."

Her employees, men, women, and herms, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and mixed-raced, stopped in mid-motion at their desks and turned to their computer screens. Their shocked faces gazed back at her in overlapping images from the full-sized wall screen like the images from an insect's multiple eyes.

Her mouth felt dry and raw, as if she'd swallowed ashes. She sucked in a deep breath and willed herself to remain calm. "When the police conduct their interviews of Meredith's friends and co-workers, it is vitally important that everyone cooperates fully with their investigation of her murder. Because I have no idea when her body will be released for cremation, I am holding a special memorial service two days from now, on Christmas Eve."

Her breath hitched, forcing her to take a gulp of air. Shannon unwound her fingers and rested her hands on the desk. She must present a calm and dignified appearance in front of her employees. The treacherous

tears streaming down her face weren't helping matters any. "I'll send a memo around the office with specific details of this memorial."

She blinked away her tears, and murmured, "End transmission," then slapped her hand on the cut-off switch.

Shannon activated the employee handbook file on the computer and inserted the appropriate codes for paid bereavement leave and counseling services for all employees. She stopped to check the memo over one last time. What had she missed?

Two red arrows flashed again on the organizational chart indicating Merry's liaison appointments. How could she forget that very important detail? She needed to create another memo opening Merry's job position for new applicants.

*Later.* She'd do that after the holidays. The office would be shut down from Christmas Eve through New Year's Day anyway.

The memory of Merry's happy face in that first image flashed across Shannon's mind again. Was she going to die without ever experiencing love? She wasn't picky. All she wanted was to love and to be loved. You'd think being a herm and having the capabilities to love either sex would make it easier instead of harder to find someone to love.

She'd kept her distance from Merry just like she did with all of her employees because she didn't want to be sued for sexual harassment. *Damn it! It wasn't fair!* She had enormous wealth from her parents' computer stocks and even more income generated from the orbital habitats they'd built. She'd spent her entire life striving to help all herms. And in the end, she sat alone in her office, too afraid to risk losing her heart to another.

*I'm sick and tired of being lonely! Sick of using sex toys to satisfy myself. I want someone to love.*

Shannon hit the send key for the bereavement leave memo and shut down the computer.

*I wish I had someone I could trust never to betray me. Someone to love me forever. The way Mom and Dad loved each other.*

The security link chimed. She activated it. "Is there a problem?"

Rolf Danner's familiar face appeared on the viewscreen. Standing six-and-a-half-feet tall, with strawberry blond hair and piercing blue eyes, he reminded her of a Viking prince instead of a modern-day security operative. He leaned forward and studied her face with an intent stare. "I just wanted to know if there's any way I can help you. Meredith's death must have been a total shock."

Shannon shook her head. She dared not trust him or anyone Merry knew. Not now. Not after what had happened. Why was he making friendly overtures to her now, after two years on her staff? He'd always kept his distance before. "I'm fine. I've already contacted the police. I expect you to cooperate with them fully."

He nodded. "Just remember. If you need me, call me. Anytime, day or night, and I'll be there for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fergus paused the monitor screen, sat back in his chair, and quirked an eyebrow at his partner. Tannamae's hair flowed past her neck in a cascade of soft black spirals. Spirals he loved to twist around

his finger whenever he kissed her. “So far, we have fifty-six regular contacts in the victim’s email. The basic security scans eliminated forty-nine as valid suspects. As for the other seven contacts, guess who was the most recent?”

“Shannon MacNal?”

“Of course.”

Tannamae shook her head and sent her curls bouncing again. “It doesn’t make sense. Why would she contact the police and report a murder if she was the one who did it? Why would she murder another herm after working so hard all her life to obtain equal rights and legal protections for them?”

She had a point there. He shrugged. “Murder doesn’t have to make sense. Maybe they were lovers at one time and Ms. MacNal got jealous when a new lover came on the scene. Maybe she reported the murder in order to throw us off the scent. What I want to know is who shut down the victim’s security system so that there’s no audio or visual records available of her death.”

Tannamae pursed her lips. “Five minutes after Ms. MacNal’s email, the victim’s entire security system went offline. Are the two events linked, and if so, how did Ms. MacNal accomplish this?”

She scowled. Her dark eyes went even darker with her thoughts. “This is the fifth hermaphrodite murder in the last two years. As far as we know, Ms. MacNal had no contact with the other four victims.”

Fergus tapped his fingers on the side of his keyboard and shook his head. “Depending on how skilled the murderer is with computer security programs, he or she could have inserted a piggyback code into Ms. MacNal’s email system. That would have triggered a direct link between her email and the victim’s security going off grid.” He pulled the keyboard up and tapped in another request.

“What are you looking at now?” Tannamae asked.

“I’m wondering how many other incidents occurred in the victim’s security links. I’m wondering if the victim was in the habit of shutting down her system in order to accommodate a secret lover. Then, I’m going to see if we can match up any of her contacts with system shutdowns.”

He tapped his fingers on the keyboard again. “I’m running a third-level security background search on Ms. MacNal. We might as well, just to be on the safe side.”

Tannamae booted up her computer. “While you’re doing that, I’m going to take another look at the other victims’ reports and autopsies.”

Almost four hours later, their suspect list had been pared down to three possibilities.

The interoffice comlink went green.

Fergus exchanged an annoyed look with Tannamae. “This better be good. I hate interrupting an investigation for stupid meetings.” He flicked open the link.

Their district captain’s bald-headed visage glared at them from the monitor screen. “Detectives Desoto and Jones, report to my office now for a private meeting on your newest case.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Shannon gritted her teeth, paced back and forth, and counted to ten. Her hands were clenched so tight



that her fingernails cut into her palms, but it was either that or pull her hair out in sheer frustration. Besides, turning around and assaulting two police detectives would only make the situation worse, not better, for her. “This is crazy! You can’t do this to me.”

The male detective, Fergus Desoto, spoke in slow, reasonable tones. His voice had a lovely Spanish lilt that sent every nerve ending on her body into super tingle. “We don’t like this any more than you do. It’s orders. We don’t have any other choice. It’s either this or put you into protective custody.”

Shannon whirled around. “Protective custody? You’d put me in jail? I’m not the murderer. Shouldn’t you be focusing your energies on capturing whoever’s killing herms instead of harassing me?”

The female detective, Tannamae Jones, had soft brown skin, almond-shaped eyes, and loose, black curls that gave her an exotic, almost magical appearance. Five-six was the minimum height for police officers. She must have barely squeaked by that requirement. Standing above her, Shannon felt like a clumsy elephant in her six-foot-tall frame.

Fergus played his hand across the small of Tannamae’s back and guided her to the other side of the table. She tilted her head to the side, flashed a seductive smile at him while he pulled out a chair for her. When she sat down, he moved behind her chair and rested his hand upon her shoulder.

Shannon sucked in a deep breath. Her throat ached. Detectives Tannamae Jones and Fergus DeSoto were more than just partners. They were lovers. Why couldn’t she have someone give her little touches and looks like that?

Tannamae held up her hand. She had short, clean nails and delicate wrists. Plus, she worked out regularly; Shannon was sure of that because the muscles in her arms were whipcord-hard. “We’re not harassing you. It’s your choice. You know the law mandates protective custody for potential victims of domestic violence. You qualify because of the threatening note you received with the holopic images of the latest victim. Either accept that we’re moving in with you until this case is solved, or accept protective custody in a more secure establishment.”

Shannon bit back a weary sigh. They were right. That particular law was an offshoot from domestic violence cases where the police hadn’t protected potential victims to the fullest extent possible. Even though this murder didn’t appear to be a domestic violence case, they couldn’t be sure and had to abide by the letter of the law. She didn’t have any other choice but to let them move in with her until the murderer was captured or killed. “All right. You can stay. I’ll tell the house droid to put clean sheets in the spare bedroom.”

Tannamae shook her head. “One of us must remain within three feet of you at all times. Would you be more comfortable having a man or a woman bunked down in your bedroom with you?”

Shannon stopped, crossed her arms under her breasts, and took her time looking them over from head to toe. Good. A blush darkened both detectives’ faces now. Served them right for doing this to her. If she called their bluff, would they back off and give her a semblance of privacy? What the hell? She might as well stick it to them deep and dirty. “It doesn’t matter who sleeps in my bed. I’m a herm, a shemale with breasts and a penis. Both sexes turn me on.”

She placed her hands on her hips and smiled a slow, seductive smile. “I’m going to take a shower now. Do you want to watch?”

The sound of water splashing in the shower came out loud and clear past the half-open door. Standing outside the bathroom was a compromise that gave Shannon a semblance of privacy while satisfying the letter of the law that said a police officer or detective must remain in the same room as the potential victim. Tannamae leaned against the wall and rubbed her arms. A nice, hot shower would help her relax, too. "Shannon did a great job of goading us with her remarks. How are we going to resolve this fiasco?"

Fergus lifted his arms and stretched himself with the unconscious ease of a wild animal. A tigerish glint gleamed in his whiskey-amber colored eyes. Per departmental regulations, he kept his dark red hair in a military buzz cut. The café-au-lait skin he'd inherited from his Puerto Rican father always reminded her of a surfer's tan. He flashed a wicked grin and said, "We could always flip a coin."

And what would that prove? Nothing, really. If she won the toss, she'd spend a sleepless night totally aware of her proximity to Shannon. And if Fergus won the toss, she'd still lose sleep. Not that she didn't trust her man. No, it wasn't that. She just didn't feel comfortable with the thought of him sleeping in the same bed with Shannon.

Fergus grinned, strolled over to Tannamae, and traced her mouth with his fingertip. "What's the matter, *mi corazon*?" He leaned in for a long, slow kiss that curled her toes and made her want to rip his pants and shirt off so she could savor every inch of him.

She managed to pull away from that kiss without groaning in frustration and glared at him. "The last thing we need right now is to get ourselves all hot and bothered and then not be able to do anything about it. I don't like the coin toss idea. The only logical way to solve this without causing any problems is to have both of us sleep in the bedroom with her."

"That sounds like a fabulous solution." Shannon's sultry murmur behind Tanny raised goosebumps on her arms. "I've always wanted to try a ménage."

Tanny sighed, schooled her face into a bland mask, and turned around. She'd be pissed, too, if she had to allow strangers to invade her personal space like they were invading Shannon's.

Shannon leaned in the wide-open doorway, very properly clad in a long-sleeved, white cotton pajama top and pants. Tall, broad-shouldered, and small-breasted, she looked strong enough to hold her own against most assailants. Her brown hair swirled in wet waves around her face and neck, leaving damp patches on her shoulders. The front of her loose-fitting pants failed to completely conceal the small bulge of her sex. Pale peach glitter polish added a disconcerting and very feminine gleam to her fingernails and toenails. "For my own peace of mind, I recommend pajamas for both of you. That would be less tempting all around."

Shannon grinned and arched sardonic eyebrows at them. "You did remember to bring pajamas, didn't you?"

Tanny bit her lip and did her best not to react.

Fergus cleared his throat. A slight flush darkened his cheeks. He pulled his gaze away from the front of Shannon's pants up to her face. "I forgot to bring any with me."

Shannon's grin widened even further. "I'll gladly lend you a pair of mine." She let her gaze travel over Fergus in a smoldering and lingering assessment of his physique. "How tall are you?"

"Six-five."

“They might be bit snug on you. I’m only six foot.” Shannon pursed her lips and a speculative gleam deepened within her light blue eyes. “As for your partner?”

Tannamae gritted her teeth. After they solved this case, she had every intention of ripping a few departmental heads off. In the meantime, they were just going to have to make the best of a very awkward situation. “I need to borrow a pair of pajamas, too.”

Shannon took her time looking Tanny over from head to toe, tsked, and shook her head. “If you roll up the arms and legs, I have another pair that should fit you very nicely. It’s such a shame. As much as I would enjoy it, I suppose it’s against the rules for you to sleep in the nude with me.”

She spun on her heel, padded barefooted across the thick hunter green carpet to a sturdy dark cherry wood bureau, and opened the top drawer.

\* \* \* \* \*

No matter how much Fergus soaped and scrubbed his body, it didn’t change the fact that he had a raging hard-on.

Shannon’s sultry-voiced insinuations had kept his mind in the gutter all night long. Plus, the sexy way she kept staring at him and then Tanny made him remember that in addition to her pussy and breasts, Shannon had a cock she wanted to use on both of them.

Slow and easy, he stroked the slippery, soaped length of his cock. He closed his eyes and considered the possibilities. How would it feel if he started out with Tanny sandwiched between him and Shannon? Or would Shannon prefer to be in the middle while he and Tanny played with the startling blend of soft, womanly breasts on her chest and the small penis sticking up from the wiry curls and folds of her pussy lips?

What was that word she’d used to describe herself? Shemale? Yeah, that was the perfect word for her. Hermaphrodite sounded like something from a medical textbook. But shemale -- that word rolled off your tongue just right. One thing for sure, having both male and female sexual parts gave Shannon a very special advantage whenever she made love. As a shemale, Shannon knew how it felt as a woman and as a man. Because of this dual perspective, she probably knew exactly how to satisfy both sexes.

Fergus switched the shower to steam pulse and let it sluice across his skin. Stabs of needle-sharp spray teased his balls and cock. He groaned under his breath, tightened his grip, and stroked faster. The tender skin at the head of his cock swelled and throbbed on the cusp of release. Had Shannon jacked herself off, too, while she showered?

What about Tanny? Was she as interested in Shannon as he was? Had she aimed the shower spray directly onto her pussy and let it tease her to orgasm?

How would it feel to pump his cock into Tanny’s pussy while Shannon pressed her breasts against his back and thrust into his ass? Come to think of it, it would probably feel a lot more natural than a woman wearing a strap-on cock trying to give him a new experience. Or would Tanny prefer to have Shannon take care of her ass while he handled her pussy and felt Shannon’s shemale sex rubbing against his larger male cock inside Tanny?

He pictured himself humping both of them, one after the other, and every nerve in his body centered on the friction of his hands slipping and sliding up and down his cock. His come spilled out in long splats against the shower curtain.

Fergus collapsed against the wet, tiled wall and shook his head to get rid of the ringing sound in his ears. Then he bent over and snagged the washcloth from where it lay on the floor of the tub.

That was one hell of a fucking mess he'd left on the curtain. Talk about leaving incriminating evidence behind. Tanny would nail him to the wall if she found out he'd been jacking himself off in the shower. He was here to solve a series of brutal murders and bring a criminal to justice, not waste his skills and experience as a homicide detective by thinking and acting like a horny teenager with no self-control.

If Shannon became the next victim because he couldn't keep his mind on his job, he'd kill himself rather than live with that shame. He and Tanny were the best detectives in the division. No way in hell was he going to ruin her career along with his just because they had to remain celibate for the duration of this investigation.

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Shannon reset the views on her bedroom wallscreen. Staring at the exterior street views was a lot less tempting than watching Tannamae sitting in front of the mirror combing out her wet hair. As for Fergus, wisps of steam were trickling out from the bottom of the closed bathroom door. He was taking a very long time in there, most likely because he had to jack off just like she had when she took her shower.

Yep. Tonight was going to be another long one. Instead of torturing herself with the fact that she was going to spend the night with a hunky man and a beautiful woman who were here only because it was their job, maybe she should take a sleeping pill to knock herself out. Trying to push their buttons and annoy them with her sexual quips had backfired and made her hornier than ever.

Snow fell in fat flakes and had already piled up in thick drifts on the streets and sidewalks. Large and small droid plows and snowblowers whirled back and forth trying to keep up with Mother Nature's latest onslaught.

A quick stab of her finger opened a link to the weather channel at the bottom of the screen. The latest prediction was eight to ten inches of snow by midnight. The City Air Patrol Squad had posted severe restrictions with heavy fines and citations for private aircar traffic. The only aircars allowed out between the hours of ten p.m. and eight a.m. were ambulances and other emergency vehicles.

"Where did you hide the controls for your hairdryer?" Tannamae's soft-voiced question sent a tingle of carnal anticipation straight to Shannon's groin.

Shannon turned around and managed a casual stroll across the room. It was probably safer to just tell her where the hairdryer was instead of moving closer, but she couldn't stop herself. She rested her hand on Tannamae's shoulder, then tapped at the buttons cleverly hidden within the roses carved around the mirror frame. "This one is for the hairdryer and styling droid, Ms. Jones. This one starts up the hair-dye droid. You can ask it to do a complete dye job, frosts, or just the tips of your hair. That one's for the manicure droid. It has a full selection of styles and colors for your nails."

Tannamae tilted her head back, patted Shannon's hand on her shoulder, and smiled. With the arms and legs rolled up on the oversized pajamas, Tanny looked like a kid playing dress-up. But there was nothing childish about the tantalizing glimpse of her full breasts where the top gaped open. "Thank you. Call me Tanny, please. Every time you say Ms. Jones, I find myself looking around for my mom."

Shannon's knees wobbled under her. This wasn't working at all. Tanny was turning the tables on her. She better snag another chair soon before she fell over and made a complete idiot of herself. "Sure."

She carefully moved her hand and twisted a strand of Tanny's soft hair around her finger. "You have

lovely hair. It's so thick and curly. Would you like to dye the tips with silver and gold glitter for the holidays?"

The bathroom door flew open. Shannon spun around in her chair with a guilty blush on her face. She snorted and bit back a laugh at the sight of Fergus stuffed into a pair of her pajamas. The arms and legs were way too short. Instead of hanging loose around Fergus's hips, her pants outlined his crotch in explicit and damp detail. He'd also given up on trying to button the top. Dark hair furred his chest and arched down past his taut stomach.

And for a final touch, the holster, stun gun, force cuffs, and shield he carried in his hands added a very wicked flavor to his attire. Shannon grinned and refrained from making comments about bondage, in deference to Fergus's embarrassed scowl.

His voice had a decidedly peeved tone to it. "While the two of you finish your discussion of hair colors, I'm going to grab a set of sweats from my gear. I can't sleep in these things."

This was true. Pajamas were supposed to be loose and comfortable, not tight and constricting. Of course, this didn't stop her from admiring the delectable view of those light cotton pants clinging to the curves of his tight-muscled ass when he exited the room.

## Chapter Four

His old pair of sweatpants and sweatshirt with its sleeves torn off felt way better than those tight pajamas. The only reason he'd even put them on was because the blasted house droids had snagged his discarded clothes in order to clean them. He should have hung his clothes on the wall hook instead of leaving them on the floor, but he hadn't expected that kind of efficiency programmed into the housecleaning system. The only things the droids didn't cart away were his weapon belt, stun gun, force cuffs, and badge.

It was either wear the pajamas or walk out with a towel draped around his hips like a porno model. Not that it made any difference. The damned things were so tight, they'd clung to him like a second skin. He might as well have strutted around stark naked with a bright red arrow flashing above his groin. At least the ones Tanny wore were loose enough to conceal her weapon belt.

On the other hand, this gave him the opportunity to explore the rest of the house from top to bottom. He didn't care how extensive the security system was, walking through the layout himself would give him an advantage if anyone disarmed it and tried to sneak past his guard.

Aside from the fact that he felt properly armed now with his weapon belt around his waist, the self-imposed tour of the house had also given him the time to figure out what to do about their ridiculous sleeping arrangement. He opened the bedroom door and stepped inside.

Tanny and Shannon had cleared off the coffee table in front of the fireplace so they could play a game of 3D chess. They sat cross-legged on oversized cushions in their matching pajamas. But the pajamas were the only things that matched. Ebony and ivory, Tanny with her dark skin and petite build, Shannon with her pale skin and tall, broad-shouldered build; they were a study in contrasts.

Fergus stopped in mid-stride and took a second look at the flames roaring behind them. "Is that a real fire?"

Shannon uncoiled her long legs and rose to her feet. She peered at the fire for a few moments, selected a small log from the woodbin, nudged it into the fire with a pair of tongs, and waited until it took before she turned around. "Yes, it's real. I don't like fakes."

Tanny stood up. Shannon moved sideways and replaced the tongs in their stand. Then she crossed her arms and murmured, "Come a little closer, honey. I can handle you."

Fergus stopped and stared. Shannon's body language didn't mesh with her provocative attitude and words. If she really wanted Tanny, she'd hold her arms out instead of crossed protectively over herself. She was trying to fake them out so they wouldn't approach her too closely. Why? What was she hiding from them?

Later. One thing at a time. Fergus jerked his thumb at the small desk in the corner. "Do you maintain a decent uplink in your bedroom for your comp system?"

The puzzlement that flickered across Shannon's face was the first normal expression he'd seen from her thus far. "Of course I do. Why do you ask?"

Fergus crossed the room and seated himself at the desk. The chair was a marvel of ergonomic efficiency with black leather padded seat and smooth ball bearings in its wheeled feet. As for the desk, it looked like an antique rolltop, with real cherry wood instead of a molded plastic reproduction. The keyboard, sofscreen, voice, and uplink panels were top-of-the-line models. He placed his detective's shield in the uplink slot. The system clicked and whirred for a few seconds, then accepted his police security access with a soft chirp. "The best way for us to protect you is to guard you in shifts. I'm going to stay awake and work online during my shift. When I'm ready to sleep, I'll wake Tanny and she can take the next shift."

Shannon strode to the desk and leaned on the edge. Angry tension held her body tight and hard. "You overrode my house computer. Why?"

He swiveled the chair around and faced her. "You're under protective custody per domestic violence parameters. In order to achieve that, NYPD security protocols will replace yours for the duration of our stay."

She backed away and crossed her arms. "I see."

Tanny came over and leaned against the side of his chair. He felt the soft flesh of her breast pressing into his arm beneath the thin fabric of her pajamas.

"How well did you know the victim?" Tanny asked, her voice deceptively soft, yet hard as steel.

Shannon swung her head around. There was a definite wrecking-ball effect to that sudden movement. She stood totally still and stared at them for one long moment. Finally, she blinked, then turned, walked to the bed, and seated herself on the edge. A soft sigh gusted from her parted lips. Two bright spots of red stood out against the light skin stretched across her high cheekbones. "You probably already know how many times I called Merry just to talk."

Shannon sat with her back perfectly straight and folded her hands in her lap. All the hard-edged sexuality she'd been projecting at them for the last couple of hours had vanished into a hesitant vulnerability.

Tanny tightened her fingers around Fergus's arm. It was his turn now. Good cop, bad cop. Hell, it didn't make any difference which side he took. Tanny would switch from one to the other without thinking. Instead of following a preset scenario, he would just go with the flow. And now that Shannon was finally relaxing and letting him see her true personality, what he wanted to do was take her in his arms and

comfort her obvious distress over her friend's brutal murder.

Shannon looked away. Firelight flickered across her face and softened the strong lines of her body. "I wanted to be close to her, but she already had a lover. I don't know who her lover was. I don't even know if her lover was a man, a woman, or another shemale like me." She lifted her chin and glared at them. "I didn't kill Merry. Why would I contact the police if I killed her?"

Fergus cleared his throat. "You had the motivation and the means, but ..."

Hope blazed in her eyes. "But what?"

Tanny spoke next. "You were at a board meeting when Merry was murdered."

Fergus explained the rest. "We've documented your whereabouts during the time of death for the other four murders. We know you're not the killer."

The shock on Shannon's face also helped confirm her innocence. "Four other murders?" She croaked out the words in a strangled voice.

Fergus rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger. "The only common link between all the murders is that all victims were hermaphrodites. Merry is the only one you had any contact with."

Shannon frowned. "What does that mean?"

Fergus shrugged. Giving her a little information should keep her off-balance and hopefully more willing to cooperate with their investigation. "We don't know. One theory says the other murders were practice murders, all leading up to you."

Comprehension splashed Shannon's pale skin with a vivid blush. "Because I'm the one who has all the money. I'm the one who's in the news every day with my campaign for equal rights for all herms."

Tanny nodded. "So, now that you know we have a serial murderer to find, we'd appreciate it if you stopped all your sexual teasing and let us do our job."

Shannon's mouth dropped open. Then she shut her mouth and grinned. It was the first natural smile she'd given and it looked even better on her than her faked leers. "When did you figure out I was bluffing?"

Tanny chuckled. "That was easy. It happened when I let you look down my shirt and you didn't follow through by making a move on me."

Shannon shook her head. "Damn, you're good. Now what?"

Fergus smiled. "Now you tell us everything you know about Merry. Tell us who her friends were, and give a list of your friends and acquaintances so we can question everyone. Then we also need to know every detail you can give us about your daily routine and Merry's."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tannamae removed her belt, stun gun, and shield. She placed them on the dresser beside the bed, reset the alarm implant on her wrist to awaken her in four hours, then lifted the sheet and crawled onto her side of the bed. One thing for sure, the intensive grilling they'd given Shannon had apparently exhausted her. She was already sound asleep on her side of the bed with the pillow bunched under her head and the sheet pulled over her back and shoulder to her chin.

The routine of getting into bed was both disconcertingly familiar and off kilter. Tannamae had to keep reminding herself that it wasn't Fergus on the other side of the bed. That she couldn't just roll over, snuggle against his long, lean warmth, comb her fingers through the springy curls on his stomach, and find the solid flesh of his cock waiting for her.

He was sitting at the desk, studying data on the sofscreen while the flickering flames from the fireplace behind him painted the wall and ceiling with surrealistic shadow shapes. They had a serial killer to stop. Tonight's session with Shannon had given them a long list of possibilities -- possibilities they needed to weed out one by one while they sorted out the truth.

Flames splashed shadows on the wall and painted Fergus's hair with dark red highlights, giving him the look of angel and devil all mixed together. Fire and brimstone, clouds and shadows. Smoky old bars. Bright holographic neon lights flashing above bored faces looking for a night of pleasure in a stranger's arms. Ice-cold beer and a shot of brandy. Santa Claus bringing presents down the chimney. Was making love the devil's candy or the whispered echo of an angel's touch? What happened when a fallen angel learned how to fly again? What did you do when you felt hungry for all the things you couldn't change?

\* \* \* \* \*

The persistent buzz against her wrist woke her. Tannamae untangled her arms and legs from the twisted sheets and rolled out of bed. Fergus was slumped over the desk, his head propped on his arms, the data on the sofscreen scrolling past unseen.

She placed her hands on his shoulders. He uncoiled himself from the chair, took her into his arms, and gave her a long, satisfying kiss. It was like coming home all over again in the strong ease of his embrace.

Finally, they pulled apart. Tannamae touched his lips with her fingers and whispered, "Go to sleep, honey. I'll take the next shift."

## Chapter Five

Baby Jamie nestled in the curve of Shannon's arm, like one of the dolls she used to have. A doll with cobalt blue eyes and a fragile head covered with thick brown curls. Except no doll, no matter how cleverly made, could create the warm, solid weight and baby-powder smell of a newborn infant wiggling against her grip. Jamie's pale blue blanket with pink bunny rabbits embroidered along the edges added a bright touch to the hospital nursery with its row upon row of incubators and babies.

Fergus smiled, reached past Shannon's arm, and let Jamie latch onto his finger with one tiny hand. "He's a strong little bugger." A confused frown creased Fergus's brow. "Uh. Jamie's a he, isn't he?"

Shannon turned to the medical data chart glowing on the sofscreen embedded in Jamie's incubator. "Jamie has adrenogenital syndrome."

"Adrenogenital syndrome?" He snorted. "Break it down into layman's terms, please."

"She has the XX chromosomes and internal organs of a female, but the external genitals of a male. Her labia is fused and she has a small penis but no testicles."



Fergus's eyes widened with surprise. "Whoa!" He swiped his hands through his hair. "How common is this?"

Shannon carefully returned the infant to the incubator. Fergus was a homicide detective. Not a stereotypical entertainment holovid star stomping around with a weapon belt and shield. He obviously had a keen intellect hidden beneath his macho exterior, an intellect geared to analyzing facts and evidence and putting the pieces together to solve crimes. "It occurs in one out of every five thousand births. Because of routine DNA testing, we're able to diagnose them during the pregnancy instead of at puberty when the child's secondary sex characteristics appear."

Tanny moved closer. "I'd be very confused if I were Jamie's parents. Are they going to raise Jamie as a boy or a girl?"

Shannon bit back her automatic sigh of annoyance at this question. Instead of looking at children as unique individuals with their own minds and souls, many parents made the mistake of seeing their children as extensions of themselves. They'd try to mold their children to fit their dreams, instead of letting their children find their own dreams. "That decision is best left to Jamie when Jamie reaches the age of consent. Many choose to identify themselves by their genotype rather than their external genitalia."

Fergus nodded. "What happens if the parents want to raise Jamie on their own?"

"Per the equal rights amendment for intersexed people, they must agree to monitoring by the Herm Foundation to ensure proper education and support for Jamie's upbringing."

Shannon sighed and stroked the sleeping infant's feather-soft cheek. "Merry, the herm whose murder you're investigating, had adrenogenital syndrome just like Jamie."

Fergus lifted his head. Angry sparks flared in the depths his dark eyes. "Some investigation we're doing right now."

Shannon jerked her chin at the exit sign. "You can walk away and investigate any time you want. I'm not exactly thrilled to have you around, either."

He winced and gave her an apologetic smile. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. I'm sorry."

Shannon sucked in a deep breath, exhaled, and managed a brief nod at his apology. She turned and went to the next incubator marked for her attention, and reached inside to pick up a baby with straight blond hair. She peered at the chart glowing on that incubator's monitor. "This is Theo. He has the exact opposite condition from Jamie, called Swyer's syndrome. This syndrome occurs in one in every twenty thousand births. Theo has the male sex chromosomes, but his external organs are female. He has a vagina, uterus, and enlarged clitoris. He has neither ovaries nor testes. Theo can get pregnant via in-vitro fertilization, if he chooses."

A dark blush spread across Fergus's olive-skinned face, almost matching the color of his mahogany-brown hair. At the same time, avid curiosity gleamed in his eyes. He gestured at Shannon with an awkward wave of his hand. "What about you?"

Despite his curiosity, he still found the topic of her ambiguous sexual state embarrassing. Shannon couldn't resist the temptation to flash him a sultry grin. "My condition is very rare. The frequency is one in every eighty-three thousand births. I have Ova-testis or true hermaphroditism. My genotype is XX. I have both ovarian and testicular tissue, a half-uterus, breasts, a vagina, and a functional penis. I could get pregnant and possibly carry a child to term. My sperm count is low, but there is a slight possibility that I could father children, if I chose."

Tanny tilted her head to the side. A deep frown etched her brow. "Now I understand why you always

refer to yourself as she instead of he. Even though you have a fully functional penis, you have the genotype of a woman.”

Fergus cleared his throat and asked, “Are what you, Jamie, and Theo have the only kinds of hermaphrodites?”

A great weariness filled Shannon’s heart. The baby in her arms suddenly felt like he weighed fifty pounds. She carefully returned Theo to the incubator. “No. Turner’s syndrome has the XO genotype where there isn’t any Y chromosome at all. Klinefelter’s syndrome is the XXY genotype. Then there are various mosaic genotypes where a few chromosomes are XX and the rest are XXY all mingled together in the same person.”

Shannon turned around and waved her hand at the rest of the incubators. “On the other end of the scale, there’s a rare hormonal disorder called Kallmann’s syndrome. This syndrome causes a hormonal deficiency. The person fails to go through normal puberty and remains sexually underdeveloped and infertile.”

She arched her eyebrows at Tanny and Fergus. “I call it the Peter Pan syndrome because they never grow old. Who knows? Maybe Kallmann’s syndrome is behind the old legends about the fairy folk not growing old like the rest of humanity.”

Tanny snapped her fingers. “I saw a vid about a little boy who had the exact opposite problem. He was only seven years old and looked like an old man.”

Shannon nodded. “That’s progeria, an extremely rare genetic disease that accelerates the aging process. Progeria affects one in four million children. Most of them don’t live beyond their early teenage years, though one or two have lived to their early twenties.”

Fergus grimaced. His gaze turned somber. “That’s horrible.”

Shannon sighed. Christmas was just around the corner. They should be feeling happy and ready to celebrate, not sad and depressed. “Last, but not least, of the more uncommon genetic variations are the XXX and the XYY genotypes.”

“XXX and XYY genotypes?” Fergus arched his eyebrows.

Shannon turned and led them to the exit. Rattling off all these statistics made her feel like she was auditioning for a position as an educational holovid teacher. “The XXX variation or super female occurs in one in every five thousand births. The physical manifestations of triple-X are larger than average breasts with wider spaced nipples, a narrow, wasp waist, wider hips than average, and a height of usually more than six feet. By most standards, triple-X females are quite attractive, proving that a genetic/chromosomal abnormality need not be considered a deformity. However, learning disabilities or developmental delays are not uncommon.”

“What about the XYY variation?” Tanny asked.

Shannon strolled past a pair of droid orderlies wheeling medi-carts through the corridor. She led Fergus and Tanny past the nurses’ station, where six nurses sat at a wall of monitor screens and data ports, and to the social services office. Her first parent liaison appointment was scheduled this morning. “This condition affects males who have an extra Y chromosome. Their physical characteristics are often indistinguishable from a normal male, though it is not uncommon for them to appear even more masculine. They have low, wide waists; narrow hips; broad, flat chest; wide shoulders; high hairlines; prevalent facial and body hair; and extra-large testicles.”

“Aren’t they also more violent and prone to criminal behaviors because of the extra Y chromosome?”

Fergus asked.

Shannon stopped at the door for the social services office. “There’s no scientific evidence to justify that belief.”

She placed her hand on the ID panel. It glowed under her touch, verified her DNA as the authorized representative for today, and the door slid open. A huge mahogany desk dominated the room. A single vase of red roses adorned the corner of the desk and a sofscreen glowed in the center. Three black, cushioned swivel chairs were lined up behind the desk. Four more chairs and a black, cushioned sofa took up the space on the clients’ side. A side door in the right-hand wall provided a separate entrance for the clients. White floor-length curtains adorned the window viewscreen in the left-hand wall.

She stepped inside and gestured at Tanny and Fergus to take the two extra seats behind the desk. The door slid shut and locked itself behind them.

Tanny seated herself. Tailored hunter green slacks and tunic clung to the lush curves of her hips and breasts and contrasted very nicely with her white scarf and café-au-lait skin. The matching bag slung over her shoulder contained her stun gun, shield, and force cuffs. She’d confined her raven-black hair in a sleek bun. Silver studs flashed at her earlobes. She wore her computer access and security link pads as wristbands. The control studs on the dark leather glinted under the fluorescent office lighting.

Fergus snagged a chair, leaving the middle one vacant for Shannon. He leaned back and crossed his long, lean legs at the ankles. No business suit for him today. He’d chosen faded jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and a loose jean jacket that gave him easy access to his holstered stun pistol. The snug-fitting jeans emphasized a very masculine bulge at his crotch.

All this talking about the different genetic and genital variations had made Shannon excruciatingly aware of Tanny’s womanly appeal and Fergus’s blatant masculinity. She smothered a sigh. No way in hell would they be interested in her. She’d never have lovers. Choosing a loose, supple indigo pantsuit with a long jacket this morning had been a very wise move. It did an excellent job of concealing her hard nipples and erect cock.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Mr. and Mrs. Nordstrom entered the social services office, Shannon gestured at them to take either the chairs positioned in front of the desk or the couch. Mr. Nordstrom managed an aristocratic sneer while he sank into his chair. His somber, pinstriped gray business suit was perfectly tailored. Diamonds glinted on his wristbands.

As for Mrs. Nordstrom, she strutted into the room and tossed her sable coat onto the couch, then sat with her legs crossed at just the right angle to slide the hem of her little black dress up to her perky little ass. Translucent spike heels, artfully styled hair tipped with silver and blue sparkles, and an expensive emerald necklace and matching earrings completed her standard “trophy wife” ensemble.

Shannon frowned and requested the stats for Mr. and Mrs. Nordstrom on her desk screen. She couldn’t picture this woman giving birth to any child, let alone one as strong and healthy and beautiful as little Jamie. Oh, of course. That explained it. They’d transferred the fetus from Mrs. Nordstrom’s womb into a surrogate mother at one week’s gestation. Mrs. Nordstrom had no intention of ruining her size-three figure and augmented breasts with the ravages of pregnancy and breastfeeding.

DNA tests at one week’s gestation pinpointed the XX chromosome but not the adrenogenital syndrome. By the time they’d found out Jamie’s intersex status through ultrasound, the fetus was at the six-month stage. Because abortion after the first trimester had been ruled illegal in 2021, they couldn’t go that route

and terminate the pregnancy.

Shannon folded her hands together and stretched her mouth into her best professional smile. “Have you come to a decision regarding Jamie’s future upbringing?”

Mr. Nordstrom studied Shannon with a cold, reptilian stare that made her skin crawl. He transferred his gaze to Tanny and Fergus and curled his lip into a contemptuous sneer. “Are all of you freaks, or just one of you?”

Fergus leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his neck. That move opened his jean jacket and revealed his holstered stun gun and detective’s shield. “The only freaks I see in this room are sitting on the other side of the desk.”

Mr. Nordstrom’s face turned red. He jumped to his feet with an incoherent roar, lunged forward, knocked the vase aside, and slammed his hands onto the desktop. The vase shattered, spilling water and roses across the tiled floor. A small panel beneath the window viewscreen slid open. A servobot rolled out and used a suction-tipped hose to vacuum the crumpled flowers, broken pieces of glass, and puddled water.

“That’s right.” Fergus deepened his voice into a purring growl of anticipation. “Go ahead. I’d love to arrest you for assault on a police officer.”

Mr. Nordstrom swallowed, sucked in a deep breath, and exhaled very slowly. He backed away and returned to his seat. When he spoke, his voice had the flat, empty intonations of a computer-generated greeting. “We have decided to waive our parental rights and give the infant up to the custody of the Herm Foundation for adoption.”

“Thank you,” Shannon murmured. She printed out the required documents and focused on keeping her hands from shaking. The last time she’d looked at the Herm Foundation’s waiting list for adoptive parents, they had fifteen couples and four triples, all of which had stable, long-term cohabitation contracts. As for explaining to Jamie when she grew old enough to understand why her parents had given her away, the child psychologists on staff would be the best people to handle that task.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the Nordstroms’ hasty exit, Fergus prowled around the office. He stopped at the window viewscreen and cycled through the available selections. The animated images ranged from the typical Earth wilderness scenes to recent images of the lunar, Mars, and Jovian Moon colonies. He reset it to a panoramic display of Saturn spinning against the star-strewn splendor of deep space and turned around. “That was interesting. Are all the parents that hostile?”

Shannon sat like a statue behind the desk, cold and distant, without expression on her face. Her brows drew down in concentration over her narrowed eyes. Dark lashes curved above her creamy skin. Two dark red blotches followed the line of her high cheekbones like rouge, except he already knew she used no cosmetics. “Each interview is different. Many parents do agree to raise their children according to the equal rights laws for hermaphrodites.”

She straightened her shoulders and shot him a steadfast stare. “Nowadays, when the majority of hermaphrodites reach the age of consent, they decide not to have their genitals surgically altered and mutilated.”

Tanny shot a glare at him, too. Then she reached out and covered Shannon’s hand with hers. Shannon gasped, looked Tanny over from head to toe, and murmured in a husky whisper, “Watch out. I bite.”

Tanny threw her head back and chuckled. The smooth café-au-lait skin of her throat gleamed like burnished gold above the cool green of her tunic top. The pose thrust her full breasts against the soft fabric. “I like that. But then you’d have to be very strong-willed to put up with this bullshit, wouldn’t you?”

*Bzzzzzzzzzzz*. The entry buzzer at the office door warned them that the next scheduled appointment stood outside.

Fergus crossed the room in three strides and hitched his hip onto the corner of the desk previously occupied by the vase of roses. Shannon composed her face into a professional mask and arched her eyebrows. “Are you sure you want to be on that side of the desk?”

He grinned. "Don't worry. My bite is worse than my bark."

Her mouth twitched. She smoothed it back into a bland smile. “Of course.” She pressed a button to unlock the client entry door.

This time it was a young couple barely old enough to vote. They crept inside, holding hands, white-knuckled and somber. The guy was skinny and blond. The girl looked like she might be Hispanic, with light-brown hair and olive complexion.

Shannon gestured at them to sit.

They sat.

The guy straightened his shoulders and stuck his bony chest out like a bantam rooster getting ready for his first time in a back-alley cockfight. “We’re not going to let you take Theo away from us.”

The girl nodded. “That’s right. We know our legal rights. You can’t take my baby away from me without proof of abuse.”

Shannon propped her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on her folded hands. Her mouth relaxed into a gentle smile. “We’re not going to take your baby away from you. We’re offering you a place where you can raise Theo in a safe environment, free from harassment.”

## Chapter Six

Shannon stepped behind the screen in her sub-basement private gymnasium and peeled her business suit off with short, angry tugs. She grabbed the white cotton shirt from the hook and slipped it over her shoulders. Soft cotton rubbed against her heated skin and swollen nipples. She belted the kilt around her hips. The pleated fabric hung to her knees in the only type of skirt she'd ever wear. No underclothing, of course. Stockings with garters and brogues completed the traditional attire for her bi-weekly sword-training session.

Her sexual tease game with Fergus and Tanny had backfired. Now, with every little gesture, every look, she kept thinking they actually liked her and saw her as a person instead of a grotesque aberration of humanity.

When Fergus defended her with his sarcastic response to Mr. Nordstrom's cruel words, her heart had

melted into a puddle of pure happiness. Then when Tanny reached over and gave her hand a sympathetic squeeze after the Nordstroms left the office, Shannon almost exploded with the need to turn and kiss her sweet lips.

They didn't really care about her. To them, she was a freak. She must remain strong. They'd only hurt her, the same way she'd been hurt so many times before when all she wanted was to love. And be loved in return.

She'd let her guard down in the nursery, touching babies she'd never be able to have and hold as her own.

Tanny and Fergus stood at the table where the broadsword waited for Shannon's usage. His mouth slightly agape with awe, Fergus touched the blade with a reverent fingertip. "Holy shit! This ain't no toy. It's got to be at least three feet long."

Tanny touched the hilt and looked up with a shy smile that cut through Shannon's heart like a needle-sharp dirk. "It looks just like the one hanging over the fireplace in your living room, except that one has gemstones."

Shannon strolled across the room. Her cock swayed under the kilt with the motion of her long-legged stride. "The one over the fireplace is a family heirloom. This one is a reproduction. It's pure tempered steel, hand-hammered for three days over an antique forge. The Society for Creative Anachronism requires authentic reproductions for their combat simulations. That's why I wear a kilt during my practice sessions. It keeps me from feeling uncomfortable when I wear it during the events."

As soon as she said that, both detectives' gazes went straight to her crotch and then moved just as quickly away. They didn't have to say anything. She knew exactly what they were thinking about her non-existent undergarments.

Fergus coughed and cleared his throat. "Ah, yes. I guess it would take some getting used to if you aren't in the habit of wearing a kilt every day."

Tanny gave her a look of startled comprehension. "You have the muscle to handle this kind of sword?"

The memory of her father swinging the MacNal sword one-handed in a full circle above his head flashed into her mind. "The strength to wield a broadsword is bred into my heritage. The double groove in the center of the blade is often misrepresented as a 'blood groove'. It's called a fuller groove and it serves to lighten the sword, making it easier to swing while maintaining the structural integrity of the blade. The basket hilt keeps my hand from slipping off in the heat of battle."

She gestured at the practice mats. "Would you like to join me in stretching first, then try a practice bout afterwards?"

Fergus gave her a sheepish grin and held up his hands in surrender. "I know diddly-squat about sword-fighting. You'd probably cut my head off with the first swing."

\* \* \* \* \*

The automated juice bar was fully stocked. All Tanny had to do was name her poison and the computerized bar whirled into action to create a frothy concoction. She sipped at a banana-orange cream with sprinkles of cinnamon and arched her eyebrow at Fergus. He tasted his whipped pineapple-coconut blend and winked at her. "Better watch out. This kind of service is very seductive." He rotated his stool sideways so he had a good view of the workout area.

Shannon faced an android representation of a red-haired Scottish clansman. She held the enormous broadsword with the grace and strength of a man. Side-on to her opponent in the classic dueler's stance, Shannon kept her sword arm bent with the blade ready and her back arm raised with open hand to show there was no hidden dagger in reserve.

"She's an interesting combination of opposites, isn't she?" Fergus murmured. "One second, she's all woman, the next, she's a typical man. Have you noticed how she blows hot and cold around us?"

Tanny savored another icy sip from her frosted glass. "I don't blame her. I'd probably be the same way. I'd always be afraid of letting my guard down around strangers. I'd always be wondering if they thought I was a freak instead of another human being with physical and emotional needs."

"*En garde.*" Two blades met with a whisper of contact.

A sidestep. A quick beat of the blades. Shannon's kilt swirled around her muscled legs. She'd plaited her wavy brown hair into a braid. A lunge and then a counter-lunge brought the blades together in a screeching duel along their deadly lengths. Both swords held fast at the hilts for a split second. Shannon and her droid opponent broke, stepped back and circled each other, looking for another opening.

"She's good." Fergus rubbed his chin and narrowed his gaze. "She won't be an easy victim, and she would probably defeat the usual attacker."

"Why didn't you take her up on her offer of a practice bout?"

Fergus twisted his mouth into a rueful grin. "I really don't know a damn thing about sword-fighting. What I'd like to do is ask her to train me, but ..."

"You can't. Not while she's in danger from this serial killer. We've got to focus on our job first."

"Right."

"How about after we've caught the killer. Then what?"

The blades clashed together again. The sound echoed through Tanny's teeth as if a tuning fork had been laid against them. Shannon swung aside with a flare of her kilt that exposed the top of her thigh and buttock.

Fergus knit his brow together in a worried frown. "You wouldn't mind?"

Tanny sucked in her breath and released it slowly.

There! He didn't actually say it out loud. But yes, the unspoken question was there. Fergus was interested in Shannon not just as a teacher in sword-fighting, but also in other areas. The one thing she always cherished about their relationship was the fact that they never lied to each other about anything. Trust was such a precious commodity nowadays, and so far, he'd never given her reason not to trust him.

"I like her, too. A lot."

Fergus swiveled his head around and locked gazes with her. "You do?"

Tanny took another sip from her glass and licked the foam from her lips. Fergus's gaze followed her tongue with the hungry fascination of a cat tracking a mouse. Warmth pooled in her pussy, and she

crossed her legs against the sudden thought of letting him fuck her standing up like he had two days ago. Was it only two days ago? It seemed like forever. “Whatever we do, we have to wait until after this case is solved. You know the rules against fraternization while on duty.”

The smoldering heat in his eyes flared into a searing look that curled her toes. He nodded. “Of course. What’s on the itinerary for tomorrow?”

Tanny breathed out a sigh of relief and lifted her glass in salute to Fergus. He returned her grin and they drank together. Having it out in the open like this felt so much better than the both of them playing mind games and trying to pretend they weren’t interested in Shannon. They were adults, not high school kids who didn’t know what they wanted.

Steel against steel. Human versus droid. A steady beat of blade upon blade clanging together like cymbals and throwing sparks in the air

Tanny accessed the computerized link on her wristband. “Herm Foundation is closed for Christmas vacation, starting tomorrow, until the day after New Year’s. The only thing on the schedule for tomorrow is Meredith’s memorial service.”

“Right. The memorial service will give us the perfect opportunity to scope out the crowd for possible suspects.”

## Chapter Seven

Shannon accessed the house computer and studied the kitchen inventory. It was just about non-existent. Two bottles of apple juice, one bottle of orange juice, one container of chocolate milk, two bananas, one tomato, a dozen eggs, and a half loaf of raisin bread. The well-stocked droid coffee and cappuccino bar was her one indulgence. She wasn’t used to having company. Hell, she wasn’t used to having *anyone* stay with her for longer than a couple of hours, let alone sleep over.

She turned around. Fergus slouched against the counter beside the droid coffee dispenser. He pulled out two whipped mocha cappuccinos, handed one to Tanny, and arched an eyebrow at Shannon. “What’s your poison?”

“French vanilla, please.”

He nodded and reset the controls for her order. A few seconds later, a cup dropped out of the slot, filled with steaming hot liquid and topped with a large dollop of whipped cream.

Shannon pulled up the shopping menu on the main comp control pad. “You have a choice of Vietnamese, Szechwan, Japanese, Thai, Italian, Tex-Mex, Hindu, Algerian, or Turkish.”

Fergus widened his eyes and peered at the counter space for yet another droid input pad. “You maintain an auto-chef here, too?”

What would he say if she told him she actually knew how to cook? “No. Most times I order out.”

Tanny grinned, smacked her lips, and rubbed her stomach. “I vote for Italian. I’ll take a tossed salad with raspberry vinaigrette dressing, eggplant parmesan, angel hair pasta with sauce, and garlic bread. And for



dessert, I'd like lemon cheesecake."

Shannon cocked her head at Fergus.

He shrugged. "I'll have the same, but make it a double order. I'm a growing boy and I need to keep up my strength."

Shannon selected an identical order for herself, and hesitated. Even though, technically speaking, they were on duty as her police guards, ordering a full-course meal like this made it feel like she was hosting a romantic dinner date. Hmmm. She might as well go all out and tell the robo-butler to set the dining room table with candles, formal tablecloth, napkins, dishes, and wine glasses. "This restaurant has an extensive selection of wines. Any particular preference?"

Fergus snorted. "I usually drink whiskey or brandy. Whatever wine you pick is fine with me."

Shannon bit her lip over the selection, requested four bottles of Merlot and one of Pinot Noir, and hit send. If nothing else, the wine should relax her enough to sleep without dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maybe she should do this more often. Maybe after this was over, after they'd captured whoever had killed Meredith, she could invite Fergus and Tanny over for a special celebratory dinner and they'd become friends.

A backless, wide-legged, green velvet pantsuit swished with every step Shannon took. Cool air caressed her spine. The one-carat diamond pinned to the high-necked collar matched the diamond studs at her earlobes.

Tanny stood at the bottom of the staircase. A sleeveless scarlet velvet sheath clung to her curves like a second skin. The thigh-high slit gave the perfect exposure to the smooth length of her leg. Diamond dangles at her earlobes cast miniature rainbows against her brown skin. She flashed a shy smile at Shannon. Gloss on the lush contours of her lips gave them a just-been-kissed wet look. "Thanks for loaning me these earrings. They're beautiful."

Fergus descended the staircase clad in black slacks and shirt with silver studs in his earlobes and at the cuffs of his shirt. No tie. He'd left two buttons open at the top, giving a teasing glimpse of dark curls furring his chest.

Tanny grinned and strolled to him with an easy sway of her hips. They linked arms.

Shannon turned and led the way into the dining room. The sudden intake of breath she heard when Fergus saw the backless state of her pantsuit was very gratifying.

The double pocket doors for the dining room slid apart at her approach. Spirals of votive candles glowed in the chandelier hanging above the massive table. A single candelabra flickered in front of three place settings. The brilliant white synthsilk tablecloth dripped lace down to the burnished hardwood floor. Embroidered vines and flowers decorated the tapestry cushions on the Georgian reproduction chairs. An oversized fireplace took up the entire back wall. The flames cast dancing shadows on the ceiling.

Shannon took her seat at the head of the table. Fergus and Tanny took the other two chairs positioned on either side in an intimate seating plan. Robo-maids swooped around the table, pouring wine and depositing steaming platters of food, bowls of tossed salad, and crispy slices of garlic bread.

Fergus took his first bite of the entrée. His eyes went black with pleasure. He uttered a soft gasp under his breath. Would his eyes darken like that during the first fragile moment when his cock slid inside his lover? How loud would his cries get when he climaxed?

Shannon lifted her cut-crystal wine glass. Red and violet fragments of refracted light drifted across her hand. "To a joyous holiday season."

Fergus and Tanny lifted their glasses and drank the toast with her.

The robo-butler stopped in front of the fireplace, spun around, and announced. "Incoming call. Priority-level personal from Angus and Kathleen MacNal."

Shannon suppressed a groan. Her mom and dad must have ESP. Why else would they call in the middle of her private dinner for three? Should she excuse herself and take the call in the library?

*Too late.*

The robo-butler's program had all calls from her parents listed on the auto-accept list. It extruded a holovidphone projector arm and pointed to the empty space between the table and the fireplace. Two 3D images appeared in mid-air, floating six inches above the floor. They'd paid for the normal-sized projections rather than the inexpensive eighth-sized ones.

Her father, Angus, had his black hair tied back in a neat ponytail. Grey at his temples added an elegant air to his rugged face. He wore a pair of casual jeans and a soft, white cotton shirt.

Her mother, Kate, wore her usual rumpled lab coat over faded jeans. A black headband held thick auburn curls away from her face. Freckles dusted her nose and cheeks.

Both of her parents worked hard on their orbital Ark. They'd retired from the business and spent their time recreating extinct and endangered animal and plant species from frozen DNA samples. Just setting up the natural habitats for each species required extensive gene-splicing and ongoing monitoring.

Her mom and dad exchanged startled glances at the sight of Shannon eating a formal dinner with two strangers. Then they smiled, linked hands, and walked around the table, taking their time scrutinizing Fergus and Tanny with obvious approval.

Kate tucked a wayward curl behind her ear and said, "Please introduce us to your new friends, Shann."

Shannon managed to return her wine glass to the table without spilling a drop. The avid delight on her parents' faces meant only one thing. They envisioned their only child and heir becoming part of a happily married triple and producing a horde of grandchildren. "Mom, Dad, my friends are Detectives Fergus DeSoto and Tannamae Jones."

Shannon almost jumped out of her chair when Fergus and Tanny reached out from either side of the table and covered her hands with theirs. Did that mean they were going to let her parents assume they were her lovers, rather than cause them to worry with the real reason for their presence in her home?

Fergus said, "We're very happy to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. MacNal."

Her parents' smiles widened into ecstatic grins. Her father nodded his head but he kept his voice clipped and businesslike. "My apologies for interrupting your dinner like this. We hadn't expected Shann to have company." He turned to Shannon. "We'll be coming down to see you on New Year's Day. Can your friends be there for our visit?"

Fergus and Tanny both gave Shannon's hands an extra squeeze. Did that mean yes or no? She gulped and

said, "I'm not sure if they'll be able to make it on such short notice. I hope so."

Her mom blew a kiss at her. "Goodbye, sweetheart. We'll see you on New Year's Day."

Their images shimmered and disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shannon gathered her neatly folded pajamas from the foot of the bed and jerked her chin at the bathroom door. "I'll take the first shower, if you don't mind."

Fergus swiped his hand through his hair and exchanged a smoldering look with Tanny. "That's fine. No problemo. We don't mind, do we?"

"That's all right," Tanny said in a husky murmur. "We can wait."

Fergus held up his hand. "Let me check out the room first." Then he strolled inside the bathroom, peered inside the linen closet, and pulled the shower curtain aside to make sure no one was hiding there waiting to attack her. He exited the room and gestured at her to enter.

Shannon ground her teeth and carefully placed her necklace and earrings in the jewelry box. She hustled past him but left the door open so he could continue to monitor her safety. With an abrupt flick of her wrist, she tossed the pajamas on the toilet seat, then glanced over her shoulder. Tanny and Fergus had already turned their backs to give her a modicum of privacy.

She peeled off her pantsuit and underwear and dumped them in the laundry chute. Two thick towels hung on the wall beside the tub. Hot water, plenty of hot water, was what she needed to ease the sexual tension coiled in her body. She turned the dial to a hot and pulsating mist and pulled the curtain shut. Steam billowed past her ankles to her waist and then over her head and past the top of the curtain.

No lingering this time. Just soap her body and get the hell out before she went crazy from thinking about having both Fergus and Tanny shower with her.

She stood under the water and let it sluice over her and remove the soapsuds. Shampoo next. This time, she took a little longer letting the water rinse her hair clean. She reached for the conditioner. There wasn't any. Fergus must have emptied it last night and discarded the empty bottle in the trash for her. No big deal. She had another bottle by the sink.

Shannon twitched the curtain to the side, leaned out, grabbed the new bottle, and stopped.

Tanny stood in the doorway with her eyes closed. Fergus knelt in front of her. The top of Tanny's dress had been pulled down and the hem yanked up so that the fabric was now tucked in a thick roll at her waist. Her large nipples were dark chocolate tips upon the creamy caramel skin of her small, perky breasts. The areolas were wet and swollen from sucking. Shannon caught a glimpse of the sable curls on Tanny's pussy, trimmed to a narrow strip, just before Fergus moved his head lower.

He splayed his hands across the top of her thighs. When he fastened his mouth upon her pussy, Tanny sighed and tightened her grip on his hair.

Shannon carefully placed the bottle of conditioner on the side of the tub. She pulled the curtain back and left it open a crack, just enough to see them without them seeing her. This was nothing like any of the porno vids she watched when she jacked herself off. The men and women in the porno vids made exaggerated faces and their loud moans always sounded so fake and crude.

None of the women in the vids had ever uttered the soft mewls that escaped from Tanny's half-open mouth while she rubbed her pussy against Fergus's mouth in fierce demand. The muscles in her thighs bunched with her eager thrusts.

Fergus unzipped his pants and released his cock. It sprang out into his hand. He was uncircumcised. The foreskin slid back under his fingers and exposed the bulbous, blood-engorged head. He stroked his hand up and down the length of his cock with a slow, steady motion.

The tightness in her throat made her shake. It became an itch in her breasts, then her cock, and a hot wetness in her pussy.

Shannon wrapped her right hand around her cock and duplicated his movements. Would he like to stroke her while she stroked him?

Water splashed into the ceramic tub and gurgled down the drain. Steam billowed against the ceiling and fogged the mirror above the sink.

She pictured the three of them lying in bed together with her in the middle. She reached for Tanny. They shared a kiss while Fergus pressed his cock against Shannon's ass. He moved his hands between them and played with their breasts.

Shannon visualized Tanny sighing with pleasure and opening her legs for Shannon's erect cock.

Shannon moved her left hand from her breasts. She feathered her fingers down her belly, past her cock. She imagined the feel of Fergus's strong, muscled body lying behind her while he parted her wet pussy lips with his fingers from the rear. Then she inserted two fingers into her pussy.

It would never happen.

But that didn't stop her from imagining it.

In her mind's eye, she mounted Tanny at the exact same moment Fergus penetrated her with his cock. She imagined the tender joy of being able to leave her heart and body open and vulnerable to both of them.

Shannon's cock jerked within her stroking fingers. The image of Tanny shaking and crying out in pleasure while Fergus rode both of them to a shattering climax filled her mind. Her cum spurted out in a long, shuddering release of sensation.

Shannon sagged against the wall. Her legs shook under her. She felt as weak as a baby, unable to walk or move.

Finally, she opened her eyes, opened her hand around her cock, and pulled her fingers from her pussy.

The shower continued to spray water and steam into the tub. The curtain remained cracked open just enough for her to see Tanny and Fergus pulling their clothing together again.

Crumpled wrinkles marked the scarlet velvet of Tanny's dress.

Shannon picked up the hair conditioner bottle, squeezed out a generous dollop, and raked it through her snarled, wet hair with both hands. The tangles smoothed out and strands of loosened hair clung to her fingers like spider webs. She stepped back under the shower and let the steaming hot water rinse her hair and body clean from conditioner, soap, and sex.

Coming after watching Fergus and Tanny was so much more intense than any orgasm she'd ever felt before. Much better than she'd ever felt after watching a porno vid. Was she a voyeur? Would she freeze up if her fantasy became reality?

Shannon shrugged and turned the shower off. No use thinking about a fantasy that would never happen anyway. She squeezed the excess water from her hair. Now that the three of them had released their sexual frustrations, tonight should be a little more restful.

One night at a time. That was the best they could do for now.

## Chapter Eight

Shannon staggered into the kitchen after Fergus. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. Tanny stood at the counter slicing thick hunks of crusty French bread, hot and fresh from the oven. Butter, cream cheese, honey, grape jelly, apple jelly, and orange marmalade waited on the table.

Tanny stopped cutting bread. She picked up a steaming mug of coffee and turned around with it cradled between her hands. The handle was chipped and the phrase "Save a horse, ride a cowboy" had been inscribed on it in a lopsided red script.

Shannon almost stumbled under the impact of Tanny's open smile. *Stop reacting like a lovesick fool!* she warned her heart. *That smile didn't mean a damn thing. She's just being friendly.*

A faint blush flared on Tanny's face. She gestured at the table. "I took the liberty of ordering a brunch from French Twist's. Do you mind?"

Shannon clung to the back of a chair and caught her breath. *Keep the conversation simple. Don't overdo the platitudes.* "Oh, no. This is great! French Twist has an excellent breakfast menu. Thank you." *Gah! That was terrible! Now she sounded like a teenager in the throes of her first crush!*

Fergus grinned at Shannon. "Good morning. I like your coffee cup collection. You must have spent years at estate auctions snagging all the good ones."

He grabbed three ragged hunks of bread from the countertop, then sat at the table and buttered them. The words inscribed on his mug said "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies." He stirred generous helpings of cream and sugar into his coffee.

The way Fergus was acting, it felt like the three of them had been living together for months instead of only two days. Shannon picked out a mug that said, "Hit Shappens!" and filled it to the brim with black coffee.

She'd chosen black slacks and a heavy black sweater to wear for the memorial service. Fergus and Tanny wore black pants and shirts, too. All they needed now were matching sunglasses to complete their look of a covert-ops team getting ready to go out on assignment.

Fergus shook his head and grumbled. "I don't like it."

Shannon licked her lips and stared at him over the rim of her mug. The memory of Fergus on his knees, jacking off while he ate Tanny's pussy, flashed into her mind. She placed the mug on the table and

managed to sit without knocking anything over with her shaky hands. Now was not the time to be thinking about sex. “What don’t you like?”

He pointed at the data stream scrolling across his wrist screen. “I don’t like the setup for the security at the Herm Foundation Chapel. It’s too risky for you. Anyone can walk in whenever they want during the memorial. The building comp system has no weapons-scanning capabilities. There’s no security vidcams or audio recordings, either.”

Shannon sucked in a deep breath and focused her attention on slathering apple jelly onto a warm chunk of bread. Fergus didn’t have any personal feelings about her. Worrying about her safety meant he was just doing his job. “That’s because everyone is scanned at the Enclave’s main entrance before they enter. Only private residences like mine have the secondary, deep-scan set-up.” She steeled her heart against the thought that he actually cared for her. “Besides, from what you’ve told me, this killer prefers to work one-on-one inside the victim’s home, not at public locations.”

Fergus scowled. “None of the other victims were under police protection at the time of their deaths. The fact that we’re with you twenty-four hours a day could force the killer into changing his plan of attack.”

Tanny leaned back in her chair and narrowed her gaze. Her dark lashes curved against her café-au-lait skin. “I’d rather force the killer out into the open than play cat-and-mouse games for days and weeks at a time.”

Shannon looked away. She didn’t blame them for wanting to leave. Hell, she’d be just as anxious to end this charade if she were in their shoes. Judging by what she’d seen last night, staying here with her was putting a serious cramp in their love life. The sooner they captured the murderer, the sooner they could leave and resume their usual routine of love and laughter. And the sooner she could return to her normal life of celebrating the holidays alone in an empty house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tanny hunched her shoulders under her thick coat. Her breath puffed out in a white cloud in front of her face. At least it wasn’t as cold outside as it had been yesterday. Unfortunately, the moderate increase in temperature meant more snow. Thick clouds smothered the city and turned the sky to the color of dull pewter. Even though it was morning, it felt like late afternoon under the dark clouds. Fat, wet snowflakes fell in a steady monotony. The city had declared a snow emergency thirty minutes ago. The only vehicles allowed out on the streets and in the sky were police, fire, and EMS.

Tanny took the rear-guard position behind Shannon while Fergus led them on a two-block hike to the chapel. They trudged single file in each other’s footsteps along the path Fergus broke for them on the snow-covered sidewalk. The chapel with its stained glass windows loomed in silent gloom at the bottom of the hill. Signs, trees, mailboxes, and parked groundcars wore fluffy caps of new-fallen snow.

More mourners trudged on the sidewalk in front of them. Their coats swung back and forth as they struggled to keep their feet inside the narrow path carved through the snow.

Shannon had remained very quiet and distant last night and this morning. Was it because she was thinking about today’s memorial service? Was it because her parents were coming down for New Year’s Eve under the mistaken belief that they were Shannon’s lovers? Or was it because Shannon had seen them stealing a few moments of pleasure while she’d showered?

They should have kept better control of themselves. Even if Shannon hadn’t seen them, if she decided to review her house security records prior to auto-erase at the end of the week, she’d be able to see in explicit detail how they’d made love to each other while she’d showered. What would she do then? File a

complaint? Or confront them with the recording?

A steady stream of mourners trickled through the chapel's doorway behind them. Tanny stomped the snow from her boots onto the rubber mats placed in the lobby. Droid cleaners whizzed back and forth, sucking up the melted slush. She ran a quick scan of the faces in the lobby and matched them to the list of names on her wrist computer. All family, friends, and co-workers so far; any one of them could be Merry's killer.

They moved into the next room. The funeral director, a gaunt-looking man with his dark hair slicked back and tied at the nape of his neck in a sedate ponytail, greeted Shannon with a relieved smile and hurriedly brought them down the aisle to the front pew. Instead of a coffin, a two-foot-high cenotaph, engraved with Meredith's image and dates of birth and death, had been placed in the front of the room. But there would be no release of Meredith's body until after the murders had been solved. No burial, no cremation, and no closure until then.

The heavy aromas of the floral arrangements piled around the bronze cenotaph permeated the air. Tanny took shallow breaths through her mouth instead of her nose. Going into a sneezing fit would not be appropriate behavior at a memorial service.

A man and woman, both thin and worried-looking with their blond hair liberally streaked with gray, stood beside the cenotaph. Per the discreet ID badges clipped to their dark business tunics, they were Meredith's parents. They'd chosen to play a series of holovid images of their child from babyhood, childhood, and teenaged years all the way through more recent images of her dancing and laughing her way through life.

A simple yet poignant piano piece played in the background. It sounded familiar. Where had she heard that song before? Tanny accessed her link and requested more information. A few seconds later, the answer appeared on her wrist screen. It was Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty Waltz*. She shook her head at the parents' choice of requiem music. No prince would ever arrive to awaken their child from her dark slumber.

Her wrist screen changed to code red. A private message from Fergus, via the security band, scrolled across it. "Last pew, second man on right. He's not listed under friends, family, or co-worker. Still searching for possible cross-references for him under security protocols."

*Oh, shit!* Tanny checked her stun gun and shifted sideways in the pew so she could view the suspect.

\* \* \* \* \*

The service itself was mercifully brief. Meredith's parents lit candles in front of the bronze plaque. Her mom stood and thanked everyone for coming here today to celebrate and remember the happy and courageous moments of her child's life. Then the mourners filed up the center aisle to hug the parents and whisper a few words of comfort.

Fergus shifted sideways in the pew and kept the suspect in sight. Dammit! Whoever was in charge of Herm Foundation Security had screwed up royally letting him inside the chapel. According to the data dump he'd received from police records, the suspect's name was Günter Snell. He was a member of the Anti-Herm League and one of the more prominent protestors picketing Shannon's corporation. His arrest record for disorderly conduct, assault, and weapons charges was long enough to stretch from Earth to the moon.

It didn't matter if Shannon's security ran a basic scan for conventional weapons on every person who came in through the main entrance of their gated community. With the kind of rap sheet this guy had, he

probably knew how to turn common, everyday items like shoelaces into weapons.

*Cool down. One thing at a time.*

Rolf Danner, Shannon's security chief, stood beside the lobby doorway, his face schooled to a blank mask while he surveyed the room. The rest of the security team had been positioned as five ushers keeping the crowd moving smoothly past the victim's parents.

Fergus buzzed Tanny via their wrist computer link while he tapped the comlink clipped to his earlobe and murmured, "Code nine. Pew six. Right two."

Rolf Danner's frigid gaze flickered toward Fergus in silent acknowledgement of the warning. Then the security chief turned his gaze to the suspect and reached inside his jacket for his stun gun. The ushers spun around, reached inside their jackets, and started moving in on the suspect from five different directions.

A muffled series of booms echoed in the air. The ground rippled and tilted under Fergus's feet. The lights flickered and went out. The only light in the room came from the two memorial service candles.

A split-second of total silence reigned.

The soft classical music playing in the background had stopped in mid-note as if someone had pulled a plug on it.

Fergus jumped to his feet and turned around. The suspect had already vacated his seat.

A man shouted, "What the hell was that?"

A running shadow darted up the aisle.

A woman screamed, "He cut me! He has a knife!"

More figures jumped to their feet. Confused shouts and panicked cries filled the air.

Time went into slow motion for Fergus. Despite all the confusion and action going on around him, he felt like he had all the time in the world to react. Judging by the explosion, this was a two-pronged attack. A bomb timed to disable the power grid gave the attacker the element of surprise.

He pulled out his stun gun, shoved a shouting man aside, and maintained his position. Günter Snell would have to go through him before he'd get to Shannon.

*There!* A raised arm with a transparent knife shining within the fisted hand.

Fergus fired his stun gun.

Twin arcs of crackling blue light spilled from the tip of his gun and stabbed into the attacker's chest. The knife glowed red.

More screams filled the air. Panicked figures jammed the exits.

The attacker stumbled.

Fergus fired a second time. Again, twin arcs of blue stabbed into the man's chest and he crumpled to the floor.



The knife shattered into fragments.

*Plas-glass!*

That explained how Günter had managed to sneak his weapon past the scan at the gate. A plas-glass knife wouldn't trigger a security alarm. Shannon's solid weight leaned into him from the rear. Fergus braced himself. No way was he going to let her move past him into danger. She whispered in his ear. "Is it safe to move now?"

## Chapter Nine

When the lights went out, Shannon jumped up, wrapped her arms around Fergus's waist, and clung to him as her anchor against terror. Leaning against him, feeling his warm solidity under her arms, felt wonderful. She felt safe and secure, like a child in her father's embrace. He didn't push her away. He braced himself in front of her and handled the attacker. When she whispered in his ear, "Is it safe to move now?" her cock rose of its own accord against his hard-muscled ass. Instead of jerking away from that contact, he patted her arm, turned his head to the side, and brushed her cheek with his lips. "It's over now, *querida*. You're safe."

Now that Fergus had unwound her arms from his waist so he could cuff his prisoner, the entire incident felt unreal and anticlimactic, like a second-rate crime vid. All the aggravation of having Fergus and Tanny staying with her for two days straight and sleeping in her bedroom for *what*? A distant explosion, a temporary power failure, and a silly, knife-waving man who Fergus handled with two shots from his stun gun. End of story.

On the one hand, she was relieved to know Merry's murderer was caught and would now have to pay for his crimes. Unfortunately, it also meant Fergus and Tanny would no longer be staying with her. She'd be alone again for the holidays. Tears flooded her eyes. Shannon sat with a sudden thump in the pew and wiped away the treacherous tears with the back of her hand.

Finally, the generator kicked in and restored electricity to the chapel. Pale yellow emergency lights glowed in the ceiling above the windows and doors.

Shannon turned to Tanny and curved her mouth into a sardonic smile. "It's over. You have a murderer to book. Don't worry about your clothes. You can stop by tomorrow morning and get them if you want."

Tanny's eyes went black. A flush darkened her cheeks. She shook her head. "It's not over. Not yet. We still need to interrogate him and see if we can link him to all the murder sites. After that, there are a few things Fergus and I want to discuss with you. Okay?"

Shannon's heart flipped over in her chest. Did that mean they wanted to continue to see her afterwards as a friend? Or, maybe even as their lover?

"Everyone, please return to your seats," Fergus shouted from the front of the room. He waved his arms in the air and pointed at the unconscious man, his hands and feet cuffed, lying at Fergus's feet. "The attacker has been subdued. We've contacted a team of investigators to gather evidence, and they will need to question all witnesses before we can release you to go home."

A man shouted from the rear of the room. "What about the power failure? How long will it take to correct?"

Fergus shrugged. "Another team of investigators is going to the site of the explosion to assess and repair the damages. I will keep you informed of their progress in restoring power to this section of the city."

“Ms. MacNal?”

Shannon twisted her head around and stared at Rolf Danner, her security chief. He had his long blond hair tied back into a loose ponytail. A hard black vest protected his broad chest. He smiled. “It’s over now. You’re safe.”

She nodded.

“It’s Christmas Eve.”

She nodded a second time. *Why the hell was he standing there telling her things she already knew? Yes, it was over, and yes, it was Christmas Eve. Why wasn’t he busy doing his job and taking care of crowd control like the rest of the security personnel here?*

“I know this is very short notice.” He stared at her as if she was the only person in the room. “But I was wondering if you would allow me to stop over at your house tonight with a Christmas gift and ... if maybe you’d accept an invitation to go out for dinner with me.”

Shannon blinked. *A date! He was asking her out on date!*

“I have to go now,” Tanny murmured behind her. “Talk to you later.” Then she squeezed past Shannon and joined Fergus at the front of the room.

Rolf winked at her. “What do you say? Is it a yes or a no?”

What the hell? *It was* Christmas Eve. He was only asking her out on a dinner date. Why should she have to be alone tonight of all nights? Even though she felt nothing when she looked at him, maybe that would change after she spent a few hours getting to know him.

She gestured at the people settling down in the pews and managed a belated smile. “This may take a while, but I think I’ll be free tonight.”

Rolf grabbed her hand and raised it to his mouth, brushing his lips across her skin. “Great! I’ll be at your front door at six o’clock tonight.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fergus swore his eyes were going to be permanently crossed. He grimaced at the taste of the stale, vending-machine coffee in his mouth, completed the last section of a detailed incident report, and sent it to the main database.

They’d revived Günter under the care of a physician. When they read him his rights and the charges against him, they did a full holographic/audio recording of their actions in the presence of his appointed attorney. The crime scene technicians had gathered, labeled, and collated the evidence and done onsite full holographic recordings of witness testimony.

You’d think that would be enough. Oh, no. Now, he and Tanny had to complete five separate detailed reports for each stage of the arrest and evidence-gathering procedure. Plus, it was Christmas Eve. The station was deserted, with only a skeleton staff on duty and ninety percent of the staff using either vacation or sick leave days.

He slouched on his tailbone and tilted his chair back until it was balanced on two legs. He raked his

hands through his hair. The cheap plastic chair creaked under his weight. You'd think he'd learn not to do it after he tipped back too far last month and split the back of his scalp open on a desk corner. That cut required six stitches and three weeks' worth of teasing from the rest of the station about him trying to get workman's compensation for on-the-job injury.

On the other side of the cubicle, Tanny slapped the send button on her deskcomp and flashed him a sympathetic smile. "I finished my reports. Now I've asked the system to pull up the data on Günter's so-called alibis for the rest of the murders."

He pursed his lips. "Send me a copy, too. I don't like the way he kept insisting he didn't know a damn thing about the other murders."

She glanced at her screen. "It's coming in now." She keyed in a command to reroute the information to his screen.

He cleared his screen and waited for the new data. It showed up in a double-column format meticulously listing dates and times for each murder, with mini-holographic vids of Günter zealously waving anti-hermaphrodite signs on picket lines.

"Oh, shit!" Fergus jumped to his feet and slammed his hands down on the desk. His chair flew sideways and crashed into the cubicle wall. "Fuck!"

Tanny jumped to her feet, pulled out her stun gun, and checked the settings. "Fucking right. Günter's not the killer. The killer's still out there and we've left Shannon unprotected."

The look she shot Fergus wasn't good. "You know what happened right after the attack at the memorial service."

"What happened?"

"Rolf Danner asked Shannon out for a dinner date tonight and she accepted."

"Danner! That dickhead!"

"Yes."

"Fuck!"

Fergus grabbed his phone and dialed Shannon's number. The phone rang and an automated recording said, "Due to the high volume of calls at this time, all lines are currently busy. Please try again later to place your call."

He tossed the phone aside. "Fuck! Everyone and his uncle is trying to contact each other on account of the snow emergency, and they're jamming up the cell phone broadcasts. And with the power failure, her computer's down and we can't contact her via email."

He cleared his screen and requested the police transport grid. "Snowmobile! The SWAT team has snowmobiles and battering rams. We'll never make it through this storm in a groundcar or aircar."

The grid for the parking garage popped up on his screen. One snowmobile remained. He keyed in a requisition and tapped his fingers while the request went through.

Green light!

He glanced at the time. 5:30 p.m. "What time did Rolf say he was going to pick Shannon up for this so-

called dinner date?”

“I don't know. I didn't stay around long enough to hear what time they set for the date. All I know is that she accepted.”

“Let's go!”

Shannon might get pissed off at them for going along as chaperones, but it was better to be safe than sorry. And if Rolf was the killer, they damn well better get there before he did.

## Chapter Ten

Fergus ran to the equipment locker, inserted his hand in the ID panel, and pulled out a double set of gear for himself and Tanny. Gloves, computerized helmets linked to the snowmobile's sensors and guidance modules, full body armor, boots, and stun rifles. Images of Merry's mutilated body flashed into his mind.

He swallowed the taste of bile in his mouth, shook his head, and focused on fastening each section of his armor shut. *Don't think about the hours you wasted booking Günter. Don't think about Shannon getting killed*. They would make it in time. Shannon wasn't Merry. Even though Rolf was her security chief, she still wouldn't trust him enough to get close to her right away. Shannon kept herself distant from everyone because she didn't want to get hurt.

Tanny donned her body armor with short, angry jerks and slaps. She yanked her boots on and jammed her hands into her gloves. Her mouth and jaw were tight with frustrated anger. “Damn! Damn! Damn! I should have figured it out sooner. What the fuck was I thinking? Merry trusted her killer. No way in hell would she have let a certified nutcase like Günter Snell into her apartment, let alone posed nude for him.”

Fergus handed Tanny a stun rifle.

He saw Shannon, broadsword in hand, step sideways and avoid her android partner's blow during her practice bout. Her kilt flipped up and revealed a tantalizing glimpse of her buttocks. He saw Shannon's laughing eyes when she lifted her wine glass to drink a toast during their dinner the night before. “It's all right, *querida*. I made the same mistake. Let's go.”

He turned and led the way out to the elevator and the underground parking garage. Tanny's steps echoed his in the empty, white-walled corridor. Fully armored, with the helmet under one arm and heavy-duty stun rifle swinging in his other hand, he felt like he was running in slow motion to the elevator while every second ticked mercilessly away to oblivion.

The lift doors opened in front of him. He charged inside, waited for Tanny to brace herself beside him, and yelled his voice commands at the computerized control panel. “Parking garage, second sub-level.”

The floor jerked under them in swift and sudden descent. When the elevator finally stopped and the doors flew open, Tanny charged out beside him and matched him stride for stride into the shadowed bowels of the garage. They raced past a line of armored groundcars and turned the corner.

A service droid hovered beside the two-man snowmobile. Tanny climbed into the rear seat. Fergus inserted his hand into the glowing red hole of the droid's access panel. Five seconds later the aperture changed from red to green, confirming his ID as an authorized user of the vehicle, and spat the keycard

into his hand.

He climbed into the driver's seat and inserted the keycard. The electric engine started up immediately and the dashboard lit up in a brilliant blue backlight with white print and a GPS map of the city. He flipped the seatbelt switch. Safety webbing extruded and fastened him to his seat. The little figure on the dashboard indicating Tanny in the passenger seat showed safety webbing deployed around her, as well. As an extra safety precaution, both seats turned into auto-eject capsules during an accident.

Clutch in the handlebars, brake pad and gas pad under his right foot, GPS map grid on the dash, and a bright yellow button for reverse. So far the controls looked identical to what he was used to on his motorcycle. No problemo. He punched Shannon's address into the map search grid. Six routes popped up on the screen. The longest and safest route took the legal streets. The shortest route cut straight across the river and went through Central Park. He selected the shortest one, of course.

Tanny's angry voice came over the helmet speaker. "How the hell is Rolf going to get to Shannon's house with the current restrictions on transportation? Let alone take her somewhere for dinner?"

Fergus guided the snowmobile to the exit. The huge double door rose into the ceiling at their approach and thick gusts of wind-driven snow roared over them. The snowmobile surged into the night upon the pre-selected course with blazing headlights that barely lit their way through the wild storm. "He's the security chief, remember? He can commandeer any suitable vehicle from the Herm Foundation garage. Plus, he doesn't have to go as far 'cause he lives in the Enclave just like she does. As for where he's taking her, he's not taking her anywhere. He'll kill her if we don't get there in time."

\* \* \* \* \*

Shannon stood in front of her closet. Should she wear a dress or a pantsuit? Maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all to have accepted a date on such short notice. And where the hell was he going to take her, anyway? With the snow emergency and the temporary power failure for this section, there weren't any restaurants open.

Wait a minute. Rolf's apartment within the Herm Foundation Enclave was only three blocks away from hers. He was probably planning to walk here and then walk her to his place for a private dinner. If she called him now and canceled their date, then all she had to look forward to was a long, lonely night sitting in front of her fireplace.

She pulled a high-necked, long-sleeved, scarlet velvet shirt and black velvet slacks from the rack. A pair of sturdy black boots, a long, black opera cape, hat, scarf, and gloves would be enough for her to walk with him to his apartment. But then again, Rolf was chief of security; he could commandeer one of the Foundation's snowmobiles if he wanted to drive rather than walk her through the storm.

Shannon slipped on the shirt and slacks and studied the effect in the closet's full-length mirror. Not bad; the outfit was simple yet sexy. The pants were loose enough to hide any bulge in front, and the shirt clung just enough to hint at her breasts without being tacky. She selected a pair of diamond studs for her ears and brushed her dark brown hair out into a soft tangle of curls that hung down to the middle of her back.

She stopped in mid-brush, frowning, then tapped the brush against her chin. The one thing that didn't make any sense to her was how and why Merry had trusted an obvious hate-monger like Günter Snell. Where had she met him? Working like she did with the public, wouldn't she have at least done a routine background check on the man when he first contacted her? How had he convinced her to go out with him, let alone pose nude for him like she did before he killed her?

He must be one hell of an actor to have hidden his hatred so completely when he first contacted Merry. When they revived Günter from the stun gun and carried him out of the memorial service, he'd turned his head and stared at Shannon with such a look of sheer rage that it had seared through her like liquid nitrogen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Heated seats, heated handgrips, sonar-ranging warning system, self-adjusting rear treads, and auto-defrost helmets and windshield gave them maximum comfort, traction, and visibility. Fergus watched the route unfold on the dashboard map and used the sonar ranging capabilities to avoid impact with obstructions thrown into their way by the wind.

If it weren't for the fact that they were on a life-or-death mission, he'd be enjoying himself. Especially when they hit the river and zoomed along so fast above the ice that it felt like they were flying. The wind screamed while it drove thick, wet gusts of snow at them in blinding fury.

With the siren blaring and warning lights flashing red and blue, they hit Central Park at full speed and sped down the twists and turns of the terrain like Olympic racers. One block away from the Herm Enclave, he radioed a full police override and warning to the gated entrance and zipped in without stopping. From the gate, he had only three more blocks to traverse in a straight line.

Last, but not least, he deployed the titanium alloy ram from the snowmobile's nose and aimed the vehicle dead-center for Shannon's front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just like every other residence within the gated community, a small generator built into her house had kicked in with the temporary power failure. Of course, without the link to the city power grid, Shannon could only power up the minimum components in her security system. The house was under manual lockdown rather than electronic lockdown. The front doorbell rang promptly at 6 p.m. Security cameras weren't online yet.

Shannon tossed her cloak over her arm and walked down the hallway to the front lobby. Her soft-soled leather boots made no sound on the smooth tiled floor. Now that Rolf had finally arrived to pick her up, she didn't really feel like going out with him. What would he say if she told him she'd changed her mind?

The doorbell rang again. She stopped and took a look through the peephole.

Yes. It was Rolf. He stood on the landing and carried a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses. Where in the hell had he been able to buy roses in the middle of a blizzard and power failure? Snowflakes feathered his hair and trickled moisture down his face. A large, two-seater snowmobile waited in the middle of her sidewalk.

She unlocked the door and opened it.

Rolf immediately shouldered his way inside and kicked the door shut behind him. "Thanks." He stomped

the snow from his boots and thrust the roses at her in a classic lunge.

Shannon sidestepped the lunge without even thinking it through. As she sidestepped the blow, the holographic roses disappeared, revealing the deadly blade he'd aimed at her.

She whipped her cloak over the blade in trained reaction to its danger, spun on her heel, and ran for her life. Did she have the time to reach the broadsword hanging over her fireplace before he cut her down in cold blood?

*Don't stop. Don't look back. Just run down the hall, through the living room, straight to the fireplace.*

She jumped, grabbing the sword and spinning around in mid-air to land facing her opponent with three feet of solid steel ready to block his blow. Their blades clanged with an ugly screech that shattered the deadly silence. A parry, then a dodge knocked his blade aside. The flames hissed behind Shannon. She whirled to the side with a panther-like speed trained into her from many long years of practice bouts with her droid and tournament competition bouts at the SCA faires.

He tried to force her against the couch. She parried his blows with a resounding clash that went straight through her teeth and bones, and refused to give ground.

Pattern after pattern she blocked. Not thinking, just reacting. Fast and furious. Sweat ran down her face. Her shirt and pants clung and flared against her body as she turned and fought and fought again.

His gaze shifted. He changed pattern on the next step. She made the instinctive move. Her blade swung around and sliced his hand off at the wrist.

Blood spurted up in her face. His sword toppled to the floor with his hand still clenched around the hilt.

He lifted the spurting stump of his hand and opened his mouth to scream.

But she didn't hear his scream. The horrific sound of a massive object crashing and ripping through her front door drowned it out.

## Chapter Eleven

Fergus pulled Shannon into his lap and hugged her close. "It's all right, *querida* ." She shivered uncontrollably.

*Diablo!* The sight of her standing tall and straight with that sword in her hand while she disarmed Rolf was seared into his mind forever. She was magnificent! Strong and beautiful! A unique and perfect combination of male and female within her mind, body, and spirit.

Shannon tucked her legs up and curved her body in a desperate need for his comforting touch. Tears spilled past her long, dark eyelashes, and she made a sound halfway between a sob and a gasp. Her soft breasts pressed against him. He automatically ran his gaze down her body, making sure she wasn't injured, and his gaze caught at the small bulge of her cock in her pants. A detail he wouldn't have noticed before he'd met her.

And the funny thing was, he couldn't think of Shannon in any other way than who she was now. Imagining her without a cock was like imagining himself without one. It felt *wrong*. Utterly wrong and bizarre.

He shifted his position under the solid, muscular weight of her body and stroked her trembling arms. "We're here now, *mi corazón*. You're safe. It's over."

Blood pooled on the floor around Rolf's severed hand and the machete. Shannon had laid her broadsword upon the coffee table when Rolf had crashed to the floor after they'd stunned him. More bright splashes of blood had sprayed over Shannon's clothes, the wall, and the floor.

Tanny had grabbed the emergency medical kit from the snowmobile. She was on her knees beside Rolf, applying a tourniquet to his arm with quiet efficiency. She sprayed the bloody stump with disinfectant, then stood and carefully transferred his severed hand to an ice-filled medical storage bin. Tanny contacted the police medical service with her vidphone and gave them terse and precise directions. The criminal evidence technicians had already been contacted. They would be arriving momentarily.

Shannon took a long, shuddering breath and wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. A blush stained her cheeks. She struggled to untangle herself from his embrace. "I'm a mess. I shouldn't be sitting on your lap like this. I was only trying to stop him, not hurt him."

Tanny stood over them. She tilted Shannon's chin up with her hand and brushed a tear away with her finger. "It's okay. You did what you had to do, and now that it's over, you're experiencing the delayed reaction of shock and horror. Don't be afraid to accept the comfort you need right now."

She gestured at the vid over the mantelpiece. "The power came on while you were fighting. We'll be able to transfer a solid database and document everything for the criminal investigation."

Shannon pushed against Fergus with desperate strength. He sighed and let her go.

She staggered to her feet and straightened her shirt and pants in an automatic gesture. "I'm okay now." She sucked in a shaky breath and gestured at Rolf. "Go ahead. I mustn't keep you from doing your job."

Sirens wailed in the distance. It sounded like both teams, investigative and medical, would arrive at the same time.

Fergus stood and shot a pleading look at Tanny. She was so much better at talking than he was.

Tanny nodded at him, then stepped forward and rested her hand on Shannon's arm. "Tomorrow, we'll be back. Okay?"

Shannon shot them a confused stare. The sound of footsteps in the hallway alerted her to the imminent arrival of the investigative and medical technicians. She straightened her shoulders, tightened her mouth in sudden decision, and spoke in a crisp, no-nonsense voice. "I understand. You don't have to stay here anymore. I'll pack your clothes and have them ready for you to pick up tomorrow."

Fergus lifted his hand and then dropped it. *Later*. After the investigation was completed and they were no longer on duty would be a much better time for them to talk.



\* \* \* \* \*

Shannon walked through her empty house. The storm had ended. It was ten in the morning already. Sixteen hours had passed since Rolf attacked her, and it all felt so unreal and distant, like a strange dream. Her house droid had already repaired her damaged front door and cleaned up the debris. She had to reprogram the droid to seal off the living room in order to preserve the crime scene intact, as evidence for the investigators.

They'd taken her clothing away as part of that evidence.

*And her sword.*

The clothes she didn't mind. Hell, she never wanted to wear them again after what happened. In fact, as soon as she'd torn them off, she went into the shower and scrubbed herself raw, getting rid of the horrid feel of dried blood on her skin.

But the sword was a family heirloom. She wanted it returned to its rightful place above the mantelpiece as soon as possible.

Christmas Day and she was alone again. No laughter, no one talking, drinking coffee, and eating breakfast with her. Her bed remained empty. Fergus and Tanny no longer took turns lying beside her in slumber, comfortable in her presence.

Shannon entered the kitchen, ordered the droid to prepare fresh coffee. She went to the refrigerator, pulled out the remains of yesterday's brunch, and set it out on the table.

Fergus had the habit of gulping his coffee and taking greedy bites of his bread, leaving a smear of butter on his lips. Tanny ate and drank with delicate, quick bites and sips. She always waited until after she ate to sit down and comb the sleep tangles from her long, black hair. And her caramel-colored skin always glowed with a soft heat after she woke up.

Shannon selected the mug she'd used the day before and filled it to the brim with steaming-hot coffee. The mug was one thing that still remained the same.

The only reason Fergus had held her in his lap after the attack was because she'd gone into shock and needed the simple comfort of his touch. Nothing more. Nothing less. If she tried to read anything more than that into the way he'd held her and murmured words of comfort and endearment, she'd be setting herself up to be hurt.

*Querida* was the Spanish word for dear. It didn't mean he cared for her. The same thing when he called her *mi corazón*. He wasn't really calling her his heart. He didn't mean it as an endearment. They were just words said to make her feel better and get over the shock.

Just because Tanny had wiped a tear from her face with her finger didn't mean she cared, either. She was just doing her job. Taking care of Shannon, making sure she was all right. The same way Tanny took the time to make sure Rolf wouldn't bleed to death while they waited for the rest of the crime scene technicians and medics to arrive.

Shannon tore a piece of bread from the loaf and buttered it with short, angry strokes.

*Dammit!* It hurt! The house felt so *empty* without them!

It didn't matter before. True, she wanted love. But she hadn't missed what she'd never known.

She hadn't known how good it'd feel having them around her at all hours of the night and day. She never knew before how solitary her lifestyle had been.

Maybe she should get a dog. That might help keep her mind occupied and fill the house up with the presence of a living being again. Not one of those pedigreed dogs. She'd contact the Humane Society tomorrow. They'd have plenty of unwanted dogs who needed good homes.

Fergus and Tanny never did say when they'd be stopping over. Probably later this afternoon after they'd had a chance to rest. They probably spent most of the night writing reports and listing evidence from last night's events.

Plenty of time left to pack their clothes.

\* \* \* \* \*

The storm had ended at 2 a.m. Now, at eleven in the morning, the city permitted aircar travel with one safety restriction. All aircars must remain on auto-pilot, with no deviations from the programmed course. The deep snow was considered too high-risk for manual piloting and landing.

Fergus entered Shannon's address into the aircar's comp system. Then he raked his hands through his hair for the fiftieth time. "Do I look all right?"

Tanny patted his knee. "You look fine. Just relax."

The stubby aircar taxied to the end of the ramp and lifted off with its wings extended and copter blades whirring.

All too soon, they arrived on Shannon's rooftop. Her house droids had melted every scrap from the landing pad. The bright sunlight flashing from the snow almost blinded him. Fergus unfastened his seatbelt and climbed out. He clutched a bottle of *Coquito* to his chest with his gloved hands and waited for Tanny with his heart in his throat. A cold, crisp wind blowing across the roof whipped tears from his eyes.

Shannon's surprised voice boomed from the speaker set into the rooftop entrance panel. "I'll be right up! I wasn't expecting you to get here until later this afternoon."

About fifteen seconds later, a buzzer sounded. The light above the entrance glowed green and the door slid open.

Shannon looked gorgeous. She wore a thin, white cotton top and a pair of gray sweatpants. Her whiskey-colored hair fell over her shoulders in loose waves. The bright sunlight showed a faint dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

He let Tanny step inside first, then followed and immediately handed Shannon the bottle. "*Feliz Navidad*," he said with all the élan of a teenager on his first date. "This is called *Coquito*. My father makes it every year for the holidays. It's a mixture of coconut cream, rum, and cinnamon."

The elevator hummed and moved under their feet, bringing them from the roof to the first-floor lobby. Shannon fingered the silver ribbon and bow tied around the bottle. A slight flush darkened her cheeks.

“Thank you.” She looked away. The feathered screen of her lashes hid her eyes from him. “I didn’t get your clothes packed yet.”

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Shannon stepped out, holding the bottle in front of her like a shield. “You can wait in the library. It won’t take long. Fifteen minutes at the most for me to bring down your clothes.”

Fergus exchanged a startled glance with Tanny.

*Diablo!* After all they’d been through together, Shannon was acting as if they were total strangers.

Fergus shrugged his coat off and tossed it onto the bench against the wall. He stepped forward and covered Shannon’s hands with his.

*Bad move.* Now the damned bottle was in the way.

Shannon tried to free herself. “Let go, please.”

He blurted out, “Not before I say what I came here to say.”

Shannon glared at him. That slight flush had deepened into two bright red spots on her cheekbones. “Go ahead. Say whatever it is you have to say.”

He ground his teeth and shook his head. “Let go of the bottle first. It’s in my way.”

“I can’t let go of the bottle until you let go of my hands.”

Tanny’s throaty chuckle broke the deadlock. She reached between them and carefully seized the bottle at the bottom. “On the count of three, both of you let go. Okay.”

Shannon nodded. “Okay.”

*“Uno, dos, tres!”*

Fergus lifted his hands and hurriedly moved them to Shannon’s waist. Shannon relinquished the bottle. Tanny placed the bottle beside the vase of poinsettias on the little end table against the wall.

Shannon placed her hands on Fergus’s chest and gave him a gentle push. “Let go of me, please.”

He tightened his grip on her waist and shook his head. Shannon was so stubborn and proud, she made his heart ache just looking at her. “No. Not yet. I want to kiss you first.”

“K-Kiss me?” She shifted her gaze to Tanny and then back to him. “What about Tanny?”

Tanny’s carnal murmur sent a rush of blood straight to Fergus’s groin and rapidly rising cock. “After he finishes kissing you, it’s my turn.”

Shannon’s eyes darkened. Her body relaxed under his hands, from stubborn tension to a hesitant sensuality. She wrapped her hands around his neck. Her fingers teased his hair.

She moistened her parted lips with the tip of her tongue and moved closer. “Like this?” Her soft breasts flattened against his chest and the hard bulge of her cock nudged him.

He moved one hand up to the back of her head, cupped her ass with his other hand, and pulled her close. The feel of her arousal against him was driving him crazy with anticipation. He bent his head and kissed her, long and hard and greedily. Shannon opened her mouth, sighed, and kissed him back just as greedily. At the same time, she tightened her arms around his neck and ground her hips against him, matching his thrust for thrust.

*Dios!* Dry-humping Shannon like this was driving him crazy. He wanted to feel her, every inch of her sweet, strong, passionate body against him.

They ended their kiss with reluctant groans. He stepped back with his heart hammering against his chest.

Tanny nudged him aside with her hip and wrapped her arms around Shannon's neck. "My turn."

Shannon's grin was carnality personified. She cupped Tanny's breast with one hand and her ass with her other hand.

Tanny arched her back and pulled Shannon's head down to hers.

*Por dios!* Watching the both of them kiss and hump each other was even worse torture for Fergus. All the blood in his body went to his groin. His balls and cock felt like they were going to explode. It took all of his self-control not to unzip his pants right then and there.

This time, Shannon ended the kiss. She crooked her finger at him to join their embrace. "Come on. I want to finish this in my bedroom."

## Chapter Twelve

Shannon climbed the staircase with Tanny, their arms entwined around each other's waists. Tanny rested her head in the hollow beneath Shannon's shoulder and she fit perfectly. Not too tall and not too short.

Fergus walked beside Shannon, holding his hand at the small of her back. With that intimate and simple touch, he claimed both her and Tanny as his lovers.

She wanted to pinch herself and prove once and for all that this wasn't a dream. In a few moments, she was going to enjoy the best Christmas Day of her life. This was far better than any sexual fantasy she'd ever imagined. Two experienced and sexy partners, man and woman, both ready and eager to show her the infinite possibilities of making love to them.

They stopped at her bedroom door. Fergus opened the door and ushered them inside. Shannon's heart stuttered. She kicked off her sneakers, removed her socks, and then sat on the edge of the bed. Sweat drenched her hands.

Tanny and Fergus's warm, loving smiles were what kept her from turning around and running away. She turned them on, both of them. The way they'd kissed her had told her that. They weren't grossed out because she had breasts, cock, and pussy. It didn't matter if this was going to be only a one-time fling. She wanted them, too.

Fergus kicked his shoes away and peeled off his shirt. The fire blazing on the other side of the bedroom cast shadows across the lean, carved muscles of his belly, chest, shoulders, and arms. Dark hair furred the center of his chest and narrowed down to a black arrow that pointed at the impressive bulge behind his jeans zipper. He grinned at her, then unzipped his jeans and slid both jeans and underwear off his hips.

His cock sprang out, thick and long, and rose to his navel. Pre-cum dewed the bulbous head.

Shannon sucked in a breath. Her mouth watered and she swallowed convulsively. His cock was impressive, alive and warm. Nothing like the vibrators she'd used, and larger than her cock. Would it hurt when he tried to fit all of him inside her?

Fergus bent and pulled both his pants and underwear down to his ankles. He stood and his cock and balls hung heavily between his thighs. He stepped out of his clothing, then went to her and sat down. The mattress sagged under his weight.

Shannon grabbed the edge and maintained her position without sliding any closer to him.

Fergus touched her chin with his finger. "What's wrong, *querida*? Did you change your mind?"

She shook her head.

"My turn!" Tanny strolled barefooted across the carpet. Her toes curled into the thick carpet with each lazy step. She posed beside the pile of discarded clothing, pulled her sweatshirt over her head, and tossed it aside. A lacy bra hugged her taut breasts and glowed a brilliant white against her tawny skin, outlining dark brown nipples and areolas beneath the flimsy material. Her hair tumbled to the middle of her back in a black curtain of waves and curls.

Shannon's gaze stopped at the delicate scar above Tanny's navel marking the location of an anti-fertility implant. She grinned. No distracting worries about getting pregnant for either her or Tanny.

Tanny unzipped her jeans and wiggled them down and off her legs. A white lace bikini barely covered the soft pubic mound. She curved her mouth into a wicked smile and undulated across the carpet to the bed.

Shannon's throat constricted, making it difficult to breathe. She dug her fingers into the bed covers and held on for dear life.

Tanny stopped in front of her. She exchanged a puzzled glance with Fergus and said, "You're afraid. Why?"

Shannon gulped and moistened her suddenly dry lips with her tongue. She didn't know what to say. The moment of truth was here, and all of a sudden she didn't want to take her clothes off. Her clothing was her last barrier, her last shield against rejection.

Tanny leaned down. She kissed Shannon with a hungry need that sent a shock of melting heat straight to Shannon's crotch. When she ended the kiss, Tanny held Shannon's face between her hands and stared at her with wonder. "Is this your first time? Is that why you're afraid?"

Fergus gasped with sudden comprehension. He squeezed Shannon's leg and leaned sideways so he could look into her eyes, too. "There's nothing to be afraid of, *mi corazon*. Everyone has a first time. Even me."

He managed a lopsided grin. "Just tell us what you want and what feels good for you. We have all the time in the world to make this feel perfect for you."

Shannon looked down at Tanny's lovely breasts confined by the lacy cups of her bra. She let her gaze dip lower to Tanny's panties, then sideways at Fergus's cock standing strong and hard at attention between his hairy thighs. "I want to keep my clothes on for a little while longer."

Her nipples ached under her shirt and her cock had become hard as steel inside her pants. Her face was

burning up with embarrassment already. If she looked either one of them in the eye, she wouldn't even be able to say what she wanted out loud.

Shannon gestured at Tanny and mumbled past the lump in her throat, "Take your bra and panties off, please. I'd like the both of you to lie down side by side on the bed so I can take my time touching you first."

Fergus squeezed her knee. "That sounds wonderful, *querida*."

Tanny yanked the bedcovers down and plumped up the pillows. Fergus grabbed Tanny's hand, then Shannon's, and the three of them piled onto the bed like kids at a slumber party.

They sorted out their arms and legs and left just enough space for Shannon to kneel between them. They were every wet dream she'd ever had turned into reality. She reached out with trembling hands and touched them.

Fergus's golden-brown skin scorched her hand. His chest was hard, solid muscle. Four black curls circled his nipple. She rolled the hard peak between her fingers and he groaned.

Tanny's rounded breast filled Shannon's hand completely. The whipped-chocolate skin was so soft and warm and her nipples were longer, darker, and harder than Fergus's. She squeezed Shannon's hand tighter over her breast and murmured, "Suck it, please. Suck it nice and hard for me."

Shannon bent her head and sucked. The nipple blossomed under her questing tongue. Tanny whimpered and wiggled under her mouth.

Shannon sat back on her heels again. She ran her hands over their bellies. So similar and so different at the same time. Male and female.

When she stopped, Fergus thrust his hips at her. "Go ahead. I'm not going to break if you touch me there."

So she did. His cock filled her hand with a surprising familiarity. She knew exactly how to squeeze it, pull her hand slowly up the shaft, and then press her thumb over the hole in the tip and rub the pre-cum over the soft skin. She moved her hand up and down his cock with a slow, steady pressure, coaxing him over the edge. He rolled onto his side, giving her an easier grip on him, and thrust into her hand in eager response.

Tanny had shaved her hair down to a narrow strip. The vulnerable pink flesh between the dark skin of her nether lips lay exposed under Shannon's hand, responding to her touch like a rosebud unfolding its petals. No cock hardening between her lips. Only a pink-flushed button of engorged flesh. Shannon touched Tanny's clit carefully. She didn't want to hurt her.

Tanny arched her back and butted her clit against Shannon's finger. "There!" she murmured. "Rub along the left side for now. The right side is too sensitive at the beginning for me."

Warm pussy moisture flooded Shannon's fingers. She smoothed it over Tanny's clit and rubbed harder. The flesh responded like a miniature penis under her touch. So much sensation packed into such a small button.

Tanny whimpered, soft and low, in a keening cry for more. She writhed against Shannon's hand.

Amazing! And humbling to know her touch could give so much pleasure. Shannon caught her breath at the thought of her cock sliding into Tanny. And all the blood in her brain suddenly flooded into the diamond-bright ache at her groin.

Shannon looked up. Fergus held Tanny's breasts in his strong, callused hands. He was carefully sucking and biting her nipples, one after the other.

More moisture flooded Tanny's pussy. Shannon rubbed harder on Tanny's clit while Fergus pumped his cock against the stroking of her other hand.

Then it happened! Tanny threw her head back and bucked against Shannon's hand like a wild woman. Her eyes rolled back, and she moaned and cried her way to a climax.

Fergus thrust faster against Shannon's hand. She tightened her fingers around his cock. The fat vein coiled around the thick shaft pulsed under her hand.

He yelled, "*Diablo!*" and let his cum spill across Shannon's hand and Tanny's pussy.

Shannon sat back on her heels. Her hands were wet with cum and pussy juice. She wiped them on her sweatpants.

Both Fergus and Tanny sat up. Tanny captured her hands.

Fergus said, "Now it's our turn." He tugged at the hem of her T-shirt.

Panic rushed through her. She pulled her hands from Tanny's loose grip and blocked Fergus from lifting her shirt. "I'm not ready yet."

Fergus slipped his hand under her shirt. Tanny grinned and slipped her hand under beside his. They dragged his fingers down her stomach together. Her skin ignited under their touch. Their fingers snagged at the waistband of her pants, then settled on the obvious swelling tenting the soft fabric below. Both hands pressed hard against her erection. Her pulse went into overdrive.

"*Querida.*" Fergus spoke in a husky, demanding murmur. "We want to make love to you. Now!"

Oh, yes! She was ready now. Shannon peeled her shirt off and tossed it on the floor.

Two hot hands captured her breasts. Their mouths and tongues tugged and nipped on her in slow, deliberate heat.

She wrapped her hands in their hair.

Pain and pleasure. Sheer ecstasy. So much more than she'd ever imagined it would feel.

They lifted their heads.

Her nipples were swollen and wet from their mouths.

They pulled her down between them. Tanny tugged off her pants and panties with eager hands. Shannon went very still.

Fergus leaned over her and smiled. "You look perfect, Shann." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, kissed the tip of her nose, and then ran his callused hands down her body.

Tanny plopped down on the other side. She stroked Shannon's arm and then her belly.

Slowly, teasingly, with the both of them watching her face, Tanny moved her hand lower and circled Shannon's cock in a warm, gentle, experienced grip.

Shannon closed her eyes. *Yes!*

Fergus scooted down. He stopped and brushed his lips across Shannon's anti-fertility implant scar. His hot breath feathered across her belly. "I don't have to wear a condom. I hate wearing them."

When he kissed the head of her cock and swirled the tip of his tongue over the pre-cum, Shannon thought she was going to die from happiness. Now both he and Tanny caressed her cock, teasing her with slow, even strokes.

Shannon braced her heels and dug her fingernails into the sheets. *Yes! Oh, God. Yes!*

Soft mewling sounds escaped from her parted lips.

Fergus slid two fingers into her pussy and wrung a gasp from her with that sudden intrusion. "Do you have a hymen?" he asked. "I can take care of it with my fingers first if you want."

"Noooo." She groaned. "My gynecologist cut it when she inserted my first implant on my eighteenth birthday."

Fergus inserted a third finger and probed her deeper. "That's perfect. No pain for you, then, only pleasure when I ride you for the first time." His thumb pressed against the tight sac of her balls. Tanny milked her cock with her hands and fastened her hot mouth over the head.

Faster and harder, Fergus and Tanny probed and suckled her. It was fantastic. Her balls tightened. Her cock jerked inside Tanny's mouth. Her pussy clenched and dripped around Fergus's long fingers.

*Oh, shit!* Shannon opened her eyes.

"Stop!" she yelled. "Please! Stop!"

They stopped.

She gasped. "Tanny, I want to come inside you and I want Fergus to fuck me. Now!"

Both of them scooted up. Tanny fit her curvy body into Shannon's arms with practiced ease.

Fergus moved behind her and rolled her sideways with his strong hands. He ran his hand down her ass and under her thigh, lifted her leg, and eased himself closer. His cock slid between her buttocks and the already moist tip nudged open her pussy lips.

Shannon pushed her cock at Tanny's pussy and bumped into her pubic bone instead. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"That's all right," Tanny drawled. She wrapped her fingers around Shannon's cock, lifted her leg, and guided her inside.

*Oh, God!* Shannon bit back a gasp. Tanny's pussy was so hot, tight, and wet.

Fergus moved his hand from Shannon's leg, reached over her and took hold of Tanny by the waist, and pulled them both to him. That pushed him inside her in one glorious stroke that went all the way through into her cock.

"Oh, God," Tanny moaned. "It feels like I have two cocks in me at the same time."



Fergus lost control then. He exploded into motion. He pistoned his cock into Shannon.

It was incredible. Even better and more intense than her best fantasy had ever been. Shannon reveled in the sensation of him riding her, showing her how to move inside Tanny, pushing her in and out as if her cock was his. Hard and fast and long he rode them both.

Hot, eager cries escaped from all three of them with each deep thrust.

*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!* Shannon's pussy clenched and squeezed around his cock in wave after wave of excruciating pleasure. Her cock filled Tanny's hot pussy with a long, glorious geyser of cum. Fergus slammed into Shannon one last time and shot burst after burst of his cum into her.

They collapsed in a limp tangle, gasping for air. Legs twitched and trembled. They were so deeply imbedded together, Shannon wasn't sure whose legs were trembling.

Fergus groaned, then pulled himself out and rolled to the side.

Shannon hugged Tanny for a few more moments, breathing in her scent. She tasted salt on her lips. She felt sweat trickling past their breasts and bellies.

Tanny's pussy gave Shannon's half-erect cock one last convulsive squeeze. Shannon's cock slid out as she rolled over on her back.

She closed her eyes. It was over. It was the most fantastic and special Christmas of her life. And she didn't want it to end. *Ever*.

Now that they'd satisfied their curiosity about what it would be like to fuck her, they'd leave and she'd be alone again. They had each other already. They didn't need her.

Finally, she opened her eyes. Fergus and Tanny propped themselves on their arms. They grinned at her.

Fergus rubbed his thumb across her mouth. "*Querida*, you were wonderful!"

Shannon sucked in a deep breath and exhaled carefully. She steeled her heart for the inevitable and said, "Thank you. I guess I better pack your clothes."

Fergus stared at her with a look of astonishment on his face. He frowned. His bushy eyebrows met in the center of his forehead. "Why? Was it that bad for you? Don't you want us anymore?"

Her ears were ringing. Did that mean they wanted to stay with her?

Tanny wrapped her hand around Shannon's breast and pinched the nipple. "Shann, honey," she whispered. "I don't know about you, but what happened here between was very special."

"It was?"

Tanny fastened her mouth on the tender flesh and suckled for a few moments. Then she lifted her head, winked at Fergus, and then smiled at Shannon. "We want to stay with you and be your lovers for as long as you'll have us."

"You do?"

Fergus grabbed her chin and glared at her. "Damn right we do. We love you and we want to stay with you. Are you going to throw us out now?"

Her ears *were* ringing.

They wanted her. They loved her.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. “I love you, too. Please, stay with me.”

Fergus’s cock stiffened into a hard, solid column against her leg. He shouted, “Yes!” Then he kissed her.