

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**

**PRIMAL**  
*Elements*

CHRISTINE  
D'ABO

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Primal Elements

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# *PRIMAL ELEMENTS*

Christine d'Abo

## **Chapter One**

"Welcome to Perfect Match, version 3.5."

The voice of the computer faded leaving the spinning logo of the dating service on the screen. A loud chorus of cheers erupted from the small collection of women gathered in the booth.

"You guys are insane," Jenna laughed and squeezed onto Rhonda's lap.

"Shut up, jerk, and enjoy your present," Rhonda said and gave her arm a light shove.

Ruby piped in, "Yeah, jerk, it's not every day the baby of our group turns thirty. Now what are our options?"

The holographic face of the host appeared above the viewer. Relief ran through Jenna – thank the gods he hadn't shown up in person again. It was bad enough having him take her picture for her profile. The prospect of having to spend another minute in that creep's presence, especially in this cramped space, was nauseating. At least this way she had the pleasure of knowing he was safely three rooms away.

"Ladies, I hope you find the booth spacious."

"First-rate. Hell, you could put a king-size bed in here," Rhonda said and rolled her eyes.

"Glad you like it, sweet cheeks."

The angle at which the holograph hung gave the proprietor a perfect look down the front of their shirts. Rhonda tugged the neckline up half an inch and glared.

Jenna knew this would get ugly fast if she didn't put a stop to things. Waving her hand in front of his holographic face, Jenna smiled sweetly at him. "How does this thing work?"

The man sniffed before a holographic arm appeared from out of nowhere and hovered above the smooth keypad. His hand began to whip wildly around, pointing out the features.

"Press here to access the database. You'll be asked a series of questions. Questions and images will be displayed here on the screen. If you lie on the questions the matching system won't work. And remember the information you enter will be kept confidential."

"Are you sure you don't peek?" Michelle asked.

The man laughed, "I can't even if I wanted to. The database is locked tight with both a hard-coded and soft-coded password. Only the owner has them."

Somehow, that didn't completely reassure Jenna. Neither did it seem to reassure

Rhonda, who now had her arms crossed firmly over her chest.

"And who's the owner?" Rhonda asked in a tone that was less than inviting.

The holographic host licked his lips before winking at her. "That's the million-credit question now, isn't it? I don't ask, don't care as long as I get my paycheck."

"What do we do when we're done?" Jenna piped up, not wanting things to get nasty.

The host turned back to Jenna and his slick smile was quickly back in place. "The file saves automatically once you've completed the questionnaire. It runs a compatibility test and then you'll see your perfect match. Any questions?"

"Nope. Bye now!" Rhonda waved.

Jenna tapped the back of her friend's head. "Settle down."

"Don't do that on my account. I like them wild." The man winked before the holograph disappeared.

"Okay, eww," Ruby shuddered.

Michelle laughed, "I hope he's not in the system."

Ruby smiled. "I bet he is."

*Oh shit.*

"I'm out of here," Jenna said and stood to leave.

Six hands reached out and stopped her escape.

With a groan, Jenna fell back on Rhonda's lap. "Come on, guys, I was only kidding when I said there wasn't a man on Mars for me. Don't make me do this."

"Too late, it's too late," Rhonda said in a singsong voice. "Now let's get this party started."

After tapping a few of the keys, she managed to get the program up and running.

"Welcome to Perfect Match home screen," the computer cooed in a distinctly feminine voice. "To begin your journey to find your ideal mate, please complete the following questionnaire. If you have questions or problems at any time, please contact the proprietor."

"Fat chance, sister," Ruby giggled.

The screen popped to life with a slick, interactive questionnaire. Rhonda dramatically cracked her fingers then attacked the keypad. "First off, is your perfect match male or female?"

"Male please," Jenna said and hung her head, knowing she wasn't going to get out of this. At least not without inflicting bodily harm on her best friends on the entire planet, and that wasn't high on her list of things to do.

"Easy enough. Question two is to list the ideal height of your Romeo," Rhonda rolled her tongue over the r to produce a purr-like sound as she said it.

"Earth plays suck. Especially old ones," Michelle said and kicked the wall under the vid screen.

Ruby turned. "Hey, you have an Earther here. No slams, please."

Michelle merely smiled.

"Let's make him tall," Rhonda typed quickly as she spoke. "I'm thinking around six-two."

"Smart too. The professor here would get annoyed with a lesser man." Michelle laughed.

"I would not." Jenna tried to sound offended, but it was probably true. Not that she was a snob, but she needed a man who could keep up with her when she talked about work. Or at the very least, a man whose eyes wouldn't glaze over at the mention of terraforming and soil compounds. She sighed as her friends continued to chatter around her. "Look, don't I get a say in any of this?"

"No," all three of her friends responded at once.

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Dark hair, please."

"And blue eyes!"

"No, hazel. She's always liked hazel."

"He should be artistic."

"No, athletic."

Jenna shook her head at the flurry of adjectives flying around the small booth. She laughed and tried to remember how she'd let the girls talk her into this. Vague memories of lots of homemade booze and a long heart-to-heart chat with Rhonda one night a month ago surfaced. The idea of turning thirty was harder than she cared to admit. It wasn't the age as much as the fact that she was turning it alone. Her students at the university referred to her as the pathetic professor. She didn't have much of an urge to take a closer examination at that title. She may have considered herself many things in the past, but pathetic certainly wasn't one of them.

The chorus of voices grew louder to the point of chaos. There was no holding back her friends once they got going.

"Wait, wait, wait," Rhonda practically shouted. "Time to describe his libido."

"Wild man, ready for nonstop sex." Ruby spoke in a voice that a news anchor would use.

"Adventurous lover, willing to do anything for his partner," Michelle offered.

"Perfect," Rhonda said and entered the information.

Jenna shook her head, "Guys, you're not going to find anyone if you make the profile too specific. Or else it's going to spit out a weirdo."

"I'll do a psych profile on him if you'd like. Free of charge too." Rhonda waved her hand in the air, as if to dismiss all Jenna's worries. "Now we need to put in Jenna's profile."

"This will be fun," Ruby said and rubbed her hands together.

"Be nice, it's my birthday," Jenna said but couldn't stop cringing.

Ruby poked her, "Remember the thirty red bras hanging in my apartment?"

"And the thirty black teddies?"

"And the thirty thongs?"

"First of all I wasn't all alone in those little capers," Jenna said, even though she knew her protests were weak.

"But they were your ideas," Rhonda added.

Jenna crossed her arms across her chest. "Second of all, lingerie is a little different than this. Can't you just buy me some leopard-print panties and get it over with?"

The three friends looked silently at each other, smiled and turned back to the screen. Rhonda pushed Jenna off her lap so she could lean in better. Now forced to skirt around to stand behind them, Jenna's heart raced.

"If you three aren't nice I'll go get our charming proprietor. I bet he'd be more than happy to help me out. Come in to fix some imaginary problem with the computer."

They completely ignored her. Jenna pushed away her growing frustrations and tried to relax into the fun. That's all it was after all, a bit of fun. She could play along or be miserable about it. What did it matter that the idea of getting back into a serious relationship was the last thing she ever wanted to do as long as she lived? There wasn't any way this could turn out worse than her last stint in the dating world. Was there?

"Okay, I have smart, tall, blonde hair, female with hazel eyes. What else?" Rhonda said as she tapped her fingers on the smooth datapad.

"Committed, passionate."

"Loyal, friendly."

"Good gods, you're making me sound like a dog," Jenna groaned.

"Put sexy," Ruby piped in.

"I am not. Shit, don't lie to it. The guy will walk out on the date ten minutes after we meet. Sue for false advertising."

Michelle rolled her eyes. "You are too. The way you wear those stuffy shirts buttoned down to show cleavage. Guys eat that shit up."

Jenna looked down to check out the cleavage in question. She'd never intended to be sexy, or enticing in any way. Gods, she could just imagine what the university board would say if they thought she was trying to entice her students or colleagues. *Proper ladies don't dress this way.*

"Okay, here's what we have. Jenna is a tall blonde woman with hazel eyes. Her educational background is a PhD in environmental studies. Defining traits are loyal, committed, passionate and unintentionally sexy. Now," Rhonda took a deep breath, "it wants us to write a few lines about your ideal mate."

"I thought we did that? Someone needs to change the order of this thing." Michelle threw her hands up.

"No, that was a physical description. Now we need to describe his personality."

"Well, they should have asked for that sooner."

Rhonda patted Michelle's arm, "Baby, when you design a mate-matching program, you can write it however you want. Now who's Jenna's perfect mate?"

The room went quiet for a minute as the three women stopped to consider. Jenna hated silence and wasn't one to let others handle her fate.

"Put down, an open communicator, who enjoys socializing, going to the movies and debating political issues." She said the words quickly and prayed they'd listen.

"Boring. But we can start with that." Rhonda poised her fingers above the keyboard.

"I know. A mysterious man, who is looking for a woman to unlock his inner beast." Ruby giggled.

Rhonda typed frantically. "Better. Think, ladies. Who's the perfect match for our little Jenna?"

"A quiet music lover, who prefers alone time with his lady rather than socializing," Michelle added.

Rhonda laughed. "I love it."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "You're not actually going to expect me to go on a date with this person?"

"Hush, I'm clicking next," laughed Rhonda. "Oh! Time for her sexual match."

Another round of hoots and laughter filled the room. Jenna's face was hot and she knew she must be three shades of red by now. This was such a stupid idea.

Ruby spun around in her seat to face Jenna. "What do you want in the bedroom, a tiger or a lump of clay?"

"Lump of clay?"

"You know, a lover you can control and mold to meet your needs. I call them clay," Ruby winked.

All of a sudden, the birthday game took on a slightly more serious tone. It'd been so long since she'd been with a man she almost forgot what it was like. The last thing she needed right now was her three best, though slightly demented, friends trying to determine what her sex life needed.

"I want to do this part myself." The words slipped out, but once said Jenna's resolve grew.

Michelle shook her head. "No way, we're doing the —"

Jenna held up her hands and the protests quickly died down. "I promise I'll treat it seriously and won't change anything else. But just in case this guy turns out to really be my perfect match, I want to make sure everything is, well, perfect."

The three women looked at Jenna then at each other. An unspoken agreement was reached between them, and Rhonda nodded.

"If you promise to fill this in and to not change anything, then we'll step outside the



booth. You have five minutes, chickie.”

“Give me ten, I need to think.”

“Fine,” Michelle said with a huff, standing dramatically. “Let’s go.”

It took a few minutes for the gaggle of women to leave the small booth. Once gone, Jenna could suddenly breathe again.

The screen still flashed at the prompt waiting for her to disclose her darkest sexual desires. The butterflies in her stomach tried to take flight as she walked around to sit down in the chair closest to the datapad. She reached out with an unsteady hand and hovered for a moment before she tapped next.

“To help the program find a compatible mate, please answer the following questions honestly,” the computer’s voice was hushed, as if it recognized the sensitive nature of the material.

*Okay, I can do this.* Jenna tapped the screen.

“You are lying naked on a large bed. Your eyes are closed but you know your lover is in the room with you. What part of your body does he touch first?”

“Oh.” Jenna’s mouth grew dry and she had to lick her lips to bring some relief.

Images whizzed through her head, a thousand different faces of men she’d seen over the years. She gave her head a shake. Gods, none of them. She needed her fantasy lover and concentrated on that alone. Reality had proven to be too much of a disappointment over the years. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and tried to relax.

The girls’ description of the dark-haired lover floated to the surface of her mind. She grabbed hold of his image. He was tall, muscular without the bulk of having spent too much time in the gym. He stood before her, his untucked white linen shirt unbuttoned down to his navel. She could see the light dusting of dark hair that covered his flat stomach.

As he walked towards the bed that she was lying on, he smiled gently.

“Close your eyes, Jenna.”

She did. Lying back on the bed, she waited, anticipating his touch. The tips of his warm fingers drew a line from her stomach up to between her breasts. Shivers ran through her body, dragging a sigh from her lips.

The sound of her voice startled her. She opened her eyes and found the computer screen still patiently waiting for her response. Instinctively, she gave her hands a shake to stop the trembling so she could type.

*He touches my stomach.* She touched next on the screen.

The screen went blank for a moment before a new question blinked up.

“After touching you, your lover whispers in your ear that he wants to try something kinky. What does he do to you next?”

Jenna closed her eyes again. Her fantasy lover placed a kiss on her stomach. He

licked around her navel as he slid his large hands along the sides of her rib cage.

"I want to do something for you." His words were soft against her skin.

"Anything."

"Look at me."

She opened her eyes and fixated on his ruffled hair. She reached over to touch the soft strands. He looked up with his deep hazel eyes.

"I want you to come with me and sit over by the fire," he said as he teased the sensitive skin of her inner thigh.

"In the chair?"

"Yes."

In a blink she was there. He was standing before her naked and in his hands were four black silk scarves.

"I'm going to tie you to the chair. Is that okay?"

Her throat was dry, but she managed to whisper. "Yes."

Barely opening her eyes, Jenna's fingers found the keypad. *I am sitting in a chair by a fireplace. My lover has bound me to it with silk scarves. He proceeds to touch my skin, my breasts, my thighs. He teases me until he finally goes down on me, licking my pussy until I come.*

Her body responded to the fantasy. It would only take a few minutes to relieve the pressure that had built in her pussy. It would be so easy. She clicked next instead.

"It's now your lover's turn. He is standing naked in the room. What do you do to him?"

Jenna couldn't move. She'd never thought about what she would want to do to her lover. *Fundamental flaw in my thinking. No wonder I'm still single.* She didn't need to close her eyes this time for the fantasy to come to life.

He stood there, his ridged cock jutting straight up in the air. Now freed from her chair, Jenna picked up one of the silk scarves.

"Let me put this over your eyes."

He gave her a questioning look, but nodded his agreement. Being taller than she was, Jenna was forced to get up on her tiptoes to tie the blindfold in place.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Don't move."

She found the other scarves and selected one from the pile. Firmly holding the silk length in both hands making it taut, Jenna stepped closer to him. Slowly, she slid the silk over the head of his cock.

"Oh gods," he gasped.

"You like?"

"Don't stop."

Over and over she kissed his bulging head with the scarf. She watched as his body twitched from the contact. The silk was dampened from the pre-cum leaking from his shaft and the sweat from her hands.

"I can't take much more of this." His voice sounded ragged as his breath came out in labored gasps.

Jenna dropped the silk to the floor and stepped in to place a kiss in the middle of his chest. In a heartbeat, his arms were around her, lifting her in the air. Instinctively, he made his way over to the bed, not needing to see where he was going to get her there. Jenna loved the feel of his large frame pressing down on her. She groaned as she wrapped her legs around his waist, giving him access to her cunt.

Locked in the throes of her fantasy, unable to stop herself, Jenna moved her hand down slowly to touch herself. It'd been so long since she'd been with a man she'd forgotten how they felt. She kept the pressure hard, rubbing her pussy through the damp fabric of her pants. Air filled her lungs as she sucked in a breath. The pressure and her own fantasies brought her to the brink of orgasm quickly.

"You only have a few minutes left, Jenna."

Ruby's voice jerked her back to reality. Quickly, she sat up in the chair and fixed her clothing. What the hell did she think she was doing anyway? She was sure that masturbating in public wasn't entirely legal. Even on Mars.

"I'm not quite done. Give me a minute."

"Hurry up, I want to sit down." Michelle poked her head in.

"Out!"

Jenna tried to relax, her body still vibrating with her arousal. To actually have a man under her control like that would be intoxicating. If she could actually get up the confidence to take control, she wouldn't know what to do with it. That wasn't her, even if she wished it were. Reaching over, she hit the keypad to send the report of her fantasies off to the computer database. Jenna stood and straightened her clothing. No need to give her friends more ammunition for their crusade to get her laid.

"Please press next when you are ready to continue," the computer announced from behind her.

"I'm done," Jenna announced, her voice surprisingly steady.

Michelle threw open the curtains. "Thank gods, I thought you were going to take all day."

"Did you fill it in?" Ruby clapped her hands excitedly.

"Yes. Completed, verified, and away it went."

Rhonda took up her position in the chair by the keypad. "Should we look at what she wrote?"

Jenna felt the blood drain from her face. "Do that, and I'm out of here."

"From the look on her face, I believe she actually filled it out." Rhonda patted Jenna's hand as she spoke.

"Not funny."

"It's all good. I'd never hurt you that way." Rhonda gave Jenna's hand a quick squeeze before facing the screen. "Okay, we're ready."

Rhonda dramatically hit the next button and the computer frantically went into a working mode. No one said a word until the screen flashed that it had finished its calculations.

"Click here to see your perfect match!" The computer's voice was far too cheery.

Jenna's stomach flipped. This wasn't going to go well, she knew it.

"Are you ready?"

"It probably didn't find anyone." She closed her eyes.

Despite her words, Jenna clutched the back of Rhonda's chair. *Please let it have come up with someone.*

"Now, Jenna, here's the deal. You have to go on a date with this person, regardless of who it is, for a minimum of thirty minutes."

"What?" Jenna couldn't believe it. "That wasn't a part of what I agreed to."

"Happy Birthday!" they all cheered.

"No way. That has bad idea all over it. What if he's hideous, or a jerk, or boring? Or worse, he thinks I'm all those things."

The last blind date the girls had set her up on had turned out to be a disaster. She swore then she'd never do it again. Dating had never been a priority for her. Well, not until the last month. Once again the idea of growing old alone tugged at the back of her brain. It was the reason she'd agreed to come on this little excursion in the first place. Being thirty and single on a space colony, even one as prosperous as Mars, wasn't a pleasant experience.

Rhonda knew her dilemma. Growing up together they used to feel sorry for the colonists who would come into her father's store to check the singles ads. Some had even gone the route of mail-order spouses from Earth—sight unseen. She never understood how desperate someone had to be to do something like that—until recently.

Ruby patted Jenna's hand, interrupting her thoughts. "Too bad, Professor. The lucky man behind this screen is the winner of a date with you for at least thirty minutes."

"Push it," Michelle said.

Rhonda clicked the screen. The header screen blinked away to reveal the name of her date.

*Ben Hawthorn.*

"Is he famous? Shit, I was hoping for someone famous," Michelle sighed.

Jenna froze. *No, my luck can't be this bad.*

"Pictures, we need pictures," Rhonda muttered and began to click different links.

"There won't be any," Jenna said, her voice barely a whisper.

Within a few seconds Rhonda managed to pull up an image. The quality was poor but that didn't matter. Jenna's world bottomed out when she saw him. The blurry image showed a man in his late thirties. He had dark hair, and from the picture she couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but knew full well they were hazel. Jenna shivered. He wasn't smiling, but it looked like he had that same small smirk he got whenever he thought he was right. There was something in the way he held his body that caught her attention—while still the same overconfident Ben, there was something different, changed. Not that any of that mattered because he was the last man on Mars who she wanted fulfilling her fantasies.

"He doesn't look too bad, but this picture does suck. If nothing else you'll have a good story to tell us when you get back," said Ruby.

"Press yes if you are interested in arranging a date with this person. Press next if you would like to make another match," the computer spoke smoothly.

Rhonda laughed and clicked yes.

"Oh shit, wait!" Jenna tried to stop her, but couldn't reach her.

"Too late," Ruby laughed.

"What's wrong, Jen?"

Jenna groaned. "Gods, why did it have to be Ben?"

The three women looked at each other, and then Jenna.

Michelle spoke first, "I'm sorry, I'm obviously missing something. Who is this guy?"

She knew her friends weren't going to care once she told them. But it was worth a shot.

"Mr. Hawthorn is the CEO of CalCorp, the company that has just partnered with the university for the Rebuild project."

"That's the new committee they stuck you on?" Ruby asked.

This wasn't going to work. "Yes. Mr. Hawthorn is the financial backer and the university is supposed to conduct the research to determine if old Mars is able to be reconstructed."

"So why the bad picture if he's rich? Is he hideous or something?" Michelle poked the vid screen with her finger.

Jenna shook her head, "No, Ben's quite good-looking." Unbelievably fucking hot to be precise. But with his good looks came a stubborn, uncompromising streak that made her life a living hell seven years ago. He was oil to her water in every way. "He is, for the most part, a total recluse. And one of the biggest assholes on the planet."

"Ben? You sound like you really do know him," Michelle said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Is this cheating? It feels like cheating."

"Wait a minute, I remember him," Rhonda smiled. "He was the one who wouldn't let you continue your research or something."

Jenna crossed her arms across her chest. "Seven years ago. The impact of transplanting genetically modified food from Earth onto Mars soil."

Michelle rolled her eyes. "Riveting."

"If memory serves you liked him quite a bit, up until he squashed your project. I believe you even thought he was hot. Correct?" asked Rhonda, a smirk playing on her lips.

Jenna ground her teeth, knowing there was no point in denying what Rhonda knew as truth. "So?"

"So...I think you need to relax. Assume what he did was for business reasons and let it go. Face the facts. You, my dear, are going on a date with Mr. Ben Hawthorn," Rhonda said and leaned back into the seat with a smug smile on her face.

The crack and fizz of the holographic proprietor popped into view.

"Ah, I see my favorite ladies have finally made a match."

Jenna's mouth went dry. "It seems that way."

"Well, I hope the lucky man can handle such a large group."

Rhonda shot him a look that normally quelled her most annoying students. "My friend here is very pleased with her choice. What do you do now?"

"Well, it appears that your match is one of our special clients. Congratulations, my dear."

"Thanks," Jenna said with fake enthusiasm.

"You need to wait to see if your perfect match is interested in meeting up with you. If he is, he'll call you to arrange everything. Then you're all set for a date. If he doesn't, you can give me a call."

Jenna cringed. "When should I expect to hear?"

"He has twenty-four hours to make up his mind. Stay by the communicator."

The need for air became overwhelming. She nodded, and stepped around her friends and out into the hallway so she could breathe. This was such a bad idea. She hated smugness and Ben was the epitome of smug.

*I'm sorry things had to end this way, Miss Robins. But it's for the best.*

She came awfully damn close to ending up in jail that day. Assault and bodily harm. She knew, just *knew* it would be worse if they actually went on a date. Whenever she didn't listen to her gut, bad things always followed.

Ben Hawthorn was going to prove to be very bad news.

"You okay?" Ruby was the first to come out.

"I'll be fine. Was getting hot in there."

"I wonder how long it will take for you to find out if he wants to meet with you?" Rhonda asked as she emerged.

"I wouldn't count on a date, ladies. Ben and I are oil and water. I doubt he wants to see me any more than I want to see him." Jenna could only hope.

The women talked for several more minutes before Jenna waved and got in the public transportation shuttle. She needed to get home and rest. With all of the problems on the new project, and now this whole dating issue with Ben, she was exhausted. Her body fell heavily into the compartment chair and the shuttle began to move on to the next station. The red Mars landscape outside the dome glass whizzed by, and slowly helped melt the tension from her shoulders.

Looking at the beauty of her home always set her at ease. This planet was her whole life, just as it had been her parents. And what most people didn't realize was that it was in serious danger. In enough danger that she'd neglected her own love life since she'd begun her research ten years ago. If she could figure out what had killed the terraformed soil in sections of old Mars, she'd be able to save their current dome.

Her PCD buzzed on her hip. She withdrew the device to check the message. One of her preliminary experiments regarding the viability of the soil in that area of the planet should be finishing up any time now. She didn't recognize the email address of the new message. Opening the note, there were only a few words contained in the message. She read them over and over, not quite believing it.

*Yes. Tomorrow 8 p.m.*

## Chapter Two

Jenna paced back and forth in front of her condo window. *He wasn't coming.* He couldn't be coming. This was Ben after all. He probably wanted to play a cruel trick on her by agreeing to the date and then not showing up. Why would he want to date someone like her anyway? She paused once more and peeked outside to see if a transportation shuttle had arrived. Nothing.

Her pacing route ended at the mirror that took up half the wall of her living room. Another quick inspection of her hair and the dress Rhonda had helped her buy didn't increase her confidence. She tugged at the low neckline, but it didn't help. Too much cleavage for her liking.

"It's not your liking you need to worry about. It's Mr. Ben who needs to approve," Rhonda had teased her at the store.

Why the hell would she care one ion for what he thought anyway?

She spun around, the maroon and blues of the dress blending together in the swirl of fabric. She had to admit, it did make her look good. And the sexy black lace bra and panties she wore underneath gave her an added feeling of wickedness. Not that Ben was going to get a chance to see them. That was her little secret.

Jenna sighed as she plopped down on her chair. She hadn't given Ben any thought for the last few years. He'd aggravated her to no end when they'd worked on her project. The fact that he was domineering and always thought he knew what was best didn't help the fact she'd been hot for him from their first meeting. Only a dead woman wouldn't gush at the sight of his perfect body and handsome face. Gods knew every female on the project did nothing but moon over him every time he walked into the room. Back then, Ben didn't pay anyone any attention—except her. Of course she was only the object of his teasing and rebukes regarding what she wanted to accomplish. Not the kind of behavior to base a relationship on.

What the hell was she doing? She doubted he was really interested in her. He hadn't been seven years ago, why would he be now? Knowing Ben, he probably wanted to preemptively woo her over to his side of the Rebuild project. Now wasn't that a charming thought?

Two men laughed as they walked by on the street below. Jenna jumped up to peek out to see who it was, her nerves starting to get the better of her. It was then she saw a long black car slowly move down her street and pull up in front of her condo. Who the hell drives in a personal vehicle anymore? It took her a second to will her hands to let go of the curtain and make her body move when she realized it was Ben. *Oh gods, he's actually here for me.* In a dash, she grabbed her shawl and purse and headed for the door. Not too quickly though. She didn't want him to think she was too anxious for this date.



Anxious to see if the spark that had been there seven years ago still existed. She wasn't...not really.

By the time she walked outside, a man was waiting by the car. The blond hair and smiling face gave away the fact that this wasn't Ben. As she approached, he gave her a wide smile. She'd never been able to resist Matt's charm. She couldn't help but relax a bit until she saw his gaze flick to her purse. Not like Matt to be quite so paranoid.

"Jenna, Jenna, Jenna. I didn't think I'd get to see you again," he said and winked.

Jenna's heart began to pound. Matt had been one of her few allies all those years ago. She loved his easy manner and the way she instinctively trusted him.

"Hi, Matt. How have you been? Still keeping Mr. Perfect safe and sound?"

He smiled. "I'm trying. You still bringing the high and mighty down a few pegs when they need it?"

She smiled back, "No one else seems to want to do it. So they're stuck with me."

"I hate to do this right before your date, Miss Robins —"

"Gods, that sounds weird coming from you," she said as she crinkled her nose.

Matt chuckled. "But I need to look in your purse."

"My purse?"

"Yes, ma'am. I need to check for concealed weapons."

Jenna looked down at the tiny square that was nothing more than a holder for her six-inch-long PCD and smiled. "No worries. If you happen to find anything of interest, please let me know. I've lost a lot of strange items in this beast."

Matt chuckled again and opened the tiny opening to her purse. With nothing else to do, Jenna's gaze drifted to the blackened windows of the car. She couldn't see in and had to wonder if Ben was inside or if Matt was here to drive her.

In a very official-sounding voice Matt handed the purse back to her. "Looks fine. Sorry about that, Miss Robins. If you would allow me."

"Is he inside?" she whispered when Matt got close enough.

"Yes," Matt smirked. "I haven't seen him this excited in a while."

"Ben? Excited?" *To see her?* Maybe there was hope for this date after all.

"Have a good time, Jenna."

She took a step backward so Matt could open the door for her. She still couldn't see the interior very well, but that wasn't going to stop her now. With great care to keep from showing too much of her leg, she stepped into the limo and sat down on the closest seat. Matt closed the door and the darkness of the limo surrounded her like a blanket. After a few seconds of silence she began to tug at a strand of her hair that had escaped her updo.

"Hello?"

A noise across from her announced the presence of another person. Even squinting she couldn't make out where Ben was sitting. Instead, the bubble of nerves started to

build deep inside her, which kick-started her mouth.

"Nice to see you again, Ben. Well, not that I can actually see anything yet, but you know." She tried to swallow. *Stupid mouth is dry again.* "You have a beautiful car. I don't remember seeing this one before. Does it run on electricity, or do you have an alternate fuel cell?"

His chuckle was deep and rich. Mentally, she kicked her own ass.

"Sorry. I ramble when I get nervous," she muttered.

"I remember," his deep, rich voice floated across the small space.

Her eyes were finally beginning to adjust to the darkness. She could now see where he sat, but wasn't able to clearly make out his features. It wasn't until Matt started the limo and the soft glow of the LED lighting turned on that she saw his face.

Benjamin Hawthorn was as stunningly handsome a man as she remembered. His dark brown hair held a slight curl and was beginning to show faint signs of graying. His rich hazel eyes didn't reveal much emotion, but he still had a slight smile on his full lips. She couldn't tell from his position if he was in the same amazing shape he'd been in seven years ago, but a small part of her really wanted to find out. Damn, she'd thought she was over him.

He wore a black jacket over a white linen shirt buttoned up to his neck. She suddenly got a mental picture of stripping him from his jacket and yanking his white linen shirt from his pants. *Damn.*

She refocused in time and realized he was checking her out too. Jenna blushed.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting. The streets of old Mars weren't designed for a vehicle this large."

"You should get a smaller car, or use a public transport car. It would make traveling around much easier and you would conserve energy at the same time." As the words left her, Jenna slapped her hand over her mouth, mortified. "I'm sorry. That was very rude of me."

He chuckled again. "Since when did you ever apologize for speaking your mind? And you're right. But I don't think I could convince Matt to give up his baby. He reconstructed it from parts he had shipped from Earth."

He ran his hand gently back and forth over the seat cushion. Jenna couldn't tear her eyes away from the movement, amazed that she'd forgotten the size of his hands. Too many times she'd imagined what it would feel like to have them caressing her skin. She blushed again.

Ben reached over and picked up one of the large bottles that sat secured to the bar.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

Jenna's insides did a small flip-flop. She was going to need some courage if she was going to survive this date. He'd always been able to do this to her. Send her into an emotional tailspin with as much as a single look. It pissed her off to no end that he never once lost his cool. He never appeared to come unglued by anything or anyone at

all. Ben always came across as more than just a mere man, and that was the one thing that had always irked and attracted her. He had absolute control over everything in his universe. She'd always wondered what it would be like to give control to a man like that in the bedroom. Maybe it was time to find out. Looking back up to his eyes, she shivered at the predatory grin she saw there.

*Or maybe not.*

Realizing she hadn't answered his question, Jenna nodded weakly, managing to swallow past the lump in her throat. "Yes please."

He filled two glasses with a bubbly honey-colored liquid and did something that surprised Jenna. He picked it up and carefully made his way over to beside her. He sat just in time as the limo turned a corner. Jenna took her drink, but a small portion of it sloshed over the side. Without thinking, she licked the trickle from her hand to avoid it dripping onto her new dress. When she finished she realized Ben was staring at the spot where her tongue had been moments ago. He then brought his gaze to hers, and she forgot to breathe. Her heart was pounding loudly in her chest and ears as a shiver of sexual awakening ripped through her body.

"Do you like the champagne?" he asked in a voice that barely rose above a whisper.

He took a sip from his glass and waited for her answer. Jenna's body betrayed her mind's resolve to keep her distance on this date. She was here out of curiosity, to see why Ben had agreed to this date in the first place. It had nothing to do with the secret obsession she'd had for him seven years ago.

Fuck, he'd barely spoken to her and she was ready to pop, she was so turned-on. Who was she kidding? All the old feelings she'd had for him had resurfaced with a vengeance. And those weren't going to lead anywhere—except maybe his bedroom.

Jenna dragged herself away from her thoughts and took a gulp of the drink and waited for the bubbles to travel the distance from her mouth to her stomach before she answered.

"It's very nice. Tickles my nose, but I love it."

"I'm glad," he said simply.

With their bodies this close together, Jenna could smell the light scent of his cologne. The musk seemed to suit him, different from what he wore the last time she'd been near him. She was also close enough now to see a light scar on his cheek. *Interesting.*

Ben didn't say anything. This was probably some sort of tactic on his part. His way of putting her off guard so he could play one of his famous mind games with her. She swallowed a large gulp of the champagne and let the bubbles sting as they forced their way down her throat.

Jenna wiggled around in her seat, trying to get comfortable. Her dress tightened, constricting her movement. The neckline was too damn low, the cool air from the car chilling the tops of her breasts. Images of his large hands warming them up, caressing her through the fabric were pushing her arousal higher. She'd been without a man for

so long any man could have satisfied her. But Ben was more than simply any man, and he was very much her type.

He leaned in and kept his eyes firmly fixed on her. "I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to take you to a special place for dinner," he said with a knowing smile.

"Oh? I hope you don't intend to try and win me over with by showing off one of your secret millionaire hideaways," she said in what she hoped was a teasing tone. Jenna already found herself second-guessing her actions.

He kept his gaze steady, locked to hers. "Still suspicious of everyone, I see."

"Not everyone. Just you."

They sat in silence for a minute, Jenna's mind reeling over the implications that this date would have for her. She wanted him badly. Not that she was into vengeance sex, but it would be amazing to finally satisfy her long-imagined and insatiable curiosity. However, she wasn't willing to throw out her integrity for a good lay.

"There's something I want to ask you," she blurted out.

Ben frowned for a brief second before nodding.

She took mouthful of the drink. *Time to lay things out in the open.* "You know I've been assigned to lead the Rebuild project. So you know, I have no intention of letting you or your corporation have any undue influence on the project. I wanted to make that perfectly clear before this date goes too far and you need to kick me out."

Ben leaned forward a fraction of an inch and kept his eyes locked on Jenna's. "I wouldn't dream of interfering with your project. Or kicking you out for that matter."

The words didn't quite register with her. "You wouldn't?"

"You're a very interesting, attractive woman, Jenna."

She shook her head, "So why the hell did you agree to this date if it wasn't to woo me to your way of thinking?"

"Despite your popular perceptions, I happen to like to spend time with interesting, attractive women."

Jenna's mouth opened to respond, but nothing came out. Not that it stopped Ben.

"To be honest, I was curious to see if time had changed you into a kowtowing scientist, tempered your spirit any," he said and reached up to tuck the loose strand of her hair behind her ear. "I'm glad it hasn't."

With a snap she shut her mouth. That was the last thing she was expecting him to say. Hard to come up with a snappy comeback when he'd basically paid her a compliment. So she did what she always did when she was nervous, she laughed.

"I'm surprised you just didn't run a background check on me. Who knows, I could have changed into a crazy woman since you last saw me."

"I did."

Jenna blinked. "Pardon?"

Ben cleared his throat and moved his hand out of biting distance. "I ran a

background check. I wanted to make sure you were the same Jenna Robins."

*Unbelievable.* "Did you find out anything interesting about me?"

He looked steadily into her eyes and smirked. "A few things."

Jenna had to force her lungs to work. She should be outraged that he would look into her life like you would check on a criminal. But when the logical side caught up with the rest of her brain, she realized that a man in Ben's position would have to check out her background thoroughly. Especially after their history and the fact that they were now sitting thigh to thigh in the back of his limo.

"Anything I should be aware of?" her voice was shaky as she spoke.

He inched closer to her, "You're still obsessed with work. You haven't seriously dated for the past five years. And you like seafood."

Without thinking, Jenna reached up and brushed a piece of lint from Ben's jacket. "I think that was all in my profile. Learn anything else?"

Ben captured her hand as she brought it down, turned it over so the palm was facing up and brought her wrist to his mouth. Jenna's heart pounded and her nipples hardened when his lips made contact with her sensitive skin. But when his tongue licked a slow circle over her pulse point, she thought she would burst.

"I learned that you like that," he said against her wrist, his breath heating and cooling the damp skin.

He licked once more before pulling back. Her heart pounded in her chest, throat and ears from the intensity of his touch. The skin tingled long past the warmth of contact.

"Well, that definitely wasn't in my profile," she managed to squeak out. Had she been thinking straight she would have read *his* information.

Heat from his body warmed her and she had to fight against the temptation to lean in and get close. Without pulling back or releasing her hand, Ben moved his face to within inches of her. "Our destination is a short distance away. But would you like something to eat?"

From seemingly out of nowhere, Ben produced a strawberry and brought it to her lips. She gasped, fleeting thoughts about the cost of the berry quickly disappearing when he placed the juicy flesh of the berry to her lips. She closed her eyes as her mouth exploded with flavor.

"I've haven't had one of those since I was a kid," she managed between bites.

"The university hydroponics lab sent me a pint shortly after we partnered with them. It seems only fitting that you get to share them with me."

Ben finally released her hand and brought the small bowl of berries to rest between them. Jenna stared at them and couldn't stop the grin that slowly spread across her lips.

"I forgive you. For whatever past transgressions you did to me, totally forgiven."

Jenna pulled back slightly to give her head time to clear. Things were moving so quickly, she'd almost forgotten that this was Ben—the man who'd tried to put an end to

her research and her plans to help Mars.

"Would you like another?"

He held the bowl out to her. Jenna really looked at him then, trying to read any hidden meaning behind this date. All she saw was a handsome man holding a bowl of strawberries. Maybe there wasn't anything more to this date than what he said. *Take a chance, Jen.* She nodded and they slowly ate the berries in silence until there were none left.

The alcohol started to make her head spin. Jenna had to give it a shake to help her focus. The silence and movement of the car started to act like a sedative. *Conversation.* She needed to get him talking.

"Okay," she said as she shifted in her seat, "I have a question and I'd like you to answer honestly. Why are you, Ben-the-richest-man-on-Mars-Hawthorn subscribed to a dating service?"

"For the same reason as you, I imagine."

Jenna laughed at the thought of Ben shoved in the room with her friends. "I doubt that. I was set up as a birthday present."

"Ah."

"Well? Why would a well-known, rich and attractive man need a dating service to find a woman?"

"Attractive?" he smiled.

Jenna groaned. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hawthorn—"

"Miss Robins," he drawled.

"I so suck at small talk," she said with a sigh, thumping her head lightly against the headrest.

"You know me well enough to be able to answer that yourself. I don't have the patience to wade through the dating scene to find a woman who would be interested in me."

She took a moment to absorb his words. "And not your money?"

"Exactly."

Ben turned his head to look out the back window. "Other than Matt, I don't have a lot of close friends. I was hoping to find someone who could understand."

"Understand what?"

"Me."

*Whoa.* Jenna had to take another hard look at Ben. Maybe Rhonda was right and he had been so focused on the business seven years ago, he couldn't see what he was doing to people. He'd changed.

She looked at him and reached up to touch his scar. "Thank you."

He turned to face her again and frowned. "For what?"

"For being honest."

On impulse, she leaned in and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Ben stiffened at the contact, the muscle in his jaw flexing for a moment before she pulled back. Jenna cringed. *Damn, I crossed a line.*

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Jenna apologizing? That's something I didn't think I'd ever hear."

The limo slowed down and came to a stop outside what looked to be a large warehouse. Jenna was thankful for the distraction. Their conversation had gotten too serious and she was feeling a little drunk from the champagne, berries and excitement. They'd better arrive soon so she could get some real food into her.

Static from the intercom preceded Matt's voice.

"We're here, sir."

"Thank you, Matt."

"Matt calls you sir? And where's here?" Jenna said and took a closer look out the window, trying to get a feel for what was inside the building.

"Matt only calls me sir when he's trying to be formal. And one of my homes."

"I thought you lived in Red Beach?" She took another quick look out the window. "This looks pretty run-down."

Ben's gaze traveled over her body. "Give it a chance."

She nodded. *In for a penny.* Her stomach growled loudly in the limo. She was so hungry right now she probably would have agreed to have eaten outside the dome if he'd asked her.

"I'm sure it's lovely. I can't wait to see it."

"You'll be surprised by what you find inside."

Before she had a chance to respond, Matt opened her door. Light flooded their private cocoon, shattering the intimacy. Jenna quickly inched away from Ben and hoped she didn't look as aroused as she felt. The exaggerated red glow of the sun through the dome made her squint, so she didn't see Matt's hand.

"Do you need some help?"

"Oh, yes please."

Her legs were shaky as she stepped out onto the hard road. She took a few steps to get some distance between her and Matt. This was worse than before. Ben was somehow able to arouse her faster than any other man. Either she was completely desperate for sex, or the Perfect Match program wasn't a complete fraud after all.

From outside the limo, Jenna was better able to see the large building. Or at least part of it. One entire side appeared to be against the dome barrier that kept the breathable atmosphere contained. She couldn't believe they'd let someone build this close to the dome. The facing wall of the building was constructed from a combination of old Mars stone and black silicate glass. It was large for a building on Mars, and surprisingly, there weren't very many other buildings close by.

She didn't hear Ben get out of the car. When he placed his large hand on her waist she shivered but didn't turn to face him. She had to keep her head about her if she was going to survive this date without looking like a fool.

"I bought it because of its location. Do you like?" he spoke the words near her ear.

Jenna swallowed hard and turned slightly into his half embrace. "I don't think I've been this close to the dome in years. You never see structures within a thirty-meter radius anymore."

"The government wanted to tear it down. Claimed that it was a target for terrorists who'd want to take out the dome. I made a small donation to the president's campaign fund and then bought the building under the condition that I would install a security detail. I have hidden security officers, cameras and sensors around the perimeter and inside the building. It's probably the safest place on Mars. I'm surprised you haven't been out on the surface recently."

"I've tried to get permission. But you know how strict this administration is."

"Incompetent group, our leaders."

Jenna was shocked. That was dangerously close to treason. When she looked at Ben this time, she noted that the man of the shadows was gone. The light showed a slightly harder edge to him. He was still the most handsome man she'd ever met. But for the first time she clearly saw his social mask, something she'd only guessed existed before. This was clearly the businessman, Mr. Hawthorn. She surprised herself when she realized she was more interested in seeing Ben.

Oblivious to her revelation, Ben motioned to the building. "Would you like to go inside? I'd asked Matt to prepare a supper for us earlier. I was hoping we could spend some time talking."

"Of course, I'd love to," she said, her heart racing.

He guided her with his hand resting lightly on her hip. The constant contact kept her senses charged. Matt was already at the entrance holding the door open for them. As Jenna entered the building he smiled.

"Have a wonderful time, Jenna."

"You're not coming in?" She faked surprise.

"No, I have the night off."

She smiled back at him. A small part of her was pleased she would have Ben all to herself. The other part was terrified.

Jenna moved into the dark room as far as she dared and tried to make out some of the features. Ben was speaking softly to Matt, the content of their conversation not quite reaching her ears. Then Matt was gone and Ben made his way over.

"I love Matt like a brother and I trust him with my life. But even I don't want my bodyguard hanging around when I'm on a date. Computer, low lights."

High above her head, the lights clicked on and flooded everything with a soft glow. The hallway was refinished and modernized. Computer panels were built into the wall,



creating a smooth surface. She couldn't immediately see any doors, their smooth surfaces blending in magically with the wall. At the end of the hall stood a large sculpture of an angel with a sword. The angel's eyes seemed to follow them as they walked.

"Beautiful."

"She was a present from a friend. Someone to watch over me."

Jenna turned to face him. "I have friends like that. Always trying to keep me out of trouble."

He smiled. "Dinner is in the observation room. This way."

Ben held out his arm and Jenna instinctively took it. His body heat seeped through his jacket and was absorbed by her skin. He led her down the short hallway to another door. When he opened it, he paused for a moment to let her take in the details.

The far wall was fitted with large windows, swallowing up most of where the outer wall should be. She could tell it was tinted with a one-way coating, preventing any prying eyes from peeking in. The view of the red sand of the planet's surface and the orange sky was stunning. She almost forgot to look around the rest of the room.

Her eyes were drawn next to a large fireplace. A shiver ran through her when she saw two chairs flanking a large table. Her stomach bottomed out on her. She'd forgotten that he would have read her fantasies. *Shit, shit, shit*. Why hadn't she taken the time to read his?

"I hope you like it," Ben said next to her. He gave her hip a light squeeze before moving away.

She tried to ignore the implication of the chair by the fire and instead focused on the window.

"The view is amazing. I don't think I've seen a better one without actually being outside the dome."

"Yes, a beautiful view indeed."

She turned to face him, but he had ducked behind a large bar that took up most of the side wall. Jenna took a deep breath to try to calm her nerves. She'd have to be an idiot to have missed his compliment. Or else she *was* an idiot for thinking he'd implied one. What the hell did she think she was doing here tonight?

*I can't do this. Not with Ben.*

"Would you like a drink? I have some wine, or if you're feeling adventurous, I have a bottle of twenty-five-year-old Scotch straight from Earth."

She was Jenna Marie Robins. Professor of Environmental Issues at the University of Mars. Not a socialite who jetted about society dating powerful men. Especially with a man who'd sabotaged her research, her dreams. It felt like she was betraying something very important. But was she?

"Or I think I have another bottle of the champagne if you'd prefer."

"I need to leave," the words came out as a whisper.

"Sorry?"

"I think I need to go," she said louder, pausing for a moment before she made her way back to the door.

With her hand on the knob, Jenna turned around to face him. He hadn't moved from the bar. He was watching her intently, but made no effort to stop her. She opened her mouth to say something, but the words didn't come. Instead, she took another look at her perfect match.

Sometime in the last ten minutes he'd taken off his jacket and stood there in his crisp white shirt. The buttons were now undone at the collar and sleeves, exposing the promise of a well-defined chest. He looked completely relaxed, as if her uncertainty meant nothing to him. If she walked out that door, he'd simply pop back online to find his next date.

It wasn't until she looked at his hands that she realized he was just as tense. His fingers clenched the bottle of Scotch so tightly his knuckles had turned white. Something about the fact that he stood there, waiting for her to make a decision, trying not to influence her, let her relax.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm more nervous than I wanted to admit to myself," she said, darting a glance towards where he stood.

"Why? You know me."

"Exactly."

Ben didn't say anything at first. He released the bottle and walked in long, determined strides across the room to her. He stopped within a few inches of her, reached out and placed his hand on top of hers on the doorknob.

"Stay for supper at least. If you want to leave after that, then I'll call for Matt to come get you and take you home."

Warmth from his hand enveloped hers. Tiny jolts of energy seemed to pulse from the spot where their skin contacted up her arm and into the core of her body. She'd never been so turned-on in her life, never responded to any man this way before. All from the simple touch of their hands. Jenna's body was screaming at her to take him up on the offer. That's why she was here after all. And if she was reading his signals correctly, he was genuinely interested in her. But that silly professor side of her, the logical, practical and, most importantly, safe part of her was waving a very large red flag in her mind.

"If it would make you feel better, simply consider this a business dinner. Things won't go any further than you want them to."

Was that what she wanted? Something safe? All of the feelings of loneliness came rushing back. All of her fears of growing old alone. No, she wasn't going to be like that. Not when she had a chance to grab a little excitement for herself.

Jenna stood a little straighter. "I'll agree to stay on one condition."

Ben cocked an eyebrow, but nodded for her to continue.

"You are a very powerful and obviously influential man. I am, well, just me. To be honest this date is by far the riskiest thing I've ever done in my life. The last thing I want to do is turn tonight into something..."

"Yes?"

"Safe."

Jenna took a deep breath to steady her nerves. She wanted this, didn't she? No, being with Ben would mess everything up. She'd finally gotten back on track, everything was great. Then why the hell couldn't she think with him looking at her that way! Jenna looked back at him and sighed. Why was she cowering out? She wanted him, didn't she? *I can't believe I'm about to propose this.*

"I'll agree to stay if you kiss me first. But I have to like it."

## Chapter Three

For some crazy reason Jenna knew he would say no. It was moving too fast for him. Hell, things were moving too fast for her. This was the first time they'd seen each other in seven years and she was pushing his buttons, trying to get him to kiss her. The last time she'd pushed against his control, she'd lost her project. What would she lose this time if she continued down this path?

She wasn't a match for Ben, at least not in the bedroom. Jenna sucked in a shaky breath and looked into his eyes. She couldn't read the emotion in his hooded eyes, but was surprised at the intensity of his look.

Jenna jumped when he leaned in and cupped her cheek with his hand. *Easy now.* She couldn't take her eyes from his, drawing her in like a moth to his bright light. Everything about him seemed larger than life. A pulse of desire flowed through her, reaching every nerve ending in her body. She licked her bottom lip before lightly biting down on it.

Ben's lips turned up in a faint smile. "I'll agree to your terms if you answer a question."

Jenna's throat was tight, thick to the point of blocking her speech. Not trusting herself, she nodded.

Ben moved his face closer, stopping inches from hers. "How will I know if you like it?"

Her hand automatically moved to his chest, a feeble attempt to protect her sensibilities and to put a small barrier between them for her protection. It didn't matter. Ben took another half step closer, increasing the contact between them. His words were hot against her skin.

"How will I know? I hate performing below expectations, Jenna. And after you took the time to look so absolutely," his eyes traveled down her body, "stunning, I don't want to be a disappointment to you."

Her brain already screamed her approval, but a mysteriously wicked streak suddenly emerged in her. He was as affected as she was. Ben's heart pounded in his chest under her hand, the muscles tightened as she flexed her fingers against him.

"I'll let you know," she said with a confidence she never quite felt around him. "I would hate for you to work blind."

Ben's wide grin seemed to fill his perfect face. "Aren't you full of surprises? I forgot that little detail about you. I think you'll find that I have a few of my own."

With another half step forward, Jenna's back was pressed against the door she was trying to exit a few moments earlier. Thighs against thighs. The hand that had been

caressing her cheek now pressed against the door. His scent surrounded her, intensified by his body heat.

"Close your eyes," he said in a low voice.

Unable to resist such an invitation, her lids fluttered shut. Every nerve in her body was stretched in a vain attempt to anticipate what Ben would do. So when he whispered in her ear, she jumped.

"Now I have a dilemma," his hot breath swirled around her ear. "You didn't tell me where you wanted me to kiss you."

She tried to speak, but he squeezed her hand still held captive on the doorknob.

"Now, now. It's more fun when I have to figure things out on my own."

Jenna's heart couldn't possibly beat any faster than it was at that moment. His hand slid from hers and brushed the neckline of her dress.

"Personally, I would love to place a kiss right here." He brushed his fingertips above her cleavage. "But I don't think that's what you had in mind with your request."

His fingers traced a slow path up her chest to stop at her collarbone. She shivered, goose bumps rising on her skin.

"This looks like it has potential, but I think you would prefer something closer to here."

Again his fingertips journeyed higher, this time stopping at the hollow below her earlobe. Jenna sucked in a small breath.

"Here? Is this the spot, Professor? Should I test my hypothesis?"

Without another word, Ben lowered his lips to her neck. His tongue found her overly sensitive skin, caressed her neck and suckled her earlobe. Jenna flexed her fingers against Ben's chest, encouraging him on. She almost opened her eyes in protest when he pulled back.

"Hmm, I don't think that was quite right. Will you give me another chance?"

"Yes," her voice was almost desperate.

"Thank you. I promise I'll get it right this time. Now I think I was close last time. I was close, wasn't I?"

She couldn't help it. Jenna opened her eyes to look at her tormentor. His hazel eyes were almost swallowed by the blacks of his pupils. His lips were wet, parted slightly, poised for further contact.

"Yes, you were close."

"I see." Reaching up he brushed her lips with his thumb. "I wouldn't want to be accused of being traditional, but I would very much like to kiss your lips. Would you like that?"

As if on cue, her eyes closed and she tilted her face towards his. If he *didn't* kiss her soon she was going to scream.

Ben chuckled, "I see I've found the spot."

Her body couldn't handle any more and she began to tremble. Her breasts ached, her skin burned, and her cunt was wet and ready for him. She gasped when finally his lips brushed against hers. Too light. She needed more and she needed it now.

Jenna opened her lips, inviting him closer. His growl rumbled against her as he pressed his body hard to hers. His tongue entered her mouth to seek out its mate. She tried to taste him by sucking his bottom lip and performing her own explorations of his mouth. It wasn't enough for her. She wanted everything.

His hand moved from her neck to slowly caress the side of her breast through the thin barrier of her dress. Jenna gasped when his forefinger and thumb captured her nipple, squeezing lightly.

"Do you like that?" He spoke the words against her lips.

"Ben," she managed to say as she sighed.

He didn't release her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, stoking her passion higher and higher. Her hips bucked against his groin, the length of his cock straining against his pants pushed hard against her.

Jenna reached up and raked her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer for another kiss. Refusing to release his lips, she increased their contact. Her hand on his chest pulled at his buttons, sending one flying as she uncovered his tanned skin underneath.

No longer able to breathe, Jenna pulled back from their kiss. Panting, they stood locked together in a half embrace. Jenna's gaze searched his face looking for a sign that he was leading her on. What she saw was pure animal desire, barely contained within a shell of self-control.

He was perfect. Her fantasy lover, willing to let her play with his body. Wanting her. Jenna began to feel overwhelmed by the sudden turn of playfulness to intensity. She refocused her attention on his chest.

"I see you work out, Mr. Hawthorn."

"All eccentric recluse millionaires do. Part of belonging to the club."

She cocked an eyebrow as she brushed the newly revealed crinkly hair that covered his skin, causing him to chuckle.

"I'm kidding."

"Well, as you are the only eccentric millionaire I've ever met, I wasn't sure," she said, smiling.

"Do you approve of my kiss? Will you stay?"

Jenna looked up in time to watch Ben's emotions, the passion he'd so clearly displayed a moment ago, slip beneath a mask. The sudden change shocked her.

"Are you okay?"

He smiled the same half grin he gave her in the limo earlier. "Yes. But we had a bargain. I want to make sure I've lived up to my end of the deal."

Jenna broke eye contact. "I think you've more than lived up to your end. However,

there is one small problem."

"What's that?"

"I'm not interested in supper anymore."

Ben took advantage of the access to her earlobe and nipped her skin lightly. "Oh? What are you interested in then?"

"I..."

"Tell me," he said with a degree of urgent seriousness in his voice.

Her hand found his arm and slowly she ran her fingers over his sleeve.

"I want you to take this damn shirt off."

He licked her neck lightly before placing kisses over the damp spot. "And then?"

"This is too fast." She slid her hand over his shoulder to his neck.

"And then."

She shook her head. "Ben."

His lips found her collarbone, placing kisses along it.

"I want you to fuck me. Right here against the wall," Jenna blurted out.

Ben stopped moving. After a few seconds, Jenna began to panic.

"Ben? Did I say something wrong?"

He took a deep breath and rested his forehead on her shoulder.

"Nothing's wrong. I needed a minute to get control of myself. That particular image was quite potent."

Jenna lightly brushed his hair with her hand. The pressure from the door against her back reminded her that she was blocking her escape route. Not that she was sure she even wanted to escape anymore. She tried to get her logical side of her brain working again.

"I think we may want to slow down. All we know of each other are a few tidbits of information from a dating service and a not-so-pleasant run-in seven years ago. Shit, for all you know I'm a sex-crazy psycho who will stalk you after this and try and get money out of you."

"Are you?"

She gave her head a slight shake. "Am I what?"

Ben lifted his head, "A crazy psycho who is going to screw me then take my money."

"No!" she laughed.

"Then I don't see a problem."

Jenna pushed him off her and walked across the floor to the middle of the room. Her body was vibrating from her aroused state, but she desperately tried to ignore it. She didn't want to screw things up again. Last time Ben had been in her life she'd lost out on an important project. And the last relationship she'd been in had been a disaster.

She didn't need complications right now.

"Be serious. Despite what you think, you don't know me at all. Shit, the parts of you I *do* know, I'm not sure I like." Jenna stopped moving and closed her eyes. "I don't believe I'm doing this."

"I like that."

"What?"

"That you want me so badly you're not acting like yourself," Ben said as he turned around and rested his back against the door.

"Doesn't that happen to you all the time?"

He laughed. Not like before, but a deep rich belly laugh. He leaned forward and rested his hands on his legs.

"Ben?"

"I'm sorry. You don't realize how different you are."

"I'm hoping you mean different as a good thing."

"The very best thing. You're so unbelievably hot."

They held their positions for several minutes, staring at each other. Jenna fought back her sexual impulses by squeezing her fists. Again she recognized the fact that there was something about Ben that was different. Whether he really was her perfect match or if it was simply the idea that he could be no longer seemed to matter to her. This was her opportunity to let go. Her shot at living out a fantasy she never thought would come true.

"You look like you've made a decision." He held her eye contact.

She swallowed hard. "I think I did."

"And can I know what it is?"

"If you promise me something."

He straightened and made his way over to her. When he was a foot away he stopped, crossed his arms across his chest and waited.

"Whatever happens here tonight, I don't want it to go beyond here and now."

Ben didn't answer, but simply waited for her to continue.

Jenna sighed, "I have to admit, I'm incredibly attracted to you. And I'd like nothing more than to strip every stitch of clothing off you this second. But I need to know that after tonight, things will go back to normal."

"I'm your perfect match but only for one night?"

"Yes." She cringed.

Ben nodded, reached out for her hands and pulled her close. "I'll agree to your terms, if you agree to one of mine."

As she moved into his arms, she stayed silent.

"I'll agree to forget everything that happens here tonight, if you grant me the option



of courting you in a more traditional manner. After.”

Court her? After? The idea was as bizarre as Mars rejoining the Earth coalition. But with Ben standing so close to her and her desire ramped up into overdrive there was only one possible answer she could give.

She held her breath and looked up. “Agreed.”

Without another word Ben brought his lips down to hers. He hesitated for a moment before leaning in to nibble her bottom lip. Gently, he brushed his lips over hers before claiming her mouth. The air rushed from her lungs as she drank him in. Jenna pulled his shirt edge out of his pants and began to undo the rest of the buttons. A moan escaped her lips when she was finally able to pull his shirt free from his arms. His arms and chest were firm, the well-formed muscles tensed as she ran her hands over his skin. She dipped her head down to kiss along his chest and slowly dropped to her knees.

Back and forth she rubbed her lips over his abs, the light dusting of hair tickling her nose. His entire body began to vibrate as her mouth grew closer to his groin.

“I thought you wanted me to take you against the wall?” he said in a low raspy voice.

“Oh, I do. But there is something I’ve always wanted to try first.”

Her fingers shook as she reached up and began to undo his belt buckle. The silver finish caught the reflection of the setting sun, sending a beam of light bouncing off his body. After a few fumbles, she managed to loosen the buckle and pop the button holding his pants together.

Jenna inhaled deeply, letting the rich scent of his arousal wash over her. Slowly she freed his cock and was surprised at the size. The last man she’d slept with wasn’t interested in letting her explore. He was also a fraction the size of Ben. *Praise the gods!*

Looking up she was rewarded with the sight of one of the most powerful men on Mars, standing completely under her control, tense and waiting to see what she was going to do next. His gaze was fixed on her mouth and his breath was coming out in short pants.

Jenna tucked her feet under her bottom to give her a better angle. From there she was able to lean in, and without touching anywhere else on his body, run the tip of her tongue over the tip of his cock. His skin was warm and held the light taste of sweat. The scent of his arousal pushed her on. Again and again she licked around his head, each contact causing his shaft to twitch in response. Purely on impulse, she dipped her head lower and licked a long stroke up the length of his cock.

A moan escaped Ben and his hands flew to either side of Jenna’s head. When she didn’t move at his light tug he grew impatient. In a flash he reached down, picked her up and carried her to the window. Standing her up, he pressed her against the warm glass, kissing her mouth and cheek.

The thin straps of her dress fell from her shoulders and exposed Jenna’s breasts. Ben didn’t hesitate and dropped his mouth to her nipple, sucking it fully into his mouth. He pulled back enough to lightly graze her fully pebbled peak with his teeth,

causing Jenna's legs weaken. Ben pushed his thigh between her legs to keep her from collapsing. The pleasure from the intimate contact against her pussy brought her to the brink of orgasm.

"Ben," she gasped. "I'm so...close."

Before she realized what he was doing, Ben was on his knees in front of her. With a gentleness that amazed her, he pushed her dress up and her black lace panties off. He hooked one of her legs over his shoulder to give him access to her soaking cunt.

"My turn."

The sharp intake of air chilled her sensitive skin for a moment before his tongue found her swollen clit. He licked around the nub, teasing her with the promise of release. Jenna closed her eyes as she arched her back against the window. At last, his lips encircled her, wrenching a cry from her. When he slipped first one, then two fingers into her wet cunt and began to stroke, her body trembled.

The tempo increased and she couldn't hold on any longer. Jenna cried out as the first wave of her orgasm washed over her. But he didn't stop and pull away as other men had in the past. Ben continued licking, pushing her to the edge and over. A second orgasm pounded her body. It was too much. Her skin was covered with sweat, her muscles quivering under his touch. Finally, she had to force his face away to find relief from the pleasure.

"Ben, oh gods, Ben."

He stood, keeping his arm hooked under her leg. His cock now had clear access to her. The swollen tip brushed against her and instantly another wave of desire trembled through her.

"Unless you say something, I'm going to take you right now. I can't hold out much longer, so if you've changed your mind –"

She didn't let him finish. She could taste her own juices on his lips as she kissed him hard. Her fingers found his cock and guided him to her. Ben captured her wrist with his hand and moved it from between their bodies to hold it above her head. With unfailing accuracy he pushed forward into her pussy, stretching her muscles and filling her completely.

Jenna wrapped her raised leg around his hip, trying desperately to pull him closer. *Deeper*. She couldn't. Ben held her open, giving him complete access to her body. He dipped his head and licked the hard bud her nipple had become. The sensation shot straight to her clit. *Holy shit, I'm going to come again!* She dug the nails of her free hand into his shoulder.

"Harder! Fuck me harder."

Licking his thumb, he reached between them to rub her. The brief contact was all she needed. Jenna clung to Ben, screaming at the arrival of her third orgasm. Like before, Ben didn't relent. Quickening his pace, he thrust deep into her hard and fast. Her pussy muscles clenched around his cock and proved to be his undoing. Ben threw his head back and cried out, thrusting two, three more times against her as she came.

Both completely spent, they slipped together into a heap on the floor.

Neither of them moved for a long time. Jenna opened her eyes slightly and dozed in the setting sun. The reflection of the sun off the red Mars soil turned everything in the room a deep crimson. It would be dark within the hour. Soon she'd head home and reality would return.

A loud noise coming from her stomach broke the silence. Jenna sat up enough to cover her tummy with a hand.

"I see you've regained your appetite," Ben spoke against her hair.

"I'm famished."

Unexpected feelings of awkwardness struck her. She tried to sit up and cover up her breast.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm sitting on your legs and I know I'm not the lightest person —"

Ben shifted his position and looked her in the eyes. Jenna blushed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm...sorry. I can't believe we did this. That I did this with you. We haven't seen each other in seven years."

Running his finger down her cheek, Ben smiled. "I'm not as bad as you thought? That's good then. I think by the time we're done tonight you'll realize I'm not the monster you seem to think I am. I plan on taking all night to change your opinion of me."

Her response was stuck in her throat. What the hell can you say to a proposal like that?

## Chapter Four

Jenna appeared mesmerized by the explosion of bubbles from the champagne as Ben filled her glass. He caught himself smiling again at her reaction to things he took for granted. For once in his life, he was happy he'd listened to someone's advice. Matt had been right about this dating service. And any reservations he'd had about meeting Jenna again were gone. It was simply a matter of her realizing he wasn't the jerk she thought he was. Now he only had to make sure he didn't slip into any old habits that would reinforce that negative impression.

"Can I get you anything else?" he said, keeping his tone even. The last thing he wanted to do was add to her apparent inner turmoil.

Jenna looked up and smiled, "Are you kidding? There's enough food here to feed me for a week. I don't think I could eat anything else. Not unless I want to skip dessert."

"Matt loves cooking almost as much as driving his car."

"Well, if he's still single I have a friend who I think would hit it off with him," Jenna paused and sat back in her chair. "What's wrong?"

*Shit.* "Nothing at all. Why?"

"When I asked if he was single you cringed."

*Try to deny it?* This was Jenna after all. A quick glance at the concern on her face and he figured she wouldn't buy a lie anyway. Instead he made a mental note to keep better control over his emotions.

"I don't know if you knew this, but Matt and I grew up together. Some of my past girlfriends tried to get me to be more like him." He watched for a reaction, but when she didn't move he added, "There's a pattern."

For a moment he thought she was going to laugh off the observation as other women had in the past. But Jenna silently sat there, wide-eyed and looking more than a little confused. Not used to this reaction, Ben picked up his fork and speared the meaty inside of a mussel.

"I know you're full, but you should try some. It took us a long time to simulate an artificial environment for these little fellows to grow."

He relaxed again when she gave her head a shake, picked up her fork and mimicked his technique. She got it as far as her lips before she stopped and looked at him with a rather serious expression.

"I'm sorry," she said in a voice little above a whisper.

"You don't like shellfish?" He knew damn well what she was apologizing for, but couldn't resist teasing her.

A smile played on her lips for a brief second before she opened them to eat the morsel.

"Oh my."

Ben was unexpectedly pleased with her reaction. "I'm glad you like it."

"And I'm sorry that I...bothered you with my comment," she said and followed the comment with a sip of her champagne.

She gently sat her glass down and patted the table lightly with her hand before she pushed away and made her way towards him. Her dress was back into place after their unexpected lovemaking and a light swishing sound filled the room as she made her way towards him. He enjoyed watching her. Hell, he would be content to do nothing but watch her move around the apartment for hours. Shifting in his seat, he tried to accommodate his growing cock. Who was he kidding, he wouldn't last hours. Minutes maybe.

This was different from when they'd met seven years ago. Back then she was one more thing he'd wanted to control. One more person who stood in his way to the top. If it hadn't been for the attempt made on his life he would still be that man. And Jenna wouldn't be sauntering over to him right now.

Once she reached his side, she leaned over and placed a kiss on his temple. He could hear the pounding of her heart and caught the scent of her arousal. *Good, at least I'm not the only one affected.* Gently, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and tugged.

"Yes, Mr. Hawthorn?"

"Have a seat, Miss Robins."

Without protest, Jenna slipped onto his lap. Her hands found their way to his chest, an area she seemed to have particular affection for. They looked for five minutes for the lost button she'd sent flying to no avail. Right now, he was thrilled with the fact she had free access.

Jenna chewed her bottom lip for a moment, before she leaned in and placed a light kiss on his lips.

"Thanks for supper. This has been a wonderful evening."

That didn't sound quite right. "Getting ready to leave?"

Jenna suddenly found a spot on his chest *very* interesting. "Well, it's getting late. I'm sure you have things to get ready for."

Ben took a second before he answered. He reached into his pants pocket and slowly pulled out a silk black scarf. Without a word, he draped it around her neck and then lightly tugged. Jenna's gaze moved from his chest to the scarf and he heard her gasp.

"I did my planning earlier today," he said in a voice as tight as his grip on the scarf.

From the moment he'd read her fantasy, he'd been unable to think of anything else. The more time he spent with her, the more he wanted to be the one to fulfill her sexual desires. The pain in the ass professor was turning into a major pain in his groin. Even if the relationship wouldn't go beyond tonight, he wanted to make sure Jenna never

forgot him.

When she finally looked up, he could see that her face was flushed but she was clearly excited.

"I'm a bit nervous," she whispered.

A sudden wave of protectiveness rose in him. Ben sat forward just enough to pull her hard against him for a kiss. Jenna's shock melted into liquid heat like before. His body reacted to her like no other before. His very skin tingled wherever her touch caressed, winding his internal sexual drive into a frenzy. He pulled back and stared at her, the sounds of their panting in sync.

He looked at her hard, willing her to understand that tonight was special.

"You know I won't do anything to hurt you."

Jenna's gaze flicked to the scarf for only a moment before meeting his again. "You did trash my project—"

"Can you drop that? I'm talking about you and me living out one of your fantasies. Not a project that you couldn't find a shred of evidence to support," he managed to say in a calm voice, concealing his turbulent emotional state.

"I don't know you, Ben. You're asking me to let you tie me to a chair so you can have your way with me. I know the hard-ass business tycoon. I'm still getting to know the man. Sure, I'm attracted to you, but this is about more than that. I need to trust you."

By the end of her speech Jenna's face was flushed, her breathing was deep and steady. Anger flashed for the briefest of moments before he got it under control. *She's right of course*. What little of him she knew came from a business deal gone wrong, the media and his bio that the university received three weeks ago. She couldn't trust someone she didn't know. Hell, he wouldn't either.

Ben reached up and wrapped a tendril of her hair around his fingers. Slowly rubbing his finger over the soft strands gave him renewed calm.

"What can I do to prove that you can trust me?"

He closed his eyes, providing a barrier in case she said "nothing".

It was her turn now to caress him. Her fingers touched his cheek, lightly traced a path across it to his ear, only to return to his one flaw.

"How did you get this scar?"

He bit his tongue when his rehearsed answer almost popped out. The metallic taste of blood brought him back to his senses. She couldn't know the truth, but Jenna was bright enough to spot a lie. He'd have to walk a very delicate line. He opened his eyes and looked right into hers.

"Someone who I trusted for a very long time gave that to me. The promise of greed and power can have a tremendous hold over some people. He thought that killing me was the way he'd get his."

Over and over, Jenna ran her finger over the place where Rick had sliced him, but

she didn't look away.

"Thanks," she said in a shaky voice.

Jenna then leaned in and kissed him again. Something changed between them. The overwhelming sexual need to strip her naked, while still there, wasn't the most important thing. He simply wanted to get closer to her. Jenna ran her tongue over his lips, nipping the lower with her teeth as she squirmed against him in the chair. The silk scarf tickled his overly sensitive nipple when she leaned forward. Her dress rode up over her thighs, giving him access to her clit. His erection strained to burst through his pants, wanting him to touch her, give them both release.

"Jenna. I need to know what you want me to do."

"Make love to me."

"Do you trust me?"

"Enough for tonight."

A groan escaped him. She was killing him and she didn't have a clue. "I need to know, do you want me to make your fantasy come true?" He panted as she licked his neck.

Her back muscles tensed for a second before she looked up. "Yes."

His heart pounded so hard it made him feel dizzy. "You're sure?"

Jenna yanked the scarf from around her neck and draped it over his. "If you don't move fast, you'll be the one tied to a chair."

Ben slid his hands under her ass and stood up. She yelped and clutched at his shoulders.

"Maybe another time, since you don't know where the rest of the scarves are. For now, I believe this is your seat, Miss Robins."

As gently as he could Ben dropped to his knees in front of the padded leather chair he'd had placed next to the fireplace. She hadn't reclaimed her panties from their earlier lovemaking session, giving him a glorious view of her pussy. Right now, he wanted nothing more than to bury his face there.

Jenna must have detected the subject of his thoughts and blushed. "Ben? I think there might be a small tactical error here. There's nothing to fasten the scarves to."

"Don't be so sure."

Feeling a little bit smug, Ben reached forward and easily located the straps he'd secured there that afternoon.

"I told you, I did my planning earlier."

Not quite able to sit still, Jenna wriggled in the seat. She crossed her arms over her chest and flexed her toes against his thigh.

"Now having your arms there isn't going to help us out. How about if I take this one," he lightly tugged her left arm free, "and set it here."

Her hand twitched but she didn't pull away and allowed him to place it on the cool

leather armrest.

"And your other arm can go here."

With the same care, he placed her right arm on the other armrest. He gave her a minute to get used to the idea of what was going to happen next. Slowly, he pulled the silk scarf out and over to her wrist. One look into her eyes told him she was ready.

"I'm going to do this now. If you want me to stop, say the word and I will."

"Apples."

*What the – ?* "What about them?"

"A safe word. If I say apples, untie me. Okay?"

Ben really didn't know the first thing about this, safe words and all, but it made sense. Of course Jenna would have planned things out in her mind. The fact she'd fantasized about it this much made his cock twitch.

"Deal," he said as he ran his thumb over her hand.

He fumbled the soft scarf, trying to get it into a loose knot around her delicate wrist. *Shit.* He held his breath and concentrated, pushing past the slight tremble of his fingers. *Breathe and relax, she's going to love this.* The second scarf cooperated more and before he knew it, Jenna was tied and ready.

"Are you okay? Those aren't too tight, are they?"

Jenna tugged against each of the restraints, her hands able to come an inch off the armrest.

"So far, so good," she said as she chewed her bottom lip.

Ben sat back and took in the view. Man, she was beautiful. Her eyes were wide with anticipation, her skin held a light flush. Her hair was still bound on top of her head in a way that made her look more like a professor than anything else.

"First, let's make you look the part of the captured temptress."

Jenna looked puzzled but said nothing. Nor did she try to pull away when he pulled free the clip that held the most beautiful hair he'd ever seen. It only took him a second to rearrange her hair so it fell over her shoulders and covered her breasts. Years ago he'd tried to ignore the desire he'd felt for her when they'd worked together. But every time she was near he'd had the overwhelming urge to yank that clip from her hair just to see if she'd look as beautiful as he'd dreamed. She was more than he'd ever imagined.

"Stunning." Ben captured a strand of her hair and curled it around his finger.

Jenna smiled at him, seemingly innocent. "Whose fantasy is this again?"

"Oh, this is all yours, sweetheart. I am simply trying to make this the best possible experience for you," he said as he reached forward and caressed her cheek.

He watched as she sucked on her bottom lip, the image reignited his cock. She didn't have a clue how sexy she really was. Discreetly, he pushed down on his shaft in the hopes that the pain would keep him from coming in his pants. Being dry for a while



was certainly helping his recovery time, but now that his libido had been unleashed it didn't want to stop. He needed to get things moving along quickly before he made a fool of himself.

"I think the first thing we should do is to give you a little massage. How does that sound?"

Again Jenna didn't respond. She couldn't keep constant eye contact, her gaze flicking from his face to his chest, and momentarily peeking lower.

"You minx. We'll get to that later. For now, let's start with this."

Ben got up and moved around to the back of the chair so Jenna couldn't see what he was doing without twisting around.

"Close your eyes," he whispered above her head.

Jenna squeezed her eyes shut. The blackness didn't offer any relief from the sensation overload she was experiencing. When his fingers caressed her shoulder, her eyes opened automatically.

"Now that's not going to work. If you can't listen to my requests, we'll have to do something about that."

A black silk mask suddenly dangled in front of her eyes.

"Where did that come from?"

Ben placed a kiss on her temple. "My secret. Besides, it's more fun if you don't know what's coming."

Her mind spun in indecision. This went beyond her fantasy.

"Apples?" he asked softly.

She was able to turn her head enough to see he was serious. Ben may be a pain in the ass, but he was also true to his word. The realization helped her relax.

"I trust you." And gods help her she did. "Go ahead."

He hesitated for only a brief second before sliding the mask over her eyes and plunging her world into darkness.

"Now where was I?"

Jenna jumped again at his touch. She couldn't help it. Her skin tingled under his touch as he traced a figure eight across her shoulders. There, then gone. Quickly replaced by the warmth of his large hands. His palms were warm, the skin rougher than her own. The steady kneading of her shoulder muscles relaxed her. She dropped her chin to her chest to give him better access. He moved his hands lower. The muscles of her upper back relished his attentions, sending a shiver down her back. She groaned.

"This," he tugged at the edge of her dress, "is getting in my way."

The heat of his skin disappeared. Her skin seemed to absorb the vibration from her shoulder strap being untied. Cool air nipped at her superheated flesh as it was exposed. Her nipple puckered, now available for him to see. The other tie soon followed the first and the entire top of her dress fell forward. Jenna held her breath and waited for what

Ben was going to do next.

Nothing.

She tried to sit up, tried to cover her chest, but the restraints held her still.

"Ben?"

The rustle of clothing being thrown to the floor finally reached her. *Relax*. He was getting more comfortable. At least, she hoped that's what he was doing.

"Ben?"

In a flash his body heat washed over her again. He leaned in and his tongue lapped her breast. Jenna jerked her arms to grab Ben's head but was stopped yet again. She groaned and twisted her hips against his unrelenting teasing.

"Do you like that?" he asked, lightly nipping at her nipple.

He didn't wait for an answer. He moved his mouth to her other breast while his fingers continued to tease her. Jenna bucked her hips and managed to wrap her legs around his waist. She pulled him closer to her and relished the feeling of his naked back against her bare legs.

"Next time I'll tie those as well."

"What makes you think –?"

Ben flicked his tongue quickly over her erect nub and moved his hand down to pull up the bottom of her dress. As the material moved higher and higher up her body, Jenna felt each nerve start to burn with anticipation.

She wanted to see him. Wanted to touch him. He was so close to her, but she couldn't help but feel removed. It was frustrating. And completely exciting.

"Kiss me."

"I don't think you're in any position to be making demands, Miss Robins."

"Oh no?"

She could feel his breath on her cheek, could smell the champagne on his lips. She licked her own.

"Unless my eyes deceive me, you're the one tied to a chair."

She smiled. "But all I need to do is say the magic word and I'll be freed."

She could feel frustration radiating off him.

"Right. What was your request again, *mademoiselle*?"

Jenna's heart soared. "Kiss me."

Ben placed his hands on either side of her head again and leaned in. Even knowing what he was going to do, she still couldn't stop the jolt of electricity that zipped through her when his lips made contact.

They both parted their lips wide, their tongues lapping at each other. Hard and needy, their pace was frantic. Ben moved lower and kissed down her neck, skipped lower to her breast and lapped at her nipple.

His hands pulled her dress lower, allowing him to kiss her stomach. That sensation only lasted for a moment before his hands moved to under her ass, pulling her to the edge of the seat. Without a word, he leaned in and licked a long and slow path over her clit. Jenna cried out, squeezing her eyes shut under the mask.

Over and over, slowly he devoured her. With each pass he spent a fraction of a second longer on her clit, teasing her. His tongue circled the bud, mimicking his motions on her nipple.

*Close.*

"Ben," her voice trembled.

He slid a finger into her wet pussy, thrusting in time with the rhythm of his tongue. A second finger proved to be too much for her. Her body tensed, pulling hard against the restraints that held her down. Her body shuddered and she screamed as wave after wave of orgasm exploded in her. Ben continued thrusting his fingers into her as he sucked her clit hard.

Completely spent, Jenna collapsed back into the chair, panting. A sheen of sweat formed on her skin, cooling her body. She wanted to sleep. Needed rest after the overpowering pleasure. Gods, she'd never come this much in her life.

"Baby, are you okay?" Ben asked softly.

"Yes," she said in between pants.

"Jen, I need you."

From out of nowhere, her body pulsed another wave of pleasure. No man had every affected her like this.

"Yes. Now please."

It took her a second to realize what he was doing. Thankfully, she closed her eyes before he removed the mask. The dull light of the room seeped through her lids.

"I want to see you. Open your eyes."

She did and was taken aback. Ben was completely naked on his knees in front of her. His eyes were nearly completely black, and reflected his struggle for control. She had complete power over him at this moment. Even restrained, he wouldn't have done anything to her against her will.

"Now, Ben."

A single thrust and he was deep inside her. He stopped and tried to get control of his breathing.

"Dammit," he ground out from between clenched teeth.

He kept his gaze level and fixated on her eyes. She couldn't look away, fascinated as she watched him fight against his own body. The steady rhythm began to increase, his muscles in his arms and neck began to visibly vibrate.

Jenna's body responded, her fifth orgasm of the night building quickly. Gods, he was going to kill her. Her hips bucked up against his with perfect timing. It was too

much for Ben.

"Oh fuck," he whispered.

His eyes rolled into his head before he closed them. Hard and fast he thrust into her. Unable to keep up with him, Jenna tried to open her legs wider. Ben's cries of pleasure were quickly followed by hers. He continued to thrust into her until she couldn't breathe. His body stiffened and his cum filled her, the warmth spreading within her body.

Ben's upper body fell onto her. His head rested on her shoulder and his arms wrapped around her waist. She couldn't move. Not that she wanted to at that particular moment. Ben had her cocooned in a warm embrace. Jenna closed her eyes, feeling the sting of tears beginning.

"Let me free your hands. You must be getting stiff."

The knots that held her to the silk scarves had tightened considerably. It took Ben several minutes before she was completely free.

"Better?" He looked at her face for the first time since they'd finished. "Are you okay?"

"Thank you," she said in a soft, calm voice.

"Open your eyes."

She did and managed to not embarrass herself by crying. "That was more than I ever dreamed."

A typical cocky smile slid onto his face. "That goes for me too."

Jenna pushed herself to the floor beside him. Without a word, Ben helped her pull her dress back into place as she handed him his pants. Half clothed, they sat in silence side by side and watched the last of the sunlight dip down behind the horizon.

A loud chime suddenly filled the room. They both turned to locate the abrasive noise. When Jenna realized it was coming from her PCD, she moved to get it. A strong arm around her waist halted her crawl.

"Where do you think you're going, Miss Robins?"

"To answer my communicator. It could be important," she said back over her shoulder.

Ben closed his eyes and took a breath.

"We just had, purely from my perspective, the best sex ever, and you want to get your communicator?"

*Well, since he put it that way.* Jenna let her head hang and sighed.

"I'm sorry. That was very unappreciative, wasn't it?"

Jenna lay flat on her stomach and rolled over. Without missing a beat, Ben crawled over, placing his knees on the outside of hers and his outstretched arms on either side of her shoulders.

"I think I can be persuaded to forgive you."

Jenna smiled up at him. "Oh, how can I make it up to you?"

"I don't know about my reputation, but I assure you, even I can't recover from two rounds of mind-blowing sex that quickly."

Considering the fact that her body couldn't handle anything more strenuous than a nap at the moment, that was reassuring to her. But that didn't mean she had to let Ben know that.

"Very disappointing."

Another loud chirp from her PCD. Jenna made sure to ignore it, even though a small part of her was dying to know who was trying to contact her.

For his part, Ben was completely focused on her.

"Of course since I only have you for tonight, I may have to reconsider."

For a third time the PCD rang. However, this time, it was joined by another. Ben's head snapped up in the direction of the sound.

"The project."

Jenna gave her head a shake. "What?"

"It's the only reason why they would be trying to get a hold of both of us."

She watched as he fought some sort of internal battle.

"Fuck," he pushed away from the floor, stood and stalked towards the bar naked.

Unsure of what had just happened Jenna slowly rose to her feet. She watched Ben make his way to the vid screen on the bar and stab a finger at the answer button.

"What?" He made no attempt to hide his annoyance.

"Sorry, Ben." Matt's face popped up. "There's been an explosion at the dig site. I thought you'd want to know."

"What?" Jenna ran over, forgetting her near-naked state.

Matt's gaze slipped momentarily to her breast.

"Matt!" Ben barked, and pulled Jenna's strap back up. "What happened?"

"Sorry. Some of our people were observing a field test the university was conducting. There was an accident. I'm not sure what happened, but the whole thing blew."

## Chapter Five

"Oh my gods, no."

Jenna pulled away from Ben and scrambled to find her PCD.

From behind her she heard Ben ask the one question that scared her. "Were there any casualties?"

Not able to hear Matt's response, she yanked her PCD out of her purse and quickly checked her call history. Three calls from Roger, her assistant. Jenna was relieved that he wasn't hurt. It only took a second for the call to go through to him.

"Jenna! Where the hell have you been?" Roger was shouting over the noise in the background.

"I'm not home or else I would have answered sooner. What's going on there?"

"We found something. Not sure what it is yet, but it's definitely big."

Despite herself, a thrill of excitement set her hands shaking. They found something.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked feeling guilty. "We heard there'd been an explosion."

Roger looked surprised. "We?"

"Roger," she said with enough menace to elicit a chuckle from Ben.

Ben quietly moved beside her, careful to stay out of the vid screen's range, and whispered, "Everyone's fine."

"Only minor injuries. But you need to get down here now. You won't believe this thing." Roger sounded giddy.

"What is it?" Jenna's mind raced through the possibilities but nothing seemed to make sense.

"It looks like some sort of alien artifact. And by alien I don't mean Earth-based. Not sure what it does yet or where it's from. That's why I've been pinging you."

Jenna's mind began to whiz through the possibilities of what the artifact could be. This was out of her league.

"Okay, I'll get changed and make a few calls. I'll see if I can get a hold of an archeologist. They may be able to give us a better idea of what we're dealing with."

"Hurry," Roger said and the screen went black.

This was it. No, this was beyond anything she could have hoped for. An ancient artifact could prove that the soil on Mars once sustained life. That someone had lived here long before humans arrived. And if that's the case, there may be hope that they could reclaim the soil, and somehow get out of the bind their planet was in.

"Jenna?"

Lost in thought, she'd momentarily forgotten Ben. His hand on her hip quickly brought reality back. She looked up into his dark hazel eyes and wanted to melt. *Why tonight?*

"I have to go. I'm sorry," she said and sighed.

"No need to apologize. I'm coming with you."

Her jaw fell open for a second before she snapped it shut. "Why on Mars would you want to come? I doubt there is anything of monetary value there. At least we won't know if it even has any value until we have a chance to examine it."

"And I have people who can make that determination. You need my help. That's why CalCorp was brought on board this project to begin with."

She couldn't believe it. "Ben, think of the cultural and scientific significance of this find. There's more to this than how much money your company can get out of it."

Ben released her hip and moved across the room to gather his clothing. He didn't say anything, but she could tell he was annoyed with her. He snatched his belt from the floor, cracking the air. With steady jerks, he slipped the belt through the loops of his pants, all the while keeping his gaze locked on her. She had to fight the urge to squirm under his stare.

"You said you need an archeologist. Do you know one?" he asked in a tone that held a heavy edge.

She had to stop and think. "Alex Hanshaw from the university is quite accomplished. He'll be able to figure it out."

"If memory serves, Mr. Hanshaw is an expert on Earth antiquities and has only been on the planet six months. I very much doubt he'll be of much use."

"Oh, and I suppose you have an expert on alien artifacts on retainer," she said and crossed her arms across her chest.

"Gareth Sanderson."

Jenna blinked. "The linguistic expert?"

"And archeology, amongst other things. He's also spent the last five years working for us on a special project." Ben shot her a cocky grin. "He should be of use."

Jenna couldn't move, staring at the change in him. What had happened? Ten minutes ago she was lying in his arms thinking she'd been wrong about Ben all this time. And now here they were, facing off again. Her heart ached.

Something must have shown on her face because Ben was across the room and at her side within seconds.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

A tight lump filled her throat. No, she wasn't going to do this now. Jenna looked up and shrugged.

Ben's lips tightened into a thin line. "Just like old times. That's what you were

thinking?"

They'd gone through too much tonight for her to lie to him now.

She nodded. "I guess this means our date is over."

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "I guess it does." He paused and looked intently at her.

"What?"

His jaw tightened for a second before he smiled. "This evening wasn't what I was expecting."

That was an understatement.

"Me either," she said and gave his hand a squeeze. "Back to business now."

"Matt will be here in ten minutes. We can swing by your place to get your things."

Jenna felt her head nod in an automated response. She sucked at the whole morning-after scenario. Having to go through this now certainly sucked. Her mind bouncing between her team's discovery and her evening with Ben made the ten minutes they waited for Matt seem like an eternity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jenna hopped out of the limo, not bothering to wait for Matt's assistance this time. Her dress was long abandoned for slacks and a tight-fitting t-shirt.

"Jenna, wait." Ben's voice chased her, but she didn't stop.

"Roger!"

Her skinny assistant stalked across the sandy terrain and caught her in a fierce hug. She could feel him shaking.

"I was there, in the tent. Not five minutes before it blew. I could be..."

He stopped, unable to go on. Jenna hugged him again.

"You're not. That's all that matters."

Jenna felt a tingle move down her back as Ben moved quietly behind her.

"Do you know what could have caused the explosion, son?" he said, his voice calm and reassuring.

Roger pulled away from Jenna and looked hard at Ben. She knew how her assistant reacted to people he didn't know.

"Roger, this is Ben Hawthorn. He is the head of CalCorp."

Roger scowled. "Didn't take long for you to get here. Wanted to check the damage? See how much money you're out?"

Jenna cringed. Ben, for his part, barely blinked.

"I was told people were hurt. I wanted to make sure they got the care they needed."

Roger rolled his eyes.



Ben smiled before turning his attention to Jenna. "I'll be with Matt. Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do."

She watched as he walked away. Confident, in charge and incredibly sexy. She sighed before she turned her attention back to her friend. He was staring at her, mouth hanging.

"He was the reason you didn't answer your communicator? Are you insane? From what you told me, that guy is an asshole. Shit, from everything we've seen, that guy is an asshole."

Jenna straightened. "It was arranged through a dating service. I didn't set out to kiss up to the boss, if that's what you're thinking."

Her body quivered at the memory of Ben's kiss. His hands caressing her back and thighs. A wave of desire shivered through her. She gave her head a shake.

"And Ben's changed since the last time I saw him." She wasn't convinced that he *had* changed, but rather she was seeing another side of him for the first time.

She turned her back on Roger and walked quickly to the tent where a temporary headquarters had been set up. Instinctively, she knew he would follow, so she kept talking.

"So what did you find? Where is it?"

Business, she needed to focus in on the matter at hand. That's what was important, not Ben.

She kept her head down and examined a busted, scorched piece of metal that had been lying on the table. The smell of burned sulfur turned her stomach.

"What the hell's this?"

"It was near the artifact we found. I don't think it was a part of it. More like a piece of something someone was using to lever the object with."

"Someone was trying to steal it?"

Roger shrugged. "Looks that way. I found this just as you see it. The explosion didn't cause that damage."

When she picked it up, a black residue rubbed off onto her fingers. The metal looked to be reinforced steel from Earth. What it was doing here and who would have access to something of this nature were two questions that needed to be answered.

"Something happened to the owner of this. What was the condition of the artifact when you found it?"

Roger rifled through a stack of files and folders spread over the tiny desk. With a click of his tongue, he pulled out a photo pad.

"I took as many pictures as I could. Managed to get UV and basic structural scans done too. I was on my way to get my radiation meter to take some readings when it blew."

The photo pad flicked through the images at a rapid rate. Jenna paused it on an image of the device in the ground. The crew had set up the tent around the dig, a barrier of four feet prevented anyone from accidentally disturbing the ground. What caught her attention was a test kit lying two feet from the artifact.

Roger coughed and Jenna looked up and frowned. All thoughts of what she was going to say fled her mind when Ben walked in.

"You should come see this." He didn't wait for her to answer, simply held the door open.

"I was getting there," Roger said, hands on his hips. "She needs to understand the background before she can understand what happened."

Ben leveled an icy glare at him. Roger took it for several seconds before he stuck his hands into his pockets.

"I'll go check on the beta team. See how they're making out," Roger said, quickly averting his gaze.

It was Jenna's turn to roll her eyes. The testosterone was stinking up the place. She pushed past Ben and charged halfway across the courtyard until she realized she didn't have a clue where she was going.

Ben's chuckle came from her right. "This way."

She had to jog to catch up with him, but easily fell into step beside him.

"Any thoughts as to what it is?" she asked when the silence got to be too much for her.

He shrugged casually. "I was hoping you could tell me."

A short distance away, Jenna could see the remains of a metal and plastic portable lab skewed over the ground. It was the same color as the portable in the pictures. As they got closer, a large crater became visible, smoke drifting upward.

"Oh shit."

They stopped on the edge and Jenna was stunned at the destructive force needed to blow a hole this deep into the surface. In the side of the crater the artifact was half buried, the end sticking out like a stick in the dirt. Its round belly was mostly buried by sand and rocks. It looked like the force of the explosion sent it flying hard and fast.

Ben gently caressed her arm. "Come take a look."

He jumped down into the hole, turned and offered her a hand down. She slid her fingers into his, the contact sending tingles through her hands and up her arms. As she jumped beside him, there was a sudden buzz of electricity around them. Her heart raced, and blood pounded in her ears.

She was hit with a sudden wave of sensations. Ben's scent washed over her. His cologne and desire mingled with a scent she couldn't place. It made her nipples tighten, her breathing became ragged. So overwhelmed with desire, Jenna didn't know what to do.

A glance up into Ben's face didn't help. His eyes were wide, a look of pain and

pleasure mixed on his face.

"Were you down here before?" she asked in a quiet voice.

She watched him fight some sort of internal battle before he nodded.

"Was it like...this last time?"

"No." He swallowed.

His fingers tightened around her hand. Her body swayed towards his so she had to tilt her head back to look into his eyes. This pull was unlike anything she'd felt for him before. It was a living pulse of desire. One too powerful for her to resist.

Ben was fighting the same battle. He bent his head down and brushed his lips across hers. On a second pass he sucked on her bottom lip before devouring her mouth with his. Their contact only lasted a moment before he pulled back. He closed his eyes for a moment and then as if it took every ounce of his strength, he stepped back.

"Not here."

Her heart sank.

"Let me show you this and get you out of here before I cross the line."

*Cross the line!* her mind screamed. Instead she nodded and smiled.

"We wouldn't want that to happen." She was feeling naughty, not like her normal cautious self. She leaned in and placed a kiss at the base of his throat. "I might have to punish you."

He moaned low and deep in his chest. She tried to look in complete control as she smiled and stepped away. She turned her attention to the artifact and hoped she could rid her mind of the images of making love to Ben.

Cautiously, she approached the object, making mental notes of its position and the environment around it. She should have grabbed her camera.

"Matt said no one knows what it is. Even your assistant." He said the last with a note of disdain. "It looks like the explosion caused some serious damage though."

Squatting beside it, Jenna began to brush away some of the ash off the scorched metal. Her head began to buzz, like her brain was itchy.

"A probe?"

"Maybe. But I'm not sure if Sanderson is the right person for this job after all. He's on his way. I figure the least he can do is guess."

Something caught Jenna's eye. "Come take a look at this."

She waited until Ben squatted beside her before she pointed.

"Look at the soil. Those crystals look like they have grown straight out of the ground."

"Any chance it's a result of the explosion?"

"Possibly. I'd have to run some tests to be sure."

When she hesitated, Ben nudged her with his knee. "But?"

The brief contact jolted her. Images of Ben tied naked to his bed bombarded her mind. She needed him now. She had to concentrate to force the air to move into and out of her lungs. Her panties were soaked with her desire. One touch was all it would take for her to explode.

"Gods," she whispered.

"What was that?" He kept his eyes fixed on hers.

Jenna's mind began to race. She had to push back her desire and force her mind to concentrate.

"I have a theory."

Ben stood and adjusted his groin. "I'm all ears."

Her face grew hot and she had to turn her head away. With him standing she was at the perfect level to take his shaft into her mouth.

"Climb out of the crater for a minute," she said the words a bit too quickly.

"Why?"

"Because I can't think with you standing so close to me," she snapped. "Just trust me. Climb out and stand on the edge."

He gave her a puzzled look before he made his way up and over the sandy hill to the surface.

With her eyes closed, Jenna felt the tension drain from her body with each step away that Ben took. The air lightened, and the pounding in her head stopped.

"What the hell?"

She looked back at him. "I feel it too."

"Feel what?"

Roger had come up from the west and jumped down beside Jenna before she'd realized he was there. She stiffened, expecting her body to react in much the same way it had with Ben.

Her shock and surprise must have been obvious. Roger scrunched his nose up as he looked at her.

"What?"

"Do you," she hesitated, not knowing how to ask. "Do you feel anything?"

He stared blankly into space for a minute before he shrugged. "Hungry."

"Nothing else?" Ben called from above. His voice sounded strained, a note of annoyance clear.

"What a jerk," Roger whispered under his breath. "No. Care to enlighten me?"

Jenna knew he wouldn't be able to handle the idea of her sudden and intense attraction to Ben in the vicinity of the probe. She patted him on the shoulder and stood.

"I'd like to keep my theory quiet right now. Until I get the proof I need."

A discreet glance at Ben and she knew he saw the connection. They needed to talk.

Her legs screamed as the circulation returned after her extended squat. She had to give them a minute before she'd be able to walk out of the crater. The buzzing in her head increased and she had to give it a shake to try to clear it.

*Help.*

"Did you hear that?" Jenna asked, spinning around.

"Hear what?" Roger answered, giving the probe a kick.

*Help!*

"You can't hear her? It sounds like a woman's in trouble." Jenna turned to Ben. "Do you hear her?"

Ben turned to look behind him. "Everyone seems to be back at the base. I don't hear anything else."

*Find him please.*

"I must be more tired than I thought," she muttered and began to make her way out of the crater. Hearing voices was never a good sign. Everyone would want her to go home and lie down, blame it on stress. But it didn't feel like stress. Jenna pushed the odd feelings away for now and headed over to Ben.

Every step jolted the pins and needles through her legs as she tried to scramble up the hill, away from whatever the thing in the crater was. Roger was close on her heels, muttering curses none too quietly under his breath.

"Jenna, will you slow down? What's going on here? I don't like being kept out of the loop, especially since corporate boy is now on duty," Roger bit out beside her.

"You're being an ass. Stop it and play nice for once," she said and continued up out of the crater. Ben was there to lend her a hand up and out. Something she noticed he didn't do for her assistant.

Roger tried to pick his way up the hill, but lost his footing and slid back to the bottom. He punched the sand before making a successful second attempt. The trio stood on the edge, looking down at the unassuming object that had caused the massive explosion. Jenna still couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more here than an alien device. She needed to spend some time alone with the device so she could get her head around what was going on.

"I need to get that back into the lab. I have a theory that I'd like to test." Jenna turned to Roger. "What are the chances that we can get a crane here?"

"Zero until morning. Even if we could find one, it will take a full crew to properly secure it. I don't want to take any unnecessary chances."

Jenna nodded. "It might be easier if I conduct some preliminary tests where it is. It should give me enough to confirm a theory. Do we still have a test kit?"

"Nope. Blew with everything else. I have one back at the university. But I don't have a vehicle. Mine was damaged."

"I can have Matt drive you. He can get you there and back in forty," Ben said.

Roger jumped, and Jenna couldn't imagine how he'd forgotten Ben was standing beside them. Roger gave Ben an odd look but nodded his agreement. She knew her assistant took some time to warm up to people, but he was being hostile even for Roger. Something else she'd have to deal with later.

"I'll meet him out front. The limo, I assume."

"I'll tell Matt you're on your way," Ben said and pulled out his PCD to do just that.

Jenna watched her friend walk away until she was sure he was out of earshot. Ben stepped up beside her as he slipped his communicator back into his pocket.

"He means well. Roger is better with test results than people. Once you know how his mind works, he grows on you."

"Like a mold, I'm sure."

She turned on Ben, ready to defend Roger, until she looked into his eyes. Humor shone bright and he was waiting to see if she'd take his bait. How could she disappoint him? She leaned in so she was only an inch away. His body heat pulled her closer with the promise of warmth. Careful not to draw attention, she slipped a hand under his jacket and caressed the hard muscles of his stomach.

"Roger has been known to get under people's skin." She lightly raked her nails over the linen of his shirt.

"Reminds me of someone else I know."

He sucked in a breath when she dipped a finger under his waistband. She smiled but pulled her hand away.

"There's nothing I'd rather do than go back to your place. But I'm not sure how much energy that thing has left in it. If I don't run these tests it may stop. Then we lose all chance of understanding what happened."

"I said it would take them forty minutes. You need the kit to conduct your tests. We have time."

Her face heated again. Damn, she hated that she turned into a schoolgirl at the slightest hint of something inappropriate with him.

"There must be a tent, somewhere private where we can talk," he said in a voice full with the promise of something exciting. She even giggled when he surveyed the research camp for a suitable spot.

Every sensible part of her mind was warning her that this was a bad idea. But whether it was due to her proximity to the artifact, or if her early experiences with Ben were too fresh in her mind, she didn't care. She wanted him.

"I think I know a place. Follow me."

## Chapter Six

Ben's couldn't believe how fast his heart was racing as Jenna led him into the supply shed.

"This actually feels a bit sordid," she whispered in the half-light.

"Haven't you always wanted to have sex in a shed?"

Jenna giggled in the dark before she bumped her knee on workbench they couldn't immediately see when they entered the room.

"Son of an earther!"

"Such language from a lady. I may have to wash my ears out later."

He pulled her arm back so she was forced to turn and face him. Without breaking contact, he slid his hand up her bare arm and over her shoulder until he found her neck and face. Once he found the smoothness of her cheek, he leaned in and kissed her hard on the lips. She moaned into his mouth, her fingers bunching his shirt into a twisted ball.

"This is such a bad idea," she whispered before returning his kiss even harder.

"Scared Roger might find us?"

Jenna's fist connected with his biceps, leaving a stinging sensation behind.

"Vicious. I may have to tie you up again."

"Promises, promises."

Instead, Ben found the edge of her shirt and pulled it up over her head, exposing her breasts. The white bra underneath was barely visible in the half-light of the shed. Not that he needed to see to know what he was doing. With unerring accuracy, he pushed the thin fabric away, bent his head and laved her nipple with his tongue.

Jenna moaned and buried her fingers into his hair. She push-pulled him against her. The scent of her desire was heady in the confines of the small shed. Sweat from her skin tasted salty in his mouth and added to his desire.

The workbench behind them provided the support he wanted. Ben grabbed Jenna's ass, lifted her up and carried her over.

"Perfect," he whispered in her ear.

"That's what I like about you. Always thinking."

He set her down, giving him better access to the buttons of her pants. He was almost defeated by the small barriers before she slapped his hand away.

"Always thinking, but not very coordinated."

"Jenna." His warning quickly turned into a moan.

Instead of answering, she leaned in and captured his face in another kiss. She gasped against him when he tried to pull her pants down over her hips. His stomach sickened.

"Are you okay? I didn't mean...I just want you so bad."

"I'm fine. But let me."

Within a flash, she had her pants down and off, and then set to work on his. When her cold fingers wrapped around his cock he sucked in a breath. She wet her fingers in her mouth and began to stroke him. His body shuddered and he knew he wouldn't be able to keep things up too long.

Never before had he responded like this to a woman. As good as his stamina was, normally a third round in one evening would be out of the question. It had to be that damn machine buried out there. Jenna reached down with her free hand and cupped his balls. The chill of her hand caused his sac to tighten and sent a pulse of blood through his cock.

He had to give his head a shake to regain some degree of control over his desire. He broke her contact by lifting her once again onto the workbench. Her pussy was now at the perfect height for him to drive into. Ben slipped his thumb into her mouth. Her tongue slid and flicked around it, moistening it for what he had planned.

When he pulled it from her mouth he heard her chuckle for the briefest of moments before he began to rub her clit. Slowly at first he circled the stiffening nub, encouraged by her low moans. Cream from her pussy covered his hand when he pushed two fingers into her cunt. Jenna leaned in and bit his shoulder lightly. The mix of pleasure and pain almost made him come on the spot.

"Ben, please." She grabbed his wrist and pushed his hand out of the way. "I want you in me."

His heart began to race. Ben flexed his fingers against her thighs and tugged her to the edge of the bench. His cock twitched as he pressed up against the wet opening of her pussy. He didn't slow, but pushed into her with a hard thrust until he couldn't go any further.

Jenna wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck. Her head fell back as she bucked in unison against him. Her muscles clenched and unclenched around his shaft, squeezing and teasing him in ways no other woman ever had.

"Fuck."

"Too fast."

They both calmed, coming to a sudden stop as they held each other in the dark. Ben felt his breathing syncing up with hers. Her heartbeat echoed against his chest and he could feel her pulse beating in her throat when he bent his head to lick her neck. Without words, they both pulled back enough to look into each other's eyes. Ben searched for...something. A sign that this was just another quick fuck, like he'd had with women in the past. But it wasn't.



He pushed his cock forward hard, driving deep into Jenna. Her eyes widened, but she didn't look away. Instantly, they fell into a slow, steady rhythm in and out. Each time he pushed as far as he could, Jenna tightened her muscles around his cock for a second before releasing him to withdraw.

"You like it when I fuck you like this. Don't you?" he managed a hoarse whisper.

"Yes. Don't stop."

Over and over he pulled back until he was almost out of her pussy, only to thrust back into her hard. Each time the coil of pleasure tightened inside him. Jenna moaned as she sucked on her lower lip. His male pride swelled. His hands slid down her back to cup her ass, kneading her soft skin. He pulled her forward and tight against him.

"Mine," he growled against her neck.

Jenna reached forward as well and lightly raked her fingers down over his shoulder blades. It was his turn to swallow a moan. Gods, he loved it when she did that. Again she teased his back with her nails, at the same time she sucked his earlobe and ran her tongue over the ridge of his ear. It was perfect. She was perfect.

He pushed her back so Jenna could lie on the bench. A powerful desire to taste her hit him hard. With her on her back it was easy to suck her nipple into his mouth. He nipped at her with his teeth and flicked his tongue quickly over the tight bud.

"Ben," her voice was soft and full of desire.

His balls tightened as her muscles tightened around him. He pulled himself away from her breast and kissed her. Her body tensed underneath him and he could barely hold on to her as she cried out. Jenna's moans didn't stop as he pounded into her unrelentingly. Ben felt his own orgasm rush from him and his cries echoed in the small shed. He thrust into her over and over, needing Jenna to feel every ounce of pleasure. Of both their pleasures.

The cool breeze from outside licked though the crack under the shed door and chilled Ben's sweat-soaked back. He tried to wrap Jenna under him to protect her from the chill. He slid his arm under her head and nuzzled her neck.

"That was..."

"I know," he said softly against her.

"It's like you knew how to touch me. Right when I needed you to."

She ran her fingers lightly up and down his back along his spine. Ben shivered and instinctively thrust into her again, even though his cock was rapidly softening.

"You seem to have that knack yourself."

Jenna tapped him on the shoulder. "Sit up."

He tightened his grip on her.

"Ben, please."

He nipped at her neck, but pulled back. Jenna continued to lie on the bench, her half naked body glowing in the faint light. Ben felt his cock twitch for the briefest of seconds

before he gave it a hard squeeze. Jenna didn't look like she was up for another round. He couldn't believe he was even considering it.

She looked at him hard for a moment, her eyes moving up and down his body. He straightened, giving her as good a view as possible. Ben knew he wasn't as fit as he had been seven years ago, but he hadn't heard any of his female acquaintances complain before. Still, it mattered that Jenna was happy with what she saw.

"When we left your place," she paused and pulled herself to a sitting position. "When we left, I thought things between us were over."

Ben felt his shock like a punch to the stomach. "I told you I reserved the right to woo you after."

She seemed to consider this. "Yes, but I don't imagine having a quickie in a work shed is how you normally court your girlfriends."

His normal flip comeback got stuck. "Not normally."

"It's odd." She sat up and placed her hand on his chest. "I was so angry with you when we left earlier, I figured after seeing the artifact tonight I'd be able to avoid you for the rest of this project. But when we were in the crater, all I wanted to do was throw you to the ground and have my way with you. I didn't care if anyone saw us."

Ben reached up and placed his hand over hers. "I felt it too. When our knees touched, it felt like —"

"Like a shot of electricity went through us."

He searched her eyes for some sort of answer. "You didn't feel like that with Roger, correct?"

"No," her voice cracked. "I have no idea what's going on."

He pulled her close in a hug. "Let's get dressed and see if we can figure it out."

"I have a theory."

Ben heard the note of doubt in her voice. He gave her a squeeze and helped her down from the bench.

"Then I'm not worried. You'll figure it out and we'll know what we need to do."

Ben watched Jenna come to some sort of conclusion. She nodded stiffly and retrieved her shirt.

"Let's do this."

In the five minutes it took them to get dressed, he was amazed at how quickly she changed from lover to scientist. Her complexity definitely attracted him, but he wasn't sure how to react. In so many ways she did feel like his perfect match. Not that he believed for a second that there was such a thing. No one was perfect. Least of all him.

Jenna carefully made her way to the door and cracked it open a notch.

"It looks like we're clear. I'll head to the main tent first and wait for Roger there. If you want to follow in a few minutes, it shouldn't attract too much attention."

Ben leaped across the small space, banging into the hidden object on the floor, to

catch Jenna's arm before she left the shed.

"What? Why not go together?"

Jenna's face contorted into a look of pain. "I need to have the respect of my team if I'm going to lead them with this. You're an outsider to them. An unknown. If they see me with you..." she trailed off and shrugged.

"They won't respect you for being with me? Their loyalties are that fickle?"

"No, your reputation preceded you."

Ben dropped her arm. "I wonder how that happened."

At least Jenna looked guilty. "I'm sorry. When I heard you were backing the project, I thought it was going to happen all over again. I was angry, I guess. And a bit scared."

So much for the perfect relationship.

"I did what I did for good reason. Your theory at the time had flaws and it wasn't worth the financial risk to investigate further."

He pushed the door open and walked past her into the courtyard. He drove his clenched fists into his pants pockets and kept his stride long and fast. He hadn't even talked to her and she'd judged the project based on his name being attached to it. It was amazing she'd agreed to their date at all.

"Ben!"

He stopped dead and turned to face her. She stumbled to a stop herself a few steps away. Her hair was a wreck, her lips were swollen, looking very well kissed. And as much as he wanted to take her back to his place and forget this insanity he couldn't. He had no intention of making this easy for her. He refused to break eye contact or give her any prompting. It would drive her nuts.

"I'm sorry," she said clearly. Her arms were opened, palms facing him. "But you're not an easy man. You only give people enough to know your surface, and block any attempt at anything deeper."

"I never asked for that," he struggled to speak in a steady voice.

She shook her head. "Didn't you?"

*Never.* He never asked for, or wanted, that kind of relationship. A date, the occasional round of great sex and maybe some light conversation. That's all he looked for. That's all he needed. It had been all he'd needed for years.

Jenna laced her fingers behind her back as she walked to him.

"Ben, I'm the first to admit I'm over my head here. I'm going to need the support of every single member of my team to help me figure this out. It's my fault that they don't have a very high opinion of you. It will be my job to fix that."

She reached for his arm and pulled it out of his pocket. She poked her fingers into his fist until he relaxed.

"But I can do all the talking in the world and it won't change their minds. They need to trust you."

A trickle of voices came from behind them and Ben looked up when he recognized Matt's. His head began to pound as the muscles of his neck tensed.

"That sounds like Roger. Look, we'll go to headquarters together and get this solved. Then we can talk. Okay?" Jenna gave his hand a squeeze. "Okay?"

"Why? Why do you need me all of a sudden? You seem to have survived all right without me for the past seven years. I doubt you needed me then either."

He needed to know. He couldn't handle betrayal again. Especially if it was Jenna.

To her credit, Jenna didn't jump in with a platitude. She shook her head and smiled. How she could smile and look so sad was mind-boggling.

"I have a feeling there is something bigger going on here. That thing in the crater is more than an alien artifact. I need you and your team to help figure this out before someone else gets hurt."

Especially her. Ben realized they had formed some sort of connection tonight. He wasn't ready to walk away from it yet. To walk away from her.

"All right. Let's see what your boy Roger can come up with. And you might want to fix your hair."

"Shit." She raked her fingers through her hair and fixed it into a neat ponytail.

"Better?"

He nodded and gave her a wink.

The smile finally reached her eyes. "Thank you."

They walked the rest of the way to the temporary headquarters in silence. When they arrived, the place was buzzing with activity. Roger and Matt were arguing about something, while three or four scientists were trying to talk over the noise of the fight, increasing the racket. To add to the confusion, several men he recognized as security personnel from his company began to file into the now-crowded room. He couldn't help but chuckle.

"Glad you find this amusing," Jenna said and sighed.

"I believe I'll let you take the lead, Miss Robins."

"Why thank you, Mr. Hawthorn."

Jenna clapped her hands together loudly. "Excuse me, everyone. May I have your attention?"

Eight startled faces swung around and faced Jenna. Silently, Ben cheered her on. He'd never seen her like this, in charge. And for once in his life no one seemed to notice him. He moved to the corner of the tent, spun a chair around backward, straddled it and sat down to watch her work.

"I'm assuming Roger has briefed everyone on our situation." Jenna waited until the majority of people nodded. "Excellent. I believe the artifact was used for terraforming the planet."

A rumble in the room from the scientists, several shaking their heads. The urge to

say something, to try to help rescue her, was strong. He squeezed the back of the chair and waited. Jenna didn't leave him hanging for long.

"I know, where's the hard proof? The explosion is the key."

Jenna walked into the center of the room and pointed to Roger. "Let me see your kit."

"I didn't use anything from my kit on that thing. I didn't have a chance."

She took a large plastic kit box from Roger and set it on the ground in front of everyone.

"For those of you new to the team, this is a standard kit. In here we have various chemicals that we use to test soil and other samples that we collect. This," she picked up two small bottles, "is magnesium and this is liquid oxygen. Now on their own they are harmless. But when you combine them—"

"They're explosive," Ben finished for her.

Jenna cast him a quick glance and nodded. "Given the right conditions, yes."

Everyone turned and looked at Roger.

"I already told you I didn't do anything. I set the kit on the ground about three feet from the device and left. This wasn't my fault," he said a bit too quickly, his face growing red.

Jenna held up her hand. "I know, Roger. I'm not implying you had anything to do with this. I think it was the artifact itself."

That's when it struck him. "Of course."

Jenna looked at him from over her shoulder and smiled. "The artifact seems to have the ability to pull together elements that combine perfectly. When mixed together, these two chemicals make a very powerful explosive."

"Just like the crystals underneath the device now. Makes sense," Roger nodded.

Jenna stood. "We need to figure out how much power this thing has left. I'm going to break you into teams and give you your assignments. Once we know how powerful this thing is, then we can figure out if it will pose a threat to the planet."

"Wait a minute," Matt spoke up, making sure to catch Ben's attention. "You think there is a threat? How big?"

Jenna's eyes darted around the room, but she didn't look at him again. Ben knew she needed to stay in control and if anyone thought for a second that she was taking her lead from him, everything would fall apart.

"You saw the damage that was done when the device combined a small amount of chemicals. Think of what would happen if someone got their hands on bucketful, or a tank." She waited for that image to sink in before she continued. "Someone had tried to move the device. We found evidence of modern tools."

"Then we need to set up a perimeter." Matt looked to Ben again.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't undermine Jenna, even though every inch of him

was straining to take charge. For once in his life he was going to sit back and let someone else run the show. Jenna had trusted him earlier tonight, it was time for him to repay the favor. Ben looked from Matt to Jenna and waited.

"If it is okay with Mr. Hawthorn, I'd like to put Matt in charge of doing just that." Jenna now turned to face him fully.

Ben felt the muscles in his neck relax a notch, pleased to be officially invited into the process. "Let us know what you need and we'll get it in place."

"Thank you."

He could actually feel the gratitude radiating from her, spreading from her slow smile across the room to hit him in the chest. She looked tired. Ben stood, but Jenna turned back to the others before he could make a move to join her.

"Listen up, everyone, for your assignment," she said with clear authority.

All he could do was stand there and wait. People would file up to talk to Jenna, and he could watch their confusion change to clarity after only a minute or two of talking to her. Each would leave with their purpose clear in every step they took. After ten minutes the only ones who remained were themselves and Matt.

"Matt, I appreciate you taking charge of security. I have a feeling we haven't seen the last of the people who tried to move the device."

Jenna handed him the schematics of the base area. Matt looked between her and Ben, before he reached into his jacket and pulled out a thermos.

"The two of you look like hell. I think you need this more than I do."

Heat from the coffee inside warmed Ben's hand. Knowing Matt, it would be strong enough to keep them up until dawn.

"Thanks. I think Miss Robins needs a short break before we put her to work," he said, casting a quick look down at her face.

She tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn.

"And maybe a nap," Ben said as he rubbed her back.

"I'll leave you two alone then. I'm on the wireless if you need anything."

Matt gave Jenna one of his killer winks and headed out to check the perimeter.

The second the door closed behind him, Ben turned and scooped Jenna into his arms.

Her eyes popped wide open. "What are you doing?"

"I was serious. You need a nap."

He almost dropped her when she tried to squirm out of his arms. "Ben, please. Put me down."

"I intend to. In this cot right here."

He sat down on the cot, but kept Jenna wrapped up in his arms. She wriggled for another few seconds before giving up the fight. When she placed her head on his shoulder, a warm sensation of peace filled him.

"Tired?" he spoke against the top of her head.

"Yes," her breath warmed his shirt. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. You've earned it. It's been a while since I've seen that many people jump to action that quickly."

Her body shook with laughter. "I'm sure you see that every day at CalCorp."

When she tilted her head back Ben's breath became shallow. Even half asleep she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead before he captured her mouth in a kiss.

Jenna sighed as she teased the back of his neck with her long fingers. She opened her mouth, allowing Ben to deepen his kiss. He massaged her back with his hand, tugging up her shirt as he went so he could feel her soft skin.

There wasn't anything sexual about his touch. He simply needed to be closer to her, needed to feel her warmth and know that she was real. That everything that had happened tonight was real.

Jenna nipped his bottom lip, and then kissed a trail down his jaw to his neck.

"I hope you didn't have any plans. Because the only way you're going to get me to stay here is if you don't move."

For the first time in his life Ben didn't mind the idea of a woman holding him down. He closed his eyes and breathed deep.

"I wouldn't dream of moving."

Ben couldn't open his eyes again. It wasn't worth the fight, so he let his mind drift into oblivion. He probably would have stayed like that for hours if Jenna hadn't sat bolt upright in his arms.

"What the hell?" he asked, his senses quickly charging to full alert.

"Ben? Jenna?" Matt called from outside the tent.

Ben stood and let Jenna straighten her shirt and pants before he answered.

"What's wrong?"

"You'd both better come see this."

Roger and Matt waited for them outside, though Roger looked more than a little upset.

"We were wrong," Roger said in a tone that both accused and sounded guilty.

"About what? The device?"

Jenna yawned and gave her eyes a rub. Both Matt and Roger had the decency to look guilty for waking her up. A quick look at his watch told him they'd only managed to get twenty minutes of rest. Some night this was turning out to be.

She reached for the thermos that Matt had given them earlier, opened it and took a long swig.

Roger waited for her to finish before continuing. "It looks like this wasn't the only device. Matt found a secondary dig when he was securing the perimeter. It would

explain why the end of our artifact is damaged. Maybe the two parts were pulled apart on impact. Regardless, looks like someone else got here first and took whatever it was with them."

*Shit.*

Jenna crossed her arms across her chest. "Was there anything left? If there is another one of those things out there—"

"Then we have a very big problem on our hands."



## Chapter Seven

Jenna knelt beside the device and looked at the gaping hole in its side where it had been joined to its partner. She ran her fingers around the twisted metal, careful not to cut her skin. It didn't look like someone had ripped this thing apart, so the damage must have come from impact. But the fact someone had known about this at all, taken the other part, whatever it happened to be, meant they had a security risk. The university was going to have her head when they found out about the damage done to their crane, but at least they had managed to move this behemoth to a secure location.

The more she caressed the metal, the stronger the strange stirring inside her got. Longing and loneliness tugged at her, and for the first time in a long while she actually had to fight the urge to cry. She gave her head a shake. *I must be more tired than I thought.*

Jenna cleared her throat and tried to sound like she wasn't running through an emotional ride. "It looks like it was ripped apart. Broke up in the atmosphere maybe."

"I haven't seen anything like this," Gareth Sanderson said from the other side of the device.

Ben moved behind her, but she didn't turn to face him. It was hard enough being in the same room with him and the device. If they got too close, things would go downhill fast. She tried to relax and focus on Sanderson. At least he wasn't setting her hormones racing. If anything he was pissing her off more than he should.

"I guess they couldn't move the two pieces together. They probably intended to come back for this, but our team got here first."

Gareth stood and brushed sand from his pants. "So how powerful is this thing anyway?"

"Powerful," Ben and Jenna answered in unison.

Ignoring her blush, she concentrated on the underside of the device. They couldn't possibly make things any more obvious than they already were. Roger had ripped into her after her quick nap in the tent with Ben. Not that it was any of his business whom she dated, and she'd bitched him out for even suggesting it was. Still, she couldn't help but feel a tiny bit guilty. That somehow she was being disloyal to her team. And to Ben.

Regardless, she wasn't about to make their relationship public knowledge. Not yet anyway. Gods, she didn't even know if they *had* a relationship at this point.

"Who would want a device like this? If we can figure that out, then we can warn the authorities," she said to Ben from the device. He nodded, knowing as well as she what would happen if the wrong people got a hold of this device.

Sanderson joined Ben and turned his back to her. Jenna shook her head and pretended to examine the damaged metal again. Sanderson had been an absolute pig

since his arrival an hour ago. She was going to have to get his ass kicked off her project.

That is if she could keep her hands off Ben long enough to talk to him.

"It could be any extremist group. If the other section of this thing has even a fraction of the power this end does, it could produce a very big bang," Ben said in a cool tone.

Jenna finally faced him and immediately wished she hadn't. He stood, leaning against one of the walls, his arms crossed loosely across his chest. He made eye contact with her and Jenna felt her insides quiver. His hazel eyes looked black as he stood in the half-light of the room. His jacket had been discarded long ago and his sleeves were now rolled up to the elbow. A thin line of dirt was smudged along his forearm. He looked hot, tired and very sexy.

He also looked pissed. Ben hadn't missed Sanderson's slight towards her. Jenna gave her head a shake, and prayed he got the message. The last thing they needed right now was infighting. It was going to take everyone, even Sanderson, to solve this puzzle.

A loud gurgle echoed in the room. Jenna grabbed her stomach and cringed.

"Sorry."

"You need to eat and sleep." Ben pushed away from the wall and offered her a hand. "Let me take you home."

*Screw that.* "I'm fine. Besides, Gareth just got here. I need to get him up to —"

"Roger can do that. You need to rest."

Ben stood there, hand outstretched, and waited for her to take it.

"Mr. Hawthorn, I'm fine."

"My company is ultimately responsible for this project. I can't afford to have one of its most important resources tired and hungry. Gareth, you can handle things until Jenna gets back?"

The question hung in the air as Sanderson stood, mouth gaping, looking at the back of Ben's head.

"Well, since I know he'll do such a great job, I supposed I can take a short break. I'll ask Roger to check in with you. He should be back from breakfast soon."

Jenna smiled and slid her hand into his without thinking. When their hands touched an immediate rush pulsed through her. Her nipples tightened and her pussy practically gushed. She saw her desire reflected in Ben's eyes, only this time he didn't flinch. Ben didn't wait for Sanderson's response and led Jenna out of the makeshift lab. As they got farther away from the device, the supercharged arousal she'd felt ebbed enough so that she was able to think again.

"Sorry I forgot about the not-touching rule around that thing," Ben leaned in and whispered the words against her ear.

A pleasant shiver ran down her spine at his nearness. "It's okay. I don't think he noticed."

"No, I think he was in shock. Cocky bastard." Ben shook his head.

"That was so worth it." Jenna smiled.

"My staff has been telling me for months Gareth's full of himself since he took over special projects. Thank you for helping me to make a point."

Ben squeezed her hand that now rested in the crook of his arm. Jenna looked down at the contact and realized that it felt right. Which somehow seemed wrong.

"I think I'll rest in one of the tents. I'm pretty sure Matt said something about getting cots set up for us," she said, suddenly needing space.

When she tried to pull away, Ben stopped and looked at her hard.

"I thought we had gotten past this," he asked, confusion on his face.

Jenna shrugged. What the hell could she say? Things didn't make sense, least of all her feelings for him.

"Ben, I don't know what's going on half the time. I'm tired and need to sleep."

Voices from an approaching group caused her to try to pull her hand free again. Ben made a sound that could have passed for a growl.

"We need to talk. This way."

He half pulled her towards the limo and jerked the door open.

"In please," he said through clenched teeth.

"Excuse me?"

"I said please."

Jenna buried her hands into her back pockets and stood there. She'd played this game with him before and wasn't about to let him win again.

Ben frowned and shook his head. "There's food."

Another loud grumble from her stomach signaled her defeat. Jenna let her head drop to her chest.

"I don't like this."

He tapped his fingertips along the edge of the open door. He took a half step towards her, leaving just enough space so she didn't feel crowded.

"I promise I only want to talk," he said in his low rumble that only reached her ears.

When she looked into his eyes she was surrounded by his smoldering look. Every inch of her wanted his touch. She wanted to lie down, stretch out naked beside him and not move for hours.

"Well, since there's food."

Jenna flopped down onto the seat, and slid over to give him room. When he didn't move to join her she patted the leather beside her. Ben muttered something under his breath as he sat down and closed the door behind him.

"What was that?" she said with enough innocence to almost sound convincing.

"I said you're going to kill me."

Jenna laughed. "No, I'm your perfect match, remember? Now where's the food?"

She watched as Ben's lips curled into his wonderful slow smile. The scar on his cheek pulled tight when he did. She reached out and touched it as she had last night.

"Amazing how much things can change in a few hours."

Ben nodded once, dropped to his knees and opened the fridge. They sat in silence and quietly consumed their breakfast. Jenna was thankful they had been on their date when the explosion happened. The feelings she was having for him would have been too much, too soon. She would have blamed the device and not trusted that there may be something to them. Amazing that the dating service was that accurate.

"I meant to ask you. Do you own Perfect Match? It didn't strike me as the sort of company you'd use unless you had something vested in it."

"No. The only reason I tried it was because of Matt. He lectured me one night over a drink. Told me I couldn't hide behind my desk anymore and needed to rejoin humanity."

"Good for him."

"You'd say that," he said. "After I'd made some discreet inquiries, this service came up as the best."

"Well, if our device is what I think it is, maybe we can use it to start our own dating service."

Jenna trailed off, her hand stopped in midair. *No, it couldn't be.*

"What's wrong?" Ben turned in his seat to fully face her.

It couldn't be that obvious. "If my theory is right, then the device pulls separate elements together for a perfect combination. Unlike you, I've had my name go through these dating services before. Trust me when I say they are normally far from perfect on the first match."

"We got lucky?"

Jenna shook her head and leaned in close to Ben. "According to Rhonda, Perfect Match has only been operating for the last four months. That's about the time my team set up camp. We only discovered the device a few weeks ago. Didn't know what it was until last night though."

"You think that the people running Perfect Match have the other device? That seems a bit of a stretch."

"Why? With all the people out there, why did the program tie the two of us together? We don't move in the same circles or have the same economic status. Honestly, would you have personally involved yourself with this if we hadn't been on a date?"

Ben frowned but didn't answer.

Her heart began to pound and her hands grew damp. "Both the program and the device put us together. It has to be the other half."

Jenna crammed the last bite of her food into her mouth and fished her PCD out of her pocket.

"What are you doing?"

A quick tap of her speed-dial button and Rhonda's number began to ring. "Getting answers."

"Hello?"

"Rhonda, I need your help."

Without giving her a chance to interrupt, Jenna told Rhonda as much of the story as she thought was relevant. On the chance that the people who had the other device were dangerous, Jenna didn't want Rhonda to get too close.

"I tried to find as much information on the company as I could when I was planning your party, but there wasn't much. Mostly testimonials as to the success of the program," Rhonda barely managed to say before she yawned.

*Shit.*

"Any info on who owns the company?"

"Nope. The only name I could dig up was a lawyer, and I think that's a dead end too. They are based on Earth."

"Earth? Why the hell would someone want an Earth law firm to look after a dating service on Mars? It's not like they will be able to pop right over to help with lawsuits."

Ben sat bolt upright in the seat, and snatched the PCD.

"Hey!"

"Rhonda, this is Ben Hawthorn. What was the name of the lawyer?"

Jenna tried to grab it back from Ben, but he blocked her attempts. She hit his arm, once lightly, but the second time she put as much as she could into the punch. He didn't flinch.

"I promise."

"Promise what?" She tried to lean in to hear what was being said.

Ben listened for another minute, before thanking Rhonda and offering the communicator back to her.

"She wants to say goodbye."

Jenna glared at him and plucked the PCD from his open hand.

"Hello?"

"I like him a lot. You need to keep that one."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Right. Goodbye, Rhonda."

"I'm serious."

"Goodbye, Rhonda."

"Okay, but let me know how things turn out."

The loud beep of the power button filled the limo. Jenna closed her eyes and took a

deep breath.

"Your friend is very...energetic."

Jenna half looked at him and shook her head. "You have no idea. What did you promise her, by the way?"

"She knew you would ask," he said and leaned forward.

"Of course I'd ask. My best friend was talking to you. And I know what you're both capable of."

Ben didn't stop moving closer until Jenna was forced to lean back against the seat. With barely any room between them, he brushed his lips across hers.

"She told me the name of the lawyer. Then she made me promise to keep my eye on you."

The air between them thinned, making it hard for Jenna to breathe. She couldn't keep her eyes from his mouth as he leaned in closer and closer.

"We need to talk to that lawyer," she said the words quickly. The heat from her breath warmed her face as it came out in shallow gasps.

Ben slipped his hand around the back of her neck and tugged her close. His lips found hers, capturing them in a light kiss. With his thumb stroking the muscles of her neck, Jenna felt her body relax against his. Her fingers found his chest, slipped between the buttons of his shirt and teased the curls of hair that covered it. He moaned, pulling back.

"I thought we weren't going to do this?"

Jenna laughed. "I believe you were the one who kissed me."

"Yes, but I promised your friend I'd kiss you if you got too nosy."

Jenna dropped her head to Ben's shoulder.

"I'm going to kill her."

"She wanted to make sure you were having a fun date. Even though she knew you were working."

He rubbed her back in long, slow strokes, sending small shivers down her back and across her skin.

"I know enough about women to know you never become enemies with the best friend. So I obliged."

All of her earlier desires began to come back, her body awakening under his touch. Desire pulsed in her causing her hips to grind against him. She looked hard at his face. He was trying to fight it too. The pull between them was getting stronger.

It wasn't until Ben gave his head a shake that the spell broke.

"We need to talk to the lawyer, get to his office and figure out what the hell is going on," he said and placed a last kiss on her lips.

It was then she realized this wasn't going to work.

"Ben, I think we need to split up. We can't go five minutes without mauling each

other. That's the last thing we need in order for this investigation to work."

"No."

She half pushed him away. "No? What do you mean no?"

"No."

This time she shoved him hard enough to move him off her and onto the seat.

"Look, I thought we'd moved past the arrogant boss attitude. It doesn't make sense for us to stay together. We can get more accomplished on our own."

"Trust me on this. The lawyer your friend mentioned is a front. He works for a man named Rick Jennings."

Even though Ben was lounging against the seat, Jenna could tell his body stiffened. His normal casual air evaporated instantly.

*What the hell?*

"Who is he?" Damn, why the hell did she sound nervous? It's not like anything had changed from a few minutes ago.

The muscle in his jaw jumped. He looked at his fist and slowly unballing it.

"He's a mobster. A killer. And he used to be a close friend of mine."

Her eyes grew wide when it hit her. "Rick. He's the man who attacked you?"

"If he's involved then you're not going out of my sight. Knowing Rick, he's got some power play going on behind the scenes. The last thing we need to do is stick our collective heads in the way. He's likely to cut them off."

"But he can't keep it!" Jenna sat up and pulled her arm away. "He could use it to blow up half of Mars. We need to find the second half of the device and get it someplace safe. Who knows what someone like Rick would do with it."

He looked out the window. "Trust me, I'm not going to let you anywhere near him. He'd tear you apart."

Jenna couldn't believe what she was hearing. "So you want to do *nothing*?"

"I plan on doing something. But I want to know you're safely far away from where he can get you."

When he turned back to look at her, she could tell something had changed. She'd see that look before, the look of someone who'd been betrayed.

"Rick doesn't care about anyone or anything. He's out for power and money. The second he knows a woman who I feel a connection to is involved in tracking down something that he's using for a money haul, he'll grab you. He would kill you or worse and make sure he's back for dinner."

Jenna felt sick and angry, but didn't know how to argue against it.

"So what do we do?"

"We don't do anything. I'm going to get Matt to take you back to my place. He'll get some of his security men to keep an eye on you while he and I track down Rick and put an end to this. We'll find the device, slip in, grab it and get out fast."

Jenna shook her head. She had to put her foot down quickly before he went on an overprotective rampage.

"I don't think so. I'm not a child who needs a babysitter. I'm coming with you. If you find the other device you'll need someone who can take a look at it. You won't know its condition, if it's safe to move, or what," she said in the same voice she used when her team started to get out of control.

"This isn't a game and not open for discussion. Rick would shoot, stab or rape you on a whim. The fact that he gets to keep something he wants, then all the better. I can't deal with him knowing that you'll be in harm's way."

Jenna refused to break eye contact with him. He looked as pissed as she felt.

"You don't trust me," as she said the words she realized they were true.

After everything they'd been through in the last day and a half, everything they'd been through seven years ago, he couldn't stand the fact that she was her own person.

"Fuck, woman! This has nothing to do with you. You're a professor at a *university*. Not a member of the Mars security force," Ben said as he ran a hand through his hair.

"Bullshit! You don't trust me. You think I'll run off and get myself hurt. Or worse, something will happen and *you'll* get hurt. Here I've been thinking that you've changed. But you haven't. You're still the same controlling, pigheaded jerk you were seven years ago."

"Jenna—"

"I'm not just a professor. Like everyone else on this colony I know how to use a weapon and how to defend myself."

"Not like this. Jen—"

"Don't bother, I'm out of here. Fuck this and fuck you."

Jenna fumbled for the door latch behind her and nearly fell out of the limo when she managed to get the door open. She blindly swiped at the tears on her cheek.

"Jenna!"

She didn't wait, heading straight for one of the cars that had been brought for the crew to use. Thankfully, when she hopped into it the keys were shoved into the sun visor. But she didn't see him coming until it was too late. Ben jammed his body in the space between her and the door, making it impossible to close.

"Jenna," his voice was soft as he reached for her.

"Don't."

Her throat was sore, the muscles straining in their effort to keep her sobs trapped inside. She squeezed the steering wheel of the car. She wasn't going to look at him. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"I'm sorry."

"No, I somehow don't think you are." She dropped her head to the wheel and tried to relax. "You've always had to be in control. You're the only one who can make the



right decisions. That's why you're alone, Ben. People can't handle having every decision made for them. I sure as hell can't."

Silence filled the space between them. Waves of frustration radiated from him, lapping against her like the tide, trying to pull her in. *Enough of this.* Jenna sat back, turned the key in the ignition and looked over at him.

"I'm going home. I don't need you, Matt or anyone else to accompany me. I'll call Roger later today to check in."

For a second it looked like he was going to say something. Instead, he took a step backward and closed the door.

"Be careful," he said the words through the glass.

Jenna pulled away, leaving Ben standing in a swirl of red dust.

## Chapter Eight

Steam rolled off her body as Jenna stepped out of the shower. With any luck she'd be able to relax, maybe even sleep tonight. Not that she'd had much luck with that over the past week. She wrapped her hair in a towel, trapping the drips inside, and walked naked out to the kitchen. The floor was cold under her feet and she shivered but made no move to grab her fluffy terrycloth bathrobe draped over her kitchen chair. She stood in front of her island where she ripped a strip off the dehydrated fruit bar and shoved it untasting into her mouth.

One week. That's how long she'd been able to avoid Ben. No emails, PCD calls, messages and certainly no face-to-face meetings. She'd been able to put him off or ignore every attempt at contact. And there had been plenty. She was pretty sure a restraining order would be the next step, but most likely Ben had every lawyer on Mars on retainer, so it wouldn't do her much good.

Not that she thought it would come to that. He'd stopped trying to get in touch with her for two whole days now. If he'd backed off, then everything would be fine.

Perfectly fine.

Her mouth dry from the tasteless fruit, Jenna grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. The slick glass fogged under her touch, which caught her attention. Cracking open the bottle, she downed the entire contents before setting it down too quickly and sending a loud *thunk* resonating through her condo.

"Shit."

She caught her reflection in the mirror in the living room. Her slim waist contrasted against her slightly too large thighs and ass. Her breasts were average, with two dark areolas beginning to tighten against the contrast of the cool condo air from the scalding heat of her shower. *What the hell does Ben see in me anyway?* She was so average, normal—dare she think it—boring.

Leaving the bottle and the depressing image in the mirror, Jenna made her way over to her large beige chair and flopped onto it. The air felt nice on her naked skin. The last few wisps of steam rose from her arms and thighs, making her skin tingle as it left. She closed her eyes and tried to relax.

Of course Ben came to mind. Every time she'd closed her eyes he was there waiting for her. She gave her head a small shake but she couldn't lose the image of him standing in front of her, wearing only his dark dress pants. Gods, she loved his chest. The soft curls of his chest hair tickling her fingers as she slid them up between his pecs and around to the back of his neck.

Her nipples ached as the cool air teased them into peaks. Her memories of Ben on

his knees in front of her, his mouth wrapped around one nipple, teasing it with his tongue while his hand lightly pinched the other were vivid. She squirmed in her seat, the fake leather preventing her damp body from moving too far. Moisture dripped from her pussy to mix with the water that still clung to her. Squeezing her legs together increased the pressure on her clit, drawing a gasp from her.

No. She wasn't going to do this. Her hips bucked up into the air in an involuntary protest before she stilled. Her skin itched and pulsed. She'd ignored her needs for a week. *Too long.*

Jenna moved her hand to between her breasts and paused. She could feel her heart pounding under her fingers, the rhythm fast and strong. Eyes still closed, she cautiously moved her hand over to her left breast and caressed her nipple. The coolness of the air added to the sensation, making it easy for her to imagine Ben on his knees in front of her, his mouth inches away from her, teasing her with his breathing.

He liked to tease her. Push her to the limits and then over them.

One more pinch, this time harder before she moved her hand away. Her nipple pulsed and quivered from the attention. She moved her hand to her other breast and squeezed. Jenna pulled it towards her mouth as she leaned forward and flicked her tongue over the tip. The sensation felt odd and yet thrilling at the same time. Back and forth, over and over her tongue moved before she uncurled back against the chair again.

Her breath came from her in shallow gasps. She needed release—now. Slowly she moved her hand down her stomach and brushed to top of her pubic curls. Her skin was moist from her shower, water drops still clinging to her hair. She traced a lazy pattern through the curls, enjoying the feeling as she brushed the skin just above her clit. Closer she moved to her goal, her touch as slow as Ben's in his apartment. Down along the inside of her thigh, only to return to the sensitive skin that joined her leg to her body. When she couldn't take any more, Jenna returned to her cunt. The one place she wanted Ben, now more than ever. The air left her lungs as she touched herself, her fingers cool as it slipped between the wet folds of her pussy.

*Do you want me to lick you?*

His voice rang in her head. Jenna circled her finger around her clit, teasing herself. Not quite touching, not yet. *He* wouldn't let her off that easy. Back to the hood that protected her clit, she applied just the right amount of pressure to send a wave of pleasure through her. So close to the edge. She'd have to be careful. Again she circled her clit and retraced her path over the hood. This time she had to bite back a cry.

Time was of the essence now. She abandoned her pressure point and slipped her finger into her now-soaking pussy. With the heel of her hand pressed against her mound, she deliberately moved her index finger around the engorged flesh of her clit before dipping it into her cunt. Steadily, over and over she slid her finger in to the knuckle and pulled it out and up to circle her wetness over her clit. A moan finally escaped her, the sound heightening her excitement.

*I want you, Jenna.*

"Yes," she spoke into the emptiness.

Release was there, but still far enough out of reach that she needed more. Jenna reached up and brushed her nipple with her free hand. She was too horny and could barely feel the contact. This time she caught her nipple between her forefinger and thumb and pinched, lightly at first before squeezing harder. The sensation sent a bolt through her body. Her hand began to thrust into her faster. Not enough.

Careful not to hurt herself, Jenna added a finger then two as she continued to pump her body. She could almost feel Ben on top of her, his thick cock pushing into her.

*Come for me.*

Her orgasm slammed into her. She cried out, biting her bottom lip in an attempt to stop. The hand on her breast flew to the arm of the chair, clutching it to keep her from falling to the floor. Her other hand continued to pump into her, her juices dripping down her hand and arm as wave after wave of pleasure racked her body.

Finally, she stopped. She couldn't move as her body hummed in the aftereffects of her release. The familiar peaceful calm was missing from her sated ache that enveloped her. She could smell her musk from her hand, proof that she should be satisfied.

But she wasn't. Jenna opened her eyes and let them adjust to the light of the condo before she pulled the towel from her hair and let the damp strands fall on her shoulder. Masturbating had always helped in the past. She'd gone years without being with a man. For fuck's sake, it had only been a week since she'd fucked Ben. So what if it had been the most amazing sex she'd ever had in her life? He was just a man. She'd find another one and prove that stupid matchmaking program wrong. And her heart.

A strong chill got her out of the chair in search of warm clothing. Jenna kicked clothing out of her path on her bedroom floor until she found what she was looking for—her jogging pants and blue t-shirt. With no plans for the evening, she bypassed the necessity of undergarments. This time she ignored the flush-faced reflection staring back at her in her bedroom. She wasn't about to see anything there she'd like anyway. Somehow, she managed to comb her hair and pull it into a ponytail without the benefit of looking when there was a knock at her door.

Jenna froze. She'd talked to Roger earlier, so she was up to date on the project. No reason for him to stop by. Silently, she crept out of her bedroom and made her way to the kitchen until she stubbed her foot on a stool and had to will herself not to scream. Too late. A second, more insistent knock and Jenna's stomach bottomed out.

"Who is it?"

"Open the door please."

Ben.

She marched over to the door but stopped short. Her palms were damp, forcing her to rub them on her pants. He was really here. Thank gods he hadn't arrived ten minutes earlier or she wouldn't have been able to deal with him. But right now she was ready.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said and cringed at the sound of her own nervousness. She needed to keep her head.

Ben's sigh vibrated through the door. Jenna was glad of the physical separation between them and not having to see his face. Maybe she was a coward, but at this point she would use whatever it took to survive when it came to Ben. She didn't move and waited to see if he'd say anything else. Hell, she couldn't move if she wanted to. He'd finally come to her. It took a week, but he finally clued in that she wasn't going to discuss anything through technology or an intermediate. She'd wanted him face-to-face, to prove she could live her life as she always had and still be a productive member of the team. And Ben was about to realize that she eventually got what she wanted.

She waited as the silent seconds ticked by.

"Why not?" He sounded annoyed, but not angry.

Automatically, she crossed her arms across her chest. "Gee, I don't know. The last time I saw you we had a lovely chat about how you don't trust me. Well, I've been thinking that I don't really trust you either, so I don't think I want you in my place."

Too childish? Jenna shrugged to the empty space between herself and the door. She couldn't help that he brought out the worst in her.

"You didn't have a problem trusting me at my place."

Of course he'd have to bring that up. The thought of being tied up again, left to his mercy was damn arousing. Surprising considering her recent orgasm.

"I've changed my mind."

"Fine."

Jenna instinctively jumped back from the door when the knob rattled. The noise was followed by a light thump, the shuffling of feet and silence. Heart pounding, she stood and strained to hear a noise, some indication that he was still there. Anything. She couldn't.

"Ben?"

Nothing. He wouldn't have left. Would he?

"Ben?"

Jenna's arms dropped to her sides, the weight of gravity pulling them down hard. He'd given up already. She suddenly found it hard to breathe with the weight of her disappointment pressing down on her. Her stomach began to burn like a lead weight was on fire inside. He spent five whole minutes at her door before walking away. Her own hand flexed around the doorknob for a solid five seconds before she jerked the door open. Her jaw dropped when she looked up to see him leaning against the wall across from her.

Calm and collected as ever, Ben stood there and stared at her. Jenna closed her mouth and tried to get a handle on the situation.

"Hello," he said, sporting a cocky grin.

And that's all it took.

Jenna shook her head. "You're such a jerk," she said and stepped back inside her condo.

Before she was able to close the door, his arm stopped it. She tugged on the knob a few times to force him to move. Instead, he leaned down close, his mouth only an inch or two from hers. The scent of his musk tickled her nose on its way to her head. She inhaled deeply, a stupid attempt to test her resolve. Her earlier self-induced orgasm was immediately forgotten by her body and a tingle of desire began again.

"We need to talk."

He spoke to her in that rich, deep tone that resonated deep inside her chest. The blush started somewhere low on her chest and begun to creep up her neck to her cheeks.

"Do we? I think things have been going just fine recently."

He didn't respond, except to let his gaze move from her eyes, to her neck, and back up to her lips. Her tongue darted lightly over her bottom lip, which brought a frown to his face.

*This is insane.* Careful not to touch him, Jenna ducked into her place and walked as far away from him as she could. Suddenly very aware that she didn't have on a bra or underwear, she walked behind the island in the kitchen. She grabbed the biggest knife she could find, rolled the largest piece of fruit she had in front of her, a melon, and began to dissect it. Intently focused on the blade as it sliced into the meaty part of the fruit, she was able to ignore Ben as he closed the door with a quiet click and moved into her condo and examined her things.

"Nice place."

When she looked up Ben was standing at her window looking out. He was wearing black dress pants that hugged his ass and barely hid his well-defined thighs. His normal dress shirt was gone, and instead he had a light beige shirt that clung to him, the three buttons at the collar open to reveal his throat.

"Thanks."

She watched the muscles of his biceps and forearms move under his skin as he dropped the curtain, picked up a stress ball that was sitting on her table and began to toss and catch it. She could almost feel those arms as he slid them under her ass to pull her to the edge of the chair in his apartment. The strength in his grip as he squeezed her cheeks, massaging her fear and tension away while at the same time stoking her arousal. The strength as he picked her up and pressed her against the wall, driving his cock into her.

Jenna gave her head a shake to break the spell of the back-and-forth movement between his hands as he tossed the ball. She stabbed the knife into the piece of melon she forgot she was cutting and moved to stand in front of the island.

"What do you want? I'm really busy."

"Yes, I can see that." He made no attempt this time to hide the fact he was checking

her out. "Big date?"

Her spine straightened on reflex. *Enough of this.* He wasn't going to win this time. She would deal with him like she should have seven years ago when he sabotaged her project. Locking her fingers together behind her back, Jenna took three steps into the room and waited until she had his complete attention. She then took one more step to close the distance between them and to guarantee he was paying attention.

"What...do...you...want? Either give me a straight answer or get the fuck out of my apartment."

She kept her gaze fixed firmly on his eyes. The pupils were so large they swallowed up the color of his irises. His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath. But when he spoke she was surprised when his voice was gentle, almost sad.

"To find out why you are so angry with me."

A small part of her felt guilty, but she wasn't going to back down now. He needed to know, if not for her sake, then for his own.

"I don't know, maybe because you're a bully."

When he recoiled she knew he wasn't going to understand. She had to calm down or this wasn't going to work.

"I'm angry at you because I've seen the other half. The unselfish part of you that wants to give, to really be with another person. But as soon as something comes along that might hurt you, challenge your views of the world, *that* Ben disappears and the jerk comes back."

Desperately, she waited to see if her words would sink in. Some small sign that he understood. But nothing changed. Jenna felt her heart ache. She was going to lose him before she'd really gotten through.

"You should leave," she whispered.

Slowly, he reached up and brushed a piece of her hair from her cheek. The warmth of his touch penetrated her, slipping past her defenses and into her heart. A pressure built in her throat, the muscles tight around the lump that had formed.

The frown on his face ran deep. "I can't change who I am. Even if nothing was more important to me. You know that."

*Why not?* Her inner child wanted to rant, to get him to see that he could change and that it had nothing to do with her. She really looked at him for the first time since their date. Thin worry lines were etched into his face, across his forehead and around his mouth. For the first time since she'd met him, Ben didn't look completely in control. Knowing that, her anger softened into annoyance.

Begrudgingly, she nodded. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

"I would think there was something wrong if you didn't. That's one of the things I respect about you, Jen."

Respect, but not love. She shouldn't even have those delusions. He may be hot and horny for her, but love wasn't a place he traveled. She'd watched the broken hearts of

his past lovers splash across the Martian Flats tabloid over the years.

But still. "Why are you here then?"

"I'm here to ask you to come back to the project. They need you."

His lips clamped together, as if he didn't want to give her too many details all at once.

Jenna shook her head and sat down on her couch. "I've never left the project, you know that. I talk to Roger every day and review the results."

Ben moved her chair so he sat directly across from her. Just close enough she could feel his body heat, but far enough away they couldn't bump knees. The familiar charge began to swirl in the small space between them. It hadn't reached her yet and she was able to keep her body still, keep her outwardly appearance of calm control.

Resting his elbows on his knees, he leaned in, closing the distance between them. A sudden rush of his scent was on her then. Her body responded, but she didn't move. Ben didn't seem to notice and continued.

"It's not the same and you know it. Roger is barely able to manage the personnel. He and Gareth are constantly taking swipes at each other, and no one seems to be able to make any forward progress on this thing. They need you."

She closed her eyes and tried to fight off the oncoming frustration. Of course she knew Roger was having problems with the project. They'd struck a deal four years ago when they'd first started working together. He'd oversee the data, she'd oversee the people. Socializing and small talk were not his strengths, and everyone was thankful when Jenna stepped up to fill in the gaps. Roger was drowning out there and it was her fault.

But not completely her fault.

"Can't you control Gareth? He is your guy after all."

"I've talked to him," he said in a frustrated tone of his own. "He's got it in his head that if he figures out what that device of yours does, that I'm going to promote him to the VP of research."

Jenna had to smile at the idea of Ben being chased on a daily basis by the weasel of a man.

"I hope you straightened him out."

When she opened her eyes, Jenna was surprised to see Ben staring at her chest. Her already hard nipples pebbled further. Slowly, he shifted his gaze up her body to her face. Finally, he reached her eyes, where she saw a deep hunger reflected back at her. He looked like he was ready to pounce.

"Of course I did," he said, his voice husky with an edge to it.

Jenna's mouth grew suddenly dry. "I talked to Roger earlier. I've given him a strategy for dealing with the next few days. That should give me enough time to figure out what I'm going to do."

Ben sat straight. "What do you mean?"



She should say something about the job offer she'd received yesterday from Paq Ridge Research. Department head was a very tempting offer. If she wasn't neck-deep in figuring out the device they'd discovered, she would have jumped at the opportunity. One look at him told her this wasn't the time to talk about career moves.

It was Jenna's turn to lean forward. Her elbows dug sharply into the sensitive flesh above her knees.

"I'm not sure if I can go back to the site. With everything going on, the fighting between Gareth and Roger, not to mention the...emotional strains of working such long hours. It's starting to get to me."

Ben stood. He shoved one hand into his pants pocket while scratching his head with the other.

"You're kidding."

Jenna groaned and let her head fall forward. "No, I'm not."

"Bullshit. This has nothing to do with Gareth or Roger. It has to do with us."

Again she looked up. If possible, he was even more attractive when he was angry. Maybe that's why she was his perfect match, because she always seemed to make him angry.

"What do you want me to say? It's the truth."

What she wasn't expecting was for Ben to pull her to her feet, lace his fingers through her hair and tug her head back so she was forced to look into his eyes. He crushed his mouth to hers in a fierce kiss that made her curl her toes into the thick carpet. When he pulled back, Jenna was left gasping, staring at his swollen lips.

"No, it's not. And I'm not leaving until I hear it."

## **Chapter Nine**

Jenna forgot to breathe. The room melted away and only Ben remained in focus.

"What did you mean by that?"

"The kiss?"

She smacked his arm.

"Despite what you seem to think, there is something between us," he said and kissed her forehead.

Deep inside her, Jenna felt her blood pulse, igniting her senses. The hair stood up on her arms and her body threatened to sway against his.

"Obviously there's something. I'm just not sure this is something that I want to pursue."

"Why not?"

Ben's jaw was clenched so tight Jenna saw the muscle pop. He was doing it again. Holding himself so tight she wouldn't be able to penetrate his armor. It only took a single step back to break his embrace.

"Stay here a minute."

She ignored his questioning look and skirted around him and the couch. Standing at the threshold of her bedroom, she cursed her lack of housekeeping abilities.

"Jenna?"

"Hang on."

A few well-placed kicks revealed the still half wrapped box she'd wanted, buried under at least a week's worth of clothing. Tearing the rest of the birthday paper off, she flipped the lid off and smiled.

"Perfect."

"Dare I ask?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice. She turned to see him leaning in the doorway, arms loosely folded across his chest.

"I told you to stay put," she said and pulled the box to her in order to hide the contents.

"You were taking too long." He motioned with his chin. "Hiding something fun?"

Jenna pushed her nervousness down with a deep breath and rose to her feet.

"You don't trust me."

"Jen, I told you —"

She held up her hand to cut him off.

"What I have in mind will prove that you do then."

He didn't move, but she saw something change in his eyes. A mixture of uncertainty and interest.

Ben finally nodded. "What?"

She couldn't help but smile. This was going to work. She could feel it.

"Come here."

She watched him flinch, pause and let his arms fall to his sides. He stood straight and hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants as he walked towards her.

"Yes, ma'am."

He was so big. She loved the wall of heat and scent his body generated. She closed her eyes and let his presence wash over her. She needed all the strength she had for what she wanted to do next.

"Take your shirt off."

He didn't hesitate this time. The shirt landed with a dull *whoosh* on the floor. That order carried out, he re-hooked his fingers and silently waited for the next.

Jenna took her time, letting her gaze roam over his well-defined upper body. Thin corded muscles flexed in his arms and across his chest. When she'd looked her fill, she found the edge of the bed and sat down.

"Now your shoes and socks," her voice sounded husky.

Ben smiled and she could tell he knew his little striptease was exciting her. As he bent over, Jenna was able to watch the muscles in his back ripple. He was perfect. When he stood again, he now wore only his pants. His next move would either send him running out the door or into her bed.

She reached into the now-crushed box that held her other birthday present from her friends. A small black blindfold untangled itself from the other contents of the box as she pulled it out slowly.

"I want you to put this on."

He didn't run. That much was good. But he didn't move to take the blindfold either. Ignoring her sexual as well as emotional frustration, Jenna managed a throaty chuckle.

"I thought you trusted me?"

His eyes shot her a warning, but he nodded and took the blindfold from her outstretched hand. She watched, enraptured, as he brought it to his face and secured it tightly on his face.

"Can you see?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Jenna."

"Okay, okay."

With it securely in place, Jenna simply sat on the edge of her bed and watched him. Amazingly, he didn't move. Not a single muscle, most of which she could currently see. His abs were well-defined, the gentle rolling ripples covered by a dusting of dark hair. She knew exactly where that trail of hair led to under his pants. But she wasn't ready to go there. Not yet.

Jenna stood and stepped close beside him. She ran fingers over his stomach, gently scraping her nails over his skin. She could feel him straining to maintain control over his body, to keep still.

"Don't move now," she said and barely recognized her own voice. The power of having Ben at her mercy was going to her head.

With her fingers still on him, she walked around to his back. Again, she traced a pattern over his exposed skin and smiled when she heard him groan.

"You're killing me, Jen."

A well-placed kiss in the middle of his back elicited another moan.

"You'll die well then."

With both of her hands on his back, she let them slide down until they were stopped by his pants. She gave them a little tug.

"These seem a bit tight. Why don't I make you more comfortable?"

She reached through the space between his arms and his body to find the button that held his pants in place. A single tug was all it took to free it, providing her with complete access to the rest of him. Gods, she wanted nothing more than to strip the damn things off him right now, but she couldn't. Not yet.

Next, she moved beside him, taking his hand in hers. Now it was time to put the rest of her plan in action.

She led him to the bed, turned him around and gave him a little push so he sat on the edge.

"Comfy," he said as he gave the mattress a pat. "Care to join me?"

"Oh, I'll be joining you soon enough, Mr. Hawthorn. But for right now I want you to lie back."

He smiled his crooked grin and lay back and placed his hands behind his head.

"How's this?"

Jenna shook her head and grabbed his feet in an attempt to spin him into the right placement. Ben had to help her, and after a bit of maneuvering, he finally had his head on the pillows and his feet by her footboard. When she stood to admire her handy work, a rush of adrenaline pulsed through her body. She was really going to do this.

It took a second to locate the present box again. But she was able to pull out the rest of the items and line them up on her nightstand. Never did she honestly think she'd have an opportunity to use the gift the girls gave her last year for her birthday. Especially not on Ben. It's a good thing she hadn't thrown it out like she'd planned on doing.

Another cautious glance at him and she pulled the last of the presents – a set of silk restraints. Her hands shook a little as she attempted to attach them to her headboard.

“What are you up to?” He sounded more amused than anything.

“You’ll see in one...second.” A final yank secured the scarf in place.

She took his hand in hers and brought it above his head. She could feel his pulse beating hard in his wrist as she wrapped her fingers around it. Either he was horny or scared. She doubted he was scared.

“Are you sure you trust me?”

His lips turned down for a split second before he nodded. “Yes.”

His arms were too long to secure him too close to the headboard, so she decided she’d have to leave them at right angles. She slipped the end of the scarf under his wrist and began to tie a loose knot. Ben turned his head to face her and jerked his arm when she finished.

“Did you just tie me?”

Jenna leaned in and ran her tongue over his bottom lip. “You said you trusted me. So trust me.”

“Jenna?” his tone gave her all the warning he’d ever be likely to give her.

This time she kissed him. He didn’t immediately respond to her advances. She slipped her tongue into his mouth, seeking his. Her fingers found his chest and flexed against his skin. She could feel his resistant begin to wane, each kiss he responded to grew with insistency and strength. Finally, he moaned as his free hand found her hair and gently began to massage her scalp. She pushed hard against him, her body responding to the contact between them. If she didn’t stop this now, the rest of her plan would be useless.

She pulled back as far as she could and placed a final kiss on his forehead.

“I’m going to tie your other arm now. Remember our safe word?”

He was panting, his fingers stroking the back of her neck and preventing her from moving.

“No. Wait, apple?”

“Yes. Are you okay with this?”

Ben pulled her back down for another kiss. Jenna’s heart and stomach began to beat together, her nerves growing. But when he released her and lay back against the bed, her doubts disappeared.

“I trust you,” he said with confidence.

She found her legs weren’t as steady as they were a few minutes ago and she almost tripped trying to make it around to the other side of the bed to secure his arm. She decided to leave his feet free for the time being, at least until she was ready to take his pants off.

Finished, Jenna stood back to admire her handiwork. Ben’s long arms and naked

chest were wide open to her. She watched as he tugged on the scarves, testing her knots. The fact that he couldn't see her turned her on even more. Her breasts were tingling, her nipples hard and begging to be touched. The fabric of her shirt rubbing against them was driving her insane. She took it off and threw it in the pile with the rest of her things.

"What are you doing?" Ben asked, his own voice sounding strained.

"Getting naked. Why?"

He groaned. "Want to take this bloody blindfold off?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not yet anyway. For now, you'll have to use your imagination."

Another tug followed by a sigh. "What was that safe word again?"

"Don't be a baby. By the way, I'm taking my pants off now."

"Killing me."

Jenna laughed as she kicked her pants off and stood there naked. Her gaze stopped on Ben's crotch as she saw his cock straining through his pants. She needed to do something about that soon. But not yet.

The black feather tickled her fingers as she ran it over them to smooth it out. The fact that it was a real bird feather still amazed her, considering there weren't any on Mars. She turned it on its side and touched Ben's forehead with it. He stiffened instantly.

With great care, she traced a path down the center of his body, over his nose, chin, throat, chest and finally his stomach. She smiled as his nipples hardened and his shaft twitched in his pants.

"What was that?" He sounded breathless.

"This?"

She ran the feather over each of his nipples, his chest suddenly rising with a strong intake of air. Ben's feet dug into the mattress as he managed to squirm out of her way.

"Yes that, damn you."

Instead of answering, Jenna set the feather down and reached for his pants. As a result of all of his moving around, they were open wide and were already riding low on his hips. It took very little effort on her part to slide them off, quickly followed by his underwear.

Jenna stood and stared at him. She hadn't taken the time in their earlier encounters to look at the man who'd kept her dreams erotic for the past week and a half. His cock was long and thick, and her body instantly remembered the feeling of him stretching her, filling every inch of her insides. His balls were pulled tight against his shaft, and she knew it wouldn't take long for her to bring him to the edge.

"I'm going to tie your feet now."

She watched him swallow, but he didn't protest. Not wanting to startle him, she

touched his leg at the knee and slid her hand down his leg to his ankle where she tied the scarf. Another minute and his other leg was secured as well, leaving him completely at her mercy. Jenna frowned, not sure of how to say what she was feeling.

"Now I know you *say* you trust me, but it's hard to really accept that."

"I believe I'm the one tied to the bed."

"Yes, this time. But I doubt very much you would have let me tie you up on our first date."

Ben lifted his head off the bed and turned to face her. "That was about your fantasy, Jen. Of course I wasn't going to let you tie me up."

She put her hands on her hips. "And you also wanted me out of the way when you were going to investigate the lawyer."

"Jen, it could have been dangerous. I went with Matt. I know he can protect my back in a jam."

"And I can't?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

She dropped her chin to her chest. "I am more than capable of looking after myself. I know how to defend myself in an attack and I know how to use a laser gun."

Ben's head fell back onto the pillow. He seemed to consider what she'd said. Unfortunately, the serious turn of their conversation was taking a toll on his arousal. When his cock twitched and softened ever so slightly, she knew she would have to resurrect their passion quickly.

The feather saved her. Taking the tip, Jenna touched the tip to his balls, causing his hips to immediately buck.

"Shit," he groaned loudly.

"We need to keep things moving along, Mr. Hawthorn. And I believe we were talking about trust. You have a problem trusting others."

She circled his balls twice before caressing the sides of his cock, which was now more erect than before. Jenna watched as his shaft thickened before her eyes, pulsing with the rush of his blood.

"Trust means being willing to place your fate into another person's hands." She flicked the feather over the mushroom tip of his purple cock. "It means knowing that no matter how bad things look, that person will do everything in their power to support you. To help you get what you need."

Ben wrapped his fingers around his restraints and squeezed as he pulled. His body began to quiver from strain.

"Trust goes beyond rational thought and lives in your gut. That is what I mean when I say you don't trust me. I'm not sure if you trust anyone."

She was thankful she'd put her hair into a ponytail earlier. When she leaned over him and took his cock in her mouth, there was nothing to give her away. Ben cried out

when she ran her tongue over his head. When he tried to buck his hips to drive the rhythm, she pulled back.

"See, you don't trust me. I'm in charge, Mr. Hawthorn. You need to know that I'll look after you."

"Jenna, you're killing me."

"No, I'm helping you. It's important you realize you don't need to be in control all the time."

Dropping the feather to the floor, she grabbed the next item from her present—a bottle of massage oil. She poured a generous amount onto her hands and hoped it wouldn't be too cold. Jenna tipped her hand, letting the oil drip onto his chest to roll over his muscles. She could feel his labored breathing as she worked the oil into his skin. Small circles became larger as she moved to massage his arms and neck. She'd used over half the bottle before she reached his cock.

Jenna held herself back for a moment, letting his anticipation fill her bedroom. His shaft twitched and pulsed and Ben shifted his hips, thrusting into the air in a silent plea. Who was she to keep a man waiting? A quick squeeze of the bottle and the palm of her hand filled with the scented oil. Careful not to spill any before she was ready, Jenna positioned her hand an inch above his tip.

Ben moaned when the oil spilled over his cock and wasn't sure if he'd be able to stop his own release. *She was driving him fucking nuts!* It was bad enough he couldn't see what she was doing, but he could barely hear her, she'd gotten so quiet.

"Jenna?" he asked when she didn't move.

"It's fascinating to watch the oil roll down your cock."

*Gods!* He couldn't handle it when Jenna, proper little professor that she was, talked dirty to him. He bucked his hips in the air again and prayed she'd touch him soon before he embarrassed himself. And that would be a first.

When her long finger caressed the side of his shaft, he bit out another moan. She didn't stop—over and over she ran a single fingertip up the length of him. With each touch, his blood pulsed, stretching him to a width he'd never experienced before.

"Jenna, I need you now. Can't take much more of this."

"Are you saying I brought the all-powerful Ben Hawthorn to his knees? Me?" she cooed against his stomach as she placed a kiss above his bellybutton.

"Jenna," he wanted to sound menacing, but only sounded desperate.

"Did I?" She sounded amused. Aroused, but amused.

"Yes, fuck!"

He sighed when she wrapped her fingers around his cock, but she didn't move. He pushed up and into her hand, increasing the pressure. It wouldn't take much to push him over.

"Not yet," she scolded him with a chuckle. "I want to you to say it. Tell me what you want me to do."



Ben's mind raced with the thousands of things he wanted to experience with her. Currently, there was only one thing he needed.

"I want to you climb on top of me and ride me hard."

He heard the sharp intake of her breath. For a second, he didn't think she would do it, until the bed depressed under her weight and her legs straddled his hips. She held herself far enough away that he couldn't enter her. In a single motion, Ben felt her wet pussy swallow the tip of his cock whole as she slowly lowered her body onto his.

Thankfully, she held still for a moment or else he would have lost it there and then. Jenna moaned, her body shuddering against him before she pulled up and quickly impaled herself again. Ben felt his balls tighten and hoped he could hold off long for Jenna to find her release.

Over and over, she thrust herself on him, grinding her clit against his pubic bone. He could feel her juices pour out of her, her inner muscles clenching around him. Her taut nipples grazed his chest as she rubbed her body up and down the length of him. She was so close, he could feel it.

"Fuck, I need to see you," he said and groaned as she increased the tempo. "I want to watch you come."

Nothing for a moment, but then, thankfully, her fingers were at his face, pushing the blindfold up an inch. Not enough for him to see everything, only Jenna.

A flush covered her cheeks and traveled down to her breasts. Her eyes were closed, a look of concentration and raw desire etched on her face. Ben yanked hard against the restraints, desperate to touch her. *Fucking things!* He wanted to beg her to release him, but she didn't look like she'd be able to stop. *Gods, she was so close.*

"Ben," Jenna gasped as she curled her fingers around his shoulder.

Her pussy tightened around his cock as she cried out. Over and over she drove herself madly down on him. He couldn't hold out anymore. He thrust into her one final time, calling her name as he felt the rush of cum shoot deep. His orgasm blasted through him, charging every muscle and sensitizing his skin.

Finally, Jenna collapsed on top of his chest. Their frantic breathing slowly synchronizing into a steady rhythm. Ben couldn't move, couldn't think, his entire focus was on Jenna's limp body and how she made him feel.

"That was incredible," he managed to say after a few minutes.

"It was, wasn't it?" she said and chuckled softly. "Who knew?"

"Think you could untie me now?"

Jenna lifted her head to look into Ben's eyes. "So anxious to escape my clutches, Mr. Hawthorn?"

For the first time in his life, Ben wasn't in a hurry to get away from a woman. That didn't mean he wanted to be at her mercy all night long either.

"I don't plan on going anywhere. But if you don't untie me soon, I'll be forced to take drastic measures."

Jenna raised an eyebrow in question. *Gods, he loved it when she did that.* She managed to look sexy and smart at the same time.

"I'll be forced to beg, Miss Robins. It really is a sad sight to see. I'd hate to inflict that on you."

She giggled, but reached up and began to fumble with the knots. It took longer than he'd hoped to free himself, especially when Jenna abandoned him once his arms were free to go take a shower.

"You don't expect me to do everything for you now?" she teased as she wiggled her ass on her way past him to the bathroom. "I think I need to get cleaned up again. I'm all sticky from the oil."

By the time he was free of the silk scarves and able to slip off the bed, Jenna was humming away under her shower. Ben chuckled, tempted to join her. They'd never get out of her place if he did that. With nothing else to do, Ben explored her room. The woman needed a maid. He'd have to look into that for her once things settled down. Maybe even look at bringing her over to CalCorp from the university. Ben smiled at the idea of seeing Jenna every day at the office. He'd never get any work done.

As he passed by Jenna's dresser, a dark blue cover screen of a contract datapad caught his attention. Without thinking, Ben flicked the document on and began to read. He got three-quarters of the way through the cover sheet when he realized what this was. An offer of employment. Quickly, he scanned through to the end and sighed with relief. No signature. Not yet anyway.

"What are you doing?"

Ben turned to see Jenna standing in the doorway, towel wrapped around her hair. He didn't miss the look of guilt on her face.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," he said and tossed the datapad back on her dresser.

"*That* is private correspondence. Why the hell are you going through my things anyway?"

Ben crossed his arms across his naked chest. "It was out in the open. Why the hell didn't you tell me about this?"

"Because it's none of your damn business," she snapped back.

Ben felt all his old paranoia come creeping back. This was Rick all over again, except Jenna was set to rip his heart out instead of scar his face. He turned his back on her and dressed quickly.

"Ben!"

"Matt will be by tomorrow morning to pick you up. No excuses."

He walked past her and out the door, making sure to keep his emotions in check. Why did he let himself get close to someone again?

## Chapter Ten

Jenna climbed out of the limo, not bothering to wait for Matt. Despite having the best orgasm of her life, she'd barely slept last night. It completely sucked that the source of both her release and frustration were the same man. She looked around the front of the CalCorp building, but Mr. Annoying wasn't there.

"Where is he?" she asked Matt, and gave her head a shake at the harshness of her tone. "Sorry, Matt."

"Hey, no worries. He drives me nuts too," Matt said and chuckled. "I'm just glad you're around to keep him in line. Let me call upstairs."

"Not necessary."

Jenna spun around. Ben was standing there in his black leather jacket, dress shirt and pants. Feeling completely underdressed in her blouse and plain black pants, she tried to ignore the effect he was having on her body. She couldn't quite manage it. Despite her annoyance, Jenna found herself growing wet at the sight of him. *Gods, she had to get control of herself.* His hazel eyes didn't tell her anything about how he was feeling, which in itself proved he was still pissed off.

*Good! So was she.*

"I'm here as you commanded," she said and gave him a mock salute.

Jenna knew she shouldn't push him, but she couldn't help it. Ben flinched, but didn't take her bait.

"Matt, Jenna and I are going to be going for a walk. We shouldn't need you, but stay close just in case."

Jenna didn't hear Matt's answer, her mind was too busy racing. "Where are we going? I didn't come here to play girlfriend."

Ben slid his arm through hers and led her off down the street away from the limo. Jenna struggled for a moment until she realized the futility of her situation. When she began to cooperate, she could feel the tension in him ease. Jenna tried to ignore the stares of the people as they walked by. What, hadn't they seen two people walking together before? *Not when one of those people is Ben.*

After they'd walked for a few minutes, Jenna finally looked up at Ben. "So now am I allowed to know where we're going?"

"I didn't want Matt to know. He'd insist on following us."

*This sounds interesting.* "And why don't you want Matt to come along? If we're going someplace dangerous, I'd think you'd want him around."

Ben stopped walking and pulled Jenna to the side, allowing a couple behind them

by. She smiled weakly at the woman who winked at her as she passed and hoped she didn't look ridiculous. For his part, Ben was looking only at her.

"I was thinking about the machine and what you said about Perfect Match. I think you're right about there being a connection. We need to go back and see what we can find out about the place. That might lead us to the owner."

Jenna couldn't believe it. Ben trusted her to come along on one of his investigations.

"So why bring me and not Matt? I would think you'd want him around to watch your back."

She watched a flash of something appear in his eyes. Jenna felt him move closer to her, the pull of his body powerful. She couldn't take her eyes from his mouth and when his tongue slipped along his bottom lip, her body shuddered, remembering how it had felt lapping her most sensitive spots.

"I doubt very much that they will believe Matt is my perfect match. It made sense for you to come along."

When he tried to pull away, she stopped him. She'd been with him long enough to know when he was hiding something.

"That's not the only reason. You never go anywhere without Matt. Why now?" she said and hoped he'd hear the concern in her voice. She didn't like it when he acted unexpectedly. Ben wasn't like that.

Jenna didn't expect what he did next. In one smooth motion, he pulled her tight against him so every inch of her body came in contact with his. The thin fabric of her shirt did nothing to stop the wave of heat pouring off him. Her nipples tightened as he lowered his head to her, hovering an inch away from her mouth.

"You wanted me to trust you. I'm trusting you now. Just like you need to trust that I know what I'm doing. We're going to go inside Perfect Match and play the happy couple."

"Are we?" she whispered, her eyes fixed on his mouth.

"I will be as soon as I kiss you."

With no barriers between them this time, Jenna was shocked at the intensity of his touch. His hands began to roam along her back until they came to rest on her ass, squeezing firmly as he pulled her even closer against his groin.

Jenna felt his cock straining against his pants. She needed to touch him. Without any thought to where they were, she slid her hand down his chest until she was able to wrap her fingers around his shaft. Ben groaned into her mouth and nipped her bottom lip.

"Minx."

"You started this."

Ben pulled back as someone from across the street whistled at them, but didn't release her completely.

"I think we're providing that crew a bit of a show," he said as a smile spread across

his full lips. "We should move along to our objective."

It took her a second to clue in the objective wasn't finding an empty alley so she could have him throw her up against a wall again.

"Right, the company." She looked around to try to get her bearings. "We're only a few blocks south."

She slipped her arm through his and managed to make their way down the street without mauling each other. Looking up at the neon sign that covered half the store, Jenna was amazed Ben had ever considered putting his name in with the company.

"It looks different online," he muttered.

"Oh, wait until you get inside. The host is a peach."

Jenna dropped Ben's arm and pushed the door open. The familiar smell of plastic and what she could only describe as lubricant hit her. The last time she was here, she'd almost gagged. At least she was ready for it this time.

At the sound of the door chime, the host popped his head out from the side room. When he saw Jenna, a wide grin split his face.

"Well, well, well. I didn't think I'd see your sweet face in here again," he said, practically leering at her. "Did things not go well and you're taking me up on my consolation prize offer?"

"No, she isn't," Ben's voice filled the small front room as he came in.

Jenna smiled and leaned back against Ben when he wrapped his arm around her waist. The look on the host's face was priceless. It was too bad Rhonda wasn't here to enjoy it.

"I don't think you had a chance to meet, Ben. Mr...I'm sorry, I don't remember your name?" Jenna put her best pout on and hoped it would work. She really didn't give a rat's ass what his name was, but that wasn't going to get them very far.

"Kyle. Just plain old Kyle," he grinned, though not as smugly as before. "What can I do for the happy couple?"

Jenna stepped up to the counter and leaned against it, giving Kyle a perfect shot of her cleavage. "We wanted to stop by and thank you for matching us up. Things really have gone very well and we wanted to show our appreciation."

Kyle's eyes flicked from her chest to Ben and back. Jenna smiled as she reached out and patted his hand. She wanted to laugh as a look of panic flashed on his face.

"Ah, look, I'm glad things worked out, but I really had nothing to do with it. I just man the desk."

"You don't want us to show our appreciation?" she pouted again, but this time she ran her tongue over her bottom lip.

Kyle watched her tongue and his gaze flicked back over her shoulder to Ben who was now only half a pace behind her.

"Look. I'm happy you're happy, but I don't do threesomes unless it's two women, if

you catch my drift. No offense, buddy."

"I think you misunderstood," Ben said and gave Jenna a tap on her ass with his hand. "Do you know who I am?"

Kyle's eyes narrowed and he ran a hand through his greasy hair. "I think I'd be an idiot not to."

"Then you know that I am a very wealthy man. I'm impressed with the quality of the matches, if not the store itself." Ben leaned in over Jenna's shoulder and lowered his voice. "Is there someplace private we can talk?"

Kyle hesitated, giving Jenna another quick once-over before motioning for them to come around to the back office. Jenna let her frown slip for a moment as she turned to face Ben.

"You touch my ass like that again and I'm going to kick yours."

Ben smiled as he tipped her face back and placed a kiss on the end of her nose. "Stay in character, *darling*."

"Of course, *sweetheart*."

Arm in arm, they made their way into the small office and took a seat. Kyle hesitated for a moment before flicking the invisible privacy barrier. As Ben opened his mouth to say something, Kyle held a finger to his lips before pointing to the computer monitor on his desk. He took out a small wireless jammer and set it on the desk in front of them.

"Sorry about that. My office has been bugged for a while now. Mr. Jennings doesn't trust me," he said with a grin.

"I can't imagine why." Jenna couldn't stop herself and rolled her eyes.

Kyle chuckled. "I'm going to recommend you take your money elsewhere, Mr. Hawthorn. Perfect Match isn't the sound investment you think it might be."

Jenna looked at Ben, who was frowning deeply.

"I find that hard to believe based on the number of participants who are in your database. If I could meet with your boss, I'm sure we could come to some sort of arrangement." Ben kept his voice even, but there was no mistaking his seriousness.

Jenna looked out into the lobby and noticed there weren't any customers, not like the first time she'd been here. Very strange.

"Mr. Hawthorn, if I thought for one second that my boss would be interested in taking your money, I'd let him know. But Mr. Jennings is quite happy with his profit margin from Perfect Match since its opening," Kyle said, leaning forward. "Please, I think you should both leave now."

Jenna couldn't believe this was the same sleazy man who'd practically jumped over her and her friends the first time she was here. Something in his face changed, the way he held his body was different.

"What's wrong? Why do you want us to leave so bad?" she asked and instinctively lowered her voice.

"Nothing at all." He sat back and grinned again. "I just hate to see nice people like yourselves get hosed."

"But maybe your boss will like our offer. I'm sure we can afford any price he names. We're really interested in getting our hands on the device that makes it all work."

As soon as the words left Jenna's mouth, she knew she'd screwed up. Kyle leaned forward and braced his arms against the desk.

"What do you know about it? No one outside of a few people close to my boss has even heard of it."

Ben shifted in his chair and leaned forward, matching Kyle's pose.

"We found the other half at a university dig site. We think it might be dangerous."

"How dangerous?"

Jenna's heart began to pound in her chest. "It could take out a large portion of the city. Maybe even the enviro shield."

Kyle looked from Jenna to Ben before closing his eyes and sighing. "My name is Kyle Regan. I'm an undercover protector on the Mars security task force."

"Rick Jennings," Ben nodded, seemingly understanding what was going on.

"If what you're telling me is true, then we have a bigger problem on our hands than Rick buying off government officials. One I'll need to tell my real boss about back at the task force."

Jenna had to give her head a shake. "You mean you've been investigating Rick Jennings? How long have you been after him?"

Kyle ran his hand down his face and fell backward into his chair. "Look, I've already blown my cover trying to get you out of here, so listen up. Rick has been up to some nasty stuff, but we've never been able to prove his involvement. I've been working my way up in his organization for the past two years trying to find out all I can."

"And you ended up running a dating service?" Jenna felt sorry for the poor bastard.

"I thought it was a crap assignment too, until your name made its way into the system." Kyle gave Ben a good long stare. "My superiors thought it was odd a man of your reputation would enroll with a dating service."

Jenna didn't like where this was going. "Look, we haven't done anything wrong here. We wanted to know who was running Perfect Match and you've given us that information." Jenna stood up. "Ben, we should go."

When he didn't move, Jenna grabbed his arm and tugged hard. Ben wrapped his fingers about her hand and gave it a light squeeze. He didn't take his eyes off Kyle.

"Let me make something perfectly clear," he spoke in slow measured words. "I have no love for Rick Jennings. If your superiors want to try and catch this bastard, that's fine. But I plan on taking him down. Don't get in my way."

Ben finally stood in one smooth motion. Jenna couldn't contain her surprise at the anger in his stance and on his face.

"I wouldn't suggest that." Kyle stood, and for the first time Jenna got a true sense of who the real man was.

When she thought they were going to come to blows, Jenna threw up her hands. "Do you two just want to take your dicks out and compare? I can wait outside."

They both snapped their heads around to look at her, Kyle with his mouth gaping and Ben with his tightly shut.

"We're all on the same side with the same goal. If we want to figure out what our friend Rick is up to, we better pool our resources." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at them.

Kyle finally looked at Ben and broke out into a grin. "You've got your hands full with that one."

"You have no idea," Ben said in a serious tone, but his face betrayed the barest hint of amusement.

"You're right, Miss Robins. But I don't think my superiors are going to be easily convinced of your intent. It's best if we keep this alliance low-key for the time being." Kyle sat back down behind his desk and set his foot on the edge of the desk.

"Agreed," Ben nodded before he turned to face Jenna.

The pull of his body, the instant attraction whenever he stood close to her, was too much. For a moment she forgot they weren't alone. If they were, she would have pulled him in. Jenna gave her head a shake, trying to clear it. Looking into Ben's eyes showed he was feeling the same pull. Like they had back at the dig site.

"What's in this building?" she asked Kyle, who clearly hadn't missed the interchange between them.

He shrugged. "You've seen most of it. The front lobby, two viewing lounges and the can. It's a pretty chickenshit operation."

"Did you —" she started.

"Yes," Ben cut her off and gave her a look that told her not to say anything else.

It was probably for the best if they didn't reveal that little fact to Kyle just yet. Not until they knew they could trust him.

"Look, we don't have much time left with the blocker. It muffles our speech beyond comprehension, but it's limited." Kyle nudged the small black device with his toe. "My boss will start to wonder what's going on. Is there someplace we can meet later? To talk about this?"

"We can meet at my place," Jenna offered, but both men instantly shook their heads.

"No, it's one of the first places they'd look." Ben took out an e-business card and quickly tapped in an address. "I got this place after Rick and I parted ways. I doubt he's even aware of it. Come by tonight at nine. We'll talk."



Nodding once, Kyle leaned forward and hit the button on the jammer. "Look, buddy, I don't care how much money you have, I'm not giving up my boss. Screw you and your slut girlfriend."

Jenna thought for a moment he was serious until he winked at her. Ah, he had to maintain his cover. She'd enjoy herself then.

"Fuck you," Jenna hissed and stormed out of the office.

"Don't think I'm going to let you get away with that."

She heard Ben slam Kyle against the wall and Kyle gasp, trying to regain his breath.

"I'm sorry, buddy, fuck!"

Jenna's heart began to pound. Even though she knew it was all a ruse, there was something about the way Ben stood up to defend her that was intoxicating. And downright sexy.

"Ben, let's get out of here. This jerk isn't worth it."

"Yeah, I'm not worth it. Listen to the lady."

Ben growled and let Kyle fall to the floor before he stormed out of the office. Jenna had to fight the urge to giggle as the look of anger and disgust on his face when he wrapped an arm around her waist and escorted her out the door.

Neither of them said anything until they were sure they were out of sight of the store. Only then did Ben slow down his pace and drop the angry scowl.

"Well, that was interesting," Jenna said as she looked back over her shoulder. "I certainly wasn't expecting him to be one of the good guys."

"Maybe. I find it hard to believe Rick let a protector into his organization. Undercover or not."

"And what was with that little..." she struggled to think of a name. "The *thing* between us back there."

Ben stopped and looked down at her. Again, she couldn't help her attraction to him every time he looked at her like that. Her chest tightened and she couldn't take a deep breathe. When she tried, her nipples hardened as they rubbed mercilessly against her thin camisole she wore under her shirt. Gods, she wanted him. Even if she couldn't be the type of woman he needed and there was no way he'd change to be the man of her dreams. She still wanted him.

"I signaled Matt as we were walking. He should be here soon with the car," his voice was a deep rumble as he spoke. "Let me take you home."

She should refuse. After having spent the night and most of the morning cursing him, she should turn around, hop on the tube and not see him until their meeting later on. But despite everything that had happened between them, she couldn't deny the thread of attraction.

Ben didn't say anything to pressure her and she had to wonder why. He was never subtle with these things. The moment of refusal passed as Matt honked the horn and pulled the limo up behind them. He didn't get out, instead Ben walked to the back door

and held it open for her.

“Are you coming?”

Not a command or an order. A simple question. Jenna only battled her internal demons for a moment before striding over and placing her hand on the door.

“Only if you promise to behave yourself. I’d hate to have to tie you up again.”

She didn’t wait to see his reaction and climbed into the darkness.

## Chapter Eleven

Ben couldn't take his eyes off Jenna. He could tell she was trying to avoid looking at him too by the way she half looked out the window before examining the floor between them. He made sure to take the seat opposite her when he climbed into the limo. It was the only way he'd be able to keep his hands off her.

And it was *still* a challenge.

"If there is someplace else you'd like to go, Matt can drop you off."

He watched as her eyes widened for a second before narrowing. She still didn't trust him. He couldn't really blame her after being such an ass to her last night. So what if she went to work for his competitor? Jenna didn't owe him anything.

So why did the idea piss him off so much?

"I should stop by the dig. I promised Roger I'd make an appearance today."

Ben's cock jumped to life at the idea of being with Jenna near the device. Merely the thought of what that thing did to him, did to her, set his libido on fire. *Fuck!* He adjusted his position on the seat to try to cover up his straining erection while reaching to hit the intercom.

"Matt, can you take us to the dig?"

"Sure thing. But it'll be slow going. We'll have to pass through old Mars to make it."

"Thanks, Matt," Jenna piped up and looked out the window.

He remembered she'd lived there as a kid. "Is your old home still standing?"

She shook her head. "It was torn down a few years ago to make way for condos. It's too bad really. We're losing all our history because the damn government keeps tearing them down."

*Gods, she was gorgeous, especially when she was angry.* He must have moaned, because she instantly looked at him. Jenna's eyes roamed over him and he swore he saw desire in her gaze. He didn't understand this push-pull attraction between them, but damn if he didn't want her right now.

Ben dropped the leg he had resting across his knee to the floor and spread his legs. Unless she was blind, she wouldn't be able to miss his cock pushing against his pants. Jenna's gaze flicked to his crotch and he instantly felt the effects as his cock thickened. She sucked in a breath and ran her tongue over her bottom lip before biting down lightly.

"How long 'til we get to the site?" she asked breathlessly.

"Fifteen. Twenty minutes if there are people walking on the street."

He watched her emotions race across her face. Jenna shifted forward on the seat, her knees pressed tightly together. She sighed so softly he didn't think she'd done it.

"Regretting your decision?" he asked when she shifted restlessly back deep into her seat.

"The tube would have been faster. And not as stuffy."

Jenna reached up and ran her hand from the back of her neck down the side until her fingers stopped just above her cleavage. She began to play with the neckline, the top button of her blouse threatening to come undone under the pressure. He couldn't look away.

"If you're hot, we can do something to fix that."

She looked at him that time, her expression a mix of longing and annoyance. Ben prayed her annoyance would lose the battle in her mind.

"What do you suggest?" her voice was barely a whisper in the small space.

He could tell she wanted him, that she was ready to play his game this time. The way she sucked her bottom lip as she let her gaze roam over him. His cock was painfully full, but he fought the urge to reach down and squeeze it. No, he wanted Jenna's hands and mouth to do that.

"Get on your knees," he ordered, his voice firm with desire. When she didn't move right away, he added softly, "Trust me."

Still she hesitated. Ben wasn't about to ask again for fear it would ruin the spell they'd both seemed to be under. Finally, she sighed. Without taking her eyes off his, Jenna slid to the limo floor three feet away from where he sat. Her hands dropped to her side as she waited for his next command.

"Unbutton your shirt."

She didn't hesitate, her fingers gently tugged each button, taking her time as she pushed each through its hole and spreading the thin fabric of her shirt to reveal a cream camisole. Her body stilled once she'd completed her task. He could see her nipples, two hard peaks poking through from underneath the camisole. His mouth watered at the idea of sucking them into his mouth. *Soon.*

"Take your shirt off." His need made his voice sound thick.

Jenna blushed as she shrugged her shirt off, letting it pool on the floor behind her. The cream camisole accentuated more than it hid, but it still wasn't enough for him.

"The pants next."

Jenna looked down and frowned. Ben's heart pounded when her fingers began to work the buttons that held her pants closed and pushed them down over her hips. She sat back onto her ass and pulled them off the rest of the way, revealing a cream-colored thong. Ben's mouth watered at the sight of her as she pushed her way back up on to her knees.

"Crawl to me."

Before she moved, an impish smile appeared on her face. She pulled her hair free of

the elastic that held it in place. Her blonde hair spilled over her shoulders, down her back to softly frame her face. He wanted to feel her hair on his skin as he had last night. Only this time he wanted more of it. More of her.

Jenna dropped forward so she now rested on her hands and knees. From that angle he could see her full breasts, watched as they swayed with each motion she made crawling towards him. Inch by inch she crept closer, her eyes never leaving his. She stopped when her head brushed his legs and she rose to kneel in front of him.

"Hi," she whispered.

He couldn't talk, she was so beautiful Ben could barely think. He reached out and traced a line down her cheek and along her neck until he came to the junction of her neck. With a gentle tug, he pulled the thin strap that held the camisole in place. It fell, until it came to a rest at her elbow. The weight of the material pulled the front down, exposing her breast in the dim light of the limo. Reaching up with his other hand, Ben pulled the second strap and the light fabric fell to her waist.

"Beautiful."

"How long do we have?" she whispered.

Ben reached forward and hit the intercom. "Matt, take the long way."

He didn't wait for a response and flicked it off. Jenna looked over her shoulder at the black barrier that separated the two of them from Matt. Ben knew what she was thinking.

"He can't see a thing."

She turned back to face him and grinned. "That's good."

Jenna pushed the camisole to the floor so she knelt before him in only her thong. He stared at her, memorizing every inch of her skin. Everything about her was perfect. The soft curve of her hips, the size of her breasts. His cock and balls tightened, needing release.

"Your turn," she said with a purr.

A smile threatened to cross his lips and he had to focus hard to fight it. Instead, he frowned and leaned further back against his seat.

"I'd rather have you do it for me."

Jenna cocked an eyebrow, but leaned forward and attacked his buttons. Her nimble fingers had the shirt pulled apart quickly and they began to explore his chest. She even pinched his nipples, sending a burst of pleasure and pain through him. He sucked in a breath and caught her wrists in his hands.

Ben pulled her hard against him and caught her in a fierce kiss. He struggled with his control, wanting to throw her on the floor and have his way with her. She didn't back down, thrusting her own tongue in and out of his mouth. He moaned and deepened the kiss as he moved forward, pulling her to the floor, covering her body with his. He finally pulled back and began to lick and nip his way down her neck, over to her ear.

"You like to push, don't you?" He nipped the fleshy ridge as he spoke.

"It's more fun that way." And she licked his lobe.

"You're the only woman I know who does that."

Jenna shifted so she could see his face. "It's about time someone taught the mighty Ben Hawthorn a thing or two."

"And you think it's you?"

She ground her hips against his groin and smiled. "Damn straight."

He couldn't wait any longer. Ben sat up enough to undo his pants and push them off. The cool air felt good against the hot skin of his cock. But it wasn't going to stay cool for long. Ben was back on top of Jenna, grinding himself hard against her pussy. The thin thong proved to be an annoying barrier which he pulled aside.

Before he pushed inside her, Ben wanted to make sure she wanted this. That she wouldn't regret the decision later and blame him. He began to ask her when she pressed her hand to his mouth.

"If you don't ram your cock into me right now, I'll scream."

That was all he needed. In one swift motion, he pushed his way deep inside her until he couldn't push any further. He held still for a moment before pulling back and thrusting deep again. Jenna moaned and clutched his back with her hands, flexing her nails against his skin. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him in closer with every thrust.

Ben had to close his eyes and concentrate on not coming too fast. Jenna deserved more than a quick fuck. But holding back proved difficult as her muscles contracted around his shaft.

He reached down and wrapped his fingers around her breast, squeezing and teasing her nipple. Jenna moaned louder this time and bucked her hips against his. Gods, he forgot how sensitive she was there. Pulling out, he bent his head and captured her nipple in his mouth, sucking it to a tight peak.

"Ben!" She was desperate, her hands urging his head closer as she pulled him back inside her with the pressure of her feet on his ass.

Soon they fell into a steady rhythm, meeting each other's thrusts, licking and tasting whatever part of skin their mouths and tongues came into contact with. He could feel her pussy swell around his cock, her juices making her passage slick and warm. She was close to coming. Ben ground against her clit, increasing the pressure enough to push her over the edge into pleasure.

Jenna gasped as she drove her nails into his shoulder. The first ripples of pleasure caused her muscles to squeeze his cock as she cried out with her orgasm. Ben didn't slow his pace, pounding into her harder, chasing his own release. Jenna continued to meet him thrust for thrust, panting hard as a sheen of sweat covered her chest and arms. When she angled her hips up to meet his, Ben felt his cock swell and explode as he pumped his cum into her. He bit her shoulder to try to muffle his cries. Jenna's

surprised gasp quickly turned into a moan.

He finally fell upon her in a heap, kissing her neck, tasting the mix of sweat and desire on her skin. Her fingers were stroking his hair, whispering his name as she returned his kisses.

"You're so sweet," he said and darted his tongue out to tease her earlobe. "I wish the rest of the planet would go to hell."

"We can have Matt keep driving around if you want."

He looked into her eyes and his heart thrilled to see the playfulness in her eyes. This was the Jenna he needed. He needed a woman who could put him in his place if needed. One who wanted the man, not the status.

*Jenna.*

"I'm sorry, I must be crushing you," he said as he tried to roll off her.

Instead of letting him move, she tightened the grip of her legs around his hips. Holding him close, she sighed.

"It feels nice."

It really did. Ben lowered his face to the crook of her neck and breathed in her scent. Everything about her was right. Then why couldn't he let go and trust her? She'd been right when she'd accused him of being selfish, not wanting to let anyone get close. His father had warned him years ago that men in their position couldn't afford to get close to anyone. In the end, it would come back to haunt them. As it had with his friendship with Rick. But he couldn't believe Jenna would do anything to hurt him.

Not on purpose.

Ben placed a kiss on her neck. "We should get dressed. Matt must be driving circles around the site by now."

She chuckled. "Do you make him do this often? Poor Matt."

"No, never before." *And never again.*

Reluctantly, Ben pushed himself up and held his hand out for Jenna to take. Jenna smiled and a blush covered her cheeks and spread down her body to the tops of her breasts. His cock twitched at the sight. If he didn't get her up and dressed soon, Matt was going to run out of power for the limo.

He handed Jenna her shirt and they got dressed in silence. It wasn't uncomfortable, though. He caught her looking at him more than once and smiled every time he did.

"What?" he finally asked.

Jenna shrugged. "I never thought I'd be here with you. Doing this."

"Why not?"

"I was really...attracted to you back then. Seven years ago, I mean. But you never seemed to notice me. Except when I was yelling at you about the project."

With her clothing back in place, Jenna slid back onto her seat and looked at him. He finished with his own buttons, and moved to the seat beside her.

"You drove me nuts." He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I would bitch to Matt about you on a daily basis. But even after the project was shut down, I couldn't get you out of my head. For the longest time, I wondered what you were doing."

Her eyes widened. "Really? How far away from that stupid machine are we anyway?"

Jenna looked out the window as if to gauge the distance. Ben chuckled and caressed her cheek, gently turning her face around. Only inches away now, he watched her suck her bottom lip into her mouth.

"Far enough."

He pulled her close, their lips brushing for a moment before he captured them in a kiss. Unlike before, Ben felt something change between them. He was lonely, but when he kissed her, was with her, that loneliness disappeared. When Jenna touched his cheek in response, he was almost crushed by the tenderness. His heart began to pound and his skin tingled under her touch.

When she pulled back, he could feel her tremble.

"I don't think we're moving anymore," she said in a breathy whisper.

It almost hurt to turn away from her and look out the window.

"We're at the dig." Ben ran a thumb over her bottom lip before releasing her from his embrace. "Go check what you need to and come back. Matt will drive you home. Tonight we'll figure out how we can stop Rick and put an end to this."

Jenna nodded and made her way over to the door. She opened it, but before she got out, she hesitated and looked back at him.

"And what about after that?"

The uncertainty in her voice matched the confusion of his heart. He didn't know if he could let go of everything he'd believed in, everything he'd done to protect himself for years. Ben looked at her and shook his head. He didn't know what else to do.

"We'll worry about that...after."



## Chapter Twelve

Jenna sat on the oversized couch, squished in between Matt and Roger and wished she could find a way to escape. Ben was busy playing host and she couldn't get over the change in him. She knew women would throw themselves at him and now she understood why. He was completely at ease in his environment, the social frontlines.

"When is this protector guy showing up? I need to get my ass back to the site," Roger grumbled before sucking an ice cube into his mouth.

"Any time now," Ben said and handed Roger a fresh drink.

"I would have felt better picking him up. I hate that he has this address," Matt shook his head.

For whatever reason, Ben didn't want Matt out and around, preferring to keep him close. Jenna could only assume that meant he was worried about something and wanted Matt in case there was a problem.

"We're hardly ever here, Matt. Even if he sends a SWAT team, we'll be fine."

As if on cue, there was a loud knock at the door. Ben started to make his way to it, but Matt was up in a flash and beat him.

"Let me," Matt said and pointed at Ben. "Humor me."

Throwing his hands up in defeat, Ben made his way back towards the bar, winking at Jenna as he went. She managed to squash the giggle that threatened to rear its ugly head.

Things had changed between them since their earlier ride in the limo. They'd come to some sort of truce, if not an understanding. Her lips tingled at the memory of their last kiss, the rush of warmth that spread through her body, culminating somewhere near her heart. It hadn't been lust that had driven him to kiss her that time. It wasn't lust that had squeezed her heart when she felt his loneliness through his touch.

Jenna couldn't help but wonder how badly she'd misjudged him all those years ago. He'd only been trying to do his job, one she really didn't appreciate at the time. Ben needed to be in control of his projects, not only because of who he was, but because he cared about what he did. The realization opened her eyes to another side of him, of *them*.

She was falling in love with him.

"You must be Kyle," Matt said as he opened the door.

Jenna couldn't believe the man who walked through the door was the same slimeball who'd leered at her and her friends at Perfect Match. Gone was the greasy mustache, replace with a smooth-shaven face. His stringy brown hair had been washed and cut short so it accentuated his strong jaw and rich brown eyes.

The man was gorgeous!

"Sure am. You must be the muscle. Wanna frisk me?" Kyle said in a laughing tone. One that Matt didn't appreciate.

"As a matter of fact, spread them."

"You've got to be...hey!"

Matt threw Kyle against the wall and began to pat him down. Jenna shot Ben a look, but he merely shrugged. And Roger looked as if he were watching an episode of *Mars' Most Wanted*.

"My ID is in my back pocket. You can run the ID number in the system if you don't believe me."

Matt snatched the black ID case out of the pocket and walked away. "I intend to."

"I would apologize for Matt's behavior," Ben said in a voice loud enough to get everyone's attention. "But I don't really trust you myself. Drink?"

Jenna immediately felt sorry for Kyle and walked over to where he stood.

"Hi, Kyle. You'll have to forgive their manners, they've been living under a rock for years. You cut your hair?"

The strain on Kyle's face instantly melted and he let Jenna lead him over to the bar. "Since I had to break cover thanks to your arrival at Perfect Match, I thought it was about time I cleaned myself up. I burned that shirt I was wearing too. Ick."

Jenna chuckled. "It was pretty gross. Were your superiors upset about your leaving Rick?"

"They weren't very happy that I threw two years of investigation out the window. But after I filled them in on what you told me, they backed my decision."

"I'm sorry if we ruined things for you," she frowned. She hadn't considered how things would be handled by the authorities. Not that she suspected they were in any legal trouble, but one never knew when it came to the Martian authorities.

"Hey, I'm glad to be out of there. Rick is a psycho. I'd kill for a Scotch if you have one."

Ben poured a glass and handed him the drink. Kyle took an appreciative sniff of the contents and let loose a small moan of pleasure before taking a deep sip.

"Shit, that's good."

Ben smiled and she could tell it gave him pleasure to be able to share these things with people. For not the first time, she wondered what his life had been like as a child. Growing up with everything except other people to share the experience with.

They made brief introductions and finally sat around the large stone table near the window. Jenna had been amazed by the view when she'd first arrived. Ben's condo overlooked most of Serenity proper. The capital city was buzzing this time of night and Jenna could see the steady movement of lights as people moved below. Why Ben didn't spend more time here was beyond her.

"Can we get this thing going? I have tests to run back at the site," Roger said and immediately tapped his fingers on the table's edge.

"Gareth's there. Everything is fine," she said quietly to him.

"Exactly! He'll have things so screwed up by the time I get back I'll have to spend hours undoing it."

"Then we better get started," Ben interjected. "Let's start with what we know."

For the next hour, they waded through everything they knew about Rick Jennings' organization. Kyle proved to be very helpful, filling them in on details of his organization for the past two years.

"I was originally brought into the organization to see how far he'd managed to work his way into the government. He has several of the municipal councilors on his payroll, the odd building and health inspector, but nothing too deep." Kyle wrote out a list of names and slid the datapad over to Ben, who quickly read it over.

"This doesn't surprise me. Rick's about how much he can get away with, how much money he can make. Power is only a nice side effect." Ben tossed the datapad aside and scratched his fingers through his hair. "But this doesn't tell us what he plans to do with the device."

Jenna's head was sore from all this. Nothing made sense. "Okay, so he has a device that can pull different components together to make a perfect combination. We've seen this work on basic elements and on people with the Perfect Match program. What would Rick get from being able to do this?"

"Money," Matt offered.

"How?" she asked.

"Well, if the two people he brings together are married, there could be blackmail involved. He could use it as a bomb, threaten to set things off if he's not paid. Gods know he has enough influence with the government they would convince the others to pay up."

"This is ridiculous!" Roger stood, his chair falling to the floor with his sudden motion. "None of you have foggiest idea of what you're talking about. I'm out of here."

"Roger!" Jenna barely beat him to the door, blocking his escape. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the site. You don't need me here for anything."

Jenna couldn't believe the anger she heard in his voice. For the first time in the five years she'd known him, Jenna couldn't tell what was wrong.

"We need you. I don't know all the research data as well as you. Please stay."

For a moment she thought her plea worked. But Roger looked over her shoulder at the collection of men sitting at the table staring at them. He sneered as he jerked the door open. "You don't need me. Doubt you ever did, Jen."

Jenna stood looking after him for what felt like forever until Ben came up behind her.

"He'll be fine," he said. Jenna welcomed the warmth of his touch on her arm and didn't fight it when he tugged her back against him.

"I'm not so sure."

"Well, I think our next plan of attack is for me to find out where our friend Rick is holed up for the moment. Once I do, we can bring a team in and haul his ass into the station. One where I can trust he's not going to make a quick escape," Kyle spoke up from behind them.

Jenna and Ben made their way back to the table. Despite Ben's words, she knew something was very wrong with Roger. When she saw him tomorrow, she'd have to talk to him.

"What evidence are you going to bring him in on? We haven't got anything that directly links him to anything illegal," Matt shook his head. "He's not stupid enough to incriminate himself."

"Then we need proof."

"We don't need to arrest him, we just need to get the device away from him. You can leave him for another day," Ben interjected.

The three men turned and looked at Jenna. She shrugged. "I'm probably the best one to get the device from him if that's all we're after."

"No," Ben said with quiet resolve.

"He'll talk to me. He knows I'm important to you and will wonder why I've come to him."

Ben ignored her and looked at the other two. "Get evidence on Rick if that's the angle you want to take. I don't care how, just find a way to get him away from the device so we can get it somewhere safe."

Kyle shot Matt a questioning look before the two of them stood.

"We're on it," Matt said and shot Jenna a small sympathetic smile. "Night."

"Been fun, thanks for the booze." Kyle saluted Ben with two fingers and fell into step behind Matt.

Jenna suddenly found herself alone with a very annoyed millionaire. Ben stalked over to the door and flicked the security lock in place. The finality of the lock sliding into place sent a chill through her. But not as much as the fierce look on Ben's face when he turned around.

"Are you insane?" Ben's voice filled the room. He stood by the door, hands on his hips, eyes fixed on her face. "To even suggest going after Rick...not another word of that."

"He'll smell Matt coming a mile away and Kyle's cover is gone. I doubt we could get Roger to speak civilly to the man, let alone try and find out what he's up to. And you said yourself we can't trust the authorities. That leaves me."

Jenna wanted to melt away as Ben moved towards her, but she didn't. If she couldn't stand up to him, she had no right suggesting she meet with Rick. There was no

doubting Ben's anger. When he got close enough to touch her, he grabbed her hand and brought it to his cheek.

"Rick did this. Not one of his men or someone he hired to take me out. Rick. He was toying with me, wanting to see if I'd break under the pain. He wanted to hurt me, not because he needed to, but because he's a sadistic fuck. He wouldn't hesitate to slice you to ribbons to torture me."

"Ben—"

"Not another word."

His eyes were closed for a second, but when he opened them, Jenna sucked in a breath. Tears had welled up, not quite to the point of spilling over, but there nonetheless.

"Promise me you won't go there alone. I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to you." His voice was barely a whisper, threatened to be swallowed up in the large room.

It felt like someone just ripped out her heart and shoved it back in upside down. This was the indestructible Ben Hawthorn? The fearless leader who'd challenged most of the Mars government at one time or another? Her finger found the ridge Rick's knife had made as it had sliced its way through Ben's cheek. The skin had long healed, leaving smooth, pale scar tissue. Rick could have killed Ben, let the knife slip to his throat to cut it.

"I promise. I won't go near him."

Jenna went up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss on his lips. Ben didn't move, his body tensing under her touch. Her mind screamed at her, she was going to lose him just as she managed to break through. Her hands slid up his arms as she began to kiss his closed mouth again, trying desperately to coax him back to her.

Ben parted his lips and moaned. Jenna felt his arms come around her waist and back, pulling her tight against his chest. Her heart began to race as Ben opened his mouth to her, their kiss deepening. There was something different, earnest intensity building between them. Jenna felt her entire awareness focusing in tightly on where their bodies touched. The pressure of his hands under her shirt and against her skin. The way his tongue searched her mouth, tasting her. Her body began to mold against his, the juncture between her legs growing damp from wanting.

Jenna barely felt it when Ben lifted her into his arms and began to carry her out of the room. When he placed her on the king-size bed, Jenna's body reacted to the intimate gesture. Her nipples tightened into painful buds that ached for his touch. Chills of desire started at her neck and zinged down her back and through her body, stopping at her clit.

"Ben, I need you to touch me now before I explode."

He yanked his shirt over his head and threw it to the floor. Instead of removing the rest of his clothes, he lay down beside her and began to tug her buttons free. Jenna sucked in a breath as the cool air caressed her now-exposed skin. But the heat from

Ben's body quickly warmed her. With expert hands, he pushed her bra and shirt from her body. Next, he peeled off her pants and underwear, kissing every inch of skin as he exposed it.

"I never want to see anyone or anything hurt you," he said the words against her belly, placing a kiss above her bellybutton when he was done.

"You can't keep me safe from everything. I'm a grown woman."

She ran her fingers through his hair and flexed her fingers against his scalp when he began to run his tongue over the sensitive skin above her mound.

"We'll see about that."

Jenna cried out as he ran his tongue over her swollen clit. She had to fight her own body, forcing it to relax. It didn't matter and she cried out again when he sucked it into his mouth.

"I'm going to look after you from now on." He licked again. "You won't be able to stop me."

She couldn't think anymore to argue with him. Her body tensed as he pushed her thighs wide apart and slid a finger into her pussy. Her juices made her passage slick and he easily began to move in and out of her before adding a second finger. Jenna began to thrust her hips against his hand, mimicking what she wanted to be doing with his cock. She needed him inside her now.

"I want to come with you in me," she somehow managed to say.

Ben pulled back long enough to shed his pants before he pressed the full length of his body on her. Jenna opened her legs wide, pulling him deep inside her as quickly as she could. Ben stilled for a moment before he began to pump into her.

This wasn't like before in the limo. Ben clutched Jenna, pulling her close. But it wasn't close enough for her. She needed more, needed to let him know that she wasn't going to leave him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and devoured his lips with hers. Their bodies were pressed together so tightly their skin was slick as she rubbed against him.

The pressure against her clit was too much, her hard nipples rubbing against his chest, sending waves of desire through her body. She gasped and clutched his shoulders as he increased his tempo. Holding on desperately, Jenna couldn't stop the inevitable. She screamed seconds before Ben began to madly pound into her, his own cries of pleasure mixing with hers. The orgasm blasted through her so hard and so fast Jenna couldn't think. Her muscles tightened, shaking her entire body for one last second before she collapsed back onto the bed.

Ben continued thrusting over and over, filling her body and pulling every last ounce of pleasure from her. Finally, he thrust one final time before resting on her. Ben managed to roll to his side, taking Jenna with him. They lay on his bed, naked and panting, wrapped in each other's arms.

He brushed her hair from her face and gently kissed her temple. Jenna laid her head

on his chest and was almost lulled to sleep by the sound of his pounding heart. What the hell was she going to do?

"Ben?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"We need to talk. About us."

"I know. But not now."

She danced her fingers across his chest, twirling his chest hair with her fingertip. "Okay. But soon."

"Soon."

She must have drifted to sleep because when her PCD rang, Jenna sat up with a start. A chill racked her body and her skin was cool to the touch. Ben was still snoring lightly when she slipped from his embrace and jogged naked across the room to her purse.

"Hello?" She looked back into the bedroom and prayed Ben didn't wake up.

"Jenna."

She scrunched up her face. "Roger? What's wrong?"

"I need you to come to the site to see something. Right away."

There was something in his voice that didn't sound right. Jenna walked farther away from the bedroom. "Are you okay? You don't sound right."

"I'm fine. Listen, you need to see this tonight. I've called you a cab and it should be there any minute."

"What is it?"

Roger sighed into the PCD. "Look, it will take me an hour to explain what's going on. I don't trust Gareth with this, okay."

Jenna couldn't be sure, but this didn't feel right. "No problem. Let me get Ben and we can be down there in thirty."

"No!"

Jenna had to pull the PCD away from her ear. "Why the hell not?"

"This involves him. I want to you see this alone first. Trust me."

She sighed and knew she didn't have a hope of talking Roger out of this. The sooner she got dressed and got down there, the faster she'd get back to Ben and they could finally have their talk.

"Fine. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thank you. The cab should be there soon."

Flipping her PCD shut with a snap, Jenna tossed it back into her purse before sneaking back into the room. She couldn't resist stopping to look at Ben as he slept. His now-soft cock lay against his well muscled thigh. The light dusting of dark hair covered his body, tempting her to reach out and touch him. Instead, Jenna crept closer and

pulled a blanket over him before turning and getting dressed.

She toyed with the idea of waking him to let him know where she was going, but thought better of it. If he knew, he'd insist on following her. The last thing she needed was for Roger to lose it again and Ben be the reason why.

Somehow she found all her clothing in the dark and managed to get dressed without making too much noise. She was about to leave, but stopped and kissed Ben on the cheek that wore the scar. He'd gone through so much of his life alone, she couldn't imagine what it was like. When she got back, she would tell him that he didn't need to do that anymore.

Jenna left a note on the table, telling him she'd be back soon and slipped out of the condo. As Roger had promised, a black Mars Express cab was waiting for her at the curb. Jenna opened the back door and plopped into the seat, anxious to get this little trip over with.

"Hi, I need to go to the university dig site near the north sector gate."

The cab began to move slowly and Jenna sat back and watched the building pass as they drove. When they turned down Powers Street instead of continuing straight, Jenna knocked on the glass that separated her from the driver.

"Hey, why are you turning here? I'm not paying you extra for the long way."

He didn't respond, not even to make up some excuse. Jenna's heart began to pound. *This wasn't good.* The door lock snapped down and she tried to raise it to no avail.

"What the hell is going on?" she yelled and banged on the glass barrier again.

The driver continued to take them down several back roads until they finally reached a building with underground parking. They pulled into the dark structure, the door closing behind them.

Jenna swallowed hard and had to force her body to relax. Whatever was going to happen, the last thing she needed to do was panic. The lock finally clicked up and released as she heard someone approach from outside. The door opened as the lights to the garage came on. She had to blink several times before she could see the man who stood before her.

"Hello, Miss Robins. I'm Rick," he said with a cocky grin. "How nice to finally meet you."



## Chapter Thirteen

Ben's mind wasn't fully awake, but he knew something was wrong. He rolled over to find the bed cold beside him and a blanket covering his body. He sat up and listened for the sounds of a shower or movement in the kitchen, but was greeted instead with silence.

"Jenna?"

He threw the blanket aside and walked naked out to the living room. There was no sign of her anywhere. Her clothing, coat, shoes all gone. *Gods dammit!* He had to fight down the urge to punch the wall. Where the hell did she go? They'd seemed to connect last night, he'd felt it, felt things change between them.

So why the hell did she leave?

Ben started to make his way back to the bedroom when his vidphone rang. He quickly pulled his shirt and boxers on before answering.

"What?"

"Mr. Hawthorn." Gareth's smiling face beamed back at him from the screen. "I think I may have discovered something about the machine. Is Miss Robins there?"

If he'd been in the same room at Gareth he would have punched him. "What makes you think Miss Robins would be here?"

There must have been enough venom in his voice that even Gareth picked up on it. The man had the decency to blush as he obviously clued in to what he'd implied. "Sorry, Roger mentioned that she was there last night. I just assumed because he was so pissed, and considering what he said —"

"For a man who's supposed to be brilliant, you're sounding very much like an idiot right now. Spit it out."

Gareth took a deep breath. "I think I may have discovered how the device works. I'm not sure, but if we don't get the two halves together soon and deactivate it, we may have an explosion on our hands. I need Jenna to check my results."

"She's not here."

The words actually hurt to say. He'd thought they'd connected last night. He'd certainly felt different, closer to her than any other person he'd known. Why did she leave?

"Well, she's not at home and Roger can't be found either."

The bad feeling Ben had when he first woke up quickly returned. "What do you mean you can't find Roger either?"

"It pains me to say this, but I've been looking for the little bugger for three hours. I

wanted him to double-check some readings, but he's nowhere to be seen. No one has seen him since last night when he left."

Ben quickly replayed the scene in his mind of Roger's leaving.

"We had a meeting and he left here around eleven. He said he was going back to the site."

"He never showed," Gareth shrugged, but he couldn't quite hide his nervousness.

Ben looked over his shoulder and something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. A datapad propped up on his table.

"Hang on," he said and put the vidphone onto hold.

His hand shook slightly as he picked up the datapad. What if she'd changed her mind about him, left before things got too serious? It didn't matter to him. He'd been alone most of his life, this wouldn't be any different. Not thinking about it any further, it only took a few quick clicks to see Jenna's note.

*Hi. Roger called and needs me to check something at the dig site. I didn't want to wake you, you looked so comfy. I'll call you later today and maybe we can get together for supper. I think we have a lot to talk about.*

*Love, Jen.*

Ben read the last line over and over. The breath he'd been holding rushed painfully out of his lungs. Did she mean it or was it a reflex? For a second, he didn't know what to do. She was missing, or he assumed she was, and he couldn't do a thing to help her. Grabbing his PCD, he tapped in her number and let it ring. Nothing.

"Shit."

Clutching the datapad, he walked over to the vidphone and flicked it on. Gareth was waiting, and for the first time, Ben noticed the stress lines around the other man's eyes.

"I'll grab Matt and we'll be there soon. Will you be okay 'til then?"

Gareth nodded. "And Jenna?"

"I'll find her."

Gareth nodded and they broke off communications. Ben didn't think after that, running on instinct. He quickly got dressed and managed to ignore the bed and the evidence of their lovemaking last night. *Love, Jen.* The words played over and over in his mind, driving him crazy.

Rick had to have grabbed her. And from the sound of it, Roger was involved somehow. Either deliberately setting her up, or he'd been coerced into it. Either way, Ben would rip him apart if anything happened to Jenna.

Ben called Matt and filled him in on what happened. Matt was only five minutes away and managed to make it to his place in record time. Thank the gods he didn't have the limo, instead driving his own car. They were going to need the speed and maneuverability.

"Where's Jenna?" Matt asked, a frown fixed on his face.

"She left this morning. Left me this."

Ben tossed Matt the datapad and hopped into the passenger side of the car. Matt slid behind the wheel, read the note and shot a confused look at Ben.

"What does Roger have to say about this?"

"He's gone too."

"Shit," Matt sighed and handed the datapad back to Ben. "Rick?"

"That's my guess. You and Kyle have any luck?"

Matt threw the car into drive and took off towards the dig site. "I haven't heard from Kyle yet, but none of my sources have seen Rick. He hasn't even come up to collect any debts this past week. And while there are many happy people out there that he's disappeared, it's still strange."

"Probably busy playing out whatever crazy scheme he has on the go right now."

"Any reason why he'd want Jenna?" Matt said, and somehow didn't sound like he already knew the answer.

The most likely reason Rick would take Jenna was to get at him. Ben tried to relax his hand, stretching out his balled-up fingers. This is what his father had warned him about growing up. Letting someone get close, even a little bit, made you weak. Made you question everything about your life. Made you vulnerable to outside attack.

"It's possible he needed her to fix his half of the device," Ben said, his words bouncing back at him from the widow.

"I'm sure that's it."

They lapsed into silence, both knowing the chances they would find Rick in time to help Jenna were quickly diminishing. She'd been with him at least a few hours now. More than enough time for him to put into play whatever twisted plan he had in mind. Ben let the hum of the powerful engine block out the thoughts of what Rick would do to her.

*Love, Jen.* How could she love him after what he'd put her through over the years? He'd shut down her project, bossed her around and hadn't given her much in return. Did he love her? It had been so long since he'd really thought about someone else that way, did he even know how to express those emotions anymore. Even his friendship with Matt had its distance. They weren't as close as they'd been years ago. He'd just assumed it was the nature of their positions. But now he couldn't help but wonder if he'd pulled back as he had with everyone else.

Life gets complicated when you care.

Matt pulled off the main roads and tore onto the now well traveled path towards the dig site. They passed several trucks from the university full of equipment heading back towards town. There were several men sitting in the back of the truck who Ben didn't recognize.

"I wonder where they are going with all that," he wondered out loud.

"I'm sure Gareth will fill us in once we get there," Matt said as he stepped on the accelerator. "I have a bad feeling about all this."

"Me too."

And most of that bad feeling had to do with Jenna missing.

They finally reached the site and Ben was out of the car before Matt had fully pulled it to a stop. There didn't seem to be many people around, which wasn't too odd for this time of day, but Ben still didn't like it. Maybe he was getting paranoid.

"Gareth?" he called out as he entered the main research building.

Only silence greeted Ben.

"I don't see anyone outside," Matt said as he entered behind Ben. "Could they have packed it in for the day?"

A sudden bang from the small side room grabbed their attention. Matt pushed ahead of Ben and yanked his laser pistol from his holster and carefully made his way over to the closed door. It was locked and it took both of them to free it. Inside were Gareth and two of his assistants.

"I'm so glad it's you. We heard voices, but I wasn't sure," Gareth sighed with relief.

"What happened?" Ben asked and helped them out of the room and into a chair. One of the assistants, a man he couldn't remember the name of, had a big gash on his forehead.

"I don't know who they were, but they knew what they were after," Gareth said as he made his way over to the first-aid kit. "They waited until we were at our lowest population and grabbed some equipment. Didn't even ask us any questions."

"How long ago?"

Gareth looked quickly at the clock. "You must have passed them on the way in."

Matt and Ben exchanged a quick look.

"The trucks," Matt shook his head. "Shit."

"Hey, there you are."

All eyes turned to the door where Kyle stood. He was smiling and Ben said a silent prayer that meant good news.

"I found Rick. And I think he has Jenna."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jenna banged her hand against the smooth metal door, feeling the noise echo in the small room. She waited and prayed it would be different this time. That someone would acknowledge she was stuck down here. After a minute of silence, she sighed and rested her forehead on the cool door instead.

*This is pointless.*

"Stupid, blind idiot," she cursed herself, smacking the door one last time.

She walked around the small room that had been her prison for the past few hours. Since her arrival, she'd barely talked to anyone. Really, she was thankful for that. She'd only spent a short time with Rick, but every inch of her skin had crawled when he'd put his hand on her back after pulling her out of the taxi. Other than his introduction, he'd barely said two words to her. Just enough to order his men to take her to this stupid room.

Not that it mattered. She could tell he'd kill her without a second thought if it got him what he wanted. Jenna just needed to figure out what that was so she could live long enough to get out of here. A sudden wave of exhaustion rolled over her and she flopped down onto the hard metal chair that was the sole piece of furniture in the room. Jenna let her head fall into her hands and closed her eyes. If she hadn't been so stupid, she'd still be in Ben's bed. Maybe he would have made her breakfast. Probably not, but anything would be better than her current situation.

Jenna was so tired, she didn't even react when the electronic key beeped outside the room and the lock gave way. The air whooshed out of the room and she heard several people enter. Someone coughed when she didn't respond to their presence. She looked up to see Rick and several other men she didn't recognize standing in a group, blocking the entrance to the room.

"I'm pretty sure this many people in a room this size is a fire hazard," she quipped, not even thinking of the consequences of pissing off a crazy man.

Rick's face broke out into a wide smile as he chuckled. It almost sounded pleasant.

"No wonder Ben likes you. You must be a force to be reckoned with, Miss Robins."

She made sure to keep eye contact when she spoke to him. "That's what everyone keeps telling me. What do you want?"

A second chair was passed to Rick and he moved it into the room. He turned it around so the back faced Jenna and he was able to straddle it. He really looked Jenna over before making a slight tsking sound.

"At first I didn't want you at all. Then I found out you and your boyfriend were sticking your collective noses in my business. Now I find myself with the need to re-teach a lesson to my old friend Ben," he said, still smiling, and ran his finger down her cheek.

"Why do you think we'd do something like that? I don't even know you."

"I have my sources. But you're in luck, Dr. Robins. You do have a PhD, right?"

Jenna nodded, not sure where he was going with this. All she could do was pray Ben would look into why she wasn't at the dig site and come looking for her. Not that he'd know where to start.

"Excellent. I seem to be in need of your scientific expertise, Dr. Robins. My current *expert* seems to have hit a barrier with a project I've given him."

Jenna frowned and tried to fight back her curiosity. "Why should I care if you can't figure out your own diabolical scheme?"

"Funny is cute for a while, but don't test my patience."

Jenna could tell despite his smile he was dead serious. She didn't want to push her luck, not until she knew she had a way out of this mess first.

"Who is your guy?" She needed to stall. Getting as much information as she could would help.

Rick's lopsided grin looked slightly charming. "Oh, I believe you are well acquainted. Why don't you go say hi?"

The guards at the door stepped aside, clearing the way for Jenna to leave the room. She eyed Rick warily before standing up and striding quickly out into the next room. She took note of her surroundings, which looked to be a warehouse. That meant she was somewhere on the lower east side of town. Ahead of her was a makeshift lab where several people scurried about.

"Where the fuck is the equipment?"

Jenna's mouth dropped. "Roger?"

When he spun around, he had the decency to blush. "Hi, Jenna."

"What the hell are you doing here?" She couldn't believe he'd set her up, betrayed her like this.

For his part, Roger couldn't look her in the eyes and choose to inspect the Geiger counter on the table in front of him.

"I'm glad you're okay. I told them not to hurt you, but you never know with these guys."

"Roger?" Jenna marched over, getting right in his face. "What's going on?"

He looked up and she could tell he'd lost control of the situation. Whatever that happened to be, she wasn't sure. And it was very unlikely he'd ever had control in the first place. Roger sucked at reading people and what their true intentions were. He always had.

"Would you believe they made me an offer I couldn't refuse?" he said and offered a weak smile.

"Actually, I would. Do you know how dangerous these people are?" she whispered and looked back over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I figured that out. They offered me a shitload of cash to make their half of the device work. I pulled that off and got them set up with Perfect Match. Then they offered me another way to get them access to the second half of the device. That quickly turned into me getting out of this with my life intact if I agreed to help them."

"You did this for money?"

"No, not *just* for money. I've been working my ass off for ten years and I can't even land more than a research grant at the university. You boyfriend didn't even bother to interview me when a job came up at CalCorp. I took the next best offer."

Jenna felt her disappointment like a sick taste in her mouth. She'd worked side by

side with Roger for years and never had any indication he was capable of something like this. She hadn't seen his anger and bitterness. In fact, she thought he liked working in the background. How could she misjudge someone this badly?

"If they have you, then why do they need me? You know as much about these things as I do. Probably more based on what you've just told me," she asked and tried to ignore the three men who entered from the side door, each carrying large laser rifles.

"I need you to confirm a theory I have." Roger's gaze flitted from her to Rick, who was now watching them very closely. "I want to make sure I'm right before I say anything."

"You told him about me and...?" She didn't want to say Ben's name out loud just in case.

"I know exactly who you are fucking, Miss Robins," Rick said in a voice loud enough to set Jenna's heart racing. "And let's say once you're done helping your friend, you'll be assisting me with a little payback."

"He has good ears," Roger turned his back to Rick and mouthed, "and he reads lips."

"I'll have to remember that." Jenna sighed and picked up a datapad. "So what can I help with?"

"Come here."

Roger led her over to the section of the warehouse where the three men with the rifles stood. She tried to ignore the heavy stares and leers the brutes gave her as she passed. Her skin began to itch where their gaze landed and she had to fight the urge to tighten her jacket around her tighter, protecting her body from their looks. Once they were inside the small closed-off room, Jenna felt the air rush out of her body in surprise.

There in the middle of the room was the second half of the device. It was much larger than the section they'd found back at the dig site. The smooth metal was disrupted by several medium-size control panels that displayed readings in a language she didn't understand.

"Gareth would go nuts over this," she said in a hushed voice and approached it cautiously.

"It doesn't do anything when I touch it. But I know you had some sort of reaction to the other half."

She knew nothing would happen this time with Ben not here. "I doubt anything will happen."

"Humor me. Go and touch it and tell me if anything happens."

Jenna was about to argue when Rick appeared in the doorway behind Roger. He leaned against the doorjamb, blocking the only exit from the room. His grin was a cross between charming and terrifying. She was trapped and they both knew it.

"Anything to help a *friend*."

As she approached the device, Jenna's body began to react. She could feel a low-

level electrical charge like tiny fingers begin to gnaw at her skin. She tried to take a deep breath, but the air didn't want to come. Her nipples hardened, pressing hard against the thin fabric of her bra. Without thinking, she brought her hand to her throat and caressed the skin along her collarbone. Her body seemed to remember what it was like the last time she was near it.

Not wanting to reach out and touch it, Jenna had to fight against her own body, against her hand that seemed to rise up on its own. As she moved closer, her fingers began to tingle, the sensation traveling up her arm and across her chest. Desire rolled through her body like a powerful wave and she grew damp.

*Where is she!*

Jenna sucked in a breath. "Did you hear that?"

"What? What are you hearing?" Roger was at her side, looking at her, wide-eyed.

*I need you!*

"A man. He's looking for...someone?"

"Is it Ben? Is he looking for you?"

Jenna closed her eyes and could hear an angry cry, one of pure frustration. Then silence.

"He's gone," she whispered.

"Who?" Roger sighed. "Tell me what you're hearing."

She wanted to reach out and comfort whoever it was. But how? Unable to fight the pull of the device, Jenna reached out. Upon contact with the metal, her eyes closed. Invisible hands caressed her body, touching her breasts, her clit. This time when she sucked in a shaky breath, she could smell Ben. That unmistakable combination of musk and soap mingled with a scent that could only be described as him. Jenna sighed and felt her body being pulled closer.

Closer to what?

"Jenna."

"Ben?"

"Tell me what you're feeling."

She couldn't open her eyes to look at him. Her body reacted to him as his touch tugged her shirt away and slipped underneath to caress her skin. Tipping her head backward, she pressed her body against his. His swollen cock pressed hard against the back of her thigh.

"I want you," she said and ground back against him.

"I could so fuck you right now."

Harsh fingers dug into her hips and pulled her back. It was enough of a jerk for her fingers to break contact with the device. The fog that had covered her brain lifted and she realized Rick was behind her, his lips against her ear. Roger was standing off to the side, looking like a frightened child. Jenna felt sick, the sting of it climbing up her



throat.

"No wonder Ben likes to have you around."

"Let me go," she whispered.

"Oh, I don't think so. I have plans for you," he said and licked her cheek.

Jenna tried to pull away, but Rick held her still. Her heart was pounding so loudly she was sure Rick heard it. His fingers gripped her tight to the point her skin was sore. She tried to fight back the tears, refusing to show him what he was doing to her.

"Did it work?" Rick asked in a loud voice.

"It did. This half of the device seems to not only pull opposite elements together, but it is able to pull energy from a living source. The readings went off the scale when she touched it. I think if we hooked her up, we could build a bomb big enough to take out half the environment shield," Roger grinned.

Rick licked Jenna's earlobe before releasing her and making his way over to where Roger stood.

"So your idea will work?"

"Without a doubt."

Jenna couldn't believe the look of glee on Roger's face. "That's why you did it. You wanted to prove to everyone your ideas were right? And you're going to use me to kill..." She couldn't finish her thought.

Roger pushed past Rick and got right in Jenna's face. "You're fucking right I am. I don't need to be second to you or anyone else anymore. I solved the puzzle. Me! And when this guy pays me what I'm worth, I'm going to find a nice little colony somewhere far from here and buy a nice —"

Jenna took a step back just as a loud hissing noise exploded around her. The smell of burning flesh hit her half a second before Roger slumped to the floor. Jenna gasped wide-eyed at Roger's lifeless body before looking at Rick.

"I don't know how you worked with him for all those years. I would have killed him ages ago," he said with a grin and walked out of the room.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Ben accepted the coffee from Matt as they stood outside the Perfect Match building waiting for Kyle to emerge. They'd come directly here from the dig site at his request so he could use his secured line to his boss. Ben didn't want to wait. He didn't give a shit about getting the proper authorities on board to stop Rick. All he needed was a laser pistol, a car and he'd look after the rest on his own.

Gods help them if anything happened to Jenna. Ben closed his eyes and enjoyed the sting against his hand as the hot coffee's heat seeped through the thin cup.

"He better get his ass out here in the next minute or I'm leaving," he grumbled and took a sip.

The sour expression on Matt's face deepened as he shot Ben a look.

"If you leave without the right backup, things could explode around you and you'll have no way of stopping it. You have more than yourself to think of here."

"I have Jenna. And right now, Rick's doing gods know what to her."

"Rick's not doing a thing. He wants you and you know it," Matt said and sipped his own drink.

Both men turned to see Kyle emerge from the building. Shoved into a shoulder holster that peeked out from beneath his leather jacket was a RX7 laser gun. At least they were well armed for their encounter.

"Well?" Ben tried to keep the impatience out of his voice, but it wasn't any good.

"They can't send anyone for backup," Kyle's jaw tightened as he spoke. "They don't feel the information is strong enough to risk it."

Ben threw the coffee cup to the ground and pushed past Matt to slide behind the wheel of the car. Matt hopped into the passenger seat.

"Where are you going?" Kyle asked, sounding more than a little pissed off as he hopped into the backseat.

"I don't give a shit about your boss's opinion. Rick has Jenna and I'm going to get her. Now."

"Well, the three of us can't just burst in there. We need a plan," Matt said quietly.

Ben threw the car into drive, barely noticing the traffic around him. "I never go anywhere without a plan. Kyle, where the hell is this place?"

"Lower east side. Trader district. He's got a place near the dome wall, which scares the crap out of me. How the government ever let that one get by, I'm not sure."

A tremor of recognition surged through Ben. Ten years ago, he'd helped Rick buy a little place on the east end. It hadn't been much, but it would have given him a foot in

the door. A means of buying and selling until he could acquire a larger spot.

"He's had a spot there for years. They would have grandfathered his place and monitored his building," Ben said as he slammed the car into top gear and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

"Take it easy now. Not your car, remember," Matt teased, but gripped the door handle tightly.

"I'll buy you a new one."

"So what's the plan?" Kyle leaned forward between the seats. "I'm assuming you're both armed."

Matt reached under his front seat and pulled out two older laser guns, ones Ben knew to be deadly accurate, and handed one to him. Not that he'd have much use for a weapon, but it was still good to know that his backup would be there for him.

"Matt, you and Kyle are going to get out about a block from Rick's place. Circle around and find a way in. I'm assuming he's got a small army on staff, so be careful. I'll signal you for a distraction once I have Jenna. They we'll get the hell out of there."

"Well, that's a fucking stupid plan," Kyle snorted and sat back in his seat. "What are you going to do, go through the front fucking door?"

"Pretty much."

One look at Matt and Ben knew he wasn't happy.

"You're walking into a trap. He'll kill you."

Ben slowed the car down to a stop at a red light. Of course he was walking into trap. That's what Rick wanted—his head on a stick. Sure, he'd be suspicious of why he'd arrived, but he wouldn't pass up the opportunity.

"He won't kill me right away. Not when he thinks he'll be able to get something out of me first. And he won't hesitate to use Jenna against me, so we'll have to move fast before he tries anything."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, with Kyle making the occasional comment about what they drove past. A block away from the address Kyle had provided, both he and Matt hopped out.

"We can do this another way. Take him by surprise," Matt said, though not looking very convinced.

"We don't have time and you know it. I'll drive around for five minutes to give you a chance to get close. Then I'll throw myself on his doorstep."

"Be careful." Matt slapped him on the shoulder.

"You too."

He waited until they disappeared into the shadows of the buildings. Midafternoon was a strange time to be engaging in shady deals with terrorists, but such was life. He'd improvise and turn things around to his favor, just as he always had.

He was about to pull the car out into traffic again when he suddenly felt as if a

lightning bolt had hit him. His skin seemed charged, the fabric of his clothing rubbing against it, sending jolts of pleasure through him.

"Fuck."

His eyes flew closed and when he sucked in a deep breath, all he could smell was Jenna. His cock recognized her and instantly sprang to life. *What the hell was going on here?* Ben tried to open his eyes, but they wouldn't cooperate. He could practically feel her body pressing up against his. Her ass rubbing against his shaft, teasing it through his clothing.

As suddenly as the feeling hit him, it was gone again. Ben was left shaking, his body on the edge of orgasm. All it would take would be a stroke or two to push him over the edge. It took him a few minutes to get his breathing under control and for his heart rate to slow down enough that he was sure he wouldn't have a heart attack.

The passenger side door was suddenly jerked open and a tall, bald man fell into the chair. Tattoos crawled out from the collar of his shirt and covered most of his neck. He grinned as someone else yanked open the driver's side door.

"Well, I think you've just earned me a bonus, Mr. Hawthorn," he said, the smell of stale booze filled the room.

"So happy to help."

That was all he managed to say before the tattooed man rammed his fist into Ben's face, knocking him out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jenna was happy to be back in her makeshift prison. She could still smell Rick's scent all around her like a brand. Gods, she'd sworn she'd been with Ben. The idea that Rick had turned her on at all made her sick.

A chorus of voices echoed in the hall outside her locked door. The sound made her heart ache. She'd had a happy life for the most part. So what if she didn't see much of her parents these days? She had Rhonda and the girls to keep her company.

Ben's face popped into her head and she couldn't help but sigh. She was lonely, and as infuriating as Ben had been over the past few weeks, she'd grown quite used to him being there for her. She'd even grown used to his interfering ways. No, it wasn't interfering, but his attempt to help.

Gods, she missed him.

Jenna curled up in the chair, tucking her knees under her chin, and closed her eyes. She'd been running on adrenaline for hours now and it was starting to take its toll on her.

She must have drifted off, because she jumped when she heard the slamming of the door down the hall from where they kept her. Thunderous footsteps marched down the hall until they came to a stop in front of her cell. She straightened and stood ready to face whatever Rick was going to throw at her. But she was shocked when they threw a

beaten and bleeding man at her feet. It took her a second to recognize him.

"Ben!"

"Yes, your boyfriend was driving in the wrong part of town."

Rick was standing in the doorway, a cocky grin on his face.

"What the hell did you do to him?" She tried to wipe the blood from his cheek, but he fought her.

"Jen, I'm fine." His voice cracked as he spoke, but he looked at her with very determined eyes. "Are you okay?"

She wanted to laugh. Here he was beat to a pulp and he wanted to know how she was. Instead, she leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Roger's dead."

It still hurt to think of it. He may have been misguided, but she'd always believed Roger had meant well—fool that she was. Her throat tightened and she had to fight to stop the tears. There'd be plenty of time for that later.

Ben frowned, the motion causing the cut on the side of his mouth to split again. "I'm sorry. I know how close you were."

"This is all very touching, but we don't have time for a lengthy reunion. I have a job for you, Dr. Robins."

Ben stiffened as Rick spoke and Jenna could see the barely restrained hate flash in his eyes.

"She's not doing anything for you."

"I don't think you're in much of a position to stop me, *Mr. Hawthorn*," Rick practically hissed and kicked Ben in the stomach.

"Stop it! I'll do what you want, but you have to promise to leave Ben alone."

"Jen, no, the device is dangerous." Ben grabbed her arm. "Gareth said it was going to explode."

"Of course it's going to explode. You never were very bright, were you, Ben? Dr. Robins is going to be the one who blows it up. We discovered she's a supercharged reactor."

Jenna looked up and really looked at Rick and what she saw made her shiver. The smile on his face didn't make it to his eyes. His teeth gleamed in the dim light and she had the distinct feeling he would eat her alive if he could. If he didn't need her to blow up the device, she'd probably be dead already. She was dead either way, it seemed.

"I don't see a lot of options here," she said quietly to Ben, making sure to smile at him with as much love as she could muster.

Her heart broke. She'd just figured out how much she loved him and now they were both going to die. Stupid, shitty luck.

Ben reached up and caressed her cheek. Instead of dismay, he looked more determined than ever. "Don't give up on me yet," he said and winked.

She tried not to react and only nodded. Matt! She hadn't thought of him until that second. There's no way he'd let Ben come in here without some plan to get him out. To get them both out. She knew it was going to be rough, but they'd make it.

"I wouldn't dream of it." And she leaned in to kiss him.

Ben winced as she brushed the corner of his mouth that was hurt, but he didn't pull away. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, squeezing gently and he returned her kiss. She could tell something had changed with him. The way he touched her made her feel protected and loved. He'd be willing to rip Rick apart right now if he thought it would save her. His lips were hungry, demanding, but loving.

Jenna pulled back and looked into his eyes. He would never be able to say it here, but she needed to see it. See if he really did love her.

"Enough of that shit." Rick grabbed Jenna by the shoulder and yanked her to a standing position. He pulled her tight against his chest and Jenna had to fight the impulse to pull away. "Here's how this is going to work, *Dr. Robins*. You're going to finish what your friend started and build me a bomb big enough to blow the environment shield back to Earth. If you can find a way to blow it without strapping yourself to the device, then I'll let you go. If you move too slowly, I'll take our friend Ben here apart bit by bit and I'll strap you to the device myself, turn it on and walk away."

"Jenna, don't worry about me," Ben said quietly from the floor.

She could almost hear his silent *I'm dead either way*.

"He's not going to pass up the opportunity to torture me. Are you, Rick?"

Rick shrugged, never breaking eye contact with Jenna. "True. But I'll promise to make it a painless death if you cooperate, *Dr. Robins*. Otherwise, I'll take my time. Days. Weeks maybe. And then I'll blow you up."

Jenna felt her stomach sicken from fear. Ben better damn well have a plan or they were both dead sooner rather than later.

"I'll do it. But only if you promise not to hurt him."

Rick regarded her carefully for a second before he smiled. "Of course. Now let's get you to your lab, Doctor."

"Wait, I'll need Ben to come too." Her heart was pounding, scared of what Rick would do to her. But she knew if she didn't keep Ben with her, he *was* dead. "I'll need help and he knows the device almost as well as I do."

"If you think for a second —"

"Look, you can keep guards on us the whole time if you want. I can't do this alone. Had you kept Roger alive, he would have said the same thing. Why do you think he wanted me here in the first place?"

Rick instantly slapped Jenna. Pain shot up her cheek and numbed her face. The next thing she knew, Ben was on his feet, his fist slamming into Rick's face. The two guards who were flanking Rick were struck motionless, momentarily stunned by the swiftness

of Ben's attack. It took them a second to jump to their boss's aid. But a second was all Jenna needed. When the guard closest to her began to punch Ben in an attempt to get him off Rick, she grabbed his laser gun from his holster. Without hesitating, she pointed it at the man and fired. The shot rang out, quick and deafening in the small room. The smell of burned skin was almost as sickening as the sound of burning skin. The man fell in a lump on the floor, crying out and clutching his side where the laser had connected.

"Get off him now!" She whipped the gun around and into Rick's face. Her heart was pounding, but thankfully her hands weren't shaking. "Ben, can you move?"

Rick started to move towards her, but Ben kicked his legs out from under him. Ben hopped to his feet and joined Jenna. "Let's go."

"Get in," she ordered and motioned to Rick. "Take him too."

The second guard pulled his wounded counterpart into the room as Rick leveled a dark stare at her. His face had grown red and he was breathing harshly.

"You won't make it out of here alive," he said through clenched teeth.

"Slide your guns out now," Ben ordered and picked them up as the guard complied.

"You're dead, Hawthorn."

"Not yet." Ben slammed the door in his face.

It took a second to secure the lock and make sure there weren't any other guards in the area. Now that she knew they were safe for the moment, Jenna's body began to shake. Tears welled up in her eyes and threatened to spill over.

"Do you think that man will be okay?" she whispered.

Ben looked around quickly before pulling Jenna close to him. She could feel the strong pounding of his heart and knew he was as affected by what was happening as she was. Somehow, knowing he was shaken too made her feel better.

"I'm sure he'll be fine. You were amazing."

His lips were warm against her forehead. She could feel his concern and his admiration in that single contact. Jenna tilted her head back and pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

"We need to get to the device."

Ben shook his head and laced his arm around his waist. "Out of the question. We're getting out of here. Matt and Kyle will be creating a distraction soon and we need to be ready to move."

"We can't go. Not until I have a final look at the device. I think I know what's wrong with it, and if I'm right, we won't have a lot of time to prevent it from exploding."

Jenna refused to move, even as he tried to pull her along. When he growled in frustration, she wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry.

"Ben, trust me."

His eyes snapped to hers and she could see the internal battle he was fighting. She knew whatever his decision was, she was going to have to get to the device to see if she was right. She prayed she wouldn't have to fight him to be able to do it. Jenna waited, her fists clenched at her sides. Instantly, her body relaxed when a small grin crossed his lips.

"I must be crazy."

"I could have told you that years ago. Let's go before the guards realize Rick's missing."

Silently, they made their way over to an empty room that was directly across from where the device was kept under guard. So far, no one had noticed their escape, but Jenna knew that wouldn't last much longer.

"How the hell are we going to get to that thing?"

"I told you this was a bad idea," he whispered next to her ear. "We need a distraction, and a big one at that, if we are even going to think about getting to that device."

Jenna looked around the warehouse, trying to find something, anything that could help them. She was about to suggest they try sneaking around the back through the office when all hell broke loose.

All the windows that lined the top of the far back wall shattered, sending shards of glass cascading down onto the warehouse floor. Every guard in the warehouse came running, their guns pointed up, some firing blindly at the unseen invaders.

"Now, Jenna," Ben said and shoved her out into the open.

Once her feet were moving, she didn't stop. She could feel Ben behind her more than hear him and it gave her the courage she needed to dodge the chaos in the warehouse. Gun blasts echoed in the large room and assaulted her ears as black-clad figures began to pour in from the gaping holes where the windows used to be.

Thankfully, the door to the room that held the device was open. Jenna shoved it wide and ran quickly inside.

She stopped short of the device, making sure to keep a few feet between it and her. "I think if we can't find a way to shut this thing off now it's going to explode."

"Gareth said it needed the second half of the device if it was going to stabilize."

"Of course. Makes sense."

*Help!*

*Where is she?*

Memory of the voices came back to her and Jenna had to wonder if there was something more to them. Both sides were pulling together various elements around them in an attempt to find its other half.

"That must be how they made the dating service work too. Feed the profiles of each person into the computer, link it to the device and it will naturally pair the compatible profiles." She turned to look at Ben. "Why would Rick bother?"



"Money. The only thing other than power that really drives him. He'll take it any way he can." Ben shrugged. "He's a greedy bastard."

"Well, if we don't figure this thing out now the entire colony is screwed. This thing is big enough to take out this entire building and half the colony environment shield."

Jenna took a step closer to the device. Despite knowing what was coming, the sensation was overwhelming. As she got within a foot of it, a blinding lust raced through her body. Her breasts ached and grew wet with need. One touch and she would have come on the spot.

"Fuck," Ben groaned behind her.

"It wasn't this bad the last time I was close to it. It must be because you're here too."

"I felt it last time, I think. I was in the car and my dick nearly exploded, it was so hard."

Jenna turned to look at him. His face was screwed up tight in concentration. His breathing was coming in short, controlled gasps. When he looked up and met her gaze, she was floored. Barely restrained lust flared in his eyes, his body held tight as if he were fighting for his control. For a second, she thought he was going to turn around and leave, but instead he took several long strides to stand beside her.

"Let's do this and get the hell out of here."

Jenna couldn't tell if the look on his face was one of pain or extreme lust. Considering how she was feeling right now, it could be either.

"Okay, I need to think," she managed to say once she'd regained control of her tongue.

Ben inched closer to her, his arm brushing hers. Jenna gasped and blindly reached out to steady against the sudden rush of desire. Her emotions were all over the place, her stomach clenching from fear of rejection to the rush of desire she had for Ben. Shit, she wasn't even sure the emotions were all hers. When her fingers came down, they landed in the middle of the device.

Everything in the room suddenly stilled. The shouts of the guards under attack, the noise of their bullets exploding in the warehouse behind them all gone. The only sound she could hear was the beating of a heart. She prayed to the gods it was hers.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded muted in her ears.

"Hello."

Jenna was suddenly all alone in a dark room. Before her stood a man, but not a human. His tall, lean body looked to shimmer in front of her. His skin was almost transparent, his white hair radiating in the darkness.

"Who are you? Where have you taken me?"

Amazingly, she wasn't afraid. She could still feel Ben close by. Knowing he was there gave her strength.

"Your mate is worried about you," the alien said.

The sadness in his voice struck a chord with Jenna. Like he understood the fear and loneliness of finding that one person who despite all the differences, all the reasons in the world why they shouldn't be the one, they are. Her perfect match. That's when it hit her.

"You're worried about your mate too, aren't you?" As she said the words, she knew they were right.

"They've hurt her. I need to find her." There was an edge to his voice now. An anger she understood. "This planet is ill. We must leave. I need to find her so we can go."

"She's fine. Safe. I know where she is and can —"

In a blink, the alien was beside her, his hand wrapped around her throat. Jenna's heart began to pound, but she managed to keep calm.

"You took her!" he hissed in her ear.

"No, but I know who did. We found her and have kept her safe. She's very lonely and misses you. I can bring her to you if you give me a chance."

His fingers squeezed ever-so-slightly tighter before he relaxed his grasp. Jenna was now able to take a deep breath. If she didn't get him calmed down soon, it would be too late to prevent the explosion.

"I know you want her back, but you need to calm down. You can't help her if you hurt yourself. The device that's holding you is overloading."

He released her and took a step back. Jenna turned a slow circle to face him, her fingers massaging her neck. The alien tipped his head to the side and looked at her curiously.

"Our ship was badly damaged. We were forced to flee to the escape pods. We landed here, but something went wrong."

Jenna couldn't believe it. They must have crashed on Mars before the colony was built.

"You said the planet was ill. What do you mean? Can we fix it?" A million thoughts raced through her mind. They may have been here long enough to be able to help her. Help rebuild.

"I need her back," the alien said again, the anger in his voice replaced with a heart-wrenching pain.

"You've crashed on a planet. You've been here a very long time. Over three hundred years. Maybe longer. Why do you need to leave now? What is wrong with the planet?"

"The soil was healing. But something changed it. Hurt it again," he said and looked at her, desperation in his eyes. "Where is she?"

"Some people took your mate. They didn't know she was there. But she's fine. I felt her back at the site. She misses you so much."

"She's all I've had for so long."

Jenna smiled. "You must have been together for many years now."

"Years?"

"It's how we measure time."

"Time?"

Something they were running out of. "I can't explain right now. But I will bring your mate here. Promise me you won't be angry any longer."

"No," he said simply.

Jenna couldn't stop the groan of frustration. Shit, she wasn't a diplomat and they didn't have time for her to learn. A thought suddenly came to her.

"What if I promised to give you the man who *was* responsible for harming your mate?"

His face twisted into a sneer and Jenna was very thankful she wouldn't be on the receiving end of that anger.

"If you can, then I will calm. I will wait."

She released the breath she was holding. "I promise. Thank you."

"Bring her back and I will help you."

"What do you mean?"

The room seemed to tip on its side and Jenna stumbled backward and found herself in Ben's arms.

"Jenna!"

He spun her around and before her brain had time to register what was happening he crushed her against him and claimed her mouth in a savage kiss. She could feel his fear, desire and complete relief.

"I thought I'd lost you. You went so pale and didn't respond to me," he murmured against her head, kissing her hair.

When she looked into his eyes, she could see it. He loved her. Despite their differences, he'd fallen in love. Jenna felt the tears begin to well up in her eyes, but she blinked them away.

"I love you," she whispered.

"Well, isn't that touching."

They both turned their heads in time to see Rick standing in the doorway. A laser pistol pointed directly at them.

## Chapter Fifteen

Ben instinctively pushed Jenna behind him. He knew Rick wouldn't hesitate to shoot either of them. But he also knew he enjoyed the games, the taunting. They had a minute for him to figure out how the fuck to get out of this.

"How the hell did you get out?" Ben said, using his anger and fear at almost losing Jenna to good use. He needed to keep Rick talking.

Rick sneered and took a step into the room. "When all hell broke loose out there, my men came looking for me. I figured you would have run away by now, Ben. Heroism isn't your style. No profit in it."

The comment stung. He suddenly felt Jenna's hand squeeze his and realized Rick didn't have any power over him any longer.

"I'm not going to let you destroy this colony." Ben kept his eyes on Rick and his gun. Jenna moved again. She'd taken hold of his shirt and began to tug him backward. Back towards the device. Not needing to know what she had in mind, he followed her lead.

"Had the government given me what I wanted, it all would have worked out fine. But you went and fucked that up on me now. And that wasn't very nice of you."

Ben took another step back and watched as Rick moved even closer to him. The rush of desire he'd felt earlier began to build in his again. His cock sprang to life, making it hard to focus on anything other than stripping Jenna and taking her right there and then. She bunched her fingers, squeezing his shirt into a tight ball. Sighing, she pulled him back even closer against her.

"So you were the one who took the devices away from each other?" Jenna asked in a loud voice, almost too loud.

*What the hell was she up to?*

"Are you fucking stupid?" Rick laughed. "Of course it wasn't me. I pay people for that shit."

Jenna didn't seem fazed by the insult. "But you were responsible. You moved them, separated the devices?"

Rick's laughter died down instantly. "I think I'm going to kill you now."

Ben watched in horror as Rick raised the pistol up and prepared to fire. He didn't think. Ben launched himself at Rick, letting out a primal scream. It was enough of a shock to make Rick pause. By the time he realized what was going on, Ben was on top of him.

The last time they'd fought, Rick had the upper hand. Ben was wiser now. He knew Rick was weak. Jenna had shown him that and he'd be damned if he'd let anything

happen to her now.

Ben threw a punch, connecting with Rick's jaw. Pain shot up his arm and his hand went numb, but he wasn't about to stop. Again he took a swing, but this time Rick ducked and landed a blow of his own on Ben's stomach.

He doubled over in agony, the air rushing from his lungs. Ben dropped to his knees as Rick turned to face Jenna.

"Now it's your turn, bitch."

Ben felt a sudden injection of rage and he threw himself once more at Rick. His shoulder connected with Rick's back with enough force to push them both forward, landing squarely on the device.

Unlike his earlier approach, Ben didn't feel the effects this time. He was able to back up enough to put a small distance between them. He was about to grab Rick and pull him off the device when Jenna's hand gripped his shoulder.

"Don't," she simply said.

But he couldn't stop. Ben stepped forward and rolled Rick around. What he saw drained the anger from his body.

Rick's eyes were rolled back into his head, as Jenna's had been the last time she'd touched the device. Like Jenna, Rick's face had lost its color. He looked to be in agony, his mouth open in a silent scream. Rick didn't, or couldn't, move.

"What the hell?" Ben whispered.

"It's not a probe like we thought. It's an escape pod. Two, actually."

Ben turned to look at her. She was shaking, but managed to hold her emotions in check.

"What do you mean, escape pod? It's not big enough."

"The last time I touched it, he talked to me. The alien trapped inside. He was looking for the other half. The part with his mate."

"But it was set to explode."

"He was angry. Somehow, they've been in that thing so long it's become a part of who they are. I told him I'd give him the one who was responsible. And that I'd get his mate back to him."

"Ben!"

He turned at the sound of Matt's voice. "In here!"

Matt and Kyle came barreling into the room, blasters drawn.

"Are you two okay? When you didn't come out, we got worried," Matt said, his eyes moving quickly over both of them. When he spotted Rick, he raised his gun. "Ben, move."

"It's okay, Matt." Ben looked over his shoulder. "He's not going anywhere."

"What the fuck?" Kyle shook his head and made his way over to where Rick stood.

"Don't touch him," Jenna warned. "He's been given a taste of his own medicine."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Kyle snapped.

"There is an alien inside. Rick hurt his mate."

"Payback's a bitch. Go, alien guy."

"Matt, we need Gareth to get the second half of the device and bring it here. Is it safe to do that yet?"

Matt peeked out into the warehouse. "Kyle brought in the troops. They're still cleaning up out there. I'd give it a bit yet."

"Apparently, the chief of police didn't want to be responsible for your death, Mr. Hawthorn," Kyle chuckled.

Ben would have to remember to buy the chief a drink next time he saw him.

"It will take Gareth and my people some time to get the other half of the device here. We should tell them to get moving," Jenna said and slipped her arm through his.

Everything felt right about the contact. He smiled and moved her hand down so he could wrap her fingers in his.

"You mind looking after that, Matt?"

Matt looked at Kyle and chuckled, "Pay up."

"Damn," Kyle groaned and handed over a currency chip.

"I don't want to know what that bet was about, do I?" Jenna sighed and shook her head.

"Nope. And I'll get Gareth moving." Matt winked at Jenna.

From out of nowhere, Rick moaned and dropped in a heap to the floor. Both Matt and Kyle had their pistols on him in a flash, but Ben knew it wouldn't be necessary. He could feel the alien's satisfaction and he knew it had exacted its revenge. Did what he would have done in his place—hurt the man who hurt his mate. Hurt the woman he loved.

"I don't think he's going to cause you any problems," Ben said softly.

As if to further add to Ben's point, Rick curled up into a ball on the floor, moaning.

"How about I take this garbage out for you?" Kyle said in an extremely cheery tone and radioed for some help. Within a few minutes, three armed police officers came and dragged Rick away.

Matt and Kyle drifted out of the room as well, leaving Ben finally alone with Jenna. He turned and pulled her into his arms.

"Gods, I was so scared. I thought he was going to kill you," he said and placed a single kiss on her temple.

She turned her face into his, her mouth igniting his body until he was shaking with need. He held his passion in check instead, wanting to show her how much he cared. How much he loved her.

Unrelenting, he drove his tongue into her mouth. Every repressed, pent-up scrap of love he'd ever felt for her, he poured into that kiss. He needed her. Now, next week,

forever. Jenna pulled back, her eyes wide and questioning. She ran a finger down the scar on his cheek.

"He can't hurt you anymore." She smiled and leaned in to kiss his scar.

"I know. You saved me."

Jenna chuckled. "I think we saved each other."

"Look, I know I'm not perfect. I can be an arrogant ass most of the time, but I swear I'll love you until you can't take any more."

He could tell from the shocked expression on her face he'd actually said it. It felt like a weight, a heavy burden was suddenly gone. Everything was okay for the first time in a long while.

"You love me?" she asked, her voice catching.

"I do," he said and brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"I love you too," she whispered and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest.

"As soon as Gareth gets the second half of the device here, I'm taking you home."

"He'll need help."

"And you'll be here. But after that, we're going into hiding. For at least a week."

Jenna shifted her body so her hip was pressed up hard against his stiff cock.

"Maybe two weeks," he muttered.

"Who am I to argue?" She raked her nails down his chest.

"I was hoping you would. That way I'd be able to tie you up to convince you."

Jenna chuckled. "Who am I to ruin your plans?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Jenna frantically combed her fingers through her hair, trying to make it look half decent. Ben would be back any second and she wanted her surprise to be ready. Her mind raced, unable or unwilling to settle. So much had happened in such a short time— gods had it only been a month since her life had changed completely?

She'd slept most of the day after she and Gareth managed to reunite the two sides of the device. Thankfully, the self-destruct deactivated. She'd actually felt the relief and satisfaction as the alien and his mate were reunited.

She shook her head as she looked at her image in the mirror. That had been two weeks ago now. At the time she'd talked to the alien, she didn't know what he'd meant by his offer to help. But with all of the changes, his intervention was the only explanation.

The soil around the escape pods was fertile.

Not just filled with tiny microbes, but rich with minerals that hadn't existed before. And it was spreading. The atmosphere inside the dome was changing too. As the soil

changed, more and more natural oxygen was being produced. She didn't know how he done it, but the alien had healed the planet. It was beginning to live again. They predicted at the current rate of transformation, there would be a breathable atmosphere outside the dome within twenty years.

Ben and Gareth then carefully took the device back to CalCorp. Until they could figure out a way to free the aliens, Ben wanted to make sure they were someplace safe. He would be back from his last meeting with Gareth, which marked the end of their project.

And the beginning of their future.

Jenna adjusted the tight leather bra and smoothed out the black silk skirt she had on. The bright red lipstick she had on seemed to stand out against her blonde hair. She hoped Ben would like it.

Not that she was going to give him any time to pay attention to her lips. Not for long at least.

The beeping of the security pad announced Ben's arrival home. Jenna ran from the bathroom, the clicking of her black thigh-high boots loud in their condo. She made it to the chair and placed her boot on it as Ben walked into the room.

"Jen, hon, I'm..."

She tried not to smile at the look of surprise on his face. "Welcome home."

"My, my, my." He whistled as he dropped his black leather jacket to the floor. "Who are you and what have you done with my wife?"

She still got a small chill every time he called her his wife. Even though they'd only been married a few days, she didn't think hearing those words would ever grow old.

"Your wife thinks you've been naughty and need to be punished."

Ben simply raised an eyebrow. Jenna knew he'd be more than happy to play along. Without wanting to give anything away, she sat down on the chair, leaning back and making sure to keep her legs open enough so he could see she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

"You're overdressed, Mr. Hawthorn. Take your shirt off."

She could see he was trying to play along and be serious, but his lips betrayed a smile. "Yes, ma'am."

Ben slowly, one by one, undid his buttons. Jenna wanted him to hurry up so she could see his gorgeous chest, but she resisted. Patience was important in their little game. When he reached the last button, he did smile at her, knowing she loved watching him strip. He shrugged the shirt from his well-defined arms and she watched it fall into a heap at his feet.

She looked her fill, drinking up every detail of his perfect body. He stood still for the most part, flexing the occasional muscle as her gaze landed on his body. His pecs were inviting and she wanted nothing more than to trail kisses over his body, down his tight abs until she could wrap her mouth around his cock.



"Now your pants," she somehow managed to say with a steady voice.

"As you wish."

It only took a second for him to push his pants to the floor, taking his underwear with them. His cock stood erect, thrusting straight up. Jenna felt her body react to his obvious arousal. She would have come on the spot with the slightest touch. But she wasn't done with her game quite yet.

"You bad boy. I didn't tell you to take your underwear off. Now you're going to be punished."

Ben looked rather serious as he stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his legs slightly apart. If he wasn't standing there naked, she could have believed he was running a board meeting.

"And what would you have me do, Mrs. Hawthorn?"

Jenna could think of hundreds of things she'd like to do to and with him. But considering the state of her desire, she wouldn't last long enough to fully enjoy any of those options. Instead, she beckoned him with her finger.

"Nice and slow," she commanded.

Again, she watched him fight for control over his emotions. His lips rose into a quick smile before he dropped it again and made his way over to her in slow measured steps. When he got to within a leg's length away, she held up her hand.

"That's far enough. I think it's time for you to get on your knees and do a little groveling."

"I'd hate to upset the mistress of the house."

He sank to the floor in front of her. At this height, Jenna had a clear view of his chest, his chest at the level of her pussy. She knew he could smell her arousal when he took a deep breath. The fact she knew he was aware of it was enough to drive her mad. Jenna squirmed in her seat, but was careful not to touch him.

"I don't hear your groveling," she teased and pressed her knees together.

The pressure of her thighs against her clit was almost too much for her. She squirmed again and felt a ping of pleasure radiate out from her cunt.

"Mrs. Hawthorn, I beg you to forgive me for...what have I done again?"

"For leaving your wife horny this morning when you went to work."

Ben smiled. "For leaving you all hot and bothered. As your humble servant, I want to do whatever it takes to make things right."

Jenna ran her hands down over her black bra, squeezing her breasts hard. Her nipples were tight buds, begging for Ben's touch. "It was very mean."

She sighed when he reached out and ran his hands up the front of her closed legs. The light silk of the skirt was easily pushed aside by his forearms as he continued up to her thighs, squeezing her sensitive skin.

"It was cruel, but I plan to set things right."

Before she could say anything to stop him, Ben slid his hands in between her thighs and pulled them apart. Jenna gasped at the possessiveness in his touch, at the barely contained desire. He leaned forward and, without touching her, breathed in her scent.

"Very cruel of me indeed."

Jenna stretched out her legs high enough to drape them over his shoulders. She'd been dreaming about this all morning. She tugged his body forward with enough pressure to convince him he didn't have any say in what came next.

*Ideally her.*

Knowing what she wanted, Ben allowed himself to be led to her moist pussy. He was able to slide his arms under her ass and pulled her to the edge of the chair. The scent of her cream was enough to make him come on the spot. Despite the pressure of her legs on his shoulders, he managed to keep his face an inch away from her swollen clit. Jenna groaned and tried to buck her hips up to connect with him.

"Ben," she moaned.

"Ben what?" he whispered, blowing as much hot air against her swollen and sensitive skin as he could.

"Lick me now," she ground out and bucked her hips again as if to punctuate her comment.

"As you command."

He pressed his tongue flat against her and licked a single long stroke from the wet opening of her pussy to her clit. Jenna moaned as she drove her hands into his hair. Ben repeated the motion, careful not to spend too much time in the one place he knew would push her over the edge. She tasted like heaven. Her happiness was the most important thing in the world to him. He'd enjoy showing her how much he loved her. Every day with every word, kiss and look. With every lick.

He could feel her clit swell under the constant pressure of his tongue. It wouldn't take much to push her over the edge. The desire to feel her come hard, to feel her legs squeeze his head won out over wanting to end his own sensual torture. Withdrawing his hand from under her ass, he reached up and pressed two fingers deep inside her hot cunt.

Jenna flexed her fingers in his hair and the muscles in her thighs began to tremble against his cheeks. Not wanting to bring her orgasm too quickly, he began to pump in and out of her slowly. He hooked his fingers inside her, teasing her well protected G-spot. Her hips joined the rhythm of his fingers, meeting them with each thrust, mimicking what he'd do her with his cock in a matter of minutes.

Her juices began to roll down his hand and arm as he continued to pump inside her. He bent his head down and circled her clit with his tongue, teasing her to the edge. When her muscles squeezed his fingers, he knew it was time. Ben sucked her clit hard into his mouth and began to furiously slam his fingers into her.

It was too much for Jenna. Her body seized up as the orgasm slammed into her,

exploding from her pussy until it touched every nerve in her body. Jenna cried out Ben's name and pulled his face hard against her as he continued to lick over and over until she couldn't breathe.

"Stop. Please stop."

She relaxed her leg enough to let him move his face from her pussy and place a trail of kisses along her stomach.

"Ben, I need you in me," she whispered.

He got to his feet and brought her with him. Before she knew what he was doing, he spun her around and sat down on the chair himself.

"Straddle me. I want to be able to watch you."

There were no games this time. They both needed to get as close to each other as possible. Jenna pulled up her skirt so she could straddle his lap. His cock was purple from the pressure, his balls pulled tight against the base of his shaft. It only took a second to position herself above his tip and slowly impale her body on him.

Once she had fully sunk down on him, her body swallowing up every last inch of him, Ben held her hips in place. She could tell by the expression on his face he was barely in control of himself. The ride would be sweet, but short.

When he finally opened his eyes, he focused in on her breasts. "Now why would you cover such a beautiful part of your body?"

He slipped his fingers under the cups of her bra, and in an easy motion, pulled it up to expose her hard, pink nipples. As she began to ride him, Ben leaned in and sucked one of the nipples into his mouth while he teased the other with his fingers. Instantly, Jenna felt a second orgasm building. The sensation of his tongue on her breast shot directly to her clit.

She tried to keep her pace steady, wanting to tease him the way he'd teased her, but they were both too far gone. She could feel his cock swell inside her, thickening and she continuously drove her body up and down. Ben leaned back in the chair to give himself enough leverage to buck up to meet her. The contact rubbed her clit and was enough pressure to push her over the edge.

Jenna felt her orgasm hit her, driving her body down hard onto him over and over. It proved too much for him. He released her breast and cried out, squeezing her nipple with his fingers as he came.

The echoes finally silenced in the room, the only sound remaining was the sound of their panting. A fine sheen of sweat covered both their bodies and Jenna felt herself begin to lose the battle with exhaustion. Who knew sex with the man you loved could wear a lady out?

"Let's get you to bed," he murmured against her breast, nuzzling her.

"Okay."

Without having her get up, Ben stood and carried her over to their bed. He set her gently down and climbed under the sheets with her. Before she could drift off, he

spooned her, draping an arm around her waist.

"I hope you don't plan on going anywhere tomorrow, or the next day, or the next year. I intend to keep you very busy, Mrs. Hawthorn."

"I can handle busy."

"But can you handle me?"

"Of course I can. I'm your perfect match."

## About the Author

It took Christine a lot longer than the average bear to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up. When she was home on maternity leave, she decided to take a stab at saving her sanity and sat down to write a romance novel. After dabbling with various sub-genres, she realized she really enjoyed creating strange new worlds and writing about sex. Whether due to the pregnancy hormones or sleep deprivation, she thought this was a great combination.

Many years later her kids are in school and she's back at her day job, but the writing bug is here to stay. When not torturing her characters, she's busy playing with her children or conducting "research" with her husband.

Christine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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