



# *The Diabolical Doctor Masters*

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# *Dedication*

To LB

## Prologue

The Federal Bioengineering Lab at Black Foot Mountain was a worse prison than the Intergalactic Penal Colony on Ackron Nine had been. For eight long years, Doctor Jason Masters had been a prisoner on that soulless, cesspool of a world, and for what? To be brought back to Earth and locked up in this claustrophobic top secret Federal Lab and pumped full of stimulants so he could work all day and night, only to be callously executed when his work here was done.

It wasn't that he claimed to be a decent man wronged by a corrupt system. No, he knew his sentence on Ackron Nine had been deserved. But working here on the Plan Nine project was akin to torture. And his misery was all but assured in the diabolical person of the man in charge, General Pellon.

Pellon made no secret of his hatred for Jason and seized with malicious glee any opportunity to make the doctor's life a living hell. Sometimes, he'd manipulate the temperature in the room so Jason had to sweat like a farm animal over his experiments. Other times, he'd just come in to taunt him and fill Jason with lies about how his success in perfecting the Plan Nine virus would mean fame and freedom from all this grueling work.

But Jason knew the truth.

He'd seen what had happened to the last scientist they'd housed here. One day, they'd just come in and mercilessly shot him in the head. And what had been his crime? Poor results. That was the only reason why that hopeless slob had been murdered like a sick dog.

"*There* you are, my boy," Pellon boomed, coming into the lab followed by a medical tech. "It's time for your pep shot."

Jason glared at Pellon. Very soon, things were about to change around here. Jason had just finished proofing the virus, and he had no intention of standing by and letting Pellon steal his new discovery only to be rewarded with a bullet to the brain. "I'll take the medication," he said, glancing at the tech, "but I want you to wait over there." Jason directed the General to the farthest point in the room.

Pellon shook his head, amused. He didn't look surprised. Jason made no secret of his loathing for the man.

"When are you going to stop hating me, Masters? Aren't you the least bit happy that I took you off that damned prison planet? Where's your gratitude, man?"

"Oh, I am grateful. I'm just a little shy about showing it." Jason rolled up his sleeve as the tech took the cap off the needle. The tech glanced up at Jason and must have read the expression on the doctor's face because he took a step back. But it was too late. Snatching the tech by the arm, Jason wrenched the injection away and squirted the contents onto the floor. Reaching into his lab coat, he pulled out a vial containing the virus, punctured the top, and filled it quickly. The tech shouted in alarm. Pellon ordered Jason to turn around and face the wall.

Jason ignored both of them.

Hauling the tech in front of him, Jason twisted the man around and used him as a human shield. He advanced on Pellon. The general had pulled his firearm and was screaming orders in hope that the volume of his voice alone would compel Jason to stop.

But, of course, it didn't.

When Jason was only two feet away, Pellon tried to shoot around the hostage and ended up striking the tech in the shoulder instead. *What a gutless scumbag.* Fearful that the next shot would kill the tech, Jason tossed him aside, wrenched the gun from the general, and injected him in the neck.

The tech's hysterical yelling filled the lab and drowned out the general's swearing.

Jason emptied the syringe into Pellon and let the general go. Frantic to find someone who could help, Pellon punched in the door code, scrambled out into the hall, and disappeared around a corner.

Jason held the pistol, waiting for security to come after him. A moment later, four security guards rounded a corner and slid to a stop when they spotted him armed. *Might as well give up. There's no way out of here.*

"Put the gun down, Masters," one of them said.

For a moment, Jason thought about putting the gun in his mouth, but then he dismissed it. The general would be starting to get sick very soon, and he didn't want to miss a single moment of it.

## Chapter One

He was leaving.

Suitcases, stuffed to capacity with clothes and personal items, sat on the bed.

Gloria Hobbs lowered herself to the edge of the mattress and sat chewing on her thumbnail. The small TV babbled to itself about the news while her personal life was quickly falling apart.

Robert emerged from the bathroom holding his toiletries. His handsome black face had the nerve to look relieved, and even a little happy. Admitting to herself he'd been planning this for a while was painful, but the harsh truth.

Robert placed the items on the bed and began packing them into yet another suitcase. "Is this about something I've done?" Gloria asked, unable to remove her gaze from the suitcases.

"No Gloria, you haven't done anything wrong. I just can't keep living a lie anymore, and I think it's best if I don't stay. It only hurts both of us."

"You never cared about hurting me. It's become good sport for you."

Robert took a break from packing and stared at her. "My leaving shouldn't come as a shock to you. We've been growing apart for years."

A vicious spark of fury filled her. "That's such a pathetic lie. This is about my infertility. Why can't you just come out and admit that? At least be brave enough to be honest about it."

"My leaving has nothing to do with that. We just don't have anything in common anymore. Perhaps we both work too many hours, perhaps there are other reasons. But whatever it is, nothing is going to change my mind. We're finished. I accept full responsibility for the failure of this relationship. Does that make you happy?"

Gloria got up and paced. If she didn't move, she was going to punch him in the face. "Bravo, Robert. Well played. I admire how fucking noble you are."

"Now you're just being ugly." Robert resumed packing. "I don't know what you want me to say here."

"I don't want you to say anything," Gloria said, her voice rising in anger. "I don't want you to spout sermons about the injustice of life. I don't want you to try and make me feel better. All I want is for you to get out!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way." He zipped up the suitcase he was working on and grabbed two off the bed. "I'll come by and get the rest of my stuff when you're not here." He marched through the house and headed for the front door.

“You don’t need to bother,” she shouted, following after him. “I’m changing the locks today, and you can find the rest of your stuff out by the Dumpster!” Gloria slammed the door behind him.

She returned to the master bedroom and flopped onto the bed. She tried to make herself cry, but nothing would come. Maybe deep down inside she was glad to be rid of him. Something on the news caught her attention. Groping for the remote, she turned to volume up higher and sat up.

The attractive Asian newscaster was talking about a dangerous scientist who’d been sentenced to the Ackron Nine prison planet a few years back. Gloria vaguely remembered him from watching the trial eight years ago. Behind the woman was a shot of a large mountain with a narrow road leading into a winding pass. The road was barred by a ten-foot chain-link fence crowned with razor wire and a guard house.

After a few fleeting shots of the checkpoint, and general questions from the male newscaster in the studio, the Asian reporter continued her report: “Our sources inform us that, despite attacking General Pellon, Doctor Masters is still the head of the top secret Plan Nine project. It’s unknown why the CIA would continue to use such a dangerous and unpredictable criminal for this project, but those close to the project content that Masters is essential personnel.”

Male newscaster: “Has anyone been able to tell you what the Plan Nine project is, Lynn?”

Asian reporter: “No, Jim. The project is very hush, hush, and even our close sources don’t know what’s going on. But one thing everyone we’ve spoken to seems to agree on is that is, whatever Plan Nine is, its gone way beyond what the CIA originally envisioned. Whether that’s bad or good still remains to be seen . . .”

## Chapter Two

Jason hated hospitals, which was ironic since he was a doctor. But even for doctors, hospitals were an acquired taste. Either you liked working in them or you didn't, and he definitely did not. But at least this particular hospital visit was promising to be a short one. All he had to do was secure the release of two very special cadavers and follow them to the research facility at Black Foot Mountain. Everything should go along fine as long as no one asked too many questions.

Following behind two tall CIA agents, Jason watched the scattering of frightened looks directed at him as they walked up to the nurse's station. He knew what they were staring at and he rubbed his neck self-consciously, wishing his collar were higher.

A plump Licensed Vocational Nurse with bleach blonde hair came up to them with a forced smile. Her white name tag said Emily Ross. Her expression was so artificial that it looked painful, and Jason wondered how long it'd been since the woman had had any fun at all. "Yes, can I help you?" she asked the agents. Her gaze flickered over to Jason, then darted away before their eyes met. She was openly terrified of him, which he expected. It wasn't everyday you got to be face-to-face with an off-world felon.

Cooper, the skinnier of the two agents, took off his sunglasses and squinted at Emily. "We're here for Jones and Hickory."

The nurse fidgeted with her ID card hanging from a lanyard around her neck. "The head nurse does all our releases and she's with a patient right now. She'll be with you mome—"

"We don't have time to wait," Cooper said, glancing at his watch. "We're on a tight schedule."

"I'm not authorized to release the bodies to you."

"There must be someone besides the head nurse who can authorize a release," the other CIA agent, Newsom, said.

Emily's smile disappeared. "I'm sorry, there isn't."

"Well, you're going to have to do it then," Cooper said.

"No," Emily said slowly as if Cooper was a foreigner that barely spoke English. "I will not. As I said before, you're going to have to wait for the head nurse, Miss Hobbs."

Jason liked Emily. She was ballsy. How could you not admire a woman who told the CIA to fuck off in so many words? He decided to help the CIA boys out. They weren't doing too well on their own. Emily may not like him, but he knew how to talk to her to get things done. "Nurse Ross, could you please inform Head Nurse Hobbs that we are waiting for her to release the remains of Jones and Hickory?"



Her hazel eyes snapped over to Jason and quickly eyed him up and down. Her gaze paused on the prison numbers tattooed in dark green metallic ink on his neck. He waited for her to look him in the eye, but she didn't. Instead, she took a step back and said, "Yes, Doctor Masters."

Emily retreated down the hall, her rubber soles squeaking in her wake.

Cooper turned around and stared at Jason, grinning. "Wow. That got her moving. I can't believe people still remember your name. How long has it been since you were shipped off to Ackron Nine? Seven, eight years?"

A mild nausea settled in the bottom of Jason's stomach. "Yes, something like that."

"Was it worth it to you?" Cooper asked.

Jason didn't reply. He didn't have any interest in talking about that cursed prison planet and what he'd done to get there.

Emily emerged from a patient's room followed by another attractive black woman that Jason assumed must be the head nurse. She wasn't classically pretty, but perhaps a better word to describe her was handsome. The head nurse had a perfect bone structure. High cheekbones, sculptured temples made all the more alluring by dark brown eyes, and the most kissable, full lips he'd ever seen. Her thick, wavy brown hair was pulled back into a single ponytail that didn't capture the smaller curly lock in front. She walked with a swift, certain step, listening to Emily and nodding as both women shot looks at the CIA agents and him. Nurse Hobbs stopped abruptly in front of them, impatiently trying to drape the rebel lock of hair behind her ear. Her dark brown eyes flashed with her annoyance.

"What seems to be the problem, gentlemen?" she said, fixing her gaze on Jason like he'd started the whole thing. God, she was sexy in a very hard, no-nonsense way. He wanted to peel her clothes off with his teeth.

"We're here to pick up the remains of the two transients that died yesterday," Jason said, looking for an excuse to talk to her. "Their names are Jones and Hickory."

"I know that," she said, her voice holding a knife edge. "But why couldn't you wait until I was finished with my patient?"

Jason wasn't taking the rap for that. He looked at Cooper, and the head nurse's gaze followed his over to the agent. "We have a schedule—" the CIA agent began.

"Is that right? Well, Agent, what is your name, please?"

"Cooper," the unfortunate man offered.

"Agent Cooper, this may come as a shock to you, but I have a schedule to follow too. Most of these patients have serious illnesses that require constant monitoring and follow-up. The two subjects you have come to collect are no longer in need of those services. Now, that

being said, I am happy to assist you as soon as I'm done with my rounds. Why don't you take a seat and I'll be with you shortly?"

Jason shook his head and grinned. "We'd be happy to, Nurse Hobbs." The woman met Jason's gaze, and a hunger roared to life inside him. He wanted to run his tongue along her sweet cocoa cheeks and bury himself in her inviting heat. She glanced at the ground, and he knew he'd frightened her with his open lust. *Damn.*

"You can call me Gloria, Doctor Masters." She turned and stormed off down the hall, her white tennis shoes squeaking on the waxed linoleum.

Jason touched his tongue to his upper lip, imagining what a woman like that would be like in bed. "Gloria it is then," he whispered.

"I think she likes you," Agent Cooper said.

"Yeah? Maybe. But then I wasn't the one trying to be a prick to her," Jason countered.

### Chapter Three

Gloria marched back into the patient's room, relieved to see the other nurse had finally been able to sedate him. She checked his vital signs and frowned. They were still unusual, but at least the patient looked comfortable. Anna, the patient's assigned nurse, was checking the IVs to make sure everything was flowing as it should.

"What was that whole exchange in the hall about?" she asked Gloria.

"Believe it or not, two of those men are CIA agents," Gloria said, staring at the sleeping patient without really seeing him.

"Who's the third?"

Gloria folded her arms and leaned against the wall. "Doctor Jason Masters."

Anna gasped, putting her hand over her mouth as if to muffle her own voice. "You've got to be shitting me. Are you sure it's him?"

Gloria nodded slowly. "It's him all right. I followed the trial a few years back."

"Why would the CIA and Doctor Masters be here together?" Anna said, moving over to close the patient's door a little. Gloria was glad. She didn't want to be overhead gossiping about Masters either.

"I don't know, but it can't be good."

"Do you think the government is planning to experiment on us?"

"Don't be silly, Anna. Of course not," Gloria said. "But I'll bet all this has everything to do with the strange, violent cases we've been getting in here over the past few days."

"Why do you think that?" Anna asked, her eyes turning wide and round.

"Because they came to collect those two homeless men in the cooler. I'm sure you remember them. They were the aggressive ones with the strange vital signs who died of undetermined causes."

"What would the CIA want with a pair of vagrants?"

"That's the million-dollar question." Gloria unfolded her arms and slipped out the door. She stayed by the nurses' station for a few minutes, stealing looks at Jason and wondering what he had to do with all this. She dreaded the answer. *Should I take them to the bodies, or call one of the doctors to deal with this?* Finally, she sighed and shook off her fear. Masters must have something to offer the CIA or they certainly wouldn't have brought him here. With a crackle, the intercom called one of the doctors to the Emergency Room. Probably another crazy homeless person coming in off the street. But how did all this fit together with Masters and the CIA? Boy she'd love to have some answers.

Well, she guessed she was about to find out. After grabbing the keys to the cooler, she marched over to Masters and the CIA men. Without saying a word, she signaled them to follow.

\* \* \* \*

The hospital morgue was a small, bright, nondescript place with four gurneys lined up against the wall. The pungent stench of cold rot assaulted Jason's nose, but he ignored it. Cooper walked forward and lifted up the sheet on the first man. He compared it to a photo he had in his pocket.

Jason yawned and turned his attention to Gloria, who was standing stiffly by the steel door. She looked kind of wound up, like she was about to jump out of her skin at any moment. Her dark eyes darted over to him and he locked his gaze with hers. A blush darkened her cheeks, but she didn't look away.

"What do you want them for anyway?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Newsom said with a weak smile. "We're not at liberty to discuss that."

She shot the CIA man a sharp look. It wasn't unlike an annoyed school teacher when a child speaks out of turn. "I wasn't asking you. I was asking him," she said, lifting her chin at Jason.

Cooper covered up the first body and moved on to the second. "He can't tell you anything either."

"It's kind of Top Secret," Jason said. "If I say anything in front of the Feds they'll throw me back in jail. But maybe I could come by another time and fill you in on all the details. What days do you work?"

Gloria blinked at him, surprised by both his off-handed pass and his open defiance.

"No, you will not fill her in another time," Cooper barked, checking the other body's identity. "Or we'll send you back to prison, Masters."

Jason felt a dark current of rage ooze into his blood. No one told him what to do or how to do it. "You're not going to do that," he said to Cooper in his most acid tone. "Because if you did, you wouldn't have anyone to solve your little problem, now would you? And what will the good citizens of this city do without a solution to their problem? Why I'll tell you what they'll all do, they will . . ." Jason paused, looking for the right words. "They'll get sick, won't they, Agent Cooper? Yes, very, very sick."

Gloria folded her arms and glared at Agent Cooper. "What does he mean by that? Is there something going on that we should be preparing for?"

"No, there isn't." Newsom chuckled and shook his head. "He's just trying to spook you, Nurse Hobbs. Doctor Masters is very much a bogeyman at heart. He just *loves* to scare people. If I were you, I wouldn't pay much attention to him."

Jason looked Newsom in the eye for a full minute before speaking. Sweat broke out on the agent's upper lip. "Agent Newsom isn't afraid of very much, Gloria," Jason said. "And he's certainly not afraid of me. That's why he's changed the alarm code on his house three times since I've come back from Nine."

Agent Cooper walked in between them, adjusting his suit jacket. "Who wouldn't be cautious around you, Masters? As far as I'm concerned, you're a certifiable nut job. I don't blame Agent Newsom one bit for changing those codes. Hell, I've changed my own a few times, too."

"If Doctor Masters is so dangerous, why did you bring him back from Ackron Nine?" Gloria said. Her forehead wrinkled with worry.

"Because I'm the one who started all the trouble to begin with, but I'm the only one who can stop it," Jason said.

"What kind of trouble are you talking about, Doctor Masters?" Gloria asked.

Jason wanted to lie to her, to tell her he was only joking and that everyone she knew and loved was safe, but he couldn't. Even if she despised him, which he was sure she already did, he had to tell her the truth. He licked his lips and said, "A terrible kind of trouble, Gloria, end-of-the-world type stuff, wrath of God—"

"Okay, Doctor, I'm sure she gets the picture." Newsom rushed over to Jason to shut him up. When he was only a few feet away, he reached out and placed his hand on Jason's shoulder to forcibly escort him out. But Newsom hadn't count on the years of hand-to-hand fighting Jason had perfected on Ackron Nine. Grabbing the agent by the arm, Jason stepped into his opponent's body, twisted the arm, and brought Newsom to the floor on his back. The agent's eyes flashed white as he panicked and fought to get up, but Jason was already on him with his knee resting on the agent's windpipe.

Cooper pulled his automatic from a holster under his arm. "Hold it right there, Masters!"

"Stop it!" Gloria shouted, startled by all the violence. He couldn't blame her. This was supposed to be a routine body pick up and now it had become a testosterone-fueled showdown.

Jason let Newsom get to his feet. "Don't ever put your hands on me again, got that, Newsom?"

Newsom ignored him and glanced at Cooper. "I'm okay. Put that thing away."

Cooper glared at Jason. "I ought to put a hole in you, Masters."

"Am I supposed to be scared now? Piss myself perhaps?" Jason asked.

A muscle twitched near Cooper's eye. "You know what, Masters? You're a royal bag of shit, you know that?"

"I've had enough of *all* of you!" Gloria said. "Collect the bodies you came here for and get the hell out of my hospital! If you're not out of here in ten minutes, I'm calling security to have you thrown out. I don't give a crap who you work for."

"I'm sorry about the craziness, Gloria," Jason said.

"I don't care about any of that right now, just please go!"

"May I meet you somewhere for coffee sometime?" Jason asked.

Gloria's stare told him the answer wasn't just no, but probably when-hell-freezes-over no. "I don't think so, Doctor. Now, please get your government secret agents and leave us in peace."

Jason nodded. She just needed some time to cool off. "Okay, Gloria, we'll take the bodies and leave. But if you're looking for peace and quiet, I'm afraid you won't get much of that. In fact, I think we can guarantee there won't be any kind of peace in your future at all."

## Chapter Four

Gloria sat in the break room of Linden Memorial Hospital sipping a cup of coffee and reading *People Magazine*. So far, the most interesting articles were about a young woman's daily struggle with her primordial dwarfism and an old actor's heroic battle with testicular cancer. She found the woman's story heartening and uplifting, but the man's story was a letdown, ending in a cryptic editorial note about his untimely death. Isn't that what they always said about a long-suffering death? That it was untimely?

She stared into her coffee cup, watching the powdered creamer form creamy swirls in the center. Gina, one of the LVNs from her section, came in humming a happy tune. She waltzed over to the soda machine and plopped some coins in.

Gloria closed her magazine. "I thought you'd sworn off soda?"

Gina popped the top and came over to sit across from her. Taking a sip, she raised and lowered her eyebrows. "Some habits are hard to break."

"Two more hours and I'm off for three days," Gloria said, glancing at her watch.

"You'll sleep for the first day, run around packing your stuff on the second to get ready to come back to work on the third. So, really, you only have one day off." Gina smirked.

"Ever the optimist."

"Been on any good dates lately?" Gina said, twisting her can on the tabletop.

"No. Why, have you?"

"You betcha," Gina said, leaning across the table. Her eyes sparkled. "I went out with Jason Masters last night."

Gloria stared at her friend. Her mouth went desert dry. *She's got to be messing with me. That man is a certifiable lunatic.* "You mean Doctor Jason Masters of Ackron Nine fame?"

Gina nodded slowly, pleased with the shock value of her revelation. She sipped her drink. "The one and only."

"Why?"

Gina shrugged. "Because he asked me, and I was curious. I had a lot of questions to ask him."

"Did going out with him answer all those questions you had?"

"I don't know," Gina said thoughtfully. "But I can tell you he's one *hell* of a great lay. He tied my wrists to the bed and blindfolded me. Fucking like that is *very* cool. You should try it. I don't think I've ever come that hard before in my life."

Gloria thought her ears were going to bleed. She had heard enough. *Ugh, some people just don't have any boundaries at all.* She held up her hand to ward off any more unsolicited information. "That's great, Gina. I'm happy for you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work."

"But wait," Gina said. "I haven't told you the best part."

"I don't think I want to know what the best part is."

"I'll bet you do," Gina said in a sing song voice.

Gloria folded her arms. "Okay, what?"

"After we had sex a few times and were bumming around his house, he started asking me a lot of questions about you." Gloria opened her mouth to ask what kind of questions, but Gina silenced her with a waving hand in the air. "He even remembered your first and last name."

The fact that Masters remembered her name after two days had passed didn't surprise her much. He was a doctor, after all, and a gifted scientist, even if his methods and philosophies were quite sinister. He probably had a ton of information memorized in that crowded brain of his. No, Masters knowing her name didn't creep her out, but asking all kinds of questions about her did. "What kinds of things did he ask you?"

"He asked me what your schedule was, if you'd ever been married, if you had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. He asked me how long you had been working here, what time of night you got off, and the coup de grâce—he asked me where you lived."

"What did you tell him?"

Gina finished her soda and tossed the can all the way across the room into an open trash can. "Nothing, of course. I said you mostly kept to yourself and I didn't know much about you at all."

"Do you think he believed you?"

"No," Gina said.

Gloria could remember those mysterious brown eyes cutting into her like knives, slicing their way into her soul. She couldn't recall saying or doing anything to give him the impression she was interested in him. A shudder quaked along her shoulders. "Just great. I wonder if I should notify the police."

"Don't worry, Gloria. I think he got the hint."

"He probably just wants to fuck his way through all the nurses. Some doctors get off like that."



With an exaggerated shrug Gina tossed her hands in the air, then she got up. It clearly didn't bother her what his motives were. She'd had her fun. She started her march to the door when Emily suddenly burst into the room. Emily had been moving so fast she almost slammed Gina in the nose.

Emily's breast heaved like she'd been running for miles. "We've got a really agitated patient on our hands, and we could use some help out here!"

Gina and Gloria bolted out into the hall to the sounds of excited screaming and the metallic scent of fresh blood.

## Chapter Five

Gloria emerged into a passageway filled with melee and violence. Straight in front of her was the patient, his eyes rolling around in his head like a panicked horse. Next to him on either side were two security guards trying without success to force the man back down onto the gurney so they could restrain him with straps. Standing against the wall were two nurses and the attending doctor, William Goldstein. His white hair, a little too long for a man his age, stood up on parts of his head as if someone had grabbed two great handfuls and pulled hard. His pale blue eyes met hers, and Gloria saw something there that she'd never seen before. Fear.

She marched up to a nearby resident doctor and said, "What the hell is going on here?"

"I'm not sure," the young man confessed. "The patient came into the emergency room with only a human bite, but once we got him to a room, he just exploded."

Doctor Goldstein hurried over to them. "This man needs a psychiatrist. He is way out of line with my expertise. Surely there must be someone on call who can prescribe an antipsychotic to calm him down."

Gloria rushed over to where the struggle was in full swing. Everyone was yelling. The patient was screaming about his rights, the security guards were shouting about the patient going to jail if he didn't stop fighting, and the nurses were barking for the man to calm down. It sounded like a lunatic asylum. Gloria looked at one of the nearby nurses. "What is this man's name?"

"Zackary Smith," she replied, shouting over the din.

"Mister Smith," Gloria shouted over everyone. "My name is Gloria Hobbs, and I need you to calm down and listen to me for a moment, please."

Zackary stopped fighting, but didn't relax. The security guards continued to hold him. He stared at Gloria like she was the second coming of Christ.

"Thank you," she said in a softer tone. "Now, I need you to do exactly what I say. I want you to allow these people to take you to a room and wait there with these men." She gestured to the guards. "Then I need you to be still while the doctor examines your wound so we can help you. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Zackary stared at her without blinking. "I was bitten."

"We know that, Mister Smith, and we're trying to help you. But we need you to cooperate with us."

"My wife bit me."

Gloria nodded patiently. Perhaps when he said what he needed to, he would go back to the exam room peacefully. "Would you like me to take a look at your injury?"

“You can look, but it won’t do no good. I’ve already been bitten,” he said. His hands were trembling.

Gloria took a few cautious steps forward. “I can give you medicine for the pain and to prevent infection.”

The man held his arm out to her, and Gloria had to force herself not to pull back. The injury was more serious than she’d first thought. It was badly bruised with angry black stripes and about the size of a baseball. A deep bite was clearly visible. “How long ago did this happen?”

“Yesterday.”

Gloria turned the arm to get a better view of the bite when Zackary lunged forward and tried to bite her in the face. Letting go of his arm, she stumbled back amid the alarmed shouts of the guards. She had heard Zackary’s teeth snap shut inches from her cheek.

“Oh my God! Are you all right?” one of the nurses asked.

Gloria nodded, shaken. “I’m good, really. Better take him to a maximum security room and I’ll call the psychiatrist on duty.”

Doctor Goldstein threw the man’s file on the ground and kicked it to the wall. “I’m not going to examine a homicidal patient! This is madness, Nurse Hobbs!”

She wanted to be angry over his outburst, but she could hardly blame him. “I know, I know. I’ll have him taken to the psych ward as soon as they come for the evaluation. You can just observe. Let the psych nurses deal with the bite on his arm.”

## Chapter Six

If Gloria had had her way, she never would have set eyes on Jason Masters again. But that apparently wasn't how the cosmic universe wanted to play things. And so here he was, standing before her in an enclosed office, telling her things about Zackary Smith that didn't make any sense.

"Now let me get this straight," she said, paraphrasing what he'd just said to her. "You and the CIA have taken custody of Mister Smith, but you can't tell me why or what's really wrong with him." She didn't bother to keep the contempt out of her tone. "By whose authority are you taking him?"

Jason's dark eyes sparkled with demonic intelligence. "The president."

"Of the United States?" she asked to clarify.

"That's right."

She nodded grimly. Ever since she'd met Jason, the world had gotten kookier. "I should have expected as much." She wanted to believe him, she really did, but this whole thing was starting to sound like the plot of a bad B-Movie.

"I also need a favor from you."

Gloria blinked at him. "And what would that be? Do I need to take an oath and sign it in blood to keep silent about all this?"

Jason smiled briefly and it took the edge off her tension. "I need you to report any and all human bites to me immediately."

Gloria folded her arms and shifted her weight to another foot. Enough was enough. "You need to tell me what's going on here, Jason." She glanced at her watch. "I should have been gone three hours ago, but I stayed because you said you had something important to discuss. Well, I waited, and all you've handed me so far is your secret government mumbo jumbo and I'm not in the mood. So cough it up. What the hell is *really* going on here?"

Jason stared at her for a full minute, those dark brown eyes so intent they seemed to be reading into her soul. He was a handsome man with black hair and olive skin the color of desert sand. If Gloria had to venture a guess, she would swear he had a hint of Middle Eastern ancestry. Then, he broke eye contact and walked over to lock the office door. "What I tell you cannot leave this room, is that understood?"

"Okay," Gloria said, feeling the flesh on the back of her neck crawl.

"The CIA brought me back from prison for a very specific project. The project was called Plan Nine, and it involved the creation of a special chemical compound for use by the military. In order for me to earn a presidential pardon, I was to create a virus that cheated death by resurrecting those that have recently died. I believe the military's plan was to create

an army of super soldiers that could never be killed. Anyway, as per our agreement, I created the virus for them, but then something went terribly wrong. One of the junior scientists I was working with snuck into the lab one night and stole a sample of Plan Nine to sell to a pharmaceutical company.”

Gloria shook her head, trying to cut him off. “Jason, you can’t really expect me to believe that—”

Jason’s gaze hardened, cold as black ice. “Let me finish. The scientist didn’t quite make it to his rendezvous, however, because something happened to him and that experimental vial of Plan Nine. His car was found smashed in a ditch with the engine still running, but the scientist and the virus sample were gone.”

“How long ago was this?”

“A week ago, and crazy stuff has been happening ever since,” Jason said. “We think the scientist was badly injured in the crash and, in ignorance, took the virus to save himself long enough for help to arrive.”

The room suddenly seemed much too quiet and small. Gloria reached into her pocket and took out a piece of gum to combat her dry mouth. She thought about offering some to Jason, but then decided this disaster was his fault and he didn’t deserve any kindnesses. “So, what did the virus do to him?”

“We don’t know.”

“You think the two dead men, Jones and Hickory, were somehow infected?”

“We know they were.”

“But they were dead, I saw them. They were most definitely dead,” she protested, wanting desperately to be right.

“They came to life in the van while we were taking them back to the lab,” Jason said matter-of-factly.

“You almost seem to be enjoying this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I feel horrible over what’s happened, but I would remind you, Gloria, that this wasn’t something I chose to do. This was my assignment, and I carried it out to the best of my ability.”

“To the detriment of the human race!” she said, walking away from him to stare out the window.

“I can’t take back what’s happened. All I can do is try to reverse what’s already been done,” he said coolly. A few silent moments passed between them. “Will you help me?”

Gloria sighed and turned to meet his penetrating gaze. “I feel like an accomplice to murder. But yes, I’ll help you. I’ll help you every way I can.”

## Chapter Seven

Doctor Masters had always been an outsider. Labeled a genius at the age of five, he was graduating college with a degree in advanced biochemistry by the time most kids were getting their first kiss. When most teens were learning how to drive, Jason was writing ground-breaking articles on restorative cellular biology for *Scientific Review*. There were even rumors among academics that he was a shoe-in for a Nobel Prize. As if his astounding accomplishments weren't enough, he continued his studies in his late teens, earning a PhD and an MD in the same year. Jason was certainly a brilliant mind by anyone's definition.

But no gift comes without its share of difficulties, and so it was for the good doctor. Jason, as it turned out, was desperately lonely. Absent by choice from the normal teen hangouts while growing up, Jason had no idea how to befriend anyone. His shyness became debilitating to the point where, in his twenties, he couldn't carry on a conversation with anyone that didn't have something to do with math or science. Needless to say, that didn't make him very popular with the ladies.

According to his biographer, Jason's struggles with his social shortcomings plunged him into a deep depression until, finally, he decided not to leave his home at all. He resolved to live alone and care for his frail, elderly mother. Instead of going to parties or other social affairs, he filled his time from morning to night with work.

Life continued on that way until his mother was diagnosed with incurable cancer. Jason became determined to save her. Hiring homeless off the street and bribing local prostitutes, he started using real people for his experiments. Of course, he chose his subjects well, often hiring people no one would miss, those with high-risk lifestyles. Even if they tried to tell the police what was going on in Jason's lab, it wasn't likely they'd be listened to.

Then his mother passed away, and while removing the body, the paramedics saw the lab and had quite a story to tell police about Jason's unusual home. When the police arrived to investigate, they found the bodies of several subjects buried out back.

Jason was arrested, tried, and sentenced to the prison planet of Ackron Nine for life. The newspapers, nicknaming him the Diabolical Doctor Masters, vilified him and his work.

Gloria took a sip of water and closed the biography resting the thick book on her lap. How could such a brilliant life turn out so twisted? She pulled a throw over her shoulders and couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for the man. Perhaps if he'd had someone in his life other than his mother, he might not have made the devastating choices he had. She wasn't excusing what he'd done, but it seemed like such a shame that a man with so much potential had wasted his talent hurting people.

Glancing at her watch, she felt a nervous flutter tickled her belly. And he was coming here tonight to tell her more about Plan Nine. A part of her wanted to bar the door and not let him in, but she had to meet and talk with him. She wanted, not to forgive him, but to understand his crimes, for her own peace of mind.

A heavy knock sounded at the door. Gloria tossed off the throw and put the biography in the bookcase behind a volume on Greek mythology. She came to the door with a tiny kernel of panic nestled in the back of her mind. *I should just pretend I'm not here.* Reaching out for the knob, she was surprised to see her hand trembling. Gloria gripped the knob so tight that despite her dark skin, her flesh paled. Then, she twisted it, and let Jason Masters into her life and home.



## Chapter Eight

Gloria opened the front door and stepped back to let Jason in. He could feel her anger bubbling under her calm exterior. She was furious with him, and she had every right to be under the circumstances. He was responsible for unleashing a terrible thing onto the world, and there was no easy way to stop it.

Jason walked inside, tensing under her severe glare. He strolled to the center of the living room and waited for her to invite him to sit down. A nervous sweat dampened his temples.

“Won’t you sit down?” she said, taking a seat in a plush side chair.

Jason stalked over and sat on the couch. A heated fantasy filled his head of making love to Gloria on this couch. She was moaning and clutching his shoulders as he buried his cock deep inside her over and over again, holding off his pressing orgasm until she was screaming out her passion to the ceiling. Jason let a tiny grin curl the side of his mouth.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

Gloria played with a small loose thread on the chair arm. “I just finished reading your unauthorized biography.”

Jason’s stomach iced over. “I wouldn’t believe everything I read.”

“It said you were shy, but you don’t seem that way to me.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Like I said . . .” Rubbing the back of his hand across his upper lip, he noticed how dry his mouth had become. “Could I get a glass of water?”

Gloria got up and walked stiffly into the kitchen. She cast a sideways glance at him as she passed. He knew that look. He’d seen it many times before, and he knew right away that she hated and feared him.

Just like all the rest.

It was a mistake coming here. All she wanted to do was interrogate him about his crimes.

She returned and handed him a tall glass of ice water. He took it from her and swallowed several big sips, then placed the glass on the table. The room was so tense that he half expected Gloria to start screaming at him, accusing him of being responsible for all the world’s ills. Well, if he was going to be on trial, they might as well get right to it.

“You must have a million questions. Most people do. What do you want to ask me?”

Gloria leaned forward in her chair, her lips very tight. “How could you experiment on those people like that? What were you thinking?”

“I was trying to find a cure for cancer,” he said, calmer on the outside than he felt. A furious resentment built in his soul, threatening to claw its way from his insides. “You know the disease that kills millions of people around the world every year? You know what I’m talking about—it’s the disease that drains the vitality from people one venomous inch at a time.” He gave her a hard stare. “Yeah, you know the one. You’ve probably treated enough patients with it.”

“Even though your cause was noble doesn’t mean you can use people as Guinea pigs! I don’t even understand how you could bring yourself to do such a thing,” she said, her voice trembling.

Jason had had enough. He got up and went over to where she sat, taking her hands in his. Gloria stared at him with eyes glassy with terror. *It was definitely a big mistake coming here.* “Gloria, listen to me,” he said, trying to soothe her. “I’m not trying to minimize what I did, but the people I picked up off the street were dying anyway. They just didn’t know it yet. Isn’t it better that they died for something?”

Gloria pulled her hands away. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

Jason held up his palms in surrender. “Okay, I was wrong, and I’m truly sorry for it. But I served my time on Ackron Nine for the crimes I committed. All I want is to put the past behind me and move forward.”

“You were supposed to be put away for life and now, eight years later, you’re out. I hardly call that serving your time. And as far as moving forward goes . . .” Gloria rose from her chair. “You’ve put the human race in danger of extinction with your infernal experiments!”

“I might remind you that creating the virus wasn’t *my* idea. I also wasn’t the one who stole it in search of a big, fat profit. I am, however, one of the few people trying to make things right, for all that’s worth. But that’s really hard to do because everyone wants to keep dwelling on my past mistakes. You, the hospital, the CIA. And you know what? I’m fucking sick of it.” Feeling like his guts had been kicked out, he walked toward the door. He had to face it. She hated him, she had before she’d invited him here, and she would after he was gone. Talking to her was a hopeless waste of time.

“This isn’t how I wanted this to go,” Gloria said.

Jason ignored her and grabbed the doorknob.

“Please don’t leave,” she said softly.

He turned around. “Why not?”

“Because I meant what I told you. I want to help.”

“You don’t need me,” he said. “Why not contact the CIA yourself and volunteer that way?”

“Because you fascinate me and I want to learn more about you.”

Jason laughed. *How very interesting.* “Okay, I’ll tell you all about Plan Nine and let you assist me in finding an antidote. But there’s just one small thing I want in return.”

Gloria blinked at him. “Anything, you name it.”

Jason prowled over and stopped in front of her. “I want to make love to you my way.” Placing one hand behind her neck, he pulled her into a dark, demanding kiss. Then, he broke the kiss and took a step back to give her a moment to collect her thoughts.

“I don’t know . . .” She cast her gaze at the floor.

He brushed his lips against her cheek. “I can teach you so many things about my work, Gloria. You can become a part of something fantastic. Just picture it. You can help me save the world.”

“Why me? Why do you want me?”

He grinned. “I want you because you’re strong and intelligent. I love those qualities in you. And I think you’re turned on by me being a mad scientist.”

Gloria chuckled. “You *are* the strangest man I’ve ever met.”

“Let me show you how strange. I promise you, you’ll love it. Just do exactly as I tell you.”

“Well . . . maybe. Okay,” she whispered. “Where do you want me?”

Jason glanced at the couch and felt his cock grow stiffer. “Right here will do nicely.”

## Chapter Nine

Gloria's brow furrowed as he drew closer. Taking her cheeks in his hands, he leaned forward and placed a soft, wistful kiss on her lips. "Don't be afraid of me," he said, trying to comfort her. "I would never hurt you."

"I wish I could believe that," she whispered.

He chuckled, and it came out as a deep rumbling in his chest. "What possible reason could I have to hurt you?"

"Do you need one? Surely a man who's served as long as you on a prison planet would be capable of all kinds of cruelties."

Sliding his hand behind her neck, he pulled her into another gentle kiss. "I'm very attracted to you, Gloria. The last thing I would do is be mean to you." He smiled playfully. "Even if you do have it coming."

She stiffened. "Why would I have it coming?"

"Because I think you invited me here to put me on trial all over again. I told you, I served my time. Whatever I was in the past is gone now. All I want is to find an antidote for Plan Nine and reverse this horrible accident. Frankly, I'm surprised by your mistrust. I thought you wanted to help me."

Gloria shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jason, you're right. And I do want to help. I guess you just intimidate me. I mean, what other person could have dreamed of bringing back the dead, let alone create a virus that could actually do it? It all makes you seem so—"

"Unnatural?"

She smiled for the first time, and his heart felt lighter. "Yeah, maybe that's the word I was looking for."

"I'm not a monster. I'm just a man like any other." He brushed his lips back and forth against hers. "Kiss me, Gloria."

Yielding to him, she relaxed a little and surrendered to his tender kisses. Her lips became soft as rose petals, pillowing his hungry mouth and tempting his desire. "I don't know what you want with me. I never would have imagined I was your type."

"Just this." Jason took her hand and led Gloria to the couch. She moved slowly at first, reluctantly, like a woman being coaxed into a dark, forbidden room. Then, she relaxed enough to sit down.

Grabbing the hem of her shirt, Jason lifted it off her body to reveal large, round breasts. Unhooking her bra, he took one nipple into his mouth, tracing his tongue around the areola. Gloria gasped in delight and ran her fingers through his hair.

She surrendered to him in millimeters, letting her guard down one item of clothing at a time until she was naked and breathless before him. Leaning into her, he pushed her down onto the couch cushions, exploring and teasing her with his mouth and tongue. He wrapped her shirt around her wrists, binding them, and held them above her head with one hand as he kissed her.

Her scent grew heavy, musky with the depth of her hunger, and when he ran his fingers through the luxury of her folds, he knew she was ready. Then, he also removed his clothing, letting her help. Her touch was warm and gentle delighting him with caresses as pure and uncertain as a virgin.

Gloria was the most attractive woman he'd ever laid eyes on.

Jason knew it right away. He was gone. He was in love.

Gloria arched her back and moaned. "Come into me, Jason," she said with a note of heartbreaking tenderness.

Jason pushed her thighs as far apart as the couch would allow and nestled his hips into the decadent valley between her legs. His swollen tip found her center and speared through her body into the sweet void of carnal joy. Gloria cried out his name, a tender song of submission and hunger that fueled him to search for every and any way that would delight her.

They made love for over two hours, eventually abandoning the couch for her bedroom, until they were awoken by the annoying buzz of her bedside alarm.

## Chapter Ten

Gloria knew something was terribly wrong at the hospital when they called her to come in because they were short staff. In Gloria's ten years of working there, her supervisor had never called her on her day off. The hospital was famously well run. Workdays had plenty of staff, so whatever was happening now, it obviously needed a lot more trained people to handle it than they usually had on hand. That couldn't be good news.

"Who was that?" Jason said, sitting up in bed.

"My supervisor. I have to go into work," she replied, rushing into the bathroom to shower. She left the door open in case he wanted to talk once she emerged. He'd probably have a lot of questions she didn't know the answer to.

Gloria showered quickly and came out with a towel wrapped around her. She hurried to the dresser and picked out some clothes, got dressed, and rushed into the kitchen to grab a bite. From years of practice getting ready for work fast, Gloria was clean, dressed, and ready to race out the door by the time Jason emerged from the bedroom. He'd showered too and combed his dark hair back from his face, which accentuated how diabolically handsome he was. Dressed, he ambled over to the breakfast nook. She had prepared him a bagel and a cup of coffee.

Jason sat down. "I'd like to go with you."

"To the hospital? I don't think you'd be welcome there. They're already scared to death of you. Besides," she said, pausing to glance at her watch and sip her coffee, "why do you want to come with me? I'm sure it's nothing."

"Is it normal for them to call you in on your day off?" he asked. He wolfed down his bagel and chased it with scalding coffee without wincing. *What a strange man.*

"No."

"Then I'm not comfortable with you going there by yourself." She opened her mouth to protest when he held up his hand to ward her objection off. "How about this? Why don't I sit in the cafeteria patio? No one's likely to object to me being there, and I'll be close if you need me."

Gloria shook her head. "I think you're being paranoid and silly, but okay." She glanced at her watch. "But we have to go now."

\* \* \* \*

When Gloria came onto the floor, she was struck by how chaotic it was. Doctors, some she didn't even recognize as from this hospital, were rushing around giving orders to staff and nervously reading handheld computerized patient charts. Gloria stopped at the nurse's station and wished her stomach would stop twisting. *I've had nerves before, but nothing like this.*

Emily bumped her as she hurried into the station and took a seat at one of the computer terminals.

“Emily, what’s going on?” Gloria asked.

Emily didn’t even look up from her data input. “No one knows. We keep getting slammed with patients infected with some kind of virus. Most are in quarantine, but we now have to send them to other hospitals because we’re full up.”

“Has the Centers for Disease Control been notified?”

“Sure, but even they can’t keep up with what’s going on. They are supposed to come by late this afternoon.”

“You mean to tell me that of all the specialists here, none of them has a hunch as to what these people have?” Gloria asked, shocked.

“They’re as stumped as the CDC is. Some are even asking the nurses for possibilities. Wow, that’s a switch, huh?”

“I know someone who can tell us what’s going on here,” Gloria said softly.

Emily stopped typing and stared at her. “Who?”

“Doctor Jason Masters,” Gloria said. “I’ll be right back.”

## Chapter Eleven

Gloria rushed to the cafeteria and came out to the patio. Jason was there, just as he'd promised, reading a romance paperback and sipping a coffee. She walked up to him with short, quick steps and tried not to appear panicked. Glancing around self-consciously, she leaned down and said, "Could you please come with me to look at a patient?"

"Sure," Jason said in a tone so nonchalant one would think they were going to a movie together. Once inside the hospital, he headed for the main elevators, but Gloria stopped him with a gentle hand on his arm and gestured to the service elevator. He just shrugged and followed her inside. She stabbed the sixth floor button and leaned back against the wall.

"Spooked?"

"Yes," she confessed. "I am."

Jason reached out and squeezed her hand. "I know this is crazy stuff, but I'm going to take care of you Gloria," he said. "All I want you to do is trust me and do exactly as I say. Okay?"

Gloria took a deep, relaxing breath and let it out slowly. "Okay," she said, even though every inch of her screamed that Jason was a dangerous and cunning criminal and shouldn't be trusted. But these weren't normal times, and he wasn't a normal man. Who else knew what on Earth was going on here? Not her, and certainly not the hospital staff. What choice did she have but to trust him and hope he could find a solution to all this insanity?

He was the one who'd started it, after all.

The steel doors opened onto a floor filled with frantic, rushing hospital staff. Everyone was so panicked that they didn't pay any attention to her and Jason as they slipped into the patient's room. She closed the door behind them so they wouldn't be interrupted while Jason examined the sick man.

When she turned around from closing the door, she had to stifle a gasp. The patient was grotesquely pale with red-rimmed eyes and dried blood around his nose and mouth. Working on instinct, she went into the bathroom and moistened a face cloth to clean him up. She emerged with the cloth flat on her palm and approached the patient.

Jason placed a hand in the middle of her chest and chuckled. It was a dark and sinister sound. "What do you think you're doing?"

"The . . . patient . . . is a mess," she said, stumbling over her words. "I was . . . going to clean him up. We need to change his sheets too."

"I wouldn't suggest that." Jason placed his hand on the man's forehead and was almost bitten in the forearm. "Stand by the wall. I don't want you to get bit."

Gloria stared helplessly as Jason conducted a thorough exam. He went over the patient with meticulous care, checking his vital signs, which were so erratic Gloria was surprised the



patient wasn't unconscious, and ending by drawing blood and saliva samples in two clear containers in his pocket.

The patient glared at Jason through the entire exam. No questions about his health, or when he was going to see his family, or leave. Just a big, fat nothing. Gloria thought that was one of the most frightening things about all this. She'd seen sick, but she'd never seen anyone who didn't care about what was happening to them and want comfort. All this man seemed to want was to bite her or Jason.

"Now what?" Gloria asked as Jason came over to her.

"Now I take these back to the CIA lab and run some tests." He leaned forward and tenderly kissed her on the lips. She hated to admit that it made her feel a little better. "Listen, Gloria," he said in that bad-news tone he had, "this thing is spreading fast and I'm worried about you working here."

"So what do you want me to do, Jason? Quit?"

"Maybe you should consider it."

"And what will I do for money? I don't know about you, but I *like* my job, and now that this has happened, they're going to need me. I don't have any intention of quitting and sitting home like a frightened child," she said.

"Would you consider moving in with me?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her waist and nuzzling her neck.

Gloria felt her heart melting, but she remained strong. "I really like you, Jason, and the sex was great, but the fact remains, I barely know you. I'm not comfortable moving in with you yet."

"Only I can keep you safe," he whispered against the side of her lips.

"Do I have to move in with you to have you protect me?" she asked, curious what he would say.

"Of course not. I'd walk across a pit of hot coals to keep you safe, but I can't always be with you. My house was specially built to withstand . . . something like this. I'd feel better if you lived with me while this epidemic was going on."

Gloria stared at him as a ribbon of dread unraveled inside her. She placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back so she could look him in the eye. "It's going to get worse, isn't it?"

Jason's eyes were cold and black like onyx. "Oh yeah, honey. It's going to get a whole lot worse."

## Chapter Twelve

Although she had her misgivings, Gloria agreed to move in with Jason temporarily. Coming into his home with a small suitcase in hand, she was surprised to see that the ranch style house was larger than it appeared from the outside. It was also cleaner than she thought it would be. From her experience, men who lived alone rarely kept a neat living space, but then there were a lot of things about Jason that were off the beaten track. Not surprisingly, the house was wired with all the most modern electronic equipment and surveillance cameras that even covered the backyard. The furniture was modern, but comfortable, and reflected a masculine preference for dark woods and leather seating.

Jason moved up behind her and took her suitcase. The action was so smooth and unexpected she jumped in alarm. “You’re a little nervous.”

“I wonder why?” she joked. “Ever since I met you I’ve had to get used to all kinds of craziness.”

He carried her suitcase down a hallway and disappeared into what, she assumed, was the master bedroom. Gloria hesitated, not because she was prudish—after all she’d already slept with the man—but because it was hard to be comfortable in a place that seemed so sterile. She took a cautious step forward, then stopped. “Does anyone live here with you?” she called out.

Jason emerged from the bedroom, dressed only in dark grey sweatpants, and prowled toward her. His long, muscular torso was an erotic delight as his tan skin glowed under the soft overhead lights. Across his pectorals was a sparse covering of black hair that traveled down his midsection and disappeared into the waistband of his sweats. His medium-length black hair framed his face perfectly and set off the sinister darkness of his eyes. For a moment, Gloria was transfixed by his cruel beauty. Then she blinked, and the spell was broken.

Slipping a hand around the back of her neck, he pulled her into a sinful, luscious kiss. His lips and tongue caressed her mouth, coaxing a delicate sigh from her chest. Gloria’s heart pounded a furious rhythm in her chest like a bird in the clutches of a cat. Breaking the kiss, she said, “I’m hungry.”

“Then I’d better feed you,” he replied and slipped away to go into the kitchen.

Trying to calm down, Gloria took several deep breaths. Why did this man have such a startling effect on her? What was it about him that made her yield so easily? The whole thing was driving her insane, but the truth couldn’t be denied. The more time she spent with him, the more attracted to him she was.

There was no denying his mysterious allure. And the more Gloria thought about it, the more she realized it had something to do with power. Jason was an evil genius who’d figured out a way to resurrect the dead. You couldn’t get more bad boy than that, she guessed.

Slipping into one of the stools in front of the kitchen counter, Gloria spent a few minutes just watching Jason cook. He removed a few steaks from the fridge and turned to look at

her. Their eyes met in an explosion of sexual chemistry and Gloria felt her cheeks grow hot until she forced herself to look away.

"I hope you're not a vegetarian," he said.

"No."

"How do you want your meat cooked?"

"Medium-well," she replied.

Gloria heard the sizzle of the steaks hitting the hot pan and decided it was safe to examine her lover closer while he was preoccupied. Thick knotted back muscles moved under light skin as he worked cutting up some onions.

"Have you ever been married?" Jason asked, not turning around.

Gloria swallowed. "No," she said. "But I was in a committed relationship. It just didn't work out."

"What happened?"

"Irreconcilable differences."

Jason turned around, wiping his hands on a red dish towel. "What's the real reason?"

"I really don't want to talk about it." Gloria glanced around. "Do you live here by yourself?"

"Yes." He gathered up the steaks and brought them over to the table. Gloria joined him at the dining room table and dug in, not realizing until the food was in front of her how hungry she was. Each morsel melted in her mouth.

"This is delicious," she said, pausing to sip a glass of water.

Jason's eyes sparkled with infernal light. He ignored her compliment and said, "You know everything about me, but you won't tell me anything about you."

Gloria chewed and swallowed. A knot of pain settled into her throat and she put down her knife and fork. "Why are you pushing me to tell you this?"

"Maybe because I'm a little jealous and want to make sure you're ex-boyfriend is really gone for good," he said.

"He was a doctor, a well-known neurosurgeon," she began awkwardly. *How can I find the words for this?* "We had been planning to have a family and . . ." Hoping for a reprieve, she glanced up and met Jason's gaze, but there was none. He was going to have the truth no matter what it did to her heart. "I found out I couldn't have children. So he left me and got

married a few days later to some nurse who worked in his private practice office.” Gloria pushed her plate away. “Satisfied?”

“Not yet,” Jason said. “Did you want children?”

Agony filled her heart and her eyes burned. She placed her hand over her mouth to stop the sob that tried forced its way from her. “Yes, I did,” she whispered, slamming her fist on the table to try and threaten her pain back inside.

Jason was out of his chair in a second and next to her, but she warded him off with a hard look. “I’m sorry. I’m just stressed and overtired.”

“It’s been a long day for both of us,” he said, gently kissing her cheek.

Gloria nodded. “Can we go to bed now?”

“Sure, we can,” he said, took her by the hand, and led her down the dark hallway to the master bedroom.

## Chapter Thirteen

The master bedroom was serene and inviting, its center dominated by a queen-size bed covered with a dark red comforter and, buried beneath, snow-white sheets. It had been a long time since Gloria had actually *dated* anyone, and she was amused to find herself slightly nervous. Jason came in behind her and gestured to the bed.

“Undress and lie down,” he said in a voice seductive and dark like black magic. “I’ll give you a massage. You’d be surprised how much it will relax you.”

Gloria stood for a moment by the bed, while wondering yet again what it was about Jason Masters that attracted her. Yes, he was handsome, but something else about him eluded her just as she tried to put her finger on it. Dare she say something almost demonic? There was a forbidden darkness to him, a savage killer simmering just under the visage of normality. The man hidden behind the face he showed the world every day. And somewhere, in that quiet, black soul of his, was the key that could save millions of lives. All she had to do was unravel this enigma.

Standing by the edge of the bed, she felt as though she was standing on the brink of a cliff. With calm fingers, she unbuttoned her blouse and peeled it from her shoulders. The cool bedroom air delighted her dark skin and made her more aware of her growing arousal. Her nipples grew erect and she paused to run her palms over them. A stream of delight trickled from that delicious point of contact around her torso and down her spine.

Jason walked over to the bedside table and put down a few lit candles and some scented oil. His gaze caressed her body as if he were memorizing every inch. Gloria let a tiny grin curve her lips. She unbuttoned her slacks and snaked them down her thighs until they coiled on the floor and she could step out. Taking her time, Gloria removed the rest of her clothing, then stood before Jason naked.

“You’re beautiful,” he said with quiet reverence. “You remind me of an African goddess.”

Gloria tilted her head back and laughed. It was a small laugh from being flattered that took her completely by surprise. “Thank you. I didn’t know there were any.”

“Sure there are. I think of you as the kind and lovely goddess Oshun.” Jason gestured to the bed. “Lie down.” The tone was more of a request than a demand.

Gloria lay down on her stomach and hugged the pillow to her cheek. She inhaled and caught the clean, fresh scent of laundry detergent and a slight undercurrent of his skin. The two blended into an aphrodisiac that filled her senses and aroused her even more.

Jason climbed up on the bed next to her with a small jar in one hand. Gloria closed her eyes. He started at her feet, rubbing warm, lilac-scented oil onto her soles and ankles. Jason moved slowly, carefully, teasing his hands along her flesh in a seduction that was pure bliss. Plumes of lust drifted from each point of contact, swirled through her body, and teased her. A tender moan escaped her lips, encouraging him to keep going.

His strong, slick hands rubbed her butt and back as he kneaded the tension and fear from her muscles and wrought an untamed desire from her heart. Soon her entire being was aflame, wanting him beyond reason. But Gloria forced herself to remain still, forced her desires to wait for their feeding. She wanted Jason to finish his exploration of her because, not only did it fuel her hunger for him, but it also stitched up the old wounds in her soul. It was nice to have a man make love to her with his entire self, not just his penis.

Jason's hands moved up to her shoulder, and he rubbed with just enough pressure to soften the tension. Gloria teetered on the brink of sleep, her pussy slick and throbbing with its desperate need.

"I want you to kiss me," Gloria said, her voice partly muffled by the pillow.

Jason, who'd been sitting on her butt, lifted up so she could roll over.

With hungry hands, Gloria tugged at Jason's sweatpants and pulled them down his hips to free his long, wide cock.

"Gloria," he moaned and enveloped part of her right breast into his mouth. His hot tongue swirled around the areola, flicked over the stiff nipple, and sending pure liquid heat into her pussy.

Gloria opened her legs as far as she could and grabbed Jason's cock. Groaning her name, he settled between her legs and let the length of him slip through her pussy lips, deliberately avoiding penetration.

Arching her back, Gloria hissed in protest. "Don't tease me," she said, breathless. "Take me, Jason! Take me *now!*"

Then, with feral kisses along her throat, he was gliding inside her. An immediate and intense orgasm seized her, forcing a gasp from her lungs. Jason dug his fingers into the flesh of her hips and possessed her, riding her through the first climax and into the crashing oblivion of two more. Time rushed past Gloria as each nerve sang as one in a chorus of earthly delight. Jason bucked out his own peaks and, when he was done, eased himself onto the mattress next to her.

Gloria blinked at the ceiling, attuned to the luscious aching as it faded into a mist of sweet and welcome sleep. She wanted to talk to him, to tell him secrets and lies, to find out so much more about him, but the feeling passed with the seduction of sleep and the quiet stillness of night. *Maybe we can get to know each other better in the morning.*

## Chapter Fourteen

Gloria woke before daybreak and jumped into the shower. She washed slowly and let the hot water roast away her confusion. *What the heck am I doing with this man? He's nothing like the kind of men I've dated, and what's worse, he's dangerous. I need to end this odd relationship before it goes too far.* Resolute, she emerged from the bathroom half expecting him to be awake, but he wasn't. He lay in bed on his stomach, dead to the world. Gloria toyed with the idea of waking him up to break up with him, but that seemed too cruel so she decided to wait. *Not a very nice way to start the morning.*

Creeping into the kitchen, she made herself a pot of coffee and turned on the small TV mounted on the wall. The television came to life right in the middle of an emergency news broadcast. A banner ran across the bottom of the screen urging motorists to avoid certain downtown areas because of rioting. Gloria pushed the volume button higher so she could hear what was going on.

A breathless male newscaster came on the screen with chaos behind him. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. As you can see behind me, the city has erupted into violence. Everyone is being urged to stay indoors and not travel unless absolutely necessary. Channel Nine has spoken to a number of experts, and no one seems to know what's going on. But stay tuned and we'll keep you updated as details become available."

Gloria knew what was going on. It had everything to do with Jason.

The hospital was probably overrun with sick and injured. She had to get there and help. Grabbing her keys off the counter, she heard something bump the sliding glass door leading to the patio. Gloria glanced up and spotted a disheveled woman outside at the same moment the woman slammed her body into the glass, shattering it.

Gloria screamed.

The woman was covered in filth and was dressed in a torn yellow T-shirt and tan shorts. As she drew closer, a definite stench of rotting flesh clung to the intruder. Snarling like a wild animal, the woman ran over broken glass and lunged at Gloria's throat.

Throwing a kitchen chair behind her to slow the woman down, Gloria sprinted for the front door, her heart beating a frantic rhythm in her chest. Behind her, she could hear the wild woman drawing closer, clawing at the furniture that hindered her path. Human nails dug into Gloria's arm just as she reached for the doorknob. A flash of yellow teeth dipped toward her captured arm, and Gloria was forced to hit the woman's forehead with the heel of her palm to stop her from biting.

Somewhere in the melee, a gun discharged twice. The noise was so loud it deafened Gloria for a second. The nails digging into her skin slacked and dropped away as the intruder fell to the floor. A dark crimson halo darkened the rug behind the fallen woman's head. Gloria instinctively knelt down, and, taking great care not to get any of her limbs near the mouth, checked for a pulse.

Nothing. No sign of life at all.

The poor creature was dead, or perhaps she'd been that way before she'd even shown up here.

Jason was at her side, pulling her up and checking her for injury. "Did she bite you?"

"You killed her," Gloria said, unable to summon any other words.

"She was already dead. What about you? Are you all right?"

Feeling strangely calm and disconnected, Gloria stared at him. The whole world had gone insane, and she was stuck in the middle of it.

"Gloria," Jason said, shaking her shoulders. His normally calm voice was laced with panic. "Are you okay?"

"No," Gloria said finally. "I don't think I am okay. I think I need to sit down for a few minutes."

Jason picked her up in his arms and carried her to the living room couch. He set her down gently as if she were made of fine porcelain and might break at any second. Gloria didn't know what she was feeling.

"I need to go to the hospital," she said.

Jason stared at her. "You've got to be kidding, right?"

"They need me. I have to go," she repeated, knowing she was sounding somewhat robotic.

"That place is going to be a zoo."

"You can stay here then," she said, staring at the shattered glass all over the carpet. A chill raced through her, making her shudder. Mild nausea churned in her belly.

Jason grabbed a throw blanket and put it around her shoulders. "Okay, I'll take you there, but if it's too crazy, we go to a shelter. Agreed?"

Gloria stared without really seeing anything. "I agree."



## Chapter Fifteen

Jason grabbed a backpack loaded with two extra guns, ammunition, water and food and placed it under the driver's seat of his Toyota 4-Runner. Gloria stood in the garage with her arms wrapped tightly around her as if trying to warm herself from a bitter cold. Although her reaction might seem strange to people unfamiliar with shock, Jason knew the signs. He'd seen them often enough as a doctor on Ackron Nine. All she needed was some time to adapt to this new and terrible reality. She'd adjust. Everyone did eventually.

Under normal circumstances, Jason would have never agreed to go back to the hospital, but Gloria needed to go. The hospital was a place she knew well and felt safe in. What she didn't know and hadn't come to grips with yet was the fact that her old world was gone, swept away on the back of a zombie virus that had just started its terrible work. Once she saw the hospital in a crushing state of bedlam, she'd begin to absorb the truth. Nothing was ever going to be the same again.

They pulled out of Jason's garage and started driving. Even though it was eight o'clock in the morning, the streets were deserted.

Gloria smoothed her hands down the fabric of her slacks. "Who did you say got hold of that serum?"

"A lab assistant of mine by the name of Eric Plume."

"Has the CIA been looking for him?"

Jason glanced at her. "Probably not very hard. He's not important now that the virus has spread."

"Still, we should try to get him back. He would be interesting to study," she said thoughtfully. "See how the virus progresses."

"Those CIA agents you met a few days ago have been paging me nonstop since two this morning. I finally had to turn my pager off," he said.

Gloria turned in her seat to stare at him. "Why did you do that?"

"Because they want me to go underground and work on the antidote and I'd rather work from home."

Her gaze swept over his face. "You don't want to go underground because of me. They won't let me go with you, will they?"

Jason kept his eyes on the road. "No."

"Jason, you *need* to solve this epidemic! Millions of lives are at stake!"

“You’re not ready to survive without me in a world like this, Gloria, and I refuse to leave you behind.”

“Don’t you give a shit what happens to the human race?” she asked, fuming.

Jason pulled over and looked at her. She was beautiful and fragile. Her dark brown eyes burned with dire understanding and sharp intelligence. She was the first person in his life for whom he’d ever felt anything this consuming, this powerful. And he wasn’t going to let that go.

Never.

“No, I don’t. All I care about is you and me. That’s it. And I’m not going to apologize for that.”

Gloria’s shoulders rose as she took a calming breath. “I want you to call the CIA right now, Jason.”

“No. Didn’t you hear what I just said? They’ll want me to meet with them, and I won’t. So what’s the point of calling them?”

“Will you go if we force them to take me too?”

Jason’s gaze left Gloria’s face and moved behind her. From a few yards away, three zombies emerged from an otherwise empty public park. There were two men and one woman, their hair long and matted and their clothes filthy and torn. They stumbled toward the car on unsteady legs. He needed to get out of here now.

Jason started the car and pulled back onto the street. “How are we going to do that?”

“They seem to want you bad enough. We’ll just tell them that if they want you to go to the bunker I have to come with you,” she said. It was good to hear that old strength coming back into her voice. “But before we do anything, I want to stop by the hospital. I have to see with my own eyes if things are as hopeless as you say.”

“It’s going to be dangerous,” he warned.

“Then give me one of your guns,” she said.

“Do you know how to shoot?”

“I’ve shot a gun before,” she said. “I was just hoping I’d never have to do it again.”

Jason felt his guts turn to ice as memories of the sand dunes on Ackron Nine flooded back to him. A sticky nausea nestled in his stomach. “Yeah,” he said, steering around a pile of burning trash in the middle of the street. “I’ve had to do a lot of shooting in the past too.”

She stared at him with full understanding. “I thought there were no weapons allowed on that prison planet.”

“Where there’s a will . . .” Jason said. He reached under the seat and handed her an automatic. The hospital loomed up in the distance, and it took all of his will not to turn the car around and head back to his home. “Keep your wits keen because here we are.”

## Chapter Sixteen

The hospital was a disaster. As Jason pulled up to the main entrance, Gloria noticed the sliding glass doors were smashed and the lobby was strewn with trash. The facility looked so bad that she couldn't believe this was the same place she'd worked most of her professional life.

"I'm going inside."

"You're not going in there alone. I'm going with you," Jason said, stepping out of the vehicle and holstering the gun to his hip.

"What about the car?" Gloria said.

"What? Are you afraid I'm going to get a ticket?"

Gloria stood there and blinked. Yes, she guessed she was afraid he was going to get a ticket. Funny how your mind stuck to old rules when it was obvious everything had changed. With the gun Jason had given her in hand, she stepped over the broken glass and through the main entrance. Everything looked deserted. The information desk, the gift shop, and central admitting. Even the hallway leading to the emergency room looked empty, something that was almost unheard of in a busy hospital like this.

Jason moved up alongside her, glass crunching under his feet like crushed ice. He kept his gun holstered to his hip, which seemed curious under the circumstances. "You seem pretty calm," she said.

"I have good instincts."

Gloria headed for the elevator, but Jason shook his head. "Why not?" she asked. "The power's still on."

"The elevator is a death trap. You get to a floor and bad stuff is going on you're trapped in there. With the stairs, you can escape the same way you came in."

Stepping into the stairwell, Gloria immediately froze. Fresh blood coated the stairs with large droplets splashed against the walls. A corpse in a doctor's lab coat lay crumpled in a corner, its head completely removed and nowhere in sight.

Millions of conflicting thoughts raced through her mind. *What if I get up to my floor and all my friends and colleagues are dead? How the hell am I going to handle that?* But even though she knew she should put as much distance between herself and this hospital as possible, she just couldn't leave without knowing what had happened up there. She could never live with herself not knowing if she'd really done all she could to save *someone*. It was crazy, but it just felt that important. These were her friends. She had to know for a fact that none of them had survived this madness.

"Having a change of heart?"

“No. I’m just preparing myself for what we might find,” she said. Stepping cautiously, Gloria continued to climb the stairs. Every floor they passed echoed haunting sounds of screams and crashing followed by the nauseating scent of rotting flesh. Finally, she reached her floor marked on the door with a huge blue number.

“Let me go first,” Jason said.

Gloria gratefully stepped back and let Jason take the lead.

They came out into a passageway littered with bloody sheets, fallen linen trolleys, and the occasional dismembered body part. Gloria wanted to call out to anyone who might still be alive, but she fought back the urge. Who knew what would come lumbering out after them?

“If the staff needed to lock themselves in, where would they go?” Jason asked, his hand resting on the butt of his pistol.

Gloria fought to get a handle on her emotions. “Probably the break room.”

“Where’s that?”

“Follow me.” Gloria crept down the passageway, feeling the tiny hairs on the back of her arm stand on end. An illness sat like a rock in the pit of her stomach, an undefined feeling of utter dread. She reached the break room and peeked through the small mesh window.

It looked empty.

“I don’t see anyone.”

Jason tugged the door and it opened. “They might be hiding.”

Inside things looked less disturbed. Only a few tables had been knocked onto their sides, but other than that, things looked to be where she’d last seen them. “Hello?” Gloria ventured softly.

“Check the cabinets,” Jason said, keeping a sharp eye on the door.

Stepping over to the large cabinets, Gloria opened them one by one. Opening the third one, she found a person inside. Gloria cried out in alarm and jumped back, pointing her weapon at the cabinet.

It was Nurse Emily Ross, and she looked like she’d been through hell. But she didn’t look like she had the virus.

Gloria holstered her weapon and stepped forward to help the woman out when Emily began screaming. Loud.

Jason pulled his pistol and pointed it at the break room door, getting ready for any company that was bound to show up. "Shut her up!"

Getting down on her knees, Gloria held her hands out to show she was unarmed. "Emily, please," Gloria said. "You must be quiet. It's me, it's Gloria, remember?"

Emily didn't appear to remember much of anything. She only screamed louder, and despite all of Gloria's efforts to get the woman to come out and calm down, she was just too far gone.

A new, chilling sound penetrated the gaps in the nurses' screams. The sound of running feet. Jason glanced back at Gloria. "We have to leave her."

"No!" Gloria said, trying even more frantically to grab Emily and drag her out. The terrified nurse swatted at Gloria like a cornered animal. *Oh my God, how am I ever going to get her out of there?*

The running feet got louder, and Jason leaned his back against the door. "Gloria!" he roared. "We've got to go *now!*"

There was no time. If she was going to save Emily's life, she was going to have to do this the hard way. Talking her T-shirt off, she wrapped it around her forearm and reached into the woman's hiding place. Snatching a hysterical Emily by the hair, she dragged her out and closed the cabinet door so she couldn't race back inside. Gloria tackled the other nurse, fought her to the floor, and sat on her butt. Shredding her T-shirt, she used part of it to secure the nurse's hands behind her back and another strip to gag her.

Jason was doing all he could to keep the zombies from pushing the break room door open. Gloria wrestled Emily to her feet and unholstered her gun. "I'm ready," she announced.

Jason dropped back to where Gloria was holding Emily by the arm and waited. The break room door burst open, and two zombie nurses came in, their faces smeared with drying blood. Emily uttered a pitiful and muffled scream. Jason opened fire, hitting the first nurse, and Gloria took out the second. The sickness in her stomach twisted and threatened to purge, but she held herself together.

With the exception of Emily's whimpering, silence filled the room.

Jason grinned and swept his gaze down Gloria's naked torso. At least she still had a bra on. "Very nice," he said. "I didn't know you could shoot like that."

Gloria didn't say anything. It annoyed her that Jason seemed to be enjoying himself. All she could do was shiver.

Grabbing the hem of his black T-shirt, Jason pulled it off and handed it to her. She handed Emily over to him and slipped the shirt on. It was warm and smelled like him.

She took Emily again and felt the terror of the last few minutes fading. “I need to get the hell out of here.”

“I’m right with you, baby. Just lead the way.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Back inside the 4-Runner, Jason pulled away from the hospital and into the middle of the almost empty parking lot. He chose the lot because it was one of the few places around where you could see someone coming from any direction.

Gloria had grabbed some medical supplies for first aid on the way out. In the back seat, she checked Emily over for injuries and then, finding none, sedated her a little so she would calm down. When Emily's eyes fluttered closed, Gloria took her restraints off, leaned her own head back, and let out a huge sigh. He loved her when she was like this, all tough and ready to fight. But, not wanting to be the subject of her ire, he remained quiet, waiting patiently for her to speak.

"Are those CIA agents still trying to contact you?" she asked.

He frowned and checked his pager. The last thing he wanted to do was contact those idiots. "Yes," he replied flatly.

"Then you need to call them, Jason."

"I told you. I work better at home."

"That's bull. The only thing you've been doing at home is fucking me," she said, her voice rising in anger.

"They'll try to separate us."

"Well, we won't let them. I would think after all this craziness, they would agree to almost anything to get you back to their labs."

Jason lapsed into a dark silence. He didn't want to be locked up in a government lab like an animal. Gloria didn't know what she was asking him to do.

Frustrated by his silence, she got out of the back seat and jumped in next to him. She pierced him with a hard stare. "You know, I'm starting to think you *like* the world like this."

"Let's just say it's more familiar to me than the way it was before."

"You mean it's more like Ackron Nine?"

"Yeah."

Gloria licked her lips, her eyes hard and intense. "But it's not more familiar to me, Jason. I don't want to live like this. I want the old world back, if that's even possible at this point. I want you to do what you promised me. I want you to find a cure."

Her dark eyes were glassy and beautiful. God how he wanted her, right here and now. "And if I refuse?" he asked.



Gloria's face hardened. She placed the gun under her chin. "Then you can live in this world alone."

With that one simple threat, she changed everything. He didn't know if she meant it, but he wasn't willing to take that chance. Jason reached out and placed his hand over the gun, pushing it away from her jaw. With gentle pressure, he pulled the weapon from her hand and placed it on the vehicle floor. "I'll call them."

Reaching into her pocket, Gloria pulled out her cell phone, opened it, and handed it to him. "You call them now."

Jason's heart twisted in agony. What a choice she'd left him. Defeated, he took the phone and dialed the CIA.

\* \* \* \*

The helicopter came through the sky toward them with its rotary blades sounding like the wings of an ancient carnivorous bird. Gloria stood back as the thing landed, kicking up a huge dust storm as it touched the ground. She couldn't remember ever feeling so relieved. Glancing in the truck, she noticed Emily was still dozing. Her eyes fluttered in sleep, and then she twitched violently only to relax once more. Gloria knew exactly how she felt. Would any of them ever feel safe again?

The pilot of the helicopter came over to them, ducking under the circling blades. He had a blond buzz cut that made him look all of twelve years old. "My name is Captain Teg. You ready, Doctor Masters?"

Jason squinted at the pilot. "These two ladies are coming with me."

The pilot was shaking his head even before Jason had finished talking. He obviously didn't want her and Emily. "The helicopter can't take them. Too much weight."

"Then I'm not going," Jason said with a cool edge to his voice.

"I have orders to take you back with me, sir," the pilot said, reaching for his side arm. "No matter what I have to do."

Before the pilot could pull his weapon, Jason had unholstered his and placed it under his own chin. "Listen to me, Captain. I'm willing to go with you, but under one condition. I want these women flown to where I'll be working. You're welcome to fly them out first and come back for me. But I will *not* be leaving first."

Captain Teg took his hand away from the gun. "It could get a little hairy waiting around here for me to come back."

Jason smiled, and it chilled Gloria to the bone. The captain obviously didn't know Doctor Masters very well. "I'll be fine. Just get the women out."

Teg shook his head as if he was dealing with pure insanity. “Okay.”

Gloria stepped in and gestured to Emily trying to fight off the sedative in the back seat. Her eyes were fluttering, trying to open, but Gloria knew the drug wouldn’t wear off for another hour. “You’ll need to carry her,” she said.

The pilot climbed out of the helicopter, picked up Emily, and carried her to the aircraft. Gloria hesitated by Jason. He leaned forward and gave her a warm, affectionate kiss.

“Are you sure about this, Jason? Are you sure about staying behind?”

“Don’t worry about me, honey. You just make sure they do right by Emily. I’ll be at the bunker in a little while.”

Gloria touched his cheek, then jogged over to the helicopter, and hoped she was doing the right thing by leaving him behind. *Stay safe, Jason. Please stay safe.*

\* \* \* \*

Gloria hadn’t realized how devastated the city was until they flew over. High above the trees they raced, with the remnants of civilization unraveling below. Everywhere were abandoned cars, smashed windows, and wandering zombies. Is that the word she was looking for? *Zombies*? Of course it was, nothing else fit. There was no denying it, these people were dead, and the ones that weren’t were going to be very soon.

She looked at Emily on the seat next to her. The woman looked almost sick enough to be one of them herself. She was pale, tense, and still hadn’t uttered a word since she’d woken from the sedative. The nurse was as emotionally fragile as a rape victim, and Gloria couldn’t blame her.

But at the same time, Gloria resented Emily for her emotional withdrawal. She had so many questions to ask Emily that it hardly seemed fair that the only survivor wouldn’t, or couldn’t, talk about it. What had she seen at the hospital? What had she experienced? Gloria didn’t have the heart to ask.

As Gloria stared out the window, listening to the steady beat of the rotors, her thoughts went to Jason. He was both her savior and her scourge. She hated his ruthless intelligence and the fact that he could cause all this unspeakable destruction and not even have the moral sense to feel guilty about it. Because there was no mistake, Jason didn’t feel guilty about any of this, and perhaps he shouldn’t. Just like he’d told her, it wasn’t like he’d wanted to create the virus to begin with.

Gloria leaned her head back and ran her fingers through her hair. It felt dry and brittle like her soul. What was it about Jason that attracted her? What did *he* see in her? She guessed those were some of the unanswerable questions of all love affairs. But, to make matters even more complicated, she had a unique power over this situation. Jason loved her and she could

use that love to force him into finding a cure sooner. It seemed wrong, but all of the old rules about love and relationships had gone out the window with the first infected zombie. No, she had a moral obligation to use her influence over Jason to *make* him find a cure. And she took that responsibility very seriously.

She closed her eyes and rubbed them, wondering if even Jason could save them, or if it was all just too late. Glancing down at the ruins of her city, she made up her mind. No matter what it took, she would have to push him, to make him mend a world he had inadvertently destroyed. This she vowed to do no matter what it cost her. Or what it might cost him, for that matter.

The pilot gestured to her and pointed ahead of them. A series of mountain ranges came into view. They traveled through a few until they circled around some low lying topography, and Gloria spotted a small, round landing pad in front of a cave entrance. The entrance was blocked by two large steel doors. It was big enough to fit three freight trucks traveling side by side. *This must be the CIA compound.*

The helicopter landed and two army medics came out to join them. Gloria disembarked and watched the helicopter leave again to go and get Jason. The medics asked her a few questions about Emily, and she answered them as best she could. Then, they opened the huge doors and wheeled Emily inside on a gurney. One of them gestured for Gloria to come with them, but she shook her head. “No, thank you,” she said. “I’m going to wait for Doctor Masters.”

The medic shrugged as if it was all the same to him. “Suit yourself,” he said and disappeared inside the mountain bunker just as the huge steel doors slammed closed behind him.

\* \* \* \*

Jason arrived a few minutes later, and he and Gloria were escorted to a cavernous furnished room. There was a desk with a computer, an exclusive passageway to the labs, and a king-size bed with clean linens. Jason was pleased the CIA hadn’t decided to fight him on the issue of Gloria staying with him anymore. That silly argument had begun to get tiresome.

“How’s Emily?” he asked.

Gloria was walking around the room, opening drawers and running curious hands over the rock walls. “I’m not sure. They took her to the clinic when we got here.”

“They didn’t want to check you out too?”

“I refused. I’m fine.”

Jason moved over to her, aching to feel her in his arms, but she took a step back and gave him her hard, sober look.

“What’s wrong?”

“You need to get to work,” she said, pointing at the passageway leading to the labs. He frowned. That was the last place he wanted to be holed up for the next few months. “It can wait.”

Gloria knew he was stalling, and she wasn’t having it. “No Jason, it can’t. Now I’m willing to go with you and help as much as I can, but you’re going in there and getting to work.”

This was bull. The world could go to fucking hell for all he cared. It was the time to piss Gloria off and see what kind of temper she had under the hood. “Have you ever stopped to think that maybe this epidemic was meant to happen? Just look at the statistics. The world was overpopulated anyway. Maybe it’s a good thing this virus came along to thin out the ranks.” He eased into a wing chair, dug into his pocket, and pulled out a cigarette. After lighting it, he blew out a thick stream of smoke. Gloria’s eyes narrowed and he was undone lusting for her. *God she is sexy when she’s mad.*

Gloria folded her arms. “I know why you’re acting like this.”

“Oh really?” he said sarcastically.

“You don’t give a shit about the human race because you have nothing to lose. You have me and I’m safe, but nothing else you care about is at risk here,” she said. “You know the CIA won’t turn you out because they *need* you to find a cure. You know they won’t turn me out because they’ll do anything to keep you happy.”

“Very clever of you, dear.”

“But I know what you want. I know what would motivate you to work,” she said, cocking a sculpted eyebrow.

Jason gave her an amused smile. “And what’s that?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” Gloria said, taking a few steps toward him. “If you get in there now and find that cure, not only will I fuck your brains out every night, but I’ll also agree to marry you.” She stopped and tilted her head to the side as if trying to gauge his reaction.

Jason flicked his ashes onto the floor. “You really mean that? You’d marry me?”

“Yes.”

“How long do I have to wait?”

“I’ll marry you tomorrow if you like. Do we have a deal?”

Jason eased out of his chair, dropped his cigarette, and crushed it out. He prowled toward her like a stalking lion. When he reached Gloria, he pulled her into his arms and stared into her eyes. She had him. He wanted her as his wife more than anything. Stroking her cheek with the back of his hand, he placed a gentle kiss on the side of her mouth.

“Do we have a deal?” she repeated.

“Yes,” he said, low and dangerous. “We most definitely have a deal.”

## Chapter Eighteen

The rest of that day they worked. Jason dug out his old notebooks and set up a few experiments while Gloria did what she could to assist him. The work was detailed and required hours of concentration, but Gloria was a quick study. All he had to do was give her instructions, and she would confine herself to a corner of the lab and work tirelessly until either the experiment became viable or it was proved to be hopelessly off track. She took impressive notes, too. This tough nurse was proving to be exactly what he'd believed she was, very smart and under-employed working as a nurse.

By six o'clock in the evening, Jason was ready for a break. He called the kitchen and had some food brought to the lab for them. As he expected, Gloria was still hard at it and seemingly oblivious to her hunger. Jason leaned in the doorway of a glass room where she'd been closed off from him most of the day. "How about dinner?"

Gloria gave him a weak smile, got up, and stretched. "What's on the menu?"

"It looks a lot like mac and cheese."

She slipped past him and the scent of ebony skin filled his senses with desperate want. How long had it been since they'd made love? Two, three days? He wanted to crush her beneath him and taste the nectar of her pussy.

She took her seat and unfastened the plastic lid. "I haven't had mac and cheese since I was a kid."

Jason sat across from her and twisted the top off his coke. He took a long sip. "You never told me anything about your childhood."

"What's there to tell?" Gloria picked up her fork and dug in.

"Where did you grow up?"

"South Central L.A."

Jason stared at her. That section of Los Angeles was well known for its struggles with violent gangs and drugs. There was definitely a story there in how a young black woman escaped a difficult world like that. "Not many nursing schools in South Central," he ventured.

Gloria put down her fork and sipped a soda. "No, you're right about that."

"So how did you escape a rough neighborhood like that?"

"My mother worked three jobs to help support me and my brother. Then, when my brother joined a gang and ended up in prison, she decided to pack me off and send me to live with my uncle in Atlanta. He was a good man, a Baptist minister, and even though he had three kids of his own, he treated me like a daughter. Between him and the money my mother sent, I was able to go to a private Baptist school with my cousins and eventually got a scholarship

to nursing school.” She shrugged. “My first job out of school was the hospital where I’ve worked ever since. You know the rest.”

“So I take it you learned how to use a gun in Los Angeles.”

“Guns are a way of life there. You either know how to handle one or you end up dead.”

“You ever been married?”

“Close. I had a very serious relationship with a doctor,” she said with an ironic grin.

“He cheat on you?” Jason asked.

“Among other things. What really broke us up was the fact that I could never get pregnant.”

“Did you try fertility treatments?”

“Like I told you when we met, my boyfriend wasn’t interested in any of that. He just found someone else and moved on,” she said, then wolfed down two big bites. Her jaw worked a few times, then she swallowed. “What about you? I mean, I know what the official biography says, but what’s your real story?”

“You talking about my conviction and sentence to Ackron Nine?”

“Yeah,” she said, cocking her head to one side. “How does a brilliant scientist, a man working on a cure for cancer no less, end up in an off world prison?”

“I have a dark secret.”

“And what is that?”

“I hate people.”

Gloria wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. “I don’t follow you.”

“I told the authorities I was working on a cure for cancer, but I wasn’t. I told them that because I wanted to avoid the death penalty. The experiments I conducted on people were random.”

“You weren’t looking for a cure for cancer,” she said, her eyes so dark they were unreadable.

Jason leaned forward for emphasis. “No, I wasn’t.”

Gloria shook her head as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I don’t get you, Jason. Don’t you give a shit about anything in life? Don’t you even give a tiny shit about the suffering you caused? Do the people you killed mean nothing to you?”

Jason stood up and paced. *I shouldn't have told her the truth. What was I thinking? How can she forgive a confession like that?* "I didn't say I was proud of what I did."

"But you don't regret it either."

"I did regret it after I met you."

"What do *I* have to do with it?"

"You made me feel compassion for the first time in my life. You made me ashamed that I'd only used my knowledge to destroy lives. You made me rethink everything I thought I believed. Loving you has changed me, Gloria."

She leaned back in her chair and swung one arm over the back rest, piercing him with her sharp gaze. "Then why are you stalling? Why haven't you found a cure for that virus you've unleashed upon the world?"

"I don't know," he said, taking a sip of his soda.

"You *do* know, Jason. You're the only one who does. Why are you dragging your feet in finding this cure?"

He started back toward the main lab. But Gloria was up from her chair, blocking his way. "You're dragging your feet because you hate them, don't you? You hate the whole human race, don't you? You blame everyone else for putting you on that God-forsaken planet, and now this is your chance to get revenge. You don't fool me. You *want* the whole world to die just so you can feel vindicated for suffering in prison for eight years. Well, I've got news for you, Jason. I *don't* hate the human race. I happen to love those strangers out there, and I'm not going to sit here in safety watching them die on video monitors. So you'd better get cracking and find a cure soon, or I'm going out there to die with them, and nothing you can say is going to bring me back in here."

Jason's head pounded furiously. A dull ache settled in his stomach. He started walking again and refused to look at her. Gloria intercepted him and took his face in her hands. Placing her lips against his, she gave him a kiss filled with longing and heartbreak. "*Please*," she said against his mouth. "Please do what you promised me you would do."

All the rage that had been sitting in his heart a moment ago simply drifted away. Pulling Gloria into his arms, Jason claimed her mouth with his own. Her lips were soft, delicate brown silk against his flesh, and they fired his blood. His desire for her became a fever, a desperate longing that begged him to make them one. He was powerless to resist.

Running his fingers into her thick, dark hair, he cradled her head in his palms and danced kisses over the landscape of her face. Gloria's hands roamed too, sliding under his shirt and traveling along the muscles in his back. Her touch softened him even further, made him want the tempting life of marriage she offered. Even if they couldn't have children, they could still have a joyful life together.



Gloria tugged on his shirt and he lifted his arms, allowing her to pull it off his torso. She ran her hands down his chest, petting the straight hair over his pectorals and bringing gooseflesh up on his arms. Had he ever loved a woman as much as her? Not in recent memory. But he'd certainly never loved a woman this much and had her return his affection.

In a tangled mess of discarded clothing, they fell on the bed, Gloria lifting off her top to expose those luscious, full breasts that peaked under his breath, begged to be licked. His tongue claimed one and then the other, rolling moist circles around the areola and raking his teeth across the erect nipples. A tender sighed escaped his lover, followed by a wistful plea. Jason's love for her devoured his very soul, demanding carnal satisfaction. Parting her legs with his thighs, he entered her as if coming into a stranger's house for the first time, with polite caution and careful movement.

"Jason," Gloria gasped, gripping his butt with both eager hands to push him deeper. "You feel so good inside me." There, with her long legs wrapped around him, Jason knew he had found something so special, so necessary to his heart, that he would do anything she asked of him. Because the truth was—even though he didn't want to admit it—was that he needed Gloria like a starving man needs food. She was his heart, soul, and life's blood. Living his life without her would be impossible.

"What is it about you that makes me feel this way?" he whispered, bewildered by his own passion. His penetration pushed deep, stroking her wet channel with slow and massaging thrusts, whispering in her ear how desperately he loved her. Then, with a shattering climax threatening to crest, he stopped with his cock buried to the root inside his lover.

Gloria hugged him tight. "Is this what it feels like to be in love?" she said in a voice as lovely and fragile as fine crystal.

"Yes," he said, squeezing her as if she might disappear at any moment. "I think it is."

"I want to be with you forever, my love."

He placed a tiny kiss on her forehead. "Me too."

Rocking his hips into her, he began to build their pleasure again. Gloria moaned loudly, clutched, and whispered words that tore his heart open. *God how I love her.* She gave a loud cry, and the slick muscles inside her gripped him, massaging the orgasm from his cock as if both their bodies had been constructed for this purpose alone. In an explosion of exquisite lust, he climaxed, groaning out her name.

She collapsed on the bed, panting. He watched her, his mysterious goddess, the owner of his immortal soul. A long time passed as he watched her doze. Then, he knew it was time. Rising from the bed, he slipped his pants back on and stretched.

Gloria stroked the empty bed next to her. "Where are you going?"

“To work. I made you a promise, remember? And I fully intend to keep it. I want everything you promised me, Gloria. I want you as my wife, and if I have to save this rotten, stinking world to do it, then that’s exactly what I intend to do.

She gave him a gentle smile, and in that moment, he would have stepped in front of a barrage of bullets for her.

“I love you, Jason.”

“I love you too, Gloria. Now let me prove it.”

## Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, Gloria went to the lab for a few hours and helped Jason any way she could. But, eventually, she needed to get away from those four walls, so she left him alone with his experiments with his blessing. She spotted Captain Teg just outside the cafeteria and waved him down. He stopped and gave her a strained smile. Gloria didn't think he had anything against her personally. He probably just didn't like Jason or anyone who had anything to do with him. She guessed if she were Teg, she wouldn't like her much either.

"Captain, isn't there a gym around here somewhere?"

Teg's features immediately relaxed. Exercise and gyms were apparently speaking his language. "Sure. Follow me, I'll show you where it's at."

Gloria fell into step alongside the burly Captain.

"How's Jason's research coming?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she confessed. "I don't know much about biological engineering, but he looks to be making progress."

"Well, all respect to you, ma'am, but he'd better hurry the hell up or there isn't going to be any reason for a cure. The latest statistics say we're losing thousands of people to that damn virus per day."

Gloria felt a rock settle into her stomach. "I knew it was bad, but I had no idea how bad." She stopped in the hall and glanced around to make sure no one was overhearing them. "Captain, you're a CIA man—"

"Technically I'm Air Force," he said, correcting her.

"Whatever," she said. "You must know Jason Masters's background better than I do. What do you think his chances are of finding a cure for this virus?"

"I'd say there's a damn good chance if he's really applying himself. But I'm gonna level with you, Miss Hobbs. Jason Masters is a *bad* man. He's even bad as far as other criminals go. You gotta be pretty wicked to end up on a hellhole like Ackron Nine. But what makes Masters worse than other criminals of his caliber is that big, fat, evil brain of his. Now you may be thinking this whole virus thing is a simple case of an experiment gone wrong. But I'm here to tell you there's much more to this whole mess than meets the eye."

"What do you mean?" Gloria asked, halfway wishing she wasn't here to listen to any of this. She was afraid the truth about Jason was going to drive a wedge between them.

"Plan Nine and the virus Masters perfected as a weapons-grade biohazard is all about revenge. Masters and General Pellon, the man who headed up Plan Nine a few months ago, have been feuding for the past two years. Pellon was the official responsible for getting Masters off the prison planet. It was a simple exchange. Pellon would get Masters off and into a CIA lab to work on Plan Nine, and Masters would exchange his off-world prison for a

cushy on-Earth one. But Pellon made one big mistake and that was assuming he could control Masters.”

“Jason told me a lab assistant named Eric Plume took the virus, but that’s not how it got out of the lab, is it?” Gloria asked.

“No,” Teg said. “General Pellon was in the lab that day, and Jason deliberately injected him with the virus just before he made his escape attempt.”

She rubbed the back of her neck, trying to loosen the tense muscles. *I should have guessed.* “So if he’s such a dangerous felon, why have him work on a cure at all? Why not just execute him?”

“Because, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, there is no one else capable of finding a cure. Masters may be a devil to deal with,” Teg said, “but he’s the only deal in town if the human race is going to survive this.”

“There must be something I can do to help,” she said softly.

“There is. Just keep that evil bastard working.”

## Chapter Twenty

After her workout, Gloria picked up dinner for Jason and returned to the lab. She expected to be shocked by Captain Teg's story, but she wasn't. Nothing about Jason Masters was much of a shock anymore. But shouldn't she be afraid of such a man? Deep inside her heart, she knew he would never hurt her. She didn't know *how* she knew it. She just did. There was no doubt Jason was a troubled criminal, but there was a side of him that was capable of change, or at least reformation.

The lab was a cluttered mess. Notebooks lay on the countertops; three computers flashed information across their screens, running programs on their own; and the air was filled with the scent of burnt almonds with a faint undercurrent of ammonia. Gloria breathed through her mouth to prevent the smells from stinging her nose.

She walked around, looking for Jason, and found him in the restroom. He was sitting on the toilet seat, injecting something into his arm. Gloria walked up and leaned in the doorway. "What do you think you're doing?"

He rubbed his arm and stood up. Capping the needle, he tossed the syringe in the trash and stared at her with bloodshot eyes. "I'm injecting a stimulant so I don't have to sleep."

Gloria wanted to be angry, and under normal circumstances, she would have been furious, but nothing about this existence was normal. She decided to let his drug use go for now. "I picked you up some dinner."

He walked toward her, his long, powerful body reminding her of a leopard. "Are you mad about the drug?"

"Yes," she said, folding her arms. "But I don't have a right to be. I made you commit to doing everything you could to find a cure. If this helps you do that, then how can I object?"

"But you're mad about something," he said, leaning in to kiss her. She ducked away from him and backed out of the bathroom. He followed her, his dark eyes growing vulnerable.

"I am pissed about something," she said.

"What have I done now?"

"You lied to me. Why didn't you tell me the truth about General Pellon?"

A muscle moved in his jaw. "If I had told you the truth, you wouldn't have had anything to do with me."

"That's probably true. But lying to me doesn't help you case either."

"Honestly, Gloria, I just wasn't ready to tell you. But I wasn't going to keep it from you forever. I just needed the right time."

“The way I hear it, you murdered him in cold blood.”

“I suppose you could say that, yes,” he said. He moved over to the table where she’d set his dinner down and took a seat.

“Why?” Gloria demanded.

Jason lifted the lid on the carton and picked up his fork. “Because he was an asshole and he was planning to have me killed the minute I finished engineering the virus. I just beat him to the punch.”

“And endangered the entire human race at the same time!”

He took a small bite. “That was an accident,” he said, talking with his mouth full and gesturing with his fork. “I had no idea he wouldn’t drop dead before he left the military compound.”

“But he did, and in doing so, he infected the first few people, making them zombies.” She took a seat across from him. She’d been guessing, but Jason didn’t deny it.

“They’re not *exactly* zombies.”

A fireball of rage burned her gut. “I don’t give a shit what they are!”

Jason stood up, his eyes burning coals of wrath. “Okay! You want me to admit I fucked up? Well, guess what? I fucked up! But if you think I’m going to sit around a government lab and wait for the CIA to put a bullet in my head, you’re sadly mistaken. I have a right to defend myself, Gloria.”

“But surely there was another way! Couldn’t you have used a weapon or something?”

“And what kind of weapon do you think they’re going to let a convicted felon have access to? There *were* no other weapons, Gloria. The virus was it, my only chance at survival, and I took it. Did I think about all the consequences of my actions? No, because back then, I didn’t give a shit about what happened to anyone but me!”

Gloria put her face in her hands and rubbed. Of all the men in the world, why did she have to have feelings for this sociopath? She fixed him with a hard stare. “And now?”

Jason lowered himself back down in his chair and picked up his fork again. “Now I give a shit because you do. I want the cure because I want us to have a life together beyond these walls. I want us to have a *normal* life.”

“Okay.” Gloria leaned back in her chair. “But no more lying to me. I want there to be complete honesty between us. Is there anything else about you that I should know?”

“I like to be tied up during sex,” he said with a devilish smile.

Gloria shook her head and sighed. “You are one crazy son of a bitch, Jason Masters.”

He gave her a sinister chuckle. “Then what does that say about you for loving me?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot,” she confessed.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Jason had been awake for three days straight, and the lack of sleep was definitely taking its toll. Rubbing his eyes, he took a break to make another pot of coffee. Gloria came into the lab, took one look at him, and frowned.

“You’ve got to get some sleep, Jason,” she said.

“I will, baby, I will. I just have a few more tests to run, and I’ll have a prototype for the cure. Then I’ll sleep, I promise.”

Gloria came closer to him, her movements soft and sweet, her glowing skin smelling of black licorice. He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her for days, but he’d made her a promise and he fully intended to keep it.

“You must get some sleep,” she insisted. She removed the coffee filter from his hands and placed it on the counter. Then, her warm hand was in his, pulling him toward the other room and the large, welcoming bed they shared. With nimble fingers, she unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it back from his shoulders, and ran her hands down his chest.

He placed his hand over hers and brought it to his lips. “I love you,” he said, kissing her palm. “Everything I’m doing, I’m doing for you, for us.”

Her warm brown eyes became glassy. “I know.” She stroked his cheek. “But you can’t think clearly without sleep. Get some rest and I’ll wake you in a few hours.”

“We don’t have a few hours.”

A tear fell from her eye, and she wiped it away. “I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I’ve survived much worse than this.”

“Just sleep for one hour. Please.” Gloria pulled him down onto the mattress.

She snuggled close to his and cradled his head against her breast. The warm, heady scent of her flesh, mixed with the sweet perfume of her sex, filled him. How he wished he wasn’t so drowsy. How he’d ravish her! Then, she began to hum a light melody. The sound was rich, comforting and earthy, like how an angel might sing at the salvation of a sinner’s soul. Everything about Gloria was wonderful and new, making him feel things he never thought possible, enriching him in subtle ways. And that’s when Jason knew he’d walk laughing to certain death to save her from the damaged world he’d created.

With his heart full, Jason wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, deeply, passionately. She responded to him with caution, knowing even before he got up that he wasn’t going to sleep. There was fear in the kiss she gave him back.



Jason ran his lips along her throat. "You mean everything to me," he whispered against her flesh, as if it were a secret that only the two of them should know. "I made you a promise. I'm going to honor it. Just give me two more hours, and I promise you I'll get some sleep."

Gloria stared at him, frightened, but defeated. "Okay."

Then, Jason slipped out of her loving embrace, injected himself with another stimulant, made a pot of coffee, and went back to work.

\* \* \* \*

On the bed, Gloria sat, tortured and guilty over Jason's state. The man was pushing himself too hard. Dark circles of fatigue make his dark brown eyes look sunken and sickly, and she was beginning to obsess that he was going to get ill. But what could she do? He was only doing what she'd asked him to. After several minutes getting her emotions in order, she decided that if Jason was confident he would have the antiviral in a few short hours, she was going to be ready to administer it.

Gloria got up and left, resolute to get vehicles and ammunition ready to go back into the city and vaccinate as many infected people as possible. Marching down the narrow halls, her first stop was Agent Cooper's office.

Cooper had been playing solitaire on his computer. She guessed with the world coming to an end, there wasn't much left for the CIA to do. He looked up at her and blinked in surprise.

"I need vehicles, guns and techs loaded up and ready to go within the next two hours," she said.

Cooper stood up with a startled look on his face like she'd just come into his office throwing trash at him. "Why? What's going on?"

"Masters is going to have the vaccine ready in the next couple of hours, and we have to be ready to roll."

"You're a marvel. How the hell did you get that guy to do anything?"

"It was easy," Gloria said as her stomach twisted into knots. Poor Jason was killing himself for her. The least she could do was get the rest of his work done. Someone had to administer all these vaccines. "He'd do anything for me. He loves me."

Shaking his head, Cooper pulled on his jacket. "Hell, Gloria, you've probably saved us all. I love you too." He gestured for her to follow, and the two of them took off running down the hall to get the rescue squads ready.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

It was twenty minutes past the two hours Jason had promised when Gloria decided to go into the lab and check on him. No matter how eager and curious she was, she'd been putting off going into the lab for fear he'd be distracted. But now the vehicles were packed and the tech assembled. All they needed was the vaccine. Chewing her lower lip, she came in cautiously.

"Jason?" Gloria made her way to the lab but didn't see him. Listening carefully, she crept around a corner and headed to the bathroom. The door was open, and there on the floor, was Jason, passed out.

Gloria gasped and rushed to him.

Kneeling down, she was relieved to see he was coming around. "Oh my God, Jason, are you all right?"

"Yeah," he croaked. "I'm okay. Listen, I've been keeping an eye on the statistics, and we don't have much time. The vaccine is untested, but we're going to have to try it anyway. The computer is replicating the vaccine so you should have enough for a test run."

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked as he struggled to his feet.

He gave her a weak smile. "I'm good. I just need to get some sleep. Take the vaccine and get it distributed to the tech. It only has a twenty-four-hour shelf life, so you'll need to work fast. And Gloria?"

"What, babe?"

"Promise me you'll *be careful* out there."

Gloria grabbed his jaw and gave him a joyful kiss. "I will, don't worry." She ran over to the lab table where several glass vials of a blue liquid sat. "Is this blue stuff it?" she called back to him.

"Yes," he said, crawling into bed.

She grabbed them and took off to where the techs were waiting by the vehicles.

\* \* \* \*

Outside, the world looked as it should after a major disaster. Streets were littered with trash and abandoned cars, buildings were gutted with broken windows, and streets were empty except for the occasional zombie shuffling around as he looked for someone else to infect.

Gloria set up a central command station in the center of the city, and that's where she sat now, monitoring the three new patients they'd captured overnight. Emily, who'd surprised everyone by her recovery, had volunteered to help.

“How are they?” Gloria asked, approaching the cot of one young woman in a light coma.

Emily glanced through the chart. “Her vital signs indicate she’s doing better.”

Cooper came over, looking even thinner than he had before. “We’ve rounded up some more patients, but we’re quickly running out of room for the ones that are recovering. Any suggestions?” he asked Gloria.

“What about the hospital?” Emily offered.

“We thought about that,” Cooper said. “But it’s not secure. It’s smashed to pieces. The last thing we need is people recovering just long enough to get reinfected.”

“What about Jason’s house?” Gloria said. “I’ve been there. The place is huge and a virtual compound. I seem to recall he locked it up before we left.”

“You think he’ll let us use it?” Emily asked.

“I think he will,” Gloria said with a private smile.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Jason's house turned out to be a perfect central infirmary. The work had been grueling, but satisfying. Here they were, three months later, with definite signs of success. One by one, the sick were rounded up and brought to Jason's house where they were treated for the virus. And with every recovery, the infirmary gained another working volunteer. But for those already dead, there was nothing left to do but give them a cocktail that would finally bring them the dignified passing they so deserved.

Gloria sat in the back bedroom of Jason's house, which now served as their main infirmary, updating a progress report to the president. She stopped typing long enough to sip her cold coffee. Someone entered the room behind her, and she turned around.

Jason smiled, holding a fresh, hot cup of coffee for her. He came over and replaced her cold one. Gloria picked it up and sipped. Perfect amount of cream and sugar. "You're a prince."

"I try to take as good care of you as you do me," he said, taking a seat nearby. "But I didn't come in here to whisper sweet nothings into your ear. I have something important to tell you."

Gloria groaned. You could never tell what kind of mischief Jason was up to. When he wasn't out helping with the vaccinations, he was in the basement, tinkering in his lab, perfecting the antidote, or testing new ideas. The only time he took a break was to make love to her, which she didn't mind at all.

"Okay," she said. "I'm listening."

Jason reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, clear bag with three brown pills. "I created this for you."

"What do they do?"

"They *might* help you ovulate."

Gloria stared at the pills. "They might," she repeated.

Jason shrugged. "There are other, more invasive procedures we could try. That is, if you are willing."

She leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. It had been so long since she'd thought about having a baby. Did she still want one? She was so confused. Maybe she'd only wanted one because Robert had. Once they'd broken up, she hadn't given it a second thought. "I don't know, Jason. What if I don't want to have children? Would that be the end of us?"

Replacing the pills in his pocket, he got up and came over to her. He knelt by her chair. "No, Gloria," he said. "I want *you*, baby or no baby. I just wanted you to know that, if this is what

you wanted . . . I mean if you still wanted to have a family, I could achieve that for you. I know I could.” He kissed her and stroked her cheek. “All I want is for you to be happy.”

“I don’t need a baby to be happy,” she said, tenderly tracing his lips with her finger. “I’m happy now. Of course, things in the city could be better,” she joked. They both laughed and the release felt really good. Her relationship with Jason felt very good.

“So, how’s the president’s update coming?” he asked, glancing over her shoulder.

Gloria turned around to the computer. “It’s getting there. What are your estimates as far as getting this virus under control?”

“The numbers look good. If I had to guess, I’d say everything will be back to normal in about six months.”

“Great. I’ll put that in my report,” she said. “Now go away and let me finish this.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Three years later*

Surrounded by reporters, Gloria stood in front of a huge picture window in the research wing of the newly renovated Linden Memorial Hospital. As the associate director of cancer research, she always had to hold news conferences to update the public on their progress in the fight against cancer. The only difference was that this time, she had some great news to report.

One young female reporter pushed forward and shoved a microphone in Gloria's face. "Are the reports true, Director? Have you and Doctor Masters really found a cure for several dangerous cancers?"

Gloria held up a white folder stuffed with papers. It had the logo of the hospital on the cover and "Research Findings" in silver print. "Yes, it's true, but I really don't have time to go into all of our research results right now. For your convenience, I've prepared a full report, which will be passed out to everyone who wants one. We will be holding an annual conference in a few months, and more will be discussed then." The reporters closed in on the table next to her, each one eagerly grabbing one of the white folders. In the melee, Gloria managed to slip away.

Taking the freight elevator, she went down to the labs to see if she could find her husband, Jason. She found him all right, just where she'd expected him to be, playing a video game with their adopted eleven-year-old son, Jerome. Gloria walked in front of the TV screen, blocking the game. She frowned at Jason. "Don't you have work to do?"

Jason glanced at their son guiltily. "We're bonding."

Gloria folded her arms and stared at Jerome. "And I know you have homework, young man."

"Oh, Mom, I was just about to win!"

"How do you expect to grow up and be a brilliant doctor like your father if you don't study?" she scolded playfully.

"Dad never studied," Jerome said.

"I did too," Jason said. "Sometimes." He put the game controller down. "How did the news conference go?"

"Great. They're all impressed with what we've achieved so far. But don't get a fat head. We still have a lot of testing to do. And don't forget that conference we're holding in three months. You're scheduled to give a two-hour lecture the first day. I'll bet you haven't written a word."

"I'll be you're right." Jason grinned at Jerome. "You're mom's a ballbuster. You'd better finish your homework."

Jerome jumped up and tore off out of the room. But just before he ran through the door, he paused and turned around. "I love you, Mom. Love you, Dad." Then, before Gloria or Jason could answer, he was running toward his room to do as they'd asked.

Jason came over and placed his arms around her. Gloria couldn't help but smile. "I love you too, Mrs. Masters," he said. He leaned in close to nuzzle her cheek.

Gloria squeezed him tight. "I'm glad I never gave up on you."

"Me too. But what made you so sure I wasn't a lost cause?"

She shrugged. "I just believed that, under all that wickedness, there was the heart of a good man. I'm glad my hunch was right."

He placed a gentle kiss on the side of her mouth. "The only good thing about me, Gloria, is you."

"I guess I'll just have to settle for that then," she said. "You *are* such a diabolical man, Doctor Masters."

"That's what they tell me," he said.

The End

## *About the Author*

Michelle Marquis is the pen name for author Michelle O'Neill. Michelle has authored many erotic adventures for the internet over the years. For more about Michelle and a complete list of her books, please visit her Web site at [www.michelle-oneill.com](http://www.michelle-oneill.com).