



# Dark Abyss

By

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## Chapter One

The concussion of the bomb blast alone was powerful enough that it created a spider web of cracks in the thick glass and compromised the seals around the office window where Simon stood. Thin streams of water shot through the weakened seals, forming miniature fountains that swiftly created pools on the carpet beneath his feet. One moment he was scanning the tourists and potential colonists as they emerged from the transport in front of the desalinization plant. The next, he was staring at havoc. The certain knowledge that he was about to become a part of it hit him like an aftershock of the blast itself.

Spinning on his heels, he lunged toward the door. His right foot hadn't even settled firmly on the floor when the window exploded, compromising the integrity of the entire structure. He had time to feel a split second of relief when he saw the door of his office seal automatically and then he was swept off his feet by the cannon of water blasting through the hole when the force of the explosion turned the two foot square window he'd been standing in front of into a missile. Within a handful of heartbeats, water had filled the room and transformed it into a deadly mixer, turning everything that hadn't been bolted to the walls or floor, including the window itself, into powerful projectiles that slammed into him or narrowly missed him.

Briefly disoriented as the water sent him tumbling, panic flickered through him, but as he rolled, he caught sight of the now empty socket where the window had been. Gritting his teeth, he fought to reach it, struggling against the artificial current created by the churning of the trapped water as it slammed into the walls and was deflected back upon itself. It was luck more than determination that ejected him from the building. A back surge caught him, slamming him against the edge of the window. He felt the impact, but shock prevented his brain from registering pain or even numbness from the blow.

His luck held. By the time he was swept out, the wave of projectiles created by the explosion had already passed over the Watch Center.

There were hundreds that hadn't been as lucky. The debris still spreading outward from the blast zone included bodies and parts of bodies. Clouds and streams of blood mixed with the water, smoke, and ash.

Galvanized by that discovery, Simon bellowed instinctively for the watch. The gargle of sound that emerged briefly confused him until it dawned on him that he'd been in his office. He wasn't wearing his communicator.

Fuck!

Whipping around to look for some means of directing the emergency, he spied one of the watchmen gaping at the scene in shock and shot toward him. Grasping the young recruit by both shoulders, he shook him furiously and ripped his communicator from his head, pointing toward a bleeding victim drifting near them.

"Code Red! Code Red! Watchmen to your stations! Emergency personnel—get the injured into a shelter! Immediately! Priority on the air-breathers!"

Even as he made the announcement, he headed toward ground zero to assess the damage and see if there was anyone alive that could be pulled from the rubble. Before he'd reached it his men had launched into emergency mode. The heart of the city, as still as death in the aftermath of the explosion, began to churn with rushing watchmen and emergency workers.

The blood in the water was going to draw predators. That was going to be the biggest danger for anyone uninjured, but the colonists knew the drill by now. At the first sign of a terrorist attack, they rushed to the nearest available shelter if they were able to move.

*The fucking bastards!* Wondering if it was the work of the radical Green Peace movement, the Humans for Humanity, or some other crazed fanatic bent on 'saving the oceans' or 'destroying mutants', he surveyed the desalinization plant with disgust and budding anger. The plant, in the heart of the territorial capital, New Atlanta, supplied about a third of the fresh water for the entire colony of New Atlantis. If it was completely destroyed ....

His anger blossomed into rage. He tamped it with an effort. First things first, they had to get the injured to safety so that they could be treated and gather up the dead before the sea predators were drawn by the blood into a feeding frenzy.

He worked alongside the emergency personnel to sort and move the injured until he saw that they'd managed to get all of the injured within view to safety. Leaving the emergency workers to sift through the rubble for the possibility of other survivors, he headed out to check the city's perimeter. As he'd feared, sharks had begun to gather. He paused to watch as three of his men worked to bring down a great white and, when the huge predator became the focus of the feeding frenzy, returned to the plant.

The workers were still collecting the dead and searching for survivors, but he focused on the men clearing the rubble from the plant. It took them four hours to clear away enough of the debris to enter the building and begin assessing the damage. By that time he'd begun to get reports on the number of casualties and the damage to the other structures nearest the blast zone and had fielded a half a dozen calls from the mayor and the territorial governor.

Seething with frustrated anger, he finally left the disaster area and headed to the capitol building to report.

He discovered when he emerged from the access pool inside the building that the atrium was full of victims of the recent attack and bustling medics. Instead of heading directly to the dryer, he stopped to survey the scene and finally made his way along the aisles that had been formed, unable to resist the urge to search the faces for people he knew. He didn't see any but since most of the people he looked at appeared to be land dwellers, he didn't take much comfort in it.

He paused beside the physician in charge. "This is the tourists?"

The doctor stared at him blankly for a moment, his mind clearly elsewhere. "All of the survivors we managed to find," he said finally. "The blast demolished their water gear. We needed to get them inside quickly."

Simon nodded grimly. "Any idea how many were killed yet?"

Anger flickered across the doctor's face. "No numbers. Most of these people aren't going to make it, though."

Simon ground his teeth, but he left the medics to their work and headed to the

dryer. He barely paused. He was already almost dry. By the time he reached the council chambers, he would be presentable enough.

There were robes in a locker near the dryer. Pulling one out, he shrugged into it and headed for the stairs. The council was in the middle of a heated debate when he was announced. The room fell silent at his entrance. A dozen pairs of eyes turned to nail him.

"I hope you have some news for us, High Guardian!" the governor barked.

"How the hell did they get past our security!" the mayor demanded at almost the same moment.

Simon glanced from one man to the other and finally strode to the seat reserved for him and settled. "Would you like a preliminary report? Or would you prefer to pelt me with questions I don't have answers for?" he said sardonically.

Both the mayor and the governor looked taken aback and then deeply offended, though why they should was a mystery to him. They ought to be accustomed to his forthrightness by now. They'd complained about it often enough! He wasn't a damned politician, though, and he saw no real benefit to beating around the bush.

"It's been hours since the attack!" Mayor Grissom snapped. "You don't have anything?"

Simon narrowed his eyes at him. "I've got a lot of bodies and a lot of people in need of medical attention," he growled.

Grissom paled. Governor Harding spoke before he could think of another reproach. "Give us your preliminary report—has the saboteur been caught? And what is the likelihood of another bomb going off in our midst?"

Simon settled back in his chair and scrubbed a hand over his face tiredly. "Most of the watchmen were detailed to protect the citizens. As much blood as there was, it was like ringing the fucking dinner bell. I had to get them out there to prevent shark attack and the like.

"Preliminary 'guess' on getting the plant back up to full production is a month. Until then, it'll be working at about half, which means the water will have to be rationed for a while unless you can come up with an alternative plan ... or the feds lend a hand and we all know how likely that is.

"We were able to determine that no one left the city either directly after the bomb went off or in the hours since. It's possible the bomb was remote detonated—we haven't found all the pieces yet and can't rule that out. We found ... hamburger inside, though, so I'm leaning toward a suicide bomber. It might have been a tourist, but that's doubtful since they hadn't actually made it inside, that we know of, before the explosion and there shouldn't have been any workers in that area at that time—although we haven't yet ascertained the identities of the dead and we can't rule that out. The shift supervisor is trying to track down the identities of everyone who was inside the plant when it blew up. There were twenty men on the clock at the time of the explosion."

"My god! The tourists!" Grissom exclaimed as if it had just occurred to him. "The publicity! This is a disaster!"

Simon narrowed his eyes at him. "It was pretty much a fucking disaster for the colonists caught in the blast, also."

Grissom glared at him. "It's a disaster for the colony all the way around!" he snapped. "I'm not downplaying local repercussions, damn it! Don't take that attitude

with me! I'm the mayor! I have to worry about the city and the citizens, but that god damned bus was full of potential colonists! There'll be shockwaves all the way to Washington and god only knows what the repercussions will be! Everyone in the states already considers the territory wild and lawless! This will only make us look worse!"

Simon slammed his balled fist on the table top, half rising from his seat. "That god damned bastard that just killed several hundred people isn't *from* the god damned colony! You can bet your ass he's a god damned *air breather* from the 'civilized' states!"

"Do you know that for certain?" the governor demanded sharply.

Simon sucked in a breath to blast him with his temper and then folded his lips together again. "Not for certain."

"Then find proof, damn it! And find it fast! We're going to have to have a defense when Washington comes down on us about this! Grissom's right ... as badly as I hate to agree with him on this. This entire episode is going to land in our laps if we can't hand them proof that it was a terrorist!" He studied Simon for a long moment. "Do whatever you think is necessary, Simon, to protect the Atlantean Territory. We have to put a stop to these attacks!"

Surprise flickered through Simon, but he didn't think he'd misunderstood.

Frankly, he didn't give a damn if he had. He'd had enough himself. Nodding, he pushed his chair back and got up. "I'll see to it," he said grimly. He paused at the door. "I'll have the full reports on the damage to you by late tomorrow."

He was more thoughtful than angry as he left. The anger was still there, roiling inside of him. Much of it had found purpose, though, a possible outlet that had cooled the nearly overwhelming urge to strike out at something, anything to vent his frustration.

Sucking in a deep, cleansing breath when he emerged from the government building, he looked around at the city. He was third generation aqua-former, or mutant abomination as the air-breathers referred to them, he thought with a flicker of anger.

It was hard to say what bothered him most—his own sense of failure or the not so subtle implications of the mayor and governor that he'd failed.

A lot of good men had died today because he'd failed to prevent a terrorist from invading the city and a lot of innocent tourists looking for the possibility of a new and better life.

He was going to have somebody's ass when he found out who'd fallen down on the job and let the bastard through, he thought grimly!

He supposed there was some truth to the charge that the territory was a wild place, but then again ninety percent of the colonists were men. They lived on the edge, knowing every breath they took living in the territories could be their last. They worked hard. They played hard and there was always some bastard out there who preferred claim jumping and robbery to actual work.

He was more inclined to view it as rowdy rather than lawless, however, although he would grant them that much. He took it damned personally, though, that the entire territory was lumped together as if there was no difference, as if it was all the same. He was High Guardian of New Atlanta, the capital city ... as his father had been before him and his grandfather before that. Considering how thinly spread they were, he and his watchmen did a hell of a job at keeping the peace. Their crime rate was certainly no higher than the major cities in the states—not as high from what he'd been able to

determine.

The same could be said for all of the other established cities within the territory if not the smaller burghs that had popped up over the years across the vast continental shelf claimed by the U.S. Outside those areas ... well, it was a territory and the last frontier ... on Earth. They attracted all kinds and that included plenty of people that had worn out their welcome among the air-breathers. It was the militia's job to patrol the areas beyond the cities and they were spread thinner than the watchmen.

Which meant he was responsible not only for keeping peace within the city but protecting it from attack from the outside when necessary.

And he meant to do that! Whatever it took!

Instead of waiting for the reports to be brought to him, Simon toured the disaster area and the emergency medical stations that had been set up to treat the injured. He felt vaguely nauseated as he made his way at last to the Watch Center. The death toll was staggering.

The bastards had planned their assault well, or been damned lucky. He wasn't sure which, but they'd managed to set the bomb off at the peak of activity in the center of the city and caught a bus load of potential colonists on top of that. Of the fifty men, women, and children that had arrived for a tour, thirty-five were dead and the rest likely to die. Twenty men had been in the plant itself and it had been shift change so they still weren't sure of just how many of them had been killed—possibly all of them unless some had left a little early and some had been late reporting for their shift. There was another hundred dead or dying who'd been in the office building directly across from the blast or moving along the street between the two buildings, sixty in or around the surrounding buildings, because the concussion of the blast had blown out the windows and the buildings had imploded. Added to that, they had several hundred people with injuries from the flying debris.

He discovered when he reached the Watch Center that it, too, had been closed off due to damage. Wondering how many of his own men had been in the building when the shockwave hit, he headed toward the nearest watch station on the edge of the city. There were several inches of water standing on the foyer floor when he emerged from the pool and uneasiness flickered through him. Hoisting himself onto the rim, he ignored the dryer and the locker with robes and stalked into the control center. To his relief, he spotted his lieutenants, Ian, Caleb, and Joshua as soon as he entered.

"What the fuck is all this water doing on the floor?" he growled by way of greeting.

Ian flicked a quick look at him. "Glad to see you're still among the living, too," he said sardonically. "There's been a good bit of traffic in and out since the blast."

Simon glared at him, and then encompassed the rest of the room. "Emergency or not, there's a reason for protocol. There's a fucking inch of water in here! Somebody, or *everybody*, is going to get electrocuted. Oscar! Get the vac and get this floor dried up before we have another disaster!"

Caleb looked him up and down pointedly. "Guess everybody was in too much of a rush to stop to dry off and grab a robe."

Irritation flickered through Simon, but, unfortunately, Caleb had a point. Deciding to ignore the provocative comment, he headed toward the console the three men had been studying when he came in. "Anything, yet?"

Ian pointed to the screen. "Most of the surveillance cameras close enough to have caught anything were destroyed in the blast. This one was pretty beat up, too, but we lucked out and managed to get most of the feed from it. That man right there was the last to enter the building before it blew."

Simon leaned close, studying the grainy image Ian had paused on the screen and then leaned back, trying to bring the man's features into focus. "This isn't worth a fuck. Has he been identified?"

"One of the workers," Caleb supplied.

Simon glanced at him frowningly, waiting.

"The supervisor gave us a positive ID on him—name's Trey Carter. New colonist."

"How new?" Simon asked grimly.

"Moved into the territory about six months ago. Applied for a job at the plant, which just happened to have an opening since one of the workers had disappeared only a few days earlier."

Simon felt his belly clench. "And nobody thought that was worthy of comment?"

Ian shook his head in disgust. "I questioned the supervisor myself. I'm positive he didn't have anything to do with it—he's second generation, no known ties outside the territory. The man that disappeared was a friend of his. He said he guessed he was just too upset to consider that the man applying for the job was 'convenient', had his mind on his missing friend and all that. I believe him."

Simon studied Caleb pointedly until he finally took the hint and got up, offering Simon his seat. "Any other suspects?"

"We're ninety-nine percent certain it wasn't anybody with the tour group. They were checked at the border before they ever entered the submersible bus and checked again before they were allowed to enter the city. We've determined the bomb would've had to have been big enough that it would've taken something fairly large to conceal it—it couldn't have been concealed in their clothes—and the tourists were required to check everything before they were allowed in. Plus they were scanned."

Simon nodded, feeling a little relieved that at least the disaster couldn't be put down to sloppy security on that end.

"So ... what have we found out about Trey Carter?"

His lieutenants exchanged a look. "Nothing. Nada. Not a damned thing."

Simon stared at Ian in disbelief. "What do you mean nothing? He had to have the procedure to become a colonist. There would've been some sort of background check, at least medical! He would've had to have registered as a colonist."

"Fake," Caleb said succinctly. "All of it."

"What the fuck do you mean by that? Did they run any background checks on him or not?"

Ian tapped the screen. "That man right there ... I don't who the fuck he was, but I know who he wasn't. He wasn't Trey Carter." He tapped the keys of the console and brought up a photo of a man who looked to be around forty. "That's Trey Carter, and pretty much everything we have on file is for that man—except that isn't the man who applied to become a colonist." He pulled up a photo from employment records. "That's the man who was working at the plant."

"Jesus!" Simon growled. "Find out which fanatical organization he was working



for. He was working for one of them. It took some clout to get him in here. Someone was backing him.”

The discovery that their suspected bomber was a plant wasn't just sobering. It was terrifying in its implications. “How many men did we lose in the bombing?” he asked brusquely.

The room got quiet at the question. “Watchman Bart Singleton was on patrol of the area when it went off. Watchmen Calhoun, Mason, and Smith were only a block away. Calhoun probably isn't going to make it. Mason and Smith are stable and probably will, but they're not going to be fit for duty any time soon. Tom Carson and William Singleton were killed in the Watch Center when the windows blew out. Billings got mauled by a shark after the bombing. They say he'll make it, but he lost half his arm. As far as we know at this point in time, nobody else sustained more than a few minor cuts and bruises.”

Simon lifted a hand to his face, massaging the throbbing pressure in his temples. “Everyone will have to pull double shifts,” he said finally. “We need to run a background check on anybody in any position to plant another bomb in another critical facility. I want around the clock guards on our water reserves. If they blow that up, we're looking at worse than a few weeks of rationing water. Power plants, food processing—Contact the owners. I want everybody that isn't at least second generation Atlantean pulled from their job and kept out until they've been thoroughly checked out.”

Ian looked doubtful. “We run the risk of alerting any potential saboteurs.”

“Better than taking a chance on losing anything else critical or more people dying. If they make a run for it, we'll have them.”

“But you don't expect it?” Caleb said musingly.

Simon shook his head and rose. “I think if there'd been others, they would've blown us all to hell. I'm just not willing to take a chance that I'm wrong.”

\* \* \* \*

Anna tried to tamp her rising excitement as she looked over the test results of her latest crop. She discovered she couldn't. With one failure after another, to be looking at what might just be her first breakthrough was dizzying. The produce was perfect—nutrition-wise, anyway! She frowned faintly as she set the report down and studied the fruit itself.

Truthfully, it wasn't very appealing visually. The meat looked a little stringy and the color wasn't all that appetizing ... or the smell.

“Well, if it doesn't pass the taste test, it can't really be considered a success,” she muttered to herself, trying to work up her enthusiasm and actually eat it.

Hearing footsteps in the hallway outside her lab, she relaxed fractionally as a sudden thought occurred to her and hopped off her stool, moving quickly to the door to catch her assistant before he left.

“Paul! Do you have a minute?”

Her assistant halted in the corridor and turned to look at her questioning. “Sure! What do you need?”

Anna felt her face heating. “I just wanted to show you something.”

Something flickered in his eyes. For a brief moment, she saw speculation in his expression that sent a flutter of nervousness through her, then it vanished and he smiled broadly. “Don't tell me the tests were a success!”

Anna felt her excitement rise to the forefront again. "Yes! Come have a look at the readouts!"

His enthusiasm bolstered her flagging confidence and she rushed ahead of him to grab up the report and give it to him to read. "My god! This is fantastic!" he exclaimed when he'd skimmed through the report, grinning at her.

Anna chuckled with excitement. "Isn't it? It's almost the perfect food! *And* it thrives in seawater contaminated soil! I was just about to give it the first taste test. Would you like to try some?" she ended hopefully.

His smile faded as he stared at the fruit lying on her table. "Ah ... you should be first. It's your success."

Anna looked away. "We'll both try it," she said firmly. "You're my assistant. I might not have gotten this far without your dedication to the project." She saw his expression was reluctant when she handed him a piece of the vegetable she'd cut.

He stared at it and lifted it to sniff it. "This is fresh?" he asked a little doubtfully.

"Well, it has been sitting there for an hour or so ... but I just harvested it."

"Hmmm—it smells a little like ... uh ... fish ... interesting texture."

Anna frowned uncomfortably. "Really? I thought it sort of smelled a little like banana."

He sniffed it again. "I think you're right. I do detect just the faintest sort of whiff of banana there."

"Well," she said briskly, lifting the piece she held in imitation of a toast. "Here's to success!"

Paul nodded. Swallowing a little sickly, he popped it into his mouth. Anna watched his face closely as he chewed a couple of times. A look of alarm flickered across his face. He looked around a little frantically, strode quickly to the waste basket, and spat it out.

Disappointed, Anna touched her tongue to the fruit and grimaced. "Salty."

Paul cleared his throat. "Definitely fishy, too. But there was also the distinct taste of bananas," he added hurriedly when he saw her expression.

"I should try cooking it," Anna said decisively. "I think it might get rid of the stringiness."

Paul tried to look enthusiastic. "The right seasoning is probably just what it needs," he said bracingly.

Anna nodded, trying to ignore the depression slowly creeping through her and obliterating her excitement of before, trying to think of a recipe she might try the produce in. Something with a little lemon to neutralize the faint fishy taste?

"I don't suppose you've given any more thought to my invitation?" Paul asked, breaking into her thoughts.

Anna stared at him blankly, trying to remember what invitation he was referring to.

"The group?"

That still didn't ring any bells.

"Humans for Humanity?"

"Oh! That group. Oh! I don't know. I'm really not much for socializing."

He smiled at her coaxingly. "It would do you good to get out. You spend too much time in the lab with your plants. Maybe what you need is to step back from it for a

little bit?"

Anna was of the opinion that she needed to put in more hours, not less. People were starving. With the rise of the sea levels, they'd lost the coasts, forcing everyone to evacuate to higher ground and shrinking the land available for producing food. Her research was aimed at reclaiming land that had been contaminated by seawater so that they would no longer grow traditional crops.

So far, she hadn't had much luck with it, though, she thought morosely. She'd managed to develop a number of genetic hybrids that would thrive in soil devastated by tsunamis. She'd even managed to produce plants that would yield, but the fruit they bore was inedible as far as taste—nutritious, but horrible.

Her peers referred to her projects as Franken-veggies. They thought she didn't know, but she'd heard the whispers and snickers when she had to meet with company people for her reviews.

"There'll be plenty of food," Paul coaxed.

Anna blinked him into focus again as her stomach growled hopefully at the suggestion. "It's a dinner party?" she asked with more interest. "Do I have to dress?"

He sent her a wicked look that brought a rush of blood to her cheeks. "I think that would be a good idea, yeah."

It took her a moment to realize he was teasing. "I meant dressy dress," she said a little testily. "I'm not sure I have anything ...."

Realizing that she was wavering, Paul pressed the issue. "It's nothing fancy or formal. Wear what you have on."

Anna looked down at herself doubtfully, discovering she was 'wearing' soil from the greenhouse. There was a stained patch on one knee of her jeans, as well, from putting her knee down on one of her Franken-veggies. "I can do a little better than this," she said tartly.

"Great! I'm going home to change myself. I'll pick you up in ... about an hour?"

Anna stared at him, trying to recall if she'd actually said she would go or not and finally nodded. She frowned when he left, feeling an odd mixture of reluctance and anticipation.

It occurred to her forcefully when she reached the kitchen and settled to flipping through her recipe book in search of a concoction that might work with her latest harvest, that Paul actually seemed interested in her ... as a woman. The thought was radical enough it completely distracted her from her search for the perfect recipe.

Lifting her head, she thought it over, wondering if she could realistically consider his invitation in the nature of a date. He'd said it was some sort of group meeting, though, and try as she might she couldn't envision any kind of meeting as date-like, even if they were serving refreshments.

Of course, it had been a long time since she'd actually *had* a date. She frowned, trying to decide just how long, but finally gave it up as unimportant. She didn't think it had been long enough that dating could've changed radically—not since college, and she'd left college ...?

Well! There was no getting around the fact that she was definitely out of the dating loop! She was pretty sure it had been at least two years since she'd gotten her doctorate in genetics ....

Her stomach growled, reminding her that there'd been the offer of food. She

studied the fruit she'd dropped on the counter and finally set the recipe book down. Gathering up her 'harvest', she put it in the cooling unit and headed into her room to bathe and dress for her 'whatever'—date slash dinner slash meeting.

At least she'd get fed. If there was any romance ... well, Paul was sort of cute and it had been a very, very long time!

## Chapter Two

Anna felt her self-confidence melt away like mist before sunshine as she stared—gawked—at the mansion Paul stopped in front of. It flickered through her mind that this couldn't be the right place, but it was hard to ignore the fact that music and many voices were drifting to her, that it was lit up like there were no restrictions on power consumption, and there were already a number of water taxis lined up at the dock.

"This is the place?" she asked Paul uneasily.

"This is it. The head of the organization—Miles Cavendish—decided to throw a welcome party for all of the new recruits."

Anna blinked at him, feeling an uncomfortable jolt at the word 'recruits'.

"Recruits?"

Paul smiled with obvious effort, leaping out to tie up the line of his sleek boat.

"New members. Ready?"

Not really! All she wanted to do was rush back to her tiny little home and bar the doors. This was socializing on steroids! She'd thought she was just going to be with a small group. She tried to remember if Paul had said anything to indicate he was talking about a massive social function, but she couldn't remember that he'd actually said anything at all.

She'd just assumed, since he was her assistant, that he was as anti-social as she was and had expected a small, awkward group of academics. "I don't know about this," she said uneasily, staring down in dismay at the cocktail dress she'd put on. She'd felt downright sexy—well almost attractive—when she'd looked herself over in the mirror. It still fit, even though the dress was at least five years old. She'd only worn it once, though, and it looked as new as the day she'd bought it.

Paul's smile was slightly strained. "Come on! We're here now. You aren't going to back out on me?"

Put that way, it made her feel more uncomfortable. She didn't protest when he reached for her hand and helped her out of the boat. She was still trying to decide a tactful way to back out or possibly an alternative 'date'. "I don't know anybody ...."

"You know me," he said cheerfully, tucking her cold hand into the crook of his arm and guiding her toward the entrance.

Not really, she thought unhappily. True, he'd been her assistant almost a month, but she certainly hadn't known he rubbed elbows with people like this! She hadn't known he could afford a transport like the one he'd arrived in. She was beginning to think nothing she'd assumed about him was correct.

Her patron had sent him, though, she reminded herself. That was why she hadn't actually checked him out, although, truthfully, she hadn't checked out her last assistant either and she'd hired Kelly herself.

That had turned out badly, but who would've thought somebody would *fake* credentials just to get a job?

They were greeted at the door by a servant who was wearing a formal suit that

looked more expensive than her house! Before she could turn tail and run, Paul had dragged her inside. She glanced back at the closing door a little forlornly as he marched her across the huge, crowded main salon of the mansion, trying to ignore the uncomfortable sense that everyone in the room was staring at her.

“Mr. Cavendish—I’d like to introduce you to my boss, Doctor Anna Blake.”

The introduction caught her attention and Anna turned to meet a coldly assessing gaze. To say that Miles Cavendish wasn’t what she’d expected would’ve been an understatement. If she’d had time to consider it at all—which she hadn’t—she would’ve concluded that no one could attain such wealth without also attaining a great age. The man studying her with the coldest blue eyes she’d ever seen didn’t look to be much more than middle aged, if that.

She discovered it was hard to actually pinpoint his age. He was fair, his hair lighter even than her own ash blond, but it was definitely blond and not gray. His face, surprisingly handsome, looked mature but certainly not old.

His smile transformed his face from cold to intimate. “Doctor Blake. I’ve heard a great deal about you. What a pleasure to meet you at last!”

Anna felt her face reddening. “Nothing bad, I hope,” she muttered.

He threw back his head and laughed as if she’d said something extremely witty, drawing far more attention than she liked—which was none!

“Nothing bad at all, I assure you!” He glanced at Paul. “Do you mind if I steal her away for a bit?”

Paul bowed. “I’ll just help myself to the refreshments.”

Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, Cavendish began to stroll through the room with her, pausing to introduce her to people as they progressed. It did nothing to calm Anna’s nerves. For someone accustomed to spending most of their time complaining to plants, the crowd seemed suffocating. She smiled and nodded until her face hurt, wishing she could escape. Eventually, they reached the refreshment table, however, and that diverted her.

Her stomach was tied into so many knots she wasn’t certain she could eat without choking, but the heavily laden table of food was beguiling. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen so much bounty. It was almost obscene considering half the world was on starvation!

Make that *was* obscene, not almost!

Cavendish released his grip on her hand and picked up a plate. “What tempts you?”

“Everything,” Anna said without thinking.

He laughed again and Anna felt her face redden. “A little of everything then?”

“Oh god no! I couldn’t possibly .... Some of that, though, and maybe a little of that.”

“You’ve a good appetite,” he commented after a few moments.

Anna shot a look at him and then the plate he was holding and blushed. “Uh ... I missed lunch.”

Chuckling, he picked up a glass of wine and escorted her out onto the balcony, where she discovered to her relief, there were only a few guests sitting at the tables set up there. Excusing himself, he turned to the buffet to fix his own plate.

Anna stared at the mound of food in front of her, torn between embarrassment,

hunger, and nausea. As wonderful as everything looked and smelled, there was something vaguely disgusting about the sheer abundance of it.

And she was still tempted to dig in and see how much she could manage to put away. It took an effort to sit politely and simply drool over the food while she waited for her host.

He settled across from her. "So ... tell me ... how goes the research?"

Anna felt her appetite take a nosedive. "It's coming along very promisingly," she lied and then frowned. "Paul mentioned my research?"

He seemed to hesitate. "Let's just say I know a little about it—genetic enhancement of plants, correct?"

Anna struggled. It wasn't a deep dark secret by any stretch of the imagination, but she didn't particularly want to elaborate. "Something like that."

He grimaced. "All things considered, it seems like the way to go."

Inwardly, Anna shrugged. "Yes, all things considered. They've made great leaps in food production in a lot of areas, but not nearly enough to feed everyone."

He frowned. "And yet, I got the impression that you didn't approve of tampering with genetics?"

Anna blinked at him, trying to assimilate the comment.

"On people."

"Oh! No, definitely not. I don't see that as the answer at all! That's playing god! And, when all is said and done, if you alter the human race, we aren't human anymore and we've already lost the battle for survival."

"My sentiments exactly," he murmured approvingly. "In fact, I can safely say that everyone here shares your view."

"Really?" Anna asked disbelievingly. "Oh! That's right. Paul said something about the organization you started—Humans for Humanity. That's the goal of the organization? To preserve pure human genetics?"

"Ummm," he said. "We've been lobbying against tampering with human genetics for years—not with a great deal of success."

She could relate to that! "Well, I don't see changing humans as the answer to the problems we're facing! I mean, just because we can adapt humans to conditions they might not otherwise be able to tolerate doesn't mean we should! What we need is enough food to feed everyone, not to turn people into ... well, for lack of a less offensive term, freaks. People have enough trouble fitting in, socially, without setting them apart from everyone else physically."

"Here! Here!" he agreed, smiling at her. "Research like yours is the answer we need."

Anna felt the momentary lift her spirits had taken take a downturn. "Hopefully, it will eventually."

"Tell me a little about yourself," he invited.

"There's not really much to tell, unfortunately," Anna said wryly. She discovered that he was very good at drawing her out, however, leading her from one thing to another with intuitive questions and comments until she'd told him things about herself that she'd never told anyone else.

"I couldn't help but notice you haven't mentioned your father ...?"

"Oh! He died when I was a baby. I don't remember him. Mom never talked

about him.”

“So ... it was just the two of you ... growing up?”

Anna shrugged. “I always hoped Mom would find someone else, but she never did. I guess it was because we moved so much. She really didn’t have much chance of forming any sort of relationship. She did date a couple of men that I was hopeful would become my father, but ... we moved on.”

“Umm,” he murmured noncommittally. “Your mother liked to move?”

“I guess.” Anna thought it over. “She was always searching for a better life for the two of us, a better job, a better place to live.”

“Where does she live now?”

Anna felt the smile freeze on her lips. “She doesn’t. She was killed by a hit and run driver when I was in college.”

He frowned. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Anna felt discomfort waft through her. He sounded sincere enough and yet she had the sense that he was secretly ... pleased?

She studied him uneasily, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on why she’d gotten that impression.

“Are you finished?”

Anna stared at him blankly until she realized he was talking about her food. Embarrassed when she saw she’d barely eaten enough to tell the food had been touched, she glanced at him uncomfortably. “It was really good. I guess my eyes were bigger than my stomach. I hate to see it go to waste, though. Maybe I could take it home?”

“I’ll tell the server. Why don’t we take a walk?”

Anna glanced around a little uncomfortably, wondering where Paul had gotten off to. “I should probably find Paul. I completely abandoned him and he brought me.”

“He’ll survive,” Cavendish said coolly, rising from his seat and helping her from hers. “Don’t look so guilty! He brought you because I told him I wanted to meet you.”

Anna looked at him in surprise. “He did?”

So much for thinking Paul had an interest in her!

“He did,” Cavendish responded, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm once more and guiding her along the balcony, which she discovered had emptied while the two of them had dined.

“Why?” she asked a little blankly.

He looked amused. “Why did he? Or why was I interested?”

She thought it over. “Both, I guess.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he countered. “You’re a lovely, fascinating young woman and a brilliant scientist.”

Anna felt a little thrill at the comment ... and a good bit of doubt. “I am?”

He chuckled. “If you didn’t know that, it gives me grave doubts about the young men out there.”

“I haven’t found many hiding among my plants,” Anna said wryly.

He threw back his head and laughed heartily at that. “You have a quirky sense of humor. I like that. Don’t tell me you’ve no interest at all in the male of the species?”

Not a great deal, actually. “My research is important,” she said a little stiffly. “I consider myself extremely fortunate that I found a patron before I’d even graduated—who has given me the opportunity to pursue my research. I certainly don’t want to



disappoint him. I really haven't had the time to spare for ... other pursuits."

"Somehow, I don't think your patron expected you to devote your entire life to research," he said dryly. "You want children, at least?"

"Heavens! I certainly can't consider *that*! I'd never get anything done if I had a child to take care of! Besides, people are starving and the world is ... well, it's a disaster! It's unthinkable to consider bringing children into a world like this!"

"And yet life goes on."

Anna glanced around and discovered he'd led her into what appeared to be a home office or maybe a library. The important thing was that they were completely alone.

She eyed the couch a little uneasily, considering the topic under discussion as he'd directed her to it and wondered a little wildly if that was his idea of seduction. "Uh ... I guess so."

He settled on the couch and patted the seat beside him invitingly.

Anna glanced toward the door he'd shut.

"Sit down, Anna. We need to talk."

She frowned at the tone of his voice. "About what?"

"About our relationship."

"We don't have one."

"But I'd like for us to."

Anna gaped at him. "We just met!"

He stared at her blankly for a moment and grimaced. "This isn't what you apparently think, Anna. Please! Sit down."

Embarrassed to think she might have jumped to the wrong conclusion, Anna reddened, but she wasn't convinced enough to sit down on the couch with him. "I'm fine. I'm a little tired of sitting, actually."

He released an irritated breath. "I'm your patron, Anna. I also happen to be your father."

\* \* \* \*

The unthinkable had happened. Miles Cavendish had dropped a bombshell on Anna that had totally disrupted her focus. He'd torn apart the very fabric of her life by telling her that her entire life had been a lie. She wasn't certain an actual bomb could have so completely traumatized her.

The shock itself was almost as debilitating. She'd never in her life had trouble concentrating. If anything, she'd been accused of too much focus, tunnel vision that blocked everything out except whatever it was she was centered on. To find herself suddenly without the ability to concentrate threw her even more off-kilter, as if she'd lost a vital part of her body and was trying to learn to cope with it. Try though she might to find her inner strength, though, she hadn't managed to block out the many things disturbing her for more than a handful of minutes at the time since the night she'd met Miles Cavendish.

She couldn't even sleep! If she managed to beat her thoughts back during the day enough to go through the motions of carrying on her research, at night when she lay down total chaos erupted in her mind. Random thoughts seemed to pelt her and lead her in first one direction and then another in an endless round of tug-of-war—everywhere except to composure and sleep.

Releasing a pent up breath of annoyance, Anna threw her covers off and rolled out of her bed. Food, she decided, would help her achieve her goal—sleep. She needed to find something pleasurable enough to keep her focus and filled with enough drugging elements to knock her out. High fat, she decided as she made her way down the hall toward the kitchen. Milk had sleep inducing properties.

Moving to the cooling unit, she opened the door and stood staring a little blankly at the nearly empty interior, wondering when she'd last ordered a grocery delivery. Of course, she never ordered much. For one thing, food was rationed. For another, it was damned expensive and she had to keep costs down and focus her spending on her project.

Which her 'father' had been paying for all along!

Squeezing her eyes closed, she forced the thought to the back of her mind. She tried. When that didn't work, she started humming a tune, forcing her mind to focus on the tune rather than the thoughts battering to get inside.

Unfortunately, she couldn't really think of any damned songs except the childhood songs her mother had taught her and they were too simple to help her keep focused. "Old MacDonald had a farm ...."

She picked up the container of milk and examined the expiration date. "Had sour milk because his cow had expired ...." She opened it and sniffed just to be sure. "Oh my god! I could make cheese with that! Ok, milk's out. Fattening, fattening ...."

The take out boxes were empty, she discovered, wondering why she'd emptied them and left them inside the unit. "Old MacDonald had a farm, e-eye, e-eye, O!" she sang, pitching the containers over her shoulder in the general direction of the trash bin.

"And on that farm he had wrinkly tomatoes and withered lettuce, something unidentifiable and a black, hairy moldy thing! E-eye, e-eye ... fuck!"

Slamming the door of the unit, she turned to head to her cabinets to check those for something that might appeal to her. It took her eyes a few moments to adjust from the brightness of the cooler to the darkness of the kitchen, several critical moments for her eyes to discern that there was a big, black, impenetrable shadow between her and her objective. The split second she realized that the dark shape was roughly the size and shape of a very large man, she screamed.

Something brushed her arm—a hand—and she screamed again, whirling to flee. She slammed into the wall before she'd taken more than two leaps of fright. Stunned by the impact and the discovery that the wall was a lot closer than it should have been, the man she'd slammed into had coiled his arms around her before she'd gathered her wits. Screaming again, she dropped all of her weight against his arms and slithered halfway through the loose coil before he realized what she was doing and tightened his arms, pinning her face against something soft and squishy. It hardened while she was huffing and puffing out muffled screams against it, flailing her arms and legs wildly and gyrating her body to try to get loose.

"Grab her god damn it!" the man above her bellowed.

She sensed the presence of a second man and then a third as they surrounded her moments before she felt them grabbing at her. The man holding her head released her abruptly. For a handful of seconds, she managed to keep her arms free. She surged upward when the man holding her let go. Someone grabbed her around the hips. She slapped at his head and shoulders, heaving against him to try to break his hold and then someone grabbed her from behind, manacled her arms to her sides. A hand nearly as big

as her face clamped over her mouth and nose. A fresh wave of panic swept over her when she sucked in her breath and found her mouth and nose passages blocked by the hand. She sank her teeth into the heel of the hand over her mouth and sucked in a sharp breath when he yanked his hand back with a hiss of pain.

"Don't cover my face! I can't breathe!" she exclaimed in a frantic gasp, twisting her head back and forth to prevent the man from covering her face again.

He hesitated.

"Gag her," the man in front of her said grimly. "She'll start screaming again the moment we get her out of the house.

"I won't!" Anna said pleadingly. "I swear! What do you want? What are you doing in my house?"

"Your father," the man who'd spoken before growled angrily. "You're going to lead us to him."

Shock went through her. She stilled, but her mind was churning. Miles Cavendish? She hadn't even accepted that he actually *was* her father and now, within the space of a week, she'd met a man claiming to be the man she'd thought long dead and a dangerous gang of men wanting to get to him through her?

"I'll take you to him!" she volunteered. "I know where he is!"

"Just like that?"

Anna nodded vigorously, ignoring the twinge of guilt that stung her. Why should she die for a man she didn't even know, though? Whatever he'd done, *she* certainly hadn't had any part in it!

The man moved away. A few moments later, the kitchen light came on, blinding her. She clamped her eyes closed instinctively the moment the glaring light hit her pupils and then squinted to see. Another jolt went through her. There were four men standing around her and not one of them had on a stitch of clothing!

Her eyes widened as the shock of discovery went through her. The light glistened on their skin. Sweat from wrestling with her? Or water?

The man standing by the light switch, the one she realized had been issuing all of the orders, was exceptionally tall—over six feet, she was sure—and broad shouldered. His black hair hung around his shoulders in damp, faintly curling locks that ended just at the tops of his bulging male breasts. Wedge shaped muscles formed blocks all the way down his belly to the light nest of black hair that cupped his genitals. He was still semi-erect, leaving her in no doubt of where her face had been.

Even as heat began to creep into her cheeks, she registered something that made the blood rush from her face.

His skin from just below the waist to his feet was patterned—not smooth and even as the rest of his skin. It almost looked like a tattoo—except she knew it wasn't even before she caught a glimpse at the feathery looking fins at his wrists and elbows and his ankles. Her gaze swept upward to his face again of its own accord and then, with barely time to actually register his features, moved from him to the other men within her view.

She couldn't see the one holding her, but she could feel the hard ridges of his flesh digging into her through her thin nightgown and knew he was the same.

They were all tall, with hard, elegantly delineated muscles that gave them the grace and beauty of sculptures depicting the perfect male body rather than the appearance

of actual, flawed human beings.

Because they weren't human beings at all.

"Mutants," Anna breathed in shock, scarcely realizing she'd spoken aloud until she saw their handsome faces freeze and harden.

The man she was staring at glanced toward the one she'd realized must be their leader and her gaze automatically followed the movement.

She had the impression that he'd been studying her with equal thoroughness while she'd looked at them. It was hard to say what he'd thought of his assessment, though, because, clearly, she'd managed to insult and anger all of them.

"She either isn't very bright," he said coolly, "or she has some sort of false sense of superiority that not being a 'mutant' somehow protects her from the consequences of pissing off men who aren't in a very forgiving mood at the moment."

Anna swallowed convulsively several times, blushing at the insult, struggling to think of a response. "I'm not very bright," she agreed shakily. "Could I ... uh ... just give you directions?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "And apparently, she doesn't think we're very bright either," he said dryly.

Irritation flickered through her. "I'm not deaf! I do understand English, although I have to say *yours* is damned hard to understand!"

He moved toward her, bending down and pushing his face close to hers. "It comes from being a water breather," he growled, enunciating each word slowly, and then added. "Born one."

Her eyes widened.

He lifted a hand and skimmed a finger lightly along her cheek. "Yes, we *breed*. Is that why your father decided to step things up? He figured if he didn't start blowing us up there'd be too many to kill all of us?"

If he'd punched her in the stomach he couldn't have more surely jolted her or deprived her of air or sent her mind into complete chaos. She felt dizzy with the rush of blood away from her head. "Blow up?" she managed to whisper through lips that didn't seem to want to cooperate in forming the words.

"Simon! We need to move!"

Simon straightened and turned to look at the man who'd spoken. They seemed to exchange a silent communication and the one named Simon turned to look at her again. This time his expression was speculative. "Take us to him. Mind you, if this is a trap, you won't live long enough to regret it."

\* \* \* \*

Anna stared in disbelief at the spot where the mansion of Miles Cavendish had been moored less than a week earlier. After turning all the way around and studying the houses, though, she finally had to accept that she *was* in the right place. The house wasn't.

That was the problem with a floating city, she thought fearfully. There was never any telling when someone might decide to move their property to another city altogether!

She sent a terrified look at Simon. "It was right here! I swear to god! Don't hurt me! It *was* here!"

His face looked like stone. "When?"

Anna blinked at him, trying to jog her memory. "A few days ago! I'm not sure.

Paul brought me. There was a party and ... and I met Miles Cavendish."

"No doubt celebrating their victory!" Simon spat in furious disgust. "Two hundred people dead! Two hundred! Fifty of them 'human', just like you, tourists whose only mistake was getting in the way! Another three hundred wounded, a lot of them fucked up for life!"

Anna gaped at him, thinking for several moments that she might throw up.

"Met?" one demanded sharply.

She looked at him, vaguely recalled Simon calling him by name—something Biblical? Caleb!

"What do you mean 'met'?" Simon growled.

Anna returned her attention to Simon. "Paul brought me here! Mr. Cavendish said he'd asked him to so he could meet me! He wanted me to join him, told me he was my father," she babbled. "I swear to god I hadn't met him before that! I don't even believe he *is* my father! Mom said my father died before I was born. So, if Paul or somebody told you he was, they were lying! I don't even know the guy!"

"Who the fuck is Paul?"

Anna blinked at him again. "My assistant—Paul Warner."

"Where is he?"

"We need to take her to the Watch Center to interrogate her," one of the men said. "We're liable to attract company we don't want here!"

"We could go back to my place!" Anna volunteered, immediately certain she had no desire to be taken anywhere else, adding in a small voice when Simon glared at her, "Couldn't we?" And then she could tell them everything she knew, which shouldn't take more than five minutes, and they could go away again!

Simon looked like he wanted to bite nails in two and could've done it. He uttered a growl of pure frustration. "The bastard's probably already slipped through our fingers," he muttered. "Snakes!"

"He isn't mine!" Anna gasped. "Swear! I've only known him a few weeks, and Cavendish told me he'd sent him." Her chin wobbled. "I don't know what's going on here! I'm just a scientist! I genetically engineer plants! And I'm really bad at it, too! Everybody calls them franken-veggies! I'm sure I'm absolutely useless to you, so you might as well just let me go! I won't tell anybody! I have a bad memory for faces and names!"

She didn't realize the men had turned away from the city and begun tugging her out to sea until Simon abruptly dipped her head beneath the water. She came up coughing and spluttering and swinging her arms wildly.

"God damn it, Simon! Was that really necessary?"

"It shut her up, didn't it?" Simon growled.

"We need a suit to take her down," one of the others said.

"I'll breathe for her."

"Aw, come on, Simon! Lighten up! It'll scare the ever loving shit out of her!"

"If you can't keep your mind off of your dick, stay out of it!"

"Oh yeah? Well maybe it's you that can't keep your mind off your dick! I wasn't the one that suggested I'd breathe for her!"

"You're both scaring the piss out of her! Keep a lid on it!"

Anna was shaking like a leaf, but she was hardly aware of the conversation going

on around her. Her entire focus was on the fact that they seemed determined to take her below and her phobia of heights—which included depths! As tempted as she was to plead her case further, the dunking had taken what little spine she had and beyond that, she wasn't sure she could get her mouth, tongue, and vocal chords to cooperate. Her heart seemed to stop in her chest when Simon turned her to face him and she knew he was about to take her far below the surface.

She didn't *have* gills! She couldn't sift the oxygen from the water! She was going to drown!

He slapped her cheek lightly. "Focus, Anna! I'm going to breathe for you while I take you down!"

She nodded jerkily, but it was an instinctive urge to agree with anything he said, not actual comprehension. She whipped her head to the side the moment he ducked beneath the surface with her, holding her breath. He waited until she began to fight him frantically and tightened his grip around her. She would've continued to try to elude his mouth if he hadn't tangled his hand in her hair and held her head.

She continued to claw at him in mindless terror for several moments after she felt his heated breath in her mouth and sucked it into her starving lungs. He touched her nose. She was at a loss to grasp why until it occurred to her that he was telling her to breathe out through her nose.

The panic never really left her. She simply wore herself out fighting him and went limp, her entire focus on sucking in each breath he gave her and waiting anxiously for the next.

## Chapter Three

It was like a lover's embrace and one endless kiss—except more frustrating than pleasurable, Simon reflected, relieved beyond measure when he surfaced with Anna in the pool within the pod he shared with his lieutenants and closest friends. It took Anna several moments to realize they'd surfaced, unfortunately, and his relief was slightly premature. The moment he loosened his hold on her and broke contact, she began struggling to reattach herself. "There's air here, Anna!" he said tightly, eluding her attempt to press her mouth to his again by turning his head, giving her a light shake to break through her panic.

She opened her eyes like someone waking from a nightmare and uncertain it was over, gasping, shivering all over.

"Let me help her out," Caleb said, his voice roughened with sympathy that irritated the shit out of Simon.

For a moment, he tensed, but he forced himself to let go of her as Caleb pulled her toward the lip of the pool, caught her waist and hoisted her out.

It was a view that stopped him in his tracks. Her clothing was plastered to every inch of her skin and nearly transparent, hiding just enough to tease him. Either his reaction was of short duration, or it affected everyone else the same way. When he finally blinked in an instinctive effort to bring the view into focus, he came to himself enough to look around to see if the others had noticed and saw Caleb had just hoisted himself from the water.

Anna wrapped her arms around herself, shivering, her teeth clattering together hard enough he could hear it. He struggled with the sympathy that coiled in his belly, but he couldn't shake it. He also couldn't prevent the rise of resentment inside him when Caleb helped her up and supported her to the dryer.

"Why did you bring her here?" Ian muttered beside him. "I thought the plan was to take her to the Watch Center and interrogate her."

Simon didn't even glance at his friend. He was fully focused on watching Caleb wrestle with Anna for her clothes. Not surprisingly, Caleb won the battle and stripped her. He swallowed a little convulsively when the 'veil' was lifted, allowing him an unrestricted view of her.

"The governor told me to handle it," he responded finally, a little absently. "He made it pretty clear that he didn't want to know the details. We can't take her there without everyone in the city knowing inside of a day, and if the governor hears, he'll be forced to do something about it." Moving to the side of the pool before Ian could question him further, he climbed out and strode to the dryer. Caleb had pulled a robe from the locker next to it and was dressing Anna as if she was a child.

She looked like a child, he thought, feeling his belly clench—all big, round, frightened eyes.

Well, unfortunately, not entirely like a child. As slender as she seemed, there was nothing at all childlike about her full breasts and rounded hips. That was all woman and

his cock knew it, springing to attention before he even realized his body was working against him.

The robe swallowed her—no surprise since all the robes were of a size for them and she was at least a foot shorter than he was and probably half his weight.

He managed to get himself under control when he discovered that she was clutching at Caleb a little frantically, as if trying to shield herself with him.

“It’s alright, baby,” Caleb murmured. “No one is going to hurt you. I promise.”

Simon rolled his eyes. He didn’t like it that she was scared anymore than any of the others, but the hard truth was that her fear of them was all they had to work with. They couldn’t hurt her. He wouldn’t have even if he wasn’t constrained by law to protect her.

Glaring a warning at Caleb, he caught her arm, dragged her loose from Caleb in spite of her efforts to cling to him and marched down the main corridor until he reached his room. “Wait inside,” he said curtly, stealing himself against the wide-eyed look of terror she turned on him before she scurried inside.

Closing the door behind her, he jerked his head at the men in a silent order to head into the living area. He could see all of them were thoroughly pissed off—with him. He supposed he should’ve expected it, all things considered. There were virtually no women in all of New Atlantis. The government had glibly promised brides to the first colonists to accept the ‘change’ and establish the new American frontier. Like everything the bastards promised, though, it never really materialized.

They’d legalized prostitution just to get any women at all and even the money wasn’t enough to draw droves of them. Those who came could not only name their price, but the men were eager to take them as brides and carry them away if they could convince them. That practice eventually led to bride bartering on the bride mart. The poor and desperate sold their daughters to the colonists, but even the most dutiful daughters apparently refused to support the family in that way more often than not, because there remained a tremendous shortage of women even after generations.

It was the main reason the people in the upper forty considered them wild and barbaric—their wedding practices—because beyond the fact that women were scarce, they were damned expensive to acquire. Few of the colonists, no matter how hard they worked, could afford to buy a bride without help, let alone protect their investment from the men who were doing without, which had led to claim sharing.

It was a marriage—of sorts, but it was so ‘outlandish’ to the traditionalists in the continental U.S., who weren’t faced with the problems they were, that it was seen as proof of their barbarism. No one in the territory was particularly happy about it, if it came to that, but ‘owning’ a fourth or even an eighth of a bride beat the hell out of having no woman at all!

So he could see their point. Women were precious. They were to be pampered and cared for because they were so scarce and fragile.

“Let me remind you before anybody says a god damned word that that ... *human* in there is the spawn of the bastard that just killed a hell of a lot of friends of ours,” he growled, “and it’s very likely that she’s the only chance we have of getting our hands on the son-of-a-bitch.”

Some of the angry tension eased from them, but he could see he was going to have a battle on his hands. “I don’t believe she had anything to do with it,” Joshua said



tightly. "I mean ... look at her, Simon! She's just a little bit! Any one of us could break her in half! I feel like a god damned bully and I don't mind telling you I don't like it worth a shit!"

"You bought that dumb act?" Simon growled with disgust. "She admitted she was a scientist—although we knew that already! She graduated at the top of her class. She has enough brains to more than make up for her lack of sparing abilities! If you can't keep your head on straight around her, keep your distance! She'll play mind games with you and fuck you over forwards and backwards!"

"Jesus, Simon!" Caleb snapped. "There wasn't a damned thing in anything we uncovered about her to suggest she's like that! Or even that she had any connection at all with her father!"

"And yet she's written and published a half a dozen papers condemning genetic manipulation of the human species!" Simon shot back at him. "Whether she is or was connected in any way to the attack, she is clearly a chip off the block—of a like mind with her father who considers the only good 'mutant' is a dead one! You need to keep that in mind when you're dealing with her! You probably make her skin crawl."

Caleb looked angry and a little sick. "She ... clung to me."

"Because she's scared," Ian said coolly. "It was probably instinct because she was more afraid of Simon right then than you—or because you offered sympathy. Don't let her get in your head, Caleb. I hate to agree with Simon on this. I think she's as pretty a little thing as I've ever seen and there are a lot of things I'd love to do to her besides interrogate her, but there's the danger. She doesn't need strength to beat us. She just needs to weaken us—turn us against one another."

Caleb glanced down the hall, but he subsided. "So ... we're going to keep her here and interrogate her. I don't see what that will gain us. Say what you like, but she convinced me she didn't know anything useful."

"She's been inside his home," Simon pointedly. "She attended a party—I still say a celebration of their victory. If that was the case, then she saw a lot. She knows what Miles Cavendish looks like—and we don't. She knows what a lot of his people look like—because she saw them. She also knows what his home looks like. It's a long shot. He could've moved it anywhere up and down this coast or he could be heading for Europe—in fact anywhere. But it's still something and we don't have anything without her."

"You don't think we could use her as bait?"

Simon stared at Ian a long moment and finally moved to a vacant chair, settling in it heavily. "I don't know," he said finally, reluctant even to consider it. "If it's true she didn't even know the man before she met him last week ... doubtful. Anybody as cold-blooded as Miles Cavendish probably doesn't have any real attachments to anyone—let alone a young woman he doesn't even know."

"So ... we keep her here, under wraps, until we've gotten what we can out of her, and then what? She'll know our names and our faces. The minute we let her go we're facing federal kidnapping charges. She'll make a dash to the nearest police station and spill her guts."

Simon shrugged. "We're territorial lawmen. The most we have to worry about is operating outside our jurisdiction—fines and a slap on the wrist. She has terrorist connections. All we have to do is produce the evidence and the charges vanish."

"Then why hold her here at all?" Joshua demanded. "Wouldn't it be better to hold her at the Watch Center? This could easily be interpreted as false imprisonment—keeping her here."

"Except the bomb made the Center unstable," Simon pointed out and held up his hand before any of the others could comment. "There is a chance Cavendish will try to get her back—a slim one, granted, but a chance that he'll discover his only child is being held by the people he despises. As long as there's any chance, at all, that she could help us stop the bastard, I'm keeping her here. Like I said, if we jail her, the governor will be informed and if the feds demand her back—which they would—then we have to turn her over."

"This is a little deep into the gray area," Ian said.

"I don't like it either," Simon said grimly. "But I also don't like the idea of waiting for the next bomb to go off."

Caleb blew out a heavy breath. "Alright. How are we going to handle this?"

"The same way we would if we'd caught the bastard that blew up the desalinization plant. We interrogate her, keep her off-kilter until she cracks and we know we're getting the truth out of her. If any of you just don't think you have the stomach for it, speak now."

\* \* \* \*

The bone deep chill that had been rattling her teeth finally eased off and some of the tension with it, but Anna was still in such a state of shock that it almost seemed that she was moving through a nightmare. She kept trying to reconcile the smiling, personable man she'd met with a cold-blooded killer and discovered she just couldn't. A monster capable of killing so many people should *look* like a monster. He shouldn't be able to project so much charisma, kindness, joviality. He shouldn't be handsome and rich and polished.

Was it possible, at all, that they were mistaken?

They didn't seem to think so, and she still couldn't accept it. She hadn't been able to accept his claims of being her father—and her patron!

Bitterness washed through her at that. She'd felt like she was making her own way, felt like her mother would've been proud of her if she'd been alive to see it! She'd felt that winning a grant right out of school justified her existence, underlined her importance to society.

And it hadn't been anything but ... an ego-trip for a man who hadn't even been around for her birth? So that *he* could take pride in his off-spring?

She felt betrayed in every sense of the word, belittled by what he'd done.

She realized abruptly that she did believe every awful thing they'd said about Miles Cavendish, as hard as it was to accept. It was accepting that his blood ran through her veins that she was having trouble with.

She hadn't believed him when he'd spun her the tale about her mother. She hadn't *wanted* to believe it and therefore she'd tried to keep an open mind. Deep down, she'd felt the entire time that he was a liar. She didn't know him, but she knew her mother. There was just the two of them. They'd been close enough that she felt like she knew her mother better than anyone. The very fact that her mother had never said one word about him seemed proof positive that he was a liar. She didn't believe her mother would've stayed on the run throughout her life without a reason.

And that reason had to be that she was terrified of the man she'd married. If it had been a 'misunderstanding' as he claimed, she might or might not have reconciled with him, but it seemed probable that she would've vented about it—at least at some point.

She'd never understood why her mother kept them on the move. There'd been many times when she'd resented it, become angry and argued with her mother and just generally been a pain in the ass. She had a hard time making friends. She didn't fit in easily and it had made her miserable every time she made a friend and then had to give them up until she'd finally ceased even trying to connect. She'd nursed a lot of resentment toward her mother because of it.

And to think all that time her mother was just trying to protect her!

She was so sorry she'd doubted her mother, angered that her mother hadn't trusted her enough to explain it.

She must have found out what he was doing, Anna thought abruptly. She must have discovered he was a terrorist!

\* \* \* \*

Anna was huddled in a tight ball in the middle of his bed when Simon entered the room. He checked momentarily, his gaze flickering over her, and then continued inside. Grabbing his easy chair, he pushed it closer and settled in it, studying her, trying to read her 'tells' as he generally did with prisoners. He discovered she was much harder to read than his usual suspect, mostly because he was having trouble putting it out of his head that she was in his bed. She was still shaken. He could see that, badly, but was it only shock? Or was guilt, at least a little, behind her nervous movements?

"Where am I?"

"I'll ask the questions."

Her lips tightened. The show of spirit, minor though it was, surprised him.

"Just tell me one thing. Are you ... some sort of ... thug? Are you after him because he cheated you? Or ... what?"

Anger washed through him. He supposed, given the way they'd taken her, he deserved it, but it still pissed him off. "I'm High Guardian—head of the Watchmen."

She frowned, turning that over. "That's territorial lawmen, right?"

"It is."

She lifted her head and looked around. "This isn't a jail."

And this interview wasn't going the way he'd expected either! "The Watch Center was damaged when the bomb went off. I was in it at the time, so I think you can probably understand that I'm pretty fucking pissed off."

Her gaze flickered over him. He didn't doubt she was assessing the damage. She looked away after a brief appraisal. "I'm sorry, but I didn't have anything to do with it. I didn't even know about it."

"I guess it's unanimous, then. Air-breathers don't give a fuck what happens here. One would've thought it would warrant at least five seconds on the news considering the death toll."

She blinked at him, turning red, and cleared her throat. "I don't actually watch the news. It's always depressing."

"That's a little dangerous in this day and time, isn't it? Not keeping abreast of the weather at least."

She shrugged. "Water City always sounds the early warning if there's dangerous weather headed our way. In any case, I'd notice if my neighbors broke their moorings and moved away."

"Would you?" he asked dryly.

"Maybe not," she admitted uncomfortably. "But I always have an assistant to keep me informed."

"Tell me about Paul."

Anna felt her face heat with embarrassment. "I don't really know much about him. When I fired my last assistant, the research center sent him over—the company funding my project. He had all the right papers. I just assumed he'd been thoroughly checked out."

"You said you'd found out that your father was your patron and he'd sent Paul."

She shrugged. "Either he was lying about being my sponsor or he owns the company or some part of it. I don't know. I don't even know if what he said about Paul was true. Although ...."

"Although?"

She lifted her hands to her cheeks. "He ... uh ... I thought he liked me, you know? He acted like he did. Anyway, he told me he was a member of Humans for Humanity and kept trying to talk me into joining them. I'm not really much for socializing, though, you know? And I also didn't think it was a very good idea to get personally involved with my assistant, but he said they were having a get together, a party, to welcome new members and talked me into going with him. I actually thought it was sort of a date. But then, when we got there, he introduced me to Miles Cavendish and vanished and Miles spent most of the evening ... flirting, I thought, and then he took me to his office and told me .... A pack of lies, I guess."

"Humans for Humanity is the terrorist organization that Miles Cavendish started thirty years ago and built into a multi-national group, whose sole purpose is to eradicate mutants."

Anna gaped at him. "That can't be right! Everybody knows about the organization—I mean everybody! And most of the wealthy people in the U.S. are members. It's an elite ... social club, really, but they lobby against genetic ... uh ... altering the human race artificially. They believe humans should evolve naturally."

"It's a terrorist organization and well known as one—to lawmen worldwide," Simon said grimly.

Anna blinked at him. "Well! I don't understand how they could get away with being so ... public!"

"It's because of that façade that they get away with it—that and the money behind it. As you say, the wealthiest people in the world, and most influential, are members."

Anna pressed a hand to her chest. "But I'm not! I'm not wealthy or influential and I'm not a member!"

Simon pulled the papers out of the file he'd brought with him and tossed them onto the bed at her knees. "You didn't write those?"

Anna stared down at the papers unhappily. To think that she'd been so pleased with herself when she'd been taken seriously enough to be published! "I have a right to my own opinion!" she said defensively. "Yes! I wrote them. That doesn't make me a terrorist, damn it!"

"No, that just makes you a racist and a bigot. Helping your father build a bomb would make you a terrorist. Did you? Help him?"

Anna gaped at him for a moment in shock and then glared at him. "That's completely untrue! I don't hate anybody! I certainly don't hate them because of what they felt like they had to do to survive! If you'd actually read the damned papers, you'd know that!"

"I read them," Simon countered although the truth was he'd barely skimmed through them. He hadn't had any interest in them beyond the fact that they seemed to support an affiliation with her father.

"Changing people into something else isn't the answer to our problems! Eventually, the imbalance causing the climate changes will right itself, but humans will still be forever altered into a different species altogether if they continue playing with our genetics! No one knows what the long range effects could be! We could completely split off and take different evolutionary paths! I'm against experimentation that might bring us grief in the long run. That doesn't make me in favor of ... killing people!"

"So ... you're saying you don't agree with your father?"

"I don't know the man. I don't know what he thinks or what he does, but if that's what he's been doing, then, no! I don't agree with him ... at all!"

Simon nodded. "Have you ever been to New Atlanta before?"

Anna stared at him, trying to shift gears. "Is that where we are?"

"Answer the question, please."

"No."

"Tell me about your mother."

"Tell you what?"

"You said she left your father before you were born."

Anna glared at him. "I said my mother told me he died before I was born."

"So ... you met him when?"

"You've got a worse memory than I have!" Anna snapped irritably. "Paul took me to the party at his house about a week ago. And I don't know that he *is* my father, damn it! My mother said my father died!"

"He is your father."

Anna studied him unhappily. "You're sure? There couldn't be a mistake?"

"So your mother lied to you about her association with Miles Cavendish."

Anna glared at him. "If you're implying my mother was a liar ...!"

"If she told you he was dead, that was a lie."

She picked the pillow up off the bed and threw it at him. "Don't you *dare* talk about my mother!"

Simon caught the pillow and dropped it on the floor. "What else did she tell you about your father?"

"Nothing," Anna said sullenly.

Simon lifted his brows. "I find that hard to believe!"

Anna narrowed her eyes at him. "And I give a shit what you believe, you asshole! I want a damned lawyer! I'm not talking to you anymore!"

"You don't have the right to an attorney. You're being held as a suspected terrorist," Simon said coolly. Getting up, he left the room, leaving her to stew over that for a while.

"That went well," Ian said dryly.

"Bite me!" Simon snarled.

Ian grinned at his back, but wiped the smile off his face as he entered the room where their 'terrorist' was sulking.

\* \* \* \*

Anna hated it, but she was desperate. Moving to the door, she rapped on it with her fist. "Hello? Is anybody there? I need to ... go!"

Hearing footsteps outside, she stepped back from the door. It opened and Caleb stuck his head in, his expression questioning.

"I have to go. There's no bathroom in here."

"The door wasn't locked." He stepped out. "Joshua is using the shower in this bath. There's another bathroom on the other side of the living area."

Red faced, Anna merely nodded and followed the direction he'd pointed out, feeling the beginnings of anger on top of her embarrassment. To think she'd been doing the pee-pee dance for a damned hour and the fucking door wasn't even locked! How was she supposed have known that? They'd just done it to make her feel like a complete moron!

She jolted to a halt when she reached the living room and discovered Simon sprawled out on the couch on his belly—buck ass naked!

She wasn't inclined to look upon him with any sort of favor after his nasty remarks about her mother, and yet ....

Oh! What a beautiful sight! What a beautiful back! What a beautiful ass! It made her little heart go pitter patter just looking at him and, unfortunately, she couldn't dismiss it as fear.

There was a little of that. It added a little extra gallop to her heart, but ... she'd never *seen* such a beautiful male animal!

Except the others. Caleb, she decided, was much prettier in the face. Simon's face didn't appeal to her at all. It was all hard angles, too harsh to really consider it handsome—and *she* certainly didn't!

He had a nice mouth, though, she thought, swallowing with an effort as the memory surfaced of his mouth on hers.

Resuscitation, moron! It certainly hadn't felt the least bit ... erotic at the time!

Banishing the wayward thoughts with an effort, she tiptoed across the room and found the bathroom she'd been so desperate for—a half bath. A bath and a half didn't seem like much for four men, but then they were either spotless housekeepers or they didn't actually spend much time in the place.

It had to be their place. She hadn't given it that much thought when they'd been questioning her after she'd arrived, one after another until she was so exhausted she began to doze off between sessions. She'd been on an emotional roller coaster, completely off kilter, terrified that they would hurt her until she discovered they were cops—terrified after that when Simon had said she was a suspected terrorist, for that matter.

She'd supposed they might have just settled in to turn her life into a living hell, but they seemed too much at home *not* to be at home.

She discovered when she left the bathroom that Caleb was in the kitchen, cooking. She didn't know what it was, but it smelled wonderful and she was starving.

She debated briefly, but she hadn't had anything to eat and very little to drink since they'd brought her. "Could I ... have something?" she asked tentatively when she'd stopped in the doorway.

Caleb glanced around at her in surprise. "Sure. I'm cooking enough for everyone."

"Do I have to go back to the room?"

He frowned and turned back to the stove. "You've got the run of the house. It isn't like you could leave."

Anna glanced around and finally pulled out a chair and settled to watch him. They all wore robes like the one she was wearing if they wore anything at all. She thought it was curious, but then realized she'd never given any thought at all to what life below the sea must be like. "Are you all cops?"

He glanced at her. "We're watchmen."

Anna frowned. "Isn't that the same thing?"

He shrugged. "In a way."

"How is it different?"

"We're the city's first defense. We keep the peace, arrest the wicked, investigate crimes—but we're also militia."

Anna mulled that over. "I thought there was a territorial militia?"

"There is, but it's a big territory. More often than not, if a problem arises, they're too far away to help, and often engaged."

"In boundary disputes," she guessed. "I thought the territory was established."

"It is. Some countries don't agree with our borders, though," he said dryly. "The militia is federal. Their primary focus is to protect America's interests."

"Meaning the mineral and ore deposits?"

"Meaning the money," he agreed dryly, "and a lot of those are close enough to the borders that they fall in the dispute zone."

Anna fell silent as he took the food up and began to distribute it on plates.

He glanced at her. "Take your pick."

Getting up, she took two of the plates and carried them to the table. Caleb was looking at her strangely when she returned to carry two more. "Fighting utensils in that drawer," he murmured, pointing.

Taking that to mean 'eating', she went to the drawer and gathered enough for everyone, setting a fork, knife, and spoon beside each plate. "Does everyone have a usual spot?"

He nudged his chin toward a chair across from him. "That one hasn't been claimed," he said, smiling faintly. "Although we rarely sit down at the same time."

"Should I tell them the food's done?"

He sent her another strange look. "They smelled it. They'll be here when they get here."

Shrugging inwardly, Anna settled in the chair he'd indicated. Apparently, it wasn't their custom to wait for everyone to arrive to start eating. Caleb hadn't even waited for her to sit down and she was standing beside him!

"Were you born here?"

He stiffened, swallowing his food before answering. "Yes—I'm second generation. Simon is third—his father was born here. Ian's also third generation

Atlantean. Joshua is first. He immigrated here with his family when he was a kid.”

She could see Caleb knew the direction of her thoughts. After casting around for a moment for a distraction, she said, “So, really, he grew up here, too.”

“Yes. He’s few years younger than me, but I’ve known him since he was a kid.”

Anna looked at him in surprise. “Really? I thought the two of you were the same age.”

He looked amused. “How old do you think I am?”

“I’m not very good at guessing that sort of thing.”

“How old do you think Joshua is?”

“Like I said ...,” Anna said uncomfortably.

“I was just wondering how you arrived at the conclusion that we were the same age if you have no idea how old we are.”

She shrugged. “You look about the same.”

“Except I’m eight years older than he is.”

Anna gaped at him. “You’re joking, right?”

He looked so amused she was sure he must have been teasing. Joshua arrived, to her consternation.

“Anna thinks we look like we’re the same age,” he said, chuckling.

Joshua sent her a startled look and turned red. “He was born here.”

“I know. He told me,” Anna said curiously.

Joshua shrugged. “They don’t age like we do.” He thought it over. “Actually, nobody does down here, even if they weren’t born here. It slows the aging.”

Anna frowned, trying to think if she’d ever heard that or read about it, but it dawned on her that it wasn’t just a matter of her own focus on plants. No one seemed to know much about the Atlanteans. There certainly hadn’t been any studies done that she’d heard of about the long term effects of living beneath the sea.

The colony was more appropriately named than she’d realized. It *was* a lost continent, ignored and forgotten by pretty much everyone. Nobody, including her, gave Atlantis or its citizens a thought beyond enjoying the fruits of their labors in their daily lives—except for those who wanted to wipe them out because they considered them ‘abominations’.

The slowed aging actually made sense now that it had been pointed out to her, though, and she thought about it. They were almost completely protected from both gravity and solar radiation, two major contributors to aging, or at least the appearance of aging. The necessary change in their diet might also contribute and the exercise—swimming, even slowly, took a lot more effort than walking. Granted, she hadn’t seen many of them, but if Simon and his men were anything to go by, they didn’t seem to carry around a lot of extra fat.

It made her wonder just how old they were. Just how out of her league was she if they had *years* more knowledge and experience than she did?

No wonder she felt so damned inadequate to the situation!



## Chapter Four

Luckily, Anna had almost finished eating when Simon arrived at the table, heavy-eyed, wearing a distinct 'five o'clock' shadow, and with his hair still tousled from sleep.

It took an effort to peel her eyes off of him.

Maybe she'd been just a little hasty in deciding he had *no* appeal at all?

"Is there any coffee?"

His husky voice sent a shiver down her spine.

"I put it on. It should be ready."

He got up and left the table, heading for a cabinet near the sink. He hadn't bothered to put any clothes on—not even a robe!

God! He had a nice ass!

She whipped her head around when she saw him start to turn toward the table and discovered Caleb and Joshua were both watching her. Feeling her face heat, she got up abruptly. "I think I'll have some coffee, too, if it's alright?"

Not that she wanted coffee, but it was the only thing she could think of to cover the fact that she'd been staring at Simon's ass. She'd grabbed a cup and was reaching for the pot when it abruptly occurred to her that it was doubtful they had cream. "I don't suppose you have cream?"

Caleb stared at her blankly.

"No cream," Joshua said sardonically. "It's a major bitch trying to milk fish."

Anna glared at him. "I think I'll just have water."

"The water's rationed," Simon growled. "The terrorists blew up the desalination plant."

Anna's lips tightened. "Caleb made coffee! What did he do, piss in the pot?"

Simon strangled on his coffee.

Caleb uttered a choked laugh and then apparently thought better of it when Simon glared at him. He cleared his throat. "Everybody's allowed four a day. I used the morning ration to make coffee."

Anna poured herself a cup and settled at the table again, glaring at the dark liquid. She didn't want coffee, damn it! She didn't even like coffee with cream. It just made it more bearable.

She drank it, though, every drop and then took her plate and cup to the sink and went back to her 'dungeon' to sulk. Uneasiness crept in after a while when she'd listened to men moving around the house. She could hear their voices although she couldn't make out what they were saying and wondered if the conversation pertained to her.

Surely they wouldn't keep her long? If they'd checked her out, wouldn't they know she hadn't had any dealings with Miles Cavendish before?

But how could they, she realized uneasily. The connection they'd found was a public record. *She* could've found it if it had ever occurred to her to research it.

Except her mother had given a false name for her father on her birth certificate ... or, at least she had on the birth certificate she'd given her. Was it fake? If it wasn't, she

realized, they wouldn't have found it and known Miles Cavendish was her father.

Just how many lies had her mother told her, she wondered?

She shook that thought off. She wasn't going to start doubting her mother. She knew everything she'd done had been intended to protect both of them, not to deceive her. It still distressed her that her mother never had told her the truth, but who was to say she wouldn't have, eventually, if she hadn't died?

That thought resurrected a memory and gave rise to some very unpleasant speculation. Miles Cavendish hadn't seemed to be the least surprised that her mother was dead, which meant he'd known when he asked her. She didn't suppose she could or even should read anything else into it beyond deception, though why he'd pretended he didn't know everything about her when he'd clearly already decided to tell her about himself was a mystery. What bothered her was the perception at the time that he was almost pleased at the news. She hadn't known then, and she certainly didn't know now, why she'd gotten that impression, but she realized it probably wasn't a false one.

Either he'd been pleased because he still held a grudge against her mother for running off.

Or he was pleased because he'd finally tracked her down and gotten his revenge.

The thought made her cold. She tried to dismiss it. She wanted to, but once the thought occurred to her she couldn't banish it.

\* \* \* \*

Simon wasn't particularly happy when they settled down to compare notes over their interrogation and it was born in upon him that Anna was either the best liar he'd ever come across, or she was telling the truth.

It was more than the frustration in discovering they'd run into another dead end. They had no valid reason for keeping her unless they did decide to use her to bait a trap, and that didn't appeal to him any more than it had to begin with.

"What next?" Ian asked.

Simon shook his head, scrubbing his hands over his face tiredly. He hadn't had more than a few hours sleep, in snatches, since the attack. He had the uneasy feeling that it was beginning to affect his judgment. "Where do we stand on the background checks?" he asked after a moment.

"We've put three men on the watch list," Caleb responded.

Simon sat up straighter. "When?"

"As of this morning."

"Have they been brought in for questioning?"

"We have them under surveillance right now," Joshua responded. "We decided to run it by you before we picked them up. We don't actually have anything on them we could charge them with—just suspicions."

"What have you got?"

"Steve Roach—served time for petty theft in the same prison Trey Carter was in. He arrived in Atlantis about six months before Trey Carter. Works at the power station—shift supervisor.

"Billy Moyer—no criminal record. He arrived in the same group as Trey Carter and petitioned for genetic reversal the day after the attack. We actually haven't been able to locate him.

"The third is Moi Spencer. He colonized eight months before Steve Roach."

Simon frowned. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"He's the newest member on the territorial council," Ian said grimly.

"You've found a connection between him and the other two?" Simon asked sharply.

"We found a connection between him and Humans for Humanity. Before he came here, he was the CEO of M.C.C., Inc, a small telecommunications company that was located in California before the quake of '75. By '76 they were up and running again in Denver, so we did a little digging to see how they recovered so quickly and discovered it was a subsidiary of TelCom, who turned out to be a subsidiary of Media Group, Inc., who was a subsidiary of M.T. Com ...and on through two more Incs, and LLCs until we arrived at Martin Communications. The CEO of Martin Communications, Don Spencer, is a very active and visible member of Humans for Humanity. He also happens to be Moi Spencer's uncle."

"Shell game," Simon muttered in disgust. "And nobody made that connection before? Didn't he have to disclose before he ran for the council seat?"

Caleb shrugged. "He openly claimed his connection to M.C.C., used it as a point of experience. On paper, he looks squeaky—except for his divorce, which should have sent up flags but didn't. He left his wife of fifteen years and three children when he colonized."

Simon sat back, tipping his head back against the cushions and staring at the ceiling while he tried to fit the puzzle pieces together. It would've been easier, he thought wryly, if random thoughts of Anna hadn't kept creeping in. She was a distraction he couldn't afford, particularly when it seemed clear that she wasn't going to lead them anywhere.

He lifted his head and sat up. "Joshua, arrange transport for Dr. Blake. I'm going to cut her loose."

Ian cocked a dark brow at him. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," Simon said grimly.

"I thought we were going to get descriptions from her?" Joshua objected.

"We don't need to detain her to do that. She might not feel like being helpful, as far as that goes, all things considered. Caleb can pump her. He was busy playing good cop on the way here," he said dryly.

"I wouldn't mind pumping her," Caleb muttered under his breath.

Simon caught it and glared at him. "For information," he said tightly. "She's still a person of interest so watch yourself!"

It was obvious when he'd tapped on the door and stuck his head in the room that Anna had been sleeping. He hesitated, but when she opened her eyes and looked at him, he entered the room.

Anna groaned. "You've already asked me everything a hundred times," she complained.

Simon stopped halfway between the door and the bed. "I just came to tell you we're cutting you loose. Joshua will arrange transport. On behalf of the Atlantis Watchmen, I'd like to apologize for any inconvenience or discomfort our investigation may have caused you," he said stiltedly.

Anna blinked at him. "You're letting me go?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Irritation flickered through her. It might be considered a courtesy to refer to her as ma'am, but it felt a hell of a lot more like a cold dismissal. They'd dragged her from her home in the middle of the night, in her nightgown, nearly drowned her, scared her half to death, and then grilled her almost non-stop for two days and that was all? 'We're cutting you loose, ma'am'? 'Sorry for the inconvenience'?

"That's it?" she demanded in dawning anger.

"Yes, ma'am." He hesitated. "Unless you'd like to help further the investigation by giving us a description of Miles Cavendish and anyone else you might remember from the party."

She gave him a stony look. "I'm not sure how helpful I could be. My memory of it isn't very clear after two days of interrogations and almost no damned sleep! To say nothing of having the pure piss scared out of me by having four men invade my house in the middle of the night and haul me off without even bothering to tell me they were cops!"

"That's what I thought," he said grimly. "You *are* your father's daughter."

Anna narrowed her eyes at him. "And you, of course, aren't a bigot for judging me by something I had no control of, but *I'm* a bigot because I think it would be better for everybody to focus on feeding people rather than tampering with their DNA!"

"Nobody's judging you!" Simon growled.

"Like hell!" Anna snapped. "I'm sitting here, aren't I?"

Simon ground his teeth. "It was a lead we had to follow."

"Now I'm a lead? I'm not even a person?"

"I didn't come in here to argue with you!" Simon snarled.

"Why *did* you come? Why didn't you send one of the others?"

"Because *I'm* High Guardian. It was my orders to take you, and it's my job to explain and apologize!" he growled.

"Well! You did that! And with such charm I feel better already!" Anna snapped sarcastically. "When do I leave?"

"Not soon enough to suit me," Simon muttered, turning on his heel and stalking toward the door.

Spying a book on the table by the bed, Anna snatched it up and threw it at the door as Simon slammed it behind him.

"That's considered assaulting an officer of the law!" he growled from the corridor.

"So arrest me and beat me up with your nightstick, asshole! You've already terrorized me, and manhandled me, and locked me up, and drilled me for hours and hours, and *breathed* for me!" She cringed when she realized that she'd accused him of drilling her. "I meant grilled!"

"I'm going to be really pissed off if you broke my book!"

Her shoulders slumped when she heard him stomp off down the hall. The urge to cry came out of nowhere. She sniffed, blinking at the stinging in her eyes, wondering why she felt so ... thrown away ... so afraid.

It occurred to her with a force that dried up the urge to cry that she *was* afraid. She wasn't relieved to discover they were going to haul her back to her place and dump her.

Because Miles Cavendish had found her and she wasn't nearly as convinced as

they seemed to be that he'd given up on her and left for good. What if he came back for her? What if he sent someone to collect her?

Beyond that, how was she going to live? Carry on her research? Her home, her research garden and everything in it belonged to Miles Cavendish! He *owned* her! She wasn't even sure it would be safe to try to get another research grant. She hadn't known he was behind the one she'd gotten! How could she ever be sure he wasn't behind anything else she happened to get? Keeping tabs on her, having her constantly watched, maybe *demanding* that she become a part of his organization?

That was why her mother had run as far and as fast as she could, to keep from being tied to a man who thought killing was an answer, and she'd run until *she* had gone to college. Her mother had desperately wanted that for her, and she'd known she would never earn a degree if she was yanked out of college and moved every six months or so.

She didn't know her father had had anything to do with her mother's death. The police had never solved her murder. But it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility, whether it was likely or not. Miles thought nothing of killing people he didn't even know! How much more motive would he have for killing someone who'd crossed him? Her mother had to have known *something* or she wouldn't have run to start with.

And what about her? Why had he suddenly decided to reveal himself? Had he leapt to the same conclusion that Simon had? Read her papers and decided she saw things the same way he did?

As far as she knew, she was his only child. Had he decided it was time to start grooming her to take over?

That seemed just too farfetched. If he'd been having her watched, he had to know that she didn't have it in her to *run* anything, certainly not an organization like his. But what other reason might he have?

Not love, certainly.

She was never going to feel safe again, not while he lived! Not when he could pop into her life at any moment and turn it upside down!

That's why she was so angry with Simon. She felt like he was throwing her to the wolves!

That was most of it, anyway. As soon as she realized that much, she also realized that, in spite of everything, she was deeply attracted to him. It was deflating to be so summarily dismissed when she couldn't help but nurse the faint hope that he might actually notice her as a woman.

She'd never actually mastered the art of flirtation. She wasn't very good at interacting with people even of her own gender. She'd given up even trying after a while. It had seemed pointless and, in any event, it had been a tremendous struggle for her mother to pay her way through college. It placed an equally heavy burden on her to do her best. She hadn't felt right to spare a lot of time for anything as frivolous as socializing instead of studying.

She'd still managed to land a boyfriend in college—a gorgeous jock, who she found out was a player just about the time she fell hard for him. She'd never really understood how she'd caught his attention, though, beyond making a fool out of herself and staring at him with zen-like meditation every time she spotted him. Was it the clear signs of hero-worship that had emboldened him even though she ran like a turkey every time he glanced her way? Or was it that he discovered she was the only virgin on

campus that he hadn't nailed?

She didn't suppose it mattered. She couldn't think of anything in her previous 'experience' that was likely to be helpful. She hadn't *done* anything beyond finally getting up the spine to stand her ground when he approached her. *He* had done all the flirting—seduced her—not that he'd had to work too terribly hard! She wasn't *saving* her virginity. She just hadn't managed to find anybody that wanted it!

Her lovelorn situation was the least of her worries at the moment, anyway. It didn't matter how attracted she was to Simon, or any of the others for that matter. It wasn't doable even if it wasn't for the situation she'd found herself in. They were mutants. She wasn't. There was no future for an air-breather and a merman!

It was far worse that she was looking at her life's work crumbling to dust, with no idea of when or even if she would ever be able to take it up again.

Was there any way, she wondered, that she could convince them *not* to pitch her out to sink or swim?

Simon seemed damned eager to get rid of her, and she had the bad feeling that whatever he decided was decided for all of them, privately as well as professionally. She'd tended to think of Caleb almost as if he was Sir Galahad because he'd seemed sympathetic and understanding from the beginning, almost protective, but she thought it was probable that he'd only been playing 'good cop'.

It was a crying damned shame she was such a dumbass that she'd picked a fight with Simon instead of saying something clever and suggestive, such as 'Are you going to breathe for me on the way back?'. She honestly couldn't picture herself carrying anything like that off, though. And it probably would've scared the piss out of her if he'd taken her up on it, if it came to that.

He was a scary man. There must be something wrong with her to want to play with fire! He was out of her league on too many levels to count.

She still hadn't managed to banish her disappointment when Caleb and Joshua arrived to collect her, but their appearance brought her fears to a head. Her stomach cramped and she couldn't blame it entirely on her anxiety about climbing into a coffin equipped with a propeller.

Caleb entered the room dangling her nightgown from one finger and her panties from another. "You want to put your own clothes back on?"

She sent him a drop dead look, stalked across the room, and snatched her clothes from him. "So I can run around the city in my nightclothes? I don't think so! I'm taking the damned robe! You can have it back when I ... we ... get to my place where I can dress."

He shrugged, grinning at her a little lopsidedly. "I liked the way you looked in it. What's wrong with it? It's dry now."

She gaped at him, trying to decide whether to ask him if he'd liked the way it looked wet or dry. As thin as it was, it probably hadn't covered much when it was wet. She felt her face heat just thinking about asking, though, and she decided against it. "It's for sleeping. People don't usually run around in public in the clothes they sleep in," she muttered.

"You sleep in clothes? Why?"

He wasn't feigning flabbergasted, she saw. "Because ... just because," she retorted. Because she was more comfortable when she was covered up and because when

she was naked she was too aware of every brush against her skin. Because she didn't enjoy looking at herself and she feared being looked at by anyone else. And it just plain felt indecent!

She realized she envied their complete comfort in their own skin, but she supposed they had every reason to be confident and it seemed doubtful they had ever known it any other way. Their living quarters were like anybody else's, but just going about their daily lives meant that they were in and out of the sea all day long, and that wasn't even counting those who worked outside—like Caleb and Simon. They probably got tired of dragging the robes on and off, which would explain why they dispensed with them regularly.

It presented her with an interesting question. If they were so accustomed to nudity, did they actually pay any attention to it? She hadn't been able to get her mind off of it, partly because they were all just plain gorgeous, but also because the sight of naked flesh was completely alien to her—almost. It sent a jolt through her every time and it took her several minutes to recover from it and even *try* to behave 'normally'.

She saw when she emerged from her thoughts that Caleb was still looking at her questioningly. "Because it's the custom on the surface and it's what I'm used to."

"So it ... bothers you that we don't wear anything?"

"I didn't say that."

"But it does, doesn't it?"

"No, no! It really doesn't!" she lied, wishing he would drop the subject.

He frowned. "I was thinking about trying to talk you into stopping by the station to give us some descriptions, but you aren't going to be comfortable with that, are you?"

So much for thinking there was anything flirtatious or suggestive about the discussion! It was an opportunity to put off the inevitable, though, and she didn't want to lose it. "I could do that."

He cocked his head questioningly. "You're sure you wouldn't mind?"

"No ... I mean, I'm sure!"

His smile lit up his handsome face, lit her up and turned her insides to molten putty. No man should be able to do that with no more than a smile, she thought a little dazedly as he caught her elbow and escorted her through the house, make her feel weak all over and breathless and faint just by smiling at her.

She felt the same way when they reached the foyer and the pool she only vaguely remembered arriving through and she looked down to discover the metal 'coffin' she'd feared attached to it. "How ... how clever!" she gasped weakly. "It's a ... uh ... docking station, too?"

"Be careful climbing down the ladder. The rungs might be a little damp."

They were, but she did all right until she stepped on the trailing hem of the robe and pulled the thing half off. Grabbing the neck, she yanked on it to cover herself and managed to dislodge her foot from the rung below her completely. Fortunately, she only missed the last one. Her knees buckled from the scare, though, and she landed in the floor—actually the front window of the thing since it was docked nose down, which scared her almost as badly.

Joshua was already trying to help her up when Caleb hooked his feet on the sides of the ladder and slid down it. The hard part about getting up was trying to straighten without disrobing at the same time. She finally managed to get her feet free of the

damned thing, though.

"You alright? You hurt?"

"No," Anna said shakily, trying to ignore the throbbing on her hip, shin, and along her ribs on her back. She actually wanted to examine the pain to see if she was just bruised or bleeding, but she was embarrassed enough about her clumsiness that she decided to wait until neither of the men were looking.

"Let me help you get strapped in," Caleb said soothingly, helping her into a seat.

She was shaken enough from the fall and the discovery that she'd landed on a glass window that she was grateful for his help. She wasn't sure how long it would've taken her to figure out how to get the harness fastened without help.

"Too tight?"

She shook her head.

"You sure you aren't hurt?"

"Oh! No! No!" she assured him. "I may be bleeding internally—heh-heh—but otherwise I'm sure I'm fine."

He frowned at her.

"I was joking."

He still looked skeptical, but he settled in the seat beside her and strapped in.

"Ready?" Joshua called back to them.

"We're ready."

Anna gripped the arms of her seat as Joshua started the engine and she felt the bubble-like transport begin to vibrate all over.

"Does it always do this?" she asked uneasily.

Caleb frowned. "I guess. I never noticed."

Oh! That was reassuring!

A jolt went through her, traveling all the way down her spine and making her sphincter clench when she heard a loud clang behind her. "What was that?" she gasped.

"He just closed the hatch."

"Oh."

"This will be a lot more comfortable than the trip down."

She smiled at him weakly. Then Joshua dropped the damned thing. It suddenly *fell*. Her stomach leapt into her throat and tried to choke her, which was fortunate because it prevented her from screaming her head off when he swooped upward again and her seat rotated. She thought for several unnerving moments that it was going to keep rolling until she was standing on her head. Instead, it righted itself and began to rock back and forth, slowing gradually to a gentle rocking and finally stopping and clicking in place.

"Wasn't that fun?" Caleb asked cheerfully.

She discovered when she glanced at him that he was wearing a pleased grin. She gave him a drop dead look. "You might have warned me my damned seat was going to flip!"

He looked surprised and vaguely annoyed. "I thought you'd enjoy it."

"I don't *enjoy* getting the shit scared out of me!"

"Well, pardon me all to hell!" he said tightly. "How was I supposed to know it would scare you?"

He had a point, but there was a world of difference between 'enjoyment' and



'scared half to death'. She might not have been frightened and *still* not enjoyed it! She sulked about it a while, but she began to feel guilty about being so nasty when she lost some of her fear. "Sorry," she muttered. "It scared me, ok? I've never been in one of these things and I'm afraid of heights."

He relaxed fractionally. "We're in the ocean."

"But I *still* felt like I was falling and it's black as pitch down there."

"The sun isn't up yet. During the day, there isn't much light this far down, but the water sort of glows."

No wonder she felt like hell! Why they'd thought it necessary to drag her out of bed when she probably hadn't been asleep more than a couple of hours was a mystery to her—except they seemed determined to torture her with sleep deprivation!

She struggled for something pleasant to say to smooth the waters. "I'm sure it's beautiful."

He smiled more easily. "You'll have to tell me when you see it," he said, pointing to a glowing patch of water ahead of them.

She stared at it, watching it spread through the water, watching the ripples catch it and refract it until the water around them seemed to glitter with gems. Loathe though she was to admit it, it was pretty.

And then Joshua turned the craft and she saw the city for the first time. Her stomach went weightless as she stared at it, watching the brightening water slowly envelop it. It almost looked ... magical, as if fairy dust had been sprinkled over the city. The buildings were nothing like anything she'd ever seen. Built like domes set upon tall stalks that reached down to the sea floor below, surrounded by the greenish-blue water, it almost looked like a garden on an alien world.

"It *is* beautiful!" she gasped in surprise a split second before she spotted the rubble, saw the twisted metal and chunks of jagged, broken concrete that littered the center as if someone had waded through the garden, carelessly lobbing the flowers from their stalks. Her smile faded. The pleasure she'd felt only moments before became distress as she stared at the gaping holes and realized this was where so many people had died, or been maimed for life.

As the light reached down to chase the shadows, she saw the merfolk moving between the buildings. At this distance, they looked more like the creatures of fable than real people and it increased the sense of staring at a magical world even while it reminded her that it must have looked much the same the day of the bombing.

She swallowed a little convulsively, feeling guilt creep through her insidiously, as if it was somehow her fault.

And maybe, in a sense, it was—though not the way she felt it. She hadn't wished it on them. It wasn't her fault that her father was a murderous lunatic, but wasn't she just as guilty as everyone else of simply ignoring the problems the colonists faced? Wasn't she ultimately as responsible as everyone else for doing nothing? Atlantis might be a territory, not a state, but it was still a part of her country and they were countrymen.

Had she, even once, thought that their problems were their own and for them to solve because she disapproved of them? Was it ever really right not to help someone, someone who was *family*, just because you didn't approve of the way they lived?

And what if they hadn't chosen to break free of the society they came from and establish the territory? *Most* of the energy they used to make their lives comfortable

came from the labor of these people.

"This was your father's doing," Caleb said grimly.

Anna sent him a hurt look. "I know, but I didn't know he was going to do it. I couldn't have stopped him—this."

He shook his head. "I meant, this is *his* doing, not yours."

Did he mean he didn't hate her because of her father? She hoped so. It was hard enough to bear the responsibility for one's own actions, but at least you could attempt to make amends. You knew you were the one who *should* pay for the mistake. To have to make up for someone's faults when you had no control over what they did and knew beyond that that you might spend the rest of your life trying to clean up behind them was just too depressing to contemplate.

She could deal with being ignored, with being alone, not having friends, not having anyone anymore. She'd *been* dealing with that. She didn't think she could deal with having people hate her, of feeling cold condemnation in their gazes every time they looked at her.

She was so distressed it hardly unnerved her at all when the transport docked.

## Chapter Five

"This is the Watch Center?" Anna asked as Caleb and Joshua escorted her briskly down a short hallway and through a fairly large room that seemed to be bursting at the seams with men, desks, and equipment.

"This is a sub-station. The Watch Center was too badly damaged in the blast to use until we can get someone in to repair it.

"Oh," Anna said uncomfortably. "I guess that's why it's crowded?"

"That and it's shift change. The night patrol comes in to file their reports. The day shift reports in for assignments."

The three of them paused in front of a door and Caleb rapped on the panel.

"Come!"

Anna's heart executed a little double step when she recognized the voice, but Caleb opened the door before she could brace herself. Simon looked up with a scowl from the report on his desk. The expression was wiped from his face so quickly that it might have amused Anna if she'd been in any condition to enjoy it. Unfortunately, memories of their argument only a little earlier were bombarding her.

"Anna came to help."

Simon seemed to drag his gaze from her only with an effort to look at Caleb almost blankly for a moment. "Good," he said finally, slowly. "Take her into the neuro-center down the hall and get her hooked up."

"You have a neuro-scanner?" Anna asked in surprise and with more than a little uneasiness.

Joshua glanced at her. "We appropriated it from the Water City PD."

Anna gaped at him. "Really?"

He chuckled. "No. We bought it."

"I've never had a neuro-scan," she said uneasily when they'd helped her into the reclining seat and Joshua moved behind her to settle the scanner over her head.

Caleb planted his hands on the armrests and leaned toward her until he was almost nose to nose with her. "It doesn't hurt, sweetie. It's a little disorienting, but there's not even a tiny sting."

It was *very* disorienting having him so close, distracting enough that she hardly noticed when she felt the pressure of the scanner helm settling against her scalp.

"Promise?"

He winked at her. "I'd promise you anything. You want me to stay and hold your hand?"

Desperately! She smiled at him weakly, knowing he was teasing. "I'll be fine," she said doubtfully.

He leaned closer. "You are fine," he whispered near her ear, the warmth of his breath sending a shiver along her arm.

Warmth blossomed inside of her as he leaned away and she saw the look of appreciation in his eyes, but it wasn't enough to keep her focused on happy thoughts very

long.

Joshua settled his hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Ready?"

She squeezed his hand back and nodded, unable to speak past the knot of nerves in her chest.

"Good girl! Now just relax, breathe slowly, close your eyes and think back to the night you went to the party, focus on the things you remember seeing—one thing at the time—and try to see if you can create a detailed memory of the image in your mind. The more details you can remember, the better our picture. Understand?"

Anna nodded a little jerkily. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Start with Paul asking you to go."

She tensed at the new voice—Simon's. She could tell from the sound that he wasn't in the room, but it didn't make it any easier to relax when she realized he must be watching.

"Relax. I'm going to turn off the light to help you relax, ok? We'll be in the next room monitoring the scan."

She did relax, relieved the moment he turned out the light because she didn't feel as if she was on display. They wouldn't be watching her. They'd be watching the screen, she reminded herself.

Coaching herself to relax fully, to allow her mind to drift for a few moments, she began trying to remember every detail of the conversation with Paul. She remembered thinking he was sort of cute and that he liked her. Focusing finally, she tried to summon details, the shape of his face first—long and narrow—the way his hair framed it, his chin. He had a weak chin. It wasn't bold and cleft like Simon's. It formed a little rounded knob. His lips were full, a little fuller than she liked, and his mouth wide. When he smiled it was very toothy, almost like a predator—and his lips, the entire mouth area, protruded slightly further than his chin. His nose was long and slightly pug at the end. His eyes were close set, the eye sockets shallow, his eyes small and almost almond shaped. His eyebrows were dark, like his hair, and formed almost perfect arches, almost as if he plucked them to shape them.

"What about his cheekbones? High? Rounded? Flat?"

She considered it and remembered they were high and sort of pointy—his ears looked almost pointy looking at him straight on, giving him a sort of elfin look.

A small screen above her head flickered on, startling her so that she opened her eyes.

"Is that him?"

Anna stared at the image she'd created with her mind feeling a sense of awe. "It looks just like him," she said, amazed, feeling her heart thump with pleasure and excitement that she'd managed to remember so many details. Tamping her excitement, she studied the image carefully, trying to decide what was just a tad off. When she closed her eyes again, she knew what it was. The image was broader across the cheek area and his features were grouped a little closer together. Satisfaction filled her when she opened her eyes again. "That's it. That's him."

Feeling far more confident, she relaxed in the chair again and conjured an image of the boat he'd taken her to the party in and then the mansion. She wasn't particularly happy with the results of those. It had been dark and she'd been uneasy. She couldn't remember enough details.

Creating an image in her mind of her father wasn't hard at all. Committing it to the image display proved nearly impossible. Dismay filled her as she realized that he looked like a male version of herself ... or vice versa. She hadn't realized until she'd tried to create the image that she had his face.

She tried not to let on how much it disturbed her, but she couldn't dismiss the anxiety that they would see the strong resemblance and consequently, she had a hard time producing an image of him that matched her memory.

"Try to relax, Anna," Caleb murmured from directly beside her, startling her momentarily since she hadn't realized he entered the room with her. "You've been doing so well. What's wrong?"

She tried breathing deeply and slowly to calm herself. "I look like him," she admitted finally, realizing there wasn't much point in trying to hide it, feeling scalding tears slip from beneath her eyelids and run down the sides of her face.

He slipped his hand beneath hers and wiped the tears from her temples. "Well, don't cry about it, sweetie! He makes a lot prettier girl than a man."

Caught off guard, Anna uttered a sound midway between a laugh and a sob. She sniffed and said a little crossly, "I didn't mean *just* like me."

He stroked a finger along the bridge of her nose. "What about this part?"

She summoned the image. "A little broader and longer."

He touched her cheekbone and traced it down to her jaw-line. "And here?"

Anna felt a warm tingling in her belly. "Not as pronounced, the cheekbones. The jaw's a little more square."

"Picture it in your mind."

She took a calming breath and conjured the shapes in her mind's eye.

"Now this," he murmured huskily, tracing her chin.

Hers was more pointed, narrower, not quite as pronounced. She held her breath when he traced her lips, focusing for a moment on the feel of his touch before the image of her father's mouth rose in her mind—a hard, straight slash, the lower lip slightly fuller but still narrow. When he put his lips together in displeasure they almost disappeared.

She was almost sorry when she completed the image. It had felt ... a little strange when Caleb traced her features, but pleasurable, too.

She found herself staring at her father's face when she opened her eyes, but she didn't feel the soaring sense of satisfaction that she'd felt when she'd produced the other images. She swallowed with an effort. "It's him."

The light limned Caleb's face as he stared at the image grimly. "We don't need to adjust it?"

Anna shook her head. "No," she whispered when she realized he hadn't looked at her once.

He turned to look at her when she spoke, smiling with an obvious effort. "You don't look that much like him."

She didn't believe him. She knew she did and she didn't believe he didn't see how strongly she favored her father—the man they all hated so much.

She tried to conjure images of some of the other people she'd seen at the party, but with indifferent success. Partly, she knew it was because she couldn't really focus after she'd done her father, but most of it was because she'd been too uncomfortable when her father had dragged her through the throng of people to really look at them.

She was relieved when they finally removed the scanner from her head, exhausted from the effort, and depressed. Everyone thanked her for her cooperation and Caleb and Joshua escorted her out again.

She felt like every man in the station was staring at her and wondered if they really were or if it was just hypersensitivity that made her feel like they were. The trip home was more boring and depressing than frightening. Although Joshua had already shown her the little transport was capable of surprising speed, they had to rise slowly to the surface to allow themselves time to adjust to the difference in pressure and there was very little to see beyond the occasional startled fish darting away.

When they'd left their home and headed to the city, Anna had rehearsed over and over in her mind how to go about asking them to keep her in protective custody, but she discarded the idea after the session with the neuro-scanner. She didn't think they would refuse only because she looked like the man they wanted, but it certainly occurred to her that they would've offered protective custody if they'd thought it was necessary.

*She* wasn't convinced that it wasn't, but she didn't feel up to trying to convince them that she needed protection especially since it occurred to her that she couldn't without sounding like she was begging.

Well, she'd made enough of a fool out of herself in front of them! She would be too uncomfortable, she assured herself, to be around them after all that! It would be a relief, actually, not to have to face them.

She would be better off asking for police protection from the Water City PD anyway. At least, if they granted it, she would be able to have some normalcy. She'd be in her own home, surrounded by familiar things, and she could continue her research.

Routine comforted her. She'd heard a lot of people complain about not having enough excitement in their lives, about leading dull, uneventful lives, but she liked hers that way. She liked the quiet nights and days she spent in her lab and her greenhouse, listening to the music she played for the plants.

It would help her regain her equilibrium.

Her neighbors stared at them when Joshua and Caleb climbed out of the submersible and escorted her into her house. To her relief, they passed her in the foyer and checked the house thoroughly. Joshua paused when he reached her again and smiled a little ruefully. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Dr. Blake."

Anna felt her throat close at the realization that she wasn't going to see him again. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Joshua."

Nodding, he glanced at Caleb and left.

"Was it a pleasure meeting me, too?" Caleb asked teasingly when he stopped to tell her bye.

Anna looked at his achingly handsome face, wishing .... She wasn't sure what she was wishing for. She tried to return his smile and found she couldn't. "I want to thank you for being so nice to me," she said, stumbling over the words a little, feeling horribly awkward. "I know you were just doing your job." She shrugged, smiled wryly. "Playing good cop, I guess. But ... I was so scared! And it made me feel ... better."

The laughter died in his eyes. For once, he looked completely somber. "I wasn't playing good cop."

He leaned closer. Anna lifted her face a little hopefully. She saw his deep blue eyes gleam, either with triumph or amusement. She wasn't sure which, but even as she

began to move away, embarrassed, thinking she'd misunderstood, he caught her chin and closed the distance. The touch of his lips was electrifying. A river of scalding heat poured through her and with it stinging sensation. She clutched at his robe a little frantically as dizziness swept through her, parting her lips for him in mute supplication to give her more. So mighty a thrill went through her as he thrust his tongue into her mouth and raked it along hers and she took his taste and scent into her that she thought for a moment she might have come. Shudders raked her, sapped the strength from her until she began to think she would've been in real danger of simply melting into a puddle at his feet if she hadn't been clutching at him so frantically, if his arms hadn't been around her, supporting her, holding her against his length.

Disappointment flooded her when he broke the kiss. At the same time, she felt a flicker of relief that she hadn't embarrassed herself by passing out. She couldn't seem to unglue her eyelids, though, or stop her eyeballs from swimming.

"I have to go, Anna."

She managed to get her eyes open at that, realized she was still clutching two fistfuls of his robe as if it was a lifeline and forced her fingers to relax. Nodding a little jerkily, she settled on her feet. "I know."

She couldn't think of anything to say even to delay him a few more moments. When he moved away from her and turned to go, though, she found the speech she'd tried to formulate tumbling from her lips. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

He froze, swiveling around to look at her.

"I'm afraid he'll come back for me."

Something flickered in his eyes. Suspicion? He frowned. "What makes you think that?"

Anna felt her face heat. "I don't know. I'm just afraid he will."

He studied her thoughtfully for a moment and lifted his head to look around at the neighboring houses. "I'll talk to Simon. He can contact the Water City PD and have them keep an eye on you."

Relief flooded her. She knew they were more likely to listen to another law officer than her. They'd probably just put her fears down as a woman trying to get attention. She'd worried herself sick trying to think of how she could ask for protection without having to tell them the entire sordid mess, worried they wouldn't believe her even if she did. "Thank you, Caleb."

He nodded, studied her a moment longer and turned to go again. She was tempted to stand in the doorway and watch him until he was out of sight, but she ignored the urge, closing the door and locking it. For a few moments, she leaned against it, relishing the memory of his kiss and his promise.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm not sure it was a good idea to take her back," Caleb said the moment he entered Simon's office.

Feeling his belly clench, Simon lifted his head from the report he'd been studying and stared at his lieutenant, trying to decide whether Caleb would buy it if he pretended he didn't know what he was talking about. "Why?"

Caleb shook his head. "She's afraid he'll come back for her. I'm afraid she might be right."

Simon frowned, trying to ignore the uneasiness twisting in his gut. "We

discussed this. I thought we all agreed that it didn't seem likely."

Caleb glanced around and finally dropped his long frame into the chair by the door. "I know," he admitted tiredly, "but I didn't like it then and I like it even less now. She's afraid. I'd like to think it's just nerves after all we put her through, but I think maybe she's right." Crossing his legs at the ankles, he frowned at his toes. "He's been keeping tabs on her for a while—at least since college. She told us that she'd gotten the grant before she graduated and then found out he was behind it. How long did she say she'd been working on that project?"

Simon frowned. "I don't think she did and I'm not sure it has any bearing on this."

"It does if it's been years. Why watch her at all if he wasn't ... *obsessed* with her or at least had some kind plan for her? Why not approach her as soon as he found her if it was only a matter of a father wanting to find his only child?"

"What do you think his motive might have been?"

Caleb shook his head. "I don't know. Do crazy people need motives to do the things they do?"

"They do," Simon dryly. "Their motives just aren't rational. I'm not sure Cavendish is insane, though. In fact, I'm reasonably certain the cold blooded son-of-a-bitch is completely sane in the sense that he's well aware of his actions and the possible consequences. He's gone to great lengths, in point of fact, to cover his tracks very thoroughly."

"He's not done," Caleb said grimly. "And that means he isn't done with Anna. I feel it in my gut. I don't know why he picked this time and place to finally show himself, but he had a reason. What I can't figure out is how he found out we were coming. Those floating houses can be moved, but they aren't boats. They move slowly, too slowly for him to have gotten clean away if he'd only discovered we were coming after him when we got to Anna's place. He left well before we got to Anna's house."

"I'm fairly certain he left as soon as the bomb went off," Simon said grimly.

"She told us he'd been trying to arrange another meeting with her, though," Caleb countered, frowning. "You think she lied to protect him?"

Simon shrugged. "I could be wrong, but I don't think so. I've been going over everything we found. I don't think the bomb was supposed to go off—not when it did. I think that was a fuck up on the part of the man that planted it. It's possible he didn't even manage to plant it where they'd intended to or it would've done more damage than it did.

"From what I can see, Cavendish had spent over a year carefully placing his agents where they could do the most harm. That was the confusing part. It didn't make sense just to blow up the desalinization plant when he already had men in place in other critical sites—the power station, communications. When it finally occurred to me that the blast might have been an accidental detonation, that it was intended to coincide with others, then it all made sense."

"You've got confirmation they were his men, then?"

"No, unfortunately. If I had proof, they'd be in jail now. We found the missing man, though. Well, his hand. Looks like the sharks got to him first. It's hard to determine the cause of death when that's all we have, but I think he panicked when the plans went south and tried to run and the other two, or one of them, killed him. I think



Cavendish knew his plan had fallen apart when he heard about the explosion and removed himself to a safer location, probably to establish an alibi. It fits.”

“Neatly,” Caleb said, “But it’s still just a theory until and unless we get proof.”

“We’re working on it. In the meantime, I have Spencer and Roach under close watch and we’re tracking a couple of others that look suspicious.”

“What about Anna?”

“Take Joshua and head back to her place. Scan it for electronic surveillance and plant a few transmitters of our own. That way we can keep an eye on her without being underfoot.”

Caleb studied Simon assessingly. “You know damned good and well we’d never reach her in time from here if we heard anything, Simon,” he growled. “About all that kind of stakeout is going to get us is evidence ... maybe.”

Simon’s face darkened. “I also know you aren’t going to do her any good dead, and you’ve got a hell of a lot more on your mind that just watching her.”

Caleb flushed. “I know what I’m doing, Simon.”

“Do you?” Simon asked tightly. “I don’t think so. If you did you wouldn’t be thinking what I know you’re thinking.”

“How do you know what the fuck I’m thinking?”

“I’ve seen the way you look at her.”

“And you assume I’m thinking the same thing you are?” Caleb growled.

“She’s a land dweller, Caleb, an air-breather, and nothing you, I, Ian, or Joshua have to say or to offer is going to change that fact. And that’s assuming she isn’t just plain repulsed at the idea of fucking mermen!”

“I didn’t get that impression when I kissed her,” Caleb drawled coolly, though he couldn’t subdue the anger glittering in his eyes. “In fact, just the opposite.”

The stylus Simon had been holding in his hand snapped. Dark color flooded his face as he looked down at it. “Gratitude isn’t desire,” he managed after a moment, “but since you brought it up, that makes my point. You were supposed to escort her home, not try to seduce her.”

Doubt surged through Caleb and anger sprang from it. “If I’d been trying to seduce her I could’ve had her then. It’s been a while since I was with a woman, granted, but it sure as fuck didn’t feel like gratitude to me.”

Simon stared at him furiously for several moments, wrestling with the impulse to dive across the desk and choke the life out of him and wipe the smug look off of his face. When he had his anger under control, he spoke again. “She has a deep-seated revulsion of mutants even if she doesn’t want to admit it,” he said tightly. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you and *do* take this to heart, Caleb, because I mean it. You can take the sub and setup an observation post within five minutes of her place, but if I find out you’ve been ‘watching’ from her bed, you’ll be on suspension.”

Caleb stood. “I think you’ve got it backwards. I think you have a deep-seated distrust of humans in general and Anna in particular. I’m just not sure if it’s because of her father or because of that bitch, Roxanne, that cleaned you out and headed back landside. I will tell you this, though, Joshua’s in and Ian’s in. I think we have enough credits without your input.”

“You’ve forgotten one critical detail, Caleb,” Simon growled when he opened the door to leave.

He turned back to glare at him. "I don't think so."

"I know so. She isn't on the market."

He could've lived without that fucking reminder, Caleb thought furiously as he stalked out of the station!

Joshua met him in the atrium where they'd docked the sub upon their return from Anna's house. "Shit! He said no?"

Caleb stared at him without comprehension for several moments. "No," he said finally, striding to the hatch and climbing down into the sub. "He gave us a green light. He also said he'd hand our asses to us on a platter if we camped on her doorstep."

Joshua, who'd followed him down, stared at him in disgust as he settled into the pilot's seat. "Well how the hell is that going to help us if we can't get within a mile of her?"

Caleb shook his head. "We'll be close enough to protect her if Cavendish comes after her. That's the most important thing at this point."

Simon had pissed him off so thoroughly he hadn't thought to point out that it was going to be damned impossible to scan her place for bugs and plant some of their own without getting near her. Especially if she spent all her time in the house like she'd said she did or at least suggested she did. Her garden, lab, and living quarters were in the same house. There wasn't a lot of reason for her to go out.

Ok, so they couldn't watch her from inside the house ... not that he'd had any intention of doing that to start with! He wasn't a damned rookie! It was almost as damned insulting that Simon had suggested he didn't have any more sense than that as his snide personal remarks!

He supposed after a while that what was really bugging him was that he had an uneasy feeling Simon might be right. He hadn't thought too much about how scared she was that first night. He'd figured it was them that had scared her and a trip down to Atlanta for an air-breather without a tank strapped to their back was bound to be a scary proposition on top of the fright they'd already given her. The sub had scared her too, though, enough she'd bitten his head off when he tried to distract her. That didn't actually augur well for a potential Atlantean—the fact that everything about being in the sea unnerved the hell out of her.

He'd dismissed it, figuring she wouldn't have any reason to be afraid once she had the change, but then Simon had just had to bring up that shit about her hating mutants again. He didn't believe she did. He hadn't seen anything about the way she'd looked at them, spoke to them, or behaved around them to suggest such a thing. She'd said she didn't have a problem with mutants, but was he right? Or was Simon right?

He was inclined to go with his gut. She hadn't just *let* him kiss her. She'd responded, god damn it! Yeah, she'd lit him on fire, but he was damned if he believed he was the only one feeling that way.

So Simon was right about her not being on the market and he was a dumbass because he hadn't considered that when he'd decided she would do nicely for him. Granted, it would've been a different ballgame if she had been on the mart, maybe an entirely different game. Women who allowed their families to badger them or beg them into selling themselves on the bride market had a tendency to go for the highest bidder, but that wasn't always the case, especially when a man had an opportunity to do a little wooing beforehand. That didn't mean he, or one of them, couldn't convince her, though,

and all it would take was one. They had a deal. Ian and Joshua had already agreed they were in. He had an idea that Simon wasn't going to hold out if she capitulated. He was just leery because that bitch Roxanne had burned him so badly.

Anna wasn't like that, though. She wasn't glamour, glitz, and fluff. She was a real woman—brains, beauty, a body to kill for, and sweet as candy, with just enough fire to keep a man on his toes.

Of course, Simon had been the recipient of most of that fire and it had been damned uncomfortable when he'd gotten a taste of it, but he figured, what the hell? There was bound to be a little vinegar to go with the honey and if they'd seen her worst, and he figured they had, then he could deal with it.

It pissed him off big time that he thought he had it all figured out and that it was all but a done deal and Simon had thrown a wrench into it by pointing out that she might not be interested!

Joshua brought him out of his dark thoughts by punching him on the shoulder. "What?" he growled.

"Are we going to do this or what?" Joshua demanded irritably.

Considering the direction of his thoughts, it wasn't a great leap from there to where he wanted to be—in Anna's bed—and he stared at her house speculatively through the front porthole. "We should wait until after dark," he said finally. "He could have somebody watching her house and we've already shown ourselves one time today."

"In that case, I guess I should take it down a little."

"Yeah, just not so much that we don't have a view of the house."

Joshua headed to the food lockers when he'd settled the sub low in the water. "I stocked up since we were going to do a stakeout. You want something?"

"A beer would be nice."

Joshua chuckled and tossed him a bottle of water. "Sandwich?"

"Sure ... whatever. If you made them they all taste the same anyway."

Joshua shot a bird at him and grabbed two sandwiches. "What did Simon say that pissed you off so much, anyway?"

Caleb grunted, unwrapping his sandwich to examine it. "Reminded me she wasn't on the market," he muttered, "among other things."

"Shit!" Joshua said, nearly dropping his sandwich. "I hadn't even thought about it! Damn! I guess we're fucked ... or not to be, as the case may be."

"You're taking it damned lightly!" Caleb snapped.

"Do I look like I'm taking it lightly?" Joshua demanded tightly. "What the hell am I supposed to say?"

Caleb shook his head.

Joshua frowned. "I guess that's what comes of never seeing a woman that isn't attached already or on the market. You get to thinking there's only two kinds—taken and available."

Caleb grunted. "She isn't taken," he said pointedly.

"No, but she didn't volunteer to take any mutants on either."

"Don't you start that shit, too!"

"Ah ... Simon reminded you that she didn't seem too keen on mutants, huh?"

"Did she seem to you like she was ... repulsed? Or she hated mutants?"

Joshua shrugged. "She seemed pretty fascinated with Simon's ass ... or maybe

his back, but I'm thinking ass. I suppose she might've been staring at the fins, though. I didn't see anything on her face that looked like revulsion, but I have to tell you I've got my own doubts she'll go for it. I don't think she hates mutants—not like her father does. She just isn't that kind of person, to my thinking, and I think she was all right with us once she discovered we weren't going to hurt her, but that doesn't mean she likes any of us. Or that she might feel more than like. If she'd put herself on the market, we'd at least know that she was willing to settle with mutants. As it is, all we do know for certain is that she doesn't approve of the practice and it seems to me that that means she won't be easy to convince to make the change."

"That doesn't mean she can't be convinced," Caleb said doggedly.

"That's going to be hard to do from out here," Joshua retorted wryly.

"That's why I don't plan on staying out here."

Joshua stared at him. "Man you've got it bad! You're going to risk suspension or worse?"

"I could use a little vacation time ... maybe I'll spend it with Anna."

Joshua thought it over a moment and grinned. "I haven't had a vacation in a while if it comes to that."

## Chapter Six

Anna began to feel the beginnings of deep depression as soon as the glow from Caleb's kiss began to wear off. Shaking herself, she headed to her garden to check on her plants since she hadn't been able to in several days. To her relief, the automatic drip feed hadn't let her down. The plants were still hardy and had burgeoned with a bumper crop of the nutritious but horribly nasty produce.

Heading back into her kitchen, she grabbed a large bowl and went back into the garden to pick what seemed to be ripe. When she'd washed them, she remembered she'd been looking for a recipe that might make the food more palatable before she'd been whisked off to the magical land of mermen. Deciding there was no sense in completely giving up on the still unnamed vegetable she'd invented before she'd at least tried cooking it every way she could think of, she settled to looking for recipes again.

She didn't actually have a lot of them in her book, though, that she thought were worth a try and when she saw she'd already tried most of the promising ones, she went to her media center and connected with the net to look up others.

She started with the fish, since Paul had pointed out that it had a faintly fishy taste—which it did—which led her to Atlantis since the territorial fish farms were now the biggest supplier of the fish distributed in the U.S. She hesitated. After a few moments indecision, instead of pursuing the recipes that had brought her to research the net to start with, she veered off to see what sort of information was available. It wasn't until the light came on in the living area that she realized she'd been sitting in front of her media center for hours.

The board of tourism and colonization had offered far more information than anything else she'd found, although she suspected, like most places, their main objective was to make the spot as enticing as possible. It had pretty much glossed over the customs she'd found so unsettling beyond comparing it to a nudist colony.

It was certainly that, she thought as she headed to the kitchen and began chopping up some of the 'franken-veggies'! Not that it didn't make perfect sense! As disturbing as she'd found it, she could see the reasoning behind it. It was a matter of practicality.

She supposed that was one of the main reasons why people tended to dismiss the territory as a wild, uncivilized, decadent place—because they didn't have enough sense, or just didn't care, that the custom had evolved out of purely practical considerations.

The marriage practices were another matter! After reading all about it, she was obliged to admit that that, too, had clearly evolved from necessity, and she *still* found it shocking—intriguing, but scandalous!

It just supported her case, though! If times weren't so hard people wouldn't feel compelled to help to support their families by placing themselves on the Atlantis marriage market for sale! It was sad, really, for everyone concerned. Sad to think the colonists were so desperate for families, for women, that they paid a fortune for them and sad to think the women's families were so financially crippled that they had to offer up their daughters just to survive!

Her genetically engineered food would go a long way toward solving some of the worst problems, she knew ... if she could ever get it right. The recipe she finally decided on was a complete disaster, though!

Shuddering after her first bite, she set her fork down and studied the casserole speculatively, wondering if the vegetable was that salty or if she'd just added too much salt. She really hadn't noticed that the vegetable tasted salty when she'd tried it before, though.

Of course, she'd barely stuck her tongue to it.

Taking another out of the cooling unit, she sliced a piece off and popped it into her mouth. Almost the instant she sucked on it, her mouth filled with a salty, fishy taste and she dashed to the trash and spat it out.

Maybe she could soak it before she cooked it and remove some of the salt? She really hated to just chuck the lot and start over from scratch! It had so much potential! It thrived in seawater contaminated soil. The plants were hardy and prolific producers. The meat was nutritious. It had everything but an appealing taste.

Deciding to mull over it a while, she raked out the casserole she'd cooked, cleaned the kitchen, and found something more edible to nibble on, heading back to her media center. Instead of looking up more possibilities for her veggies, though, she went back to researching Atlantis and eventually found an article written by a man who claimed to have traveled extensively through the territory and lived among the natives, whom he pointed out didn't like to be called mutants by outsiders since they knew very well that land dwellers considered it a derogatory term. They might, and frequently did, refer to themselves as mutants, but outsiders shouldn't unless they just wanted to piss them off—which he didn't recommend since they tended to be twice as strong as a 'normal' human being and were accustomed to settling disputes physically if the mood struck them.

That was unsettling, but at least it explained why they always gave her evil looks when she used the word! Of course, it would've been more helpful to know this sort of thing *before* rather than after an encounter!

The territories, according to the author, were vastly more civilized now than they had been even a decade earlier, but it was still a bit more like the 'wild west' of the late 1800's than 'air-breathers' were accustomed to—which was a derogatory term they used for land dwellers.

Anna gaped at that, recalling all too well that Simon was in the habit of referring to her as an 'air breather'. That ass! Of all the damned nerve to insult her and everybody else and then call *her* a bigot! Of course she hadn't actually felt insulted because she hadn't realized that was what he'd intended, but that was beside the point! No wonder he'd been so nasty to her! He just disliked land dwellers in general and went around with a damned chip on his shoulder! How unfair was that?

The anger didn't last. It flared and died, leaving her tired and blue. She didn't know why she'd spent most of her day trying to find out what she could about Atlantis. It wasn't as if it mattered. She was never going to go there again. From what she could see they disliked 'air-breathers' as heartily as land dwellers despised mutants. And she *was* her father's daughter, as Simon had pointed out so nastily. They figured they had even more reason to dislike her.

Simon certainly did. She didn't know why she cared about his opinion anyway!

If she'd had any damned sense she would've focused on trying to find another sponsor and someplace to live. She couldn't just stay where she was and bury her head in the sand. She couldn't pretend her father wasn't a murderer or that working for him didn't taint her and everything she did.

She didn't understand why Simon couldn't see that what her father had done went against everything she believed in and everything she was working for. She wanted to *save* people! She wanted to make their lives better!

Trying to push it from her mind, she checked her doors and windows to make sure everything was locked up and went to prepare herself for bed. She was exhausted. If she hadn't done anything more useful with her day anyway than reading about Atlantis, she thought glumly, she would've been better off trying to catch up on her sleep.

Settling at last, she stretched the kinks from her muscles and closed her eyes, beginning her sleep chant. She learned long ago that her mind was too often too active, no matter how tired she got, to allow her to sleep without help. The sleep chant helped, gave her something boring and repetitive to focus on until she could drop off.

Eventually, it worked and she dozed off. She woke to sheer terror as something heavy settled on top of her, pressing the breath from her lungs. A hand was clamped over her mouth. A mouth brushed her ear and then his heated breath on a whisper of sound. "It's Caleb."

The chaos her mind had erupted into prevented instant recognition but even as he eased his hand from her mouth her heart stopped hammering with fear and took up a happier cadence. "What ...?"

He clamped his hand over her mouth again. "We're sweeping your house for bugs. Don't talk."

Bugs? She didn't have bugs, damn it! Ok, so a few garden bugs, but why in the hell would they be sweeping up her bugs? And who was 'we'? Certainly not Caleb! The big lug was crushing her lungs!

He moved his hand again. She sucked in a breath to ask him what was going on, but he apparently decided on a more interesting way to keep her quiet. He planted his mouth firmly over hers. As disoriented as she already was, it took her mind a few heartbeats to shift gears, but the moment pleasure registered, she instantly forgot everything else. As if hours hadn't passed since he'd kissed her, her body leapt almost instantaneously to the same level of drunken euphoria where they'd left off. She struggled to free her arms from the coverlet binding her and clutch him more tightly.

He broke the kiss, lifting his head to stare down at her questioningly, his breath puffing raggedly against her face and throat. The shifting of his weight gave her enough room to free her arms, though, and she caught his shoulders, trying to pull him back. He leaned toward her and then changed his mind, rolling away instead. Dismay and disappointment filled her until he grasped the coverlet and tossed it away. Cool air wafted over her and then he settled his chest against hers again and she felt the coolness of his skin, the dampness that told her he'd only just come from the water.

It flickered through her mind to wonder how he'd gotten in and why he'd climbed into her bed with her, but she dismissed it as soon as his lips met hers again in hungry assault. It sent a fresh thrill through her. She shifted closer to him, rolling her hips and curling one of her legs around his, sucking at his tongue greedily to absorb the taste of him more fully as he explored her mouth.

He caught her thigh, holding it as he shifted his hips between her legs. Her kegel's clapped together in anticipation, her mind instantly leaping to the realization that that was what she needed, to feel him inside of her. Instead of entering her, though, he broke the kiss and stroked a hand over her, searching for a way beneath her nightie. Goosebumps broke out all over her, making her nipples rise to hard points when he found the hem and delved beneath it. The coast of his hand upwards to cup one breast created goosebumps on top of goosebumps, made her skin feel too tight and so exquisitely sensitive it was almost painful.

She couldn't catch her breath! The struggle to do so produced only pants that made her dizzy. She clutched at him as he broke the kiss at last, half afraid he'd stop. Instead, he pushed her gown up and covered the tip of one breast with the heat of his mouth. She gasped. Her eyeballs rolled back in her head. She thought she was going to pass out from the sensation pouring through her with every tug of his mouth on her.

She arched against him mindlessly, pressing her mound against him rhythmically in a silent demand, sinking her fingers into his hair when he moved to her other breast instead.

Now! Now! Now, she thought deliriously, struggling with the urge to voice her demand. She felt like weeping when he ceased to tease her breasts at last, but instead of giving her what she needed, he tugged her gown off and pressed his chest to hers, rubbing restlessly against her as he explored her throat with his mouth.

It drove her to the brink of madness. She'd begun to despair that she would climax the moment he touched her sex if he didn't enter her soon, or come before he ever touched her when he lifted away from her and slid one hand down between her thighs. Cupping her sex, he stroked her lightly with his hand and leaned down to kiss her again.

Her panties were wet from the moisture seeping from her. She grasped his arm, tugging his hand away and then shoving it beneath her panties, groaning when she felt his fingers gently parting the sensitive flesh, stroking her cleft.

Breaking the kiss with a hoarse gasp, he withdrew his hand and grasped his cock, trying to push past the leg of her panties and enter her. For several moments, they struggled with the barrier. Abruptly, he reared upward onto his knees, grasped the waist of her panties and snatched them down her legs.

She disentangled her feet from them and planted her bent legs on either side of his, lifting her arms to him in invitation, in supplication. He surged over her, seeking. She reached down, catching his buttocks in both hands and bumping her pelvis against his until they finally managed the connection they'd both been desperately seeking.

Caleb, she thought in a mental supplication and praise she didn't dare voice as she felt his cock stretching her, slowly delving a little deeper inside of her with each bold thrust. The friction of his flesh against the inner walls of her sex produced the most divine heat imaginable, each thrust generating more until she felt as if she would be consumed by it.

And then she felt her body stir, begin to vibrate as her body reached a surfeit and could contain no more. Groaning as the first shockwave of her climax traveled through her and her body tensed, she burrowed her face against his chest and clutched him more tightly. As if he felt the vibrations of her climax, he shuddered and began to drive more swiftly into her until he reached his peak and trembled with it as she had, shuddered, groaned with the intensity of the pleasure.



A sublime sense of rightness wafted through her as she held him tightly to her, stroking his back as the shudders tapered off to nothing and he relaxed limply against her. For long moments, they simply lay locked together, panting for breath. Eventually, he stirred and slipped away from her. A minor shaft of disappointment wafted through her, but she discovered she was simply too relaxed to have the energy for much distress.

A shiver skated through her when she'd cooled. She was just contemplating trying to retrieve the cover from beneath him when he rolled toward her again and nuzzled his face against her throat, nibbling lightly. Lifting his head after a moment, he bent lower, plucked at each nipple, and then sat up and rolled off the bed.

She pushed herself upright and stared at his back as he headed toward the door. A jolt went through her when she saw the shadowy figure standing framed in the opening. It didn't make her feel particularly better when she finally recognized the other man as Joshua.

She stared at them curiously as they exchanged hand signals and then Caleb turned back to her and gestured with his hand for her to follow.

Trying to decide whether she should be alarmed or not, she grabbed her nightgown and snatched it over her head, and then followed the two men. They left by way of her greenhouse, which *did* alarm her since it was clear that was the way they'd entered the house.

When they reached the edge of the yard, both men dove in. She was staring at the water when they surfaced again and Caleb motioned to her once more. She shook her head. She'd had enough of the mystery! No way was she getting in that cold water!

Caleb shot out of the water and caught her before she'd managed more than a few steps back toward the house. That time instead of simply diving in, he took her with him. If she'd had time to scream, she would've. She only managed to suck in a sharp breath, however, before they hit the water and plunged beneath the surface and then she felt him pulling her with him as he moved deeper into the water away from her platform.

She struggled to break free but discovered very quickly that wasn't an option. It took her five minutes of gasping to catch her breath when they finally surfaced. Shoving her hair out of her face, she turned to look at Caleb with murder in her eyes.

"The house is bugged—end to end. We couldn't talk in there."

The comment took the wind out of her. "What do you mean bugged?"

"I scanned the house while Caleb ...."

Anna felt her face redden when Joshua broke off, and a sinking sensation as it occurred to her to wonder if that had been a plan—to keep her occupied. "Scanned the house and found bugs?"

"Electronic transmitters, video and sound feed."

Anna's eyes widened. "Somebody's been ... Somebody ...!"

"I doubt it was just somebody," Caleb said tightly. "Did you notice any signs that anyone had been in the house when you came back?"

Anna stared at him blankly, still trying to digest the fact that someone had been watching her every move. Finally, she shook her head.

Joshua and Caleb exchanged a look. "We didn't either, but then we aren't familiar with the house. You're sure everything seemed as you left it?"

Anna frowned, trying to think if she'd noticed anything at all that might have been moved or shifted. "I'm pretty sure," she said finally.

"That means it's been there a while. You leased the house yourself?"

"It belongs to the company," Anna responded weakly, feeling ill.

"So ... maybe they like to keep up with their researchers."

"Or it could've been specifically for me. That's what you're saying, right?"

"Cavendish was gone when we finally got around to looking for him," Caleb said pointedly.

Anna turned and looked back at her house. "Did you take them out?"

"That would alert them to the fact that we'd discovered them," Joshua said.

She glanced at him. "And why don't we want to do that?"

"It's standard procedure. If we take them out or disable them, they know we're on to them and then they ... act."

Anna shivered.

Caleb sent Joshua a hard look. "It's possible they've been there since the previous occupant and it's nothing more than the company keeping an eye on their investment."

"But ... he said they were everywhere! Are they in my bedroom? My bathroom?"

"I didn't check."

Anna pointed at the house. "Well go check, damn it!"

"Calm down, Anna," Caleb said soothingly.

"I am *perfectly* calm!" she snapped. "I can't stay in that house with some ... *perv* peeping at me!"

The two men exchanged a look. "We came to plant some of our own so we could keep an eye on you," Caleb admitted.

She stared at him for a long moment before it finally sank in that it was the surveillance she'd asked for—begged for. And she didn't like that any better!

"We can't stay in the house and guard you," Caleb said as if he'd read her thoughts. "The electronic surveillance is so that we'll be alerted if there's any threat so that we can come."

She still didn't like it! "You'll be listening in and watching me? You two? Nobody else?"

"Baby, we aren't going to be much use to you if we don't get some sleep sometime," Caleb said reasonably. "Someone will have to spell us at some point."

"Why can't one of you sleep while the other watches and then change places?" she asked plaintively.

"Because we'll be stationed in the sub so we can be close and there's no place to sleep."

Anna hated to be completely unreasonable, but she liked the idea of one of them sleeping with her—between her and the door—a lot better. "How did you get in?" she asked abruptly.

"The same way we came out. The lock's faulty."

"Oh! That's just wonderful! Is that the way you all came in before?"

They exchanged a look.

"I'll never sleep a wink with the house wide open! *Anybody* could come in!"

"Except we'll be watching," Caleb pointed out, "and we're less than five minutes from your place."

That made her feel a little better, but not much! “So I’m just supposed to pretend I don’t know I’m being watched?”

“We don’t know that anyone’s on the other end,” Joshua said. “We’re going to try to track it and see what we can find out.”

Relieved, Anna smiled at him a little tentatively. “And you’ll make sure my father doesn’t come back, right?”

“We’ll be watching for anybody that shouldn’t be there,” Caleb agreed grimly.

It wasn’t until she’d finally gotten back into her bed that it occurred to her to wonder if Caleb’s comment was merely to reassure her or if he was suggesting ... a little possessiveness?

She wasn’t naive enough to think that it necessarily meant anything at all that he’d had sex with her—beyond the fact that he found her attractive—but that by itself was enough to make her feel wonderful. It eased her spirits enough that she was able to fall asleep despite the niggling anxiety that someone was watching.

\* \* \* \*

Caleb didn’t seem happy to see them, Simon thought wryly when he and Ian surfaced between the two men he’d sent to watch Anna and the house they’d been heading toward—hers. “Going somewhere?” he asked grimly.

Caleb eyed him angrily for a moment. “We just decided to take a quick swim to get rid of some of the kinks from being cooped up so long.”

“Is that what you two were doing out here instead of inside the sub?”

Joshua studied him uncomfortably. “Like he said ....”

“Well, you can stretch all the way back to New Atlanta. Ian and I came to spell you.”

Caleb looked for several moments as if he would argue. Finally, after flicking a last glance toward Anna’s place, he turned and headed back to the sub. “It’s been quiet,” he reported when everyone had climbed aboard. “Were you able to trace the signals coming from her place?”

Simon shook his head in disgust. “No luck with that. Someone’s bouncing it off of a satellite.”

“Any luck on anything?”

“We identified the mansion Anna described,” Ian said dryly.

“Let me guess, it belongs to a company that belongs to another company, etcetera, etcetera.”

“Something like that. His name isn’t tied directly to it.”

“I spoke privately to the governor regarding our suspicions about the new councilman. He was inclined to dismiss it, but he didn’t tell me to back off.”

“That’s helpful,” Caleb said in disgust.

“This little operation is backdoor, by the way. That’s why I didn’t send anyone else.”

Caleb studied him for a long moment, wondering if the comment was merely a warning not to mention it or if he was trying to make excuses for sitting in on the stakeout. Not that he had to. He was High Guardian. He could pretty well do any damned thing he wanted to.

“You think he suspects?” Joshua asked uneasily when they left and headed back to the city.

Caleb uttered a snort. "You bet your ass he suspects. I wouldn't put it past the bastard to have come himself specifically to throw a wrench in our plans!"

\* \* \* \*

Ian glanced at Simon, who was standing at the starboard viewport, watching the two men head back toward New Atlanta. "You think they broke protocol?"

"As soon as they got here," Simon said tightly.

Ian was studying him when he finally turned away from the porthole. He shrugged. "It isn't the typical stakeout or I'd suspend both of them."

Ian lifted his dark brows. "It's just a hunch anyway," he pointed out. "You don't know that they did."

Simon didn't argue with him. Instead he moved to one of the chairs that had been swiveled to face their target site and settled in it. He was bone deep tired, a hell of a way to feel starting surveillance, but Joshua and Caleb had been overdue for a relief. It wasn't just out of consideration for them, however, that he'd come. A few days and nights of staring at nothing, cramped quarters, bad food, and very little sleep dulled reflexes and if a situation arose the watchers might or might not be able to respond as fast or effectively as they should.

He wasn't entirely sure of his own motives for keeping the stakeout under wraps. No one would have quibbled with his decision to initiate one since it could easily be put down to the ongoing investigation into the HFH organization. It actually wasn't logical not to watch Anna when she'd been contacted by Cavendish so recently, particularly when it was clear he was trying to enlist her.

Doing so would have painted cross-hairs on her as a person of interest in connection with one of the most heinous terrorist acts in a decade, though, maybe permanently, and it didn't take much searching to realize why he didn't want to risk that.

Partly, it was because he believed she was a complete innocent in this mess and he didn't want to be responsible for ruining her life. Partly, though, his motives were purely selfish. He wanted her as badly as the others did. Painting her as a terrorist or even a sympathizer wasn't going to make it any easier for any of them to try to form a marriage pod with her. It wouldn't make her life any easier to adjust to in the territory, if it came to that, assuming Caleb could convince her.

He was pretty damned sure about all *he* could manage to convince her of was to run the other way. He'd considered it long and hard after the conversation he'd had with Caleb and decided the best he could do was keep a low profile since he seemed to have a knack for rubbing her the wrong way.

Aside from that, and as bad as he hated to admit it, even to himself, Caleb was right about Roxanne. She hadn't just cleaned him out. She'd undermined his self-confidence where women were concerned to a degree that he couldn't bring himself to relax his guard. He hadn't been near the marriage mart since, and he sure as hell wasn't easy in his mind about opening himself up to a woman who hadn't shown even that much interest.

Caleb was the only one of the three of them that could be said to have a 'way with women' anyway. Ian was nearly as hopelessly inept at wooing a woman as he was, and for pretty much the same reason—having been kicked in the teeth one time too many. And Joshua didn't have *any* damned experience to draw from. The closest he'd been to a woman was the brothel, and two or three half hour sessions with a prostitute, which he

knew had to be the most Joshua could ever have afforded on his salary, wasn't experience.

If what he'd heard about Caleb was true, though, several prostitutes had actually been known to offer him discounts to entice him up to their rooms. He didn't think he would've swallowed it if it had come from Caleb himself. It was hard to discount it, though, when he'd had to break up several brawls in the brothel because some of the men had overheard the offers and set out to rearrange his face.

Anna appeared at the door of her house almost on the heels of that thought, glanced around guiltily, and headed for a tiny, two-seater paddle boat he saw moored at the edge of her yard. He narrowed his eyes, certain, at first, that he must be mistaken. From what he'd seen of Anna thus far, she could be a little on the ditzy side on occasion, but even she wouldn't totally fuck up their cover by coming to them!

"You may have been right after all," Ian said sardonically. "Unless I'm mistaken, that's our little pigeon paddling this way."

"Jesus!" Simon growled. "She wouldn't!"

"I'm afraid she would."

\* \* \* \*

It had taken Anna a full day to come up with a reasonable excuse to head out to the sub where Joshua and Caleb were and another day to work up the nerve and arrange to have a paddler delivered that she could use. She certainly couldn't *swim* out!

She'd toyed with the idea for a while of simply ordering it and paddling around as if she was going about some task related to her research and then 'accidentally' stumbling upon the sub. She'd finally discarded that idea, though. She didn't think she could actually carry it off convincingly. It was better, she decided, to approach them boldly with the excuse of bearing gifts to show her appreciation and relieve the tedium of stale food.

There was one problem she hadn't been able to resolve satisfactorily. She thought arriving with gifts for them would work well enough from their standpoint, but she didn't think it was a good idea to head out in broad daylight and give away their watch post. If she had to sneak out after dark, though, and anybody else did see her—like her neighbors—she needed a ready excuse for why she'd taken the notion to paddle around at sea in the middle of the night. Collecting specimens for research might work if she did it during the day. Nobody really knew what it was that she was researching, but she couldn't make it *not* look suspicious that she'd decided to go out at night to do it.

Since she hadn't been able to come up with anything that sounded the least bit believable to her, she'd finally decided that she would be careful not to be seen instead. She'd ordered a dark blue paddler—which had taken a while to find since most of them were canary yellow, apparently. It was the color of the sub, though, and that was virtually invisible in the dark unless one knew it was there and searched for it. That should also make the paddler hard to see. To top that off, she'd found dark clothing and a dark knit cap to stuff her hair into. Her hair was closer to brown than blond to her mind, but she was afraid it might still be light enough to reflect moonlight.

She supposed it would've been safer to venture out before the moon rose or after it set in the sense of greater exposure, but she was afraid she might lose her way in the dark.

She was a bundle of nerves when she carried her goodies out and carefully stowed

them, but her need to see Caleb, even if it was just a few minutes, overrode her anxieties about being seen and her cowardice in approaching men in general that she was attracted to, and him in particular.

She couldn't relax. Even the effort of paddling and trying to guide the damned boat, which wasn't nearly as easy as she'd thought it would be, failed to wear down her tension. In point of fact, the closer she came, the tighter the knot in her stomach.

Doubts surfaced about halfway between her house and her goal. Maybe she was just putting way too much into Caleb's interest in her? Maybe he wasn't actually interested in her at all and he'd just been horny and decided she would be an easy mark since she'd practically swooned when he'd kissed her the first time? It didn't help that she'd thought so at the time. Just because she'd convinced herself since then that it might be more or that he might at least be interested enough to repeat the experience, it didn't necessarily follow that he would be.

Maybe he'd be pissed off at her obvious pursuit? She didn't know a hell of a lot about men, granted, but even she knew they preferred to be the hunter. They didn't like pushy women. Most of them didn't seem to, anyway. She'd always thought that was probably at least one of the reasons Chance had come after her—aside from the fact that she was one of the very few he hadn't already nailed! Women hung all over him and openly chased him—except her. It had aroused the hunter in him once he'd finally noticed her and realized she wasn't disinterested.

She considered turning back at least twice. If she did, she could always make up an excuse for paddling around in the ocean in the middle of the night. She'd just gone out for a little exercise, or fresh air. *He* didn't know it wasn't something she'd ever done before.

She'd spent half the day cooking, though, damn it!

Well! All being timid about men had ever gotten her was being ignored! She'd thought up a perfectly reasonable excuse to see him. All she had to do was have enough backbone to carry it through. She could just give him and Joshua the goodies she'd cooked for them and leave.

Girding herself, she paddled up to the sub and stopped, trying to decide whether to simply wait and see if they'd come out or if she should try to maneuver around to the hatch at the back and knock. It was dark inside, though, and it occurred to her to wonder if they were asleep or maybe just hadn't noticed her? After agonizing over it for a few minutes, she finally got up and leaned over the edge of the paddler to peer inside through the porthole. Unfortunately, it was lighter outside than inside and she couldn't see a damned thing. She cupped her hands around her face to block out the light.

The discovery that there was a man standing just on the other side of the glass sent a jolt through her that paled beside the discovery that it was Simon. Uh oh! Busted! She jumped instinctively, which was all it took to completely upset her balance when combined with the wet glass she was leaning on. She made several futile efforts to catch herself and then went into the water head first.

## Chapter Seven

Simon rolled his eyes. "Use the escape tube and go get her ... and move that paddler around to the back so it isn't so damned noticeable! Better yet, give it a shove toward the city. One of us can take her back."

By the time Anna had managed to surface again and shove her wet hair out of her eyes, she was dismayed to see that the damned paddler was cruising back toward the city without her. How it had managed to get so far away so fast when she'd nearly pedaled herself to death to get it out there was a mystery to her!

It was solved when Ian surfaced almost directly in front of her. Startled, she leapt away instinctively. He caught her arms, halting her retreat, drawing her closer, close enough their bodies brushed and bumped lightly together with the current.

"Hello, beautiful," he drawled. "What brings you out here?"

Anna blinked at him, trying to remember the lie she'd practiced. His face was dark and shadowy. She could see just well enough to detect the gleam of amusement in his eyes and the faintly sardonic curve of his lips, though, and it occurred to her, forcefully if belatedly, that it didn't sound nearly as convincing to her now as it had before she'd left her house.

"I was just ... uh ... tired of being cooped up and ... uh ... thought I'd paddle around the city a little before I went to bed ... so I could sleep better."

The faint smile broadened to a toothy, and slightly feral, grin. "Well, as long as you've blown our cover anyway, you might as well come in and say hello to Simon. He's anxious for a chat."

Dismay filled her. "Oh ... well, I think I should do that another time. Why don't you just tell him hello for me? My paddler drifted away and it's a rental. I need to go after it."

"I'll catch it for you ... later," he murmured soothingly, guiding her around the sub.

"Yes ... but it really is late! I hadn't realized it was so late! I should get back."

"Hold your breath."

Anna's eyes widened. She made a frantic grab for him. "Oh! Ian, don't! I can't hold my breath very long!"

He dragged her close. "That's alright, baby. I'll breathe for you," he murmured, threading his fingers through her hair and bringing her mouth to his. When she opened her mouth to receive, though, she got more than she bargained for. Ian thrust his tongue into her mouth, throwing her into a state of complete disorder and leaving her wide open to her primal urges. His taste and scent reached right inside of her, leaving molten heat in its wake, sending her mind into a dark, dizzying spiral so that she melted weakly against him.

He broke the kiss. "Whatever you do," he murmured huskily before he enfolded her lips with his again, "don't breathe through your nose."

The words had barely registered, barely begun to be interpreted by her sluggish

mind when she felt him drag her beneath the surface. For a split second, panic threatened to tear a hole in the heated cocoon he'd wrapped her in, and then she felt his free hand gliding along her back, fitting her more tightly against his length so that she could feel his body undulating against her. She countered his movements more by instinct than design, felt something brush against her shoulders and then her hips. She was hardly aware that they'd stopped moving until she felt the water receding and Ian's weight began to bear down on her.

The sucking sound of a seal being broken jolted her enough, though, to make her pull away.

Simon, she discovered, was staring into the tube-like thing they were lying in, his expression tight.

"Did she breathe better with your tongue down her throat?" he asked sardonically.

Ian shrugged, glancing from Simon to meet her gaze. "I don't know, but it gave her something to think about besides drowning."

Discomfort wafted through Anna and she felt her cheeks heat. She couldn't think of anything to say, though. She still hadn't come up with anything when Simon had helped her out of the tube and into the sub.

"Did you get lost?" Simon asked finally.

Anna felt her face growing redder, but she doggedly repeated the lie she'd told Ian. "I was out for air and a little exercise. What in the world are you two doing here?" she added on inspiration. "I thought this sort of looked like the sub Joshua and Caleb brought me home in. Is it yours?"

Simon exchanged a look with Ian.

"So this is a nightly thing for you?" he persisted, sarcasm lacing his voice.

"Oh! Not nightly, no. But occasionally I like to get out."

"I'll go get the rental," Ian said dryly.

Traitor! She glared at him, but it was a wasted effort since he'd swung himself back into the tube. "So I rent a paddler occasionally. I have to collect seawater for my project, you know."

"And the water out here is different than the water at the edge of your yard, of course!"

"Well, of course it is!" Anna snapped, knowing the entire tale was sinking, but determined to maintain it. "Contaminates from the city, you know!"

"I don't suppose it occurred to you that it might scare away anybody that could be watching you?"

Anna gaped at him guiltily. "Well, that wouldn't be a bad thing would it?"

"Except that they'd just wait for us to leave and come back," he said dryly.

That was unnerving *and* dismaying, particularly since she realized she'd also just blown her lie. She struggled for a few moments to come up with something to say that would cover the mistake and couldn't. "Well ... it is late and it's dark. The boat's dark and I'm wearing dark clothes. I doubt anybody saw me."

"We saw you," Simon said grimly.

"You did?" she asked in dismay, wondering if he'd seen her loading the boat. He didn't leave her in doubt long.

"Yes, we did—when you were loading the boat with whatever it was you were heading out here with."



Anna blinked at him, searching her mind a little frantically. "I wasn't coming here," she emphasized, pointing down at the floor. "I was just out for a little fresh air and exercise. Really!"

Simon was still studying her in patent disbelief when Ian emerged from the tube again. "Got it."

"Got what?" Anna asked uneasily.

Ian opened the thermal carrier up and looked over the contents. "Looks like dinner. You hungry, Simon?"

Anna smiled weakly. "Oh! Help yourselves! I brought plenty .... I thought I might get hungry."

"Anna!" Simon growled.

Anna sent him a wide-eyed look of innocence—or tried. When she discovered he was advancing on her purposefully, panic replaced that effort. She encountered the wall of the sub the moment she backed up, though. "Alright!" she said testily. "I thought I saw it out here ... the sub ... and I'd asked Caleb and Joshua to keep an eye on me in case my father came back. So, I figured I'd just fix a little something for them as a gift, you know? Appreciation?"

He tilted his head, studying her speculatively. "So, you expected to find Caleb and Joshua?"

"No! No," she said quickly, worried by that time that she was going to get them in trouble. "But, I'd asked Caleb and when I saw the sub I figured he'd sent someone and I just thought I'd show my appreciation."

He planted a hand on the wall beside her head when she started trying to ease to one side to escape. "So ... show me."

Anna gaped up at him blankly. "Show you?" she gasped weakly, watching in petrified fascination as his face moved closer and closer. She thought for a moment her heart was going to beat her to death. She felt weak and dizzy and torn between panic and .... Her lips tingled as his breath brushed them. Doubts ricocheted through her mind, the certainty that he was testing her or playing a trick on her. He hated her. He didn't want to kiss her. He was trying to make a fool out of her!

Too late! She was way ahead of him!

Somehow, despite her doubts and her certainty that he was just trying to unsettle her, though, she discovered she simply couldn't resist lifting her lips just a tiny bit and touching them to his. For a handful of almost painful heartbeats neither of them moved and then she ran her tongue over her dry lower lip, brushing it along his as she did.

She heard him swallow. He hesitated and then eased away from her.

Anna stared at him blankly as he turned away, trying to get her runaway heart under control, trying to grasp what had just happened—hadn't happened. Hurt and anger flooded her abruptly in almost equal measure as she stared at his retreating back, bringing her to the verge of tears, which only unsettled her more.

Ian, she saw when it finally occurred to her that she'd let him make a complete fool out of her, was watching her. She looked away, glanced around the small sub in search of a place to hide and finally moved to the nearest porthole to stare out and try to compose herself. It was a battle, she realized fairly quickly, that she couldn't win. She was too upset, in too much turmoil. She'd crossed the boundary of self-control. All she could hope for was to keep from spiraling completely out of control. A knot the size of

her fist seemed to have formed in her throat. She swallowed convulsively a couple of times and finally cleared her throat, trying to dislodge it so she could speak. "I should be getting back," she said shakily. "I was ... I was just going to deliver some treats anyway. I'm sure I'm in the way and I really need to get back."

"I took the paddler back to your place," Ian said.

Anna sent him a look of dismay.

"I'll take her," Simon said, his voice sounding strange even to her in her current state.

"No!" She hadn't meant to shout, but she was desperate to escape him. She knew she couldn't hang on to her self-control long enough to get back. All she wanted was to get out of the sub as fast as she could. "I can swim. It isn't that far."

Ian set his food aside. "I'll take her."

She wanted to argue with him, as well, but as desperate as she was to be alone, she really didn't think she could swim so far without help. Fortunately, he took control and ushered her into the tube. He didn't try to kiss her again, thankfully. She pushed free of him as soon they surfaced and struck off toward the city.

He didn't try to stop her or to help until she'd thoroughly exhausted herself and paused to tread water and catch her breath. He caught her against his side then and carried her the remainder of the way, helping her onto the edge of the platform. It took all she could do to gain her feet. She didn't thank him or even look back, although it rattled through her mind that she should have, that she should have mouthed all sorts of polite platitudes, to try to save face if nothing else and salve her wounded pride.

It was a relief to get back inside her home, her safe harbor. Shivering from the cold, she pushed away from the door and locked it and then rushed around her house checking it a little mindlessly to assure herself she was alone. She almost made it to her room before she broke down. She'd thought she'd actually mastered the urge, but it crashed back over her unexpectedly, drawing a harsh sob from her that hurt her throat. She clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to stem the tide but it was hopeless at that point. She was sobbing so hard by the time she reached her bathroom and closed the door that she could hardly catch her breath. The hot water in her shower chased the chill from her fairly quickly, but it took a lot longer to calm her.

She was so exhausted by the time she got out of the shower, she could hardly stand long enough to dry off. Dragging herself to the bed, thankfully too exhausted even to think anymore, she collapsed face first on the mattress, dropping to sleep almost instantly.

\* \* \* \*

Ian was still so furious when he got back to the sub that he debated whether he should actually go inside. He was sorry when he did. Anna's wracking sobs filled the small area, making his gut clench and the anger he thought he'd gotten under control flare up all over again. Balling his fist, he slugged Simon in the jaw even as he turned from the porthole he'd been staring out.

Either it didn't catch him by complete surprise, or the swim to and from Anna's had tired him more than he'd thought it had. The blow whipped Simon's head around, but he didn't budge otherwise.

Simon turned to scowl at him. "I suppose I deserved that, but one shot is all you get," he growled.

"One was all I needed," Ian said tightly, turning away and stalking toward the chair he'd vacated earlier.

Simon studied him angrily for a few moments after he'd flung himself into the chair and finally moved to another seat and sprawled in it, testing his jaw surreptitiously with one hand. The pain wasn't altogether a bad thing. It gave him something to focus on. By the time he'd checked his loosened teeth and the cut on the inside of his mouth from his teeth, and the throbbing from his chin all the way up to his temple had subsided, Anna had stopped crying.

"I just want to know one thing," Ian growled after a while. "Why did you do it?"

Simon felt his face heating. "Want with one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up first!" he snarled. "It's none of your god damned business."

"It is when it affects me—otherwise I don't give a fuck! Why did you even bother to tell me you wanted in if you were going to ... humiliate her like that?"

"I wasn't trying to embarrass her!" Simon snarled.

"Well, what the fuck were you trying to do?"

If he knew that he wouldn't be feeling like hell right now, Simon thought angrily! "I don't know," he muttered, then added lamely, "I guess I just wanted to know if she hates mutants."

"I'm betting she does now!" Ian growled. "One of them, anyway!"

Simon swallowed a little sickly. He wouldn't be surprised. He supposed he deserved it, too. He honestly didn't know what the fuck had been going through his head ... except that he'd more than half expected, regardless of what Caleb had said, that she would show her true feelings the moment he got too close. Then he'd know it was a waste of time pursuing her.

He hadn't known what the hell to do when she offered her lips to kiss him. The only thing he could recall was the sudden realization that he wasn't going to want to stop if he started ... and a sense of panic, as if he was standing on the edge of bottomless pit and about to fall in to it.

"Shit! I didn't know Roxanne fucked you up that bad!" Ian growled. "If I'd known you were just going to fuck this up for everybody, I wouldn't have even considered letting you anywhere near her. I want a son before I'm too god damned old to want one anymore! Anna's the first woman I've seen in years that even made me think about it."

"Jesus! Give it a rest! I fucked up! Alright? I admit it. I'll keep my distance."

"You saying you're out?"

Simon glanced at him sharply, but he didn't have to think it over. "I didn't say that."

"She might not accept you anyway."

"That's my problem. If she doesn't ... I'll deal with it."

\* \* \* \*

Anna felt hellish when she woke up. For a few moments, she considered the possibility that she was coming down with something. Her head hurt and her nose was stuffy.

Unfortunately, she remembered everything by the time she'd finished her morning ritual. It was something of a relief, though, to discover that she could feel almost distanced from it as long as she kept pushing the memories back into her

subconscious. Feeling oddly detached, she went to her living room and flipped on the media center and then headed into the kitchen to find something to eat.

Settling at her coffee table with a bowl of cereal, she began a search for a job, preferably something in research for an agricultural corporation.

Of course, she couldn't leave Agri-corp until she'd finished her current project, but she felt like she was on the verge of tying it up. After all, it fit all the criteria. It might taste like shit, but it was food and it would grow in seawater contaminated soil.

Well, not shit, fortunately—but fishy.

She stopped abruptly with a spoonful of cereal halfway to her mouth, considering that. She'd been trying to find recipes that would mask the taste, but what if she went with it?

Grabbing her bowl, she headed into the kitchen again, dropped the half-eaten bowl of cereal in the sink and took out a couple of her 'fish' veggies. When she'd sliced the eggplant shaped vegetables into thin, chip-like disks, she filled the sink with water and dropped the fruit in to soak in the hope that the water might leach some of the salt from it. Making a note of the time, she went back to her internet search and located three possibilities.

She wasn't about to submit a resume until she'd thoroughly checked them out, but she decided to go check her new sprouts to see how the second batch was doing. Dismay and irritation flickered through her when she'd checked them. They'd hardly grown at all and she could see that a lot of the seed hadn't even sprouted! After checking the water feeder, she decided maybe she'd put a little too much water to them, changed the rate of drip and the setting on the grow light and headed back inside.

Her resume needed updating, but it didn't take more than a few minutes to do that. She hadn't worked for anyone but Agri-corp. When she'd finished that, she went to work on a letter of resignation. After three attempts to come up with something that sounded reasonable and believable, she finally just cited personal reasons for her decision to move on.

It was liable to piss her father off if he read it. He'd have to know it was because she didn't want anything to do with him either, but she couldn't very well say she'd had a better offer somewhere else when she didn't even know where she might be going. Maybe, she thought as she headed back into the kitchen, she could rewrite it if someone responded to her resume.

She didn't feel very hopeful about it, actually. She could claim to have successfully engineered a new food source, but if they checked it out ....

Shaking the thought, she took up the floating disks and put them in a colander to drip while she prepared a pan with oil and mixed batter in a bowl. Everything tasted better fried, to her mind. Frying it was bound to improve the taste! She didn't know why she hadn't thought of that before!

Because she'd been focused on creating highly nutritious meals when she should've been thinking taste! It wasn't going to feed the starving masses if they couldn't stomach it!

She ended up having to blot the chips to get the excess water out, but the moment they started frying a perfectly lovely aroma began to waft from the cooking food. Feeling a good deal more hopeful, she finished the batch, blotted the excess oil from it, took a deep breath, and bit into one.

She chewed experimentally for a moment and smiled with pleasure. "It's good," she muttered to herself, surprised but tremendously relieved. "It's actually good! Tastes like some kind of exotic seafood."

She wished that hadn't popped into her mind. Her enjoyment took a nosedive, but she was able to dismiss it as she carried her chips into the living area and plopped down to see what she could find out about the companies she was considering.

It flickered through her mind to try to come up with a name for the vegetable—besides franken-veggie, as her peers referred to it—but she dismissed that, too. It actually belonged to the company. They would name it when they marketed it. She'd be lucky if she even got credit for it.

The thought brought Miles Cavendish into her mind and she felt a flicker of resentment knowing he would be profiting from her work. True, she'd been well paid. She couldn't quibble over that, but she hated the thought of what his profits would buy.

There was nothing she could do about it—not now. If she'd known .... But she hadn't and she was legally obligated to turn it over to the company he owned to do whatever they wanted. They could file it in the trash, for that matter, and she couldn't do a thing about it.

Not that she could think of any reason why they would. It might not be a gold mine, but it could be profitable and that was the name of the game.

She couldn't understand why the new crop wasn't doing better, though. That puzzled her and disturbed her. It wasn't any good if she couldn't make it happen twice in a row!

She managed to stave off all thoughts about the incident the night before by focusing with grim determination on her project and her financial concerns. It would work, she told herself. It had worked after her mother had died. She'd been devastated, but she'd focused and she'd managed to get through it.

Not that this was even close to being that catastrophic! It was silly, really, to be so upset about nothing. So, she'd been embarrassed! It wasn't as if it was something that never happened.

She didn't understand why he hated her, but what did it matter, really, even if he did? It wasn't as if she had to see him again. They wouldn't have to watch out for her once she found a new place and hopefully that wouldn't take too long.

She woke in the middle of the night gasping for breath and trying to force a sob from her throat. It unsettled her, but she was groggy enough that whatever had upset her had faded by the time she tried to capture it.

She worked harder to put all the recent emotional upheaval from her mind the next day, but the effort took a downturn when she discovered that every single one of the damned companies she'd checked out were affiliated with another company that her father was connected with in some way.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed in frustration. "Does the bastard own everything?"

After glaring at her screen for a few minutes, she got up and headed out to her greenhouse. The new sprouts didn't look any better than they had the day before. She studied them in disgust and headed back in to check her notes from the first crop. Reciting the settings she'd used before, she returned to the greenhouse to check them and reset them again when she saw that she'd had the settings right to begin with.

Despite every effort, her second day after her disastrous meeting with Simon

ended worse than the day before. She finally broke down and filled out an application for a federal grant, knowing the likelihood of getting one was just about zero. She tried looking for another job possibility in her field, but it was just so depressing she gave it up after a couple of hours.

Restlessness had been slowly building in her and she discovered a desire to escape the house that she'd never felt before. It felt as if the walls were closing in on her, though, and pacing the house in search of something to occupy her didn't relieve the feeling.

She couldn't avoid thinking about the incident, she realized. It wasn't going to magically vanish if she could put it off long enough like so many things did that disturbed her.

Lighting finally on her couch, she turned her media center on, found a TV broadcasting network, and stared at the screen. She wasn't upset because she was embarrassed, she finally concluded. At least, that was only a small part of it. She wasn't even particularly upset because she felt like Simon had goaded her into making a fool out of herself, although that was certainly the source of a good bit of the pain.

She was upset because he hated her and she didn't know why. Well, she did, because it wasn't hate so much as it was distrust and she supposed that was understandable.

She would've liked to think it upset her because she just wasn't used to people taking such a dislike of her when she hadn't personally done anything to warrant it, but she didn't think that was all of it.

Covering her face with her hands, she tried to block the thoughts when she realized she wasn't really getting anywhere. She wasn't 'working it out of her system' because she still didn't understand why it had hurt so much. It made her feel like crying all over again.

Swallowing the urge with an effort, she dropped her hands and stared at the broadcast for a few minutes and finally began flipping from one station to another, searching for something to distract her. Eventually, she hit a news channel. She was about to flip to the next when the newscaster announced that there had been another tsunami. Pictures flashed on the screen of the devastation. It had been triggered by an earthquake at sea and although the warning had been immediately broadcast to everyone likely to be affected, the islanders hadn't had time to evacuate. The tsunami had formed only a few miles from the island and swept over it within minutes of the shockwaves from the quake itself.

Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest the moment he mentioned that the earthquake had been at sea. She stared at the screen fearfully until the view switched to the area where the earthquake had been centered. Relief flooded her. It was in the Pacific. It wouldn't have affected the Atlantis territory. They had a continent between them and the shockwaves.

She felt vaguely nauseated when the fright finally eased, felt almost tearfully relieved. Sucking in a calming breath, she mentally berated herself, wondering what was wrong with her. She wasn't usually an emotional wreck over such things—or in fact much of anything. She didn't usually get so worked up even about disasters. As awful as they were, they happened with such frequency it was impossible not to become calloused after a while. She felt badly for the people affected. She was horrified at the destruction,

but she didn't feel so deeply touched that she felt it so strongly.

Because she'd never had anyone to worry about before, she realized abruptly, not since her mother had died. It was always strangers—faceless, nameless—people she didn't know and couldn't care deeply about because she didn't.

She was about to turn the media center off when something the newscaster said clicked in her mind. He was talking about the monetary losses, the loss of lives, and the estimated time it would take to clean up. It was the mention of the probability that it could take generations for the rich growing areas to produce again that made something click.

Anna stared at the screen as the man continued, but her mind wasn't on it any longer.

Turning the media center off abruptly, she surged up from the couch and headed into her greenhouse. When she'd scooped up a sample of the soil from the growing bed, she headed for her lab. She was nearly dancing with nerves when the soil analysis finally began to scroll across the screen.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she held it unconsciously as she skimmed over the readout. Her stomach abruptly went weightless. She stared at the numbers, afraid to believe it said what she thought it did.

Rushing back to the greenhouse after a moment, she took another sample from an entirely different area and then a sample from each of the other growing beds. Her hands were shaking so badly she could hardly handle the samples. Finally, she managed to mark and transfer each one to the machine. She paced the floor while she waited for the results, chewing absently on a ragged fingernail she'd broken along the way.

She felt faint when she got the results. Slowly, a bubble of euphoria began to expand inside her until she almost felt as if she could float away. "I've done it!" she whispered disbelievingly, trying to assimilate what she'd discovered. Abruptly, a squeal of absolute delight and triumph erupted from her. She clamped a hand over her mouth, chuckling like a lunatic.

"I've done it! I really have! Oh my god!"

And she didn't have anyone to share her moment with! She was too excited and euphoric for even that to burst her bubble, though. Turning up the music she kept playing for the plants, she danced a jig through her laboratory and into the greenhouse, chanting 'I did it!' over and over and kissing her plants enthusiastically.

It wasn't until she paused to catch her breath that she suddenly remembered the house was bugged from end to end. It sobered her instantly.

Fear effectively banished her excitement. Her mind went chaotic the moment she began to review her antics when she'd raced around her house in excitement. Had she been shouting 'I did it!', she wondered? Or only thinking it? She couldn't remember.

Well, she told herself bracingly, it wasn't as if it was actually hers anyway. The discovery belonged to the company. It didn't matter, did it?

She couldn't dismiss the horrible fear that had swept over her, though. She had genetically engineered a plant that pulled the sea salt from the soil and left it clean! It was too important to take a chance with it, she decided, too vital to the survival of too many people!

But where to hide it if something happened to her? That was her foremost fear, ... that something would happen and no one would ever know.

She was in too much turmoil to decide how to behave in a way that wouldn't be suspicious to whoever was watching her, particularly after her insane dance around the house!

Heading toward her media center, she sat down on the couch again and pulled up her notes. As casually as she could, she took her backup chip, inserted it in the drive, and began to quickly type up her findings.

The food the plants produced was a success in itself, but that paled beside the other properties of the plant. There were vast areas of land all over the globe that had been devastated by the encroaching sea and the tidal waves that dumped gallons of seawater into the soil, making it useless for growing the things that had been grown there before.

When she'd finished her notes, she backed the file up, removed the data chip and pretended to put it away. Instead, she palmed it. Her knees felt like water when she stood up, but she made a production of stretching and then headed to her bookshelf and picked up her reader. Tucking it into the crook of her arm, she considered for a moment and then went to the front door and went out.

Her hands were shaking so badly when she tried to wedge the chip into the reader's port that she nearly dropped it. Finally, she managed to insert it, though, all the while walking as causally across the front yard as she could to the paddler still tied up at the edge of her yard.

She'd set the book on the floor by the seat and bent down to untie it when a dark shadow fell over her. Her heart skipped several beats as her head jerked up guiltily.

"Your father sent me," Paul said.



## Chapter Eight

Anna came upright jerkily. "Paul!" she gasped faintly.

He glanced around and placed a hand on her elbow. "We need to get moving. He's waiting."

Anna gulped, trying to get her mind into gear. All she could think about, however was the chip lying not three feet from where they were standing and the fact that she didn't want her father to have it. "I don't understand," she managed to say finally.

Paul pulled on her arm to get her going and began walking her briskly toward the back of her house. "He'll explain. It isn't safe for you to stay here anymore. They'll have you under surveillance."

"Who?" Anna asked uneasily.

"The damned mutants!" Paul said testily. "You didn't think they would just let you go, did you? They've had you under watch since they released you."

It took all Anna could do to keep from glancing in the direction of the sub. It occurred to her, though, that Paul and her father clearly knew she'd been taken in for questioning which meant she didn't have to pretend they hadn't. "They cleared me and let me go. Why would they watch me?"

"Because they know of your connection to Miles Cavendish," he said tightly. "They wouldn't have picked you up otherwise."

Did that mean they did or they didn't know that she'd offered to turn him over to them, she wondered uneasily? Where were her watchmen? "But there really isn't a connection!" she objected in dismay.

"He's your father!"

Anna stared at him uneasily. "Besides that, I mean."

"That's enough," he said grimly. "They've already tried to assassinate him several times. They'll use you to get to him if they can."

That was a lie! They couldn't possibly have done any such thing when they didn't even know what he looked like until she'd given them the image!

It occurred to her forcefully, though, that they did want to get her father. Maybe they hadn't come because they were waiting to see if Paul would lead them to him? For several moments she felt lightheaded at the prospect, but even as Paul helped her into the boat he'd moored at the back of her property she realized that it might be their only chance to stop him.

And he needed to be stopped.

And if she somehow managed to help maybe it would redeem her in Simon's eyes?

Abandoning her first impulse, which was to leap from the boat while Paul was occupied with untying it and starting the engine, she settled uneasily on the seat and glanced around a little hopefully. They would be following her, she assured herself. They wouldn't have left! Not without telling her they were pulling out. She knew they wouldn't!

It didn't occur to her that Paul had caught everyone by surprise, not just her. Neither Simon nor Ian had heard his approach because she'd left the house and was beyond the range of the electronic devices. They hadn't spotted him until he was upon her because they were watching her place the reader in the paddler. They'd abandoned the sub because they knew they could cover the distance faster swimming than they could starting up the sub and sailing it to her house and then leaping out of it. And they hadn't reached her to stop Paul because they were five minutes away and he'd walked her from the front yard to the back and pulled away in less than three minutes.

Paul cut through the channel between the houses and rounded Anna's house when the two of them were still little more than halfway between the sub and Anna's place. He spotted them in the water just about the time Anna did.

Uttering a snarl, he pushed the boat to full speed and headed directly for them. For a split second, Anna was too stunned to react. The scream of terror that tore its way from her chest thawed her. She leapt to her feet and made a grab for the wheel, trying to wrestle it from his grip. The boat careened wildly from side to side, nearly pitching Anna out, but she was too intent on trying to turn the wheel to feel the fear she might have otherwise.

Abruptly, Paul ceased trying to pry her fingers loose and backhanded her hard enough she lost her grip and flew backwards, nearly toppling over the side of the boat. She caught herself instinctively before it even occurred to her that she should've seized the opportunity and gone out of the boat. By the time she realized it, though, Paul had grabbed her around the waist and hauled her back.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" he demanded furiously, shaking her. "It was the mutants!"

Anna gaped at him, trying to force her shocked brain into functioning, trying to gather the wits for survival. "It was?" she gasped.

"I missed them! Sit down and try to stay out of the way!"

He flung her toward the seat beside him even as he said it. Anna stumbled, caught herself, and looked back. To her disappointment, she saw that it was too dark to see anything. She couldn't do anything but take Paul's word for it that he'd missed them. She didn't *know* he had.

Her teeth began to chatter in reaction as she settled weakly in the seat Paul had shoved her into. It didn't help that he was going so fast that the air blowing over her felt like arctic air. She didn't know what to do, but one look at the water racing past the hull was enough to convince her she didn't want to jump. They were already too far out for her to have any chance of swimming back even if he didn't turn around and come back for her ... and she was afraid he would.

And then it would be impossible to convince him she wasn't trying to escape. As much difficulty as she was having putting logical thought together, she realized her best hope, now, was to convince Paul that she was going willingly.

"You cold?"

Anna looked at Paul when he spoke and finally nodded jerkily.

"Look in that locker toward the stern. There should be some blankets. That'll have to do until we reach the rendezvous point."

Anna half fell out of the seat. Righting herself with an effort, she made her way carefully toward the back, trying to keep her feet under her. The boat was bucking so

hard, though, as it slammed into the waves that she sprawled out before she reached the locker, rolling and skidding the rest of the way. She was shaking with terror, not just cold and shock, when she finally managed to catch a hold of the locker and pry it up. The wind nearly ripped the blanket from her grasp when she pulled it out, but she managed to keep her grip on it.

Deciding not to try to make it to the front of the boat again, she settled with her back against the low stern wall and struggled to get the blanket around her. She thought at first when Paul began to slow the boat that he'd seen her dilemma and slowed to help her. When she glanced toward him, though, she saw he had something in his hand. Her heart skipped several beats when it occurred to her that it was handgun. She was completely unprepared for the sudden explosion behind them. It took her several moments to realize it *was* behind them. Her heart had squeezed so painfully with fear, she clutched her chest, certain she'd been shot.

It was the ball of fire that drew her around to look. She gaped at the blossoming cloud of fire and smoke that lit up the area like midday without comprehension, with utter disbelief.

"Mutant terrorists just blew up your house and destroyed your research."

Anna whipped her head around when Paul spoke. The light from the fire, even so far away, made his expression of grim satisfaction perfectly clear to her. Dumbfounded, she watched him toss the device he'd been pointing at her—no, her house—into the sea. "Bundle up. We've got a good ways to go."

She'd been *sitting* on a bomb, Anna thought blankly? How long had she been walking around her house without a care in the world while there was a bomb under her just waiting for the right signal to go off?

\* \* \* \*

Simon and Ian tumbled out of the emergency tubes and raced toward the console. Simon strode to the communicator while Ian started the engines. "Watch Center! Watch Center! Priority one!"

"Watch Center! What's the priority one?"

Simon hesitated. "Terrorist suspect, Paul Warner, has snatched Dr. Blake. Heading ..," he paused and leaned over to check the radar. "Due south, making around 40 knots. I want every man you can round up. We're in pursuit!"

The explosion rocked the sub so hard and so unexpectedly it threw Simon and Ian across the deck, slamming them into the walls as if they were ping pong balls.

"Simon! Simon! Do you read? What the hell was that?"

Simon managed to get to his feet and turned to search for the source of the explosion. "What the hell? They blew up her house!" he muttered in shock.

"Simon! Ian? What's going on? Do you read?"

Moving to the communicator, Simon spoke into it again. "They blew up her house. Water City PD will be swarming all over us inside of five. Simon out!" He turned to Ian. "Get this thing moving!"

He staggered back when Ian abruptly shot forward and began diving. Catching his balance, he lurched toward the front again and fell into a seat, pulling his restraints on and fastening them. "How much of a lead does he have?"

Ian stared hard at the radar for a moment. "Fifteen minutes and gaining steadily. He's going to break up if he keeps that speed."

Simon swallowed a little sickly. "Let's hope not."

"He knows he missed us and we'll be on his tail," Ian said grimly. "He's going to try to lose us."

He'd missed them because Anna had risked her life fighting him for control of the wheel. He couldn't remember the last time anything had scared him that badly—or enraged him so much. He was going to break the son-of-a-bitch in half for hitting her when he got his hands on him! "Level out or he won't have to worry about it!" he growled, watching the depth gauge.

"The bastard!" Ian growled after a few moments. "How the hell did the son-of-a-bitch manage to get the jump on us?"

"He knew we were there," Simon said after considering it for a moment. "He wouldn't have risked pulling the boat in on the other side, in plain view of all of her neighbors, if he hadn't."

"I don't understand why she left the house! We would've known he was there if she hadn't left the house."

That had been bothering him, too. "She put something in the paddler," he said abruptly. "She was carrying something when she came out. I didn't see it when he grabbed her, did you?"

"Her research!" Ian said abruptly. "That's what that crazy dance was all about. She said, 'I did it.' That was what she was talking about."

"I'm still baffled," Simon growled. "Didn't she say she was genetically engineering plants? They blew up her house because of her plants?"

Ian frowned. "Maybe and maybe not. If they knew we were there, they could've had an entirely different reason for blowing it up—us. If we'd been found floating near the scene, what do you suppose the cops would've thought?"

Simon stared at him in disbelief. "That *we're* terrorists?"

"Can you think of a better way to turn sentiment completely against us? Possibly even start a war."

"Jesus!" Simon muttered. "Where do you think he's heading?"

"Home to papa," Ian said tightly.

\* \* \* \*

Caleb had contemplated murdering Simon throughout the nightmarish trip down the coast to the tiny island where they were currently moored. He didn't even make any attempt to contain his wrath when he finally boarded the sub. "You planned it, didn't you!" he growled. "You let that cold-blooded bastard get his hands on her just so you could get to him!"

"Hold it!" Ian bellowed, leaping between the two men before they could launch themselves at one another. "If you're looking for some-fucking-body to blame, check out the god damned mirror! We didn't plan this! Simon didn't plan it! They knew we were there and they outmaneuvered us because they did. And they knew because *you* didn't fucking follow orders and Anna came out looking for you!"

Caleb recoiled as if he'd punched him. He stared at Ian in stunned disbelief for several moments as that sank in and then looked around for a place to sit. Landing heavily on the floor when he discovered there was nothing closer, he clasped his head in his hands.

"Forget it!" Simon said harshly. "The important thing is to get her back before

anything happens to her.”

Caleb dropped his hands to his knees and looked up at him. “He wouldn’t hurt her,” he said hoarsely.

Ian and Simon exchanged a look, but Simon saw no sense in telling him Paul hadn’t been exactly gentle with her. It wouldn’t help matters and, in any case, Paul was his. “We don’t know. I don’t want her in there when we go in, though. I want to try to extract her before the shooting starts.”

Caleb nodded and glanced guiltily at Joshua, but Joshua refused to meet his gaze.

“We’ll go in,” Caleb volunteered.

“We’ll all go in,” Simon said grimly. “We need to reconnoiter before we launch any kind of assault anyway. Top priority is locating Anna and getting her out if we can. If it looks like we can’t, we’ll have to try to plan the assault so that we can reach her as quickly as possible and remove her from the line of fire.”

Ian hesitated, but he knew it needed to be said. “There is a possibility that he’s using her to bait a trap for us.”

Even Simon looked like he wanted to take his head off at that comment.

“I didn’t say she was willing. She was fighting like hell when she was kidnapped. I’m saying that might be what the bastard wanted her for from the beginning. Or she might’ve given herself away—and there’s a good chance she did when she was fighting Paul. He might have decided to seize the day.”

Simon digested that for several moments. “We won’t know until we get in there.”

\* \* \*

Anna was too numb to really feel the fear beating at the back of her mind. She was aware of it on some levels. She could feel it at the back of her mind like a shadow slithering around in the back of a dark cave. And like that unknown ‘something’, she felt as if it might suddenly erupt from the shadows and envelope her in terror, but the numbness was a blessing she was holding on to as tightly as she could. It allowed her some ability to process thoughts. She knew she wasn’t thinking ‘normally’, but she was at least capable of processing, even though it seemed to take a very long time to do it. Beyond that, it had shielded her enough that Miles Cavendish didn’t seem to realize that she was terrified of him or that she was as completely opposed to everything he stood for as she could possibly be. He didn’t seem to suspect that she was his enemy.

Paul had carried her miles and miles. They’d been in the boat for hours. She was almost certain of that even though she was aware that she didn’t have a firm grasp on time. The trip alone had been one of the most frightening experiences of her life. If there’d been no threat hanging over her at all, she thought she would still have been traumatized by the terrifying speed he’d maintained, by being surrounded by nothing but black, seething water, and by the sight of the enormous waves that looked like they might swallow the boat at any moment.

She’d always enjoyed looking at the sea from a safe distance. She’d never wanted to set off across it, to find herself completely surrounded by it so that she couldn’t get her mind off of the immensity of it, the dark depths waiting to swallow her up.

She’d been so glad when they’d finally arrived, so eager to get off the tiny, bucking boat and feel something solid and reassuring beneath her that Miles Cavendish, who’d come out to greet them, had gotten the entirely false impression that she was thrilled to have been brought to him. It was purely a stroke of luck that he’d

misinterpreted her reaction. She couldn't have pretended even though she knew her life depended on it.

He'd noticed her face immediately. It had been throbbing since Paul had struck her, but she'd been too distracted by everything else to really feel the pain. He'd examined it with concern she didn't believe and sent Paul a deadly look she hadn't had any trouble interpreting. "I fell," she said shakily, not certain why the lie sprang to her lips but almost immediately glad it had. Tit for tat. Paul couldn't tell her father she'd fought him to keep him from running Simon and Ian down without admitting he'd hit her and she could see he didn't want to do that.

"You're frozen!"

Anna nodded jerkily, her teeth chattering too much to attempt to talk if she'd wanted to and she thought she was better off remaining mute.

"Well! We'll get you inside and get something for that bruise. A hot bath should take the chill off and you can rest. I can see you're worn out. We've got a lot of catching up to do, but it can wait a few hours."

Thank you! Thank you! If she could just put off really talking to him for a while, help might come. If it didn't ... well, it still gave her a little time to prepare herself.

She still didn't like leaving Paul and her father alone. She didn't think he would tell her father about the incident, but she couldn't be sure and if he did she wouldn't be there to try to cover it with lies.

"Did you take care of the house?"

"Yes," Paul responded. "Whatever the explosion didn't get rid of I'm sure the fire did."

"Good! Excellent!"

He glanced at her, seemed to realize that she wasn't nearly as happy about it as he was. "I hope you didn't have anything in it that was special to you."

Just four years of research, she thought glumly, wondering suddenly if Simon or Ian had seen her put the book in the paddler or had the chance to recover it. It might have gone up when the house did. It seemed unlikely, she realized despairingly, that it hadn't.

"Well! We can replace whatever you lost with better things," he said cheerfully when she didn't say anything. "I've got an entire wardrobe waiting for you. I never did particularly care for your taste in clothes, pumpkin. You're too pretty to go around looking like you're wearing someone else's castoffs."

She happened to *like* her clothes! They were practical and comfortable and that was all that was important to her. It wasn't as if she ever went out!

Her first thought when he showed her the room he'd decided on for her was to wonder if it was bugged like her house had been. Her second, that it looked ostentatious and not the least 'homey'.

"What do you think?" he asked, beaming at her in obvious expectation that she would be thrilled.

She pasted a smile on and scanned it slowly, searching for any sign of cameras or microphones. "It's ... I'm speechless."

He chuckled, pulling her close and kissing her forehead. Her skin crawled.

"I'm going to leave you to get cleaned up and settled in. I'll have a tray brought up for you if you're hungry. I'm sure the cook could put something together."

"I'm just cold and tired." And she wanted to be left alone.

Thankfully, he left and took Paul with him. She still didn't know if she was being watched, but it didn't matter at the moment. She had to get warm or her teeth were going to be worn down to nubs and she wasn't in any shape to consider flight. Any attempt in her current condition was doomed to failure.

Her mind went to her lost research and the bombing of her house while she stood in the shower shivering. Apparently, she thought wryly, she truly *was* her father's daughter. She didn't know how else she might have sensed the need to hide it if she hadn't had some inkling of the way his mind worked because it certainly wasn't reasonable or logical.

That being the case, she spent the entire time trying to figure out why it had seemed both reasonable and logical to him to destroy it. Her first thought was that it was planned to get rid of evidence, but what evidence, against him, could there possibly be in her house? To her knowledge, he'd never set foot in it. It belonged to the company, so destroying it changed nothing. There would be records that it did.

She decided it had to be her research because there simply wasn't anything else in the house for them to have any reason at all to destroy but why pay her for four years of research and then destroy it? Especially since she had to suppose he must know she'd finally succeeded?

Was that the key? Had they watched her bounding around like an idiot and realized she'd succeeded and that was what set off the chain of events that had led her here? Wherever here was.

Or was it just coincidental?

She supposed it could have been but it still felt strange that Paul had showed up right after that and she found she couldn't put it down to circumstance.

Maybe they just thought she'd gone off her rocker?

Unlikely. She'd been so thrilled that she didn't really recall what she'd done, but she'd rushed to her computer to update her records. Even if they didn't have the computer itself bugged, they could probably have seen what she was doing or at least guessed.

If she accepted it was the research they'd wanted to destroy, what could be a motive for doing that? Because they didn't want to stop world hunger?

She hadn't seriously considered that but as soon as the idea popped into her head, she stopped to think it over. That was what her research meant. Beyond the money that could be made from it, it would've at least put an enormous dent in the number of people starving. Why would he not want to prevent starving?

Because he wanted to decrease the surplus population? She wouldn't put it past him. She wouldn't put anything past him at this juncture, but there really wasn't a tremendous surplus—not anymore—too many people to feed and not enough jobs, but one disaster after another in the last hundred years had already cut the world population tremendously.

Hungry people. Unhappy people. Rioting people. It struck her abruptly that that was the perfect atmosphere for hate. People that were suffering wanted somebody to blame and they mostly blamed their government, but they were all too eager to lash out and take out their fear, anger, and frustrations on anything or anyone that became a target.

And Miles Cavendish had given them one—the mutants.

It was almost too diabolical to be believed, but was it possible? The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that that had to be the motive. It wasn't as farfetched, upon reflection, as she'd initially thought. People were suffering and they were angry about it. Throughout the course of history anyone who became the target of the angry masses, usually the government, would toss out the first likely victim they could find just to get the mob off of themselves. The Romans had thrown the Christians to the lions. The church had thrown the angry mobs 'witches' to torture and burn alive. The Nazis had thrown out the Jews. The industrialists poisoning their environment had thrown out the smokers. That one was easy. Nobody wanted to lose their jobs just because the company they were working for was killing everybody and destroying the planet.

It hadn't resulted in violence, but then that hadn't been the objective. The objective had been to divert attention and animosity from themselves and prevent people from demanding they clean up their act.

The list went on and on. All they had to do was pick a victim that people wanted to hate, tell them they were right to hate them, and turn them loose. As long as it was someone they could get to easily, they were too preoccupied with venting their anger on them to notice what else was going on.

The food riots was a prime example of what could happen when the 'atmosphere' was already volatile, how easily people could be manipulated and turned into a weapon of mass destruction. And the government had been directly responsible for it. They could deny it all they wanted, but they'd *made* it happen. After siphoning people out of their money for years and years, they hadn't been prepared when disaster struck—due to greed, corruption, and plain out incompetence. Everyone had been so enraged when they discovered the food and necessities that the government had been supposedly stockpiling wasn't there when they needed it that they'd been ready to turn on them and tear them to pieces. The government spokesman that had 'appealed to the people to stop hoarding food and essentials and share with their neighbors' had known exactly what he was doing—turning the mob. The media had picked it up, broadcast it everywhere and before anyone could turn around, the mobs had been dragging people out of their cars, homes, and offices and beating them to death—because they weren't showing the signs of hunger.

It had not only worked to turn the rage on the hapless obese, who were suffering with everybody else, but it had given them an excuse to impose martial law and protect themselves.

Miles Cavendish hadn't built a global terrorist organization without knowing how to manipulate people. What were they going to do when it was announced that her research would've gone a long way toward curing world hunger? Saved hundreds of thousands, maybe millions from starving to death?

*That* was what Paul had meant! They already had their story prepared! Cavendish would have to make them believe it was the mutants that did it and she'd made it easy for them! Simon and Ian had been right there on the scene.

He might also have to get rid of her.

Would he think it worthwhile to try to convert her to his way of thinking before he went to those lengths? Or would he think it just not worth the risk?

He didn't need to kill her, though, or even convert her. If her research actually



was gone, it could take her years to do it again. She couldn't remember every single thing.

Climbing out of the shower finally, she dried off and headed back into the bedroom, climbing into the bed and pulling the covers up. She didn't turn off the lights. For once she didn't care how much energy was wasted. The cavernous room gave her the creeps. She didn't want to lay in it in the dark.

So, assuming she was right, her father had allowed her to spend four years of her life trying to create something he never intended to market even if she was successful. Maybe he hadn't expected her to succeed? It was good PR just having her work on it. It was a great motivator for the hungry if she did succeed and then mutant terrorists destroyed it. He couldn't lose. He would have droves of people joining his organization and those who couldn't afford the price would still be backing him, cheering him on.

The realization made her cold, chilled her too deeply to shake it off.

Someone had to stop Miles Cavendish, somehow.

\* \* \* \*

Simon paused in the shadow of a large rock, resisting the urge to adjust the gear he was wearing. The body armor and the assortment of weapons he'd donned for the assault had made swimming hellish, but it was even worse once he got out of the water, awkward and miserably uncomfortable. It would've been suicidal to go in without it, though. The volcanic rock Miles Cavendish had chosen for his lair was like a fortress and surrounded by a fairly impressive army.

It was a 'new' island, hadn't even been in existence long enough to make it on to any maps, not surprising since it had been formed in an eruption less than fifty years earlier and wasn't much more than a rock now. The vegetation was sparse and he was willing to bet there wasn't much in the way of fresh water—maybe none. The vegetation might rely entirely on rain—which made the island less than desirable for settlers looking for land.

He doubted Miles Cavendish had any neighbors they needed to worry about—just the army of guards bristling with weapons. By his guess, they were outnumbered and he wasn't anywhere near the mansion yet. He was hoping most of the guards were patrolling the beach and the outer perimeter and not within the high walls surrounding Cavendish's mansion, but he already had doubts those hopes would be realized.

He just hoped they could get to Anna and get her out in one piece. He'd made himself a promise that he'd stay out of her life if he could just get her out of the mess he'd gotten her in to, see to it that she was safe.

When he was certain there was no one within hearing distance, he activated his communicator. "I count four on the beach—automatics. Five in the rocks between the beach and the mansion—three have sniper rifles, two with automatics."

"Two snipers on the beach make six," Caleb reported after a moment's silence, "... four in the rocks on my side, two snipers, two automatics."

Several minutes passed. Simon was preparing to move forward when Ian reported in. "We're in position. I spotted two."

"Two more on the south east corner," Joshua reported.

"Base?" Simon asked, hoping the rocks hadn't interfered with the transmission.

The response was so weak he cupped his hand over the earpiece and still didn't catch it all. "Repeat!" To his relief, they seemed to be receiving better than sending.

“Should I send someone to take out the snipers?”

Simon considered it. “Get them into position, but tell them to hold either for a verbal command or first shots fired. Got that?”

He scanned the area and began moving again the moment he had confirmation. He wanted to get Anna to a safe distance before there were any shots fired, but failing that, he didn't want to be cut off and possibly pinned down without reinforcements. He'd left the standing order to launch the attack immediately if there was an exchange of gunfire whether they'd had time to clear the mansion or not. He didn't want the men cut down by snipers, though, and figured getting men in place to take them out was the best he could do to protect both Anna and his men. He just hoped nobody screwed up, because if at least one of them hadn't managed to locate Anna before the shooting started .... Well, it wasn't something he wanted to think about.

He found an observation post just outside the wall about twenty minutes later and settled to watching the grounds and the roofs for movement. He wasn't happy to discover he'd been right about Cavendish. There were more men inside the damned compound than outside. He spotted six on the roof and four more in the two towers on either end, east and west, of the compound, and another six on the grounds. With Ian's, Joshua's, and Caleb's counts they had twenty-two inside the compound and possibly more inside the mansion itself.

He settled to considering the situation. They could pull back and try to come up with a plan and risk another approach or make a try for it tonight. They'd managed to get all the way to the compound without incident—once—though. The chances of managing it a second time with so many men seemed remote. Anna's situation also became more dangerous the longer she was inside.

They were going to have to do something about the men in sniper positions, though. There was no way, he decided, to take them all out quietly. There were too damned many of them and most of them were in sight of each other, which meant it didn't matter when they tried an entry insofar as they were concerned.

Coming to a decision, he contacted base and ordered four more men up to try to get into a position to take out the men on the roof before they could do too much damage and gave Ian, Joshua, and Caleb a green to go as soon as they found a hole.

He ran into trouble the instant he went over the wall. One of the guards had moved into the brush near the wall to take a piss. Fortunately, the man was intent on getting his zipper up. Simon whipped his knife from his belt and lunged, driving the six inch blade through his breastbone and into his heart. The man coughed as the blade knocked the breath from him, but Simon managed to get his hand over his mouth before he could utter a cry of alarm.

Uttering a mental chant of curses, he dragged the man into the brush and disabled his weapon. He was more cautious as he moved on, but he moved quickly. They could discover they were missing a man any moment.

## Chapter Nine

Caleb went over the wall and landed lightly in the shadows. Before he could move away from the wall, however, he spotted a pair of guards rounding the back corner of the compound, heading toward the front. After glancing quickly to his left and right and discovering there was no cover for several yards, he dropped to a crouch and stilled, his finger on his trigger while he watched the men advance slowly, scanning the grounds.

He thought for a moment he'd been spotted when both men stopped almost directly in front of him, but after exchanging a few words, one continued toward the front and the other headed to the back once more. Easing his finger from the trigger of his gun, he moved to cover, scanned the roof and then the grounds and sprint toward the house, flattening himself against the wall between two windows. There were low growing plants near the house, but they were few and far between and not tall enough for concealment unless he crawled on his belly. Worse, the house itself was built of pale stone and his gear was black. After flicking a quick look through both windows and discovering both opened to the same empty room, he debated for a moment and decided to try the windows.

The first he tried was unlocked. After he'd paused to check for any sign of motion detector or alarm and found none, he pushed the window a little higher and hoisted himself through. He checked the room again once he was inside and closed the window.

He touched his communicator. "I'm in."

\* \* \* \*

Ian studied the four men standing together at the rear of the compound, waiting for them to move and give him an opening. When he tired of waiting, he checked his surroundings and moved to the corner of the wall, running north along it for several yards before he checked the compound again. He was still within sight of the knot of men he'd first spotted, but they had their backs to him. After checking the compound as far as he could see for any others, he went over the wall, paused to make sure none of the men would turn in his direction and raced toward the corner of the house where a spindly tree offered some cover.

Dragging his gaze from the group after studying them again for several moments, he scanned the house for an opening and saw light spilling from a door or window perhaps three yards from where he stood. He debated briefly whether to wait where he was for the men to get tired of standing around with their thumbs up their asses or move and decided to move. Dropping, he crawled toward his goal, stopping just before he reached the square of light beneath what he saw now was a window.

When he turned to check the position of the guards again, he saw the four had split up into pairs and set off in opposite directions. The first pair reached the corner and turned it before the second. Waiting only long enough to see if they would turn around and pace back, he pushed away from the ground and into a crouch, and then straightened. He heard muted voices coming from inside before he'd come fully erect and shifted to

the side of the window, taking a quick sideways glance inside.

He couldn't see the men talking, but he could hear them well enough that he decided it wasn't a recording of any sort and it *was* men's voices. Although he strained to hear, he didn't detect a woman or more than two men, he decided. After glancing quickly in both directions for the guards, he ducked beneath the window and moved to the other side.

Caleb's voice whispered through his earpiece as he changed positions, alerting him to the fact that he was inside. He depressed his own communicator. "Two men, rear of the building, first floor." He glanced back in the direction he'd come from. "South west corner."

The minute he raised up high enough for another quick look inside, his heart skipped several beats. He could see a monitor displaying at least a dozen positions that were clearly inside the house itself. "Cameras in the corridor!"

He hadn't even gotten the warning out when he saw Caleb step from one of the rooms, saw him freeze at the warning and scan the ceiling and then dart from his position toward a stairway.

A quick search of the room for the men talking sent a brief flicker of relief through him. Neither of them were guards and neither man was looking directly at the screen. Even as he watched, however, the man sitting with his back to him glanced toward the display. Ian jerked a look back toward the screen and discovered with relief that Caleb had made it up the stairs and ducked into a room.

He was about to leave when the man he'd been watching stood up. He recognized him instantly from the image Anna had created for them—Miles Cavendish. He wasn't certain who the other man was, but suspected it was the bastard that had tried to run them down with the boat.

His focus on the men inside nearly cost him dearly. Two guards rounded the end of the building nearest where he stood. It was too late to move. The movement itself might alert them to his presence and they hadn't seen him—yet. He froze, easing his hand very slowly toward his revolver.

He realized after a moment that the light spilling from the window was enough to make it impossible for them to see him on the other side, but they were still moving. In a few minutes that wouldn't be the case. He'd just cast a quick look for cover when he heard Joshua on his communicator. "Two more nearly at the corner. You want me to take them out?"

Ian shook his head ever so slightly and slipped slowly toward the ground, flattening himself behind a scrubby plant that was no more than a foot high or much more than that across. Hoping the deep shadow from the building itself would conceal him, he eased his revolver slowly from its sheathe.

The two pairs crossed paths, paused to exchange a few comments and continued. Ian let out the breath he'd been holding when they reached the corner.

"Got her! Second floor, north east corner," Joshua said abruptly.

"Are you in?" Simon asked.

"Negative, no hole."

"Caleb?" Simon asked.

"Second floor, first room at the top of the stairs. They'll probably spot me the minute I step into the corridor again. Go or no go?"

Ian glanced up, calculating the distance. There were false balconies over the windows on the second floor, curved, decorative ironwork that were as much of a barrier as ornamentation. "Give me five," he said abruptly.

As he stood up to sprint toward the end of the house where Joshua had spotted Anna, though, he threw a last glance inside the room where he stood. Cavendish was pushing at what looked like a section of the bookcases that lined the wall at that end of the room. He had something in his hand, but Ian didn't wait to see what it was. The guards had taken roughly two minutes to reappear once they rounded the corner. Unless they were moving faster ....

He took a running jump toward the ornamental railing around the last window on the east side of the house, hoping to hell it was well anchored into the wall. It would've been a much easier leap if he could've run straight on. Running parallel to the wall of the house, he counted himself lucky to have caught a hold at all. Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself up by one arm and caught the top edge to hoist himself upward just as the guards rounded the building again.

It was too much to hope they wouldn't see him, he supposed. Hearing a half uttered expletive below him, he hauled himself upward, ducked his head and used his back to take out the window.

Gunfire accompanied the sound of breaking glass. Anna, he discovered, was halfway between the bed and the window, her eyes rounded, her mouth forming an 'O' of surprise.

"Ian!" Anna gasped, rushing toward him.

Ian scrambled toward her at a half crouch, catching her around the waist and carrying her to the floor. Caleb burst into the room through the door just as they hit the floor. Within seconds the sound of gunfire escalated to a deafening roar around them. Bullets shattered the glass of the other windows and plowed into the walls, the molding and the ceiling.

Caleb flicked a quick look at the two of them as he slammed the door and then glanced around the room. "This lock isn't going to hold them long!" he bellowed at Ian.

"Stay down!" Ian growled at Anna as he lurched up to a half crouch and headed toward the piece of furniture closest to the door. The Armoire shattered as he shoved it over, but neither man waited to see if the pile of broken pieces would be enough of a barricade.

"Coming in!" Simon bellowed, slamming against the door, flying through the narrow opening he'd made in a diver's arch, and rolling to a stop at the foot of the bed. Ian kicked the door shut behind him and shoved a heavy dresser in front of it.

Anna, after looking around a little frantically for a safe place to hide, scurried under the bed just about the time Simon snatched the mattress off, pitched it toward the door and reached back for the support panel beneath it.

He froze for a split second when he lifted it and saw Anna staring back at him from beneath the bed. "Get in the bathroom and into the tub!" he bellowed when he'd glanced around for a place for her.

Rolling onto her stomach, Anna crawled out from under the now empty bed frame and raced for the bathroom.

"Get down!" Caleb bellowed at her just about the time she stubbed her toe on the threshold between the bath and the bedroom and sprawled out on the tile. Fortunately,

the tub stopped her. When she'd recovered enough to figure out she was lying against the tub, she crawled over the side and flattened herself the best she could against the bottom. Bullets seemed to be flying in every direction, however. She'd barely settled when a bullet ricocheted through the room and shattered the edge of the tub near her feet.

Screaming instinctively, she jerked her feet up closer to her body and then rolled to her side when she saw that position put her knees higher than the rim of the tub. It didn't seem to be working all that well as a shield, but it was certainly better than nothing!

For a while the barrage of gunfire seemed to escalate and then, so subtly she didn't notice at first, it began to subside.

"You alright in there, Anna?" Caleb called out.

"Yes," she said weakly. "What are we going to do now?"

Simon appeared in the doorway, staring down at her. "Stay put. Our men will have everything under control shortly."

She was reassured, briefly. Even as she lay listening to the sporadic gunfire as men died or fled the scene, listening to Simon and the others as they discussed the possibility of finding evidence against Cavendish, an unknown uneasiness began to churn in her stomach.

"He's got a vault, or maybe just a secret room off his office on the first floor. I didn't see enough to tell which, but that might be the best place to start," Ian said.

Anna rolled out of the tub as the uneasiness congealed into a terrifying conclusion. "Simon, wait!" she gasped, crawling frantically toward the door.

She discovered when she reached the bedroom that he and the other men were shoving their makeshift barricade away from the door. "Wait! Wait!" she gasped, pushing herself to her feet and rushing the door when she saw Simon ease the door open and take a quick look outside. "He blew up my house, Simon! He had a bomb in it!"

Simon sent her an impatient look. "I know. We were there."

"But ...he blew it up to make sure there was no evidence, Simon!"

All three men stared at her blankly for a moment as that settled in their minds.

"Get her out of here! *Now!*" Simon barked at the others. "I'm going to see if I can grab anything useful!"

The relief that had flickered through her vanished. She lunged at Simon and grabbed him. "Come with us! Please! You can come back!" she begged him.

He studied her for a long moment, his expression stony, and then abruptly jerked her upward and covered her mouth with his. As long as she'd hoped desperately that he would kiss her, she was too anguished and in too much shock to really register anything until he'd let her go. The heat and pleasure of his touch swept over her then in a backlash that rocked her to her core and abandoned her just as swiftly. "I'm sorry, Anna," he whispered harshly when he put her away from him.

Someone grabbed her arm, hauling her toward the window Ian had come in through. "Simon! Please!" she called after him.

"I'll go after him," Caleb growled, surging toward the door.

"Don't!" Anna covered her mouth with her hand as Ian swept her up into his arms, but she saw it was too late. Caleb had darted down the hall behind Simon.

"Hold on, baby," Ian said grimly, "this is going to be a jolt."

Anna twined her arms around his neck instinctively as she felt him leap. Having

braced herself to fall, the sensation of rising up instead sent a disorienting jolt through her. She discovered Ian had leapt up onto the ornamental railing just as he leapt off of it.

It was amazing enough that he landed solidly on two feet, but he almost instantly launched himself forward at a run. "Joshua!"

"Here!"

"Take her and get her over the wall! Anna thinks there might be explosives in the house!"

He had to pry her loose. She knew the moment he spoke that he was heading back inside.

"Any sign of Cavendish?"

"Not yet!"

Anna made a grab for Ian again the minute he peeled her loose.

"Go with Joshua!" he said harshly.

Before she could think of anything to say, Joshua hauled her across one shoulder and took off at a run. The jolting of his shoulder against her belly knocked the breath from her, but that was nothing beside the jolt she got when he sprang upward, paused briefly on the top of the wall surrounding the compound and then leapt down. Pain seared through her. She didn't have time to recover either. He hit the dirt running.

She thought she was going to pass out, but she never quite achieved blackout. They hadn't reached the end of the wall before a horrendous explosion erupted so close it deafened Anna. She wasn't certain if Joshua threw her to the ground or if the concussion of the blast knocked him off his feet, but he rolled on top of her, shielding her face with his hands and his own head.

Debris rained down around them. Between the pain and her deafness from the explosion, Anna wasn't even aware of it until a burning board landed across Joshua's back. He rolled with her. When he stopped, she was beneath him again, still deaf, but she could smell burned hair and fabric even above the other smells of burning things.

Despair filled her. She felt it all the way to her soul just before she lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Simon didn't have to search for the hidden door. It was standing ajar when he reached the office. Rushing toward it, he discovered the 'room' was no more than a couple of feet deep, no more than a small closet. Shelves lined the walls, though, and at the back was a steel door.

Scanning the shelves swiftly, he grabbed up a case of the sort used to store data chips and shoved it into his pocket. When he saw nothing else beyond stacks of money in a dozen different denominations, he tried the door. Without surprise, he found that it was locked. Stepping back, he flicked a glance over it, saw that the hinges weren't visible, which meant it opened in to whatever was on the other side, and began kicking at the edge of the door near the handle.

Caleb arrived just as he fell back to catch his breath and try again. Spying the door, he pushed Simon aside and began battering at it with his shoulder. Simon was having another go at it when Ian arrived.

"Is there enough room for three?"

"We can give it a try," Simon responded after glancing at the door speculatively. Lining up belly to back, the three of them launched themselves from the door of the

office in a concerted lunge. The door, already weakened from the battering Simon and Caleb had done, flew open the moment the three of them slammed into it.

There wasn't a hall or a room on the other side. All three of them flew into a well of pitch. The explosion disintegrated the house above them a split second before they hit the bottom, illuminating the walls of the cave and the tunnel that led away from it.

As stunned as he was when he hit the dirt, Simon knew everything that had gone up would be coming down any second. He scrambled to his feet dazedly. "Move!"

Either the explosion had cracked the rock the tunnel was carved from or the debris slamming into the ground above them shook loose rocks from the wall and ceiling. The three of them launched themselves in a staggering run along the tunnel, covering their heads with their hands in an effort to ward off the rocks raining down on them. They found the underground channel by falling into it in the darkness.

Splitting up, the three of them searched the walls of the channel until Caleb found the opening they were looking for. Simon knew after five minutes that, without the right gear, no human could've swum the distance, and there hadn't been gear in the tunnel or a boat in the water.

The realization galvanized him and he pushed himself to swim faster. Even so, he heard the distant sound of a boat motor before they emerged from the channel. Two men, he saw, were drifting toward the sea in a boat. One of them working feverishly to get the motor started.

Simon reached the boat just as the man finally succeeded and the motor roared to life. Shooting out of the water, he caught the man as he began to straighten and turn away, using his weight to pull him with him as he dropped toward the water again. A bullet plowed through the man he was holding and dug into his arm. By the time Simon had managed to resurface with the dead weight of the man he'd jerked overboard, Caleb and Ian had wrestled Miles Cavendish into submission.

\* \* \* \*

Anna swam upwards through a painful fog toward awareness as a voice penetrated her subconscious.

"What happened?"

"I think I cracked one of her ribs when I jumped from the wall with her."

She recognized Joshua's voice, though it sounded strangely rough and shaky.

Someone lifted one of her eyelids. When she managed to focus, she discovered it was Simon staring down at her. "Simon!" she murmured in pleased surprise, swamped with relief to discover he'd made it out alive. As soon as he let go of her eyelid, she drifted down into the dark abyss again.

The next time she roused it was to discover she was being strapped to something. Before she could open her eyes, she felt herself tilted upward. She managed to lift her eyelids just enough to get a dizzying glimpse of her surroundings and closed them again, struggling with dizziness and nausea as she listened to the voices around her.

To her vast relief, she picked out Simon's voice, and then Caleb's and Ian's. She'd been more than half convinced she'd dreamed that they were with her. "Wer 'm?" she murmured drunkenly.

"She's come around."

She didn't recognize that voice and peered from beneath her eyelids. The bright lights above her said 'hospital'. She closed her eyes to shield them from the painfully



stabbing light, and found herself drifting, swirling.

"Anna! Open your eyes!"

She opened them, but discovered she was still dizzy.

"How many fingers do you see?"

It seemed like a stupid question, but she struggled to focus. "Two."

"What day is it?"

She frowned, trying to think. "Donno."

"Did you give her anything?"

"Something for pain. She cracked a rib."

"Cracked her head, too," the stranger said. "We need to do a scan. You'll have to wait outside. You might as well go get someone to look at that burn and those cuts."

"Where?" she managed to ask after a few minutes.

"New Atlanta. Don't worry. We'll take good care of you."

"Simon?"

"He's in a treatment room."

"Caleb?"

"Him, too—and Ian and about a dozen others."

"Ok?"

"Ok what?" the stranger asked absently.

"Be alright?"

He understood that time. "I'll check their status and let you know something if you'll be good for me and stop talking while we do a scan."

She subsided, but it was more because of the wave of nausea that rushed over her when she felt the gurney she was on turn suddenly. She managed to pitch herself toward the side to throw up.

She felt like crying when she lay down again because she'd thrown up right in front of strangers! And she thought she might throw up again.

"Don't worry about it," the man said, commiserating as if he'd read her mind. "You have a mild concussion. The nausea will pass."

It didn't seem to be passing very quickly. She couldn't decide what hurt worse, her head or her ribs, but it was hard to breathe and throwing up hadn't helped that at all!

She had to focus just to catch little snatches of breath. Each time she tried to gulp just a little more, pain engulfed her.

After a while, she decided that she must be passing in and out of consciousness although she didn't seem to be completely awake or completely unconscious at any time. Her awareness of her surroundings was fractured, though, so it was either that or memory lapses. One moment she was aware of a scanner being moved above her, the next she felt the gurney she was lying on moving and opened her eyes to see lights flashing by overhead.

She was so grateful when the movement finally stopped she felt like crying, and then did because they moved her from the gurney to a bed and she threw up again. And then she couldn't breathe at all for several moments because she'd stopped her head up and her lungs felt like they were in a vice. Panic at not being able to really catch her breath threatened to engulf her. She clutched at the bedding a little frantically, trying to focus on getting enough air.

"I'm going to give you something for the pain and to calm you. Try not to cry,

sweetie. Alright? I know you're upset, but it'll only make it harder to breathe. I don't want you worrying about your men anymore either, doctor's orders. They're all alright. I give you my word. We're going to keep them here a couple of nights to make sure their wounds are healing like they should, but they're in damned good shape all things considered."

Her men? "Simon?"

"Yes, he's going to be alright. And, before you ask, Ian and Caleb, too. Joshua's in better shape than the others. Cuts and burns from having pieces of burning debris landing on him while he was trying to shield you, but nothing too serious. Like I said, they're all just fine. Now you can concentrate on getting better so they can take you home."

Anna was still trying to make sense of all that when the drug kicked in. She didn't think it had kept her out long, though. She felt just as bad or maybe worse when someone woke her up. "You doing ok?"

She frowned. She'd been doing a hell of a lot better before she was woken up. She informed the stranger of that and he chuckled. She fell asleep again as soon as he quit annoying her, but he was back again, it seemed, before she'd slept any time at all. And so it went, on and on, until she felt like she was in hell where the demons stood over her, just waiting for her to doze off so they could wake her up again. She'd lost all track of time. Finally, though, she woke up at the sound of yet another intrusion and realized she didn't feel nauseated. She even felt vaguely rested, or at least not exhausted to the point that she felt drugged and disoriented.

Her ribs still hurt. The moment she tried to drag in a deep breath to yawn it felt like she'd been stabbed.

"How are you feeling?"

Annoyance flickered through her a split second before recognition of his voice dawned. She opened her eyes to see if she was right and smiled faintly at Joshua's worried face. "My hero," she murmured, discovering her voice sounded rusty with disuse.

Joshua blushed to the roots of his fair hair. He looked so miserably uncomfortable she regretted the comment even though she'd intended it as appreciation. He looked so miserable, she lifted her arms to him impulsively, wanting to sooth him.

He hesitated fractionally and got up from the chair. Lowering the rail on the side of the bed, he leaned down over her and very carefully gathered her into his arms, burrowing his face against the side of her neck. "It wasn't much of a rescue," he muttered. "I'm not sure you would've been hurt worse if I hadn't done anything at all."

Anna searched her memories and discovered everything that had happened almost from the time Paul had taken her was a confusing jumble. She did remember the terror that there were explosives in the house, though mostly her fear that Simon would be killed and then Caleb and Ian when they'd rushed off to help him.

She stroked Joshua's cheek soothingly, trying to think of some way to banish his guilt. It was misplaced to her thinking, but she could tell it was troubling him deeply and it made her ache for him. "You saved my life. You've got no reason to feel guilty that I got hurt anyway. Don't you think I feel just as guilty that you got hurt trying to save me?"

He lifted his head enough to search her eyes. Apparently he saw what he needed

to see in them. Some of the tension eased from him. He moved closer, nuzzling his nose against hers as if seeking forgiveness. Anna was more than willing to bestow it. Although there was nothing to forgive him for in her mind, she could tell he needed it to forgive himself.

Cupping his hard cheek, she guided his lips to hers and brushed her lips lightly back and forth along his and then pressed her mouth to his more firmly. He plucked her lips gently, almost experimentally with his own, drawing warmth from her that was a combination of empathy, affection, and gratitude at first. The instant he settled his mouth more firmly over hers, though, the entire tenor of the kiss changed, and the warmth with it, to something else entirely.

The heated pleasure of desire spiraled through her as her focus shifted to the feel of his mouth on hers. His taste and scent were as beguiling as his touch, seductive, drawing forth an appetite for more.

Surprise flickered through her, for although she'd noticed from the first that Joshua was a very attractive man, she hadn't sensed a mutual attraction. She'd thought of him more as a friend, thought he saw her that way.

It was a little disorienting to feel his desire and surprisingly exciting. There was nothing even vaguely platonic about the way he made her feel now, though.

"That's enough of that!" someone said briskly from directly behind Joshua, making both of them jump guiltily and break apart.

Joshua met her gaze with a mixture of guilt, desire, apology, and amusement and then, as carefully as he'd embraced her before, he disentangled himself and straightened, moving away from the bed.

She was acutely conscious of him waiting near the door as the doctor checked her out, half fearing he would leave and just as uneasy about him staying when she was no longer sure about how to act around him. Had she read more into the kiss than there was? Or had she misunderstood his friendliness before? Or had something changed between them because of what had happened?

"I'm guessing you're getting antsy about getting out of here?" the doctor murmured with amusement, then added dryly, "I know someone—actually several who're certainly anxious for me to cut you loose."

Anna felt her face heating but hopefulness ousted her discomfort. "I can go?" she asked hopefully.

"Not today," the doctor responded with a mixture of amusement and censure, "but if you'll behave yourself and you're showing this much improvement tomorrow ... I'll think about it."

She studied Joshua a little warily when the doctor left again, struggling with her confusion. The doctor's reference to 'several' had resurrected a dim memory. Someone, a stranger not the doctor, had been talking to her about 'her' men, she remembered abruptly. He'd been referring to Simon, Ian, Caleb and, she supposed, Joshua because she'd kept asking about them. It had seemed strange to her even then that he'd referred to them as hers.

It dawned on her that multiple 'marital' partners, or pods as they often referred to them, were the norm in the territories, not the exception. The author of the piece she'd read had cited several reasons why the practice had come about—finances being one of the biggest factors. The shortage of women and the difficulties of protecting their 'claim'

in an area still pretty wild had also made it necessary and acceptable if not completely satisfactory to the men.

Had the doctor simply assumed since she was so concerned about them and, maybe, they'd been equally worried about her, that they were a ... 'pod'? Or did he know something she didn't?

The thought made her pulse go a little wild for a few moments until it dawned on her that there was no agreement between them. There'd never even been a discussion—not a hint that they had interest in that direction, as far as that went. As shocking as their custom was to land dwellers like herself, the Atlanteans still took it very seriously, just as seriously as land dwellers did marriage, maybe *more* seriously. It wasn't an informal thing. It was a commitment.

It couldn't have just 'happened' without her knowledge and consent. The depth of her disappointment when she realized it had to be a misconception on the part of the hospital staff was telling.

Then again, she'd found all of them extremely attractive from the first. The circumstances that had brought them together had taken that physical attraction to an extreme dependency with dizzying speed—from her perspective anyway. She'd had her security snatched out from under her so abruptly and so completely she'd been like someone who couldn't swim being suddenly tossed out into an ocean. She'd been ready to grab anything to keep her afloat and safe, and hold on for all she was worth.

It didn't follow that they felt anything like that. In fact it seemed highly unlikely that they would. She certainly wasn't a man magnet. She thought she was average, maybe even a little better than that, but she was shy and socially awkward and men hated having to carry the burden of courtship entirely on their own shoulders. It made them uncomfortable and they tended to avoid that, and her, like the plague even when they seemed interested. They might enjoy the hunt, but they expected the woman to let them know she wanted to be hunted, not run like hell in the other direction.

And, unfortunately, she'd never really mastered that part. Her college 'hunk', Chance, wasn't the only man she'd ever mooned over, just the only one who'd managed to stick out the hunt until he caught her. She had a 'taste' for 'pretty'. Unfortunately, it scared her so badly when they actually noticed her, she made like a frightened rabbit and scurried into her burrow to hide until they gave up.

She couldn't even really trust her own feelings, if it came to that. What she felt for them *could* be as real as it could get. They were handsome, fatally attractive men, she was sure, to any woman with eyes in her head. Beyond that, they were 'hero' material, the very epitome of what a man should be, flawed, temperamental, aggressive, possessive, but intelligent, protective, and capable of gentleness and affection. She could've easily fallen just as hard and just as fast if not for the extreme circumstances, but she couldn't rule out the possibility that she was blinded by her need for safety either.

Not that that mattered, ultimately. If they were waiting for her to make a move, they were doomed to disappointment. She was too afraid of being laughed at to chase after them.

She'd wanted Caleb desperately enough to overcome her fatal character flaw of cowardice and *that* had been a total disaster! She still cringed when she thought about her encounter with Simon that day.



## Chapter Ten

Joshua returned to the chair he'd been occupying before when the doctor finally left. "Don't worry. We've got you under twenty-four hour watch until we can move you to a more secure location."

Anna blinked at him in shock, her mind erupting immediately into disorder. "We didn't get him?"

Joshua's face tightened. "We caught the bastard alright."

He didn't elaborate. He seemed disinclined to do so, and that made her more uneasy.

"But? It isn't over, is it? You think he might still try something."

Joshua shifted uncomfortably. "Simon planned to brief you on all of it once we got you out of here. You need to focus on getting better."

"Worrying isn't going to help me do that," Anna said pointedly.

Joshua blew out a breath of disgust and grinned at her a little sheepishly. "I knew I'd stick my foot in it," he muttered, then frowned. "I guess they did, too, and that's why .... I just ...." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Jesus! I wasn't thinking about anything but getting you out of there before the place blew. I'm not used to women!" He sent her a horrified look and blushed fiercely. "What I meant to say is, being around them .... That didn't come out right."

Anna touched his hand, curled her fingers around it and held it. "Stop beating yourself up about that, ok? I thought we'd covered that? You weren't being careless. There wasn't time to ... worry about anything but getting as far away as possible and taking cover! I know that and I know you weren't being deliberately rough or inconsiderate. In all honesty, I think it was just a freak accident. I've fallen down plenty of times and never broke anything before."

"Yeah, well that might've been because you didn't have me on top of you," he said dryly.

"And I would've been hurt a lot worse if you hadn't been! I *do* remember that you were hurt because you were shielding me with your body!"

He looked like he wanted to argue it further, but she redirected him to the previous conversation. She would've suspected he'd been deliberately trying to sidetrack her if he hadn't still looked so miserable about it.

"Just tell me what's going on. I'm not nearly as fragile as you seem to think and I'll worry a whole lot more not knowing why all of you are worried."

He shrugged. "I guess we'd rather err on the side of caution than dismiss any possibilities after what happened. I don't think any of us really thought he would bother you again—before. Now ...." He shrugged again. "Well, you *are* a witness and he's a dangerous man. None of us wanted to take any more chances with you. So Simon ordered a 'round the clock armed guard at your door."

She studied his face. He had an honest face, not just a handsome one, and she thought she could trust her instincts. He was still holding something back. "What else?"

He cleared his throat. "We want to hold you in protective custody when they let you out of here."

Anna was more thrilled at that prospect than unnerved by what it suggested. "You do? Would I ... be staying at your place?"

He blushed. "That was the plan. It's actually not protocol considering ...." He stopped abruptly and sent her a look that was clearly horror at what he'd almost said. It intrigued her and amused her at the same time.

"What I mean is ...," he began again after clearing his throat uncomfortably, "we thought it would be the best place even though it isn't the most ideal given the circumstances."

She desperately wanted to ask him what 'the circumstances' was, but he looked so adorably miserable that she took pity on his discomfort. She hadn't realized that he was as bashful as she was. He hadn't seemed that way before, just quiet and rather introverted. Maybe he was more like her than she'd realized, though? The more he liked someone the more awkward he was?

She didn't have any trouble at all when she was focused on areas within her comfort zone—science—especially when she was around people she had no particular interest in. The very moment it mattered to her what they thought of her, though, she lost half her IQ and began to behave so awkwardly that she embarrassed herself.

She wasn't sure she should interpret his behavior that way, but it pleased her to think it might be a possibility.

"And this would be ... until he goes to trial?" she asked.

"Until we have a better idea .... Well, can come up with a more permanent ... uh ... arrangement."

The more he stumbled around, the more she wanted to probe. She sensed there was something else he was worried about, though, and, since he looked so miserable and she also wanted to make him more comfortable, she steered away from her questions. "Simon didn't manage to get the evidence he'd hoped for?" she asked tentatively after she'd probed her memory for a few moments.

Joshua's expression hardened and he was instantly transformed into 'lawman'. "Nothing that's going to put a noose around his neck. He's an oily snake. We got a hell of a lot of 'suggestive', but nothing unbreakable. With a good lawyer, and he can afford the best, he stands a very good chance of wiggling out from under what we have on him. It's too vague and open to interpretation.

"Right now the only thing concrete we've got to hold the bastard on, is attempted murder of a watchman."

Anna's heart skipped several beats. "Who?" she gasped fearfully.

Joshua sent her a panicked look. "Don't start crying! He shot Simon, but he's fine now. They're letting him go home today. I don't think they would've kept him this long except he lost a good bit of blood."

Anna calmed herself with an effort. "But ... doesn't that mean he'll go to jail?"

"He's claiming he had no idea we were watchmen. He thought we were kidnappers and he was only trying to defend himself ... and a lot more bullshit like that! He's a smooth bastard. I'll give him that. He's already countered everything we've thrown at him. His lawyers are demanding that he be tried in the states, saying that he won't get a fair trial here ... because we're mutants and prejudiced against anyone that

isn't."

"What about kidnapping me?" Anna demanded indignantly.

His expression twisted with anger and disgust. "Paul Warner actually did the kidnapping. If he survives from the hole your father blew in him trying to shoot Simon, he may be willing to turn on his boss, but we aren't counting on it. In any case, Cavendish is your father. He could claim that he'd only asked Paul to pick you up and you'd gone willingly."

"But I could testify that I didn't!"

He looked uncomfortable. "It would just be your word against his and he could discredit you by saying you were angry with him about something and were lying to get back at him. The jury might or might not buy it, but it's thin."

"He blew up my house."

"Paul blew up the house."

"But it was on his orders! I heard him ask Paul if he'd taken care of it."

Joshua looked doubtful and angry. "Did he say, specifically, 'did you blow up the house like I told you to?'"

Frustration surfaced. "No. He just asked him if he'd taken care of it, but he couldn't have meant anything else when Paul did blow it up!"

"He could say he did, though. Unless Paul recovers, like I said, and is willing to spill his guts .... Anyway, that happened outside of our jurisdiction, technically. We can't charge him with it and we haven't told the Water City PD that we suspect him of being behind it, either—they'd demand extradition. We don't want to take a chance on placing you where he could have someone else grab you. Whatever his motives were before, Anna, you're a witness and Miles Cavendish doesn't strike us as the sort of man that would let sentiment come between him and his goals. If it comes down to the possibility of going to prison if you testify, your life could be on the line."

She already knew that and it still set her heart to squeezing painfully. "The paddler!" she exclaimed abruptly. "Did it get blown up?"

Joshua looked at her strangely. "I don't know."

"Can you find out?" she asked urgently.

"I might be able to," he said doubtfully and somewhat reluctantly.

Anna studied him uneasily. "What aren't you telling me?"

His lips tightened. She could see he was reluctant to tell her and the moment he realized there wasn't any point in trying to keep it from her. "Cavendish's organization has been blaming the explosion on mutant terrorists. There's a lot of anti-mutant sentiment in the states right now. I don't know if the Water City PD would be inclined to cooperate. In fact, I'm pretty sure they've shifted the focus of their investigation into the bombing to us."

Even though Anna had thought it was a possibility, she was horrified and furious. "That low down bastard! I *knew* that had to be part of the reason he'd done it!"

Joshua looked at her curiously. "What do you think the other part was?"

She looked at him unhappily. "My research. I made a copy and put it in the paddler. I was going to take it out to Simon and Ian to keep it safe, but Paul grabbed me before I could."

Joshua still looked doubtful. "I'll do what I can. I can't make any promises."

"I know, but it's really important! If I just knew it was safe! I'd put my data chip



in my reader and sort of slipped it under the seat in the paddler. There's got to be at least a chance it survived the explosion."

He took her hand and lifted it. "I'll try, baby," he murmured, brushing his lips lightly across her knuckles. "I know how important it is to you."

Anna felt her throat close. He was so sweet! He'd almost gotten himself killed trying to save her and all he could think about was that he hadn't been careful enough! And the worst of it was that he felt so badly about it when she honestly thought it *had* been a freak accident that she'd been hurt. There hadn't been *time* to worry about anything but speed, but she didn't recall that he'd been particularly rough with her. She'd cracked her head because the *explosion* had thrown them both down! And she was pretty sure she'd cracked her ribs because she was too busy trying to see if Simon and the others got out to be paying attention to her own situation.

\* \* \* \*

Caleb's eyes were still glittering with brooding anger when they reached the home he shared with Simon, Ian, and Joshua. It dampened Anna's excitement over the many gifts she'd gotten from the other watchmen in appreciation for her warning that had saved their lives.

Not that she felt comfortable about that part. She'd gone with her intuition and warned Simon. He'd taken care of getting everybody out. Besides that, she felt guilty by association since it had been her father that had planted the explosives, or had them planted, to start with.

No one had given her a gift of any description since her mother had died, though, and it had felt like Christmas on steroids when all the watchmen that had taken part in the raid had come to see her and brought a gift—almost too thrilling for words.

Caleb hadn't said anything when she wanted them loaded up to take with her, but she could see he didn't like it at all.

She had mixed feelings about that. The gifts were *hers*, after all, and she certainly had no intention of slighting the men who'd brought them by discarding them! That would be just too rude!

It made her unhappy, though, that Caleb seemed to be angry with her about it—and resentful. It had made her feel guilty, as if she'd done something wrong.

And pretty damned miserable all the way around, actually! She'd been so thrilled when he'd come to collect her, and not just because she was sick to death of the hospital. She'd been hungry for the sight of him, anxious to see that he really was alright. She'd been hopeful that she might get a kiss at the very least—talk to him, see him smile, listen to him telling her news if nothing else, anything! Instead, he'd taken one look at the mound of gifts, flipped through the cards, and ... sulked about it ever since.

She was eager to retreat to whatever room they'd given her by the time Caleb had helped her climb out of the little sub and into the atrium. She discovered when she, Caleb, and Joshua reached the living area, though, that Simon and Ian were waiting. Her heart instantly took flight. Relief and hopefulness beat in her breast as she looked them over anxiously to be sure they were alright.

Simon flicked a look at her that he might have trained on a complete stranger. "I know you're probably tired and anxious to settle in, but I thought we'd just take a preliminary statement from you before you go to your room since we haven't had the opportunity before."

The swiftness of her descent from hopefulness to dismay was almost nauseating. It took her several moments to recover enough to realize everyone was waiting for her to sit down. She settled in the spot it seemed they'd left for her on the couch. The urge to draw in upon herself was strong enough that she'd already drawn her knees up before she realized she was still too bruised to sit that way comfortably. She settled for folding her legs together to one side, but that twisted her torso and it wasn't actually very comfortable either. Her ribs were pretty much healed, or knitted anyway, but she thought it would probably be a long while before she could move or sit or breathe 'normally' without discomfort.

Simon leaned forward and set a recording device on the low table between the two facing couches. "Now, Dr. Blake, if you could just tell us in your words what happened on the night of April, 15<sup>th</sup>, 2098 ...?"

Anna stared at the recorder and then at him. "Where do I start?"

"Anywhere," Ian said soothingly. "Just where ever you think it would pertain to the case."

"Start with why you were in your yard so late in the evening."

Anna studied Simon searchingly, wondering if there was an accusation in the way he'd said it or if she just felt like there was. "Could you turn that off? I mean, could I ask you something off the record first?" she added hastily when Ian and Simon exchanged a look that she thought was of suspicion.

Simon leaned forward and turned off the recorder.

"I was going out to talk to you and Ian. I'm just not sure I should say that on the recorder."

Caleb's eyes narrowed on Simon. Simon's face darkened faintly. "About what?"

"Actually, I just wanted to give you a copy of my research for safe keeping,"

Anna amended.

Simon frowned. "And it was so urgent you needed to do it right then?"

She sent him a resentful look. "Well! Considering how nasty you were to me before, I certainly wouldn't have gone if I hadn't thought it was urgent!"

His complexion darkened more noticeably. "Does it pertain to the case in any way?"

"Yes."

"Then it should go in the statement."

Anna was still doubtful when they'd seemed so angry that she knew someone was out there watching her, but she merely nodded and he turned the recorder on again.

"I discovered I'd made a break-through in my research." She couldn't help the excitement that threaded her voice as she brought the memories back. Before she knew it she was telling them about her attempts to find a way to cook the vegetable so that it would be edible.

Simon turned off the recorder. "I don't think we need all that."

She gaped at him a moment before indignation and irritation surged through her. "You said ...."

"Yes, but I don't see how it pertains to this."

She glared at him. "If you'd let me finish, damn it, I'd explain it!"

Simon's lips tightened. "This is only a sixty minute chip. At this rate it'll be full before we get to the kidnapping," he said with determined patience.

She supposed it shouldn't have stung that they didn't seem to have any interest at all in her work, but it did. She glared at him a little resentfully when he turned the recorder on again.

"The discovery I made was so significant," she began again after a moment, "that I felt the need to protect it. I don't really know why I had the sudden feeling that something might happen to it, but I did. I knew I was under electronic surveillance but not who it was. So I copied the files onto a storage chip and hid it in my reader. I thought I'd take it out to Officers Simon and Ian for safekeeping since I also knew they were watching in case my father tried to contact me again."

Simon asked her for specifics of the conversation she'd had with Paul, but she'd been too afraid to recall it with clarity. She repeated it to the best of her memory and everything else that happened right up until Ian and then Caleb had burst into her room at the mansion.

He asked her a lot of questions pertaining to her state of mind—specifically whether she'd felt like her life was in jeopardy—and finally turned off the recorder. She left them discussing it and headed toward the room she'd occupied before. Since nobody objected, she closed the door behind her and climbed into the bed, grateful to get the chance to stretch out, more tired than she ought to be when she hadn't been *out* of bed more than a few hours.

Simon's scent wafted to her as she cuddled the pillow beneath her head. She hadn't known before he'd kissed her that it his bed, his room she'd been occupying. Her mind had catalogued that scent as a source of pleasure and comfort, though, and she knew the moment she inhaled it who it belonged to. It produced a sense of longing that made her chest feel tight, but it was comforting, too, soothing her rattled nerves and the vague sense of hurt that still lingered from the interview.

Simon had told her he was sorry when he'd kissed her that night. She hadn't thought about it since, hadn't even remembered it—only the kiss, and that had felt so much like good-bye that she hadn't wanted to think about it. She discovered she still didn't want to. It brought back the horror, the fear that he was going to die.

What had he meant, she wondered? That he was sorry he'd upset her that day? She supposed he might have, but had the incident been significant enough to him for him to remember it?

Maybe he'd just meant that he was sorry he'd had to use her to find her father? She didn't suppose she'd ever really know.

\* \* \* \*

"You really have a way with women," Caleb muttered.

Simon slid an irritated glance at him. "You have a problem with my handling of taking the statement?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. She was happy, excited, chirping like a little bird, and I happened to be fucking enjoying watching her and listening to her."

"You didn't have any more of a fucking clue what she was talking about, or interest in it, than I did!" Simon growled.

"Nobody cares, either," Joshua said. "I'm with Caleb. She's been through hell. I don't see spoiling a little bit of enjoyment."

"It wouldn't have hurt to let her talk," Ian said tightly. "We could've gotten the statement later."

"We aren't here to chat. The idea is to put together a case that will stick."

"Jesus! You aren't the only one that wants to see the bastard pay for what he's done!" Caleb snarled. "Everything else aside, she isn't safe as long as he's running loose!"

Simon studied the others angrily for a moment. "We agreed this would have to be kept strictly professional. One whiff that she might be romantically involved with any of us and it could jeopardize the entire case. His lawyers would be all over it, screaming that we'd influenced the witness and her testimony wouldn't be worth a damn!"

"Well, I'm damned if I see how letting her chatter on about recipes and Franken-veggies is liable to hurt a damned thing!" Caleb said tightly.

"The point is we can't allow ourselves to get side-tracked or ... too friendly."

Ian frowned. "If you ask me, you're going as far overboard on your 'professionalism' as Caleb is in keeping things 'friendly'," he drawled. "You're as blind in your own way as he is."

Simon and Caleb glared at him.

"How do you figure that?" Simon asked tightly.

"I figure it," Ian said coldly, "because I was actually listening to her. I was enjoying her liveliness just like they were, but I was still listening. You tuned her out the moment she got sidetracked or you would've realized she's just as much of a professional as you are. She said she'd discovered something 'significant' and she was afraid something would happen to it. She risked a lot, Simon, to leave the house at all and she *knew* it was a risk, or didn't you think about that?"

"She asked me to get it for her while she was in the hospital," Joshua said. "She told me she'd hidden her files in her reader and asked me to find out if the paddler had survived the explosion."

"And?" Simon prompted.

He shook his head. "I didn't want to tell the Water City PD what I was looking for," he said pointedly. "I asked for a copy of the report."

"And they refused to send it because it's an ongoing investigation and they haven't decided yet whether we were involved or not," Simon concluded. "I don't suppose it occurred to you that asking was enough to make them that much more suspicious?"

Joshua sent him an angry glance. "It occurred to me, but she asked, and I could see it was important to her. I told her I'd try."

"There'll be men on Cavendish's payroll in the department," Caleb muttered. "He's too good at what he does to overlook the benefit of owning a few cops. If it did survive the explosion, it could still disappear from the evidence room."

"We need to figure some way to retrieve it if it still exists," Ian said, then added when Simon glanced at him sharply, "I don't know or care whether it has a direct bearing on the case or not. It's important to Anna."

Simon studied him a long moment and finally settled back, thinking. "I hate to say it, but I think we run more of a risk of losing any chance of getting it if we try regular channels than getting it. The governor's already chewed my ass out about our unauthorized stakeout. It put him in the position of claiming he'd authorized it just to keep from looking like he didn't know what was going on, and he didn't like that worth a fuck since we were completely out of our jurisdiction and hadn't even had the courtesy to

inform Water City PD, who *had* the jurisdiction. Beyond that, it's thrown suspicion on him as well as us. I don't think he could help us even if I managed to convince him, and he isn't too keen on talking to me right now."

The men looked at each other. "Do we have any connections in Water City that might be helpful?" Caleb asked.

Joshua seemed to struggle with himself. "I do," he admitted finally. "I've still got family there."

"I'd forgotten your folks colonized," Simon murmured in surprise. "Do you think they could help?"

Joshua shrugged. "It's possible. If nothing else, they might have connections that could help us."

"But would they?"

Joshua grinned abruptly. "Maybe. They aren't exactly what you'd call upstanding citizens," he said wryly. "They aren't fond of Water City PD."

Simon rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I suppose you're all aware that what we're proposing goes beyond 'gray'?"

Ian stared at the other three for a long time, wrestling with his own conscience. "I didn't become a watchman just to enforce laws," he said slowly. "I became a watchman to protect the innocent, to punish the guilty, and, above all, to do the right thing. If that chip still exists, the *right* thing to do is to get it and protect it. Anna was working on something to help people. Whatever's on that chip will, and letting someone destroy it is absolutely the *wrong* thing to do."

Simon nodded. "I agree. I hope everybody has enough credits put up for retirement. We might be needing it before we're done with this case," he added wryly.

Caleb grinned at him. "We aren't too old to learn new tricks if this falls on us like a ton of bricks."

"Speak for yourself," Simon muttered. "I feel older by the day."

Caleb narrowed his eyes at him speculatively. "You can always head over to the brothel. You haven't been in a while. It'll make a new man out of you."

Simon flushed, glaring at him. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, you conniving bastard?" he growled. "Anna wouldn't give me the time of day if I did."

"There's no reason Anna has to know," he said pointedly. "It isn't as if you've spoken to her, anyway. You're still a free man."

"Well, I don't fucking *want* to stay one!"

Caleb shook his head at him in disgust. "You aren't going to get in Anna's bed if you keep snapping and growling at her! If you want my opinion, you need to let off a little steam before you explode."

"If I wanted your damned opinion, I'd knock it out of you!" Simon snarled, surging to his feet and stalking from the living area.

Caleb sent Ian an 'I rest my case' look.

Ian shook his head at him and snorted. "Why don't you just take him outside and let him beat the shit out of you? That would make him feel better and he wouldn't be worried about Anna discovering he'd been dipping."

Caleb shot him a bird but then thought it over and grinned. "Maybe I will. Anna would be fussing over me and giving him drop dead looks for days, at least. It might be worth it."

\* \* \* \*

Simon had already snatched the door open to his 'sanctum' before he discovered there was someone sleeping in his bed. He jolted to a halt, staring at Anna blankly for several moments before he looked around the room and ascertained that it *was* his room.

It dawned on him after several moments that he'd actually *intended* to give her his room for her stay. They didn't have a guest room.

Well, they had until Joshua had moved in.

He'd planned to move most of his personal belongings out before settling her in, though, and that had included his blanket and pillow.

After studying her for several moments, he backed out of the room again and headed toward the living area.

"Where are you going?" Joshua asked in surprise.

"To my office," Simon growled, passing through and into the atrium.

"He knows it's his day off, right?" Caleb murmured curiously.

"Joshua!" Simon bellowed from the atrium. "You left the damned sub parked at the door!"

"Well take the tube!" Joshua yelled back at him. "I left it there so I could take Anna out to get something when she felt up to it. She lost all of her stuff when her place blew up."

Simon stalked passed them again, heading toward the tube in the utility room off of the kitchen. "Pick me up some bedding while you're at it."

Joshua sent Caleb a look of disgust when they heard the door of the tube slam and lock. "You just had to bring up that shit about the brothel!"

"You think he isn't approaching melt down? I didn't bring it up to try to fuck things up for him with Anna, whatever he thinks. I figured it might help him mellow out a little. He's wound so tight he can hardly think straight."

"Simon isn't the only one wound up. You might be, too," Ian drawled acidly, "except you already slept with her."

Caleb flicked an accusing look at Joshua.

"Don't look at me!" he snapped. "I didn't rat you out."

"He didn't have to," Ian said dryly. "If you think Simon and I didn't *both* know when she showed up at the sub, you don't know us nearly as well as we know you. I'm guessing here, but my guess is that *that's* why he's wound so tight. I know it's been bothering the hell out of me. It was bad enough before."

"Tell me about it," Caleb muttered, realizing there wasn't much point in trying to deny it. Not that he saw any point to it at this juncture. They all knew the game was on—except it was on hold until they tied up the damned case.

The sooner the better, as far as he was concerned. It wasn't just sleeping alone that was bugging him. No romance meant *no* romance! They couldn't speak to her, couldn't even approach her about moving to the colony, let alone attempt to try to negotiate any kind of agreement.

And, as loathe as he was to admit it, that worried the hell out of him, having her in the colony and available. Of course, they had to keep her close since she was in protective custody, which meant keeping everybody else away from her, but he still didn't like it worth a fuck!

That hadn't stopped the rest of the bastards down at the center from plying her

with every enticement they could think of! And it wasn't likely to stop any of the others in the market for a woman either! The bastards were probably plotting some way to cut *them* out right now!

He didn't know why Ian was complaining any damned way! They'd agreed he could be lead man! So he'd jumped the gun a little! It wasn't as if there was anything typical about this courtship—starting and ending with the fact that they couldn't even openly court her!

He supposed, upon consideration, that it might have been worse if she *was* on the market, but it wasn't much of an edge when they still didn't know that she would consider moving to Atlantis, let alone consider their suit!

What they needed, he decided, was an enticement that nobody else would think of. It had to be something beyond the ordinary, something that might get Anna to thinking along the lines of taking up permanent residence when they couldn't actually ask her to consider it.

The germ of an idea came to him while he listened absently to Joshua and Ian discussing possibilities for getting Anna's data chip back.

She'd lost everything in the explosion. He supposed just about anything they could think up in the way of a gift would be good, but they didn't really know what Anna liked. That was the catch.

He sure as hell hadn't been able to tell from the junk the bastards at the center had piled on her. She'd seemed pretty damned pleased with all of it, and he knew she couldn't be. She'd just been happy to get presents.

She liked music, he thought abruptly—the classical stuff. She'd had something playing just about all the time he'd been on watch.

The problem with that was that he hadn't actually recognized anything by name. He'd realized it was classical, but he wasn't a big music buff.

## Chapter Eleven

"Back so soon?" Joshua asked cheerfully when Simon returned about an hour later.

Simon's face darkened. "I didn't actually have that much to take care of at the office."

"Oh. I thought maybe you'd remembered it was your day off."

Simon's face grew darker. "I'm High Guardian. I don't actually have days off," he muttered, searching the kitchen cabinets a little absently and finally pulling out something to cook. He was starving. He hadn't realized he hadn't gotten around to eating anything before he left. He'd missed breakfast and noon had come and gone.

"What was that music Anna was playing at her place all the time?" Caleb asked, joining Simon and Joshua in the kitchen and settling at the table.

Simon flicked a blank look at him. "Classics."

Caleb rolled his eyes. "I know that. I just wondered if you recognized any of it."

Simon frowned thoughtfully. "I know I heard at least one piece that was Beethoven—Chopin. It seemed like there was more Tchaikovsky, though. Why?"

"I was just thinking about our situation and it occurred to me that we might convince Anna to move here without actually asking her outright just by making her feel at home, you know? It's going to take us weeks to get to trial no matter how fucking hard we work to put the case together. And, until then, our hands are tied.

"She's going to be bored out of her mind in a little while, though, if she doesn't have anything to do that she's used to. So, we produce them. It makes her a lot happier about being caged, and maybe she gets to thinking this wouldn't be a bad place to settle once it's all over.

"If you think about it, it might not be such a bad thing for us either. Assuming we *can* convince her, we're going to have to make some adjustments anyway. And it would give us something to do to keep from going off the deep end."

Simon frowned at him. "I see one problem with that."

"What?"

"We're all going to look, and feel, pretty fucking stupid if we get everything all cozy and comfortable and she lights out for land again," he said dryly.

Caleb felt his belly tighten uncomfortably. He glared at Simon in annoyance. "I still think we have a better chance of preventing that if we get her used to the idea first."

Ian joined them in the kitchen. "He's right. We have to think about the practical side of forming a pod anyway. This is a bachelor household. We're either going to have to look for another place, or remodel this one. Having only four bedrooms is going to get damned uncomfortable damned fast."

Simon sent him a sour look, but frowned thoughtfully. "We need a lab and greenhouse. She spent ninety percent of her time in one or the other."

Caleb stared at him blankly for a moment. "God damn it! You just *had* to suggest that before I could get it out! I was thinking the same thing!"



"What difference does it make?" Ian asked sardonically. "He's right. It's the one thing most likely to work."

"Exactly!" Caleb snarled. "And it was my fucking idea to start with and now *he* gets the credit!"

"It's going to take all of us chipping in to pay for it," Joshua pointed out, "unless you guys have more credits than I do ... or it's cheaper than it sounds like to me."

\* \* \* \*

Ian was sure he had himself well in hand right up until the moment he walked into the bathroom just as Anna stepped out of the shower. He halted as abruptly as if he'd hit a brick wall, too stunned to find her there, at first, to think at all.

It was his shower time. Everybody in the household knew he was always the first to hit the showers in the morning and it flickered through his mind, briefly, that Anna was there because she'd *intended* the encounter.

Even as the hopeful thought flickered through his mind, though, Anna, who was clearly as stunned as he was, sucked in a sharp breath, clutched the towel she had around her in white knuckled fists, and gaped at him with her eyes as wide as saucers. A red tide appeared at the tops of her breasts above the towel and slowly climbed all the way up to her hairline.

*Turn around,* Ian told himself. *Just turn around and walk out.*

His feet seemed glued to the floor, though.

*Move or say something!*

He swallowed convulsively several times, but to save his life all he could think about was the fact that everyone else was still asleep and Anna was standing in front of him warm, wet, and naked. "How are your ribs?" he asked a little hoarsely.

Anna blinked at him several times, like someone waking. She felt like she'd just awakened in a sense. Her mind tumbled the words around in slow motion as if she'd never heard them before. The air in the bathroom seemed super charged, electric. Her skin prickled all over.

He'd asked about her ribs. "Better," she mumbled. Even as the response leapt into her mind, the inspiration to show him flickered through her mind, as well. She hesitated, struggled with her excruciating modesty, and *forced* her fingers to uncurl from the towel. *He* was naked. They didn't think anything about strolling around completely naked, she reminded herself. She could always pretend she hadn't done it in the hope of seducing him if he seemed appalled. "Still bruised," she managed to say, "but it looks worse than it feels."

His gaze followed the towel down to her ankles and climbed back up so slowly that she thought her knees would give out or she might pass out from lack of oxygen. He paused when he reached the juncture of her thighs, hesitating there so long that she felt her sex begin to spasm a little frantically, felt hot moisture seep from the walls. She began to feel embarrassment and uncertainty creeping in to her. The desperation to retrieve the towel she'd dropped had just hit her when he moved toward her, effectively preventing any possibility of retrieving it.

He stepped closer, almost like a sleepwalker and lifted his hand, lightly tracing the bruise along her ribs before his gaze moved to her breasts. Anna studied his face with a mixture of hope, desire, and sheer terror, both at her action and the possible consequences and the animal lust she felt radiating from him as he finally lifted his head

and met her gaze.

She'd never seen that look on a man's face before, let alone felt it directed at her and she was almost equal parts thrilled and terrified by what she might've unleashed. He slid his hand slowly from her ribs to frame her breast within the crook of his thumb and hand.

He swallowed audibly, his gaze flickering over her face. "I won't hurt you, Anna," he said hoarsely.

"I know," she responded shakily.

He lifted his hands slowly, settling them on her shoulders and stroking her collar bone with his thumbs as if trying to sooth her. Just as slowly, he lifted them a moment later and stroked his hands along the sides of her hair. His hands shook. She felt the tremors when he finally settled them and slowly applied just enough pressure to urge her to move closer.

Still unnerved but eager, she swayed toward him, lifting her face hopefully. He released a ragged breath. The heat of it as it touched her skin, lifted goosebumps all over her. Her nipples, erect already, tightened almost painfully.

"Jesus, baby! I shouldn't be doing this," he muttered absently even as he drew her up and bent his head towards hers.

But he was going to, she thought dreamily, and that was all that mattered at the moment. She could worry about why he didn't think it was a good idea later. She knew she would, but she was too thrilled with his attention at the moment to worry about later.

He seemed to forget his qualms and his anxieties about scaring her the instant their mouths connected. There was no slow building to explosion. She thought if he hadn't reassured her, at first, by approaching her slowly, she might've taken flight instead of meeting him with eagerness. Even so, she was almost equal parts unnerved and thrilled by the hungry demand of his touch. Her heart rate sped up, making her lungs work harder for air and adding to the drunken euphoria that inundated her the moment she took his taste and scent inside her.

He explored her restlessly with his hands while he kissed her, sending a constant flow of pleasurable signals to her brain to complete the chaos there. She couldn't seem to manage more than clinging to him weakly to keep from sliding down him. She felt a bump and the coldness of the wall against her back without ever having realized they'd moved.

He used the barricade to press his lower body against hers rhythmically, directing her scattered wits to the answer to the need that had begun to drum through her. The kiss was wonderful, but it wasn't enough. She wanted him inside of her.

Her mind struggled with the logistics of mounting him. She dismissed the idea of enticing him into her bed when it occurred to her that they might have to run a disapproving gauntlet along the way and pushed herself upward. Locking her arms more tightly around his shoulders, she pushed up on her tiptoes and lifted the thigh his cock was bruising, coiling that leg around his hips. His cock obligingly slipped between her legs, bumping along her cleft just enough to set her teeth on edge when he curled his hips again.

He dropped his hands to her buttocks, digging his fingers into her and trying to spear the mouth of her sex. Apparently, he realized that wasn't going to work the same moment she did. Tearing his mouth from hers, he shifted his hands to her thighs, hoisted

her up the wall and braced her there. She peered down between them dizzily, watching as he grasped his shaft and guided it by feel until he rang the spot.

Ian's face was a harsh mask of need when he lifted his head to look at her. It sent an answering shaft of need through her. Her kegels responded by clamping around the head of his cock in a chokehold that frustrated both of them. She couldn't seem to command the muscles to let go or ease up long enough for him to penetrate her more fully and the moisture her body had produced wasn't helping with the vice-like grip her muscles had on him.

He distracted her by clamping his mouth over one of her nipples. The minute he did, the muscles in her sex began to spasm madly and her weight carried her down his shaft a little further with each fluctuation.

He let go of her breast, panting hoarsely, and nuzzled his face against her neck. "Tell me you're close, baby," he muttered raggedly. "This is going to be a rough, fast ride."

Close to what, she thought, vaguely confused? But his husky voice and the promise of a rough ride made her quake with the first tremors of her climax. Dismay flickered through her. "I think I'm coming," she gasped.

"Jesus, baby!" Ian growled, tightening his hold on her and driving deep.

She groaned, squeezing her eyes and trying to hold on to the pleasure, but it was a losing battle—a lost battle. The first quake hadn't been a warning that she was close. She was there, and there was no stopping it. And then she didn't want to stop it. Every thrust sent exquisite waves of the most glorious rapture through her. She gasped, held her breath, tried to keep the glory of it bottled inside, but she couldn't seem to prevent the little moans of pleasure from escaping.

He drove them from her with his near frenzied pumping in and out of her. She was still enjoying the delightful aftershocks when he stopped, panting raggedly, jerking against her.

A sublime sense of peace washed over her as she clung to him limply and then a flicker of uneasiness wafted through her. "Was it good for you?" she asked a little anxiously, a little drunkenly.

He uttered a shaky chuckle. "Baby, if it had been any better, I think my heart would've exploded," he murmured, gnawing along the side of her neck and lifting a rash of pebbled skin that sent a shudder through her.

Dragging in a deep breath, he eased away from her and allowed her to slide to the floor. He leaned toward her, nibbling lazily at her lips when she lifted her head. "We need to get you out of here before the others wake up," he muttered.

She grimaced, feeling semen beginning to slide down her thigh. "I need to wash up," she said uncomfortably.

"Make it quick. I thought I heard somebody stirring."

She wobbled as quickly as she could toward the lavatory and rinsed off. Ian wrapped her towel around her just as she shut the water off and all but shoved her out the door as soon as he'd taken a quick look down the hall.

She stared at the door a little blankly when he'd shut it, but a sound from the nearest room galvanized her. Whirling, she sprinted for the room she was occupying and dashed inside.

Her heart was beating unpleasantly fast when she leaned back against the door

and that was just the beginning. By the time she'd dried off and pulled her robe on, all sorts of unpleasant, if unnamed, feelings were rambling around inside of her.

The almost ... clandestine nature of their interlude made guilt begin to creep through her. She had no reason to feel it that she knew of and yet that alone wasn't enough to banish it.

Why had he said he shouldn't do it? Why had he practically shoved her out the door?

Well, that was easy. He was done and he obviously didn't want the others to know. Was that to keep her from being embarrassed and uncomfortable, though, or to keep himself from being embarrassed and uncomfortable?

Moving to the bed, she plopped down on it, trying to remember if she'd read anything about their customs that might help her understand what was going on. The little she'd found hadn't really gone into that much depth, though. Apparently, land dwellers found the sea folk's marriage practices so titillating that they didn't actually put any effort into discovering how they went about *making* those arrangements.

She distinctly remembered it had said that it was usually men that were already partners of some kind—quite often miners that shared a claim who would then extend that claim to their woman and 'co-own' her in a sense since they all pitched in to pay the bride's family.

She realized uncomfortably that she hadn't actually gotten any sort of indication from any of them that they even had an interest in that direction. Not that she was sure herself that *she* was interested. She was in a way and she wasn't. It was hard to look at them and be around them and not covet them, but there was no getting around the 'big problem'. They were water people and she was a land dweller, and the sea unnerved her.

She hadn't honestly gotten much beyond lusting after them. She hadn't even put a lot of thought into that. She'd just *let* them do whatever they wanted, because that was the only thing she harbored no doubts at all about. She wanted them and she wasn't about to put up a fight if they showed any interest in that direction.

Was it completely against their customs, though? As weird as it seemed to her that it would be given their marriage practices, she didn't know *how* they felt about sex outside of commitment. Nobody where she came from worried about it. They were probably a hundred times more likely to commit themselves to a roll just for fun, and maybe only the one time, than they were to consider a longer term commitment. It would be bizarre if the sea folk were just the opposite regarding sex outside of marriage, but it wasn't inconceivable.

So maybe what they'd done was taboo? Maybe that was why Ian had been so anxious to shove her out the door?

Or maybe Caleb had made some kind of claim on her and he'd wanted to avoid conflict?

Somehow she couldn't picture it. Ian didn't strike her as the sort of man who worried a lot about defending himself. Actually, none of them did. She didn't think they would be watchmen if they were. But maybe it was because he was a very close friend of Caleb's?

She still didn't think that was it, mostly because Caleb hadn't tried to have sex with her since and she'd decided he just wasn't interested. He still gave her those 'I could eat you alive' looks now and then, just enough to keep her quivering with

hopefulness, but he hadn't done more and never around any of the others—which meant practically never at all since there wasn't much chance of being alone with anybody in a household like theirs. At least half the time, all four of them were in the house, the rest of the time at least two.

Her thoughts didn't make her particularly happy. In fact, they left her feeling less than happy and off-kilter. The only thing that seemed certain was that she wasn't supposed to behave as if they'd just fucked each other nearly senseless and since she wasn't sure she could carry that off very well, she decided to hide in her room until she thought she could.

Unfortunately, Joshua tapped on her door only a short time later and told her there was food if she was hungry. She debated just skipping the meal, but she was hungry and besides that, she usually joined them. Well, she'd only been with them a few days, but she certainly hadn't established a habit of skipping meals.

She'd had time to calm down, she assured herself. She could do this. All she had to do was pretend nothing had happened!

It was a lot more disconcerting to sit down with four men when she'd had sex with two of them, she discovered, than she'd thought it would be and nearly impossible to pretend a nonchalance she didn't feel. She absolutely could *not* resist flicking several glances at Ian, however, just to see if he was as completely unmoved as she'd thought he might be. The second time she glanced at him, she discovered he was studying her through narrowed eyes with a smoldering intensity that set her on fire. She felt her face flood with color, squirmed in her seat, and trained her gaze on her plate when she managed to break eye contact with him. The third time she looked up, she discovered Caleb was staring at Ian—hard. He followed Ian's gaze to her even as she glanced that way.

She knew the minute her gaze locked with Caleb's that he knew exactly what had happened between them. She flicked a wary glance at Simon and Joshua to see if they'd noticed and saw they were studying her and Ian speculatively.

So much for being discreet!

Well! It wasn't *her* fault—not entirely, anyway! If Ian didn't want them to know he shouldn't have been looking at her as if he was contemplating tossing his plate aside and chewing on her instead!

"How goes the case?" he drawled after a strained moment.

The indifference in his voice seemed to antagonize Simon. "Like I said, Paul Warner died."

It was news to Anna. Jolted, she sent Simon a look of shock. "He died?"

He grunted.

"That sucks—not that there was any certainty that we could've gotten him to testify," Joshua muttered.

"Yeah," Simon agreed grimly. "I was hoping the son-of-a-bitch would pull through so I could break his god damned neck."

Anna stared at him, wide-eyed at the vehemence in his voice and thoroughly confused by his attitude. "It's ... that makes it murder, though, at least. Right?"

"Maybe. If he can convince the jury that he just fired wildly because he thought they were under attack, his lawyers might get it down to manslaughter. In Cavendish's world, that usually only amounts to a slap on the wrist. I ordered an autopsy. It seemed

damned convenient, him croaking, when the doctor thought he was improving.”

“But that would definitely be pre-meditated murder!” Anna pointed out.

“Except we can’t put the ‘gun’ in his hand, so to speak. He’s still being held without bond. Unless we could find proof that he ordered it, we’ve got nothing.”

Anna shivered. “If he can arrange something like that from jail,” she said, feeling abruptly nauseated, “I’m never going to be safe.”

An uncomfortable silence fell. Caleb, Ian, and Joshua glared at Simon in tight-lipped anger for several moments. “He’d have to go through us to get to you,” Joshua said harshly.

Anna lifted her head and looked around at them. “But ... I don’t want him to,” she said on the verge of a wail. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn’t! I don’t want anything to happen to any of you!”

Caleb covered her hand on the table, squeezing it with his.

“We’ve put together a reasonably solid case for the territorial Attorney General,” Simon said a little gruffly. “We’ll make it stick. And, regardless of his money or his power, he’ll find it damned hard to run his organization from Atlantis’ maximum security prison.”

Anna studied him hopefully and finally nodded, more reassured than she’d thought she would be, maybe even than she *should* have been. She couldn’t help but think it was the truth, though. Miles Cavendish wasn’t likely to have any friends among the Atlanteans and, after his attempt to blow up the territorial capital, the security would be much tighter, she knew. It wouldn’t be as easy for any of his men to infiltrate.

She wasn’t as certain she would be safe once she left, but, if he couldn’t communicate with the outside world, then he couldn’t send anybody after her. That didn’t mean she was entirely safe from retribution by some of his fanatical followers, but she doubted they would focus on her long without him to keep her in their sights.

“How goes our ... other project?” Ian asked after a moment.

The four men glanced at her and then one another and Anna felt her spirits perk up at the suggestion of a secret that might involve her.

“The ... uh ... acquisition?” Joshua asked cautiously. “Or the other?”

Ian shrugged. “Either—both.”

“Some progress,” Caleb drawled, stretching and then getting up to carry his plate to the sink.

They weren’t going to discuss it around her, whatever ‘it’ was. Intrigued in spite of her best efforts to convince herself it might not have anything to do with her at all, Anna got up and followed him. It caused a general exodus from the table to the sink. “I’ll do the dishes,” she volunteered, then added when all of them looked at her speculatively. “It’ll give me something to do.”

Shrugging, they left the kitchen. She thought they all had, anyway, until she felt a hand settle lightly on her elbow.

When she looked up, she saw that Ian was studying her. There was concern in his eyes that warmed her. “You alright, baby?”

She nodded, uncertain of whether he was referring to their interlude or the recent discussion.

His gaze moved over her face. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Heat lit up her cheeks, but not all of it was discomfort. The question resurrected

memories that made her warm all over. "I'm ...." She stopped, debated a moment, and discarded the trite 'fine'. "Good, actually."

Amusement danced in his eyes. He leaned closer. "Baby, you're a lot better than good," he murmured near her ear, lifting a rash of goosebumps.

She flicked a glance at him, struggling with the airy, inflated sensation his comment had produced, and the insane urge to giggle like a little girl. "You weren't so bad, yourself," she whispered back at him.

He chuckled huskily. "Now, I'm on my metal. I'll have to see if I can't wring a little more praise than that out of you."

Oh! Promises, promises!

It was just as well he left it at that. Heat was wafting off of her in waves when he strode from the kitchen.

She forgot all about her intention to see if she could overhear the discussion between them when the men headed back into the living area. She was so focused on what he'd said to her and the happiness it had evoked that she'd finished washing everything before she hardly realized it. Leaving the dishes to dry in the rack, she debated whether to join them in the living room and finally decided against it.

She'd had trouble enough behaving before. She didn't think she could sit down with them and not grin like an idiot every time Ian glanced at her.

She could read a while, she decided. Simon had loaned her his reader—the one she'd thrown at him. He had a surprisingly extensive library. She'd found plenty of books to interest her.

There was just no getting around it. The man had unsuspected depths.

She yearned to plumb those depths, but she was beginning to think that was a hopeless case.

\* \* \* \*

Ian discovered he was still smiling to himself when he reached the living room. The three pairs of laser eyes he met brought him up short, though. Wiping the expression from his face, he continued to the couch that had been his goal and sprawled on it, casually crossing his legs when he realized his cock was still tenting his robe.

No one said anything or even seemed to realize they were all poised tensely on the couches, listening to Anna in the kitchen.

Ian felt his face heat when she started humming to herself. As pleased as he was that she seemed happy, the moment she started humming, he came under fire again and nobody seemed to share his amusement. He cleared his throat. "So ... who's on watch today? And who's scheduled to go in?"

Simon narrowed his eyes at him. "You were scheduled to be on witness watch," he said tightly, "but I think I'll switch with you today."

Ian felt his face tighten with a mixture of anger and guilt. As tempted as he was to argue with Simon, however, he decided it would be more discreet to simply accept the inevitable. It wasn't likely Simon would change his mind anyway. That being the case, he shrugged with as much unconcern as he could muster. "No problem. I guess I'll be off then."

Joshua joined him as he left the house. Ian glanced at him a couple of times as they swam side by side, but it seemed pretty clear if the way he was grinding his teeth was any indication, that neither he nor Anna had been nearly as discreet as he'd hoped.

On the one hand, he was inclined not to give a fuck, to think it had been worth it if the world blew up around him. On the other—well, there was a very real possibility that it could. It would've been a lot easier to be flippant about it if that wasn't the case.

He began very quickly to feel a mixture of remorse and resentment. He was aware that he wasn't nearly as sorry that he'd made love to their one and only witness as he knew he should be, but there was no getting around the fact that guilt put a damper on his mood. And that gave rise to resentment.

Unfortunately, there was no one to aim it at but himself. It was bad enough that he'd lost control, however understandable it was considering the circumstances, but what he'd done afterwards was almost worse. He'd made promises he didn't dare keep, not in the foreseeable future.

That was exactly why Simon had ordered them to keep things professional—emotional entanglement that Cavendish's lawyers could use against them. If it was obvious they'd become emotionally involved, the defense could claim it had been used to manipulate the witness.

"Shit!" he muttered, disgusted. It was going to be hell trying to keep his hands off of her now. He'd just *thought* it was hellish before!

"I don't know what you're so damned pissed off about," Joshua muttered through his communicator. "Simon wouldn't have bumped you if it hadn't been as plain as day what you'd been up to with Anna."

Ian slid Joshua a narrow-eyed glare, but he had no intention of being sucked in by the comment and asking just *how* it had been as plain as day. He didn't have any intention, in fact, of discussing it with Joshua at all. It was *his* business—between him and Anna, and they could go fuck themselves. "Where are we on the extraction project?" he asked, as much because he wanted to know as to distract Joshua.

"Still trying to get things set up," Joshua responded tightly. "Getting in isn't a problem. Getting in and out again is a different situation entirely, especially into the evidence room. Fortunately, there was so much of it they moved it to a warehouse to sort. It's possible it hasn't made it to the evidence room even if it survived the blast."

He was silent for several moments. "The security isn't as tight at the warehouse, but that presents another problem. We'd have to get in and take the time to search through all the rubble ourselves and even knowing what we're looking for could take more time than we could manage.

"I think we're going to have to wait and let them search it and then go through the trash to see if it was overlooked and thrown out and go from there."

"They aren't going to just throw it out," Ian said dryly.

Joshua sent him a look of irritation. "You know what I mean—downgrade the importance. Once they bag and store it, they won't be watching it as closely. We'd have more opportunity, and more time with it.

"I think the chances are slim that they'd overlook it, though."

"So we still need to figure on getting into the evidence room."

"That can be arranged," Joshua said, "but it would have to be a quick in and out, which means we'd have to know beforehand where to look for it."

Ian nodded. "I hope Caleb had better luck with the other project."

"Yes and no," Joshua responded as they finally reached their destination and emerged from the pool.



“Meaning this isn’t going to be easy either, I gather,” Ian drawled as he climbed out and moved to the dryer.

When Joshua had finished drying and pulled a robe on, he continued the subject as they headed into the center. “The good news is that he located a modular addition that would give us half again what we have now—room for a garden and lab for Anna plus enough space for two or three more bedrooms and it has two baths. It’s within our budget and it wouldn’t take much to fix it up—money or time.”

“And the bad news is?”

“He checked with a local marine biologist to get an idea about what sort of equipment she’d need for a lab. It’s way the hell out of our grasp.”

“Well hell!” Ian said irritably as they entered his office and he moved to his desk to check the reports he had waiting. “That’s no good. Any options?”

“We might be able to track down some secondhand equipment that we could afford, but the biologist told Caleb he’d be willing to time-share with his equipment.”

Ian looked at Joshua in surprise. “You don’t sound very enthused about it.”

Joshua shrugged. “She’d have to go there to use it—not very convenient—but doable, except Caleb didn’t like the man’s looks.”

Ian studied him for a long moment before that sank in. “I take it he’s single?”

“Not happily,” Joshua said dryly. “He was hinting around pretty broadly about buying in.”

Ian gaped at him in dawning outrage. “But he hasn’t even *seen* Anna!” he growled, knowing even as he said it that that didn’t mean a damned thing. She could have looked like a walrus and he might still have been interested. Beyond that, she’d been in the hospital. Even with the guards there was plenty of hospital staff that had seen her, plus the men who’d taken part in the raid. Anna was pretty enough to have aroused a *lot* of interest ... and talk. It chilled him to think about the number of men that might be just waiting for them to cut her loose.

Joshua uttered an irritated huff. “Actually he has. He went to school with her.”

## Chapter Twelve

There was no way to keep their purchase a complete secret until it could be presented shiny and new. None of them were happy about it. As much as it had cost them, they knew it wasn't going to look like much to Anna before they'd had time to refurbish it.

Caleb's inquiries had made them all extremely uneasy, though. His discovery that a local scientist, who might be supposed to have a lot in common with Anna, was interested in reacquainting himself wasn't the only unpleasant discovery. Everyone, or so it seemed, had at least heard of her and knew pretty much her entire situation. She was a heroine to the men who'd taken part in the raid, because it was her intuition that had saved them from being blown to bits, and they hadn't stopped at heaping gifts on her. They'd been singing her praises to anybody that would listen, and there weren't many that didn't. She was beautiful. She was brilliant. She was brave and heroic. And above all, she was not taken.

There were a lot of men who saw their purchase as a clear sign that they were taking advantage of the situation to fix Anna's interest before anybody else had a chance—which they were—and they were pretty pissed off about it—enough that the governor had heard a number of complaints. He'd summoned Simon and raked him over the coals about behaving in a manner unbecoming an officer, unprofessional, and potentially dangerous to their witness. She was *supposed* to be in protective custody and, although they hadn't actually tried to keep it secret and couldn't have, she still shouldn't be the target of so much discussion and interest, or, to put it in the governor's words 'what the hell did they think they were doing fucking around with their witness?'.

He'd accepted Simon's boldfaced lie that they'd just decided to renovate their place and it just happened to coincide with Anna's presence there—but with patent disbelief. The governor had finally dismissed him with a warning—If the case fell through because of their mishandling of the witness, they were all going to be looking for new jobs.

Simon supposed if they hadn't all had their heads up their asses—or more accurately, up Anna's—they would've noticed before that they weren't by any means the only Atlanteans that had cast hopeful looks in her direction. As torn as he was between his duty and his desire, though, he was as anxious to try to fix Anna's interest as everyone else—especially when it was born in upon him that none of them were likely to get a chance after the case was tried. They finally agreed that they really didn't have a lot of options. The purchase had set them back enough that they couldn't afford to pay to have it remodeled and refurbished. They were going to have to do it themselves, and a little at the time.

It also didn't seem like a good idea to bring their nest-building anymore into the public eye than they had already.

They'd all still nursed some hope that they could keep it from Anna until they'd at least cleaned it up a little, but that hope, too, went unfulfilled. Anna went into a blind

panic the moment the new unit was attached to the anchoring column and the workers started winching it up to connect it with the rest of the house.

She grabbed two handfuls of robe—Ian's and Simon's since they were sitting on either side of her on the couch at the time. Her eyes widened like saucers and the color completely drained from her face. "Did you feel that? Did you hear that?"

Simon didn't know about Ian, but all he could feel was Anna's grip on his balls and all he could hear was the ringing in his ears from the pain. Thankfully, she let go and leapt to her feet before he passed out.

"What was that?"

"I'm sure it's nothing," Caleb said soothingly. "I didn't hear anything. Did you hear anything?"

"No. I didn't hear anything," Joshua responded promptly.

"You didn't *feel* that?" Anna gasped, looking around the house wildly. "It's an Earthquake!"

"It isn't an Earthquake!" Simon said testily. "We don't have a fault line within miles of us."

He'd barely gotten the words out when they all heard the distinctive scream of grinding metal.

"*Oh my god!* The house is going to fall!"

"It's alright, Anna," Ian said soothingly. "Just sit down."

She stared at him. "I think we need to leave. I really do! I can feel the house shaking! Put your feet on the floor! There's a strong vibration running through the floor."

Simon glanced at the others and gave up. "It's alright, Anna. It really is. The workers are just attaching a new unit to the house."

Anna blinked at him in complete confusion. "A unit?"

"A modular unit. An addition," Simon clarified.

Anna looked like she didn't know whether to believe him or not. "You're adding on to the house?"

"That's all it is, baby. Honestly," Caleb said.

She turned to look at him. "Why didn't you just tell me that?" she demanded in dawning anger. "It scared the hell out of me!"

"Because it was intended as a surprise," Ian said dryly.

Anna turned to look at him. "A surprise?"

"For you."

"For me?" Her face reddened. She still looked more frightened and angry than thrilled, though. "You're adding on to the house for me?"

Simon studied her speculatively for a long moment. "We leased it. We figured since you were going to be here a while it would be more comfortable."

"Leased?" she echoed. "Oh ... like another bedroom, you mean?" She frowned. "Wouldn't it have been cheaper just to lease a bigger place until the trial was over? You said the trial would start week after next."

Simon shrugged. "The government works in mysterious ways," he said dryly. "Why don't you sit down? It's perfectly safe or we would've moved you to another location during the attachment. When they're done and it's been pumped, we'll take you down to look at it."

Anna settled on the couch again, but reluctantly. She still jerked every time there was another unfamiliar sound and she inched closer and closer to Ian until he finally pulled her onto his lap and cradled her against him. She looked unsettled by that at first, but she was clearly too unnerved by the noise and the movement to worry about it long. She burrowed against him and clutched at him as if she expected to be thrown to the floor any minute.

Sighing, Simon finally yielded to the angry gestures Caleb was directing at him and got up to follow Caleb and Joshua into the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Anna gasped suspiciously as soon as they got up.

"To the kitchen," Simon said shortly. "Are you hungry?"

She shook her head, but he could see she suspected it was a ruse to abandon her to her fate and bail out the emergency exit just beyond the kitchen.

"That went well," he growled as soon as he, Caleb, and Joshua had gotten to the kitchen.

"Why the hell did you tell her it was a lease?" Caleb demanded indignantly.

"And then suggest that the government was picking up the damned tab?" Joshua seconded him.

"Because it occurred to me that we might not look like completely besotted simpletons if she didn't know we'd just about spent our last cent buying it for her! And because we can't tell her that we bought it because we're hoping to make this arrangement permanent!" He thought it over. "Well, not this precise arrangement. I'm not too keen on standing around with a hard on while you and Caleb make time with *our* woman and I don't think Joshua is either!"

"You got that right!" Joshua agreed, glaring at Caleb. "Although I'm damned if I like the idea of not taking any credit at all for the gift when I just sank ten years savings into it!"

"Well, if you want another ten years to work up another bankroll, you might want to consider it! The governor just chewed me a new asshole two days ago because he'd gotten wind of it and he made it damned clear that all of us were going to be looking for work if we screw up this trial! I told him that we'd been planning it a while, that it was just coincidental that Anna was here."

"What the fuck did you tell him that for? Why tell him anything at all?"

"Because there have been *complaints* from the other colonists, that's why. They seem to think we're trying to make points with Anna while we have her in custody. I can't imagine where they would've gotten the idea, can you, Caleb?"

Caleb flushed faintly. "I was discreet, god damn it! More discreet than you were! What if she decides to thank the governor? Did you think about that?"

Simon paled. "No, I didn't think about that. Unlike some people, lying doesn't come that god damned easy to me!"

"What the hell do you mean by that wise-crack?" Caleb demanded angrily.

"Take it anyway you like," Simon snarled.

"Well, you'll have to take it outside!" Joshua said pointedly. "Anna's in the other damned room."

Caleb and Simon glared at each other for several long moments. Finally, Simon forced some of the tension from his shoulders. "I wasn't suggesting you were a liar," he said irritably. "Only that I'm not. I suppose I should've been prepared for it, but I

wasn't. It was the only thing I could think of to cover our asses."

Caleb relaxed. "Yeah, well it would've worked better if you hadn't turned around and told Anna that the governor had arranged it."

"Maybe," Simon growled, "but we damned well can't tell her we did it! It would be bad enough looking like god damned fools when she lit out for land again, but if she happened to mention to the governor that we bought it for her, we'd be totally fucked."

"Alright!" Caleb said. "I get your point."

"It might still work," Joshua said. "The idea was to convince her we had plenty to offer and it should still count for something that we at least thought about her not having a lab or garden anymore."

"There is that," Caleb said meditatively. "And, as bad as I hate it, Simon has a point, too. I don't like the idea of looking like an idiot if it doesn't work either. At least this way, nobody knows but us. They might suspect, but they won't know for sure."

"I don't know. I think I might be too sick to care," Joshua muttered.

"You only say that because you haven't had a woman make a fool out of you yet. The only thing worse than being heartbroken and flat broke is feeling like a fool on top of it," Simon said tightly. "There aren't many things worse than being more miserable than you've ever been in your life and knowing it's a source of amusement to everybody that knows you."

Caleb studied him for a long moment. "Believe it or not, nobody thought it was funny, Simon. I sure as hell didn't. Any of us could've been in your shoes, and we all knew it. I wanted to wring that bitch's neck. Beyond that ... well, I guess you haven't noticed there've been a lot of guys damned wary about the marriage market since. Nobody pays without taking delivery first, and that means the woman accepts the change and has it *performed*."

Simon studied him. "And Anna hasn't."

"She isn't Roxanne, Simon. She isn't here for money."

"She isn't here because she wants to be either."

\* \* \* \*

The addition was dark as pitch and still ringing with the sound of dripping water when they descended to look it over. Anna struggled to look and sound appreciative purely out of politeness, but the fact was the place gave her the creeps. She felt like she was in some old, underground tomb. Every sound echoed eerily and sent another shiver skating down her back.

She was actually glad there wasn't any light beyond the handheld torches the men carried. At least they couldn't see how dismayed she was.

"It needs work, but once it's dried out we can get it cleaned up fairly quickly."

Caleb's voice, which she supposed was intended to sound cheerful, sounded oddly hollow. She pasted a smile on her face when he glanced at her.

They picked their way from one room to the next, looking each over briefly before they moved on. It wasn't until they'd made the circuit that Joshua made a comment that pierced her dismay.

"I think this would make a good room for a garden. It isn't very large and it'll need grow lights to grow anything down here, but there's plenty of room to build tables to hold the plants."

"Garden?"

"Yes," Caleb said with a touch of surprise. "That's the main reason we ... uh ... requisitioned it."

"So I could have a garden?"

"So you wouldn't go stir crazy before the trial was over," Ian said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "It might be starting up in a couple of weeks, but there's no telling how many weeks it could drag on."

Anna felt a thrill go through her. She looked around with a lot more enthusiasm. "Oh, this would be plenty big enough! It's almost as big as the greenhouse I had. And I think I saw a couple of tables in one of the other rooms that could be moved in here. All I'd really need are the lights and some trays—a little soil and seeds."

She looked at Simon. "Are we still on water rationing?"

Something flickered in his eyes. "They aren't up to peak, yet, but they've increased the rations. We shouldn't have any trouble getting what you need."

She beamed at him in pleasure. "This is so thoughtful! I didn't want to complain, but I've missed my garden terribly! I guess you're anxious to get your room back," she added ruefully.

He swallowed audibly. "I don't mind the couch."

She chuckled. "You're just saying that because you're so sweet! I know it has to be miserable."

"We'd thought you might be able to set up a little lab in the room beside it,"

Caleb interrupted, "but so far we haven't been able to get our hands on any sort of equipment."

Disappointment flickered through her briefly, but she dismissed it. "That's ok. I can't really do any research anyway."

She glanced at Joshua a little hopefully.

He grimaced. "I haven't forgotten. I'm still working on it."

She sighed. "It probably didn't make it through the explosion anyway. I'll have to start over."

It was daunting, but she realized there wasn't any point in moping over it. In fact, there wasn't time to spare to feel sorry for herself. The sooner she got started, the better. At least, it was something she'd already figured out once. She was bound to remember a lot if not everything. It shouldn't take nearly as long as it had the first time. "I don't suppose there's a lab in New Atlanta that I could use?" she asked a little hopefully when they'd returned to the main house.

The men exchanged looks she had trouble deciphering until it occurred to her that she was in protective custody. They probably didn't want her to leave the house and that was why they'd made arrangements for a place for her to work. It might not be safe for her or them. "Never mind. I wasn't thinking. I forgot I was in protective custody. I guess I can't wander around."

"Actually," Caleb said slowly. "I did talk to a guy that has a lab here. He said he went to school with you."

"Really?"

"Dr. Sikes? Raymond Sikes?"

Anna blinked at him. "And he remembered me?"

Simon glanced from Anna to Caleb, feeling a different sort of uneasiness flicker through him. "You don't remember him?" he asked grimly.

Anna frowned, thinking it over. "Actually," she said wryly. "I didn't really socialize a lot in college and I'm not very good with names."

Caleb shared a look with Simon. "I don't think you would've overlooked him. He's about my height, hair about the color of Ian's—maybe a little lighter shade of brown. Green eyes. He looked like the kind of man a woman would notice. Not that I'm much of a judge, but I would've said he was handsome."

"Oh, well maybe that would explain it," Anna said. "I've always been more attracted to ...." She stopped abruptly, feeling her face heat at what she'd almost said. "Uh ... jocks, you know?"

She could see that they knew that wasn't what she'd intended to say, but she wasn't about to tell them that she'd always been more inclined to notice blonds—not with Ian and Simon standing there and *both* of them dark!

"To be perfectly honest, I was pretty wrapped up in this guy I met—Chance Linden—a football player. And after he dumped me, I focused on getting my degree. Handsome or not, he could easily have been in my classes without me noticing. I wasn't really very keen on the idea of giving anyone else a chance after I got burned, and besides, it took all Mom could do to pay my way. I didn't want to let her down," she added hurriedly to cover her goof. "Do you think I might be able to convince him to let me use his lab occasionally?"

"We'll see," Simon said grimly. "We need to check him out first."

Five minutes in to their interrogation, Raymond Sikes admitted he didn't know Anna and hadn't gone to school with her. He'd just figured it was a good way to meet her.

They ran a very thorough background check on him anyway and finally cut him loose. They decided it would be better all the way around, though, to 'borrow' a few pieces of equipment here and there. Most of what they managed to round up was outdated and no longer in use, though still useable, but it took a concerted effort, a lot of searching, and a good bit of bullying.

They decided it was worth it when Anna danced up and down and flew from one to another to give them kisses of appreciation as if they'd brought her diamonds instead of clunky, antiques.

"This is wonderful! It's great! All of it works?"

"So we were told," Caleb hedged. "I don't guess we'll know for sure until we get it hooked up and you test it."

Anna was so excited she was determined to help them clean up and remodel. She was more of a distraction and a hindrance than help, but they gritted their teeth and bore with it. Simon finally bought tool bags to hide their tools in since Anna had a bad habit of moving things and forgetting where she'd put them—cleaning up behind them. If anybody set a hammer, a wrench, a measuring tape, or a screw driver down, he had to look for it the next time he needed it.

"It's like living with a ferret," Simon muttered with a mixture of amusement and exasperation as he watched Anna taking her turn in the kitchen.

"Or a magpie," Caleb countered. "She's pretty territorial."

"Ferret," Joshua said succinctly. "Magpies are mean little bastards."

Ian's lips curled, his eyes gleaming as he, too, studied her. "But she sings."

Joshua chuckled. "As if any of you have ever actually seen either one! Magpies

are melodious.”

Ian’s smile broadened. “I didn’t say she sang well,” he murmured. “I still like hearing our little magpie chirp.”

“She still doesn’t have anything to look at in her garden but benches and lights,” Caleb reminded them. “Somebody is going to have to make a trip to Water City to buy supplies. There isn’t a lot available in New Atlanta and what there is, is damned expensive.”

“It’ll be expensive in Water City, too,” Simon said dryly. “They may only be a mile from the mainland, but they still have to haul everything like that out to the city. Ian and I will go tomorrow. You and Joshua have watch. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to stop by her place just to see if anything’s left. I’d like to get a closer look at it anyway.”

“I imagine the platform sank—either that or the PD had a tug move it.”

Simon shrugged. “We can still look.”

\* \* \* \*

“Good timing,” Ian drawled as he and Simon surfaced in the sub and saw that the city was in the process of hooking up what was left of the platform to tug it away.

“It isn’t gone yet,” Simon said grimly, throwing his safety harness off and heading for the tube. “I think we can safely assume the PD has released the crime scene.”

“True. That being the case you still think it’s a good idea to go in in uniform?”

Simon paused at the door and glanced at him. “We can’t be strolling around Water City without wearing something. The uniforms may attract as much attention as the robes, but at least they’ll know we’re watchmen. I don’t think they’re as likely to fuck with us.”

They began to hear murmured comments from the crowd of gawkers about mutants as soon as they surfaced. Several people gasped when they shot out of the water and landed on the edge of the platform, but apparently Simon’s assumption was correct. The entire crowd fell silent and seemed to take two steps back when they saw the uniforms they were wearing.

Ignoring them and the workers scowling at them for interrupting their work, Simon and Ian slowly walked the platform, scanning what little debris remained from the explosion. They’d combed the perimeter and began working their way in when Simon kicked aside a segment of wallboard and noticed a surprising regular crack beneath the flooring. Crouching, he pushed the rubble aside and studied the square.

Ian glanced around until he found a piece of wood that looked thin enough to wedge it into the crack. When it broke, Simon surged to his feet and approached the salvagers. “Any of you have a pry bar?”

After staring at him in antagonistic silence for several moments, one of the men reluctantly stepped forward. “I’ve got one. What do you need?”

Simon led him to the panel and pointed it out. Dropping to his knees, the man worked the pry bar in and worked it around until he finally managed to lift the panel. All three of them stared down into the dark hole beneath it.

“You ever seen a hatch like this in a house platform?” Simon asked the worker.

“Not like this,” the man said. “There’s usually a crawl space for getting to the pipes and duct work, but it ain’t usually more’n two to three feet.”

“I’ll check it out,” Ian volunteered.



Moving to the metal rungs set into one side of the tunnel, he tested the first few, discovered they were unstable and made his way down the hole carefully. He was back ten minutes later. "It goes all the way out the bottom."

"So it's access to the house—or was. I'm not sure what the point was," Simon said slowly. "They could've planted the electronic surveillance before Anna moved in."

Ian shrugged. "Cavendish had an escape tunnel in the fortress. Maybe he just likes to make sure there's a backdoor nobody knows about?"

"Maybe."

They closed it again, finished their survey and moved from the platform to the sidewalk of the house adjacent, watching the salvagers finish up and tug the platform away.

"You young fellas friends of Dr. Blake's?"

Simon glanced down at the owner of the creaky voice and saw an elderly woman. It flickered through his mind that he'd seen her when they arrived, standing among the other gawkers. "We are."

"She ok?"

Some of the tension eased from him. "She's in protective custody."

The woman sniffed a little contemptuously. "In jail, you mean?"

Annoyance flickered through Simon. "No. I mean we have her in a safe house where we can be sure she won't be kidnapped again."

The old woman looked him up and down suspiciously. He more than half expected a snide comment about them being mutants. She surprised him. "I guess I may as well give you fellas her stuff, then. You can take it to her?"

Simon exchanged a look with Ian. "We can."

She turned and hobbled away and he saw she was heading toward the house that had been directly behind Anna's. Exchanging a curious look with Ian, they followed her.

"Wipe your feet before you come in."

Amusement flickered through Simon. "Yes, ma'am. We're still a little damp."

"Well, don't be sittin' on my furniture then! You may as well come on back here. This stuff's too heavy for me to be pickin' up anyway."

Shrugging, intrigued despite themselves, they followed her all the way through the house and out onto a screened in porch. The odor of burned materials wafted to them as soon as they stepped out.

"Don't know if any of it's any good. Couldn't get the smell of smoke out of it, but I figured she'd want to look at it herself."

Simon and Ian approached the pile and stared down at it. He didn't recognize any of it as Anna's, but it had clearly been taken from the fire. "You collected this from Anna's place?" he asked dubiously, struggling with the fact that the old woman had removed it from a crime scene.

"Some of it. The damned cops was haulin' everything off as fast as they could and I figured there weren't no tellin' if she'd ever get any of it back or not. So I waited until they wasn't lookin' and picked up what I seen that looked like it might still be good. Most of it landed in my yard, though, when the house blew up, some of it on my roof or the roofs of some of the other houses. I paid a boy that does some work for me from time to time to get the stuff off my roof and he brought me a few things he found."

Simon couldn't decide if he was more horrified that the old woman had removed

things from the crime scene or more amused—or excited. “The cops didn’t check out your roof for debris?”

“Well, I’d done got it all before they thought about it. They was too busy trolling up and down the water lookin’ for stuff to think about the roofs till the next day.”

“Ma’am,” Ian said hesitantly. “You know this is part of an ongoing investigation, don’t you?”

She looked at him indignantly. “It’s hers. Poor thing didn’t hardly have nothin’ left!”

Simon chewed his lower lip. “Do you have anything we could put it in to take it with us?”

“I’ll see what I can find.”

Simon and Ian crouched down and picked through the pile while they were waiting. Simon was of the opinion that it should all go in the trash by the time they’d looked it over, but, as the woman had said, it was Anna’s. She at least deserved the chance to look at it and decide for herself.

“You might as well take these, too,” the old woman informed them when she came out again, carrying several bags that looked like the sort for disposing of garbage and a bowl of some sort of fruits or vegetables that he didn’t recognize.

“What is it?” he asked curiously.

“Damned if I know, but I figured she grew it. She spent all her time in that greenhouse of hers. Nastiest tasin’ shit I ever tried. I cooked a couple, but they was so salty it turned my stomach.”

Neither the smell nor the appearance was really appetizing either, Simon thought wryly, wondering if they were over ripe and rotting. Most of them were pretty banged up. “I guess they rained down in your yard,” he said with a trace of amusement.

“Mine and everybody else’s! Took me the best part of two hours to gather them up. The most food I’ve seen in one place in a while outside a grocer’s. Most of it was squished, though, or burned. I just saved the best lookin’ ones.”

“I’m sure Anna will appreciate it,” Simon said a little doubtfully. “We’ll take these to her, too.”

“I guess you may as well take the seed, too. I’ll get it from my greenhouse.”

“There’s seed?”

“Of course! I told you I collected these all over the place. I didn’t see no sense in throwing the seed away just because the vegetables wasn’t no good to eat. I figured I might grow some myself, but I didn’t have no luck. Couldn’t get it to grow for nothin’. I ‘spect they ain’t no good, but I don’t throw nothin’ away when I ain’t sure, if you know what I mean!”

He was beginning to. He studied her speculatively when she returned with the seed. “I don’t suppose you saw anything ... strange the night of the explosion?”

“Course I did! I told the cops, too, but they didn’t never come back. They told me they was goin’ to, but I knew they wasn’t. Kept lookin’ at each other while I was tellin’ them—like I didn’t know they was suggestin’ I was just a crazy old bat! *Ignored* me when I tried to call and report it before it happened!”

“Would you mind telling us?”

She shrugged. “No, but we’re gonna have to go inside so I can sit down. My joints hurt if I stand up too long. When I sit down too long, too,” she muttered. “It’s hell

gettin' old."

"You think she knows anything?" Ian asked doubtfully when she'd left.

Simon had been staring at the house absently. At that, he glanced at Ian. "She ran circles around the Water City PD and she can barely hobble," he said dryly. "There's at least two pieces of the device used to blow up Anna's house in this pile. If we can match it to what we discovered at Cavendish's island, we have a tie-in between the two cases. Let's go find out what other little treasures Anna's nosey neighbor has for us, shall we?"

She had refreshments waiting for them when they reached her living room.

Simon and Ian both looked at the little sandwiches uncomfortably.

"You shouldn't have gone to so much effort," Simon said.

She waved it away. "In my day, we always offered guests refreshment, even if there wasn't hardly nothin' in the house. I'm too old to change now."

Shrugging, they settled on the couch across from her, studying the sandwiches and the brown beverage she'd served with it a little uneasily. "That's iced tea," she informed them. "Don't guess you have that down under."

"No, ma'am," Ian responded, but took a sip. "It's good, though."

"What's this on the bread?" Simon asked curiously.

"Pimentos and cheese. I grow the peppers myself."

"You said you'd tried to call in a report before the house blew up?"

"Yeah, well. I knew they wouldn't listen to me. They never do."

Ian and Simon exchanged a look.

"Don't you two go actin' like I'm off my rocker! I ain't got nothin' much to do, you know. Ain't able to do what I want to, so I watch other people. Nosey. Never thought I'd turn into a nosey old neighbor, but I get bored. Got me a spot out near the viaduct where I can see the houses all the way around my place. I don't sleep too good, so I go out there sometimes at night where it's cool and quiet."

"Anyway, I was out there that night. Saw that fella come skulkin' up the waterway and tie up behind Dr. Blake's place. He didn't make no move to get out, so I just sat real still and watched him, tryin' to figure out what he was up to."

"Did you recognize him?"

"Not right off. He was dressed all in black, like somebody that didn't want to be seen. My eyes ain't too good anymore, but after he got out and started across her lawn, I recognized him. It was the fella that had been posin' as her assistant."

Simon frowned. "Explain that."

"Which part?"

"You said he was posing as her assistant? How do you know that?"

"Don't, but he didn't look like no scientist type to me. Some people's got brains, some got beauty, but there ain't too many got both. He was a good lookin' fella. Besides that, he didn't look all paunchy or soft and white like somebody that spends all their time with their nose in a book or lookin' through microscopes. He just looked too fit, if you know what I mean—fine figure of a man."

"So how did you recognize him if it was too dark to see that well?"

"Like I told the cops. I been watchin' him go back and forth for weeks. You watch somebody a while, you get to know the way they move. I could see he was about the right height and build. When he took off across her yard, I knew it was him."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" Simon suggested grimly. "Do you mind if I record your statement?"

"Naw. I ramble, though."

"That's fine ... so you were sitting outside when you saw him arrive?"

"I said he slunk up. I didn't hear no motor. He just sort of glided in there and tied up."

"There isn't an ordinance against motor boats in the crossings?"

She made a rude noise. "There's ordinances against everything. Stupid bastards don't seem to have nuthin' useful to do. Most people's too lazy to pay that any attention, though. They get 'em a trollin' motor and putt to their docks. He wasn't usin' a motor. I would've heard it. That means he cut it off so he could coast in an' that means he didn't want no attention. Anyway, he wasn't comin' to see me and nobody that ain't up to somethin' creeps up to somebody's backdoor in the middle of the night."

"Then, he just sits there for the longest kind of time, studyin' somethin' he's holdin'. I couldn't tell what it was, but it was about this big." She made the form in the air with her hands.

"About the size of a reader, maybe?"

"Didn't look like one. Weren't no radio, neither. The only music I heard was comin' from Dr. Blake's. Whatever it was, was real interestin' because he studied it the whole time, didn't even look at her house—didn't notice me when I got up and went in to call the cops. When I got back out, he was still sittin' there. Then, all of a sudden, he drops the thing and bounds out of the boat. Took off toward her house. Then he stopped at the back corner, like he's waitin' for somethin'."

"I was cranin' my neck to see what it was he was waitin' to pounce on. Then I saw Dr. Blake cross the front yard to that little paddling boat she'd rented and bend down. When I looked back, he was creepin' across the yard toward her."

"Creeping?"

"Running like on his tiptoes, you know, real quiet, but movin' fast."

"How did you deduce that?"

"She didn't turn around. She didn't hear him. Liked to give me a heart attack. I hopped up and took off back in the house as fast as I could, but I cain't move too fast. Called the cops again. The bitch told me they was gonna charge me if I didn't quit callin' in false reports. I didn't know what else to do. I don't have no gun. I heard the boat start up before I could get back outside and then he took off with her. So I called the cops again, only I called the regular number instead of the emergency number. They said they'd send somebody out to check but nobody showed up until after the explosion."

"You were lucky you weren't injured," Ian commented.

"Yeah, well I woulda been if I'd been snoopin' from the front window. The explosion blew them out, but I'd gone out the back. I thought he was gonna turn and head back into the city and I might get the chance to get his tag number."

## Chapter Thirteen

As thrilled as Anna had been when she'd realized she was going to have a garden to putter around in while she was waiting for the trial to start, it had taken a while to get everything ready for the plants she would put in there and then ... nothing, nothing for so long that she'd begun to lose the excitement that had kept her spirits high so long. The information that Simon and Ian had offered to go to Water City for supplies had buoyed her until she realized that they could be walking into trouble.

It was with more relief, then, than excitement that she headed into the atrium to greet them as soon as she heard the sub bump the docking station and then the gushing sound of water as it formed an airlock and forced the water out. She watched anxiously as Simon opened the hatch and began to relay materials up the ladder, from Ian, who apparently stood at the bottom, to Caleb and then to Joshua. After studying Simon's face for a few moments to see if she could see any sign that they'd had trouble, she finally followed Joshua.

A trill of happiness went through her when she saw they'd brought the supplies promised and she set about immediately unloading the bags and placing the trays beneath the grow lights. Potting soil came next and she looked around for something to cut the bag open, grabbed the trowel and began filling the trays, trying not to think about the fact that she'd yet to see seed. Surely, she told herself, they wouldn't forget that!

She was still filling trays when Simon, Ian, Caleb, and Joshua all appeared at the door. She looked past Caleb and Joshua questioningly. "Seeds?"

Simon moved inside and crouched beside her, handing her a small paper cup filled with seeds. "Your neighbor, Mrs. Bagley, sent these to you."

Anna stared at the seeds blankly for many moments before it sank in to her that they were *her* seed and she still felt distanced by a wall of disbelief. She looked up at Simon again and then at Ian, who'd moved to crouch beside him and was holding a bowl filled with *her* fruit!

"How?" she whispered finally. "I don't understand."

Simon shrugged. "Apparently, it rained them onto her roof and lawn—threw a couple through her living room window, too."

"And she saved them for me?" Anna gasped, struggling with the excitement threatening to explode from her.

"These and a few other things she found. They aren't in very good shape, but we brought them so you could look through them."

Anna didn't know whether to cry or laugh. She did a little of both. "This is wonderful! Unbelievable! I thought I'd lost ...."

She launched herself at Simon, flinging her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly, and then leapt at Ian to hug him with equal enthusiasm, and then bounded up and hugged Caleb and Joshua, laughing and crying at the same time. "That wonderful woman! I don't know how I'll ever thank her."

Simon straightened, smiling faintly. "Well, think about it. You'll get the chance

to thank her in person. We brought her with us.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “She’s here?”

“In New Atlanta. We put her up at the hotel.”

Anna stared at him blankly. “You brought her down here and put her up at a hotel?”

“She’s a witness. She saw Paul Warner abduct you. The Attorney General’s staff is taking her statement right now.”

“Oh my god! A witness! That’s ... almost the best news yet!”

“*Almost?*” Simon asked, smiling at her a little quizzically.

“*This* is the best!” she said, chuckling as she held up the ugly vegetables they’d considered discarding. “Oh! I need seawater.”

The demand confused them all. “What do you need seawater for?” Caleb asked curiously.

“Oh, these won’t grow without it. I designed them to grow in seawater contaminated soil. I’ll have to get the soil prepared before I can see if they’re still viable. At the very least, I’ve got them and I can reverse engineer to replace the notes I lost, but it would be much better if I can present the plants and the produce when I write my paper,” she said, more to herself than them.

“I guess that’s why Mrs. Bagley didn’t have any luck growing them.”

Anna nodded, but absently. She’d gathered up the seeds and moved to the lights to study them. “I had special soil trucked in for my experiments from the fields that had been contaminated. I’ll have to see if I can recreate the conditions with seawater and the potting soil.”

“They’re sea plants?”

Anna glanced a little absently at Caleb when he asked the question. “Partly. I started with sea plants, because of course they grow in salt water, but I had to engineer something that would grow on land and produce food.”

She looked up at them and smiled. “This ugly little franken-veggie will grow in seawater contaminated soil and produce a prolific crop, but it gets even better and it’s the *most* important thing about this little plant! It draws the salt from the soil into the plant, which means after one or two growing seasons with these, the soil is restored and whatever was grown there before can flourish. Without something like this a field that’s been contaminated can be lost to generations while nature slowly leaches the salt from it. In the mean time, people are starving because they’ve lost some of the richest farming land and, in a lot of cases, it’s land used to produce their staple food.” She shrugged, a little embarrassed to make such a grandiose statement, but she knew it was true. “This little plant can change the world.”

Not surprisingly, they didn’t look like they quite knew how to take that. When she glanced around again, she saw they’d left, but she was energized by the recovery. It was still disappointing that they hadn’t been able to retrieve all of her notes, but this put her years closer to full recovery. She needed both the notes and the plant itself as proof that it worked.

Simon and Ian, she discovered when she went to the atrium in hopes of dipping water from the pool, had taken the sub and left. She spent the rest of the day carrying seawater into her greenhouse and carefully adding water to the soil and then analyzing it against what she remembered about the original soil she’d used.

Caleb met her at the top of the ladder when she climbed up to the main floor of the house. He chuckled when he got a good look at her. "Is there any dirt left in the trays?"

She gaped at him in dismay. "I've got it on me?"

He laughed outright then and walked her to the mirror in the bathroom off the living room.

She'd smeared it on both cheeks and her forehead, she discovered, probably pushing her hair out of her face. She even had dirt in her hair. She supposed that had fallen off the trowel while she was fussing with her hair.

"I need a bath."

"Want company?" Caleb asked instantly.

She turned to look at him searchingly, feeling her pulse leap despite the weariness and aching muscles from working in her greenhouse most of the day. "It wouldn't ... cause trouble?"

She saw he was already regretting the impulsive suggestion, though. He sighed in disgust. "Probably," he muttered. "Go bathe. I was just about to start supper."

"Oh! I wanted to cook some of my veggies! Could you bring them up for me? I would've brought them myself, but I couldn't figure out how to climb the ladder with the bowl."

He didn't look very enthusiastic, but he left her to bathe and went to get the bowl.

\* \* \*

Anna decided it was actually fun sharing the kitchen. There were some traffic problems at first, but when she'd finished chopping her vegetables and set them in water to soak, she merely 'assisted' Caleb.

"Did your mom teach you to cook?"

Caleb frowned. "My dad."

Surprise flickered through her, but she managed to refrain from showing it.

"You're close?"

"We were."

"Oh! I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Me, too. Simon sort of took me under his wing then so it wasn't as rough as it might've been."

Anna frowned. "How did that come about?" she asked curiously.

"He was a watchman—my dad. Simon was his partner. That was before he came up through the ranks and became High Guardian—before his father was killed."

Anna felt her belly clench. "It's that dangerous?" she asked, dismayed.

Caleb sent her a piercing look. "*Life's* dangerous these days," he said dryly, "or hadn't you noticed?"

She grimaced. "Mostly lately. Not so much before." When she saw that he was almost done frying up the fish he was cooking, she checked the time and decided her vegetables had soaked long enough. Getting up, she mixed the batter while Caleb finished up the sides he'd been cooking. "So ... Simon was your father's partner before he was yours?" she asked as casually as she could.

Caleb flicked a knowing look at her. "Does it matter?"

She sent him a blank look. "What?"

"How old he is?"

Anna felt her face redden. "Not really ... I mean not to me ... uh ... I was just curious," she stammered.

"Not curious about me?"

She smiled when she saw he was teasing. "I am. None of you really seem to want to talk about yourselves. You all know my life history and I hardly know more about any of you than I did the first time I came."

He sent her a look of innocence. "I'm an open book."

She chuckled. "No, you aren't. You seem that way, I suppose, to most people. They see you smile, and joke ... probably flirt outrageously with any female you happen across, but ...."

"But what?" he asked, crossing his arms and leaning back against the counter to watch her while she patted the vegetable chips and dropped them in her batter.

"Better stand back! These probably still have enough water to pop like crazy!"

He moved a little further. "But?"

She threw a smile at him as she very carefully placed a few chips into the hot grease he'd left. "You're ... a lot like Simon, I think. Inside."

"Those are going to taste like fish," he observed.

"They do anyway, trust me!"

He picked up the first one out of the pan, blew on it a minute, and popped it into his mouth. "Not bad. Pretty good, actually," he said, sounding surprised.

She smiled wryly. "Proof positive that you can batter just about anything and fry it and it's better."

"So ... what else have you deduced, Dr. Blake?"

She frowned at the frying chips, flipping them. "That you're good people."

He uttered a cynical snort. "How did you come to that conclusion? Because we're watchmen?"

"I'm not that naïve!" she retorted sourly. "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. There are at least as many men wearing a badge who only wear it for the power behind the shield and the benefits they can reap from it as there are good cops, maybe even more. I concluded that you're good people because you don't use your positions for self-gain or to bully other people. You could, but you don't."

"And you think you've been around us enough to know we don't?"

"I've seen enough to know you have respect. You wouldn't have it if you hadn't earned it." She sent him a sober look. "You've earned mine."

His face reddened. Trying to hide the fact that she'd made him uncomfortable, he gathered the dishes he'd cooked and set them on the table.

Ian and Simon returned as they were finishing setting the table and, although it was a rare occurrence, they all sat down together to eat.

Ian and Simon were tense, Anna noticed. She wasn't certain what it was, but they barely waited until the food had been passed around for distribution before Simon made the announcement they'd clearly been bursting to tell.

"He made a mistake," he said with satisfaction.

No one asked who. They didn't have to. Anna felt excitement waft through her. "What kind of mistake?"

Ian grinned at her. "He admitted that he'd sent Paul Warner to get you."

Anna grimaced. "I know ... and you were right. The minute I said I'd been



kidnapped, his lawyers started setting me up, trying to make it sound as if I was lying.”

“That was his fatal mistake,” Simon said with satisfaction, “admitting he’d sent Paul. Mrs. Bagley will testify that you were kidnapped. That means his admission is going to hang him.”

Anna was afraid to get too hopeful, and yet she felt a great uplifting, felt suddenly light, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. “You think she can convince the jury?”

Simon chuckled. Anna felt her pulse leap, but it went beyond her pleasure at the certainty it seemed to suggest. It lightened his entire face and made him so handsome it took her breath. “She’s something else,” he murmured with appreciative amusement, “but she’s damned convincing. Unless his lawyers really get her rattled, I think she’ll be a fantastic witness.”

“Of course,” Ian added, “his lawyers are currently battling letting her testify at all. She wasn’t introduced during discovery and they’re claiming we deliberately withheld her.”

“Because, of course, if they’d known about her, Miles Cavendish would’ve tried to disclaim any connection with Paul Warner. Of course, he couldn’t disclaim *any* connection, but he would’ve come up with something else to cover his hide. Now that he’s admitted that he sent Paul, and she’s going to testify that you were kidnapped .... It’s a nail in his coffin.”

“You think they can get her excluded?” Anna asked uneasily.

Simon sighed. “We’ll know by tomorrow, end of day. The judge is considering it.”

“What about the other evidence?” Caleb asked. “You mentioned that Mrs. Bagley had given you something with potential.”

The sparkle left Simon’s eyes. “We have chain-of-command issues. The Attorney General is concerned about trying to use it at all since Mrs. Bagley picked it up from the crime scene.”

“Did they get anything off of it?”

“Mrs. Bagley’s fingerprints and DNA,” Ian said dryly. “She tried to clean up all the things she’d found and get rid of the ‘smoke smell’ and that included those pieces. She told us she thought she’d thrown them out when she was sorting because it was clearly broken. And that she must have thrown something ‘good’ in the trash and those pieces in with the ‘good’ by mistake.”

Everyone was disappointed, not just Ian and Simon. “The worst of it is that it might’ve broken the case wide open.”

“You tied it to the bomb at the island?” Joshua asked quickly.

“We did. We also tied one of the pieces to the bomb that blew up the desalinization plant.”

“They can’t throw it out!” Caleb exclaimed angrily. “On a technicality?”

“Whoa!” Ian interjected. “He said it tied the three bombs together. We haven’t managed to tie any of them directly to Miles Cavendish. Even if we could get it in, he could still walk away from it.”

“Well that just fucking sucks!” Anna snapped angrily.

All four men turned to stare at her as if she’d suddenly grown another head. She felt her face heat. “What?”

Caleb burst out laughing. "I don't think I've ever heard you say 'fucking'!"

She shrugged. "You guys say it all the time."

"We've corrupted our little magpie!" Ian said mournfully. "Instead of chirping sweet, off-key little melodies, she's going to be cursing worse than we do."

Anna couldn't help but chuckle, but she felt her face turn redder. "Well, it *does* suck!"

"It does," Simon said, amusement threading his voice.

\* \* \* \*

Anna headed back to court the following day. She was a nervous wreck before they ever left because she knew she would be called upon to testify. The trial had begun the week before, but except for the one appearance when she'd been called to testify that she'd been kidnapped, she hadn't been required to be there.

It didn't help that she still wasn't used to the sub. She thought it *might* be something she could get used to—over time—but it was still new enough that every creak, every noise she couldn't readily identify, sent a shaft of fear through her.

She tried meditation, not merely to calm her nerves from the sub trip, but to prepare herself for her court appearance. The whole situation unnerved her, but having to perch on a seat in full view of the entire courtroom, which was packed, was the hardest thing to endure. It made her feel horribly exposed and vulnerable and, unfortunately, her father's lawyers were like sharks. Despite her best efforts to appear calm and collected during that first bout, it seemed they'd caught the scent of 'blood', realized what pure agony it was for an introvert like herself to find herself the center of attention. They'd managed to rattle her enough she'd begun to stammer, almost broke down and cried.

They weren't going to do it to her again, she decided. She wasn't going to *let* them push her until she made another mistake.

She had just enough time to sit in the audience to grow completely relaxed, almost bored, when she was called. Her stomach instantly tied itself into a knot. Her knees felt like rubber as she got up and headed toward the front of the courtroom.

They reminded her that she was still under oath and then the defense came out swinging. It was clear what the name of the game was today—recover the ball they'd dropped.

"You said before that you felt as if Paul was a threat to you and that you were being kidnapped."

Anna nodded.

"Answer, please."

"Yes."

"Why did you feel that way?"

Anna's mind went perfectly blank. "Because he worked for my father."

The lawyer frowned, made a great pretense of thinking things over and reading back over her testimony. "Why did you feel threatened by your father? Had he done anything to make you feel threatened? Said anything?"

It was a trap. Everything he said was a trap, she reminded herself. "I'd been informed by the watchmen when they took me in to question me that my father was the leader of a terrorist organization. They believed he was responsible for the bombing in New Atlanta that killed so many ...."

He cut her off. "So, you're saying it wasn't anything specific that your father

did?"

"He killed a lot of people," Anna said blankly.

The lawyer gritted his teeth. "Your honor, I'd ask that this witness be classified as hostile and request that she answer with a yes or no."

The judge looked him over. "Be more careful with your answers, Dr. Blake."

Breathe, Anna! Deep breath in! Slowly exhale! "Let me rephrase that question, Dr. Blake. Your response, your state of mind, was entirely due to what you'd been told by the watchmen, not because of anything you knew, personally, to be the truth."

Anna frowned. "You're suggesting they lied to me?"

The lawyer looked like he was going to explode.

"Sorry!" Anna said hastily. "I'm just not sure what the question is or what you're getting at."

The lawyer eyed her malignantly. "Are you involved with any of the watchmen?"

"Involved how?"

"Romantically."

Anna felt the blood leave her face and then rush back. It hit her like a ton of bricks, so suddenly she wondered why she hadn't realized it before, that *this* was why she'd felt as if all of them were holding her at arm's length. They were afraid they would be accused of influencing her. She dragged in a calming breath, feeling strangely relieved by the realization, not further unnerved. "No."

"You aren't romantically involved with any of the men that have had you in 'protective' custody?"

He was hinting at something. She wasn't sure what, but he knew something and he was setting a trap for her. "No."

He sprang it. "You've never been intimate with any member of the group of watchmen?"

"In what way?" Anna asked, feeling her belly tie itself into a knot.

"Sexually."

That was it! The bastards had video of her having sex with Caleb! She felt her face redden. "Oh! Well, yes. I had sex with Caleb."

The lawyer stared at her. "You just said you weren't romantically involved with any of them, Dr. Blake."

"I'm not. I said we had sex." She didn't dare glance directly at Caleb, but even in her peripheral vision she could see that he was just as uncomfortable as she was.

"And wasn't it your lover who convinced you that you should be afraid of your father?"

"No. I don't have a lover."

"Dr. Blake. You just admitted you'd had sex with watchman Caleb Andreas!"

Anna stared at him. "A lover implies a relationship. We don't have a relationship."

"But you had sex with him?"

"Yes—once. It's called a one night stand. Haven't you ever had one?"

"Objection!" the Attorney General complained. "I think he's pursued this line of questioning long enough!"

"It goes to her state of mind!" the lawyer countered. "She already admitted that Paul Warner didn't threaten her either verbally or physically. Nor did her father. She

had to have had *some* reason to believe it was a kidnapping.”

“Which she already stated,” the Attorney General countered. “She was informed of the fact that he was the suspected leader of a terrorist organization!”

“I’ll allow it to continue, but you’re warned Mr. Lawson. Wind it up.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.”

“So, Dr. Blake, you’re saying that your ‘one night stand’ in no way influenced your acceptance and belief that your father represented a threat to you?”

“Well, it *was* great sex,” Anna said, “but it happened *after* they’d told me about my father.”

The courtroom erupted into laughter.

The judge called the court to order and gestured to her to continue.

“I believed them when they told me because they are officers of the law and I saw no reason to doubt that what they’d told me was the truth. And also because I realized when they told me why my mother had run from him. She was afraid of him. *That* was why I was afraid of him.”

“Judge!” Mr. Lawson said angrily.

The judge shrugged. “You introduced her state of mind, Mr. Lawson.”

“No more questions at this time, but I’d like to reserve the right to recall her.”

Dragging in a deep breath of relief, Anna got up and went back to her seat, trying to ignore the grins she encountered along the way. Caleb looked almost as red-faced as she felt, but his eyes were gleaming with suppressed laughter when she glanced at him.

Simon, Ian, and Joshua were all stony faced, but she wasn’t sure if it was from anger or if they’d also found her dilemma amusing.

She thought she’d carried it off as well as could be expected, however. It would’ve been far better if she hadn’t had to make a public admission, but she knew there’d been no way to avoid it as soon as she realized they had to have taped it.

It irritated her. She was sure that they’d told her that the listening devices and cameras were all over her house—except in her bedroom and bath, but she realized abruptly that she’d been having sex with Caleb while Joshua was checking the *rest* of the house.

They hadn’t checked her bedroom or bath!

She supposed Caleb might have simply decided not to tell her because he knew it would upset her more, but it was more horrifying *after* the fact, damn it! She’d thought she had at least *some* privacy!

She narrowed her eyes at the back of her father’s head. Almost as if he sensed the death glare, he turned to look at her—and then scanned the men on either side of her. There was something about the way he looked at them that chilled her to the bone.

“Not that I didn’t think you handled it well, all things considered,” Simon growled when they got home, “but it didn’t help us for you to admit that you’d had sex with Caleb.”

“They had it on tape,” Anna said tightly. “Do you honestly think I would have said anything about it at all if they hadn’t?”

Simon was taken aback. “How do you know they had it on tape?”

“I could *tell* by the way he looked at me and the direction he was leading!”

“They had her place wired from one end to the other,” Caleb said. “She’s probably right.”

"But you wouldn't know because you were in her bed fucking her instead of checking the god damned house!"

Anna exchanged an uncomfortable glance with Caleb. "We screwed up," she said placatingly. "Nobody really believed me. *You* didn't! And I *certainly* wouldn't have had sex if I'd known some pervert was watching!"

"Anyway, it was the truth! It had nothing to do with my belief that my father was a threat to me. If anybody influenced me, it was you, and it certainly wasn't because we'd been intimate!"

Simon sighed tiredly. "Well, it's done. All we can do is hope for the best."

She glanced at Ian and then looked away quickly, but not quickly enough. Simon saw the guilty glance. "Let's just hope he doesn't decide to ask you if you've made the rounds," he muttered. "I'm probably going to have to suspend Caleb ... at the very least! At this rate, I won't have any of my lieutenants left!"

"Suspend ...!"

Caleb clamped a hand over her mouth and shook his head at her.

"I could go ahead and resign," Ian said a little stiffly.

Simon glared at him. "That would look just fucking great! You might as well get up there on the stand and announce it!"

Amusement glittered in Ian's eyes when Simon had stalked off. "Don't worry about it, magpie. You handled it well. He's just worried about the trial."

Another week passed before they called Mrs. Bagley to the stand. Simon had calmed down when the Attorney General had apparently decided to simply 'overlook' the indiscretion—for the moment, anyway. He'd informed Simon *not* to suspend Caleb since he thought it would give the appearance of wrongdoing when Anna's testimony had seemed to suggest otherwise.

It was the first opportunity Anna had had to thank the lady. She hugged her effusively while they were waiting to go in. "Thank you! Thank you so much! If there's *any* way I can repay your kindness, *anything* I can do, just ask."

Mrs. Bagley beamed at her and patted her cheek. "I don't need anything else, deary! It's enough to know you appreciated the effort. Really, I had to clean up my house and yard, you know! The damned city people would've been down before I could spit and fined me for the mess!" she added irritably.

She did so well on the stand that the prosecutor looked like he wanted to kiss her when she was finally dismissed.

The Attorney General, feeling as if he'd proven his charge of kidnapping, moved on to the much harder but far more important phase of the trial, trying to convict Miles Cavendish of terrorism. His attempt on Simon's life was to be part of that process and the trial moved into a far more vicious stage as they upped the ante.

The Attorney General advised them that he thought the case was weak and that their chances were slim in getting the verdict they wanted, but he was willing to try since it seemed their best shot. At the least, he concluded, they could get the kidnapping verdict and he would spend years in jail. If they could convict him on attempted murder of a law officer and the murder of Paul Warner, he might never see the outside of a jail again.

Anna knew, though, that Simon desperately wanted him convicted for the murders of all the people who'd died in the bombing and the only way to do that was to

convict him of acts of terrorism.

And she and Caleb might have screwed that up for him just for that one moment of pleasure!

The prosecutor's certainty that he'd made his case in the kidnapping didn't matter if the 'indiscretion' undermined the rest of the case by shedding a less than flattering light on the watchmen and their work. It made them look unprofessional and that made them look sloppy, which the defense lawyers could use to further weaken an already weak case.

Simon was going to really hate her if it was her fault they lost, and what was worse, she thought the others might, too. Maybe not at first. In the beginning they would just feel too guilty about it to want to be around her and then later, they would begin to think it was her fault for enticing them to start with.

It was the way people's minds worked, she knew. When they couldn't bear their guilt, they tried to find an excuse that would allow them to forgive themselves. It was part of the survival instinct, self-defense.

She had one more chance to redeem herself in Simon's eyes, just one. She had to testify that she'd overheard her father discussing the destruction of her home and lab as part of the prosecution's case for terrorism. Somehow, she was going to have to convince the jury that she'd been part of his plan to wipe out the mutants—an unwitting pawn, but a piece of the puzzle.

## Chapter Fourteen

Anna had settled down to read for a while before she tried to sleep to see if she could 'calm the waters' enough to actually sleep. Between the trial, her anxiety about the outcome, and her struggle to come up with enough data on her project to help them, her mind rarely rested.

She'd thought everyone else had gone to bed and to sleep long since when she heard a tap on her door. Instantly alert and wild with the possibilities, she sat up and set the reader aside, struggling with her conscience.

She didn't think either Ian or Caleb would dare come to her room after the near disaster in court, but what if they had?

She had to say no, she told herself firmly. No more fooling around until the trial was over!

She was almost disappointed when she saw it was Joshua.

"Can we talk?"

She nodded a little warily and stepped back to let him in.

"I wasn't sure you still needed this, but I got it and I wanted to give it to you when Simon wasn't around—well, any of the others."

Anna stared at the chip in absolute shock. "My chip? You got it? Oh my god! Joshua!"

He shushed her. "For god's sake don't let the others know! Simon would have my ass."

"Why?" Anna asked, dumbfounded.

He grimaced. "I stole it out of the evidence room of the Water City PD," he admitted.

Anna gaped at him, horrified. "You stole ...?"

He shrugged. "I didn't see that it would do their case any good. They don't have squat. We'd all agreed to do it, but after that shit about Caleb .... Well, nobody said anything, but I figured they didn't want to do anything else that might bring us grief. I knew you'd been worried about it before you got the stuff from Mrs. Bagley, though, and I figured it was still important."

"Oh! You shouldn't have, Joshua! What if they'd caught you?" Anna gasped in dismay.

He shrugged and grinned a little sheepishly. "I'd be in shit up to my neck. That's why I decided to go it alone—so the others wouldn't be fucked if I was."

Anna very carefully placed the chip on the table by the bed and then turned to Joshua and slipped her arms around his waist. "You're a life saver ... really! From the bottom of my heart, Joshua, I thank you and if you ever do anything like that again, I'll kick your ass myself!"

He chuckled, settling his arms around her loosely. "You're welcome. Ian's right, you are a magpie! Vicious attacks when a man least expects it!"

She pulled away to look up at him and reached up to caress his cheek. "I just

wouldn't want anything to happen to you, you crazy man!"

He swallowed thickly, his expression going taut. "I should go."

He didn't move, though, and the look in his eyes was enough to encourage Anna. She shifted up to her tiptoes and brushed her lips lightly along his.

"This was a bad idea," he said, swallowing audibly.

"Do you honestly think he's going to ask me if I had sex with you?" Anna murmured.

Joshua nuzzled his face against hers. "The lawyer or Simon?"

"Either," she said after a brief hesitation, plucking at his earlobe.

"Jesus," he muttered, turning his face to meet her mouth and kissing her with a ravening hunger that sent her instantly into a drunken spiral of need.

*Jesus*, she thought as they crashed onto the mattress together. It was like unleashing a tiger. He had stripped her of her robe before she even hit the mattress. He broke from her lips as they landed, diving for her breasts.

She couldn't catch her breath. He caressed her breasts and moved from her neck to her mound as if he was consuming her. She *felt* consumed, burning up with fever, achy all over. When he surged up to kiss her again, she met him with her own hunger, disentangling her legs from beneath him and curling them around him.

It was all the encouragement he needed. He curled over her, stabbed at her blindly a couple of times and made contact, forcing an inelegant grunt from her when he drove inside of her.

She scarcely noticed. The moment he began to pummel her, first to reach bottom and then to stroke her channel in a wild rhythm, she felt herself climbing toward climax like a rocket. He climbed further, faster. She was teetering when she felt his cock jerk.

"Wait!" she gasped a little frantically, but it was already too late. She could feel his hot seed spilling into her, feel his body jerking with the force of his climax.

It set hers off, pushed her over the edge into an explosive release. She was still quaking with the hard spasms when he collapsed heavily on top of her and groaned.

"Jesus, baby! Shit!" he muttered.

"Wha?" she gasped drunkenly.

"I left you."

"No, no! Close thing, but I caught you."

Apparently, she didn't convince him. He started over. She groaned, but she wasn't in any shape to fight him off. She was too weak. She discovered she was also excruciatingly sensitive. It was pure torment to feel him tugging at her breasts, agony to feel his mouth caressing her painfully sensitive skin. She was almost relieved when he left off on foreplay and got down to business, although she was also vaguely alarmed at how swiftly he'd recovered.

Her muscles quivered when he began to stroke her more slowly than before. Pleasure wafted through her. She stroked his broad back, enjoying the slow, delicious cadence in an entirely different way than their first wild coupling and before she knew it, she felt the tension stir again.

She distrusted it immediately. She'd come. She was done.

Apparently not. He changed his cadence, began to move a little faster. Her body burgeoned once more. She seesawed between hopefulness and the absolute certainty that he couldn't bring her off again—not so quickly. That being the case, she preferred to lie



limp and let him have his way with her.

That lasted until he flipped her onto her belly and entered her again from behind, gnawing on her shoulders and her ears. Her kegels clapped. She groaned. He jerked her up onto her knees and began to pump into her faster, reaching down to pinch her clit.

Two seconds of that and she completely forgot she'd just come. She was just approaching explosion when he abruptly changed positions again. Flipping her onto her back, he shoved a pillow under her hips and began thrusting into her again, slamming the head of his cock into her g-spot.

She began to sing when the first convulsion hit her. Joshua plugged her mouth with his, spearing his tongue into her mouth in the same rhythm. She thought for a moment that she was going to fly apart. She whimpered, sucked his tongue frantically and came so hard she nearly blacked out.

She was semi-comatose when he came the second time.

He collapsed beside her, panting for breath. "Better, baby?"

"God!"

Dragging in a shuddering breath, he pulled her rag-doll limp body against his own. "Was that a yes or a no?" he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

"So help me, Joshua, if you stick that thing in me again I'm going to bite you!"

He seemed taken aback, but when he'd pulled back to study her face, he chuckled. "I didn't leave you hanging that time," he murmured in satisfaction.

"You didn't leave me hanging the first time. I think I might've pulled something when I came the second time."

"Like what?" he asked, laughter threading his voice.

"My womb!" she muttered testily. His hands felt good, though. He felt good. She thought she could drift to sleep right then. She'd almost achieved coma when he roused her.

"You didn't .... This wasn't because I brought you the chip?"

Anna frowned, trying to make sense of the question. She was vaguely insulted when she did. She might've been *more* than a little insulted if she hadn't been so out of it. It was a fortunate circumstance, because it dawned on her that it wasn't an accusation. It was a request for reassurance. She felt around blindly until she found his shoulder and patted it. "Course not, baby. I adored you before you brought the chip."

The tension eased from him. He lay strumming her back until she almost dozed off again. "You adore me, huh?"

"Dunce! Go to sleep."

His arms tightened around her. "I can't. They'd string me up by my balls if they found me in your bed."

"Then go to your bed."

She thought she'd insulted him but a moment later he was nuzzling her neck again. "As long as I'm here ...."

"I'll string you up by your balls if you start again, damn it!"

"Grouch!" he said without heat, dumping her on the bed and rolling off of it.

"Night, sweetie!" Anna muttered.

He leaned down and bit one cheek of her ass. "Goodnight, magpie."

\* \* \* \*

Anna was more than half convinced she'd dreamed the entire incident. Her sore

inner thighs, the stickiness between them, and the chip on the table near the bed were all the evidence necessary to convince her it wasn't a dream, though.

Smiling to herself, she stretched and finally got up and went to perform her morning ritual. She was tempted to grab her chip and head for the computer to check it for damage immediately, but when she smelled breakfast and heard the men's voices, she decided disappointment, or victory, could wait a little longer.

She almost regretted the decision. Joshua greeted her with a brilliant smile that she returned without thinking and breakfast went downhill from there. Discovering the moment she sat down that Simon, Ian, and Caleb were looking distinctly suspicious, she plopped her elbow on the table, shielded her face with her hand on her forehead, and focused on her coffee.

It might actually have worked if Joshua hadn't been so damned cheerful. By the time Simon and Ian got up to head first to the Watch Center and then to court, Caleb, Ian and Simon had all growled at Joshua and glared at her, and he didn't look nearly as cheerful.

She looked at Joshua with a mixture of amusement and annoyance when they finally had the kitchen to themselves.

"What the hell's with them this morning?" he growled resentfully.

"I think, maybe, it was your cheerfulness," Anna said delicately.

He looked surprised and then favored her with a heated look. "I'm always cheerful."

Shaking her head, Anna got up and moved around the table. Leaning down, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed his cheek. "Of course you are, sweetie! That's why *no one* noticed," she whispered in his ear.

His face reddened. "Well, shit!"

"It's a good thing you left last night," she said ruefully.

"Rub it in, why don't you?" he muttered without heat, then added when he saw she was leaving. "You aren't going to eat?"

She patted her stomach and sent him an arch look. "I'm still full from last night."

He stared at her blankly for a moment and then laughed a little uncomfortably.

"We have to be in court in an hour," Caleb reminded her as she passed him on her way to her lab.

"I'll be ready," she said. "I just need to check something on the computer."

He caught her waist, reeling her toward him. She looked up at him in surprise. He studied her somberly. "When this is over ...."

Anna felt her heart flutter. She waited breathlessly for him to continue.

"We need to talk."

It wasn't what she'd hoped for, but it held a promise. She was sure of that—almost. She smiled at him. "Yes."

He frowned at her a little quizzically. "Yes to what?"

"Whatever you want."

He grinned lazily. "Whatever I want, huh?"

Anna touched his face, tracing the laugh lines in his cheek. "Yes, whatever you want."

He released her reluctantly. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"I hope so."

Without a great deal of surprise, Anna discovered that the chip was damaged. She was disappointed, but she told herself she hadn't really expected it to weather such an event unscathed. The important thing was that it hadn't been destroyed completely. She had more pieces to her puzzle, enough to carve her research down to months instead of years. If the seeds Mrs. Bagley had rescued sprouted, she would have what she needed to prove her findings, but that wasn't enough. She had to be able to reproduce the sequence to make large scale production possible, and it was going to take something massive to do what she hoped to do—cure world hunger.

Armed with her files, she approached the prosecutor after court and asked to speak with him.

He looked unreceptive, but he finally agreed to give her a few minutes of his time. She supposed she could understand, under the circumstances, but his obvious reluctance put a severe damper on her own enthusiasm and confidence.

He listened to her pitch, but she left again with the distinct feeling that he hadn't been convinced—at all. Frustrated and depressed when she discovered that he'd already decided to rest his case and wasn't keen on reversing the decision, she barely even had the heart to work in her lab when she returned that afternoon.

Dismissing it with an effort, she checked on her seeds. The discovery that they'd sprouted heartened her and she headed into her lab with more determination. She'd moved all of the files from the damaged chip to the new computer the guys had gotten for her and set to work on trying to fill in the gaps on the damaged files.

She didn't sleep at all well that night despite the progress she'd made, though, and she was almost as tired when she got up as she had been when she went to bed.

It wasn't a pleasant surprise when she was called to the witness stand again. The prosecutor took her completely off guard, though, when he immediately introduced the subject they'd discussed the day before.

"We touched on your reason for being outside the night you were kidnapped, Dr. Blake," he began, "I'd like for you to tell the court what your research entailed."

"Objection! This has no bearing on the case."

"I'd like the court's indulgence to show that it does."

The judge glanced from one man to the other. "I'll give you a little leeway here, but I want to remind you that this trial has already dragged on for weeks. Come to the point."

"I'm a genetic engineer," Anna answered when the prosecutor nodded at her to continue. "I was designing a plant that would grow in seawater contaminated soil due to the fact that so much farm land has been lost to seawater contamination over the past several decades."

"Why was it so important, that night, to remove it from the house? Why did you feel *any* need to move it?"

"I discovered that the plant I'd developed had properties I hadn't suspected. The plant, while edible itself and fulfilling all of the criteria that had been established as necessary, went beyond that. It restored the soil. It had come to my attention that I was being watched and the importance of my finding was so significant that I suddenly knew that I couldn't take any chance that anything might happen to it. People are starving. This plant could, within a few growing seasons, open up vast tracts of land that would end that."

"But isn't it likely that the company that hired you to develop it was the entity that was behind surveillance?"

"I thought it extremely likely. However, it had also come to my attention that my father was subsidizing my research and I didn't trust my father."

"Objection!"

"Tighten it up Mr. Steele," the judge responded.

"But you were intercepted and taken before you could secure the data in a safe place?"

"Yes. Paul appeared and told me he was taking me to my father. Despite my suspicions, I was still shocked and appalled when he blew up my house."

"Did he indicate why he'd blown it up?"

"He didn't, but my father did. The first thing he asked was if Paul had 'taken care' of the evidence."

"So he ordered Paul to blow the house?"

"I didn't hear him order it, but his question seemed to indicate that he did."

"He ordered the house blown up, that he owned, and one has to assume that he also realized that it would destroy your research that he had paid for. Why do you think that is?"

"Objection! She couldn't possibly know what Miles Cavendish was thinking! This calls for speculation!"

The judge looked at the lawyer hard for several moments and then the hopeful prosecutor. Anna held her breath.

"You'll get to cross examine. I don't especially care for the speculation, but I'm curious as to why he would do it myself."

"Go ahead, Dr. Blake. Answer."

"Paul knew Simon and Ian—or at least some of the watchmen had been keeping an eye on me. He tried to run them down with the boat when we left. My father also knew. My first impression was that it was an attempt to blame the incident on the mutants."

"But you revised that?"

"No. I didn't understand, then, what the impact could be. I thought it was Simon and Ian specifically that he meant to take the blame. When my father asked if Paul was sure that he'd taken care of the evidence, I realized that he was aware that I had concluded my research and the scope of it. It was worth a fortune to him if marketed, but he destroyed it. When I began trying to understand why he would deliberately destroy something with so much potential for wealth, then I realized that if it became known that mutants had destroyed a plant that held such promise, everyone would turn against *all* of the mutants."

Anna braced herself when the prosecutor returned to his seat and the lawyer came after her.

"What did you say your area of expertise was, Dr. Blake?"

"Genetic engineering."

"Not ... psychology?"

"No."

"And yet you profess to know not only what was going through your father's mind, but also how everyone would react if it was proven that mutant terrorists had

destroyed a plant that might or might not have been a new food source?"

"Is there a question there?"

"How do you account for your ... perception?"

"Food riots," Anna said succinctly. "In the past several decades there've been dozens of riots and each time thousands of people were killed before the riots were put down. Starving people are dangerous."

Irritation flickered across his face. "How did you arrive at the conclusion that that was your father's motivation?"

"The rumors arose almost immediately that it was mutants who'd blown up my house and they were started by Humans for Humanity—the organization my father freely admits he is the head of."

He decided to try a different tact. "You are published, Dr. Blake?"

"Yes," Anna said tightly, realizing her damned papers were about to bite her in the ass, again.

"These papers all pertain to genetically engineering food to feed the poor, yes?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it true that you also deplored, in these same papers, the genetic mutation of humans?"

"It is."

"And yet you accuse your own father of having so much hatred for mutants that he's willing to throw away thousands, possibly millions of dollars, just to create an insurrection to kill them when you are on record as despising them yourself?"

"There is *no* record that I despise mutants, because I don't. There are many indications that my father does, because he has lobbied repeatedly against their rights as human beings, stating that they aren't, that as soon as they allowed themselves to be genetically altered they ceased to be human."

"And you know this how?"

"Because I looked it up. It's a matter of public record."

"Let's go back to your statement that your father argued that mutants weren't human."

Let's don't!

He strolled back to his table and unearthed one of the papers. He presented it to her. "What does it say there?"

"What is that?" the judge asked.

"Pardon. One of Dr. Blake's papers. It is your paper?"

"One of them, yes."

"What does it say about halfway down?"

"Genetically altering humans is a threat to humanity in that ..."

"That's enough." He smiled at her triumphantly and strolled back to his seat. Anna was sorry she couldn't put her foot up his ass.

The prosecutor stood up. "May I cross examine the witness?"

The judge nodded.

"I'd like to hear the entire statement, Dr. Blake. Will you please read it?"

Relief flooded her. "Genetically altering humans is a threat to humanity in that there are no guidelines for the safety of those who have volunteered for the procedure and there have been no long term studies done on the subject to prove that it is safe. In

the past, this never would have been allowed and it may be discovered, too late, that these procedures are ultimately harmful. At the very least, it has the potential of dividing the human race in their natural evolutionary paths and could lead to social disorder. It is far safer to focus on genetically engineering food to feed the starving.”

She was so weak with relief when she was dismissed that it was all she could do to stand up and walk back to her seat. She didn't glance at any of the men. They'd been at pains since the trial began to maintain the appearance of 'professionalism' which meant lack of emotion and she doubted that she would be able to tell what they thought about her testimony. Beyond that, it had taken far more out of her than she'd thought it would and on top of that, she wasn't at all sure she'd made the point she'd been struggling so hard to make.

She wanted to escape. She wrestled with a sense almost of suffocation while the lawyer made his closing statement and the prosecutor made his. When the jury filed out, she leapt to her feet and led the way out.

To her dismay, she discovered no one was in any hurry to leave. Instead, she was parked on a hard bench while they paced, waiting to see what the jury would decide. When it was eventually announced that the jury hadn't reached a conclusion and deliberation would continue the following day, they finally trooped down to the sub and she was allowed the retreat she'd been hoping for for hours.

No one seemed inclined to talk, but Anna was so focused on her own anxiety, she barely noticed and when she did she figured they were as on edge with the waiting as she was. Tension was certainly high in all of them due to their doubts about the verdict. She began to get an inkling that they weren't exactly happy with her after the second day of waiting for the jury to decide, though. By the third, she was positive that they weren't just on edge about the verdict. They were coolly distant—to her. It was *her* they weren't talking to. They were introspective. They didn't seem inclined toward idle conversation at all, but were definitely going out of their way to avoid talking to her—to avoid her period.

As soon as she noticed that, she began to wonder why. Try though she might, however, she couldn't think of anything she'd said or done that would explain the way they were behaving. It wasn't anger, exactly, but she was definitely getting the cold shoulder.

The discovery diverted her almost completely from the wait for the verdict in the trial. She'd been looking forward to a conviction because her father *needed* to be removed from society where he could cause no more harm. She'd also been looking forward to it, though, because she'd been certain that that was all that stood between her and what she'd realized she desperately wanted—the romantic relationship the lawyer had accused her of.

She lusted over them. She had from the first and she would've been willing to settle for being their lover if she hadn't begun to feel like they wanted more than that. Once that seed had taken root, she couldn't ignore or dismiss it and after a very little while of considering it she hadn't wanted to.

It was what she wanted. She was positive. She still thought it was scary living in the sea. She still worried that a relationship and children would severely restrict her goals as a scientist. She still wasn't used to their customs. She still harbored a lot of doubts about managing to function in a household so different from anything she'd ever

known, let alone being able to provide them with what they needed and expected from her, but she knew she wanted to try. She knew what she felt was more than desire for four very attractive men. She respected and admired them for who and what they were and because she did, she'd begun to care for them too much to allow any obstacle, real or imagined, to stand between her and what she wanted.

She just didn't know how to handle the one she'd run smack in to that seemed to have sprung up out of nowhere. She was angry and afraid and the outcome was too important to her to blunder blindly through the maze.

Were they waiting for her to ask them, she wondered? Were they angry because she hadn't made the first move and suggested they stay together?

That didn't seem to fit in with their customs, but then again nothing about her situation did. She hadn't decided to come. She hadn't chosen to announce her intentions by placing herself on the marriage market.

Should she do that, she wondered? The idea unnerved the hell out of her, though. She knew if she did that, that anyone who had no woman and was interested could bid.

What if nobody did? Wouldn't that be the most humiliating thing imaginable?

What if a *lot* of men did, but the ones she wanted didn't?

She didn't have to take anyone only because they'd bid, but it was almost as disturbing to think of having to turn them away as it was to think nobody might offer.

She couldn't do that. She thought she would get used to most of their customs in time—just not that one.

Should she risk rejection and total humiliation and inform them that she'd decided they suited her and she wanted to play house permanently? Pitch a screaming fit and demand to know why everybody was suddenly acting like she was a leper when they'd been behaving before as if they were just *waiting* the chance to jump her?

Had she been completely wrong about everything? Concluded all the things she had because it was what *she* wanted, not anything they'd hinted at?

Caleb had hinted at it, though, hadn't he? What else could he have meant? She'd been so certain that it was only their anxiety about the trial that was holding them back and, as soon as it was over, things would change.

Well, they had and it wasn't even over yet, just not the way she'd expected or hoped!

If they'd just give her a *hint* of what was bothering them, damn it, she might have some chance of working through it! She couldn't seem to work up the nerve to bring the situation to a head, though, to demand what she'd been tried and convicted of. She was too afraid she wouldn't be able to talk her way through it and she'd lose. Even when an opportunity finally fell in her lap, it took all she could do to seize it.

She'd been heading toward the bathroom for a shower when she met up with Simon in the hall outside coming from the shower. It was one of those disconcerting moments when one meets up with a person one can't seem to get past. They 'waltzed' matching each other move for move as they approached until they deadlocked in the middle of the hall and stared at each other with a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment.

Simon had already begun to step aside to let her pass when it hit her that they were completely alone in that part of the house, that she could at least reduce the discomfort level—hers—by trying to work things out one on one. She had, in fact, taken

a step to block his retreat before she'd completely made up her mind that she wanted to.

His expression was so unwelcoming when she grasped his robe that she almost lost her nerve altogether. "Why?" she managed to ask when he glanced from her hand to her face.

Something flickered in his eyes. "Why?"

He looked so completely unapproachable then that she did lose her nerve.

Casting around in her mind a little frantically, she finally remembered something else she'd wanted to ask him.

She swallowed with an effort. "I never understood why you told me you were sorry that day," she said shakily.

She could see his brief search for the memory in his eyes.

"At my father's island when you kissed me?"

His gaze flickered to her mouth and then back to her eyes. To her surprise some of the tension and anger seemed to leave him. "I realized I'd misjudged you," he said slowly.

She hadn't expected that. It threw her into turmoil. Gladness flickered through her and yet what could she do with it? How did it help her now?

Not at all. She released her hold on him, looked away. "Oh."

He touched her jaw, forcing her to look at him again. A jolt went through her when she found him waiting only for the turn of her head to cover her lips with his own and then a far more powerful one when she felt the heated pressure of his lips. She dragged in a shuddering breath as he parted her lips with the thrust of his tongue, afraid to move at all for fear he'd pull away. His leisurely exploration of her mouth was in stark contrast to the state of total disorder he'd thrown her into with his first touch. The moment his taste and scent invaded her, desperation exploded inside of her, a savage yearning that made her tremble with the effort to keep from grabbing him and demanding more, instantly.

Fear stabbed into her when she felt him shift and vanished when she felt his arms settle around her and tighten, bringing her closer. She curled her fingers into his robe, straining to pull herself closer still. She'd wanted this—him—forever it seemed.

*Don't stop*, she thought pleadingly. *Please don't stop!*

He broke the kiss almost on the thought and lifted his head. Disappointment filled her, so vast a sea of it that she felt the urge to cry.

"Anna."

She opened her eyes with an effort to look at him. "Don't stop, Simon, please?"  
*We can fight later!*

His gaze flickered over her face. Without a word, he led her into her room. It flickered through her mind that he meant to shove her in and shut the door behind her. Instead, he discarded his robe and pulled hers off.



## Chapter Fifteen

Anna shivered as Simon explored her with his gaze and the light touch of his hand, fighting the urge to cover herself, searching his face anxiously to assure herself that he was satisfied with what he saw and touched. To her relief, he gathered her to him and carried her to the bed, urging her to lie down on it. She was almost sorry she had when she scrambled on to the mattress and sprawled out in wanton display. He merely stared at her for several moments. Just about the time she began to cave in, he joined her, stretching out along her side, caging her upper body between his arms and leaning down to pluck at the tender points of her breast with his lips.

*No, she screamed inwardly! Give it to me! Now! Just fuck me! I don't care if I come or not! I have to feel it!*

She was too tense and anxious to come, she told herself. She just wanted to hold him inside of her, to wrap herself in him. That was what she wanted, needed desperately.

She nearly blacked out when he finally stopped teasing her nipples and sucked one into his mouth. Fire poured through her, arrowing toward her lower belly like a lightning bolt and making the muscles in her sex spasm frantically. She clamped her arms around his head, torn between the certainty that she couldn't bear the intense sensations flowing through her and the fear that he'd stop.

She'd just decided she was going to melt into a puddle of sheer bliss when he released the nipple he'd been teasing and moved to its twin. The jolt to her system was harsher that time, sending her spiraling closer to unconsciousness, but it also narrowed her focus so tightly to the pull of his mouth and the electric current flowing from her breast to her womb that it was as if nothing else existed in the world.

"Simon," she whispered, in awe, in disbelief that he was touching her, making love to her when she'd despaired that he ever would.

He lifted his head, studied her face for a long moment and moved upward. There was more hunger in the feel of his mouth, a hint of impatience that telegraphed through her mind and set her fires to blazing higher. She kissed him back, trying to communicate her desperation.

He broke from her lips and explored her face and throat, pebbled her skin with the heat of his breath on her ear and worked his way to her breasts again.

*Torture me,* she thought a little wildly.

He did, exploring every patch of skin downward to her knees. *Not that,* she thought in despair when she felt him move her limp legs apart! If he touched her with his mouth there it was all going to be over for her and she'd decided she wanted to die from the torment he'd been inflicting on her.

She held her breath as she felt him bend toward her and bite lightly on the inside of her thighs.

*Alright! That,* she changed her mind!

He pushed her thighs wider and moved over her, settling his hips between them. She clutched at him, digging her fingers into his flesh. "Simon! Please!"

A faint tremor rippled along his big body. She felt the brush of his hand as he slid it between them and aligned his body with hers and then the pressure as he deepened the connection, eased and then pushed again.

Torture! The anticipation was killing her! She heaved against him, trying to envelop his flesh faster, but despite the fact that her body had diverted so much moisture for him that she felt like she was dehydrating, he stretched her so tautly with his girth there was no smooth, swift entry to be had—for either of them. He settled his upper chest against her, moving his hands to her hips to hold her with his next thrust. It broke the deadlock. He sheathed himself fully, and she panted with a mixture of relief and heady anticipation as he withdrew slowly and thrust again.

*Simon*, she thought, summoning an image of his slow glide in and out of her. Her muscles clenched frantically around him in response and she felt her body burgeon toward release. She fought it. The feel of him was a sheer delight. She wanted to just hold him inside of her forever.

There was no battling the tide, though. It felt too good and her body could only contain so much pleasure and no more. It exploded all too soon in glorious waves of ecstasy that tore little gasps of delight from her and then, even as she hit her peak and drifted toward Earth again, she felt his climax. She tightened her arms around him, holding him closer, relishing the pleasure he found in her almost more than she'd enjoyed her own.

Reluctant to give up the moment, she stroked her hands over him, enjoying his solidness, the feel of his powerful muscles beneath her palms. Wariness surfaced when he finally stirred, the realization that they hadn't settled anything.

She didn't want to risk an argument, not now! She'd waited so long to feel his touch. She'd wanted it so much. She just wanted to enjoy it.

There was no more stopping the intrusion of the real world than there had been any possibility of staving off her pleasure to enjoy it longer. He rolled off of her, tucking her snugly against his length. She relaxed fractionally when he began to caress her with slow strokes of his hand but she realized fairly quickly that tension had begun to gather in him.

He was going to ask her ... something, and whatever it was on his mind made him grow cool against her and stiff.

"Anna?"

"Mmm?" she murmured warily, wondering if she could avoid any possibility of a confrontation by feigning sleep.

"Will you ...? Would you consider taking the change?"

Anna's heart leapt from her chest and into her throat so fast she felt like she might choke to death. She'd already jerked away to stare at his face in disbelief when it abruptly hit her that she couldn't—not right now. "Yes, but ...."

He scanned her face. "But?"

"I can't right now. Later ...."

He leapt out of the bed so fast she didn't know what had happened until she looked around and discovered he'd bent down to snatch his robe from the floor. She was still gaping at him in disbelief when he threw a furious, contemptuous scowl at her and stalked out.

She couldn't *believe* he'd abandoned her without even giving her the chance to

explain! "Wait!"

Scrambling from the bed, she grabbed her own robe and dashed after him. He was already at the top of the ladder when she reached the atrium. "Simon! Wait!"

He didn't even look back. Anger surged through her, completely wiping out her reservations. Grasping a rung of the ladder, she climbed up behind him and stalked after him. She caught up with him in the living room. Caleb, Ian, and Joshua were sitting on the couches. When Simon turned to glare at her accusingly, they scowled at her equally accusingly. It might have wilted her resolution at any other time, but she was so angry it only made her angrier.

"I said I can't right now!" she snapped. "I didn't say I wouldn't!"

"But you don't actually have any intention of it, do you?" Simon snarled.

She gaped at him for a moment and glanced at the others. "This is about that damned paper I wrote, isn't it?" she demanded as it finally clicked in her mind that they distrusted her. Simon was *sorry* he'd misjudged her but he *still* didn't trust her? He *still* believed, they obviously *all* still believed, that it bothered her that they were mutants! "Did you even listen, damn it?"

"We heard," Caleb said tightly. "Everybody heard."

"I said I *couldn't* make the change right now, not that I wouldn't, not that I didn't want to, damn it!"

"Why can't you?" Simon demanded angrily.

"Because I never *once* used birth control with any of you!" she snapped. She was about to inform them that she couldn't because she could be pregnant. She revised it. She didn't know *why* the lie leapt to her mind, but it did, and it was out before she could rethink it. "I *can't* because I'm pregnant, damn it! If I was the bigot you all seem to think I am, don't you think I would've used birth control? Don't you think I would've been worried you might get me pregnant? Instead of hoping you would?"

The dark scowls slid off their faces until they were all staring at her with blank, slack looks of stunned surprise.

"Who's ...? Who ...?" Joshua managed after a moment, sounding like a hoot owl.

Guilt hit her for telling the lie. Even though she knew it *could* be true, hoped it was, she didn't *know* that she was and worse, *if* she was, she didn't know 'Who? Who?!' She folded her arms over her chest. "I don't know 'who-who', damn it!" she snapped. "But one of you *certainly* did! And I didn't hear anybody objecting to making a baby, so you can all just damned well take responsibility!"

The men all exchanged questioning looks and then turned to study her speculatively.

Simon cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I wouldn't shirk my responsibility," he said a little stiffly.

"I certainly wouldn't," Ian said.

"It's settled then!" Caleb said, surging up from the couch. "We need to head down to the city hall and tie this up before she starts showing and everybody *knows* we were dipping without tying things up properly! Comb your hair, magpie. It's standing on end. It wouldn't do to show up at city hall to get married with you looking as if you've already had the honeymoon."

Anna looked down at herself in dismay. She didn't just look like she'd just had

sex, she reeked of sex! She wasn't about to say no, though! "I need a quick shower."

"Make it a quick one. I'm going to get the sub and pull it into the airlock."

Anna had had time to consider the possible consequences of her lie by the time she'd bathed, combed the tangles from her hair, and dressed. She spent the trip from the house to city hall wavering between the desperate need to confess and the fear that they'd turn back if she did. When they'd docked, she realized she simply couldn't go through with it.

"Wait!"

They tensed and stopped to look at her.

"I don't know for sure that I'm pregnant. I just know I could be. I was trying to explain that I had to know before I could take the change. I don't want to risk losing the baby if it's possible."

They relaxed immediately. "Come on, magpie," Ian murmured, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Nobody's going to let you back out now."

"I don't want to back out."

They hadn't even finished the brief ceremony when word came that the jury had finally arrived at a verdict. Simon advised the judge to finish up quickly. She could see they were anxious to leave right then, afraid they'd miss the announcement if they took the time to load her into the sub to get to the court house. "Go!" she told them as soon as the judge had finished. "You'll miss it if you wait for me."

As disappointed as she was to miss it herself, she decided it was worth it. They grabbed her, kissed her, and passed her down until she'd made the rounds and then took off. Shrugging at the look the judge sent her, she went to wait for them in the sub, feeling her emotions peaking and dipping as if she was on a roller coaster, afraid to let her mind settle too long on any particular thing—her hope that she was pregnant, that they'd gotten the verdict they wanted, that they were going to be able to work through their differences and make their life together work.

She knew they were satisfied with the verdict as soon as they returned. It looked as if they'd all dropped years with the release of tension.

"They convicted him," Simon said with satisfaction at her questioning look.

"On what charges?" she asked breathlessly.

"All of them," Caleb answered. "The prosecutor sends his regards, by the way. He said he felt like your final testimony tilted the scales."

"They recommended the death penalty," Ian said somberly.

Anna felt her stomach fall from under her. She wrestled with it, but despite the momentary twinge of guilt that she might have been the instrument of her father's death, she felt relief, too. She might never know if he'd had a hand in her mother's death, but she felt like he had and she knew in her heart that he had certainly had a hand in the massacre in New Atlanta. If she'd had any doubts, at all, she wouldn't have done everything she could to help convict him.

She smiled at them. "Let's go home."

Simon gathered her into his arms and slowly rocked her for a moment. "Anna," he said hesitantly. "There may yet be war between the mutants and the humans. They hate us and its growing."

She pulled away to look up at him, lifting her hand to cup his cheek. "I already chose my side. And we're all human, whether they want to acknowledge it or not."

They spent their 'honeymoon' celebrating by finishing the remodeling on the new addition and, of course, thoroughly exploring each other. By the time the first blush of their union had begun to fade, there was no doubt that Anna was pregnant, but no one had brought up the subject of the change since anyway.

For her part, Anna was torn between excitement about the baby and disgust that she hadn't taken the change before she'd gotten pregnant. It was really starting to chaff her that she couldn't leave the house without the sub and the men came and went freely.

Of course, she had her greenhouse and lab to occupy her time, and the nursery she was preparing, and the men to occupy her time when they were home, but it was still irritating not to be able to simply walk out when she wanted to.

"I should take the change as soon as the baby's born," she told Simon as they lay together in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

He stroked her rounding belly restlessly. Nuzzling his face against her temple, he kissed her. "You don't have anything to prove, magpie."

She liked the way they all called her magpie now. It always made her feel like smiling. "I know. I want to. I was just thinking that would be the best time. We couldn't have sex then, so I wouldn't have to worry about endangering a pregnancy."

"Sex, sex, sex," he murmured lazily. "Is that all you ever have on your mind, woman?"

Anna flicked him a chiding look. "Can I help lusting over you when I'm surrounded by the sexiest men in the world?"

"In the world, huh? Not the territory?"

She rolled over to nip at his throat. "The universe."

"I think can I live with lust ... for now."

Anna lifted her head and studied his face. "I love you, Simon."

His gaze sharpened. He threaded his fingers in her hair and drew her closer for a light, lingering kiss. "Do you?"

Disappointment flickered through her, but she dismissed it. "You had me with that first, dangerous scowl you bent on me," she added teasingly.

He chuckled. "What about the others?"

She bit his chin. "There's room for everyone."

"All four of us? At once?"

It took her a moment to realize what he was suggesting. "My god! I don't have four holes!"

He burst out laughing. "You said you could love us all at once," he reminded her.

"Not *that* way!" She thought about it. "Actually, I've sort of had this fantasy for a while of having a cock in every orifice—at one time."

His cock stood to attention. "That's one fantasy we won't be trying any time soon," he said dryly.

"Two then?"

He rolled with her, pinning her to the bed. "No!"

"Please? Why not?"

"For one thing, you're pregnant!"

"Afterwards, then."

"I'll think about it, but I'm telling you right now the others won't go for it!"

"Joshua already said he'd think about it," Anna said with satisfaction. "Caleb,

too.”

“What did Ian say?” he asked curiously.

“‘Hell fucking no!’ But he’s thinking about it.”

“Pervert!” he said without heat. “You used to be so shy! Always blushing.”

“That was because of all the wicked thoughts that ran through my mind every time I looked at you.”

He dipped his head to kiss her lingeringly. “That’s what I’ve always loved about you, magpie,” he murmured, “your mind.”

\* \* \* \*

“Uh ... guys! I think it might be time to go!” Anna called out a little frantically.

Four heads appeared in the aperture above her that had been the entrance to their home before the modular addition was attached. They stared at her in blank-faced shock as she stood hunched over below them, dripping water and holding her stomach.

“My water broke.”

That galvanized them. Unfortunately, it didn’t lend them any coordination. The four of them scrambled toward the new stairs in a blind panic, slamming in to one another. Simon bounded over the first half, bumped into Caleb and rolled and bounced down the rest of the stairs. Joshua dove over them, hung his toes on Simon’s shoulder as he was trying to get up and sprawled to a halt at her feet, and Ian didn’t even make it to the stairs. He fell off the landing, but managed to land on his feet.

Anna was still trying to decide if any of them had broken anything when they leapt up and ran toward the sub, racing down the ladder. After staring open-mouthed at the empty room for a moment, she hobbled to the hatch when she heard the engines revving. “Hey!” she yelled down at them. “A little help here!”

“What the fuck are you doing up there?” Simon demanded. “Never mind!”

Climbing up the ladder again, he scooped her off her feet with one arm and twisted around to hand her down to Ian.

“I think it’s coming,” Anna gasped as Ian plunked her into a seat and grabbed the shoulder harness to secure her.

“Hold on to it!” he growled.

Anna put her hand between her legs. “There’s something here,” she said shakily.

Ian froze. Jerking her robe up over her head, he checked. “Oh fuck! That’s a head!”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me!” Caleb snarled. “We haven’t even detached yet! Did anybody close the hatch?”

“I don’t think we’re going to make it to the hospital,” Anna moaned. “One of you will have to deliver it.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Simon roared. “We can’t deliver it! Hold on to it!”

“I can’t hold on to it, damn it! You’ve got emergency medical training!”

“Not in delivering babies!” Joshua said.

“Jesus! She’s right! It’s coming,” Ian said shakily. “Hurry! Damn it, magpie! How long have you been having contractions?”

“I don’t know,” Anna gasped, panting as another contraction moved off. The sub detached with a jolt that sent more pain through her and she curled around her stomach.

“I think sitting up is making the contractions come faster,” Ian said worriedly. “We need to help her lie down.”

"Five minutes!" Caleb said. "Just hold on five minutes!"

"Hold it steady. I'm going to help her lie down!"

"On the damned floor?"

"There's no other place for her to lie down!" Ian pointed out angrily.

"We're halfway there ... almost!"

"She's halfway there, too," Ian said grimly when he'd settled her on the floor and pushed her robe up to look. "I can see its face."

"It's crowned?"

"No, damn it! I can see its face!"

Almost as soon as he said it, the baby let out a thin wail. The sub rocked as the sound cut through Caleb.

"Keep it steady!" Ian bellowed as he knelt down and pushed her knees up.

"Don't push, Anna! Just breathe."

"I can't help it!" Anna wailed.

"Ok, baby. Don't cry! Push!" Ian said hastily.

He caught the slippery infant in shaking hands, stared down at the cord leading from the baby back inside, and finally leaned forward to lay the squalling infant on her belly.

"Is he ok?" Anna asked worriedly, reaching down to grasp one of the baby's flailing arms.

Ian tore his robe off hastily and bundled the baby in it. "She," he said shakily.

"It's a girl."

Anna sat up. "*A girl!*"

Ian stared down at the baby's face and chuckled. "She looks like Simon—minus the dick."

Simon moved closer to look and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Anna gasped uneasily.

"We made it!" Caleb announced. "What now?"

"Take the tube," Ian said. "We can't dock with Anna and the baby on the floor."

Caleb stared at him blankly and moved to where he and Simon were huddled together, staring at the baby. "Shit! That's Simon all over!"

"You think?" Simon asked doubtfully.

"Is she alright?"

All three of them looked at her. "Her lungs are good," Caleb announced.

"Good color, too," Ian agreed.

"All the fingers and toes," Simon said when he'd counted the tiny digits.

Anna reached for her.

Ian moved around to place the baby in her arms a little reluctantly. "She's pretty even if she does look like Simon," he offered when she smiled at the baby in delight.

Simon scowled at him. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Ian shrugged. "It's just hard to picture you as a girl."

Anna uttered a snorting laugh. "She *favors* her daddy. She's a beautiful little mermaid."

Joshua had just joined everyone crowding around her when Caleb returned with a doctor. He shooed them back while he finished up. They had to help her back into a seat and strap her and the baby in to dock.

Eventually, she made it to a room. "I could've had her at home," Anna said a little sulkily.

Simon, Caleb, Ian, and Joshua looked at her disapprovingly.

"You could've *also* waited until you got to the hospital. You almost scared the life out of all of us!" Joshua said indignantly.

Anna smiled at them a little apologetically, realizing it probably wasn't a good idea to tell them she'd thought she could finish up in the lab before she told them she was in labor. "Next time," she promised.

The day she left the hospital with their new baby, she received notification that she'd been awarded the Nobel Prize for peace for her development of food to feed the hungry.

The End