

Third in the Project Alpha series

Earth, 2133

Adrian is an Alpha—a genetically enhanced assassin—thought dead by the people who created him. Living outside the Gate, a high tech shield that protects the enclosed city from the contaminated and lawless land outside, he is the leader of the Resistance, living only to bring down the Gate and the people who sought to kill him.

Charity Caruthers is the daughter of one of the most powerful and brutal men in the inner city—the General. She risks everything sneaking outside the Gate to get a message to Adrian.

Passion explodes, ripping apart the foundations of both their lives. Charity begins to understand true sexual desire as Adrian teaches her the passion to be found in dark fantasies. Loyalties are tested and trust pushed to the limits as the final confrontation is at hand. Some will die. Some will live. And Adrian and Charity's fragile relationship could be the final casualty in this war of retribution and freedom.

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Sweet Charity

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Edited by Shannon Combs

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SWEET CHARITY

N.J. Walters

Dedication

This one is for all my readers who support me and allow me to do what I love for a living. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter One

Her father was a monster. Charity Caruthers had always known he was evil, but even she hadn't realized the true depths of his depravity until this moment.

The man hanging in chains from the interrogation wall in looked as though his skin had been peeled from his body, one small piece at a time. His hair was matted with blood and sweat. It was impossible to tell what its original color was. Blood and urine pooled around his manacled ankles. The horrible smell coated her nostrils and throat. Charity swallowed hard, trying desperately to keep from vomiting. Sweat clung to her skin and she shivered with dread.

She would have thought him dead if it weren't for the occasional gasp as he tried to pull air into his starving lungs. He wouldn't survive the night.

Charity pitied him even as she acknowledged there was nothing she could do to help him. He was too far gone and would be dead in a few hours, maybe less. She nervously glanced over her shoulder. There were no guards about. After all, this was a secure federal building and the prisoner was in no shape to mount an escape. But that didn't mean one of the guards wouldn't be back soon.

She crept closer, taking care not to step in the puddle of his blood, which was growing larger with each passing second. "Sir," she whispered. His head rolled to one side and he emitted a long, low moan. She bit her bottom lip and shot a look at the door. It was still clear.

Swallowing hard, she reached out her hand to touch his face but drew back. There was nowhere to touch him that wouldn't hurt and she didn't want to add to his misery and suffering. "Sir, is there anyone I can get word to? Family? Friends?" It was the least she could do for him.

His eyelids fluttered and his cracked lips moved slightly. Charity leaned in closer. "Dreeann." The words were hardly more than a puff of air.

She frowned. "Who is Dreeann? Where can I find her?" Or was it a him?

The dying man licked his lips but didn't speak. He was quiet for so long, she was afraid he'd died in between one tortured breath and the next. She started to leave but the man moved. Amazingly, he raised his head and opened his eyes. He seemed lucid in spite of the excruciating pain he must be feeling.

"Adrian. Not safe. General. Attack. Three days." The effort it took to get those words out seemed to exhaust him. His head rolled to one side.

Charity's heart stopped and then resumed beating at an alarming rate. "The General is going to attack in three days. And I need to tell someone named Adrian."

The corners of the man's lips turned up in a gruesome smile. "Wish I could be there to fight."

She reached out and briefly touched the side of his face, or what was left of it. "What's your name?"

"Manuel."

His breathing was laboring now and blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. "I'll tell him. I promise."

He stared at her with startling clear, green eyes. She thought he must have been a handsome man before her father and his goons got hold of him. He nodded once. His eyes closed and he released a huge sigh. The chains around his wrists and ankles tightened as his body slumped forward. Manuel was dead.

Taking a deep breath, Charity backed away from the ghastly scene and hurried to the door. She'd been summoned to the government building by her father, only to be told by his assistant that he was busy and had no time for her today. As she was leaving, she'd overheard a conversation between two security police, talking about the prisoner her father was interrogating.

She knew every inch of this building, had played here as a child, and knew exactly where to find the interrogation rooms in the bowels of the building. Something had pulled at her, urging her to find out for herself exactly what was going on. Maybe it had started out as simply wanting to know what had kept her father from meeting her. When he summoned her, which thankfully was rare, it usually meant he wanted something from her. And whatever he wanted, it was never anything good...for her.

Bringing her attention back to the present, she focused on her escape. There was nothing more she could do for Manuel. She glanced up and down the hallway, closing the door gently behind her before skittering toward the stairs. Sweat made her clothing stick to her body. She could barely hear above the pounding of her heart. The stairs seemed to go on forever but she kept going, putting one foot in front of the other.

If someone caught her in this prohibited part of the building, she wasn't certain she had enough wits about her to talk herself out of trouble. She straightened her spine and hurried her pace. The only option was to not get caught.

She calmed a bit when she reached the main level of the sterile government building, not really seeing its gray walls and tiled floors. The image of the poor man who'd just bled to death before her very eyes was burned into her brain. It was a sight she'd never forget.

She nodded and smiled at several people who knew her and kept walking. The front door of the building seemed to be miles away. Charity kept walking, hoping no one would notice anything unusual about her. She felt

shamed somehow and thought that must show in her appearance. But no one seemed to perceive anything amiss. Not the people she passed nor the guards who waved her through the security checkpoint. Thankfully no one stopped to chat. She certainly didn't think she could manage to stop and talk, not if she actually wanted to have a coherent conversation.

The walk home was a nightmare. Sweat seeped from every pore of her body and she ground her jaws together to keep from screaming. Every second that ticked by she expected a security patrol to stop her and drag her to her father—General Benson Caruthers, aka the General.

Just because she was his daughter didn't mean she was immune to his cruelty. Her hand went to the left side of her face, her fingers tracing the jagged scar that ran from the outside corner of her eye all the way to her mouth. Her father hadn't given her this particular scar, but he'd been just as responsible. After all, he was the one who had forced her into marriage with a man twice her age in order to gain political support and favors.

She hadn't had a choice. Like the man chained to the wall in the interrogation room, she'd been trapped. Her father had beaten her, drugged her and dragged her to the mockery of a wedding ceremony, which had been over and done before she'd even realized what was happening to her.

She dropped her hand back to her side, stuffing it into her pocket as she hurried up the walkway toward her small apartment. She'd moved here after she was widowed. The government had seized her husband's wealth after his *suspicious* death, leaving her once again at her father's mercy. No one would hire her because they feared her father's wrath. She lived on a small stipend provided by the General.

Her fingers shook as she put the key in the lock and let herself inside. She didn't stop but went straight to the bathroom where she promptly threw up her breakfast.

Dropping to the floor in front of the commode, she clasped the white porcelain in her hands as she cried and heaved. When the worst of the storm passed, she grabbed the side of the vanity and stood on shaky legs. Turning on the faucet, she rinsed her face with cool water before grabbing her toothbrush.

A few minutes later, she felt better, if not quite stable. She raised her head and studied the pale face staring back at her. Her skin was so white her freckles stood out on her nose and cheekbones. Her curly brown hair was in disarray. But it was the resolve in her eyes that steadied her.

She had to get out of this place. She'd been widowed for a year now. There was nothing she could prove, but Charity was sure her father had played a role in the death of her husband. Not that she missed Martin. The mere thought of his name made her nauseous. He'd been a sadistic son of a bitch who enjoyed the pain of others, but especially hers. Lately her father had been hinting that it was time for her to remarry.

She'd rather be dead.

Charity made her decision. She was leaving the inner city and venturing into the world outside the Gate—a high-tech, impenetrable shield that protected the enclosed city from contamination from the outside. A hundred years ago, wars, natural disasters and disease had transformed the planet. The population had been decimated and the survival of the human race was in jeopardy. When the dust finally settled, the world was divided into two sections. The rich and privileged lived inside the climate-controlled, protective confines of the Gate. Outside the barrier, everyone else resided in poverty, filth, disease and lawlessness.

But living inside the city came with a price—freedom. The Ruling Council had it. Everyone else followed the rules or soon found themselves dead, imprisoned or outside the Gate.

She'd rather take her chances out there than remain here any longer. She was twenty-five years old. It was time to take charge of her destiny. She also had a goal. A man had died at her father's hand today and she owed it to him to grant his dying wish.

Galvanized into action, she began a mental list of what she'd need—a knapsack to carry food and clothing, a container for water and a blanket or two. A knife. And probably a gun. She had one. It had belonged to her late husband. She'd never fired a gun in her life, but she could point and shoot. It was better than nothing.

She faltered briefly. Sheer terror swamped her at the thought of facing the unknown beyond the Gate. Straightening her shoulders, she took a deep breath, pushed away from the vanity and strode to her bedroom. There were hours before the sun went down and she could make her way to one of the exits to the outside world. She wasn't quite sure how she was going to manage to get past the security guards who manned the Gate, but she'd figure it out when the time came.

Right now, it was enough that she had a goal. She needed to find a man named Adrian and let him know about her father's plans. Whoever he was, he was in danger. She shuddered at the thought of this unknown man falling into her father's grasp.

In the fourteen long months she'd been married, she'd eavesdropped many times on private conversations between her husband and father. In the past year, she'd learned even more about the General. He wouldn't rest until all the rebels outside the city were dead.

Adrian. She knew that name. Charity sat on the side of the bed and tried to pull it from her memory. Something she'd overheard. Obviously, he was someone important if her father wanted him so badly.

She shrugged. It didn't matter. Whoever he was, she'd find him.

Adrian stared out into the night. It was dark, but with his enhanced vision, he could see as well as if it were midday. The back of his neck tingled. A warning. An omen. Something was in the air. Trouble was on the wind.

Sighing, he rubbed his nape, trying to ignore the nagging feeling of impending disaster. He was tired. Not an unusual state for him. Being the leader of the Resistance was time-consuming. There were never enough hours in the day to do everything that needed to be done to keep an operation this size running.

There were people to feed and clothe. They all needed shelter, medical supplies and weapons. Then there were the constant patrols against the security police to plan and implement. For what felt like the millionth time, Adrian wondered how the hell he'd ended up in this position.

He was an Alpha. A loner. Created by the Piedmont Corporation as a weapon to be used by General Caruthers and The Ruling Council. Thanks to genetic enhancements, his senses were more acute than a regular person's, his reflexes faster, his body stronger. The microcomputer that was part of his brain allowed him to learn at an incredible speed, to calculate the odds and make split-second decisions in any situation. In short, he was the perfect killer—intelligent, adaptable, ruthless and strong.

But there had been problems with the program and the scientists had decided that half the Alphas needed to be destroyed. They weren't developing fast enough and then there were budget cuts to contend with. He'd been one of the Alphas slated for termination over twelve years ago. Out of the group that had been taken outside the Gate and shot, he was the only one who'd managed to survive.

It was then and there, as a bitter eighteen-year-old that he'd vowed to destroy The Piedmont Corporation, the General and bring down the Gate. As an Alpha, there was no backing down from a goal once it was set. It wasn't in an Alpha to give up. They'd keep going until they literally dropped. They didn't know any other way. *He* didn't know any other way. Adrian had made it his life's mission to be a thorn in the General's side ever since.

A shadow in the distance caught his eye and his head jerked up. As he watched, a ragged child raced from the dubious cover of one building to another, probably searching for food or shelter. It was the children who really got to him. They deserved better than to have to scabble in the dirt for survival.

He knew what it was like to feel hunger gnawing at his backbone, to be so thirsty his lips cracked, to be cold all the way to his soul. He turned away from the window knowing he couldn't save all the children. Not yet.

If only he could bring down the Gate, then everyone would have the same access to food, water, medical supplies and so much more. He would make it happen. And soon. It had been quiet for several weeks now. That was never a good thing where the General was concerned.

One of their trackers was missing. Manuel had gone out almost a week ago and hadn't returned. He was probably captured and dead. Adrian's jaw tightened as he turned away from the window. There was nothing he or anyone else could do about it. They all knew the score, all lived with the possibility that they could die on any given day. They were at war, but that didn't make the loss any easier.

One of the drawbacks of being an Alpha was having perfect recall. Adrian could picture the faces and name of everyone he'd lost over the past twelve years. The list was a long one.

He scrubbed his hand over his face and sighed. He didn't know what the hell was wrong with him tonight. Maybe it was the fact that his fellow Alphas, Tienan and Logan, would be here tomorrow for a quick briefing and they'd both be accompanied by their women. Silence and Mercy were two incredible ladies, both of them able to get past the fact that their men were genetically altered killers and love them anyway.

A twinge of an unfamiliar emotion hit him square in the chest. He rubbed the area over his heart as he pondered it. Envy. He'd never felt anything like it before. He'd spent so many years simply doing what needed to be done in order to survive, he'd never had time to worry about what he didn't have.

But he wanted what those men had found with their women. He wanted to know what it was like to trust someone that much, to want to be with them, to make love with them each night. The sheer intimacy of it was beyond his understanding.

Adrian had sex when he needed the physical release, but he'd never had a relationship that went beyond a few nights of fucking, of burning off sexual energy and tension. Maybe that's what he needed. A night with a woman spread beneath him, her soft body cradling his as he drove his cock into her welcoming heat. Maybe then he'd rid himself of the strange mood that held him in its grasp.

He turned back to the window and gazed out, searching the gloom. Something was coming.

Charity ducked into the doorway of an abandoned building and huddled close to the crumbling wall. It wasn't much protection but it was better than being out on the street. Getting out of the inner city had been much easier than she'd anticipated.

Earlier today, she'd packed her knapsack and waited until well after dark before making her way to the edge of the inner city. She'd sneaked past several patrols within the city, but had managed to make it to the Gate without incident. She'd stood there for an hour, wondering what she was going to do. A security officer manned the station that controlled the opening and closing of the exit. Several other guards were positioned nearby as

well, keeping a continuous watch on the surrounding area. It had seemed hopeless.

Just as she had almost convinced herself that this was a stupid idea and she should try to make her way back home and forget her ill-conceived plan, a garbage vehicle had pulled up. The man driving the large metal vehicle obviously knew the guard stationed at the gate and the two of them had stopped to chat. Without giving herself time to think, Charity had taken a quick glance at the guards to make sure they weren't watching, darted out of her hiding spot and climbed into the back of the garbage vehicle. She'd crouched there, hand over her mouth and nose, trying not to breathe too deeply.

Her limbs had begun to tremble, her entire body shaking so hard she was afraid someone would hear the chattering of her teeth. She was deathly afraid of being caught. What she was doing would be considered treason. Punishable by execution.

After what seemed an eternity, the vehicle had lurched forward. Once it was out of sight of the guards, she'd jumped from the back of the moving vehicle and rolled to the side of the road, hiding in some low bushes. Her escape was complete.

A sound caught her attention, bringing her back to her present situation. She flattened herself against the rotting wood of the building, trying to make herself smaller. The world outside the Gate was so different from the one inside the inner city. The air was thicker, harder to breathe. It was also dark. There was no artificial lights out here, only the sliver of the moon. It was also dirty and cold.

Charity shivered as the noise receded. She must have been out of her mind to think she could come here and simply find this Adrian person and pass on the message from Manuel.

What would she do then? She hadn't thought about that at all. She'd simply panicked after seeing her father's latest act of brutality, knowing he planned to use her as a pawn in his own games. If she stayed, she'd be married inside a month, two at the most.

No, live or die, she'd made the right choice. Better a few hours of freedom than a lifetime of none. But where to go? She wasn't totally stupid. She knew it wasn't safe for her to be roaming around the ruins of the outer city by herself. Especially at night.

Male voices caught her attention and they were getting closer. Charity crouched down, trying to make herself invisible.

"Everything is quiet tonight."

"I haven't seen anything unusual." This voice was younger, more like a teenager's.

Charity inched forward slowly, peeking around the corner of the doorway where she hid. In the distance she could make out two dark shapes.

"I'm heading back to base and report to Adrian. How about you?"

Charity's ears perked up when she heard the name Adrian. Could this be the same man she was looking for? Surely it wouldn't be this easy to find him. She was so busy trying to shift closer so she could hear better, she almost missed their next exchange.

"I'm going to take one last look around. You go ahead."

"Be careful, Mouse," the older man admonished.

"Always," the teenager replied.

Squinting to try to see into the darkness, Charity watched as the older man started walking away from where she was hidden. The teenager was standing in the road one minute and the next he was gone. She blinked, sure she must be mistaken, but he'd disappeared.

A few seconds later, a low voice came from just off to her left. "I know you're there. I have a gun. Come out with your hands up where I can see them."

Pure terror swamped her. What should she do?

"Now." The voice was stern, but young. This was the teenager the other man had called Mouse.

"Please," she began and then stopped. Begging didn't help. She'd learned that lesson years ago, first at her father's hand, then her husband's. Men did whatever they chose to do with little regard for what a woman wanted.

"Come out."

Making certain her knapsack was secured on her back in case she needed to make a run for it, she raised her hands and stepped out into road.

"Who are you?" The voice was coming from off to the right now. She swiveled her head but still couldn't see him.

"Charity." She swallowed hard. It was now or never. "I have a message for Adrian." She sensed the teenager's interest and pressed on. "It's from Manuel."

She heard the swift intake of breath. "You know where Manuel is? You've talked with him?"

Charity nodded and then realized that the youth wouldn't be able to see her. "Yes. He told me to give a message to Adrian. Only Adrian." That wasn't strictly true, but no one else knew that.

The teenager stepped out of the shadows, hand extended. In his grip was a gun of some kind. He motioned

to her. "Take off the pack."

She hesitated and he came closer.

"Look, lady. If you want to see Adrian, we do it my way."

Slowly, she shrugged out of the pack and put it on the ground in front of her.

"Put your hands out by your sides." She did as he asked and he moved closer, patting down her sides. He pulled her gun from her coat pocket and slipped it into his own. The knife was in her knapsack, which he took and slung over his shoulder. "Start walking."

Charity did as he instructed. Dawn was still a few hours away and it was hard to see as she stumbled down the road, through alleys and over ruins. Several times, they paused and hid long enough for other groups of people to pass by. He'd warned her to be quiet. She wasn't stupid. With Mouse she at least knew she was headed where she was supposed to be. They walked for at least an hour, maybe even longer. It was hard to tell. She was totally lost.

The teenager grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop. She squinted at her surroundings. They seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. He let out a low whistle that was answered quickly. "Come on." Keeping a grip on her, he led her toward what looked like an abandoned building.

It was anything but.

Inside, the light was dim, but she could see dozens of people moving around. The teenager pulled her toward a stocky man with dark brown hair. He was speaking to another man but gave them his full attention as they got closer, his sharp brown eyes missing nothing. "Who is this, Mouse?"

"She said she had a message for Adrian. From Manuel," he added.

The older man stared at her, his eyes gone flat and deadly. She took a step back and wrapped her arms around her upper body. She was so cold.

"You spoke with Manuel?"

"Yes."

"When?" He fired his second question at her, his impatience palpable.

"This morning." She frowned. "Or yesterday morning since it's almost dawn." Had it only been less than twenty-four hours ago? Her life had turned upside down in such a short time.

"Thanks, Mouse. I'll take it from here." The teenager nodded, placed her knapsack on the floor and left. The older man took her arm and urged her forward. "Let's go talk to Adrian."

She glanced over her shoulder at her knapsack, which sat forlornly on the dirt floor. It held everything she owned in the world and, within seconds, it had vanished. She swallowed hard, realizing it would be easy for the same thing to happen to her.

Adrian heard footsteps in the hallway and frowned. He recognized Derrick's heavier tread. But there was a lighter step beside him. He rolled off his pallet and lit a candle. The light flared and settled just as Derrick knocked on the door.

"Enter."

The door opened and Derrick entered, his hand grasped tight around the arm of a woman. Adrian's senses exploded as he caught his first glimpse of her. His body tensed and his cock bolted to attention.

Within a split second, he catalogued her physical appearance. Average height, shoulder-length curly brown hair, light brown eyes, a pert nose covered in a smattering of freckles. Full kissable lips. The only thing to mar her features was a pale, jagged scar that ran the length of her left cheek.

Adrian wanted to know where that imperfection had come from. Was it an accident or had someone intentionally hurt her? A killing rage filled him at the thought of someone hurting this delicate creature in front of him. His hands fisted at his sides as he resisted the urge to reach out and touch her.

He shook his head to rid himself of the unwanted emotions surging through him. This was crazy. He didn't even know who she was. He focused his attention on Derrick. "Who is she?"

"I didn't get a name, but she says she has a message from Manuel."

Chapter Two

Charity stared at the large, imposing man standing in front of her. There was no doubt in her mind that he was the mysterious Adrian. She finally remembered where she'd heard his name before. It was two months before her husband's death and she'd been eavesdropping on a conversation between him and her father. What had piqued her attention the most was that they seemed to be afraid of this man.

Adrian was the leader of the Resistance, her father's biggest nemesis.

Most people inside the Gate didn't know much about the Resistance. The Ruling Council and the General did everything they could to downplay the threat. They didn't want the general populous thinking that they couldn't handle things. That would only create unrest in the inner city. And they had their hands full in the outer city.

Members of the security force kept silent about their patrols. To do otherwise would bring death and destruction down on them and their families. Still, there were always rumors and rumblings of unrest. The Ruling Council quickly squashed those. Most folks went about their daily lives and kept their heads down and their noses out of government business. It was the safest way to live.

The man before her had chosen anything but a safe course in life. He was a living legend.

He was a tall man, a few inches over six feet, with incredibly wide shoulders and a lean, muscular body. The T-shirt he was wearing clung to his torso, outlining the rippling muscles beneath the fabric. His waist was lean, his legs long.

His blond hair was cut short in the back, but was slightly longer in the front. He studied her with cool, pale blue eyes, assessing her much as she was doing to him. His jaw was strong, his nose straight. Charity stared at his mouth. Adrian's lips were full and managed to look soft, yet firm. She wondered what they'd feel like.

The thought startled her. How could she even think about touching a man, let alone having one touch her? Her only experience with sex had been with her husband and that had been cold at best, violent and demeaning at its worst. Still, there was no denying the light fluttering in her belly and it made her uneasy.

"Who are you?" Adrian's voice was deep and full and very compelling. He didn't raise it, and yet he commanded immediate respect.

She swallowed the lump of fear rising in her throat. She was so tired of being afraid. "Charity." Her voice was a mere whisper, so she tried again. "Charity," she repeated, this time with more force.

Adrian glanced toward the man who'd brought her. "I'll take it from here, Derrick."

Charity sensed the unease of the other man before he nodded. "If you're sure."

One corner of Adrian's mouth quirked up. She couldn't quite call it a smile, but it was close enough to have her wondering what he'd look like if he really smiled. He was already gorgeous. How would any woman resist him if he actually smiled?

"I think I can handle it." Adrian prowled toward her and she took a step back. He was too big, too male, too powerful. In short, he was a man just like her father and husband. She shivered and locked her knees to keep from taking another step away. She'd come this far. There was no backing down.

Charity heard Derrick leave and close the door behind her, but she couldn't take her eyes off Adrian. He was a large, sleek predator and she was very afraid that she was his prey.

Adrian circled her once before stopping behind her. She could feel his presence, the heat emanating from his large body. But more than that, she could sense the sheer power of the man. He was smart. He was tough. He was dangerous. And he was focused entirely on her.

Charity hunched her shoulders, an automatic response to the threat of having him behind her. She braced for an attack. But nothing happened. Her heart was racing, blood whooshing so fast in her ears she could barely hear above the din. Her skin was cold, clammy. The anticipation of being struck was almost as bad as the reality.

She jumped when his hand landed on her shoulder, whirled away and turned to face him. She watched him, trying to anticipate his next move.

He stared at her, his eyes narrowed. "Sit." She swallowed hard as he motioned to a chair. "Please," he added as an afterthought.

Her knees were shaky, so she decided it probably wasn't a bad idea if she sat. Keeping him in her sights, she scooted past him. The chair was old and rickety, but it was better than nothing. She gripped the arms tight and lowered herself onto the seat.

Adrian prowled closer. He leaned his hip on the corner of his desk and crossed his arms over his chest. He was imposing without even trying. Her father postured a lot, surrounding himself with security police who were loyal to him, bullying others. But Adrian didn't need any trappings. This was a man who was confident in himself and his abilities. He didn't need a full complement of men around him in order to be dangerous. He was that all on his own.

No wonder the General and the Ruling Council feared this man.

"Manuel," he reminded her.

Tears pricked her eyes as she remembered the valiant man who'd died at her father's hands. "He was captured by the security police and brought to their headquarters to be interrogated."

Charity noted a slight tightening in Adrian's jaw, but other than that he showed no emotion whatsoever.

"Go on."

She glanced down, unable to look at him or his penetrating gaze any longer. Her pants were dirty, her boots scuffed. She huddled tighter into her jacket, wishing it were warmer. She was so cold. But at least she was alive. That was more than poor Manuel had.

"They..." She took a deep breath and plowed onward. "They tortured him. I managed to sneak in after the guards left. I thought he was dead." She raised her eyes and stared at Adrian, willing him to understand. "There was nothing I could do to save him."

He nodded. "I know." Odd but his gentle agreement somehow made her feel even worse.

"He said that the General knew where you were and would be attacking in three days. I guess it would be two days now." She rubbed her forehead. So much had happened in such a short time.

She didn't hear him move, but suddenly Adrian was crouched in front of her, his large hands covering hers. Her head jerked up at the first contact. Part of her wanted to pull away, another part of her longed for his warmth, yearned to burrow into his strong arms and forget her problems for a few minutes. Which was crazy considering she didn't trust men and didn't even know Adrian. He was a stranger, someone she was delivering a message to. Nothing more.

"Is that everything?"

She nodded. "I'm surprised he could say even that much."

Adrian's eyes grew colder. Charity sucked in a breath and shifted back in her chair, moving as far away from him as she could, which wasn't far. She was trapped in this chair, with Adrian in front of her.

He raised his hand and touched the scar on her cheek. She could feel the heat climbing up her face and automatically covered the long, pale streak with her hand. He clasped her fingers in his and lowered them, exposing the mark.

"Who did this?"

She ducked her head down and shook it in denial. She felt ashamed of her scar even though it wasn't her fault. None of it was her fault.

"Who?"

She knew then that he wouldn't let her go until she told him. She could hear it in the determined tone of his voice. He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, raising her face until their eyes met. His blue eyes, so cold a moment ago, held another emotion. She wasn't quite sure what it was. Anger, but something else as well.

Knowing she had no choice, she blurted out the answer. "My husband."

Adrian couldn't control the blast of fury that nearly rocked him back on his heels. She belonged to another man. One who had hurt her. The urge to find her husband and kill him was almost overwhelming.

Charity belonged to him.

"Your husband?" He knew he hadn't misheard, but he still wanted her denial.

She sighed and gave a small incline of her head. "I've been widowed almost a year now."

Relief surged through him, making him lightheaded. She was free to be with him. Not like the inconsequential matter of a husband would stop him, not when he was obviously an abusive bastard.

"He hit you?"

Charity jerked her chin from his grip and glared at him. "That has nothing to do with this."

Which gave him his answer. Her husband had abused her, probably in and out of bed. It would make his job harder, but certainly not impossible. He'd get Charity to trust him, to allow him to take her to bed and make love to her. Her screams wouldn't be those of pain, but of pleasure.

His cock was pressed hard against the placket of his pants, his balls heavy and full. He was an Alpha, bred to be stronger, faster and smarter. But he was also a creature of instinct. And every cell in his body was screaming that Charity belonged to him.

The logical side of his brain told Adrian it was nothing more than pheromones and basic human biology that made him want her. She was a delectable female and he was a horny male. Simple. The instinctual part of him roared that Charity had been made for him, belonged to him in a way that defied explanation.

The leader in him, the man who had led the Resistance since he was a teenager, knew he couldn't trust her, needed answers. Her mere presence here raised myriad questions, ones that couldn't go unasked. There was too much at stake. Sighing, he stood and asked one of the questions that needed asking. "Why?"

She looked at him with those big brown eyes and it took all his discipline not to kiss her right there and then. She licked her lips. They were full and rosy and begging for long, hot kisses. "Because he asked me to. Because it was the right thing to do."

"How did you get out of the city?" That was the one that bothered him the most. Security was tight, even more so than usual in the past six months since Tienan and Logan had escaped.

She frowned. "I'll admit it was easier than I expected. I hid at one of the exits to the Gate. When a garbage detail pulled up, I jumped in the back of the truck. When it was out of sight of the Gate, I jumped out of the vehicle. After that, I made my way into the city and Mouse found me hiding in a doorway."

Adrian shuddered to think what could have happened to her at any point in her escape. There were so many dangers in the outer city, not to mention the security patrols that tended to shoot first and ask questions later. There were criminals, bands of men who would slit your throat for the coat you were wearing or the boots on your feet. What they'd do to a pretty woman like Charity didn't even bear thinking about.

The logical part of his brain told him that her escape had been too easy. With all the security, there was no way she should have made it outside. Yet, here she sat.

Was it a trap? Most certainly. Was she part of it? That part was uncertain. He didn't think so, but he couldn't

be sure.

What he did know was that he wanted her. And he'd have her. He'd simply keep her next to him at all times. That way she wouldn't be able to betray him. With that decided, he moved onto the next part of his plan. Getting Charity into bed with him.

Leaning down, he took her hands and drew her up until she was standing in front of him. Her black coat was snuggled around her, hiding her shape. He grabbed the tab of the zipper and pulled it down. The rasp seemed overly loud.

Her breathing got faster and he could see the quickening of her pulse as it fluttered. Unable to resist, he lowered his head and pressed his mouth against her throat. Her skin was soft and he caught the faintest scent of soap. It smelled like honey and hope.

"What—" She caught her breath and released a slight moan when he sucked on her skin, nibbling lightly. "What are you doing?"

He pulled back and slipped his hands under her coat and slid it down her arms. It hit the floor in a soft thud. "I'd have thought that was obvious, sweet Charity. I'm seducing you."

Charity couldn't catch her breath, couldn't think, could barely speak. Adrian's mouth was warm and gentle as it touched her neck. The light caresses sent shivers down her spine, heating her chilled skin and awakening her body.

Her nipples pebbled, drawing up tight. They felt swollen and achy in a way she'd never felt before. And between her legs, her pussy throbbed. Cream slipped from her channel, coating the folds of her labia.

This was arousal. It was exhilarating and exciting and terrifying. She'd often wondered what it might feel like to really want a man. She'd never experienced anything like this in her life. He was seducing her, with his words as much as his actions.

This was wrong, wasn't it?

"No, not wrong," he whispered in her ear. Had she spoken aloud? She must have.

Except for her coat, she was completely dressed, yet she felt totally exposed. One of his large hands cupped the back of her neck, the other one rested against her damaged cheek. She sensed none of the urgency or impatience that Martin had always shown. Adrian dropped a kiss on her nose and another one on her forehead.

He was confusing her.

"Why?" She had to know.

"Because I want you." It was as simple as that.

Charity tried to think, but it was becoming hard to form a comprehensive and logical thought with each passing second. Did she even want to think about it? Her life was tenuous at best now that she'd betrayed her father to the Resistance. And she wasn't fool enough to believe her life outside the Gate would be any easier than life in the inner city. In most ways it would be harder.

But it would be hers.

She liked the feel of Adrian's mouth on her skin as he moved steadily closer to her lips. Her pussy clenched in anticipation. Pleasure thrummed through her veins. Just once in her life, Charity wanted to know what it was truly like to make love with a man. Not the pain and degradation that had existed between her and her husband.

"Don't hurt me." The words were out of her mouth before she could halt them.

Adrian froze for a moment and then slowly pulled back. She immediately missed the heat of his mouth against her skin. "This is all about pleasure. Never about pain."

As she stared up into his pale blue eyes and his serious face, she realized that she believed him. More than that, she trusted him. It made no sense whatsoever, yet there was no denying it. "Okay."

He smiled then and she stared at his face, stunned by the change. He was handsome before, but now he was devastating. Charity knew that this wasn't for forever. This was for now. Tonight. But that no longer mattered.

She was cold and wanted to feel warm. She wanted to experience something good in the bleakness of her life. It would be a memory to sustain her in the hard days ahead.

Charity reached out and rubbed her thumb over his bottom lip. He caught it between his teeth, nipping lightly before drawing it into his mouth. His tongue lapped at her thumb, teasing the webbing at the base.

Heat flashed through her, making her skin tingle. She gasped as the pleasurable sensation seeped all the way to her bones. Adrian released her thumb and leaned toward her. Their mouths met. He moved his mouth over hers, licking her bottom lip. When her lips parted, his tongue made a quick foray inside, withdrawing almost immediately.

She felt bereft and went after it with her own. He tasted like dark spices and secrets. He was all male and, for the first time in her life, she wanted more. She went up on her toes, needing to get closer. Adrian slid one of his hands down her spine and cupped her ass.

A low moan broke from her throat as he pressed her toward him. The hard, thick length of his erection dug into her belly. He was seriously aroused, but still he didn't press her. Adrian was letting her set the pace.

That knowledge knocked her normal reserve in a way that nothing else ever could. If he'd pressured her or tried to use his superior strength against her, she would have been able to resist him. But she didn't want to fight Adrian or this wonderful feeling thrumming through her entire body. She wanted more.

Charity clasped his face between her hands. His jaw was covered in a light stubble, which rasped her skin. The difference between them, male to female, was very apparent. Instead of frightening her, it aroused her. It made her very aware of her femininity.

Adrian's hand roamed over her butt, cupping and shaping it, before slipping beneath the hem of her shirt. His fingers were warm against the small of her back. Her mind registered the caress, but she was so enthralled by his kisses, she ignored the small warning that sounded in the back of her mind.

His tongue was in her mouth now. Teasing. Tasting. Learning her. She could easily spend the rest of the night kissing him. Nothing in her life had ever felt this good, this incredibly right.

The hand on her back crept higher, sliding around to the side and finally the front. She froze as the edge of his hand brushed against the bottom curve of her breast. He broke their kiss. "Let me see you. I won't touch you unless you want me to."

His words sent a wave of heat coursing through her. He stood there, his hand not even an inch from his goal and still he waited. She could walk away or she could take a chance. She was tired of being afraid. She knew not all men were mean and nasty like her husband and father. This was her chance to experience something different. Something she sensed could be very special. She nodded.

Adrian reached for the hem of her shirt and tugged it up. "Raise your hands." She did as he instructed and two seconds later, she was naked from the waist up, except for her bra. The thin fabric still covered her, but only for a scant moment. Before she could even think to object, Adrian had opened the clasp and was lowering the garment down her arms. It fell to her feet.

"Beautiful." He stared at her exposed breasts. Her nipples tightened, both from the cold and his heated perusal. "May I?" His hands hovered just above her chest.

Did she want this? Yes, she did. She gave a jerky nod. He didn't grab for her as she'd expected. Instead, he surprised her once again. His thumbs traced the outline of her nipples. Round and round, he went.

"So soft," he rumbled, continuing to stroke the soft, velvety skin.

It was getting harder for her to breathe. Her chest ached. Her entire body throbbed with need. Licking her lips, she stared at him. He seemed intent on her breasts but he continued to touch them with only his thumbs. It was pleasurable at first, but soon became torture. She wanted his hands on her flesh, holding her, caressing her.

Reaching up with shaky hands, she wrapped her fingers around his wrists, pushing his hands toward her until his palms were covering her breasts. "Yesss," she hissed out a breath. That was what she needed. The heat from his palms sank into her skin.

Adrian cupped her breasts, massaging them, teasing her nipples with his thumbs. It was exquisite. He kissed her neck. A soft, lingering kiss that made goose bumps race down her arms. She liked that.

He continued lower, trailing kisses over her collarbone and the tops of her breasts. His breath was moist and warm against her skin as he closed his lips over one puckered nipple and drew it into his mouth.

A long, low wail escaped her. This was incredible. She arched against him, needing more. Her pussy pulsed and wept, aching with pent-up desire. As though he knew what she wanted, Adrian slid one hand between her thighs, cupping her mound through her pants.

Oh God! Tension built inside her, flooding her with heat and with something else. Something she needed but couldn't quite grasp. She gripped Adrian's shoulders for support. The fabric of his shirt frustrated her. She wanted to feel his skin.

She tugged at the offending garment. Adrian released her and she almost cried at the loss. He whipped his shirt over his head and flung it aside. Taking her hands in his, he placed them on his chest. "Touch me," he commanded.

And she did. Thick muscles rippled beneath her hands as she stroked his smooth skin. A thin sprinkling of hair spread between his nipples before arrowing down toward his waistband in a thin line. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to one flat, brown nipple. He groaned and cupped her head in his hand, urging her to do more.

Emboldened, she lapped at the small nub. But she touched him as well. His massive biceps, his wide shoulders, his sculpted abs. And he touched her too, mirroring her actions. It was exciting. But it quickly wasn't enough.

Charity wanted more. For the first time in her life, she truly wanted to feel hard, male flesh inside her. The fear was still there, but the need was greater. She could be dead tomorrow. They all could be.

This might be the only chance she'd ever have to discover what sex, really great sex, was all about. She'd be a fool not to take a chance. After all, that's what this was all about. Leaving her old life, her old self, behind. She didn't want to be afraid anymore.

When Adrian's hands went to the button on her pants, she didn't stop him. Instead, she reached for the

opening of his pants. Adrian groaned and then gave a muffled laugh. Cool air hit her butt as he tugged her clothing away. He went down on one knee in front of her and quickly unlaced her boots. He removed them one at a time. His hands shoved her pants and underwear around her ankles and then off. She was naked.

He kissed the inside of her thigh. "Lean back against the desk." The command was low and gruff.

A shiver raced over her skin but there was no turning back, for either of them. She glanced over her shoulder, surprised to see she was right next to the desk. Leaning back, she propped her naked butt on the edge.

"Spread your legs." His gaze didn't leave her face as she swallowed and complied, sliding her feet apart.

Satisfaction flared in his eyes and he lowered his head so he was looking straight at her pussy. "Beautiful," he crooned. He reached out and traced a finger over her slick folds.

Charity nearly swallowed her tongue as he brushed over the small bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. She moaned and tilted her hips toward him. He gave a low growl of what sounded like pleasure and shifted closer. She felt his breath on her moist folds. Then his tongue stroked over her.

Her fingers dug into the side of the desk for support. The contrast between the cool air on her body and his hot mouth on her pussy made her even more aware of the internal heat building low in her body. Her nipples puckered even tighter.

She should be terrified of being naked with this man, this virtual stranger. She should be mortified at the way her breasts swayed as she rocked her hips toward his mouth. She should feel self-conscious at exposing herself while he was still half dressed.

She felt none of those things. Yes, there was fear, but it was more a fear of the unknown, fear of the violent emotions swelling within her.

He swirled his tongue over her clit before drawing it between his lips and suckling. Pleasure shot through her like a bolt of lightning and Charity cried out. The scratchy shadow of beard on his jaw was a rough caress against her inner thighs, a sharp contrast to the tender care of his mouth and tongue.

She let out a long, low groan as he fitted one thick finger into the opening of her channel and pushed. Her inner muscles tightened around it, trying to draw it deeper. Her legs began to tremble as he inserted another finger, working it slowly into her.

Releasing her death grip on the edge of the desk, she clutched at his head, trying to get even closer. His tongue lapped her clit. He pulled his fingers to the edge of her opening and then pushed deep.

Charity came undone. Every thought, every sensation was focused on the spot between her legs where he was touching her. She exploded, her entire body jerking. She called his name. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she held him to her. Heat blasted through her, over her.

This was incredible. Amazing. And she was going to die if he didn't stop. She tugged weakly at his hair. His caresses changed then, becoming almost soothing. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. A tear rolled down her cheek and she turned her head toward her shoulder, wiping it away. She suddenly felt emotional.

Vulnerable.

Adrian sat back on his heels and looked up at her, his expression intent. Slowly, he stood.

Chapter Three

Adrian knew if he didn't get inside Charity in the next minute, he was going to come in his pants. He'd had sex many times in his life, but nothing he'd ever done with any woman compared to what he'd just done with Charity. He hadn't even fucked her, but he felt more satisfied than he usually did after a long bout of hot, sweaty sex.

There was no time to examine the implications of that realization, not with his dick clamoring at him to do something about his painful situation. He stood and tugged the zipper down on his pants. His cock jumped out, unhindered by underwear.

Charity's eyes widened. He could see her pulse fluttering in her neck and the soft flush on her cheeks. She licked her lips and glanced up at him before dropping her gaze to his erection. She was afraid, but she was aroused too.

"Touch me." He needed to feel her hands on him. Couldn't get enough of her small fingers caressing him. When she'd touched his chest and shoulders earlier, he'd almost come. There was an innocent delight, a sense of discovery about her that was enthralling.

She chewed on her bottom lip. Adrian wanted to smooth the abused skin with his lips. Lick it. Suck it. But he refrained. She had to come to him. He was a hunter at heart and he knew that the only way she'd ever truly trust him was if he allowed her to come to him on her own. If that happened, he'd have her. Then he could have her whenever and however he wanted. It wasn't easy, but he was a patient man and the payoff would be well worth it.

She reached out and tentatively stroked her finger down his hard length. His cock jerked toward her. She pulled her hand back, her eyes flying to his. "He likes you," Adrian said deadpan.

Charity gave a small snort of laughter, but the corners of her mouth were tilted upward when she reached for him again. "He does, does he?"

"Oh yeah," Adrian agreed as her fingers wrapped around his cock.

She was tentative at first, stroking up and down. A bead of liquid pearled at the tip of the crown and she swiped it away with her thumb, spreading the liquid over his cock head.

"That's the way, sweet Charity," he encouraged. While she touched him, learning his shape and size, he cupped her breasts and began to tease her nipples. Her hand tightened around his erection, and he ground his teeth together to keep from coming. He wanted to be buried in her hot cunt when he came, wanted to feel her tight pussy muscles gripping him.

He leaned down and kissed her, coaxing her further into his care, teasing her until she was lost in the caress. Her breathing was rapid, her skin flushed. Adrian lifted her slightly until her ass was settled firmly on the desk, her legs hanging over the edge. Slowly, he lowered her until she was lying across the hard surface. Making a place for himself between her thighs, he ground his cock against her slick folds, reveling in the wet heat that surrounded him.

"Put me inside you." It had to be her decision. Once she'd made it, there was no going back. For either of them.

Her brown eyes were wide. There was a wildness in them, partially fear and partially arousal. At this point, it was a tossup as to which one would win. He reached between her thighs and touched her slick folds and fingered her clit, ruthlessly using everything he'd learned about her in their short time together to arouse her once again.

She cried out, arching her hips, trying to get more of his touch. He licked and nibbled her neck. He kissed a hot path toward her ear where he captured the sensitive lobe and nipped lightly. Charity almost came off the desk.

"Put me inside you," he gritted out. He couldn't last much longer. His balls were so tight it was actually painful. He almost yelled in victory when her fingers tightened around his cock and she lifted her hips, squirming around until the head was positioned at the opening of her tight channel.

He pushed forward until the tip was inside her. Her inner muscles rippled around his cock head. It was a special kind of hell as he fought to keep from coming. She had to orgasm again, but this time with his cock buried in her hot cunt. He needed her to come as he pounded into her.

"That's it," he crooned. "You can take me." He swirled his tongue around the delicate whorl of her ear and was rewarded with a soft cry of pleasure.

Adrian pulled back and looked at her as he began the slow push inward. He curled his hands beneath her thighs, lifting and widening them as he buried himself to the hilt in her hot depths.

He pulled back about an inch and pushed forward again. She made little mewling sounds deep in her throat that turned him on. They were both slick with sweat, their bodies hot. Adrian strained to keep control.

"Wrap your legs around my waist." He needed his hands free to touch her. Charity complied, sliding her legs around him and locking her ankles at the base of his spine. Adrian kissed her, a hard, quick caress that left them both breathless. Then he began to fuck her.

Slowly at first, he pulled his cock almost all the way out of her pussy before driving it deep again. It was heaven. It was hell. Every time he pushed inward, her inner muscles closed around his erection, squeezing it in a silken vise. He angled his hips so his pelvic bone brushed her clit with each thrust. Her thighs tightened around his waist. Her nails bit into his skin.

She had to come first, but it was going to be close.

Charity grasped Adrian's shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh. Adrian's expression was one of deep concentration, almost frightening in its intensity, as he surged in and out of her body, his strokes getting harder and faster. He wasn't hurting her. Quite the opposite in fact. Pleasure suffused her. Her body was alive, thrumming with desire, filled with heat. She'd had one orgasm and was close to another.

And that frightened her.

Faster than she'd thought possible, Adrian had not only overcome her innate fear of men, but she was very afraid she could easily begin to crave his touch. In the year since her husband's death, many men had tried to seduce her in order to try to gain access to her father and his political clout. All of them had left her cold and afraid.

She'd thought herself frigid, as her husband had accused her of being so many times. But Adrian had found the core of her, the hidden heat. Like a smoldering volcano, it had been building. Waiting. And now it had exploded.

Charity only hoped she survived the experience. No matter what happened, he'd changed her somehow and there was no turning back.

His hips flexed faster as he drove into her. His cock slammed into her pussy at an increasing rate. His pale blue eyes were burning with an inner fire as he fucked her. Her naked butt slid across the desk and Adrian

swore.

He slid one arm beneath her shoulders, the other beneath her behind, and lifted. His strength was amazing. He held her as though she weighed nothing at all. Whirling her around, he pressed her back against the wall. "Hold on." He lowered his head and latched on to one of her breasts, sucking her nipple into his mouth.

Charity clutched at his shoulders for support, tightened her legs around his waist. He surrounded her, his large body covering hers as he continued to hammer into her. She was so close. Now that she knew what to expect, she wanted another orgasm, wanted to experience that feeling of flying, that brief moment of total union with another person. It was beautiful and scary at the same time.

His muscles tightened beneath her palms, his moments grew more powerful. He reached between them and touched her where they were joined. Charity screamed. Her entire body bowed, her head tilted back and she cried out again. Heat slammed through her, over her.

Adrian's cock swelled and rippled. She felt a surge of wet heat inside her as he thrust two final times. He swore beneath his breath as he leaned forward, resting his forehead against the wall next to her. They were both breathing heavily, their hearts pounding. Charity had no idea how he was staying upright. Unable to hold her legs up any longer, she unwrapped them from around Adrian's waist and let them fall to the floor. The motion pushed him even higher inside him. She gasped and he groaned.

Lifting his head, he kissed her. It was such a gentle caress it brought tears to her eyes. His gaze never left her face as he withdrew, one slow inch at a time. She started to crumple the moment he released her. He swore and caught her in his arms. Picking her up, he carried her to the chair and placed her on it. Charity leaned back and tried to catch her breath.

She could hear the rustle of clothing and opened her eyes. Adrian was pulling on his T-shirt and tucking it into his pants. He was totally dressed and she was lolling naked in the chair. The heat and pleasure of her orgasm fled, replaced by an intense feeling of vulnerability.

She scrambled out of the chair and grabbed her pants. Her underwear was twisted inside and it took her some time to untangle the mess. She could feel Adrian watching her, which made her even clumsier. When she finally tugged both pieces on, she felt better. But she was still half naked. She looked around for her bra.

Adrian held it out to her. The flimsy white garment looked even more delicate resting in his large, tanned hand. "Thank you," she mumbled. It took her three attempts, but she finally got the clasp done up and the straps pulled into place.

He said nothing but handed her shirt to her. When she was dressed, she stood there, staring at her boots, uncertain as to what to do. She'd done what she'd come to do. She'd given him the message from Manuel. She'd also made love with Adrian. That was something she would never have believed would happen. Yet it had.

But it was over and done with. And she was under no illusions that it meant anything other than sex to him. It meant more to her, much more. She felt a connection to this man, this dangerous stranger. It hurt her to think about leaving him. Which really wasn't very smart of her. She'd proved to herself that she wasn't frigid, that sex with a man could be good. For that, she would always be grateful. It was enough. It had to be enough.

She glanced at him. He was leaning against the edge of the desk, the desk they'd just had sex on. Heat climbed up her cheeks. She'd never be able to look at that desk without blushing. Her gaze shot to his face. He was waiting patiently for her.

He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. He tilted his head to one side as if listening to something only he could hear. He sighed. "We'll finish this later." A knock came on the door. "Come."

The door burst open and a slender woman with shaggy black hair and violet eyes bound across the room and all but jumped into Adrian's arms. "I missed you."

Charity felt sick in the pit of her stomach as Adrian's arms came around the woman and he hugged her. They were obviously close. What had she just done? What had he done? If he had a woman, he had no right making love to her. No, having sex with her. There was no point in prettying up what had just happened.

"I should be going." She inched her way toward the door.

Adrian pinned her with his laser blue eyes. "You're not going anywhere."

The woman in his arms jerked away, as if suddenly realizing Adrian wasn't alone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to burst in on anything."

"Of course you did," Adrian gave the woman an indulgent smile. "Silence, this is Charity." He reached out and caught Charity's hand with his, tugging her closer. "Charity, this is Silence."

Silence glanced at their joined hands and back at Adrian. Charity could see the shock in the other woman's eyes. But she didn't sense any anger from Silence.

"Where's Tienan?" Adrian asked.

"Right here." A large, dark-haired man took up most of the doorway. It should have been impossible for him to appear without anyone hearing him, yet Charity hadn't heard a sound. He held out his hand and Silence went to his side. Tienan wrapped his arm around the woman and held her in a proprietary embrace. "We came early."

She couldn't wait to see you."

Charity could hear the sardonic tone in Tienan's voice, yet she could also hear the affection too. Adrian shrugged and gave a short bark of laughter. "What can I say? I'm irresistible."

Silence balled up her hand and hit Tienan in the stomach. The man didn't even grunt. He merely raised an eyebrow at her. "I missed my brother."

Charity stared from Silence to Adrian and back again. Their coloring was totally different and they shared no features. If they were brother and sister, she was his maiden aunt on his mother's side.

Tienan inclined his head toward her as if hearing her unasked question. "He took her in when she was a kid. You get used to them after a while. I'm Tienan."

"Charity," she returned.

"We need to talk." Tienan was suddenly all business. Like Adrian, he radiated a sense of power and danger.

Adrian nodded. "It's worse than you think. Manuel is dead. And according to Charity, the General knows where we are and will be attacking in two days."

Tienan pinned her with his green gaze. Danger oozed from every pore in his body. She wouldn't want to get on this man's bad side. It wasn't hard to imagine what he would do to her if he ever found out she was the daughter of his enemy. Thankfully, he didn't know who she was. She sidled closer to Adrian, stopping when she realized what she was doing. Tienan glanced at Adrian. "Trap."

He nodded. "Probably."

Charity stiffened. "Trap?" He thought she was sent there to trap him! Was that what earlier was about? Did he think he could get more information out of her if he slept with her? Charity felt ill. "Is that what the roll on your desk was about?"

"Uh oh." Silence tugged on Tienan's arm. "We should probably come back in a few minutes."

Adrian ignored everybody but Charity. "No. That was about us having sex." Charity tried to pull away, but he kept his hand manacled around her wrist. He wasn't hurting her, but she wasn't getting away until he set her free.

"Bully," she muttered.

"That's not what you were saying a few minutes ago," he murmured.

She couldn't believe he'd throw her stupidity back in her face. "A few minutes ago I didn't think you were a total jerk who had sex with me to get information."

Adrian sighed. "I didn't have sex with you in order to get information. I had sex with you because I wanted to."

"Umm, maybe we should go."

Adrian ignored Silence and continued. "Didn't you question how you were able to sneak in and talk to Manuel? How you were able to get out of the city so easily?"

She had, but she'd thought it was pure, dumb luck. From his point of view, it was suspicious. Still, the fact that he'd think she was part of a trap set by her father, hurt her. It was unreasonable, but there it was. Her emotions were more tied up with this man than she could even have imagined.

Charity needed to get out of here. "I'll be leaving now."

Adrian cocked an eyebrow at her. "Where are you going?"

She shrugged and gave him a falsely sweet smile. "Anywhere but here."

Tienan laughed. "Seems like not all the ladies find you irresistible."

Charity was totally embarrassed and completely humiliated. But she'd long ago learned that as uncomfortable as both feelings were, they didn't kill you. She tilted her chin up and tugged at her wrist.

Adrian shook his head. "You're not going anywhere. You're mine and you're staying with me."

Adrian knew his pronouncement had shocked the three other people in the room. Hell, it shocked him too. But there it was. Charity may or may not be part of a conspiracy by the General to trap him, but it didn't matter. She was part of him now and he knew he could never let her go.

Better than the women, Tienan would understand what he meant. He'd thought Silence had betrayed him early in their relationship, yet he'd been unable to leave her alone. As an Alpha, once he had a goal or a mission, there was nothing that could sway him from his course. His body, mind and soul had decided that Charity was the woman for him, the one he'd been waiting his entire adult life to find. It might not be convenient timing or the best of situations, but that didn't matter to Adrian. He was an Alpha. He'd been designed to deal with less than ideal conditions.

He was keeping Charity and that was the end of it. He'd get past all her objections later. Right now, he needed to plan a strategy.

"Any idea when Logan will be here?"

"Did I hear my name?" Large and blond and every inch an Alpha, Logan stood in the doorway, a short, light-haired woman in front of him.

Charity was quiet beside him, her eyes wide as she studied Logan. Adrian wrapped his arm around her

shoulders, tucking her closer to his body. She glared up at him, but said nothing. "Charity, this is Logan and Mercy." They both nodded, but said nothing. They seemed more interested in the way he was holding Charity so close. There would be questions later. But that was okay. Both men would understand.

"Let's get Derrick up here and we'll start planning."

Charity curled up in a chair, her eyes closed. She wasn't asleep, but close to it. She didn't know how Adrian was still awake. She resented the fact that he seemed as fresh as if he'd slept for eight hours straight. She'd been dozing on and off for hours as the men talked and planned strategy. The other women, Silence and Mercy, had stayed for a while and then disappeared to go wherever. Charity knew better than to try to leave.

The words hadn't been said, but she was a prisoner. Until Adrian decided to let her go, she was stuck here. What shocked her was the fact that she wasn't really upset about the idea. After all, she had nowhere to go in the outer city, nowhere to sleep that was safe. At least here she was sheltered and presumably would be fed eventually.

She ignored the little voice in the back of her head that pointed out that she could also be with Adrian longer. The man was a jerk. A sexy one, but a jerk nonetheless. He'd slept with her in order to pump her for information. Except he hadn't asked her any questions after they'd had sex.

They'd been interrupted, she reminded herself. But still. Now she was grasping at straws. Sighing, she shivered and rubbed her hands over her arms. Adrian rose from his desk, head cocked to one side as he listened to Tienan. He went to the corner of the room, leaned down and picked up a blanket from the pallet. He walked back to her side and spread the blanket over her.

"That should help."

Charity didn't know what to think. It was disconcerting to think that he'd been aware of her the entire time, even while she'd been sleeping. "Thanks." She gripped the top edge of the blanket and pulled it tight around her.

"You can lie down if you want. You'd be more comfortable."

Her eyes were drawn to the pallet in the corner. His bed. It would smell like him. Her nipples tightened and she shook her head. That was the last thing she needed. She needed to build some barriers against this man. "I'll stay here."

Adrian nodded and turned back to the men. "If the General wants a fight, it's time we take it to him. There has to be a way for us to get inside. If Charity got out, we can get in."

Logan leaned back in his chair, long legs kicked out in front of him. "We could take down a garbage detail. Hide a group in the back of the truck. Once we're through, we can disarm the security post and lower the entrance to the Gate."

Tienan rubbed his hand over his chin. "It's risky. He could be expecting us to do just that." He glanced at Charity. He didn't need to say the words for her to read the subtext. He thought she was a spy for the General. She didn't dare tell them her relationship to the man. They'd kill her outright. After they tortured her.

"I could get in," she offered. Four heads swiveled in her direction. She wished she'd bitten her tongue. She'd just escaped the inner city and her father's long grasp and now she was offering to go back in.

"No." Adrian's expression was dark and forbidding.

"Yes," she countered. The more she thought about it, the more sense it made. The guards wouldn't kill her, not outright. Her father would probably have her tortured and kill her himself, but that would come later. She remembered Manuel—beaten, tortured and dying—and the way he fought until the end. His life meant something. If this gave the Resistance the opening it needed, it was well worth the sacrifice.

She pushed the blanket aside and stood. "It makes sense. I can sneak in like I did before. If you have some sort of explosive device you could give me, I could blow the control center at that entrance of the Gate."

"Or you could sneak back inside and betray us all," Tienan pointed out.

"I could, but I won't." Her hand went to her face and the scar that ran down her cheek.

"I don't like it." Logan ran his fingers through his hair. "It's risky and there is no guarantee of success. It should be one of us." He pointed his finger at Adrian and Tienan. "We have skills the others don't have."

"Skills?" she asked. "What skills?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Tienan taunted. "That would certainly be some juicy information for the General."

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Everything clicked into place at once. The way the men moved, their confidence, the sheer power that seemed to surround them. The rumors. The heightened security patrols to the outer city. The whispered conversations she'd overheard in several government buildings. Alphas. Two Alphas had disappeared. Most of the general populous in the inner city thought these genetically enhanced assassins were nothing but a myth. She knew better.

Growing up in the General's household, Charity had learned many things, classified, dark secrets. One of which was that Alphas were very real. As a child, she'd been all but invisible at home. As a result, she'd

overheard much more than she should have. She'd had nightmares about the Alphas coming and killing her in her bed. As she'd grown older, she'd come to pity those men who'd been raised as a lab experiment and knew no other life.

Charity swallowed hard and tried not to show any expression. "I wouldn't tell him anything."

"We only have your word for that." Tienan shook his head. "Sorry, sweetheart, but that's not good enough for me."

"I'll go with her." Adrian's pronouncement was met by silence and then by vehement objections. He raised his hand and the men fell silent. "It makes sense. I can get inside with her and disable that entrance to the Gate. If it's a trap, they'll take me. If it's not a trap, you can sneak the rest of our people in and proceed to take out all the targets we need to bring down the Ruling Council and take control of the inner city."

"I don't like this." Derrik spoke up for the first time. Charity had noticed that the man said little, but when he did speak, the others listened. "You're our leader. The people need you."

Adrian shook his head. "No. The time has come. Either we strike now or we lose the opportunity. I'm the best man for the job."

"I'll go," Tienan offered.

The corners of Adrian's mouth turned up in a sad smile. "No. You have Silence. And she'd kill me if anything ever happened to you." He turned to Derrik. "We'll leave here tomorrow afternoon and get into position. That will give me time to scope out the area before the garbage detail arrives. I'll need weapons and we'll need to get our people into position."

He nodded at Logan. "You get your people into place at the next entrance to the east. We'll take that one down second. We need to make this happen."

Derrik rose. "I'm on it. But I still think it's a mistake."

"So noted." Adrian stood. "I'm going to rest for a few hours and then we'll go over the final plans one more time."

Derrik hurried from the room, but Tienan and Logan paused. "You don't have to do this. We can find another way." Logan held out his hand to Adrian as he spoke.

Adrian took his hand and shook it. "It has to be me. And it has to be now. This has been brewing for a while now. I *know* it's time."

Tienan clapped Adrian on the shoulder. "If that's what you want."

"It is. And if this doesn't work out..."

"Understood," Tienan replied. "I'll take care of Silence and the rest of your people."

The men filed out and she and Adrian were left alone. She glanced at the door but knew she wouldn't make it. And where would she go? She had no home, no shelter. She belonged nowhere.

"You know, don't you?"

"Know what?" She wasn't quite certain what he was referring to.

"You know what I am." He strode toward her. She jumped out of the chair so she wouldn't be trapped there. Not that she had anywhere she could run. "I saw it in your eyes," he continued.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She raised her chin and glared at him.

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. "You're a terrible liar."

She'd always thought she was a very good liar. She'd been fooling her father and others for years into thinking she was content with her life. She was so good a liar she'd even fooled herself for most of her life. "No, I'm not."

Adrian captured her face between his palms and stared down at her face. "Yes, you are. I can see it in your eyes. You look guilty when you lie.

She nibbled on her bottom lip. That couldn't be true. Could it? It must be if he knew she was lying.

"Tell me the truth," he prodded.

"You're an Alpha, aren't you?" she blurted.

Chapter Four

Adrian watched Charity carefully. As much as he wanted to believe in her innocence, she knew more than she should. The true identity of Alphas weren't common knowledge among people outside the Ruling Council and the Piedmont Company. They were more myth. Legend. Ghosts. Whenever anyone died a suspicious death, people talked. There were always rumors about the Alphas.

"Why do you say that?" He was curious to see just how much she'd admit to. She looked adorably ruffled after napping in the chair. He wanted to take her to bed, bury himself in her heat and fuck her until they were both sated. Then he wanted to snuggle her in his arms and sleep.

The last was the surprising part. He'd never actually slept with a woman before. And he'd certainly never cuddled one. He wasn't the cuddling type. Or so he'd thought. Right now, the idea of having Charity's body nestled tight to his was very appealing. His cock flexed. Seemed as though his body was in total agreement with

his plans. His mind, however, demanded answers first.

"It was something Tienan said about the three of you having skills." She paused to collect her thoughts. "You all move differently. You don't walk as much as prowl. There's a sense of power that surrounds all of you. For big men, you all move like ghosts." She crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself tight. "You heard Silence coming earlier when I didn't hear a sound. The way you all think, reason, pulled facts and figures from memory when you were talking strategy."

"But Alphas aren't real," he told her.

"Now you're lying." She frowned and rubbed one hand over her face. She looked tired. More than that, she looked exhausted. There were dark circles beneath her eyes. Adrian didn't like that.

"Why would I lie?" he prompted. He hated to push her, but he needed answers.

"To protect yourself. And you should. If he got hold of you—" She shuddered.

"If who got hold of me?"

She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry. The General. If he caught you, he'd kill you, after he tortured you."

"You think so?"

Charity shivered again. "I know so. The man is ruthless, mean as a snake and just as quick to strike. He can't be trusted. He's a monster," she whispered.

Adrian stared at Charity. There was no doubt in his mind that she knew the General, and well. The fear she had of him, the way she talked about him, spoke of personal knowledge. His gut clenched. "Are you his lover?"

Her face paled. "God no." She shook her head. "No. That's sick." She doubled over and shrank away from him when he went to touch her.

"But you know him," Adrian pushed.

Charity huddled in the corner of the room. Sliding to the floor, she wrapped her arms around her legs. Adrian wanted to comfort her, take her into his arms and reassure her that everything would be all right. He was no longer sure that was possible. Not until he discovered the secret she was hiding. He had a feeling that whatever it was, it wouldn't be good.

"Who is he to you?" Adrian stood over her, legs braced, hands on his hips. "Did he hurt you?" The thought of her in the General's hands sickened him.

"Did he hurt me?" She laughed and there was a slight hysterical edge to it that worried him. "He hurt me for years. A slap here. A beating there. Little cruelties both mental and physical." She raised her gaze and her brown eyes were filled with such pain and suffering it brought Adrian to his knees in front of her.

"Tell me." He gripped her shoulders in his hands, barely resisting the urge to shake her.

Her skin was deathly white. Even her lips were pale. The only blaze of color came from the anguish in her golden brown eyes. "My father. He's my father."

Charity waited for the first blow to fall. Surely it would come after the revelation that she was the daughter of his greatest enemy. Her father was a monster, a mass murderer, a crazed megalomaniac masquerading as a man. He wore the façade of a stern military man, strong but fair, doing the hard things that needed to be done in order to protect the inner city. To many he was a hero. But then, they didn't know him the way she did.

Adrian stood and began to prowl back and forth across the room. She could practically hear his brain working as he processed all the implications of what she'd just told him. He paced for several minutes, his mouth a thin line, his eyebrows drawn down in a frown. She glanced away and stared at her bent knees, absently noting a small tear in her pants.

He made no sound as he crossed the floor, but she knew the moment he was standing in front of her. A sense of energy, of purpose, surrounded her. She glanced down, and sure enough, the toes of his boots were almost touching hers.

She didn't want to look at Adrian, to see the fury and disgust in his eyes. She wanted to remember the wonderful sensual interlude earlier when they were nothing more than a man and a woman. She'd been simply Charity to him. A woman he wanted. Not her father's daughter to be courted for favors. Not an enemy to be fought or tortured for information.

The silence grew until it unnerved her. Drawing on the last reserves of her courage, she raised her head and looked up at him. Adrian slowly reached out his hand. "Come to bed."

Momentarily shocked, she was unable to move. *Come to bed.* That's all he could say after her earth-shattering pronouncement. She shook her head, not in denial, but in frustration. Surely she hadn't heard him correctly.

He reached down, wrapped his fingers around her wrist and tugged. Charity allowed him to pull her to her feet. They were so close that her nose was pressed against his chest. He wrapped his arm around her and gave her a gentle hug. "Come to bed. We'll talk after you've had some rest." His expression told her nothing of what he was thinking.

Charity began to shake. It started in her legs and worked its way up her torso until her entire body was encompassed. She didn't understand Adrian. Why wasn't he yelling at her, questioning her, trying to intimidate her into telling him everything she knew?

"Stop thinking about it," he told her. She glanced up at him but his attention was focused on the rumpled pallet in the corner. "It's not much but it's better than nothing."

She was worried about being tortured and he was worried about the bed being comfortable for her. She started to laugh.

Adrian's arm tightened around her. "Are you okay?"

The laughter grew. She tried to stop but it was as though a floodgate had been opened. "Am I okay? I've watched a tortured man die, escaped the inner city, betrayed my father to the Resistance and had sex with a man I barely know. I'm currently in the hands of my father's most feared enemy and he knows who I am. Of course, I'm fine." The laughter ended as suddenly as it began. Tears filled her eyes and began to stream down her cheeks. She swiped at them, hating each one that fell. "I'm sorry. I don't normally cry."

Adrian scooped her into his arms, went down on one knee and laid her on the pallet. "I didn't think you did," he assured her. He pulled a blanket over her and brushed his fingers over the scar that bisected her cheek. "It takes a lot of courage to do what you've done."

She shook her head. "I've been scared spitless the entire while. I almost gave up and went back to my apartment and forgot everything." She couldn't allow him to think she was brave when she wasn't.

He pulled up the bottom part of the blanket and began to remove her boots and socks. He didn't say anything until her feet were bare. "Real courage is being afraid and doing it anyway."

She didn't know how to answer that claim. She'd always felt like a coward, unable to find her way free of her father's machinations and then her husband's. It always seemed as though she'd been afraid her entire life. Even now, she still felt the sharp edge of fear, but it was quickly becoming dull beneath Adrian's care.

If he were going to hurt her, he wouldn't be tucking her into bed. Would he? He reached for the fastenings of her pants and before she could react, he shoved them down her legs and off.

Did he think she'd have sex with him? Now?

Her mind whirled at the implications but her body responded with a resounding yes! God, he confused her. Adrian, unaware of her internal turmoil, stood and went back to the chair, retrieved the other blanket and brought it back to the pallet, covering her with it.

The sun was coming up, but it didn't matter to Charity. She was so tired she could sleep standing up. Adrian blew out the candle on the desk, drew a blind down over the window and returned to her side.

Without a word, he yanked off his boots and pulled off his shirt. He kept his pants on as he lowered himself onto the pallet next to her. Charity lay next to him, almost afraid to move. She wasn't certain if she wanted him to touch her or not.

She was still upset at the thought that he'd slept with her strictly to get more information out of her. Not that he'd needed to do that. She'd ended up telling him everything he wanted to know. No torture necessary. No sex necessary.

Her pussy clenched as she thought about sex with Adrian. Her breasts were swollen, almost tender, and her nipples were puckered tight. No doubt about it, she didn't have to worry that she was frigid any longer. If anything, Adrian had turned her into a sex fiend.

Next to her, his big body was tight with tension. She could feel the heat rolling off him in waves. He swore softly under his breath. "Come here." He didn't wait for her to move, but pulled her into his arms.

Charity didn't resist. When he was done arranging her how he wanted her, her head was resting on his shoulder, her hand was on his chest and her right thigh was draped over his legs just above his knees.

"Sleep." His lips grazed her forehead. "We'll straighten everything out later."

How did he think she could sleep? As exhausted as she was, she was still too churned up to rest. He began to run his large hand up and down her back, soothing her. She sighed and closed her eyes. She'd rest for just a minute and then she'd think about everything.

The sensation of something brushing her lips woke her. Her eyes flew open and she met Adrian's pale blue gaze. He ran his finger across her bottom lip. "I can't wait any longer."

She recognized the depth of the longing she saw in his eyes. It mirrored the same need burning deep in her soul. She didn't say a word. Instead, she parted her lips and kissed him. It was deep and hot and overwhelmingly beautiful. Adrian's tongue stroked hers as he sought out every crevice of her mouth, touching, tasting.

Charity didn't want to think about her father or what would happen tomorrow. The only time she had was right here, right now. With Adrian. He should be her enemy. He was an Alpha. A killer. She should be terrified of him. Instead, she'd never felt safer in her life.

He broke the kiss, his hands reaching down to grab the hem of her shirt. "Let's get this off you."

Charity was silent as she helped him strip away her clothing. His pants came next. In under a minute, they were both naked. The sun was peeking in around the edges of the blinds on the window. She had no idea how much time had passed, how long she'd slept.

Adrian stretched out beside her, laying his hand over her left breast. "You have pretty breasts. Not too big. Not too small. Just the right size for my hand." He rotated his palm. Her nipple puckered, stabbing the center. Her legs moved against the thin mattress. She felt restless. Empty.

The corner of his mouth kicked up, the beginnings of a smile. "I love the way you respond to me. You don't hold anything back."

She didn't understand how he could be so gentle with her. Why he would even want her. Not after her confession. "I don't understand," she muttered.

He shrugged. "What's to understand? I want you. You want me." He tweaked her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, wringing a gasp of pleasure from her.

She licked her lips and undulated her hips as fire spread from her breasts to her pussy. "My father," she began.

"Has nothing to do with us." His touch was gentle, but his voice was hard. Unforgiving. "As long as you don't lie to me, you have nothing to fear." His hand drifted up to encircle her neck, his fingers caressing the slender bones and tendons. "You told me the truth, didn't you? Told me everything?"

A sick feeling washed over her. This had nothing to do with him wanting her and everything to do with getting what he wanted. She had to admit, as an interrogation technique it worked well. She was aroused and scared to death at the same time. How that was even possible she didn't know. She suspected it didn't say much for her intellect or common sense.

"Let me up." Her voice was barely a whisper, but he heard her. He frowned, staring down at her.

"Why?"

She swallowed hard. His palm moved up and down her throat in a slow caress. "I don't want this."

He wasn't touching her except where his hand rested on her neck. "Your body says different."

Her laugh was tinged with bitterness. "My body isn't very smart when it comes to you. I'll tell you whatever you want. You don't have to fuck me to get it."

His hand froze on her throat, his fingers tightening almost imperceptibly. "What do you mean?"

Was he really that dense? "What do you think? You get me naked and aroused and then start threatening me not to lie. I know my actions might have shown otherwise, but I do have a brain and it's time I started using it. How better for you to get revenge at the General than by fucking his daughter. You don't care about me. I could be anyone and you'd be doing the same thing."

Charity stared up at Adrian, determined to be brave. It wasn't easy with his large body looming over her naked form. His erection prodding against her thigh, a very solid reminder that he was a male animal and he was very aroused. He could easily rape her or hurt her. She closed her eyes. That wasn't anything her husband hadn't done to her. She could get through this and survive.

"You really believe that." His voice was low and rough.

She tried to nod, but it was impossible given his hold on her neck. "What else can I think?"

In a quick move, he rolled on top of her, holding his weight on his forearms as he cupped her face in his hands. "Look at me," he ordered.

She did as he asked. There was really nothing else she could do. It served no purpose to defy him. The quicker this was over with, the quicker she could work on getting away from here. Although, where she would go was anyone's guess. She had no idea.

"This isn't about your father. This is about you and me. You won't lie to me because there is no reason to." He rubbed his thumbs over her forehead, eyebrows and over her cheekbones. "I won't hurt you, sweet Charity. I would never hurt you."

She wanted to believe him. A part of her, the hopeless romantic she thought had died long ago, still flickered with hope. "I'm your enemy," she reminded him. He'd taken the news about her father much too casually for her to believe he truly felt no animosity toward her.

He shook his head. "Your father is my enemy. You're not responsible for his actions. I think he's using you, but I don't think you really knew anything about that, or even understood what he was doing."

"Because I'm too stupid to get it. I can see how you'd think that." She was still furious with herself for how easily she'd had sex with Adrian. How quick she'd been to trust him on all levels. "I haven't shown much intelligence since I got here."

"You're not stupid." For the first time, she sensed his mounting frustration. She also became very aware of his hard, muscled body covering hers. He shifted his position, making a place for himself between her thighs. The rough hair of his legs brushed against the insides of her thighs in a rough caress. His cock pressed against her stomach, her breasts crushed against his chest. The thick muscles of his biceps bulged as he easily held the bulk of his weight off her.

He leaned down and brought his lips to hers. He didn't kiss her so much as his mouth simply touched hers. His lips were warm and firm and her stomach jumped, not in fear, but in anticipation.

She closed her eyes and sighed. It seemed that where this man was concerned, common sense and self-preservation went straight out the window. All he had to do was touch her and she wanted him. She'd gone from believing she was frigid to not knowing herself at all. And it was all because of Adrian.

"I want you." He pressed his lips against the corner of her mouth, along her jaw and over to her ear. "Only you. I don't care who your father is. He's not a part of what's happening between us." His tongue traced the whorl of her ear before delving inside.

Charity moaned and arched her hips, embracing the heat that enveloped her. She could feel the dampness against her stomach where his cock head prodded against her with growing need. Slowly. Tentatively, she raised her hands and touched his shoulders.

He groaned, his eyes flashing with pale blue fire. "I want to fuck you."

Was she really going to do this? He waited, every muscle of his body tense with sexual desire. It hurt to look at him. He was like some mythical god come to life. He was so strong, more powerful than she could imagine. Smarter, faster, with an intellect that was far beyond anything she could ever match.

He wanted her. That was real. She truly believed that. His frustration hadn't been faked. But she wanted the issue of her father behind them before they continued. "Do you have any more questions about my father or the inner city?"

Adrian groaned. "Hundreds. But not now. Right now I don't give a fuck about any of it." He flexed his hips, rubbing his cock against her mound and over her stomach.

Tension she hadn't even realized she was holding inside her slowly drained away. Her body seemed to heave a big sigh and melt into the pallet beneath her. She believed him. As he flexed his hips again a different kind of tension filled her. Her toes curled and her pussy began to pulse, the inner muscles clutching hard.

She moved her hands down his shoulders and over his chest. Adrian swore and grabbed one of her hands. "I'm too close and you're not ready."

Charity undulated her hips, feeling the cream slip from her core. "I'm ready."

He shook his head, a lock of blond hair falling across his forehead. "No, you're not. But you will be." The look in his eyes promised untold pleasures. "Do you trust me?"

That was the big question for both of them, wasn't it? Trust. It all came down to that. Charity went with her gut and made the biggest decision of her life. She prayed she made the right choice. "Yes."

Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. "Raise your arms over your head. There's an old pipe running along the base of the wall. Grab it and hold on."

She tried to read him but couldn't be sure what he was thinking. "I don't understand."

"It's simple." He kissed her palm and lifted her hand over her head until her fingers brushed the pipe. She automatically closed her hand around the thick piece of metal. "I'm going to torture you, sweet Charity. With pleasure." He lifted her other hand and raised it over her head until it joined the other one. "I'm going to lick and suck and taste every inch of your body until you scream for mercy. And when you're hot and wet and screaming, I'm going to fuck you until we both can't stand it any longer."

Heat suffused her, filling every crevice of her body. Her heart pounded a wild rhythm. Breathing was difficult. She couldn't suck enough air into her lungs. Her mouth was suddenly dry, making it difficult to speak. "Adrian." She said his name, not quite sure what else she could say.

Her breasts ached. Her pussy throbbed. She wanted him to touch her. To take her. She lifted her hand to touch her face but he captured it and put it back against the pipe.

"You can't touch me. You have to keep your hands on the pipe."

She licked her lips and almost smiled as his eyes tracked the movement of her tongue. "I'm not sure I can." She wanted to stroke every inch of his hard, muscled body. She'd barely had the opportunity to touch him earlier.

"I can fix that." Rising up onto his knees, he leaned to the side and grabbed her bra. Gripping the stretchy fabric in his hands, he reached up and quickly bound her wrists together and anchored them to the thick pipe. "Now you don't have to worry."

Panic flared inside her as he tied her hands. She was totally helpless now. Unable to defend herself. She whimpered. Fear began to close in around her.

"Shh." Adrian whispered as he peppered her face with soft kisses. "Trust me." He dragged the edge of his teeth over her neck. Every nerve ending in her body sizzled with sexual heat. It shot to her breasts and down between her legs. She whimpered again, but this time it was pleasure, not fear, that prompted the sound.

"That's it," he praised as he moved down her body. His lips caressed her collarbone and the valley between her breasts.

Charity moaned, her hips moving restlessly.

He palmed her breasts, rubbing his thumbs over her distended nipples. "You're so beautiful in your passion."

Let go and trust me. It's all about pleasure."

She licked her lips and arched her back, pushing her breasts against his hands.

"That's it. Give yourself to me. Body and soul, sweet Charity. You belong to me." Leaning down, Adrian captured one tight nipple between his lips and sucked. She cried out as he carefully raked his teeth across the puckered bud, using just enough pressure to bring her the most pleasure. It bordered on pain, but never crossed the line.

Time lost all meaning as he worked his way down her body. He touched and licked, suckled and nipped. From her neck to her ankles, no part of her was left unexplored, except for her pussy. He purposely stayed away from the area that needed him the most.

Cream slid down her inner thighs and into the crease of her ass. Charity thought she might go mad. She was so close to coming. But every time she thought she was there, he'd back off and wait a few minutes before starting the erotic torture all over again.

"Adrian," she gasped.

"Mmm," he answered as he licked the crease at the top of her right thigh.

"Fuck me," she demanded. She planted her feet and pushed her hips toward him. He simply smiled and nipped at her hipbone.

"I should have tied your legs down too." He teased her inner thighs with his fingers, stopping short of touching her pulsing, hot core. "Someday I'll have you on a real bed, stretched out for my pleasure, hands and feet tied to the posts. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" He casually brushed one finger over her slick folds.

She couldn't answer. Her brain was about to short circuit. She screamed as she came. Her body stiffened, her hands clenching the pipe for support. Her vision dimmed and the world around her went black.

When reality surfaced once again, Adrian was watching her. As her eyes fluttered open, he smiled. "Now the real fun starts."

Chapter Five

There wasn't a cell inside his body that wasn't screaming at Adrian to take Charity. Now! To fuck her long and hard, marking her as his. He planned to do exactly that. Just not quite yet.

He wanted her to have the maximum pleasure he could give her. He'd almost blown it earlier. She'd withdrawn from him, shoring up her defenses. He didn't like that one little bit. She'd been apart from him, emotionally and mentally. Thankfully, she hadn't been able to hide her physical reaction. That gave him something to work with. If he tightened their physical bonds, it would help forge the emotional ones.

He didn't question his motivation. He wanted her on a level that went beyond the physical and the rational. He didn't question it, but accepted it. Charity was his mate. End of story. And he'd do whatever it took to bind her to him.

And if that meant using her physical attraction to his benefit...well, he was smart enough and bastard enough to do it. He needed her trust and, for a woman like Charity, that started with the physical. She'd been hurt before, and badly. He needed her to be able to trust him not to hurt her in that way.

The way to do that was to tie her up, take away her physical freedom, and then give her nothing but pleasure. She'd surprised him. He'd thought he'd have to work much harder to break down her barriers. But she'd given in with only a small struggle. He shoved aside the small suspicious voice that whispered it was too easy and thanked his lucky stars instead.

He had her where he wanted her and now he was going to enjoy himself. Her first orgasm had hit her hard. He'd pushed her, wanting her to come with his first touch to her pussy. She hadn't disappointed him.

For once, Adrian was grateful for the extensive training he'd had. He knew every pressure point on the body and how much force to exert for maximum pain. He'd used most of them to kill. But the flip side of that coin was that he also knew every spot on the body that could bring pleasure. Little places, like behind the knees, inside the inner arm, the curve of the neck. There were so many hidden pleasure points and he'd found them all on Charity.

He'd ignored his physical complaints as he'd touched her. Now that she'd come once, his cock was throbbing. The veins were prominent on the thick shaft, pumping blood to his erection. The head was deep purple, the slit seeping pre-cum. The sac between his legs was heavy with need. It would only take a thrust or two for him to come. Hell, he'd come if Charity so much as touched him. That was part of the reason he'd tied her hands over her head.

The other reason was simply that he loved being in charge of her pleasure. Loved giving her everything she needed.

He needed to taste her. Making a place for himself between her thighs, he pushed her legs up until her feet were flat on the floor. Holding her wide open, he indulged all his senses. Her folds were wet with her cream, she smelled hot and musky. He gritted his teeth to keep from sliding up and slamming his cock into her heat.

Taking a deep breath, he spread her lips and touched his tongue to her clit. The small bud was distended,

the protective hood pushed aside. Charity let out a long, low moan, music to his ears, as he swirled his tongue over her. She tasted sweet and spicy. Like honey with a dash of cinnamon.

"You taste so damn good." He circled her opening with his tongue, loving the way her entire lower body clenched in anticipation. He'd felt strong, powerful many times in his life. With his physical strength and training it was a given. But with Charity spread beneath him accepting his touch, his domination, opening herself to him, he felt primal. He wanted her to scream with pleasure and know that he was the only man who could give this to her.

A low growl rose from low in his chest. No other man would ever get the opportunity to find out what a treasure she was. He'd kill any other man who touched her.

Charity was his.

He swiped his tongue over her outer folds before stabbing at her center. Her hips jerked beneath him, her breathing erratic as she shoved her pussy closer to his face. He wanted to laugh aloud. Satisfaction filled him as she gasped and writhed beneath him.

Gathering some of her rich cream on his fingers, he teased the puckered opening of her ass. She froze, her breath caught in her throat as he rimmed her. "Relax," he crooned. "You'll like this." He blew on her heated flesh and lapped at her clit, distracting her from what he was doing further back. "Trust me."

"I..." She swallowed hard and her voice trembled. "No one has ever touched me there before."

Adrian's shoulders bunched as he pressed the tip of his finger past the tight muscles of her behind. This was the true test of how far she was willing to go. Her entire body vibrated with tension. He could practically smell her fear, but it was interlaced with the perfume of sexual desire. Her pupils dilated as he pushed his finger deeper.

He flattened his tongue against her clit and rubbed. Charity gasped and her eyes rolled up as her eyelids fluttered shut. Her face was flushed, her body slick. Still, he waited. He wanted, no needed some other sign from her.

There it was. Her hips moved almost imperceptibly at first, a slight lifting toward him. He pressed the finger in her ass deeper, burying it to the second knuckle. With his other hand, he teased the folds of her pussy before sliding two fingers into her tight cunt. Her eyes flew open and her lips parted on a silent cry.

"Come for me." He worked her hard, using teeth, tongue, lips and fingers to push her higher. Carefully, he pressed his finger all the way into her ass. She was so tight. She'd grip his cock like a vise if he ever fucked her ass. The thought of his shaft being squeezed tight by her ass almost made him come.

Control was slipping away. He needed time. Time to get her used to him, to prepare her body before he took her that way. The last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt her.

Adrian watched her carefully as he used his fingers to fuck her, adjusting his rhythm and the depth of penetration to give her maximum pleasure. He knew the second she was going over the edge. She gave a low, low cry and her legs straightened, her back bowed off the pallet. Her body convulsed and she began to shake.

He could wait no longer.

Slipping his fingers from her, he knelt between her legs and lifted her hips, draping her legs over his thighs. Fitting his cock head to her opening, he pushed. Her inner muscles were still convulsing from her orgasm and he ground his jaw together to keep from coming before he got all the way inside. He surged forward, gaining another two inches. Her cunt was tight and swollen.

He rotated his hips, working his way deeper. "Take all of me," he ground out. Sweat beaded his brow. He had to get inside her. His balls were heavy and tight as he pulled back and pushed forward, sinking deeper into her heat.

Charity moaned, squeezing her inner muscles around him. It was too much. Adrian threw back his head and came. Hot pulses of semen jetted into her. He shoved himself against her, still not quite all the way there.

God, he had to get all of his cock into her. Even as he came, he kept working his shaft deeper. The tension in his chest eased as he fitted the last inch of his erection inside her welcoming heat. It was even better than the first time he'd fucked her. There was more of a bond, an even greater sense of connection between them.

Adrian bowed his head and sucked in a deep breath. Her skin was pale and slick, her nipples standing up like bright red berries, just waiting to be sampled. He frowned as he noted that her wrists were red from where she'd tugged against her bonds. Reaching up, he untied her. The change of position plunged his cock deeper, wringing a moan out of both of them.

Carefully, he lowered her arms to her side, rubbing her shoulders to release any tension and prevent sore muscles. She smiled up at him, a sleepy, sated smile. He was still as hard as a rock inside her. Pulling back slightly, he surged forward. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

"But you just..." The rest of her words were lost on a gasp as he gave another thrust.

"It wasn't enough." He realized the truth of his words. He could fuck her three times a day for the rest of his life and it wouldn't be enough. His balls were still tight and heavy, his cock still hard and ready.

Capturing her breasts with his hands, he massaged the plump swells of flesh, paying particular attention to

the tight nubs that tipped them. Charity licked her lips and slid her hands up his shoulders. "Again?"

He nodded, knowing how he wanted to take her this time. "Again."

Charity wasn't quite certain she'd survive Adrian's lovemaking. Her body was sore and stiff. Well used. But she also felt relaxed, sated and strangely content. She couldn't believe that Adrian had tied her up, and she'd not only let him, but she'd enjoyed it. The sensation of being helpless, but not in a bad way, was a revelation. Adrian had given her nothing but pleasure.

He'd also done things to her that no other man had ever done. She'd never trust another man enough to let them tie her hands. Nor would she ever allow a man to put his finger up her ass. It had been tight at first, almost painful, but there was a dark pleasure as well. The longer his finger had been inside her, the more she liked it.

The thought of having his thick cock buried in her ass was a tantalizing possibility. One she knew would please him as well. Adrian was so dominant, so in control. She should have run screaming in fear from him. Instead, she'd given herself into his care and had been well rewarded.

Charity bit her bottom lip to keep from groaning as he stroked her breasts, plucking at her nipples. His cock was still locked inside her, pulsing like a heartbeat. She felt restless, the familiar heat building within. As unbelievable as it seemed, she wanted him again. And he wanted her.

She dug her nails into his sweat-slicked shoulders, loving the way the heavy muscles rippled beneath her palms. He was an incredibly beautiful man. A prime example of physical perfection. His shoulders were impossibly wide, his chest banded with muscle. She splayed her hands over his torso, stroking every inch that she could reach.

He groaned and captured one of her hands, bringing it to her lips. "You touch me and I'm ready to come."

A surge of pride went through her. For the first time in her life, she felt the power of being a woman. It was strange, but she liked it. A lot. It made her feel more of an equal in this unusual relationship of theirs.

They were virtually strangers, yet she felt closer to Adrian than she ever had to anyone in her life. She *knew* him in a way she couldn't fully describe. He had honor. He'd fought for justice and equality for years, putting himself in harm's way. His people were devoted to him, believed in him. Charity trusted him.

She had no idea how long she'd be with him, but she wanted whatever time she could get. Life was short and uncertain. This was the first time in her life she'd felt happy. She wanted to hoard as much of the sensation as she could. The future would take care of itself.

Adrian started to pull out of her. She wrapped her legs around him, trying to lock him inside her. He laughed as he leaned down and dropped a quick, hard kiss on her lips. She could taste herself on him, the combination of his mouth and her cream. She licked her lips, savoring the flavor and he groaned.

He unlocked her ankles and pulled out. She cried out at the loss. Adrian flipped her onto her stomach, wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her up onto her knees. She braced her hands against the floor to keep steady. Adrian was already between her legs, fitting his cock back into her sheath. Where she was so wet from the combination of her orgasm and his, he slid in easily.

She arched against him as he forged his way into her, loving the sensation of being filled by him.

"Your cunt fits me like a glove." His voice was low and dark, his words making her blush even as they aroused her. She'd never met a man who talked like he did. He was gritty and real, comfortable with his sexuality.

One of his arms banded around her waist, his fingers dipping low until he was touching her mound. "Your sweet little bud is just begging for my touch." His voice was hypnotic. She felt the brush of his finger against her clit and moaned. "That's it," he encouraged, stroking her clit. "I love the little sounds of pleasure you make. It's like music."

He shifted his hand, bringing it back to her ass. He cupped both mounds in his palms and squeezed. "I love your ass." He dipped one finger into her crease and rimmed the tight opening. "I want to fuck your ass one day." He pressed his slick finger past the ridge of muscles and sank into her dark depths.

He worked his finger deep, stretching her. She was filled to overflowing with his finger in her ass and his cock buried in her pussy. She was stretched to the breaking point. Once again, it bordered on pain, but it felt so damn good she didn't care.

"Will you let me?" He pulled his finger back to the edge of her anus and fitted another one next to it, working both of them into her.

She threw her head back and cried out. It burned even as she shivered in sexual delight. The contradiction threw her over the edge. She came hard, her inner muscles clutching at his cock.

Adrian swore as he pulled his fingers from her ass, wrapped his hands around her waist and began to fuck her. Hard. His hips hammered against hers, flesh slapping against flesh. His balls smacked against her mound with every thrust, brushing her clit. Charity cried out as her orgasm went on and on, consuming her.

Her hands skidded as Adrian pounded into her. Her upper body was flat to the floor while he held her lower half up where he wanted her. He powered into her, his cock stretching her, filling her. He seemed to grow larger, hotter every time he tunneled deep.

He roared and she felt his hot seed spill inside her as he came. He didn't stop, but kept fucking her until he couldn't stay upright any longer. They collapsed in a heap onto the pallet. Adrian pulled out at the last second and shifted his weight to one side so he didn't squash her.

No part of her body seemed functional. She was breathing, which was a good thing, but other than that, she was boneless. She felt hot and sticky, her muscles sore and tender. She stretched her legs as a sense of contentment washed over her.

Adrian's hand landed on her butt and he squeezed. She gave a small snort of laughter and turned her head so she could look at him. His hair was damp, a lock of hair plastered to his forehead. He looked relaxed. His lips were parted and his blue eyes twinkled.

"Don't even think about it," she warned.

He chuckled. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is worn out." His hand splayed over her lower back before moving up and down in a soothing caress. She gave a sigh of contentment as he rubbed his fingers over her spine.

The caress changed. So subtly at first, she didn't notice. She froze, her sense of satisfaction disintegrating, replaced by growing tension. Adrian sat up and stared at her. She could feel his gaze boring down on her as he touched the myriad faded scars that ran up and down the length of her back.

They'd been there for so long, she'd all but forgotten them. In the heat of passion, Adrian hadn't noticed them. But now that the passion had faded, he'd found them. Like the mark on her face, they weren't her fault, but that didn't make her feel any less ashamed of them.

"Who?" The single word was cool. Clipped.

She sighed and rolled over onto her back, tugging a thin blanket over her. "The General doesn't like defiance of any kind."

Adrian's lips thinned and his eyes narrowed. "Your father beat you."

Charity really didn't want to talk about this. Talk about spoiling the mood. She dragged her fingers through her tangled hair and drew her knees up tight to her chest. "Yes."

"Did your husband?" Every line of his body was rigid as he waited for her reply.

She had no idea why this was so important to him. It was over and done with and nothing anyone could do would change it. "No." Adrian's gaze flickered to her face. She covered the scar on her left cheek with her palm. "He didn't beat me, but he did hit me once. He was in a rage and I fell and hit my face." She shrugged, not wanting to remember the shouting, the accusation, or the pain.

Adrian swore and gathered her into his arms. Leaning back against the wall, he held her to his chest. She could feel the rapid beat of his heart against her arm as she nestled closer. "I don't need your pity. It happened. I survived. It's over." She glanced up at him. "I don't imagine that your life's been easy either."

He didn't answer. He cupped the back of her head with his hand and urged her to lean against him. Sighing, she did. In spite of the sleep she'd gotten, she was still tired. But there was so much to do before tomorrow night.

Fear snaked down her spine. She was willingly going back inside the Gate, where her father's reach was unending. He'd kill her when he caught her. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind. Knowing that, she wanted to celebrate life.

She caught Adrian's face between her two hands, pulled him down to her and kissed him. There would be time for talking later.

An hour later, Adrian watched Charity as she slept. Propped up on one arm, he tucked a lock of curly hair behind her ear with his free hand. Even though his body was sated, a deep, dark fury welled inside him.

Charity had been beaten as a child and into her adulthood. His own life hadn't been easy. Neither had the lives of most of the people he knew. But that didn't seem to matter. Charity had grown up inside the Gate. She should have had an ideal childhood, filled with pleasant memories. Instead, she'd been in as much of a prison as he had. Her every thought and action directed by the General.

Was she still acting on his behalf?

No. He wouldn't believe that. Couldn't believe that. In spite of her life, there was a sense of innocence, of honesty, about Charity that tugged at him. She was the reason he was fighting. She and hundreds like her. For the ragged children and the worn women and exhausted men who all dug and clawed for their very existence in this world.

In spite of the hardships, many of them still found joy in the simplest of things. It was what kept him going. But the end of the game was at hand. Either he would defeat the General and bring down the Gate or he'd die. There was no going back.

He touched Charity's cheek, marveling at her soft skin. He only wished he'd found her sooner. They'd barely had any time together. He didn't like the idea of her coming with him, of getting in the middle of this fight. But, he supposed, she had no choice. None of them did. The lines had been drawn, the sides chosen.

At least she would be with him where he could protect her. He didn't trust anyone else to look after her, not the way he would.

He only hoped that when it came down to it, Charity was on his side. He knew that Tienan and Logan would object, as would Silence and Derrick. But Adrian was listening with his instincts, not his intellect. He was going to trust Charity as she'd trusted him.

She, and she alone, had the power to destroy him.

Leaning down, he kissed her. Her sweet lips parted on a sigh but she didn't wake. He climbed to his feet and dressed in silence. When he was done, he left the room. He stopped at the door and took one final look. Charity lay on the hard floor, covered by two thin blankets. He wanted more for her than that.

He left, closing the door behind him. There was a lot of work to do and not much time in which to do it.

Chapter Six

There was only a small sliver of light from the moon by which to see. Charity was thankful that it wasn't foggy, as was the case about fifty percent of the time, according to Silence. She'd talked briefly with the other woman when she'd come to wake Charity and lead her to the women's bathing area and then to the kitchen. Adrian had the foresight to send her knapsack along with Silence. So if she met her death tonight, she was at least clean and well fed.

Silence hadn't said anything about Charity's rumpled state. Although it was impossible for anyone with half a brain not to know she and Adrian had slept together. And Silence was no fool. She'd given Charity a warning glare, but other than that, she'd kept quiet about the matter.

Mercy was a bit more pleasant, but she'd been busy. As a healer, Mercy had been seeing patients and patching injuries. As well, she'd been working with Doc Smith on how to best handle any casualties from tonight's raid.

Her stomach churned and she jumped as Adrian's hand fell heavy on her shoulder. "You okay?" The heat from his skin penetrated the fabric of her coat and shirt, warming her.

She nodded. She was anything but okay. She'd barely seen Adrian in the past twenty-four hours. He'd been busy organizing his troops and making plans. There had been so much activity and little she could do to help. When she wasn't helping Nadine in the kitchen area, she'd answered all the questions Adrian, Tienan, Logan and Derrick had put to her. She'd sensed that of all of them, only Adrian trusted her. And she wasn't even one hundred percent certain about him.

There had been no further opportunity for them to talk alone, let alone anything else. Charity had slept by herself last night, but at least she'd slept on Adrian's pallet in his office. Just being surrounded by his scent had allowed her to sleep even as it aroused her. She couldn't be certain, but she thought he might have joined her for an hour or so. She had a vague dream of being held in his arms. But she'd fallen asleep alone and woken alone so there was no way to be sure.

She only hoped that once this was over, they'd have the opportunity to spend more time together. She squared her shoulders and concentrated on the here and now. If all she had of Adrian was the few hours they'd shared, she would count herself lucky to have had that much. He'd shown her what it was like to be happy, even if it was for such a short time.

Charity had no idea where the other men and women in the Resistance were currently hiding. She'd caught only the occasional flash of someone moving through the ruins of the outer city as she and Adrian worked their way toward the dump where they hoped to hop a ride in a disposal truck.

Adrian grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down beside him. She waited, knowing he could hear things she couldn't, see more than she could. His genetically enhanced senses were phenomenal. Adrian might as well be taking a stroll in the daytime for all the darkness hindered him. She, on the other hand, was stumbling around, desperately trying not to make any noise.

"Do you hear anything?" she whispered. She strained her ears but could hear only the occasional sound of an insect. The night was quiet, almost unnaturally so.

Adrian shook his head, his gaze focused on the piles of rubble that made up the dump. A flash of something off to her right made her gasp. Someone was out there. Before she could speak, he covered her mouth with his hand. Leaning closer, he spoke softly into her ear. "It's just a kid."

His soft breath tickled her ear, sending goose bumps down her spine. She shivered and her nipples tightened beneath her clothing. His physical nearness distracted her so much she almost missed his words. When they registered, she jolted. "A child?"

He nodded, his eyes narrowing and his jaw tightening. She was so close, she could almost hear the grating sound of him grinding his teeth. "The kids pick through the garbage, finding food, clothing and anything else they can use to survive."

"That's horrific." The thought of a child having to dig through the garbage to find food was appalling.

"That's reality." Adrian didn't turn his gaze away from the dump. "Your father's troops brought me here once."

Every muscle in Charity's body tensed. From the grim tone of Adrian's voice, she knew this story wasn't going to have a happy ending. But she sensed it was very important to him. She didn't speak, waiting for him to continue.

"Twelve of us were slated for termination back in 2121. We weren't progressing fast enough for the scientists and the General. We were too unpredictable and there were budget cuts to contend with." He turned to her and smirked. "They would no longer waste resources on subjects deemed unsatisfactory."

The horror of it slammed into her gut like the blade of a knife. To hold human life with such little regard was appalling. Her stomach roiled and, for a moment, she thought she might be sick. She swallowed hard and sucked in a breath, trying to calm herself. As horrible as this was, she needed to hear it. Wanted to know what had made Adrian into the man he was today.

"They brought us out here, lined us up and shot us." Adrian might have been carved from stone he was standing so still. "This way they didn't have to dispose of the bodies. Thankfully for me, they didn't check to make sure they'd done the job right. Their mistake."

Charity wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her forehead against his back, needing to comfort him in some small way. Nothing could wipe away the memories of that awful day, but that didn't mean he had to deal with them alone.

Every muscle in his body was tense, but gradually she felt the slightest give in them. He sighed softly and placed his hand over hers where they were entwined on top of his abdomen. "I remember the flies. The sound of the buzzing. The feel of insects creeping over my body. The coppery smell of blood, the stench of rotting flesh."

Abruptly, Adrian broke away from her embrace and grabbed her arm. "Come on. We need to get into position."

Her heart broke for him and for the men who'd died beside him that day. They would have been eighteen at the time. Not really men, but no longer boys. Not that they'd ever had a chance to be children or to lead a normal life. Her determination built. She would help destroy her father and the privileged world he inhabited. It wasn't fair that a few had everything while others starved and died in squalor.

She followed where he led and within minutes they were secreted behind the remains of an old shed. The plan was to wait for the garbage detail to go to the dump and unload its cargo. When it was on its return trip, they'd jump in the back and hope for the best.

They each had several explosive devices in their packs. When they got inside the Gate, they'd jump out of the vehicle, leaving one of the explosives behind. When it went off, the guards would be distracted and that would allow them to blow up the station that controlled that entrance to the Gate.

It all sounded simple enough, but Charity knew there were a hundred things that could go wrong. "Adrian." He turned toward her and suddenly she didn't know what to say. How did you tell a man you'd only just met that you loved him and were willing to die for him? She couldn't.

Instead, she sank her fingers into his hair and yanked him close, planting a short, hard kiss on his lips. "Be careful." There was so much she wanted to say to him, but there was no time and she wasn't even certain he'd want to hear it. There had been no talk of the future, no discussion past tonight's battle.

She barely had time to taste him when she was pulling back. They both had to keep their focus. She'd barely leaned away when Adrian tangled his hand in her hair and yanked her toward him. He slammed his lips down on hers, shoving his tongue into her mouth.

Heat ripped through her. She gripped his head, not wanting to lose contact as he stroked her tongue with his. He tasted of dark passion, of sex, of male dominance. Her panties grew damp as the folds of her sex grew wet and swollen. She ached for Adrian, wanted to be with him.

He tugged her head away from his and stared down at her, his pale eyes glittering in the moonlight. They were both breathing hard. Neither of them said anything. The atmosphere around them was charged with sexual tension, with unrequited needs.

Suddenly, he dropped his hand and spun around. "They're coming."

The jump from sexual arousal back to business made Charity's head spin. She sucked in a breath and tried to ignore the rapid beat of her heart and the heavy pulse between her thighs. She heard it then, the rumbling sound of the garbage vehicle. It was like a slap in the face, bringing her back to reality, to the reason they were here.

The vehicle sped by, its lights breaking the darkness. On top, a man sat behind an armor-plated shield, a gun peeking through a slit. It came to a stop at the dump. The driver quickly pulled a lever and the back part of the vehicle tilted upward so that the load inside fell to the ground in a disgusting heap. It was quickly lowered into place and the driver swung the vehicle around to head back to the inner city. The entire operation took under a minute.

"Get ready." Adrian's low, toneless voice reached her. She gathered herself, coming up into a crouch, ready to move. "Go," he commanded as the vehicle rumbled by. Adrian moved swiftly and quietly, vaulting easily into the rear of the garbage truck.

Charity ran, her knees pumping and her stride lengthening as she strained to reach the moving vehicle. She wasn't sure she could make it. It was much easier getting out of this thing when it was moving than it was to get in. Adrian held out his hand and she jumped, grabbing onto his hand. He yanked her into the truck, catching her in his arms so she didn't fall.

She couldn't hear over the pounding of her heart and the deep growls of the vehicle as it powered them toward the Gate. They'd made it. They had a way to go yet, but it was a start.

She grinned at Adrian and then wrinkled her nose as she got a whiff of her surroundings. It was just as unpleasant as she remembered it. The truck jolted, throwing her against Adrian's chest. He braced his back against the side of the vehicle and wrapped both arms around her.

In spite of the danger facing them and their unpleasant surroundings, Charity was surprisingly content. She was doing something important and she was with the man she loved. If she died tonight, it was worth it. To have these few days of freedom, of making a difference, was worth everything.

She suddenly understood Manuel and how he was willing to die for this cause, this man beside her. Why he'd wanted to continue to fight even as the blood drained from his body.

Freedom. Freedom to live and love as you chose was everything.

"This is it." Adrian sounded calm, while she was anything but. The garbage truck was slowing down and finally came to a halt.

Her heart was racing, her palms were sweaty and her breathing was way too fast. She concentrated on trying to control her breath as she hitched her pack tighter over her shoulder.

He tugged her down, covering her body with his as the vehicle started to move again. She peeked around Adrian's shoulder as they passed through the Gate. She recognized the small, secure building that housed the controls to the Gate's entrance. Men called out to one another, machinery creaked and groaned as the truck entered the inner city.

"Be careful," Adrian warned. "And stay close."

She nodded, but he wasn't looking at her. He jumped, rolling swiftly to one side and off the road. She followed, not quite as graceful. She was just heaving a sigh of relief when a spotlight blinded her. She brought her arm up to shade her eyes.

She heard Adrian swearing behind her and the sound of boots pounding on the ground. Lots of boots. The garbage vehicle stopped, turning so it blocked the entire road. The driver jumped out of the vehicle and took position on the far side, resting his rifle on the hood of the truck.

"You're surrounded. Come out with your hands up."

Charity swiveled her head around, unable to believe what she was hearing. It was her father. Adrian swore again, low and lurid, and she glanced at him. She flinched at the fury in his eyes. Did he believe she was part of this?

"Come out, Charity," the General yelled. "My men have him covered. Your job is done. It's safe for you."

Her mouth dropped open. "You can't believe him," she whispered frantically at Adrian.

He stared at her, the fire in his eyes extinguished, his gaze flat. She'd never seen him like this and she was terrified. This was the Alpha, the cold-blooded assassin. The killer.

It didn't matter. The man she loved was still there inside him and she'd do whatever it took to save him. Shoving her hand into her pack, she pulled out two of the explosive devices Derrik had given her earlier and surreptitiously jammed them into her pockets.

"Don't do anything stupid," she warned him. She couldn't look at his face any longer. Didn't want to know if he thought she'd betrayed him. It didn't matter. Not now. Maybe if they survived this, it would matter. Right now, all she wanted to do was to get Adrian out of here alive. "I'm coming out," she yelled.

Slowly, she stood, raising her hands above her head. She scanned the area. The control station was off to her right. Her father was directly in front of her, a smug look on his face. She could see the sadistic glee glinting in his eyes and knew he'd used her.

He'd allowed her to find the prisoner, let her escape to the outer city. If she managed to bring some of the Resistance to him...well then, all the better. If she died out there in the dangerous world beyond the Gate, it was no big deal. Collateral damage. She could read the truth in his eyes as easily as if he told her in words.

The General was certain of her. He thought she'd do nothing to stop him. And why would he think differently? She'd never defied him in her entire life. Not until she'd left here, and he'd orchestrated that. He wouldn't suspect her to do anything brave or foolish.

She didn't think about Adrian behind her, watching her walk to his greatest enemy. She could feel his eyes boring into her back. Raising her chin, she strode toward her father. She didn't glance to the right or the left.

She stumbled and fell to the ground, catching herself on her hands before she ended up face first in the dirt.

"Hurry up." She could hear her father's impatience. Sense the growing unease among the squadron of security police circling them. As she pushed herself up, she slipped her hand into her pocket. Flicking the switch on the explosive device, she yanked it from her pocket and tossed it toward the security station. It bounced

once. Twice. Before coming to a stop by the door.

Men yelled. Shots rang out. Charity hit the ground as the world exploded around her. Grabbing the second device from her pocket, she tossed it toward the opening the first explosive had made in the building. She had to bring it down, blow the controls. The ground around her exploded and she rolled just as another blast brought the night alive with color and sound. The shock wave tossed her back several feet. Debris scattered, raining down on her from above. Some of it peppered her back and arms.

Confusion reigned.

Smoke filled the air, making it difficult for her to see. The world looked odd, as though everyone was moving and speaking in slow motion. Charity pushed herself up into a seated position, trying to stand, but her legs wouldn't cooperate. She was shaking, trembling from head to toe. Nothing sounded right. Everything was muffled. She shook her head, trying to clear her vision and moaned as her head began to throb.

Suddenly the world popped back into focus and everything sped up. Gunfire punctured the night, men yelled and screamed. She glanced toward the Gate and smiled grimly when she saw the entrance was wide open and members of the Resistance were pouring through. She'd done it.

Her arm was suddenly wrenched behind her back and she was dragged to her feet. "You little bitch." She didn't have time to react as a thick forearm wrapped around her neck and she was pulled backward. "Move. You're going to be my shield while we get out of here. Don't do anything stupid or I'll shoot you in the head." Her father jammed the barrel of his gun against her temple. There was no doubt in her mind he'd do exactly as he said without a moment of hesitation or regret.

Charity didn't resist, moving as the General directed. Her explosive devices were gone, but she had a knife strapped to her side, hidden by her coat. If she got the chance she was going to use it and end the threat to Adrian once and for all.

She scanned the chaos unfolding before her. Fires were burning in several places. The garbage vehicle was ablaze, the flames lighting up the night. People were running and screaming, while others shouted orders. Charity caught a glimpse of Adrian with Derrik by his side, both men firing at the security squadron. They were both dirty and disheveled but wonderfully alive.

She smiled.

Her father dragged her farther away from the battle. Charity went without a struggle. She was looking forward to their final confrontation.

Adrian swore as his rifle jammed. "Catch." He heard the yell and recognized the voice a split second before another rifle came flying in his direction. He caught the weapon in his right hand, shouldered it and shot in one easy motion, dropping a man ten yards away.

Derrik was beside him moments later, firing at the enemy as he gave a report on the fly. Their people were in and a twelve-man detail had been dispatched to take down the next entrance to the Gate. When he was finished, he yelled over the din of the battle. "What the hell happened?"

That was what he wanted to know.

When the General had called out to Charity telling her to come out, that her job was done, everything inside him had gone cold. He'd known this was a trap, but somehow in the short time he'd known Charity, he'd come to trust her. He hadn't believed she'd had anything to do with the General's plans to destroy him and the Resistance.

He'd shut down on every emotional level, functioning purely on a physical and mental level. He was an Alpha and nothing would stop him from his mission. He could still see the pain in her brown eyes, the fear, the determination as she'd told him not to do anything stupid. Then she'd stood and walked away from him.

He'd thought nothing could break him. But that had done it. He'd felt all the blood draining from his face, the life leaving his body.

Then she'd stumbled and her hand had slipped into her pocket. His brain had begun to fire on all cylinders again and he realized what else he'd seen burning in her eyes.

Love. For him.

He knew in that split second what Charity planned to do. She was going to blow the control station and open the Gate. She was trading her life for his. Because she loved him.

Roaring, he'd come to his feet, rifle firing, even as he'd tossed an explosive device toward a security squadron. The one he'd left in the back of the garbage vehicle went off the same time the one Charity had thrown did. The blast had knocked him onto his ass, but he'd rolled onto his stomach and kept shooting.

He'd seen her lying on the ground, not moving. His heart had stopped. It was unthinkable that she'd die for him. He was an Alpha and she was his woman. It was his job to protect her.

And a hell of a job he'd done. At the first test, he'd failed, believing the General's lies instead of what he knew in his heart to be the truth. He'd been afraid to really trust Charity, to risk his heart. It was easy for him to put his life on the line. It was what he'd been bred to do. But his heart was a whole other matter.

She'd moved then, tossing a second explosive device and blowing the Gate wide open. He'd lost her then in the smoke and the melee, only to find her just as the General was dragging her away, using her as a shield.

He'd willed her to look at him and, miraculously, she had. She'd caught his gaze and smiled. He knew what she was going to do. Damn her brave hide, she was going to kill her father. For him.

If they got out of this alive, he was going to put her over his knee and spank her. He shook his head before the thought was even finished. He'd never raise a hand to her. He'd damn well tie her to a bed and fuck her until she promised him she'd never risk herself like this again.

Plan in place, he turned to Derrik. "You're in charge. I'm heading into the city after the General."

Derrik nodded. "I'll clean up here and be right behind you."

Adrian strapped on his knapsack and began to move, running quickly, zigzagging across the ground, finding cover wherever he could. The ground was littered with men dead and dying. Adrian ignored their cries and pleas as he ran. He scooped up several rifles on the fly, hooking their straps over his shoulder.

He fired as he raced down the streets of the inner city, heading for security headquarters. There was no doubt in Adrian's mind that's where the General would go. He'd feel safe there in his command post. But Adrian had spent years digging out every scrap of intel he could get. He had detailed maps of the city and its buildings. Had committed them to memory. He knew where his prey was going and he was close behind.

He could almost smell the General's fear. A feral grin crossed his face as he raced toward his destination. This day of reckoning had been a long time coming.

Sweat covered his forehead and slid downward, making his eyes sting. He rubbed the back of his arm over his face, not slowing down, not stopping. He was totally focused. He was an Alpha and he had a target. The General would die and Charity would live. There was no other choice.

The General had created a monster and now that monster had returned home to claim his maker.

Chapter Seven

Charity didn't try to slow the General down as he pulled her deeper into the city. Security squadrons rolled down the streets toward the fighting on the outskirts of the inner city. The Ruling Council would all take shelter in their emergency bunkers, leaving the general populous to fend for themselves. She saw several people looking out their windows, expressions of horror on their faces as the sounds of gunfire and shouting got closer.

She shut it all out. She had a goal and had to be ready when her opportunity arose. And she had to do it quickly. Adrian was coming. Not that she thought he was coming for her. Just the opposite, in fact. The last glimpse she'd had of him had told her nothing had changed. Adrian still wore his expressionless gaze, an Alpha with a job to do. She had no doubt he'd come for the General.

A huge explosion lit up the night, illuminating the surrounding buildings. Relief washed over her as she realized it had to be the second gate coming down. Logan and Tienan and the rest of the Resistance would be joining the fight.

The General was breathing hard now. She could smell his fear and sought to feed it. "He's coming you know."

"Shut up." Her father tightened his arm around her throat, tilting her neck back until she feared it might snap. He might be in his late fifties, but the General was stronger than most men half his age. "He won't get beyond the perimeter of the city."

Charity tried to suck in air through her nose. Black spots danced in front of her eyes and she knew she was quickly losing consciousness. The pressure was suddenly released and the General grabbed her by the wrist, dragging her up the stairs to the security building. Men raced down the steps as they surged upward. Many of them were wide-eyed with fright.

They were scared out of their minds. *And so they should be*, she thought. These were members of the inner city security. Most of them had only ever patrolled the safe confines of the city. They were about to face men and women who had been tested, who had honed their battle and survival skills every day of their lives.

Smithson Piedmont, a member of the Ruling Council and the head of The Piedmont Corporation who'd created the Alphas, met them just inside the front door. His normally neat gray hair was standing up on end, and he was sweating profusely. The white lab coat he wore over his suit was stained. The lines around his mouth and eyes were deeper than usual, a testament to his growing concern.

Piedmont was a man much like her father, rarely showing any emotion. The fact that he was showing strain was a testament to just how serious the attack was. "What is going on, Benson?" The man might be sweating, but his usual air of haughty superiority was firmly in place.

"Adrian is coming," she whispered before her father could speak.

The General whirled around, backhanded her with a savage blow. She fell back and would have landed on the floor if not for the bruising grip he had on her wrist. "Keep your mouth shut, girl," he instructed as he turned back to Piedmont. "It's nothing. A slight problem at one of the entrances to the Gate."

Charity laughed, wincing as her jaw ached. "Slight problem. That's an understatement. The entrance is

blown and the entire Resistance is pouring in.”

Piedmont paled. “Is that true?”

“It’s under control,” her father growled.

Sounds of fighting grew louder and Piedmont strode to the door and looked out. He whirled around and headed toward the back of the building. “Fix this, General,” Piedmont ordered as he hurried down the hallway.

Charity knew there was an entrance leading to a set of tunnels that ran beneath the city. She’d told Adrian all about them. The Ruling Council would protect themselves at all cost, throwing the men of the security police and the general population in front of the Resistance if it meant they’d escape. If they thought they could hide in the tunnels, they were sorely mistaken. She didn’t tell him that, but watched him go. Piedmont was another man who deserved whatever fate he got.

Her father’s fingers gripped her wrist so tightly she could feel the bones crunching together. She cried out in spite of her resolve not to give him the satisfaction of her pain. He liked hurting others. Knew just how much pressure to exert to hurt without actually breaking her bones. For now, he was toying with her. Content to inflict maximum pain without permanently damaging her.

“This way.” He dragged her toward the staircase and down two flights of stairs. They were going to the interrogation rooms.

In spite of her resolve, her legs trembled and her breathing got shallow. She knew what went on here. Had seen it for herself. There would be no mercy for her. Nor did she expect any. She expected to die.

A sense of calm washed over her. Her breathing grew deeper and her legs stronger. She could do this. She *would* do this. She would kill the General to protect Adrian if it was the last thing she did.

She let her pack slide slowly down her free arm. As the General slammed open the entrance to the stairs, she let it drop silently to the floor. When Adrian came looking for the General, hopefully he’d see her pack and know which way to go. It would save precious time in case she didn’t succeed in killing her father.

Adrian raced through the streets, aware of two men swiftly moving up behind him. He didn’t break stride, didn’t pause. The fact that they could keep up with him told him who they were.

“Where are we headed?” Logan asked as he let two shots fly, dropping two men as they rounded the side of a large building. His aim had been true and both bullets had gone straight through the foreheads of their intended targets. An Alpha didn’t believe in wasting precious ammunition.

“Security headquarters. The General has Charity.”

Tienan glanced behind, firing rapidly before turning back to the road in front of him. “There’s a team in the tunnels now, routing out the rats who thought they could desert the city.”

Adrian nodded. He trusted the people he had in place to continue fighting, to follow the plan he’d laid out. The three men moved as one unit, dodging bullets, jumping over debris and skulking in the shadows. They’d never fought together before, but that didn’t hinder them. They were all Alphas, all warriors. Their brains continuously weighed options, finding the best route to their destination.

They didn’t slow for anything, moving steadily forward. The general populous weren’t a problem, as they had no weapons of their own. That was one of the many ways in which the Ruling Council kept things the way they wanted them. Most of the city’s inhabitants would hide in their homes and hope for the best. They’d long ago forgotten what it was like to fight for what they wanted.

The security headquarters came into view. The building was squat and gray, but Adrian knew the real work went on down in the lower levels beneath the ground. That’s where the General would take Charity. There was also an escape hatch into the tunnels down there. He turned to Logan. “You take the tunnel entrance.”

“I’m on it.” Logan rushed up the steps, firing nonstop as he went. Bodies of security police fell before the onslaught of the three Alphas. They scooped up weapons as they ran by, discarded empty guns with a toss.

The three men flattened themselves against the concrete wall just outside the main entrance. Tienan motioned to Logan, who nodded. Like a well-oiled machine, they moved as one. Tienan went in high, Logan low. Adrian followed, going straight down the center.

The lobby was empty. The entire building had an air of vacancy about it. Still, they weren’t taking any chances. “Booby trap on the right,” Logan called out. “Clear,” he said a few moments later.

“I’ve got one too.” Tienan took care of the explosive device as easily as Logan had.

Adrian scanned the foyer, weapon ready as he moved steadily forward. His woman was in here somewhere. He could almost smell her. The freshness of her skin, tinged with the nasty tang of fear and overlaid with a layer of determination.

His eyes landed on a pack sitting just outside a door. It was Charity’s. His gut told him she had left it as a sign for him to follow. *That’s my girl.* “This way.” The other men were right behind him as he eased the door open. He listened, but heard nothing. The stairwell was clear.

“I’m going to hit the tunnels. Good luck.” With that, Logan disappeared down the hallway toward the back of the building where the main escape to the tunnels was located.

"Be careful," Tienan called. Logan lifted his hand and gave a backward wave to let them know he'd heard. Impatience ate at Adrian. That wasn't like him. As an Alpha, he was calm and calculated at all times, weighing options and making logical decisions.

Screw logic, he decided as he moved swiftly and silently down the stairs. Charity was down here somewhere and he had to save her. Nothing was more important than that. Nothing. She was everything to him.

He loved her.

He came up solid as though he'd hit an invisible wall. He loved her. She alone was his weak spot, his Achilles heel. Did the General know that? Would Charity tell him?

No. He knew she wouldn't. She'd do everything in her power to protect him. And he wasn't even certain she knew. He'd said nothing the past two days, burying himself in work when he wasn't trying to sate himself with her delectable body.

"You okay?" Tienan's voice was barely a whisper.

Adrian shook himself out of his stupor, resolve emanating from every cell of his body. "Yes."

Gripping his weapon in his hand, he moved steadily down the staircase, watching for more booby traps and listening. He heard it then. The sound of raised voices, one male, one female.

His heart skipped a beat and then settled into a steady rhythm as he reached deep inside himself and found the Alpha at his very core. His senses flared, his brain working nonstop to list the best-case scenarios and possible outcomes. He eased out of the stairwell with Tienan covering his back. The voices were coming from three doors down on the left.

"What the hell happened?" The General asked in a calm, level voice as he flung her against the wall. She hit it hard. Her shoulder and upper arm screamed with pain. Again, she didn't think anything was broken. Not yet. She had to kill him. Now. There was no time to wait.

He leveled his gun at her, waiting for her answer. She licked her dry lips and shrugged. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He didn't pace. Didn't betray any kind of nervousness. He was calm and cold as ever. His eyes narrowed and his upper lip curled. "Don't give me that. You've always been a sniveling creature like your mother. Your only use was in the marriage mart and even then you tried to cause problems. But you didn't succeed." He smiled and she shivered as memories of her wedding day assailed her.

"Martin told me you weren't much in bed. I told him to indulge his little vices. After all, you were his wife. You belonged to him. No one would question him. I knew he liked to inflict pain on his women during sex." The General lips tilted up at the corners in a cruel parody of a smile. "I figured it would teach you to respect your betters."

"You were wrong then, weren't you?" she taunted in a low voice. Her hand slipped behind her, beneath the hem of her shirt, to the cool metal handle of her knife. She drew it slowly, never taking her eyes off her father.

"You did as I wanted, didn't you? You're so predictable, Charity. I let you see the prisoner, talk to him. I was in the next room, listening to your pitiful conversation. I knew you'd try to leave the inner city and find Adrian." His eyes gleamed with an air of superiority. "I knew there was a good chance you'd bring him to me." He shook his head. "I'm surprised he didn't know it was a trap. We were obviously right to terminate him and the other Alphas in that group years ago. Adrian is flawed."

"He did know." She brought her hand back down by her thigh, keeping the blade hidden. She'd only get one chance to do this. He'd be on her in a heartbeat and he wouldn't hesitate to kill her.

"And he didn't kill you. Weakness. I told Piedmont that Alpha Ten was weak." The General cocked an ear toward the door, but there was only silence. "I expect my security teams to quickly retake the inner city. A ragtag bunch of under-trained men are no match for my skilled fighters."

Charity smiled. "Those men and *women* were trained by the best. They were trained by an Alpha." She shifted closer, waving her free hand in the air to distract him from her other one. "The best of the best. More machine than man. A cold, calculating killer with no feeling. Isn't that what you always said?"

She saw the General's hand swinging toward her face. Satisfaction filled her. He was the one who was predictable. It would never occur to him that she would raise a hand to kill him.

Time slowed. As his hand came toward her, she ducked and moved in low and fast. Swinging her arm forward, she brought the blade of the knife up and buried it deep in the General's belly.

He jerked back and she stumbled away as blood trickled from the fresh wound. He stared at the knife and back at her. Charity swallowed hard. He was barely bleeding. He wasn't falling to the ground. How could he still be standing?

"You should have followed through with an upward motion, gutting me while you had the chance." Her father raised his gun and aimed it at her head. "And I should have killed you at birth as I did your mother. I wanted a son and all she produced was a weak female like herself."

Charity was past fear. Past feeling surprise at the depths of her father's depravity. She'd always wondered if

he'd killed her mother. Now she knew. She knew it was no good to remind him that, as the male, it was his sperm that decided the sex of the baby. She straightened her shoulders, waiting for the bullet that would end her life. She wouldn't grovel. Wouldn't beg. Even though he'd never know what happened, she wanted Adrian to be proud of her.

"General, are you okay?" Two uniformed men rushed into the room, guns drawn and ready.

"I'm fine, you idiots. Keep a watch while I finish this."

"Yes, Sir," one of them said. They stationed themselves just outside the door, watching both ways for invading forces.

Her father's finger tightened on the trigger. This was it. Her muscles bunched and she prepared to attack. If she was going down, she was going down fighting. She wouldn't make it easy for him to kill her.

Two shots rang out, quickly followed by two more. She expected to feel a bullet tearing through her flesh, but there was no pain. One of the security police fell, the other one backed into the room. "Two men, coming fast."

Was one of them Adrian? Charity was half afraid it was. She couldn't let her father destroy him.

A loud roar echoed off the thick concrete walls. Charity's gaze flew to the doorway. The General's attention wavered and he turned away from her for a split second as he glanced toward the door. Charity leapt forward, knocking his arm upward to deflect his aim. More gunfire split the air. She heard a man cry out in pain.

Her father swore and punched her. She managed to jerk away at the last second, but his fist still grazed her chin, knocking her back. Adrian was suddenly silhouetted in the doorway, his face a mask of fury, of promised death.

"I'll make sure you're dead this time," her father promised, turning his gun on Adrian.

"No!" Charity screamed, jumping in front of the General at the last second. His gun fired and she was flung backward as fire bit through her arm. She slammed into the wall and fell to the floor, landing with a heavy thud. She heard another gunshot close by. She blinked to clear her vision, needing to know that Adrian was safe, that everything she'd been through hadn't been in vain.

Adrian was locked in combat with the General. Both large hands were wrapped around the General's wrist. He squeezed tight and twisted. The gun fell from the General's hand, clattering to the floor.

Her vision was getting hazy, but she blinked to clear it. She had to help Adrian. Her left side was on fire, so she dug her right hand into the floor and tried dragged herself forward.

Before she could pull herself an inch, Adrian was behind her father, hard-muscled forearm around his neck, twisting it sharply. A loud crack rent the air and all life faded from her father's eyes. The monster was dead. Adrian tossed the body to the floor and stepped over it as though it were nothing.

Charity closed her eyes and sighed. Adrian was safe. Nothing else mattered. She felt his hand on her face for a brief second before he touched her arm. She cried out as pain consumed her and the world went black.

Adrian had seen many wounds in his lifetime. Hell, he had one of his own from where the General had gotten off another quick shot before Adrian had been able to stop him. He'd seen men die in the most horrific ways and he'd killed more than his share. But never had anything affected him like seeing Charity shot.

Because of the sharp angle from the doorway, Adrian hadn't been able to get a good shot off. He'd known the General was going to shoot him, was prepared to handle the pain. He knew he wouldn't die, couldn't die. Not until Charity was safe. Instead, she'd jumped in front of the General at the last second, taking the bullet meant for him.

He hadn't believed in her, hadn't trusted her when the chips were down. Instead, he'd believed the lies the General had spouted. And what did she do in return? Take a bullet for him and save his life.

Her eyes were closed, her body limp. She'd lost consciousness. Which was just as well. He didn't want her in pain, nor was he ready to face her. Her words still echoed in his brain. *The best of the best. More machine than man. Cold, calculating killer with no feeling.* That's what she'd said to her father. That was the side he'd shown her and that's what she believed him to be. In spite of that, she'd risked her life for him, for all of them. The Resistance owed this woman a debt of gratitude that could never be repaid.

Her face was dirty, her cheek bruised. Beneath that, she was very pale. He expected that when he stripped off her clothing, he'd find her body bruised from head to toe. The earlier blasts, coupled with what she'd been through since, had left their mark. Her hair was matted and tangled, her clothing filthy.

"How is she?" Tienan stepped past the bodies on the floor and knelt beside him.

Adrian tore the sleeve of her shirt all the way to her shoulder to reveal the wound. It wasn't bad, but it would take some time for her to recover. His fingers were covered in her blood. Tears pricked his eyes but he blinked them back. There was no time for self-recrimination. He had to see to Charity.

"It's a flesh wound." Ripping the sleeve into several small pieces, he wrapped it around Charity's arm. "I need to get her to Mercy." He knew Doc Smith, had known him for years, but he wanted Mercy to tend to Charity. He didn't think he could stand the thought of another man touching her, even if it was to heal her. Possessiveness was riding him hard. He fought down the emotion as he finished his makeshift bandage.

Tienan nodded, not even bothering to try to convince Adrian to do anything different. The man had a woman

of his own and understood.

Logan appeared in the doorway, looking disgusted. "Piedmont was down there. I smelled him but I couldn't find him." None of them would ever forget the unique scent of their creator and primary tormentor.

"We'll get him," Adrian promised as he slid his arms beneath Charity and lifted her. His primary goal now was to get his woman medical attention. "I need to get her to Mercy first."

Logan stared at the woman Adrian had cradled in his arms and nodded. "Follow me."

The three men left as quickly and quietly as they arrived. Logan led and Tienan brought up the rear, both ready to guard the woman Adrian carried.

Deep in the bowels of the building, the body of the General lay dead and forgotten.

Chapter Eight

Charity was warm and cozy. She shifted and moaned as pain shot through her shoulder. A low male voice murmured something to her. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but the sound of the voice reassured her and she snuggled nearer to the source of warmth surrounding her.

A large muscled forearm wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer to a firm, hard chest. Sighing, Charity let herself drift back into the nothingness where she didn't hurt and didn't have to think.

The next time she surfaced, she knew she was alone. She took a moment to examine her surroundings. Warm blankets were bundled around her and she was lying on a mattress. She also didn't hurt quite as much as she had, which was a definite plus. The pain was down to a dull roar. She forced her eyes open and blinked to help herself focus.

She didn't recognize the room at all. It was fairly large and opulent. Heavy curtains hung at the window, blocking out most of the light. There were two chests of drawers made of the same dark wood that matched the frame of the bed. Two high-back chairs sat in front of a fireplace, which was empty. She wished there was a fire crackling in the hearth. In spite of the blankets, she was cold.

The door opened and she swiveled her head around. Big mistake. Her head started to pound in an unrelenting rhythm before finally settling back to a dull pain. A short woman with incredibly pale, blonde hair strode in. It took her fuzzy brain a moment to recognize her. "Mercy." Her tongue felt fuzzy and her mouth was dry, making it hard to speak.

Mercy smiled at her as she bustled over to the side of the bed. "Good. You're awake." Picking up a pitcher on the bedside table, she poured some water into a glass and held it out to Charity. "I bet you could use some of this right about now."

Charity could practically smell the cool, refreshing water. She put her hands beneath her body and pushed, gritting her teeth as the pain washed over her. It wasn't quite as bad as she expected. When she was settled against the pillows, she held out her hand, surprised to see it was trembling.

Mercy sat on the bed next to her, put the glass in her hand and helped her lift it to her lips. "Take it slow. You've been out of it for three days now."

Three days. That was a lot of time to lose. She sipped and let the water refresh her parched throat and mouth. "What happened?"

"It's been organized chaos." Mercy sighed and raked a hand through her short hair. Charity really looked at her and noticed the dark circles beneath Mercy's eyes. "So many dead and wounded," the other woman continued.

Her stomach clenched. "Adrian?"

"He's fine." Mercy shook her head. "He was grazed by a bullet when the General shot at him, but he's already healed. Alphas heal extremely fast." She watched Charity carefully as she spoke.

Too weak to keep drinking, Charity relinquished her hold on the glass and closed her eyes. "Good." She couldn't bear the thought of Adrian being hurt. She wasn't quite ready to think about their relationship, or lack thereof. She had a vague memory of him lying next to her in this bed, but decided it had to have been a dream. He'd have been much too busy to worry about her.

"He's sat with you every spare second he's had since the inner city fell."

Charity's eyes flew open. Hope rose within her. Maybe it hadn't been a dream. Maybe he had held her in his arms while she'd slept. Common sense reared up and reminded her that he was probably just interested in any more information she had. Still, a flicker of warmth was kindled deep inside her and her heart began to beat faster.

She didn't know what to say to Mercy, so she nodded. "How are things outside?"

"Right now, the Resistance is in control of the inner city. The general populous is afraid, but starting to come around now that the fighting has stopped.

"Adrian has addressed everyone several times. Tienan and Logan have been busy routing out pockets of dissent."

"Wow." She had missed a lot the past few days.

"It's a big change," Mercy agreed. "Adrian even has some scientists already put to work on finding ways to enlarge the Gate to encompass a larger area. There's a long, hard road ahead, but at least those outside the Gate don't have to worry about being hunted and killed for no reason. As well, supplies are being shipped out to those who don't want to settle in the inner city."

"Where are we?" Charity knew there were many fine houses in the inner city, but she had no idea where she was.

The corners of Mercy's mouth turned up in a smile. "We're actually in Smithson Piedmont's home."

Charity knew her mouth was open, but couldn't help herself. They were in the Piedmont mansion.

"Seems Tienan and Logan spent some time here when they escaped from the lab at the Piedmont Corporation. They know about the tunnels that run both inside and beneath the place. Plus, the kitchen is huge. Nadine has been cooking nonstop since she took up residence here two days ago."

So much information was making her head spin. She hated feeling weak. She wanted to get out of bed and be a part of things. A soft hand touched her forehead, smoothing back a damp lock of hair. Her gaze shot to Mercy.

"Don't worry. You'll be up and around in a couple more days. The wound is just a graze but you lost quite a bit of blood." Her eyes crinkled. "I know it hurts like the devil, but it's healing. Your body took a battering and is bruised from the explosion and other things." Neither of them commented on the fact that her father was responsible for most of her injuries, but it was understood.

"Rest and food are what you need now," Mercy continued. "After everything you did, you deserve to take it easy."

"I didn't do anything." In fact, she'd failed. She'd wanted to be the one to protect Adrian. Instead, he'd been the one to kill the General and rescue her. She frowned and shifted in the bed, ignoring the stiff muscles that groaned when she moved.

"That's not true." Mercy straightened the blankets, making sure they covered her patient. "You single-handedly blew the control station to the Gate. Adrian's told everyone how you tricked the General and risked your life."

Charity laughed, but the sound was bitter. "I didn't do anything. I led you all into a trap. I was nothing but an unwilling pawn in my father's game of manipulation."

"Whatever his intention, he didn't get what he bargained for," Mercy continued in her practical way. "I have to go. I have a lot of patients to see. I'll check in on you again later. In the meantime, I'll get someone to bring you some food now that you're awake. Don't eat too much too fast. Take it slow until you see how your stomach is going to be."

Feeling ungrateful and churlish, Charity proffered a smile. "Thank you. For everything."

"You're welcome." Mercy strode to the door, her movements swift and economical. "I'm just glad you're awake and feeling better."

When the door closed, Charity released a sigh. She felt sticky and sweaty after three days in bed and what had come before. Her eyes came to rest on two doors set in the far wall. One had to be a closet. The other might be a bathroom. The thought of being clean was too much of a lure for her to resist.

Gathering her strength, she sat up and swung her legs around to the side of the mattress. Her head swam and her arms and legs trembled. Taking a moment, she rested until the world stopped moving. She lowered her feet to the floor and stood. She wavered, but clung to the bedpost for support.

So far so good. The other side of the room seemed so far away when, in reality, it was only a few steps. "You can do this," she told herself. Ignoring the scream of pain that went down her back and legs, she started the slow journey across the room. One foot at a time.

Sweat trickled down her back, making the garment she was wearing stick to her. She glanced down and noted she was wearing a large T-shirt that fell to her thighs. It left a lot of leg showing, but covered everything important. Not that it mattered considering she was alone.

Two more steps.

She stumbled and grabbed the handle of the first door to keep from landing headfirst into the wall. Steadying herself, she turned the knob and pulled it open. Closet. It was empty except for a couple of boxes and some clothing.

Closing it, she moved a few more steps to the second door. Holding her breath, she opened it. Her breath came out in a rush of pleasure. A small bathtub beckoned her into the room. It wasn't a large tub, but that didn't matter.

"Hopefully, the water is working." With all the fighting, it was hard to say if any of the city utilities had been damaged. Muttering a prayer, she twisted one of the taps and was rewarded with a gush. "Yes." Who would have thought that the prospect of taking a bath would be so exciting? Now, she just had to figure out how to contort her bruised body in order to get the plug in.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Charity startled and jerked around to face the voice. Her body protested and her knees buckled. Adrian surged forward and caught her just before she ended up in a heap on the floor. Having his arms around her was heaven, but it didn't last long. He quickly deposited her on the top of the vanity, put his hands on his hips and glared at her.

He looked so vital, so alive, so...male. All Charity could do was stare at him and soak in every square inch. He looked tough and hard, an imposing male figure. His jaw was clenched tight and she could see a small tic pulsing below his left eye.

He was wearing dark pants, a dark shirt and combat boots. She'd never seen him wear anything but black, but it suited him. The shirt clung to his broad shoulders and muscled chest. It was tucked into the waistband of his pants, which brought her gaze lower to the hard bulge that was outlined against the fabric.

"I asked you what you were doing." His voice was low and even, giving her no indication of what he was thinking.

She sighed and raked a hand through her tangled curls. "I wanted a bath."

Adrian swore under his breath. He stared at her, the corners of his pale blue eyes crinkling slightly. She thought he might be trying not to smile, but she couldn't be certain. "You wanted a bath," he repeated. "I brought you something to eat because Mercy said you were awake. I didn't expect to find you gone."

Beneath his words, she thought she heard the slightest thread of concern. Or maybe she was hearing what she wanted to hear. "Thank you for the food," she began, not quite knowing what to say to him. She felt grungy and disheveled and he looked good enough to eat. It put her at a definite disadvantage.

When he didn't leave, she gave him a hint. "I'm fine."

His lips tightened and he frowned. "I want to talk to you."

She had no idea what he wanted from her. "Okay," she agreed. "As soon as I have my bath." No way was she doing anything until she was clean.

Adrian nodded and turned away from her. Instead of heading to the door as she expected, he went to the side of the tub, popped the plug in and started the water running. While she sat on the counter with her mouth hanging open, he rummaged around and found a thick facecloth and towel, setting them beside the tub.

She finally found her voice when he took a step toward her. "Thanks. I can take it from here."

He shook his head. "I'm not taking any chances that you'll hurt yourself. You're already black and blue." He reached for the hem of her shirt and she batted his hands away.

"I said I could do it." No way was she letting him strip her naked and put her in the tub. In spite of her injuries, her body responded to Adrian's nearness. Her nipples puckered tight, pressing against the thin fabric of the shirt she was wearing. What seemed adequate coverage just minutes ago was now not nearly enough. She crossed her arms over her chest, ignoring the damp, swollen feeling between her thighs.

He cocked one eyebrow at her. "I've seen you naked."

Charity could feel the heat climbing up her cheeks. "That's beside the point," she snapped.

The mood of the room changed, becoming more ominous. Adrian was angry. "It's because of what he said, isn't it?"

Okay, now she was totally lost and the water was licking at the edges of the tub. "Uh, you better shut off the water."

Adrian whirled around and flicked off the taps, testing the water with his other hand. He grunted in approval. "It's good. Hot enough to help your sore muscles, but not hot enough to burn your skin."

Through with talking, he lifted her off the counter and grabbed the hem of her shirt, tugging it over her head and tossing it aside. Totally naked, she thought about trying to cover her body, but it was a useless endeavor. Besides which, he was right. He'd already seen her naked.

It was harder than she thought to climb into the tub. Adrian offered her his arm and strength as she carefully lowered herself into the hot water. She clenched her teeth as her muscles protested and her skin screamed that it was too hot.

"Give it a minute," he murmured. "It will start to feel better."

She nodded and closed her eyes. The bandage on her arm might get wet but it was worth it to be clean again. Sighing, she embraced the heat, while desperately trying to forget that Adrian was kneeling next to the tub watching her.

Charity could feel his gaze on her as it traveled from her breasts and then lower. Her nipples, already tight buds, seem to pucker even more under his stare. And she'd been wet between her legs before she'd set foot in the tub. Her outer folds were swollen and hot. Her channel pulsed.

Swallowing hard, she put her mind to other things than her body's arousal. What Adrian had said echoed in her brain. She opened her eyes. Sure enough, he was kneeling there, watching her. "What did you mean when you said it's because of what he said? What who said?"

His expression grew even more guarded than usual. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. Charity grabbed the facecloth from the side of the tub, opened it and covered her breasts. It wasn't much, but at least

she didn't feel quite so exposed.

"More machine than man," he grated out. "A cold calculating killer." Adrian's wintry blue gaze became colder. "It finally dawned on you what kind of man I am. Who exactly you gave yourself to. The monster I truly am."

Charity couldn't believe what she was hearing. Beneath the anger she could sense his vulnerability. Of everything she'd ever believed in her life, she never would have thought that Adrian would care what she, or anyone else, thought of him one way or the other. That would imply he had feelings for her. That she mattered in some way.

Her stomach dropped and that nasty emotion, hope, stirred once again. Adrian could have been carved from stone for all the life he showed. He was totally motionless, not even blinking as he watched her.

"You're an Alpha," she began. "You have talents and skills that normal men don't have."

"I'm a freak, you mean?" His voice was tinged with bitterness.

She sat forward, ignoring the protests of her battered body and the plop of the facecloth as it fell into the water. "That's not what I mean." She scowled. "You're smart and strong and loyal." Reaching out, she put her hand against his cheekbone. "You kill, but only to protect yourself and those under your care. You're a good man, Adrian." He closed his eyes for a second and released a pent-up sigh. When he opened them again, his blue eyes were much warmer.

"You're not ashamed you slept with me?"

She shook her head. "Of course not."

The corners of his mouth turned up in a sexy male grin. "Good. Then you won't mind doing it again."

Charity's mouth fell open. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. He'd believed she'd betrayed him. Hadn't he? She was totally confused by the heat in his gaze and the softening in his expression as he shifted closer, cupping the back of her head with one large palm. He lowered his head until their lips grazed, barely touching.

She shouldn't do this. Not until they'd talked about what happened. But logic had no place in her world. Not at this moment. Her body yearned to be close to his. Her heartbeat sped up and every cell in her body was cheering. She wanted this man. She had no idea what the future held for them, but she wanted him. Right here. Right now.

She lifted her arm to wrap around his neck and moaned as it protested. Sweat broke out on her brow.

Adrian lifted his mouth from hers. "Let me take care of you." Desire was evident in every hard line of his face, but there was something more. If she had to put a name to it, she'd say it was tenderness.

Charity nodded and relaxed against the side of the tub, willing to let Adrian do whatever he wanted.

Unexpected emotion welled up inside Adrian as he lowered his lips toward Charity's. She hadn't turned him away, hadn't scorned him for who and what he was. It was one thing to know something about a man, another thing to get a graphic demonstration of it. She'd watched him casually kill her father and toss his body aside as though it was nothing.

And it hadn't been nothing. It was the fulfillment of a pledge to himself and the Alphas that had died all those years ago. But mostly, it had been the quickest way to secure Charity's safety and get to her. At that moment, nothing else had mattered. All the years of craving vengeance and retribution had fallen aside in the face of Charity's injuries.

He was conscious of the fact that she was still hurt. Mercy had cautioned him to be gentle with her, knowing that when he went to Charity, he wouldn't be able to resist touching her.

Their mouths touched and that simple connection fired his blood. His cock was hard and thick, had been from the moment he'd stepped into the bathroom and seen her leaning over the tub. Her long legs were bare and he'd caught a glimpse of the curve of her ass from beneath the thin fabric of her shirt.

Now she was totally naked, wet and welcoming. It was more than he'd hoped for, but not everything he wanted. It was a start. He wanted her love and devotion and he'd get it no matter what he had to do. She was his new plan, his new goal.

Charity was his and he wasn't letting her go.

Pleasure was the key. He'd bind her to him on a physical level and the rest would come in time. He spanned her slender neck with his hand, feeling the flutter of her pulse as he fingered her soft skin.

She shifted restlessly, making a sexy little sound deep in her throat. The water lapped dangerously against the sides of the tub. His balls tightened at the sound. Once again, he was astounded by her generosity. She held nothing back when they were together like this. From the moment they'd met, something had sparked between them and it had only grown with time.

He stroked his tongue past her lips, exploring every crevice of her mouth, touching her teeth, and nipping on her bottom lip as he withdrew. He leaned back and smiled at the sensual picture she made sprawled out in the tub, her eyes closed, her lips moist and rosy. Her breasts rose above the waterline, her nipples tight buds just begging to be tasted. Her legs were splayed in open invitation.

Adrian took a deep breath, reached down into the tub and drew out the facecloth. A bar of soap sat on a ledge inset into the wall. He picked it up and worked up a lather on the cloth. Charity's eyes fluttered open. He could sense her confusion.

"You wanted a bath, remember?" Starting at her face, he carefully washed her skin, cleaning away any remnants of sweat, blood and dirt. He trailed the cloth over her neck and down her torso, taking special care to wash around her nipples, never touching them.

Her breath caught in her throat and she arched up. The zipper of his pants threatened to burst as his cock shoved against it, demanding release. He hurt as he'd never hurt in his life, but it didn't matter. Taking care of Charity in this way filled a need within him that went deeper than the physical.

He continued downward, washing her hips, her legs and even her feet. When he was done, he helped her to sit up and very gently washed her back. Bruises were evident over her entire body, many a garish shade of yellow and purple.

Anger threatened to bubble up but he swallowed it back. Charity was safe and alive and that was all that mattered. Could have beens. Might have beens. None of that mattered now.

When she was settled back against the side of the tub, he dropped the wet cloth and picked up the bar of soap, rubbing it through his hands until they were covered in white bubbles.

This time he went straight for her breasts, cupping them, sliding his hands over the firm mounds. Charity moaned, a sound like music to his ears.

"Adrian." His name was a breathy groan as he tweaked her elongated nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. The soap made his fingers slippery, keeping the pressure light.

She licked her bottom lip before capturing it between her teeth. The steam had turned her hair into a riot of curls, which bounced around her shoulders. Her brown eyes were liquid with pleasure. Her cheeks were rosy and the smattering of freckles on her nose absolutely adorable. The scar on her left cheek was a stark reminder that she hadn't had an easy life. But she was a survivor, like him. She was smart and intelligent and brave and *his*.

Adrian couldn't wait any longer. He wanted to feel her tight pussy wrap around his fingers and squeeze tight. His cock protested, but he ignored it. She wasn't up to that yet. But when she was...

Putting that thought aside, he concentrated solely on Charity. He trailed his hands down her torso and over her hips. She spread her thighs without prompting. Growling his approval, he parted her wet folds, teasing the nub of nerves at the top.

Charity's hips pushed upward as he caught her swollen clit between two of his fingers and tugged gently. Her fingers gripped the sides of the tub so tight, her knuckles turned white.

She was too tired and bruised for prolonged play of any kind, but Adrian wanted to bring her to orgasm. Easing his other hand between her thighs, he inserted two fingers into her tight channel and pushed. Her pussy rippled around him. His cock pulsed hard and his balls ached with pressure.

Beneath the scent of the soap, he could smell the healing salve Mercy had used on Charity. It was a stark reminder that he'd almost lost her. But they were both very much alive. She'd been aroused when he'd picked her up to put her in the tub. There was no disguising that particular perfume. Hot and spicy and juicy, it had tempted him. He wanted to eat her hot cunt until she came. He licked his lips in anticipation. Next time, he promised himself.

He worked his fingers back to the opening of her channel and then surged forward. At the same time, he plucked at her clit and leaned forward, blowing on her distended, wet nipples.

Charity came hard. Her torso bowed out of the water and then went splashing back down. Water rushed over the edge of the tub, soaking his pants, as her pussy contracted around his fingers. He touched and petted her, prolonging her pleasure as long as possible.

Easing his fingers out of her moist core, he smiled in spite of the pain he was in. She lolled in the water like some mythical water nymph. Her eyes were closed, her breathing deep.

He pulled the plug and the water started to drain. That roused her from her semi-sleep state. She blinked at him. "You didn't," she motioned to his erection.

"No, I didn't." He reached into the tub and lifted her out. He released her legs, steadying her until she could stand on her own. Then he picked up the towel and swiftly dried her, being careful of her bruises. She shivered and goose bumps covered her arms.

He tossed aside the towel, picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. Adrian didn't want to put her back in bed without changing the sheets. He deposited her into one of the chairs and grabbed a blanket from the bed, tucking it around her.

He'd brought clean sheets with him, along with some hot soup, which was now probably lukewarm at best. Carrying the tray over to her, he set it on her lap. "Eat what you can."

She looked bemused, but content and picked up the spoon. Satisfied she would eat, he quickly stripped the bed and remade it. Fresh sheets and a real bed were luxuries he hadn't sampled in years, but Charity was used

to this. Sleeping on a hard pallet with him had been a step down for her.

He clenched his jaw as he tucked the sheet around the mattress. It didn't matter now. The city was open to everyone and she'd have her soft bed every night for the rest of his life if he had anything to say about the matter. And he would.

Bed done, he turned back to Charity. The tray was still in her lap, the soup bowl half empty. Charity herself was sound asleep, her mouth parted slightly on a soft snore. Now that the flush of sexual desire had faded, she was pale with dark shadows beneath her eyes.

Removing the tray, he laid it on the floor. He lifted Charity into his arms. She snuffled and snuggled close to him. He carried her to the freshly made bed and laid her on the mattress, tugging the covers around her.

Stretching out on top of the blankets, Adrian pulled her into his arms. Exhaustion washed over him. He'd only slept in short snatches the past few days and it was catching up to him. He yawned and his jaw let out a loud crack. Closing his eyes, he listened to the sound of Charity's breath, felt it against his neck.

A sense of contentment, of rightness, filled him. This was how it was supposed to be. All he had to do now was convince Charity of that.

Chapter Nine

Charity decided she'd had enough of being an invalid. There was clean clothing in the closet and tomorrow morning she was getting out of bed and going about her business, whatever that might be. She had no idea what she was going to do, but there had to be something. Maybe Nadine could use her help in the kitchen.

Her bruises had mostly faded, she could get around easily and her arm was well on its way to being completely healed. She'd started exercising her arm and was pleased that she could move it with little or no pain. The graze itself hadn't been too bad, but it had been worsened by the bruising around it where the General had thrown her against the wall.

She'd been resting, taking hot baths and eating regularly the past few days. That had gone a long way to making her feel like her old self again. She'd stood at the window for long stretches of time each day, watching the city. There was activity everywhere as the new government took hold.

Mercy gave her the news every time she visited. For now, the Resistance would rule, but plans were already underway for a new democratic structure for the government and an election of officials in about six months time. The inner city was changing, for the better.

Even Silence had stopped by once to visit. That was a bit more awkward, but Charity liked the quiet woman. Silence told a somewhat grimmer tale than Mercy. There were squabbles between citizens of the city and those from outside. As well, there were still pockets of fighting from a few remaining groups of security police that wouldn't surrender, but even that was being quickly contained and dealt with.

Sighing, Charity leaned back on her pillows and stared at the window. It was dark outside, but the night sky was clear, allowing her to catch a glimpse of the moon and several stars. She felt restless. Unsatisfied. She was alive, which was something to celebrate, but she had a hollowness in the pit of her stomach that never seemed to go away.

It had been two days since her sensual encounter with Adrian in the bathroom. Her body clenched and heated at the memory of him bathing her, his slick hands roaming over her curves and hollows. Her breathing got shallower and her heartbeat increased. The man certainly knew what to do with a woman's body.

She waved her hand in front of her face, creating a slight breeze that did nothing to cool her heated flesh. What an incredible experience. Her breasts still tingled. Her pussy ached. Since he'd tucked her into bed that night, he'd treated her with the utmost care.

He hadn't spent much time with her, not that she expected him to considering how busy he had to be. Somehow, he'd managed to carve out enough time to share a few meals with her. And every night, he'd crawl into bed beside her, pull her into his arms and sleep with her cheek resting next to his heart. But not once in all that time had he ever reached out for her in a sexual way. Nor had they talked about anything that had happened. It was as if he was waiting for something. What, she wasn't quite sure.

Quite frankly, she was tired of it. Either she was *with* him or she wasn't. Right now, she felt like an obligation, a penance more than anything else. It was time to end this one way or another.

As if her thoughts summoned him, the door opened. She turned her head and watched him prowl into the room. She was becoming a very good judge of his moods and tonight he seemed pensive, more tightly wound than usual.

"Is everything okay?" She shifted, sitting up in bed and shoving her hair away from her face.

Adrian shut the door and locked it. The click had an ominous edge to it. He appeared like a large, dark shadow as he walked across the room. Pulling a lethal-looking gun from the small of his back, he set it carefully on the bedside table.

"Adrian?" He was starting to worry her. She reached out and touched his arm. His skin was warm, almost hot to the touch.

"How are you feeling?"

She frowned at the strained tone of his voice. "I'm fine. In fact, I'm getting out of this bed tomorrow and going to find something to do to make myself useful."

Instead of lightening his mood, as she'd hoped, he seemed to grow even stiller. Tension pervaded the room, growing by the second.

"Can't wait to leave, can you?"

There was an edge to his words that troubled her and she replied carefully. "I'm tired of being laid up. It's time to get life back to some semblance of normalcy."

"How is your injury?" Concern laced his question and she hurried to allay any worry he might be harboring.

"Mercy said I'm in great shape. The loss of blood and the beating were worse than the graze by the bullet." She hurried on, not wanting to dwell in the past. "The rest and food has worked wonders." She flexed her arm for him. "See, barely a twinge."

Adrian stared down at her. She could practically see his eyes glowing in the dim light. Reaching out, he clicked on the bedside lamp. It illuminated the bed, keeping the rest of the room cloaked in shadows.

His jaw was covered with a light stubble, making him look harder and older. He had to be tired. He'd been going almost nonstop for days with only short naps here and there to refresh him. Even though he slept with her, he usually arrived late at night and was gone long before dawn. His face showed no sign of fatigue. He looked determined. Formidable. A lock of blond hair fell against his forehead. Instead of softening his features, they somehow made him look even tougher.

"We need to talk."

Her stomach dropped and she glanced down at the blankets. She'd wanted to talk since that night he'd bathed her, but now that the time was here, she didn't want to hear him say he'd believed she'd betrayed him. Sighing, she shook her head. It was time to deal with everything and get on with her life.

Now that she was well, his obligation to her was done. It was time to return to her own tiny apartment, if it was indeed still hers and hadn't been commandeered by a member of the Resistance. Adrian had a lot of work facing him and he didn't need the daughter of his enemy by his side as he tried to unite two formerly warring factions.

"I see." There wasn't much left to say. She blinked hard as tears welled in her eyes. She wouldn't cry. Wouldn't be weak. She'd changed a lot in the past week or so. She'd learned just how wonderful sex could be between a woman and the right man. She'd faced down her fears and been part of something important, an event that would be talked about for years to come. She'd survived being blown up, beaten and shot. She was alive and that was a lot to be thankful for.

She might be losing the man she'd come to love and respect, but it wasn't his fault that he didn't love her back. There hadn't really been enough time for that to happen. Not that she truly thought it would. Adrian was exceptional in all ways. He was handsome, off-the-charts intelligent, strong, lethal and a brilliant leader. Why would he want an ordinary woman like her with a checkered past for anything beyond a few nights of hot sex?

Gathering the tattered remains of her pride, she raised her head and forced a smile. "I'll be leaving in the morning. You don't need to worry about me overstaying my welcome."

Adrian moved so fast, he was nothing but a blur. One moment he was standing by the bed. The next, he was sitting on the side of the bed leaning over her, his arms and upper body caging her against the mattress.

"You don't leave me." The words were gritted out from beneath clenched teeth. "You're mine." He swooped down and captured her mouth with his, plunging his tongue past her lips. It wasn't a kiss. It was a claiming. Charity was helpless to do anything except the rough embrace. He tasted of coffee, hot male and sexual promise.

He tore his lips from hers and took a deep breath. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Charity's head was spinning from the torrid kiss. She couldn't follow his train of conversation at all. "What?"

The muscles in his forearms tightened and his shoulders tensed. "You put yourself in danger. Walking over to the General and blithely tossing not one, but *two* explosive devices into the control station." Adrian glared down at her, his lips turned down in a severe frown. "You could have been killed."

Countless emotions churned inside her, but the one that emerged was anger. "What do you care? You thought I was guilty of being in league with the General. Don't deny it. I saw it in your face." And it had devastated her as much as she'd expected it. Why should Adrian have trusted her? He really didn't know her. Why wouldn't he believe she was following her father's orders?

His scowl deepened. If she didn't know him as well as she did, she'd have been scared to death of him. He was large and fierce as he loomed over her. "I only believed it for a split second."

Even though it was what she'd been expecting, hearing him admit it was a shot to her heart. She hadn't realized she'd been secretly hoping he'd deny it and tell her he'd believed in her, not doubting her for even a second. That was a fairytale. This was real life. She shrugged, trying desperately to pretend that his last remark hadn't struck a devastating blow.

"Charity," he began. He dragged one hand through his hair, leaving it disheveled. "Why? Why did you do it?"

She met his gaze. "It was the right thing to do. My father needed to be stopped. What does it matter? It's done and it worked out the way you wanted. That's what counts."

The tension within him eased somewhat, but not as much as she'd hoped. "You could have been killed." He spoke so low she could barely hear him.

Her hands were damp and her heart was racing, but she tried to project a calm, competent image. Clasp her hands in her lap to keep from reaching out to him, she shrugged again. "It was for the greater good. And it didn't seem to matter at the time." She looked away, no longer able to meet his penetrating gaze.

There was no way she'd tell him that after she'd seen the look on his face, she hadn't cared what happened to her. Not that she wanted to die. Not really. But the cause of the Resistance, of bringing down the Gate and the General, were bigger than her. She'd been their only hope at that point and she'd done what she needed to do. She should really thank Adrian. If she hadn't seen the look of betrayal on his face, she might not have found the courage to confront her father and do what she did.

"It does matter. I made myself a promise."

She swiveled her head around until she could see Adrian. Something in the tone of his voice sent a shiver of fear racing down her spine.

"I promised myself that, if we got out of that mess alive, I'd spank you for putting yourself at risk like that." His harsh words were in direct contradiction to the gentle way he tucked an errant curl behind her ear.

"You won't hit me." She had no idea why she was so sure of that, she just was. She trusted Adrian more than she'd ever trusted another living soul.

He released a huge pent-up breath. "No, I won't." He lifted one of her hands and brought it to his mouth, nibbling on her fingertips. "Knowing that, I made myself another promise."

It was getting harder for Charity to catch a breath. She was getting warmer with each passing second, her body responding to his nearness and the passionate promise in his eyes. "What was the promise?" she asked in a breathy voice.

"That I'd strip you naked, tie you to the bed and fuck you until you couldn't think straight. Then I'd get you to promise me you'd never risk yourself like that again."

Heat rippled through her, targeting her breasts and pussy. Her mouth was open and she was almost panting with desire. Adrian had to have some deep feelings for her. Why else would he care what happened to her?

He reached into the bedside table and drew out four lengths of supple leather strapping. Holding them tight in one hand, he leaned so close she could feel the heat from his skin. "And, sweet Charity, I'm a man of my word."

Giving her time to protest, he attached two straps to the headboard. "Lie down."

Excitement raced through her veins even as the voice of reason cautioned her. She didn't listen. She'd wanted him for days. Wanted to feel the closeness they'd shared the first time he'd taken her. Wanted to feel his strong arms wrapped around her as his cock pounded into her wet, willing pussy. She reclined on the bed and waited for his next command.

Reaching out, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist, reminding her once again how much larger and stronger he was. He raised her arm and quickly bound her wrist to the wooden slat. "Lift your other arm," he ordered. "But don't hurt yourself."

Charity slid her injured arm over her head. There was only a slight twinge, which quickly abated as she found a good spot. Adrian quickly bound her wrist to the headboard.

The slide of metal on leather ripped through the room as he yanked a lethal-looking blade from his boot. Adrian tossed back the covers. Her legs were bare, but the rest of her was covered in an oversized T-shirt. It was one of Adrian's that she'd found stored in the closet. She hadn't been able to resist sliding into it, knowing that it had touched his skin. Her heart hammered against her chest and her pulse pounded in her ears as he stared at her, pure sexual hunger in his eyes.

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "As much as I love seeing you in my shirt, I'll like seeing you without it a hell of a lot more." Grabbing the neckline, he inserted the knife and slid the blade down. The fabric gave way, ripping all the way to the hem.

He peeled back the edges, exposing her chest and her pussy. She glanced down, wanting to see what he was seeing. Her position lifted her breasts, exposing her nipples to the cool night air. They were red and tight. The curls at the apex of her thighs were damp with arousal. She could feel cream seeping from her core in anticipation of what was to come.

He reached between her thighs and swiped two fingers over her swollen folds and brought them to his mouth. He sucked one finger, then the other, until all traces of her cream were gone. "Hot and sweet. Just the way I like you."

Charity moaned, her hips undulating on the mattress. The slight touch had only whetted her appetite for more. Adrian ignored her and went to work on the sleeves of the shirt. A few quick rips and he tugged away what

was left of the garment and tossed it aside. The blade disappeared back into his boot. Then he stood, picked up the two remaining leather straps and walked to the end of the bed.

“Spread your legs.”

Her breasts swayed with every deep breath she sucked into her lungs. She licked her lips and felt a trickle of cream slip down between the cheeks of her ass as she slid her legs apart.

Adrian attached the straps to the two posts at the base of the bed. Leaning over, he stroked his hand up her right leg from ankle to inner thigh. His fingertips were calloused and rough, stimulating the nerve endings beneath her skin. Her pussy clenched. She wanted to bring her thighs together to help ease the ache, but that was no longer an option.

He slid his hand back to her ankle and picked up the loose end of the leather strap. He stretched her leg wide and bound her ankle. Lifting her left leg, he kissed her instep before placing her foot back on the bed.

“Wider,” he ordered.

Charity did as he asked, opening herself as wide as possible. He swiftly bound her ankle. She was tied to the bed, naked and spread-eagled. Vulnerable to whatever he wanted to do to her.

“If I had my way, you’d be like this all the time. Naked, strapped to my bed, waiting for me.”

Sweat trickled down her temple as cream coated her sex. Her body was hot and not even the chill of the room could cool her heated flesh. Quite the opposite, in fact. The colder air stimulated her heated body, driving her arousal to a fevered pitch.

One touch. She was sure that was all it would take for her to explode.

He was watching her like she was some special treat that he was savoring before he devoured her. She tilted her hips toward him, not really able to move them, stretched out as she was.

Adrian walked back to the side of the bed. Her eyes tracked his every movement. Her senses felt heightened. Every move he made was fraught with possibilities. She had no idea what he was going to do to her. She only knew that it would involve pleasure, never pain. She’d put her absolute trust in him.

Reaching behind his head, he gripped a handful of his shirt and dragged it over his head, revealing his tight, muscled abs and broad shoulders. The man was built. Each muscle and tendon was sculpted by years of hard, physical work. He tossed the shirt aside and reached for the button of his pants.

She licked her lips and he toyed with the button. “Take them off.” It was her turn to give some orders.

He raised one eyebrow at her, but followed her instructions. The button came open and the zipper slid down. His cock sprang free. Hard and long and more than ready to fuck her. The plum-shaped head was dark red and wet. A pearly bead of liquid seeped from the slit as tangible evidence of his arousal.

Adrian sat on the side of the bed and removed his boots and socks. He whisked off his pants, leaving him naked. God, he was gorgeous. Charity lost herself as she admired his perfect physique. He had an incredible body, but what drew her most was the man himself. The raw determination, the loyalty and the commitment he had to his people and their cause. He was special in so many ways.

He crawled over her, lying between her spread thighs. He rested most of his weight on his forearms as he loomed over her. “Now, it’s time to keep my promise.”

Chapter Ten

The muscles in his arms shook as he braced himself over Charity, not with physical strain but with the overwhelming desire bubbling up from deep in his core. Her eyes were half closed, her skin dewy. There was no doubt she was ready for him. Her nipples were ripe, hard berries just waiting to be plucked and tasted. Her pussy was hot and wet. But more than that, there was her acceptance, her absolute trust. Adrian was humbled by it.

Lifting his right hand, he skimmed his fingers over the scar that marred the perfection of her face. She didn’t shy away but met his gaze without flinching. He hated that she’d been hurt. He saw the scar as a badge of bravery, of survival. She’d have another one on her upper arm now, a symbol of her sacrifice to help bring about a new world order.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” Adrian marveled as a flush of pink ran up her cheekbones.

She looked away and nibbled on her lower lip. He couldn’t ignore the sensual provocation. Swooping down, he captured her mouth in a leisurely kiss. He traced her lips with his tongue before making short forays into her mouth. He loved the sweet, desperate sounds she made as he deepened the caress, the restless movements of her body, a sharp reminder she was at his mercy.

He could spend half the night kissing her, but her arm was still sore and he didn’t want to leave her tied up for too long. He left her mouth behind and worked his way downward, spreading kisses over the delicate line of her jaw.

She was breathing rapidly now. He could feel her pulse pounding against his tongue as he licked the tender column of her neck. Her skin was soft, her bones so much more fragile than his larger, thicker ones. He nibbled on her collarbone before shifting lower.

He cupped the plump mounds of her breasts, teasing the taut nipples with his thumbs. A low moan of desire broke from her lips. Charity strained against her bonds, arching her chest toward him. He stared at her, enraptured by the picture of sexual desire she presented him. He needed to claim her, mark her as his.

Leaning down, he lapped at one nipple, then the other. Returning to the first, he blew gently, cooling the heated, damp flesh. Charity gulped in a deep breath as he captured the hard nub between his lips and sucked. He could smell her arousal flowing deep from her core. It was more enticing than any perfume could ever be.

Unable to resist the lure any longer, he kissed his way down her torso, trailing his tongue over her hipbones. Her pubic hair was wet and curly, the same brown as the hair on her head. He scooted down the bed, making a place for himself between her parted thighs. With her legs spread-eagle, he could see every sweet inch of her cunt. The pink folds were swollen and damp. Her clit peeked out from beneath its hood, begging for attention.

"Please." Her voice was little more than a breath.

Adrian touched the tip of his tongue to her clit. Her legs stiffened, the muscles in her thighs tensing as he lapped at the tender bundle of nerves. "I can't get enough of your taste." He slid his tongue over the slick folds, capturing her essence. It went to his head faster than the most potent liquor. He lost himself in her, tasting, licking, touching.

He pressed one long finger into her, testing her readiness. Her inner muscles closed around him. She whimpered and moaned as he added a second finger to her channel. She cried out and her cunt rippled. Her orgasm continued as he slid his fingers in and out of her welcoming heat. He didn't stop until she heaved a huge sigh and relaxed. His cock, which he'd almost successfully ignored until now, roared to life, demanding to be sated.

Adrian sat back on his heels and took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of sexual completion. He wanted to fuck Charity, but he wanted her mouth on him first. Growling, he reached down to the floor and grabbed the knife from his boot. There was no time to untie her. He slashed the bonds holding her feet and then leaned over her, cutting the ones holding her hands immobile. The leather was still wrapped around her ankles and wrists, a reminder of her submission to him.

"On your knees." He climbed off the bed and helped her onto the floor in front of him. He'd had this fantasy since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. "If you want me to fuck your sweet, hot cunt, you have to suck me first."

He tangled his fingers in her curls, tugging her mouth toward his straining cock. "Taste me, Charity."

The floor was hard beneath her knees and Charity was very aware of the leather ties that still encased her wrists and ankles. She felt like some slave girl at her master's feet. Strangely enough, the thought didn't bother her. Not when it was obvious she had as much power in this relationship as he did.

His fingers tightened their hold on her scalp as he drew her head closer. His cock was long and impossibly thick. She licked her lips as a bead of liquid seeped from the tip. His cock head was red and wet. She wanted to taste him, to pleasure him as he'd pleased her.

Her body was still humming from her orgasm. It had sneaked up on her and hit her hard and fast, leaving every cell in her body feeling extra sensitive and poised for a repeat performance.

He tugged gently on her hair and she leaned forward. Using only her tongue, she licked him from base to tip, swirling around the head. He tasted musky and salty and potent. She stroked the slit in his cock head, gathering more of the liquid that seeped there.

"Tease," he grated out, shoving his cock toward her mouth.

She laughed, the sound low and sexy. Adrian took advantage, pushing the tip past her lips. She widened her mouth, taking the head and several inches inside. He tensed and she could feel the sexual excitement building in him. It triggered something deep inside her and her pussy began to throb. She tried to close her legs, but he thrust one leg between them, shoving them apart. "No. You don't come again until my cock is buried in your hot cunt."

His blunt words sent shivers down her spine and made her pussy throb. In retaliation, she licked his shaft, feeling the pulse of the blood vessels pounding in his cock.

"More. Take more of me." His fingers flexed in her hair, but he didn't push his erection deeper, leaving it up to her.

Charity cupped his balls with one hand and with her free hand, wrapped her fingers around the base of her shaft. Adrian swore long and pungent. She smiled as she hollowed her cheeks and sucked hard. His thighs tensed, the muscles rippling as he steadied himself.

She glanced up at him, wanting to see his face. His blue eyes practically glowed with heat. His lips were parted as he drew in a deep breath. The cords of his neck stood out and his shoulders were rock-hard.

"Suck," he commanded.

She did, sliding her mouth to the very tip of his cock before taking as much of him as she could back into her mouth. She used her teeth, scraping them over his sensitive shaft. His balls grew tighter as she rolled his sac gently between her fingers.

"Enough." He tugged her away, lifted her off the floor and had her flat on the bed in a split second. The man

could move incredibly fast. Breathless, she stared up at him, feeling his scorching gaze on her front and the cool sheets against her back. Her skin tingled and her toes curled. She sprawled on the mattress, legs splayed in welcome.

Adrian grabbed several pillows and shoved them under her lower back, raising her pussy and opening her even further for him. He knelt in position and guided his cock head to her slit, pressing slowly.

The inner muscles of her channel tightened and then relaxed as he pushed deeper. He captured her hands in his and leaned over her. The backs of her hands hit the sheets on either side of her head. He surrounded her with his large body as he filled her with his cock.

"So good," he groaned when he was seated to the hilt. He was so big he filled her completely. It bordered on pain, but was all pleasure. She lifted her right leg, wrapped it over his hip, urging him closer.

He groaned and circled his hips, grinding his erection even deeper. She gasped, feeling him so incredibly deep. He pulsed inside her and her pussy tightened and relaxed, picking up the sexual rhythm.

Adrian released her hands, shoved his arms beneath her legs and began to fuck her. Slow and shallow at first, gradually getting harder and deeper with each thrust. Sweat trickled down her temples. She gripped his wide shoulders, holding on as he pounded into her. She was so close.

Charity could feel her orgasm building. Her breasts swayed and tingled, her inner muscles clutched him harder, tighter. He thrust deep and the world exploded. Lights flashed behind her eyes, blinding her as she tipped her head back and screamed. Her pussy rippled around him, dragging him deeper still.

He didn't stop. Didn't slow down, but kept pounding into her. Unbelievably, she felt herself coming again. Shivers racked her body. Her limbs trembled. She lost track of time as she floated on a sea of contentment.

Her eyes fluttered open when she felt something cool and wet pressing at the opening to her ass. She moaned as Adrian slid the tip of his finger past the tight muscles.

"I know you can't take all of me, not yet. But this salve will help you take some of me.

All she could do was nod and moan with pleasure as he pushed a fraction of an inch deeper.

"Good." Satisfaction was etched on his face as he worked a second finger in to join the first. She hissed out a breath at the pain of being stretched. His cock was still buried deep in her pussy and the dual penetration was hard, yet at the same time it was arousing. She tried to relax, wanting his hands and his cock in her.

A study of patience, Adrian worked his fingers in to the first knuckle, then the second, until he had both fingers in as deep as they could go. She was stretched to the limits, yet she wanted more. She moaned and shimmied against his hand.

"I knew you'd like it." Leaning down, he dropped a quick hard kiss on her lips. "Stay with me." He pulled his cock from her pussy. Her inner muscles tightened around him in protest. She felt bereft when he left her. His cock was still massively aroused, slippery with her cream. There was no way he'd fit.

As if she'd spoken aloud, he rubbed his thumb over her clit, sending a stream of heat to her core. "Don't worry. It will fit." He carefully pulled his fingers from her ass and coated his cock with some of the thick salve he'd used to help prepare her for his entry. He tossed the bottle of lubrication aside, his total concentration on her and what he was about to do.

He pulled her thighs over his and fitted his cock at her back entry. Easing the cheeks of her ass apart, he pressed his cock head against her opening. The muscles protested and Charity gasped as he pushed through. She was breathing rapidly now, almost gasping for air, as pain and pleasure warred with one another.

"Relax," Adrian gritted out. A bead of sweat rolled down his chest. All his muscles were tense, a testament to the amount of control he was exerting over himself.

Charity felt her muscles softening as she obeyed him. He wouldn't hurt her, wouldn't do anything she didn't want him to. One word from her and he'd stop. She could see that knowledge in his eyes. Because of that, she wanted to give him this.

Raising her hand, she touched the side of his face. He turned toward it, pressing his lips against the center in a kiss so sweet it brought tears to her eyes. "Not too deep," she cautioned.

He nodded and pressed his cock into her channel. She tightened around him. He tilted back his head and sucked in a breath. "I'm not going to last."

She was shocked he'd lasted this long. She'd had three orgasms while he hadn't come at all. Yet. "Then don't," she answered softly, rocking up slightly to take him deeper. It didn't hurt as much now as her body accepted his sexual invasion. In fact, it was starting to feel good.

Charity moved again, rocking ever so slightly. This time her groan was one of pleasure. Adrian began to move, short, shallow thrusts that sent sparks of sensation from her ass to her pussy up to her breasts and back down to her ass in a circle of pleasure.

He felt huge when in reality only half of his cock was inside her. He worked his shaft in and out of her body, careful never to push too hard. She felt the ripple of his cock and the tightening of his body, as he tilted his head back and roared his release. His hot seed flooded her, sending pulses of pleasure through her. She shivered and when his finger touched her clit, she let loose a small scream as she came again. God, she loved this man.

The way he made her feel. The way he was. His strength. His integrity. She lost herself in her orgasm, free to enjoy every second of it. Trust was a powerful thing.

She was so exhausted, she couldn't even muster a groan when he pulled out of her, collapsed on the bed beside her and pulled her into his arms. His fingers played over the length of leather still wrapped around her wrists and she could feel him smile as he buried his face against her temple and kissed her.

"So, you love me?" Adrian pushed a damp curl off her forehead.

Charity froze, her mind rewinding. She only thought the words, hadn't said them aloud, had she? She had. As she'd orgasmed, she'd whispered the words she'd meant to hold in her heart forever. A sense of inevitability washed over her. What was done was done. It was the truth. He could deal with it how he chose.

She shrugged, refusing to look at him. She wasn't sure what she'd see on his face, but didn't want to chance seeing pity, or worse, obligation. "It's no big deal."

He stilled and the tension rose in the room, growing until it totally encompassed them. The relaxed, flushed sense of well-being brought on by several mind-blowing orgasms dissipated.

"No big deal?" he repeated. He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and put enough pressure on it until she raised her head and looked at him. She blinked, caught by the intensity in his blue eyes. "It's a very big deal to me." He closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them again, they were filled with a sense of purpose.

Adrian brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. Her body, which she'd thought totally exhausted, shimmered to life. That tiny caress had her motor revved and ready to go again. It was embarrassing how swiftly she responded to this man. Then she felt his cock nudging her belly. He, too, was aroused. Again.

"I don't know what love is," he began. She really didn't want to hear his brush-off speech, but she didn't have much choice. She knew Adrian and there was no way she was getting away from him until he'd had his say.

"I know." She wanted to tell him that she had more than enough love for both of them, but held her tongue. She wanted to make up for all the hard years of loneliness he'd lived through. Everyone depended on him. Where did he go when he was tired? When he needed someone to talk to? She tightened her jaw to keep from blurting out her thoughts.

His fingers traced the curve of her jaw, her nose and her forehead, as though he was committing every inch of it to memory. "Then a woman stepped into my office and changed my life. At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything special about her."

Charity refused to look away even though she could feel her cheeks heating. She knew she wasn't anything special.

"But there's a fire in her eyes that drew me. I wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you."

She shrugged. "Chemistry. Pheromones. Call it whatever you want. It's sexual attraction. Biology at its most basic."

He inclined his head. "It was that. But it was so much more." He drew a lock of hair between his fingers and played with it. "Your scent intoxicates me. Your courage makes me proud, yet drives me crazy at the same time. You became more important than anyone else. Than anything else."

The intensity of his tone made her really look at him. He was deadly serious. "I don't understand."

"I know you don't, sweet Charity." He touched her cheekbone, running his finger over the edge of her scar. "You meant too much to me, too fast. When I thought you'd betrayed me, it was like a knife in my heart. For the first time in my life, I was unable to move, unable to function. That should be impossible. I'm an Alpha, more machine than man, the perfect killer."

She flinched as he tossed the words she'd said to her father back at her.

"But you destroyed me." He sighed and shook his head. "By the time I realized what you were doing, it was too late to save you. When the bomb went off." He closed his arms around her, pulling her into his arms. She could barely breathe, he held her so tight. "Then you stepped in front of a bullet meant for me."

He pushed her away as suddenly as he'd pulled her close. "Don't you ever do anything like that again." The expression on his face was fierce. "I'm an Alpha. I make split-second decisions and I knew from the second I met you that you'd change my life. You fill my soul and complete me in a way I didn't think was possible."

Her stomach jumped as butterflies filled her. Did he mean what she thought he did? "Adrian," she began, but he put his fingers over her lips.

"Let me finish." He didn't remove his hand until she nodded. "I'm controlling. I'm hardheaded. I'm domineering." He gave a rough chuckle. "I don't have much to recommend me." An inner fire lighted the pale blue of his eyes as he continued. He cupped her face and leaned closer. "But you'll never find another man who will love you like I do." He tensed, his lips twisting into a deep scowl. "You don't need to go looking for any other man."

She started to laugh. She couldn't help herself. He looked so fierce, practically demanding she love him. His frown deepened. Charity threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. "I love you, Adrian."

He buried his face in the curve of her neck and breathed deep. "You're my life."

They held each other for a long time. Finally, Adrian pulled back. He kissed her, his lips barely touching hers in a gentle caress. "Let's get cleaned up." He rolled from bed and then plucked her into his arms, carrying her to the bathroom. "Then I have some more ideas of how we can pass the rest of the night."

Charity laughed as she wrapped her arms around him.

Hours later, Adrian lay in bed, still unable to quite believe that Charity loved him and had agreed to stay with him. He smiled as he recalled how he'd wrung that promise from her. His cock jerked as he remembered the wild ride Charity had given him while they were in the bathtub. He'd had no idea bathing could be quite so pleasurable. He wanted to find a large shower to try out at some point.

"You still awake." Charity's sleepy voice made his balls pull up tight to his body. This woman only had to speak and he was instantly hard and ready. He rolled, taking her flat to the mattress with him looming over her. "You're insatiable."

"You have a problem with that?" He nibbled on the curve of her neck, working his way up to her ear. He'd discovered just how sensitive the delicate lobes were earlier. He swirled his tongue around the whorl and was rewarded with a moan.

"No." Her voice was breathy and he could feel her aroused nipples poking him in the chest.

"Good." He started to kiss her, then paused. "It's not going to be easy."

She tensed beneath him. "What's not going to be easy?"

"Building a new world on the remains of the old. There will be dangers and problems in the days ahead."

Charity wrapped her arms around him. "As long as we're together, nothing else matters."

Adrian closed his eyes as everything inside him settled. They could get through anything together. He leaned down to kiss her and paused. He cocked his head to one side and listened.

Lowering his head down to her ear, he whispered softly. "Someone is coming through the tunnels." He eased off her, drawing her with him. He reached for his knife, even as he shoved Charity behind him. She dragged the sheet with her, wrapping it around her body.

Uncaring of his nakedness, he pushed her behind a heavy dresser. "Stay here." He could sense her unwillingness to hide while he fought. "Please," he added.

She grabbed his hair on either side of his head and pulled him down to her. "Be careful." She kissed him hard on the lips and then pushed him away.

He didn't tell her he'd do whatever it took to protect her, even if that meant his life. Taking a minute, he pulled the blankets up, shoving some of the pillows beneath them. It wasn't much, but it would hopefully fool whoever was sneaking up the secret staircase. Only an Alpha, with superior vision, would know immediately that it was a ruse.

Keeping to the shadows, he flowed to the other side of the room, flattening himself against the wall just as a portion of it began to move. He'd known the secret passage was there. The only other people who knew about it were Tienan and Logan. And, of course, the original owner of the house.

A dark shape appeared in the entranceway. Adrian could smell his fear, along with the odor of sweat and his distinctive cologne. Obviously, the man hadn't showered in days as the scent of his cologne still clung to his skin.

He waited, wanting to see what Smithson Piedmont would do. Like the General, this was another man who'd haunted his dreams all his life. Piedmont had created Adrian and the rest of the Alphas in his lab. He'd tested them, supervised their training. And it was Piedmont who'd culled him and others from the group and scheduled them for termination.

Piedmont raised his hand and Adrian could see the outline of a gun. He crept deeper into the room, his weapon trained on the bed. He fired two rapid shots, neither of them loud as the weapon had a silencing device. Unlike the weapons carried by most members of the Resistance, the General, Piedmont and the members of the Ruling Council had the best technology available. The pillows and mattress muffled the sound and the sheets rippled before settling back down on the bed.

Adrian sensed Piedmont relax as he strode to the closet. The man passed right in front of Adrian and didn't even sense him. Piedmont opened the door of the closet and began rummaging around. A panel slid away, revealing a secret room behind it.

It was time for Adrian to make his move. His senses had already picked up two other intruders, but these ones were on his side. He could almost feel Charity's fear and it ate at him. He knew it wasn't for herself but for him.

He prowled forward, not making a sound. He wrapped one arm around Piedmont's neck and grabbed the gun hand with his free hand.

Piedmont shouted and began to struggle. A light flicked on and Tienan was there with Logan beside him. Tienan plucked the gun from Piedmont's hand and tossed it to Logan, who caught it and leveled it at the man.

The acrid stench of fear surrounded Piedmont as Adrian shoved the man toward Tienan. Knowing the other

men would watch their prisoner, he turned to the secret room. Piles of files were stacked everywhere, along with boxes that contained who knew what.

"Adrian." Charity's scream had him whirling around. A tall, muscular man came through the tunnel. His hair was cropped short to his head and he wore a black jumpsuit. There was no expression on his face.

Adrian looked closer, narrowing his gaze as the man moved. He caught a flash of metal as the man raised his hands. Not a man, but a machine, built to resemble a man. This had to be the prototype of the new breed of super soldier that the Piedmont Corporation had been developing. Tienan and Logan had told him about it. Thankfully, he wasn't holding a weapon. Not that it mattered. He was the weapon.

"Attack them," Piedmont yelled. "Save me."

Tienan released Piedmont and whirled him around, punching him hard. The man crumpled to the floor. The three of them ranged out around the machine. "Any thoughts?" Adrian asked.

Logan fired at the machine, hitting him in strategic spots. One in the head, two in the chest and one in the groin. Three of the shots ricocheted off the metal body. "Shit," Logan yelled as he dodged one of the bouncing bullets.

Adrian worked his way around to the back of the machine and drove his knife into the back of its neck. Air whooshed next to his face as he barely avoided being hit by a roundhouse kick. The android was fast and flexible.

Rolling to one side, Adrian gained his feet swiftly. Tienan lashed out at the machine, kicking it. The super soldier fell back a step but kept coming.

Adrian's mind was firing on all circuits. He had to find a way to stop this creature. Right now, he wished he had a sledgehammer. He'd take that metal man down a notch or two. An idea came to him in a flash. "Get him into the bathroom," Adrian ordered.

As Logan and Tienan worked to herd the metal man toward the bathroom, doing their best to avoid the creature's powerful arms and legs as it struck out at them, Adrian raced to the dresser. Pulling out the lower drawer, he pulled out two explosive devices. He didn't pause to look at Charity as he hurried back in time to watch Logan go flying. This machine was incredibly strong. He wouldn't stop until either he was destroyed or all of them were dead.

Charity had to be protected at all costs. Adrian roared and raced at the machine, ramming his shoulder into its body and prayed the explosives wouldn't go off yet. Pain ripped through him as he hit solid metal. He shoved the pain aside. He'd had years of practice doing just that.

Tienan slipped beneath the robot's arm and pushed. The creature fell back.

"Harder." Sweat dripped down Adrian's face as he set the timers on the explosive. They had ten seconds to do this. Giving it everything he had, he kicked out, striking the machine in the stomach. It fell back, caught its legs on the edge of the tub and it tipped over, landing hard against the porcelain. Adrian dropped the two explosives into the tub with the robot. "Run!"

Tienan tore through the door just ahead of him. Both of them jumped. Tienan hit the floor and rolled behind the bed. Adrian landed by the dresser, pulling Charity to the ground and covering her with his body. He had no idea where Logan was and really didn't care about Piedmont.

The explosion rocked the foundation of the building. Shards of wood and brick blew through the air. Plaster exploded and dust filled the air. Several pieces of flying debris hit Adrian in the back. He grunted as a particularly heavy section landed on him. He glanced behind him and saw what looked like a metal arm roll beneath the bed.

Tienan coughed. "Everyone okay?"

Adrian lifted his body off Charity. "Are you okay?" He lifted her into his arms, swiping at the dust and dirt with his hand, stopping only when he realized he was making it worse.

"I'm fine." She waved her hand in front of her face. "What about you?" She ran her hand over his shoulders and down his body.

Behind him, he could hear the other men moving about. "Casualties?"

"Only Piedmont," Logan replied. "He took a piece of wood through his chest. He's dead."

Adrian stood and helped Charity to her feet. "What about the machine?"

Tienan made his way to the bathroom door. "In about a hundred pieces." He turned away. "You're going to need a new bathtub."

Charity began to laugh. She sat down on the side of the bed, stared at the three of them and laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks. The door burst open and Derrik rushed in, followed by an entire squadron of Resistance fighters.

Adrian turned and started issuing orders. "Piedmont is dead. His robotic soldier is in pieces in the bathroom. Make sure every last piece is gathered for destruction. This place has a furnace in the basement. Let's put it to work."

Derrik nodded and set the men to the task of cleanup.

Adrian turned back to Charity, who had her face buried in her hands. He crouched in front of her and carefully peeled her hands away so he could see her. Tears were still running down her face but she was chuckling as well.

“Charity?”

She raised her gaze and stared at him. “You realize you’re stark naked, don’t you?”

He’d honestly forgotten. With the fight and the aftermath he hadn’t given any thought to his attire, or lack of it. He felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He rubbed his hand over his jaw to try to hide it.

“Starting a new fashion trend, are you?” Tienan tossed a pair of pants at him. “Fighting in the buff. Would certainly throw off the opposition.”

Logan snickered and Adrian couldn’t hold it back any longer. He burst into laughter. The adrenaline of the fight was still racing through his body and he could think of a very pleasurable way to take care of it. Hauling on the pants, he buttoned them and reached for Charity. Gathering her into his arms, he headed for the open doorway. The door was askew and would need to be fixed before it would close again.

“You’re in charge, Derrik. I’ll be getting cleaned up down the hall.” He strode down the corridor and found an empty room. He went straight into the bathroom, grinning when he saw the large shower stall.

“It’s time to get cleaned up.”

Charity pulled his head toward her. “It certainly is.” She kissed him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, hugging him tight. “I love you,” she whispered when she broke away.

He knew what she was thinking even though she never spoke the words aloud. “I’m okay. You’re okay. And so is everyone else. That’s all that matters.” He dropped a hard kiss on her lips. “I love you, sweet Charity. Now and always.”

He walked into the shower stall with her still in her arms. It was a very long time later when he finally carried her to bed.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, “For God’s sake, quit the job and just write!”) she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn’t mind a bit. It’s a tough life, but someone’s got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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