

Red Sage Presents

Nathalie Gray
Unclaimed





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* * *

by Nathalie Gray

To My Reader:

This story of Max and Eddy made me wiggle in my seat, clench my teeth, ball my fists and curse at the computer screen... then it made me sigh in contentment. I hope it does all that for you too!

Unclaimed: Chapter 1

“Merry Christmas to me.”

Maxine raised her tofu-based, not-quite-the-taste-but-close-enough mug of “eggnog” to the nav console in a toast and took a sip. With a shiver, she plopped the mug down on the armrest of her swivel chair. Damn tofu. Everything she had onboard was tofu-based. Well, except for her cargo....

But she wouldn’t try to eat that.

A fourth Christmas alone on her ship. It was enough to make a woman ask Santa for very strange things to appear under her tree. Like men. A whole harem of them. Company would be nice. She’d been so good all year. Mostly good. Um, good enough. Well, anyway, Santa should take crazy deadlines, interstellar commerce ups and downs, and lack of steady companionship into account if he meant to put her on the Naughty Girls List.

Even a little token stocking stuffer would be nice. Maybe a candy cane shaped like a penis on one end? That would be fun. Santa could make it as spicy as he wanted too as long as there was a big red bow on it. Had to have a big red bow.

She threw a quick peek at her “tree” and snorted. All two feet of festive foil and wire taped to the charts table. Half the lights no longer worked. Santa wouldn’t be dropping anything big under that thing.

A chirp like a bird’s tweeted. She craned her neck to check what it was. A distress beacon. Oh, great. It tweeted again.

“Nuh-uh.”

Maxine retrieved her mug and buried her nose in it, trying to ignore the demanding red light flashing on her nav console like an annoying little Rudolph. She didn’t have time for distressed people. She had a drop to make. There’d be hell to pay, too, if she didn’t make it in time. She barely made a profit as it was. Hence the need for her special payload. She wasn’t happy dealing with slimy characters like her newest client, nor proud of passing illegal goods between systems, but a woman had to eat. And fuel her ship, and repair it, and save some for the future. Lots of expenses and until recently, very little income.

Still, not answering a distress beacon meant a fine.

Only if I’m caught.

She took another sip of eggnog and grimaced.

Anyway, I can’t ‘cause I’m in my PJs and fuzzy slippers and it’s Christmas.

She picked lint from her slippers. She’d have to run the ship-wide vacuum again.

There’s probably another ship even closer and better equipped.

Um. None of her excuses stopped the distress signal pinging on her screen and

tweeting out of the comms relay.

Don't be such a Scrooge.

"Ah, shit," she snarled as she lowered her feet from the console and straightened in her seat. "There goes my schedule."

After orienting her mammoth freighter toward the signal's source and adjusting course and speed to match, she plotted a rendezvous with the "ping" on her screen.

Maxine was still rolling the mug of eggnog in her hands and sucking her bottom lip over the wasted time when she spotted the source of the distress beacon. Something tiny, way too small to be in deep space. More like a pod than a ship.

She fisted the control to the cargo hold's giant door, glided along the pod, overtook it and maneuvered her ship's rear to swallow the little thing. A space ship suppository. Maxine snorted a laugh.

"Laughing at my own jokes. I've been alone in space too long. You hear that, Santa?"

Her dusty gun in hand, she marched down the passageway leading to the lift, which made a godawful noise as it ground to a halt three levels down. Cold seeped through her red fuzzy slippers and Christmas-themed flannel PJs. She wriggled her toes. Cargo Hold 4 gleamed blood red on the rusted iron hatch. Maxine entered the hold and cautiously circled the cylinder. Twenty feet long, five feet wide. The thing resembled a giant silvery dildo.

"But Santa, you forgot the bow." Her mocking laugh echoed in the hold. If she licked it, would it taste like peppermint?

She adjusted her PJs and crept closer.

Steam angrily hissed out of a hinge. With the gun pointed in front, she circled the pod once, twice, then decided it wasn't going to attack her. A frosted rectangle caught her attention. An access panel, maybe? Maxine used her sleeve to rub at it. She jumped back with a gasp.

There was a guy in there!

She checked again. And cute, too. He could jingle her bell anytime. Now this was some nice candy cane. Woo-damn, baby, never mind the big red bow!

Steam continued to whistle out of the pod. After a cursory check, Maxine realized the seals could give anytime. The guy would asphyxiate within minutes if she didn't get him out of there.

Hey, maybe he's the ghost of Christmas past. Although she'd remember that face if it'd been in her past!

"Well," she said, taking aim at the hissing hinge. "Tis the season for goodwill toward men. Especially cute ones." Plus, she couldn't very well toss Frosty back into

the big black void, now, could she?

She fired.

The projectile popped the hinge, which created a fog of steam as the pod split in half clean down the middle. Maxine arched her eyebrow as the hatch blew open and swung outward. Talk about some quick release gizmo. She held back until the fog had cleared so she wouldn't breathe in whatever kept the guy sedated and sanitized.

After a while, she bent over the rim to examine her new payload. Not bad at all. Six-feet-something, at least two hundred pounds of muscle, closely cropped dark hair and a five o'clock shadow. But the guy could've used with a bit of fashion counseling. Polymer? Come on. Even if this particular skintight suit sent her systems into super-nova mode, no one wore polymer anymore.

An old-fashioned plastic sheet was stuck to the cover's interior. Maxine carefully peeled it from the thermoplastic pane and brought it up close to her nose. She should've worn her glasses.

Oh, English, good. There was a date and a name. January 27th, Edmond Cabanesty.

She looked down at him. "You don't look like an Edmond."

There was something else too. A list. Squinting, she brought the plastic sheet even closer to read the fine print. Where'd she put her glasses again?

The word murder hit her brain first, then genocide, defection....

By the time she read the long list of offenses and the numbers beside each—the column said "sentence in years"—her heart was in her throat. Then at the very bottom of the sheet was a stamp bearing some official-looking logo with a bird on it and some stars with the word exile embossed beside a signature.

"Oh. Shit."

Just her luck to respond to a distress signal sent by an exiled criminal's pod. Great, just great.

He's the Ghost of No More Christmas for You if I Wake Up, Lady!

She looked down into the pod again, noted the strong chin and stubble. He really did look like a crook, now that she knew his history. Maxine tapped her foot. She should close the thing back and send him out.

Yeah, right, on Christmas day.

She couldn't space him. His pod was broken and her old freighter had only one, which she had to keep in case of emergency... or for border patrol inspections.

Wait a minute.

No country had exiled a prisoner in quite some time. Um. How long had he been

floating in space anyway?

When his eyes flared open, Maxine wasn't quick enough to push herself off the rim.

Impossibly fast, he slapped the gun and sent it clattering on the plated deck, reversed his momentum and fisted the front of her pajamas. His massive hand encompassed at least a dozen smiling flannel penguins wearing elf hats. The first button gave.

Out of pure primal fear, Maxine found the strength to smack him in the face hard enough to make him lose his grip on her PJs. She yanked the shirt out of his fist, sacrificing two more buttons in the process, and rushed across the cargo hold.

Run! screamed her brain and every other nerve ending in her trembling body.

If she could get at the hatch, she'd be able to lock him in until she made it to the nearest human outpost and radioed security.

"Stop right there!" she heard a deep male voice. It was hoarse, probably from disuse.

Yeah, like I'm stupid, buddy. It might have been Christmas, but she didn't want to end up on that guy's list! And he'd probably been naughty all year, too. Well, the last year he'd been awake, anyway.

Thunder erupted in the hold. He'd fired at her? Good thing her ship was an old cargo freighter built to last. If it'd been one of those newer cruisers, he'd have just put a hole in the bulkhead that would've sucked them both out like jelly through a straw. Not festive.

A bullet thudded against the bulkhead where her left hand had been, destroying the access panel and creating a shower of sparks.

"Hey!"

Shit, he was breaking her ship! She couldn't lock him in now. So he had brains to go with the good looks. Damn.

Maxine used the hatch lever to propel herself into the passageway, praying she'd have time to get to the ladder and slam the hatch down on her Ghost of Shitty Christmas. Locking him into the lower level wasn't ideal, especially because the engine room was there. But it was better than having him roaming the decks.

"Stop!" he yelled again. His voice filled the corridor.

Cringing, she tucked her head into her shoulders and leaped for the ladder. One of her slippers flew off her foot. She slipped, banged her chin against the metal rung, and cursed. She was up almost to the circular opening in the ceiling when thunder made her flinch. A bullet clunked right above her head.

"I swear," he yelled, his voice getting closer. "The next one will hurt!"

“It won’t stop me!” she yelled back. For some reason, her brain had decided to go on holidays and leave her big mouth in charge of the toy factory.

“I’ll shoot you in the ass! That ought to stop you!” He must have been right under her.

Maxine looked up. The hatch to the next deck was barely four feet away. So close. There she was, halfway up to salvation, wearing only one slipper and her flannel penguin PJs and with an armed madman threatening to shoot her in the ass. Where had her boring life gone?

“Come down! Now!”

“No!”

Not only was she not going to be the docile little hostage for him but fear paralyzed her as efficiently as bravado. She couldn’t move even if she wanted to. A nervous pee burned her lower belly. Good going, genius girl.

“Fine. I’m coming up then.”

Something grabbed her ankle. With a squeal that shamed her, she kicked out. The other slipper went flying. When he pulled on her pajama bottoms, Maxine let out a real yelp of fright. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath!

“Okay, okay, dammit, I’m coming down. Just leave the apparel alone, buddy.”

With her chin set as forward as she could make it, Maxine climbed down, turned to face him and crossed her arms. Man, he looked mean. Maybe it’d be Boxing Day early this year.

“There’s no money onboard. And the cargo happens to be boring old construction stuff that’s worth nothing. So there you go. All this for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” Edmond replied, his sapphires for eyes narrowing dangerously. He gave her a pronounced once over.

Oh?

“I guess they forgot to add ‘rapist’ to your resume.”

That set him back on his heels. His dark eyebrows gathered in the middle in one of the most potent scowls she’d ever seen. She was properly intimidated but would date a dock worker before she let it show.

“I’m not a rapist.”

“Good for you.”

“You have a big mouth for your size.”

“That’s what my crew keeps telling me.”

“There is no crew.”

“How do you know? My little elves are going to bust your beak when they wake up.”

Edmond closed his eyes briefly. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“Poor guy. Take a pill.”

“You’ve read my file, you know the sort of man I am. Do you really want to piss me off?”

Maxine shook her head. No, she didn’t want him pissed off. She wanted him strapped to the prow of her ship, butt-naked and facing in so she could see his face through the view screen. The jerk.

She did have a big mouth, but no death wish, thank you very much. Getting her head blown off on Christmas Day wasn’t on her list. Neither was he!

“What month is this?”

His eyes were the bluest blue she’d ever seen. And the coldest too.

“December.”

Edmond stared at her. His suit creaked when he put a fist on his hip.

“You’re lying. What month is this?” His voice had dropped even lower and rumbled in his wide chest. He was getting pissed off.

Fear had her stomach in a cold, clammy fist.

“I’m telling you, today’s December 25th. You’ve, er, you’ve been out there a long time.” Air got into her PJs through the collar. A shiver tightened her belly.

He raised a thick black eyebrow. “Eleven months out of a hundred and ninety-two years sentence? I’d say that’s not so bad.”

“It’s not—” Maxine cocked her head trying to remember the year on the plastic sheet. She was so bad with numbers. But faces though, she could remember for years. “It’s not 2087 anymore.”

The guy would have a heart attack when he learned the year. Maybe that’d take care of her problem. Now, that would be a Christmas present!

“What year is it then?” he asked, his voice so low she had to watch his lips to get it all. And watching Edmond’s mouth wasn’t something she should’ve done. Not if she wanted to keep her mental faculties intact. The guy had some lips to him, thin and well formed with a wicked curve at one corner. Yum.

Back to the hostage situation, please.

She braced herself for his reaction. With his file, he just might put a bullet in her head just for saying it. “The year is now 2407 E.V.”

He repeated the year a couple of times, looking at her as though she’d sprouted a pair of elf’s ears. Long fuzzy ones. Maxine threw a quick glance at the gun. If she could maybe kick it out of his hand, or slap it away as he’d done to her.

Then what would she do?

Run, dammit, RUN!

But could she outrun him?

“E.V.?”

“Era Vulgaris.”

Kick the gun, said her inner tomboy. Shut up, snapped the Voice of Reason, the one that had pooped many a party but had kept her alive so far.

As she gave a good look at Edmond, she had her answer. Because of her job, she was good at guesstimating volume and dimensions, and this guy was large. Closer to six and a half feet than six, and at least two-forty. He was all shoulders and chest, with thick arms and thighs that distended the dark gray polymer. Not only could she not outrun him, she wouldn't be able to fight him off should he decide to commandeer her ship to go wherever murderers and defectors hung out.

“Want me to drop you off somewhere?”

His upper lip curled into a smug grin. “You act like a boss, so we are on a ship that you own and we're alone because you said ‘me’, not ‘we.’”

That was rich, Maxine. Scalpel-sharp.

“No, no—I mean, yeah, it's my ship but, my crew, it's, er, asleep for now. It's the downshift.”

He leaned into her face. “Do you think I'm stupid?”

“Nuh-uh. No, sir. You're too big for me to call you stupid.”

“Like I said earlier. You've got too big a mouth for the rest of you.”

“Like I said earlier, screw you.”

“You never said that.”

“I meant to. Slipped my mind.” She avoided his penetrating gaze when he stared at her for a long while. She couldn't decide if he was more handsome or menacing. Both equally. And that was saying something!

That had to be the strangest standoff ever. Eddy shook his head. The curvy, freckle-faced brunette stood in her pajamas—white and green penguins too—and Christmassy plush slippers, yet she was running her mouth at him. Who had the gun in this outfit?

The smell of soap and lotion wafted to him. It'd been so long since he'd smelled a woman. Or seen one. Or argued with one. Hell, even that wasn't so bad. Not compared to being sentenced to nearly two centuries of exile.

2407.

How the hell had he managed that one? Someone, somewhere had fucked up big time to misplace such a dangerous offender as Edmond Cabanesty. After all, wasn't he the spec ops team leader gone rogue, the monster who'd killed all these poor, in-

nocent people? Ha. And just his luck to wake almost four hundred years too late on some old clunker piloted by a motormouth in her holidays PJs!

He'd find a way to make it work. He always did. Although his energy and ability to start over were diminishing every time he had to do it. Back to basics.

"I'm hungry," he announced, expecting some reaction.

Either she'd show him the galley, or if he were really lucky, she'd fix him something. But she just stared at some point above his head.

Stubborn. Good, he liked stubborn women. Only not now when he was thirsty, sore all over and hungry—hungry for every type of nourishment out there. Carnal included.

Only she called you a rapist. Clearly, the lady isn't interested.

Oh well, arguing was almost a form of sex. He'd have to satisfy himself with that. Too bad though. She really was cute.

"Food. Where do you keep it?"

"In the galley." She crossed her arms.

Through the collar of her pajamas with the missing buttons, Eddy could see a very tempting sliver of freckled skin that called to him in a siren's song. His little space siren. One who'd put a bullet in his head if he gave her the chance. Or argue him to death.

"And where's the galley?" His headache was swelling to dangerous proportions.

"Down then to the left. Up the next level, past the blue section then across the gangway. It says 'Galley' above the hatch. Can't miss it. If you reach the thrusters, you've gone too far."

Smart mouth.

"No, I won't miss it, because you'll be walking in front. Go."

He waved the muzzle of the gun—a puny, dusty thing barely worthy to be called such—down toward the corridor. She lifted her chin, passed him with the regal air of a queen on her throne, and retrieved the other slipper, which she put on. Another sliver of skin, this time between the flannel top and bottoms, made him swallow hard. Good thing his polymer suit kept his excitement subdued. But, man, was he ever horny!

After a short trip through the old, decrepit freighter, they reached the small, festively decorated galley, right where she'd explained it would be. She leaned on the bulkhead, crossed her arms and stared at a point across the place. He wondered if she knew she was standing right under an old plastic bunch of mistletoe.

"You were more entertaining when I was pointing a gun at you," Eddy muttered as he stepped inside and started looking for cooking utensils or ready-made meals.

It was a well-stocked little galley. And she must have planned a Christmas meal, too, with canned cranberry sauce, canned gravy, dehydrated mashed potatoes—with Real Butter Taste or so it boasted—and a loaf of brown, gel-like something. What the hell was that? He sniffed at the plastic tray. Turkey?

“You were going to celebrate with your crew?”

“Yeah.”

“They don’t eat much. Must keep the costs down.”

She just threw him a vicious glare. Oh, she could make it nasty, too. Only he was happy—yeah, extra happy—to see a woman to get offended at the venomous looks.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Be my guest.”

“Why don’t you do it?”

She shook her head. “You don’t want me touching your food, Mister Edmond.”

He scowled, which sparked a look of alarm in her chocolate-colored eyes. He wasn’t particularly proud of that, but he was too hungry to care. He had to eat or risk keeling over. He didn’t want to wake up floating in space somewhere. Or not wake up at all. Edmond Cabanesty was a survivor, always had been. Whatever it took, he did.

That exact attitude had landed him in exile in the first place.

“Better yet, why don’t you have one of your elves do it?” He crossed the room and stood about a foot away from her. Smells of her lotion reached him again, made him hard. Thanks for double-layer polymer suits that hid inopportune woodies otherwise, he’d look exactly how he felt—like a hormone-crazed moron.

Her neck flushed a sunburn shade of red he thought was the sexiest thing he’d seen in about four hundred years. She muttered something.

“I’m sorry,” Eddy said, enjoying putting oil on her fire. “I didn’t get that?”

“I said I’m not waking them up for that.”

Stubborn.

“Then I’ll do it.”

He unzipped his suit down to his navel, which flared her eyes to the size of coasters—in a good way he hoped, instantly hating himself for it—and slid the gun in the opening. The butt stuck out so he could grab it in a hurry.

“Sit there where I can see you.”

She sat at one end of the table, both palms splayed over it. Heat marks around her hands darkened the blue fake ceramic.

After taking out the ingredients to make a Christmas “feast”—he wasn’t going anywhere near that turkey gel thing—Eddy found some red plastic plates and uten-

sils, very Christmassy with designs of snowflakes, which he piled on the table.

“What’s your name?”

“Maxine Fields.”

Maxine. Cute. Fit her well, too.

“Where are we anyway? What system?”

“A couple light-years past Uranus.”

Eddy snorted a laugh before he could stop himself. Whoa. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d smiled, let alone laughed. There hadn’t been any reason to, especially in the end, after he’d been slapped with every crime in the book for a mission he’d fulfilled to the last comma.

It pissed him off his superiors had thrown him to the wolves without so much as lifting a finger for their best spec ops operative. Not that they’d hurt his feelings, which had been trained, brainwashed, shot, tortured and ripped out of him. But he would’ve liked a bit of support, dammit. They’d sent him on a mission where blinking one too many times would’ve meant a bullet in the head. If he were lucky. But then they got all prissy and mock-horrified when the death toll started to climb. And when news had hit the public eye of a government-approved assassination of a certain well-known political figure, well, the proverbial shit had hit the fan. His name had been “leaked” to the media, he’d taken the hit for every crime under the sun, and his ass had been slammed into a coffin destined for orbit.

That’s what a guy gets for following orders.

Maxine looked as though she regretted letting her mouth run but was probably too proud to say admit it. He could relate.

“You’re a funny woman, aren’t you?”

Her stomach growled. She looked down at her hands, and a muscle bulged along her jaw.

After a look at the weird equipment set up along the counter, half of which he didn’t recognize, he snapped his chin at her. “Why don’t you do the food thing and I’ll set the table.”

Keeping her well in view, he put out plastic plates and cups for two, set everything up nice and even, the way he liked it, then sat to watch her work the strange gizmos. So that was a microwave sort of machine. It took metals now. Nice.

After about five minutes, they had a Christmas dinner set up on the small square table. During the silence, he heard her stomach gurgle at least twice. Every time, Maxine looked embarrassed by it.

As strange as it could be—and he wasn’t about to admit it to anyone—this was nicer than his usual Christmas dinner. They were usually solitary affairs spent on

some mission or other while those with families took time off. He had no one, so he worked. Hell, one time, he'd spent Christmas Eve torturing a guy for information about a terrorist plot against one of the most vocal opponents to the planetary alliance of nation-states. He must have been on Santa's naughty list ever since.

Long before, actually.

Standing on "her" side of the table, he grabbed the pitcher of beige goopy eggnog and motioned to her plastic cup. While she sat, Eddy noticed that with the angle he could see a breast between two buttons. The rosy point appeared hard and tight, so either she was excited or she was cold. Either way, even fourteen layers of polymer wouldn't have helped him hide the hard-on. And when her gaze slid down the length of him, settled in the middle then snapped back to his face, Eddy thought he was going to explode.

Those penguins looked as though they were laughing at him.

She blushed again, cleared her throat. "Thanks."

Coming half off her chair to raise her glass and meet the pitcher halfway, she leaned over very low, offered him a stunning view down her cleavage. Eddy swore he was going to start drooling.

A split second was all it took. Damn hormones.

Before he could react, Maxine had dropped her glass, grabbed the gun from the open folds of his shirt, and was leaping back so she could put the table between them. Oh she was a quick one. And sneaky to boot.

She looked half shocked, half proud at what she'd done. "Stay the hell there," she growled.

You've been boned with your clothes on, man. Rich.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"And shut up, too."

He shrugged, then sat at "his" chair so he could start eating. It wasn't bad either. After he wolfed his food down, he drained the beige goop. The entire time, she pointed the gun at him. It wasn't shaking either.

"Let me know when you're done," she remarked caustically. Her eyes sparkled when she was angry. Sexy.

"Got any apple cider?"

She silently parroted him. Got any apple cider?

"I guess not. Water?"

Keeping him in view, she slid a compartment open, grabbed a can and tossed it at him. Hard.

Why was she giving him water? Because he'd asked? Even if Maxine wasn't

all soft and cuddly, she was still a decent person, which told him that if he made sure not to push his luck, made sure to just get the gun back, there just might be a chance to come out of this without resorting to force.

He raised the can to his lips, his eyes never leaving her face, and finished it in a long swig. She watched him like a hawk. He had to admit he didn't mind being the center of her attention. But he had to get that gun back.

"Now what?" he asked after he put the can on the table, brushed some crumbs off the plastic mat and into his palm then shook them into his empty plate. "You're not going to shoot me."

"Give me a reason, and I will."

"I've given you plenty of reasons, but you haven't pulled the trigger yet. So unless I do something stupid, you're not going to shoot me."

"Something stupid like running your big mouth you mean?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"You're right, maybe I won't shoot you, but I'll plot a course to the nearest human outpost and get your ass hauled in jail. And that," Maxine said, popping a hip and snapping her chin forward, "Edmond, will make me a nice Christmas present."

Those penguins really were laughing at him now.

Unclaimed: Chapter 2

“Ho, ho, ho,” she said in the intercom before flicking the switch off.

The look on his face when she slammed the hatch!

Now that the Ghost of Christmas Prehistoric Past was sitting nice and quiet in one of the smaller cargo holds—its hatch locked and triple locked—Maxine could finally go to bed. It was already past two a.m. Her freighter would reach the next station, Shangwu, in about ten standard hours. Plenty of time to get some sleep before trying to offload her guest without the port authorities inspecting her ship, of course. If they found her cargo, she’d be accompanying “Edmond” to jail.

Edmond, sheesh.

The thought of being stuck in a very small cell with the yummy guy triggered all kinds of foolish “oh my” alarms.

He’s a killer. Remember that when you start drooling.

If she kept the gun under her pillow, she might shoot herself in the head, so she set it on the dresser. After Maxine settled in her bed, plumped and beat her pillows just so, and rearranged her Christmas themed sheets, she sighed. Ah. Sleep.

That mouth, those killer blue eyes. The oh-so-impressive bulge in his tacky polymer suit.

Quit it, woman, get some rest.

While she rubbed her belly, the tips of her fingers slipped below the elastic of her PJs as she imagined the things he could do with his hands. And he had nice, big ones, with square fingernails and a crisscross of scars over the knuckles. The nails on his right hand were filed almost all the way down to the calluses on his fingertips. Obviously, he was a right-hander. Was he so for everything?

Her middle finger found her pussy and started rubbing the thin little strip she’d waxed a couple of days ago. This wouldn’t take long. The mere thought of her guest’s hands was already enough to pre-position her right on the edge. She’d never felt so damn horny for a guy before. Despite the bad boy thing. Or perhaps because of it.

A surprising amount of honey had gathered between her folds. She dipped a finger in and rubbed gently, her mind floating out toward the cargo bay, trying to imagine the guy without his horrendous suit on. Was he hairy? She’d say yes, with the black stubble covering half his face and the portion of chest she’d seen. The tease had unzipped his suit down to his navel, exposing that glorious, compact network of muscles. Too bad he’d been wearing a T-shirt underneath. At least it’d been a clingy V-neck.

She loved hair on a man. And Edmond had the kind of beard that, should he let

it grow, would cover his jaw and fill in the hollows under his cheekbones. His chest too. It must be hard and hot and hairy all the way down.

She sighed when she realized there'd be no sleeping anytime soon. Might as well make the most of it. She'd received enough daydreaming fodder to last months. What a Christmas present!

After she retrieved Alonzo—well, it was bronzed, glossy and beautiful, so Alonzo had seemed a perfect name for her vibrator—Maxine flopped back down, kicked the covers to the foot of the bed and slipped her hand inside her PJs. Within seconds, she was too hot for flannel so she took off the bottoms and snarled a sigh.

“Am I gonna do this tonight or not, dammit?!”

On her back, with a pillow under a knee, Maxine rubbed the slender toy over her slicked pussy, her thoughts on not a bronzed god, but a polymer-clad one. She knew he'd be good, and hard too. Her clitoris swelled. She circled it, ran the entire length of the toy along her cleft then spared a hand so she could caress a breast. Oh, yeah, he'd be great. With those gorgeous lips and hands, and those legs, whew, all muscles! A soft moan escaped her. Her dildo's tiny whir made her grin in satisfaction. Then a tingly orgasm dawned at the base of her back and spread all along her cleft to tighten her clitoris. She released with a sigh.

After a couple of minutes relaxing and drifting in and out of sleep, Maxine went at it again. She dipped her toy in and pumped slowly, gently, whispering his name when another climax arched her back off the bed. She repeated it, just to hear it aloud.

“That's the sexiest thing I've ever heard,” a male voice said in the darkness.

“Shit!” Maxine spun to her side so fast she nearly toppled off the bed. The good thing about space travel was when one needed darkness to sleep, one got darkness. Utter, complete darkness. An abyss. She'd loved the pitch black of her cabin until now.

With a curse she grabbed the sheet and yanked herself back to a steady position atop the bed. Alonzo, still whirring its oblivious little acrylic heart out, rolled out of her reach.

“What the hell! How did you get out?” She pawed blindly for the gun on the dresser but felt nothing on the smooth metal surface.

“People always bother about the locks but never about the hinges.”

He'd busted the hinges on her hatch?

A lump of shadow detached itself from the corner of her cabin and advanced toward the bed. Fear and adrenaline made Maxine cock her legs. If he came any closer, she'd send him flying backward with both feet. But then again, maybe she'd

have a bullet hole in her forehead for her trouble.

“Don’t worry, I won’t do anything creepy or gross.” He sounded as though he were smiling.

Maxine wanted to die of shame. With a click, her dildo was turned off. Something landed on her thigh. She fingered the spot by her leg, grabbed Alonzo and brandished it. Nine inches and two pounds of acrylic and jelly across the forehead might do Edmond some good.

The foolishness of what she was doing hit her. Maxine was seriously considering clobbering a man to death with a dildo. She sighed.

“Sorry to interrupt something so pleasant for you.”

She felt him near the bed. Her theory was confirmed when it creaked and a heavy weight pressed on the corner. The squeak of polymer announced he’d sat on the foot of her bed.

“You didn’t interrupt anything,” she snapped through clenched teeth. Yet heat from his nearness wafted up her PJs collar. She crossed her legs to try to hide her nakedness. Because it was pitch black, he wouldn’t see anything, but the gesture still helped her feel more in control of a situation rapidly degenerating into something else altogether.

“Judging by the sounds, I thought I had. My mistake.”

“Yeah, well. What do you want? You know where the galley is now.”

A long silence followed her acid remark. She hoped she hadn’t pissed him off too badly. He did have the gun.

But I have Alonzo, by God, and I’m gonna use it!

“What do I want?” he murmured. “Same thing as you.”

Serious heat flushed her cheeks. She cleared her throat. “Scuse me?”

“Unless I’m seriously wrong about what I heard, I think you and I both want the same thing.”

Mpft! She wasn’t about to admit that, was she?

“I have everything I want, but thanks for asking.”

“I wasn’t asking but remarking. I’ve heard the way my name sounds in your mouth. You can’t fake that.”

Maxine shifted on the bed. She did want him, so what? Sue me.

“Come near me and I’ll show you what I want,” she snapped. Had to keep the brave girl thing going. What would he think of her if she caved in like a bimbo? Not that she cared what he thought of her.

He chuckled. “Why don’t you?”

Heat heralded imminent contact near her ankle. She froze when a large hand

landed on her calf, stayed lightly, tentatively brushing a thumb along the pointy bone on her ankle. A shiver tautened her thigh muscle, and damn it if all Maxine could think about was how good that hand would feel on her breast, her hip, or her ass.

She didn't try to stop him when his hand moved back and forth along her calf, the long fingers curled around almost all the way. Neither did she move when Edmond caressed her knee then transferred his hand down her other leg. Maxine wanted to melt.

"Look, er, Edmond, don't get the wrong idea, okay? I'm not that kind of woman." She cursed inwardly. Maxine had never been so tongue-tied. Dumb hormones.

"And I'm not that kind of man. If you don't want to, say so."

He removed his hand from her leg and that was when Maxine's brainwaves flatlined. To say she felt bereft and cold without his large hot bear paw of a hand would be like saying her cargo was legal. Not anywhere near the truth.

This had to be the dumbest thing she'd ever done.

And the most dangerous.

With her eyes closed the entire time, she pointed her foot and moved it outward until she met his leg—or she thought it was his leg anyway—and rubbed the polymer with her toes.

"I have a big mouth sometimes. I'll just shut up now."

A low chuckle made her smile in the darkness. He had a nice laugh. Like a bear's.

"Oh no, go on. Quiet women bore me. Talk all you want. It keeps me from hearing what's going on inside my head."

"And what's going on inside your head, Edmond?" She couldn't help but ask.

He sighed. "It's not polite enough to say to a woman. And it's Eddy."

"Try me, Eddy."

"I want to fuck you, Maxine. Even when you had a gun pointed at me, all I could think about was how good your pussy would taste."

She swallowed hard. "That's blunt."

"Told you it wasn't polite."

"I didn't say I thought it was impolite. I said 'blunt'. So, you like eating your women?"

"I'd eat pussy for a living and die a rich man. We could do only that if you don't want things to go any further."

"We'll see."

"So is this a truce?"

Apprehension deepened his voice. And something else. Hope.

“Sure.”

Who said Maxine Fields was a smart woman?!

Just throw yourself in.

She lunged for the foot of the bed and hoped she hadn't misjudged. But he must have felt her presence, for she met a thick arm that encircled her around the shoulders and brought her close to him. Straddling his lap, Maxine framed his face so she wouldn't end up kissing empty air and ruining the whole urgency thing. She crushed her mouth to his. Those lips, whew! Just as delicious as she'd thought.

Strong, hot hands grabbed at her waist and squeezed hard. She humph-ed when he twisted and crushed her against the mattress.

Oh he's an “on top” kinda guy, is he? Usually, she enjoyed being on top but all that male gorgeousness convinced her to play along for a while. Something told Maxine he'd make it worth her while.

And he did.

“Let me get rid of the penguins,” he murmured as he pulled her PJs up over her belly.

She arched so he could take it off and palmed blindly for the closure to his polymer suit. That thing was coming off! Hot skin and hard muscles rewarded her hands when she found the closure, pulled it down all the way and slipped her fingers inside and under the T-shirt. He hissed a curse.

“Slow down, Maxine, damn.”

“Sorry.”

She raised her head and kissed, nibbled and bit his chest—and it was hairy all the way down, too, when he slipped his arms out and took his T-shirt off. Muscles like iron bands played under her palms. Shoulders and triceps worked hard when he pulled himself off her so he could wriggle the suit down around his legs. She helped as she could, hooking a foot in the crotch of his suit and pushing down. Finally, he was as naked as she and—goddamn, the size of that thing!

Maxine fisted his cock, felt for its length.

“Nice, huh?”

“Oh, and humble too.”

Now that she had the thing in hand, she wasn't sure she could contain it. Not because of its length but its girth. He was some thick! Oh what the hell, she'd worry about that later. And if it didn't work out, there was always Alonzo.

While she wrapped her arms around his head and crushed his face between her breasts, he nudged a knee between her legs and angled it so his thigh would rub her

already sensitive clitoris. And boy, did it ever. With the man over her in a not-quite push-up pose, Maxine discovered quickly enough her body was now calling the shots when her hips pumped and rolled so he'd press harder. After he anchored her hips into the mattress—man, those hands—Eddy used his leg like a giant vibrator. That was good! Maxine grinned in the dark as he made sure her clitoris received plenty of attention and progressed from slow and torturous rub to oh-my-God-the-skin-will-come-off-but-don't-you-dare-stop pushes, each one triggering massive amounts of brain-melting heat to spread from head to toe. She'd never had a guy use his thigh this way before and vowed to demand it every time!

As Eddy curled his spine tighter and used his thigh to grind her sex, Maxine released his head and fisted the sheets on either side.

Ohhh...

Oh boy...

Hot damn!

Pulsations heralded one fine climax. And it hit. Maxine just managed to let it slip through her teeth. "Ahhh."

While the waves still rippled through her, Eddy came down on his elbows, one on either side of her head, and kissed her very, very slowly and tenderly. His lips barely touched hers, making each imminent contact a form of torture-by-absence, which he could do all night as far as she was concerned.

"Now," he whispered between featherlight kisses, "I've been a good boy for the last few hundred years, and I'd really like a Christmas present."

He wanted her to suck his cock right away. Typical.

Maxine sighed as she rode the last few ripples of that magnificent climax before she had to do her share. Where was the lover who would just make her come and not ask anything in return? Dammit. She tried to roll to her side but Eddy wouldn't move.

"Where are you going?"

Good thing it was too dark for him to see her roll of eyes. "If I'm going to suck you, I need a bit of room, right?"

His belly laugh filled her cabin. Maxine grinned in spite of her frustration. That was one nice laugh right there. Came from down low in the belly, rumbled up, and would probably look striking on him.

"Something I said?"

His hand landed on her shoulder and he pushed her down against the mattress.

"I meant this. I'd like some of this for Christmas." His hand snaked down her belly, over her mons and slipped between her lips. He didn't enter her, just glided

along her cleft back and forth.

Maxine twisted.

Oh?

Ohhh... You're not too bright, Maxine Fields, are you?

Understanding dawned on her and she chuckled. "Oh, that's what you meant. Well, damn, never mind me. Just go ahead and unwrap your present."

"Move to the edge of the bed," he said as he pulled away.

She was instantly cold without his large hot hands and body all over her. How about that? She'd never been cold before on a ship and had spent all her life on a freighter. In fact, she hailed from a family of deep space cargo captains and had never once been cold like most people unused to the climate-controlled, artificial environment. But she was freezing now.

Once against the edge of the bed, supine, her legs dangling, she felt Eddy's large hands wrap around her knees and press them close together.

"Hey, you're not gonna get anywhere—"

When he licked the cleft from kneecaps to compressed pussy, triggering some mighty fine shivers along the way, Maxine decided to shut up and let the man do his thing.

She felt his stubby chin rub against her mons. He stopped moving. "You were saying?"

"Nothing at all."

"That's what I thought."

Another hot, hard lick. Another set of shivers in its wake.

Arms over her head, she dug her butt in the mattress and waited for each lick to bring her closer to the edge. Gradually, Eddy parted her knees, licked and nibbled each in turn, then gave her thigh an outright bite that made Maxine gasp and snap up sitting. After a bit of blind patting, she found what she was looking for and laced her fingers behind his nape so she could roll her pelvis forward and push it against his mouth. She spread her knees wide. Now he'd have all the room he needed to work his magic.

Eddy mmm-ed as a starving man sitting to a king's feast when the first lick touched her sex. Fingers digging into her knees, he licked her. Sucked, teased and devoured her. He ate, inhaled, gorged. What started as faint tingles at her nape spread and deepened to frissons over every inch of her, frissons that left her quivering with needs urgent and profound. When he started murmuring against her vulva, the vibrato of his deep voice transferred to her flesh. Maxine thought she'd melt into a big puddle of happy jelly. Still, he worked his tongue in her, fingers parting

her for maximum effect and reach. The fire built, grew, intensified then exploded into a raging inferno. She snarled her climax at him, which he took from her in enthusiastic and noisy pulls.

Apparently not done with her, he used his tongue and lips and chin and not long after made her come again. Too many times to count, he brought her there. Again and again. Maxine was sweating and shaking all over when he flicked his tongue one last time then withdrew. She felt him stand, and his feet connecting on either side of hers confirmed it.

“Suck me.”

Any other time, the curt demand would’ve made her snort a laugh and stomp off. Or maybe snort a laugh, roll her eyes and stomp off. Or even snort a laugh, roll her eyes, smack him upside the head then stomp off. Yeah, probably that.

Or, for Eddy, because he was a special case, suck him hard enough to suction his balls right in.

After some frantic pawing in the dark, her hands encountered something hot, smooth and big enough to make rows of women fan themselves. Luckily for her, she had him all to herself. And damn the spirit of Christmas, she wasn’t sharing! She fisted him with both hands, left the glans denuded for her mouth and licked him hard enough to curve the head upward. He hissed something then gripped her wrist.

“Fuck, Maxine, I said suck me, not break my dick off.”

“Mmm. You’re not complaining, are you, because if you are....” She loosened her fists for effect.

His grip on her wrist tightened.

“That’s what I thought.”

His pre-cum tasted salty. Maxine stretched her tongue wide and ran it in an upward swipe, compressing each vein and ridge, wrinkle and swell. With her lips, she trapped the thick glans and drew hard. She tried to imagine if his toes had just curled. But when she pressed a palm to his thigh and felt the muscles twitching like that of a horse, she had her answer. She had toe action!

Wriggling her butt on the bed so she’d stoke her own fire while she fanned his, Maxine pumped him hard and slow, quick and soft, straight then in a corkscrew motion. Her saliva was the perfect lubricant. But she’d need more.

“Can you reach above your head?” she asked, then kissed the tip of his cock. “To your left, there’s an encased locker.”

The scrape of plastic against plastic indicated he’d found the sliding door. “Got it. What am I looking for?”

“A long tube that’s tapered at the end.”

Some rummaging. She could imagine his bear paw of a hand going through her toiletries and knocking over half of them. But what she had in mind was worth the aggravation of putting everything back in order.

“Found it?”

“Yeah,” he said. His voice sounded tight.

“Don’t worry,” she said, parroting his accent and inflections, “I won’t do anything creepy or gross.”

“Har har. Here.”

The tube pressed against the side of her head. She took it, recognized the shape and grinned. He had no idea what was in store for him.

“Hang on and don’t you move.”

When she had a good spoonful of the gel in her palm, Maxine rubbed her hands together very quickly then applied them to Eddy’s cock. Since it was a new product—captaining a cargo freighter had advantages when it came time to receiving samples and outright bribes—Eddy had assuredly never had this done to him before.

“What’s that?” he asked, his fingers getting in the way of her work. “It’s cold. You put toothpaste on my dick?”

She pulled to the end of his length. “It’s not toothpaste. Come on. Leave it or it won’t work. It needs heat.”

“I have plenty of that right here,” he countered, his hand finding her breast and rolling her nipple. She groaned in delight.

Sliding back along his cock, she waited until the heat of her mouth would activate the gel. After a couple of seconds, she felt the first tiny pop tingling on her tongue.

Get ready for a surprise, big boy.

When they began to melt in salvos of a couple hundred, the gelatin microspheres filled with carbon dioxide popped and crackled all along his cock, creating an instant “oh-my-God.” She knew, she used it. A lot. Although it was a first inside her mouth.

He gasped. “What... the fuck... whoooaw.”

Using her lips like a cock ring, Maxine pressed increasingly harder, both hands gripping his hips to keep him put. Tiny bursts tingled and sizzled with audible pops. There used to be candy made with those little popping crystals.

“I’m gonna come,” he snarled before pushing against her shoulder. “Hey. I said I’m—”

She'd dug her nails in his butt. There, got the drift?

Maxine could tell he was fighting it. For some reason, she liked that about him the most. He wasn't taking advantage of the situation or of her extreme horniness, and wouldn't let himself just come into her mouth. The thing was, she wanted it.

And she got it.

Tiny pulsations at the base of his shaft indicated his imminent release. Maxine readied her mouth, worked her jaw and sucked that man's cock all the harder until liquid silk glided down her throat with the sweet candy gel. Now that the microspheres had all burst, all that remained was normal, water-based gel. She had the tube in hand when one of his closed over it.

"Give me that," he growled. "Then lay on your stomach."

Maxine did as he instructed. She felt him kneel between her calves. Anticipation tightened her butt and pussy. Oh, this would be good!

She heard the tube being squished, heard the gel squirting out.

"Hey, that stuff is worth a for—"

Cool and wet, a liberal amount of gel landed in her butt crack and oozed down to her pussy. She shivered.

"Spread your feet."

She loved his voice, so deep, so much like a bear's rumble. Very feral. Yum.

With him between her knees, she spread her legs and waited. She didn't have to wait long.

She gasped when he hooked the crook of her hips and pulled high and back. By the force of his arms alone, he had her suspended over his lap while he shoved his face right into her sex and started licking. Maxine raised herself on her elbows and arched. Good man, good, good man!

Growling, mmm-ing, Eddy licked her brutally, tongue-fucked her pussy to the point that his saliva, coupled with the rubbing action of his stubbles—and just plain feeding frenzy—melted the gelatin bubbles. Waves of heat triggered along her cleft, spread outward, and made her come instantly. His name filled her cabin. She started panting, groaning with need, and pushed back rhythmically against his face. She even spared a hand and collapsed onto one side so she could wrap the back of his skull and crush his face to her pussy, and she exclaimed loudly when Eddy began to finger her ass as well. More gel squirted onto her drenched cleft. Maxine whooped in delight. The best Christmas present ever!

"Do you still want this?" Eddy asked, his finger slowly sliding in and out of her. She felt him straighten behind her.

She panted so hard she could barely talk. "Yes."

"Where's that thing you were playing with?"

“Alonzo? He’s right here,” she replied as she patted the bed, found her toy and passed it back to Eddy.

“Alonzo?”

“Mm-hmm.”

His chuckle made her grin. She wanted to see his face but at the same time suspected that light would kill what they had, the *laissez-faire* and budding peace growing between them. And if she didn’t trust Edmond What’s-His-Last-Name half the distance she could throw him, she still didn’t want to spoil this. He was being so good.

More gel. Then Alonzo’s tip against her cleft.

“Ah!”

Eddy had pushed it in her at least halfway. Maxine fisted a pillow, heard the stitching rip, then spread her knees wider. He pulled it out and rubbed her cleft up and down. Damn. Then another cock, this time hot and very human, pushed against her, slowly slid in her pussy. Damn he was thick.

“Does it hurt?”

Maxine shook her head.

“Does it?” Eddy froze.

Remembering he couldn’t see her, she sighed. “No, damn it, would you just— Ahh!”

He’d thrust into her. With a violence that shocked her, Maxine climaxed and she did it loudly too.

Unclaimed: Chapter 3

Eddy couldn't remember a better lover. Not even an equal lover.

Maxine took him to the hilt then bucked back against him for more, something that had never happened before. At six inches, he wasn't a huge fellow but a damn broad one, and had always been careful not to push into his girlfriends too hard or at an angle. That didn't always make for the greatest screwing.

So he'd learn to compensate with his mouth. No one had complained so far. But hell, he didn't have to pull back with Maxine. Probably would have to put in everything he had, too.

And that goop was great. Wow!

When she'd sucked him with that cold jelly all over his cock, he hadn't thought much of it at first, but when the stuff had begun to tingle and pop along his shaft, well, fuck! And now that he'd smeared her welcoming pussy with it, he couldn't wait to fuck her to New Year's Eve!

So while he gripped her strong hip with one hand, he pressed the butt end of "Alonzo"—Alonzo, for Pete's sake—right against his pubic bone and while he fucked Maxine hard enough to make his lower back burn, he rubbed the dildo along her cleft. Another first. And she took it all while panting his name, which had never sounded so damn sexy.

Come to think of it, no other woman had ever whispered his name the way she had.

After he'd snuck into her cabin, he'd waited for his chance to get the gun. Poor woman hadn't even been down the passageway before he'd already broken out of the cargo hold. Only a matter of popping the hinges, which had faced inward, and he'd been a free man once more. Following her to her cabin had proved both enjoyable and difficult to stomach. He'd felt like such a perv, tailing an oblivious woman to her bedroom then waiting until she was asleep. All he'd wanted was the gun. But she hadn't had sleep in mind.

To his undying delight.

Maxine voiced her pleasure in sharp little keens that did wonders for his male ego. Eddy wrapped his arm around her waist, hoping she'd be strong enough to bear the weight of his upper body, and curled his spine to take her more deeply and really give her friendly pussy the pounding it deserved. He shoved and thrust, his bottom lip tucked in so tightly he could taste blood. Into her, harder, in. Eddy saw stars but didn't slow.

She moaned incoherently, with the occasional "Eddyyyy" to spur him on. Oh she knew where his buttons were.

While “Alonzo” and he were taking turns, he could tell she was doing something.

“M-my turn,” she groaned, whimpered a couple of times then pulled away.

Eddy was pushed on his ass, landed too near the edge of the bed and with a curse, flipped upside down and landed on his head.

“Christ!”

But he didn’t have the time or opportunity to complain further when a very slick and candy-fruit-scented pussy landed on his face, smearing him all over his mouth and cheeks. Well, damn! He grabbed her butt cheeks and pushed up so he could tongue-fuck her deep enough to raise her knees off the deck. Something nudged his knees apart. He gladly obliged. Then some goop splattered his dick and balls. Again, no problem, he went with the flow. But when something smooth and pointed—Alonzo—nudged him near the butt hole, Eddy clamped his knees together.

“Hey, whoa. Where you taking Alonzo?”

“Shh, you’re ruining it. Just spread your legs. You’ll see.”

Yeah, well, he didn’t want to see. Nor did he want to “ruin it.” So mumbling and muttering, he spread his knees a tad wider, bit down then opened all the way. Maxine rewarded him by rolling her hips and rubbing her cunt in a pendulum over his face, which he greeted with his mouth wide open and his tongue straight out.

She went back to introducing her toy to his ass. An “oh” left him, one sounding both surprised and... excited? It was hard to hang on to the macho thing when a lover was pushing her toy up his ass. All in all, it wasn’t bad. Then it hit.

The goop, heat-triggered as he’d come to guess, fizzled and popped and tingled up his anus and all around it until Eddy was spreading his thighs as wide as they’d go. Damn!

Maxine pushed it in slowly, drew it out again, and repeated the motion. Tiny bursts made him squeeze his eyes shut. With a growl to his lips, he transferred the ecstasy to her, ate her as he’d never done before, and he was good at it. Abruptly, Maxine slid down over his belly, rubbed her cunt all the way to his dick then, after a second or two that made him want to die of expectation, she bore down on him. Hard.

He let out a grunt of animalistic abandon. And boy did it ever seem to elicit some response from her. Fucking wouldn’t begin to explain what she did to him. He had no idea women’s hips could move this way. Fire burned low in his belly, spread outward. He was going to come again.

Her hips firmly in his hands, Eddy gripped her and pushed up to meet the brutal thrusts halfway. A violent climax forced a loud grunt from him. His head thudded

back against the deck when every ounce of energy went the same way his cum had. Drained in every possible way, he gently caressed her hips while remnants of her own climax tightened around his dick in rings of bliss.

He'd come twice in the same, what, hour? Well, fuck me!

She pulled away, took her toy with her, then sat back down closer to him. He felt her breath on his face.

"You're gonna talk, aren't you?" he panted.

"You said quiet women bore you."

"I did, and they do."

"Good, then you won't mind me asking where you're gonna go to make yourself a new life."

Okayyy.

She'd thought about his "new life" before he'd had the chance—or the will—to do so. His lack of purpose in life bugged him. What could he do here and now in the twenty-fifth century? All he knew how to do was shoot guns. Big ones, little ones, sneaky ones, not-so-subtle ones. Wage war and kill was pretty much all he'd ever been asked to do, and Eddy wasn't sure he could unlearn all those years of training. Plus, he was a criminal, even after his sentence of two hundred years had run, and he doubted whoever was in charge back on Earth would want an obsolete weapon popping up on their radar screen. He'd probably go back to jail, or whatever they had for jail nowadays.

So back to what the hell was he going to do for money, for work? He didn't do well at idle.

"Unless you have other plans," she went on tentatively, "I could drop you off at Shangwu. I need to go there anyway to make my drop. It's a large station and you'll be able to find work easily there. We should enter their airspace in a couple hours."

He raised an eyebrow, even if he knew she couldn't see him. "And what else is there in that Shangwu place?"

Silence answered him.

"What's in Shangwu, Maxine?"

"Oh, just my client. He's waiting for his shipment later today."

The way she'd said "client" sounded as though she were talking about the guy who'd stolen Christmas. He couldn't remember the character's name. Grunge? Crunch?

A ping interrupted them. He felt her stand and heard her soft tread as she padded toward a small blinking light along the bulkhead across the cabin. It blinked off.

“That’s the prox alerts. We’re inside Shangwu’s airspace now. I’d better get ready.”

Light outside her door illuminated the mess they’d made of her neat cabin. He rubbed a hand over the flannel PJs, brought them to his nose and took a deep sniff. He liked her scent. Uncomplicated and, well, just clean. No heavy perfume, no girly-girl flowery smells. Just soap and some subtle lotion. With a sigh, he sat on the foot of the bed and waited until she’d come back from the shower. He heard the water drumming against the shower floor and guessed she was done.

Eddy entered the bathroom and grabbed the towel from the toilet tank. A great whiff of that soapy smell flared his nostrils, as did the sight of her naked body. She was built solid, with wide hips and well-muscled thighs. Built to last.

Even water didn’t manage to flatten her curly hair. It dripped in cute little ringlets around her face as she stepped out of the stall, reached for the towel, then noticed it was no longer where she’d put it.

He proffered it and made sure their fingers touched when she took the towel.

She cleared her throat, rubbing her hair almost brutally. “I have some men’s coveralls in one of the holds. A shipment to a mining colony. I’ll go get a set while you’re having a shower, okay?”

He tried to meet her gaze but she kept it riveted to the deck. Did she regret what had happened? He didn’t, but if she did, it’d kill the whole thing for him, too.

True to her word, when he was done washing up, a white T-shirt, some boxer shorts and a set of black coveralls waited on the toilet seat, which was down and reminded him she lived alone on a cargo freighter. A woman alone in deep space. That wasn’t safe. Any asshole could come onboard and mess with her.

Assholes like me.

He put everything on, marveled it fit at all and returned to the cabin to retrieve the gun. It was gone.

Hoping she wasn’t going to bust the tentative truce that had come between them, Eddy found her on the bridge. And a frilly bridge it was too. Christmas decorations hung from pipes and access panels. That foil tree must’ve scared Santa away. He grinned in spite of his sour mood.

In the large view screen, he spotted a massive station. Hell, humanity must have spread far and wide during his “sleep.” That thing was huge!

She sat in a swivel seat with her back to him and didn’t seem to have heard him. Those black pants and turtleneck suited her very well. He wanted to run his hand along her shoulder to see if the fabric was as soft as it looked.

Eddy was about to talk when a male voice crackled over the comms. Instincts

kicked in. He took a step back, put his hand to his waist and cursed when he met nothing. His guns were long gone.

“Magna Argus, this is Shangwu border patrol, you are entering Shangwu airspace. Transmit your cargo manifest and passenger list.”

“Shangwu border patrol, this is the Magna Argus, transmitting manifest and requesting clearance to dock.”

Even from where he stood, he could tell Maxine was nervous. Shit. He realized too late his mistake. She was going to give him away to them! Eddy rushed toward her just as she flicked a switch and grabbed the mike. He couldn't let her do it. He had to survive. Always survive.

“Manifest transferred. No passenger. Magna Argus out.” She put the mike down then crossed her arms, humming the chorus to Deck the Halls under her breath.

Eddy froze mid-step. Waited. She didn't add anything else, didn't yell in the mike she had a prisoner onboard. Nothing about the pod either.

His heart squeezed in fear. He'd almost done it. Almost. Her neck wouldn't have needed much effort. A simple twist and that would've been it.

Christ, man.

She'd never even realized she'd been that close to her own death, or to making him do something that would've haunted him for the rest of his life. His hands dropped by his sides as relief coursed through his shaking body in hot waves. Close. Too close. His heart pounded arrhythmically.

So why the hell does she look so damn nervous?

“So,” he said, coming close and startling her, “what is it you're transporting again?”

“I told you, boring stuff, dry goods, textiles, just stuff.”

“You said it was construction supplies.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, that too. It's a big ship.”

Eddy shook his head. “You're a lousy liar, Maxine. What's in your ship that's making you so damn nervous?”

She stared into his face as though looking for something. She scratched her throat and pulled at the turtleneck collar.

Eddy sat against one of the consoles. “What is it? Weapons, contraband?”

A blush rose to her cheeks and highlighted her freckles in a sexy way. “Meds. Illegal meds.”

“You mean drugs.”

She shook her head. “Meds. As in pharmaceuticals, vaccines and medicines. I have no idea what he'll with them nor do I want to know.”

Maxine turned her back to him and didn't speak another word until she'd piloted the mammoth ship closer to the station. Displaying some amazing depth perception, she docked along a mooring station he swore must have been half the size needed to accommodate the freighter. With a deep clunk something attached itself to the hull. Some clamping mechanism, he surmised. Half the technology would be new to him.

She powered everything down then stood. She dug in her back pocket and gave him a set of plastic strips with bar codes and tiny circuits on them.

"Look," she said, clearly ill at ease. "Those are credits. You should have enough to last a while. Shangwu is huge, so finding work will be easy. No one asks for identification here, so you won't have to worry about that."

With his male ego bruised and pummeled into a heap on the deck, Eddy took the plastic strips, turned them around a few times then pocketed them.

"How long are you staying here?" The thought of not seeing the freckle-faced motormouth left him feeling annoyed and pissed off.

Her blush deepened and Eddy realized she wasn't blushing because she was shy but because her eyes had welled. "I-I'm not. I have to be gone in a few hours."

Eddy gritted his teeth and nodded. His heart was fluttering like a trapped beast as he followed her to the airlock then out of the freighter.

Smells—and sounds, that thing was noisy—of the station hit him squarely in the face. He coughed. Fuel, people and smoke. Very healthy. He already missed Maxine's quietly rumbling ship and the dead of space. He already missed its captain, too.

She put some sort of padlock thing on the hatch and activated it. With a clunk, it stuck to the metal door. A magnetized lock? He was so obsolete. Shit.

In his eyes, Shangwu resembled an old-fashioned oil refinery more than a space station. They walked along concrete gangways and suspended metal bridges, then passed through what must at one point have been a security checkpoint. But only a bored-looking uniformed man leaned against the wall, talking into some sort of weird cell phone attached to the back of his hand.

Maxine stopped at an intersection and abruptly gave him a bone-crusher of a hug.

"Food is free here, so don't let anyone try to con you into buying basic rations. And it's very bad form to go out in public wearing a hat. A decent place to live shouldn't cost you more than five or six credits per day, so if they charge more, they're gouging you and you tell them so. Stay away from the lower levels. Only crooks go there. Once in a while, try to get some real oxygen. They sell it in cans

now, with the mask and everything—you can't miss the booths, they're bright red with a big O2 design that flashes. Okay, well, erm, bye."

She cleared her throat, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek then ran-walked away.

And he just stood there. Unable to talk for the lump in his throat, unwilling to tear his gaze off her, incapable of anything more than swallowing repeatedly so he'd have something to do with himself.

She was gone. Just like that.

Suddenly numb and cold and feeling alone in a major way, which surprised him since he'd always been a loner—an "emotionally stunted jerk" according to his last girlfriend—he looked at the mass of strangely dressed people pressing in on all sides. Around him concrete stretched as far as the eye could see, and smoke billowed high above his head. A headache jackhammered at his skull.

What now?

It might have been his shiny new future and a chance for another life, but Eddy still wasn't sure his pod wouldn't have made for a nicer home.

At least he wouldn't have missed her so much.

Leaving the poor guy standing there staring at her had been the hardest thing she'd ever, ever had to do. Her heart, she swore, had broken cleanly in half. Tears welled. She angrily knuckled them away and sniffed.

It was better this way. She couldn't have Eddy be there when she made the drop. Neither could she forget the look he'd given her when she'd admitted her cargo was illegal meds. No judgment. Only disappointment. As though he hadn't expected this from her.

Join the club, buddy. She hadn't expected this of herself.

Pushing away thoughts of him and everything else unrelated to her present task, Maxine hurried to the rendezvous point, some old-fashioned cook shop that served real pasta. She ordered an iced tea and waited.

And she waited.

She checked the clock on the wall and winced. He was late. After her third iced tea, the guy behind the counter suggested she ought to go somewhere else. After using the bathroom, she left the cook shop and crossed the alley. She was putting her hands in her pockets when something grabbed her wrist and yanked her sideways and between two large concrete pillars.

"Hey!"

But all she saw was concrete as a man she didn't recognize pushed her and kept her there with a forearm against the back of her neck. Damn, it hurt!

“I don’t have anything of value, so you’re wasting your time.”

Ah, so her mouth was in control again.

“You showed up,” he said behind her as he patted her pants pockets and her belly, then whipped her around so he could wrap his very large hand over her throat. “You actually showed up. Alone.”

He had the pockmarked skin of a junky and the glassy eyes to match. No telling how strong he would be, so Maxine stayed quiet and nodded as best she could. Fear twisted her guts.

“W-We’d agreed on Boxing Day, and this place.” She hated how she sounded. Scared and small.

Maxine grimaced at the pain in her neck. She tried to swallow but nothing would go past his merciless hand. She wrapped hers around his wrist and tried to pull it away. The guy had some grip.

“Now you listen hard,” he snarled. “My guys are waiting at the docks right now. So you and me, we’re gonna join them there, and you’re gonna give us a nice tour of your ship. You understand?”

Hell, no! But she wasn’t about to tell him so. Maxine only nodded.

“Good. Then you’re gonna give us the launching codes and everything else we’ll need to pilot the ship.”

“Ex-cuse me?! My ship? Not again! What is it with crooks, I collect them or what!”

A fist in the stomach silenced her. She would’ve doubled over in pain had she been able to move.

He put his face very close. “Don’t make me hurt you, ‘cause I will. What you have in your ship is worth a lot to me. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost it. You get me?”

She mumbled something that sounded like “m’kay” to her buzzing ears. She was afraid she might puke. Her insides churned, saliva pooled under her tongue. She’d been so stupid.

He straightened, looked both ways then pulled her to him, keeping her close with an implacable grip around her elbow.

“Let’s go.”

The trip back to the docks proved even more unpleasant than the first time. She was glad Eddy wasn’t there to see this. Hell, she wished she wasn’t there to see this. It was so sordid and disgusting. And dumb. The dumbest thing she’d ever done. That would teach her to try to get a few extra credits.

“We didn’t agree to any of this,” she snarled by the corner of her mouth. “I have

the shipment. What more do you want?"

He didn't answer as he steered her through the oblivious crowd. Up ahead, she spotted the docks and the multitude of ships, large and small, in clusters according to departure time. Since she'd be leaving in a couple of hours—well, in theory anyway—the Magna Argus was docked almost to the very end.

When they'd cleared the more populous parts of the space ports, he pushed her in front of him with a nasty shove between the shoulder blades. Maxine stumbled a few steps, regained her balance and shot him a venomous look. She couldn't help it.

"You make those eyes at me again, and you'll be sorry."

A quartet of men, all thuggish with mismatched clothes and mean eyes, waited by the Magna Argus, one of them leaning against the hull with his arms crossed. He eyed her down when her "client" and she drew near.

A shiver tingled all the way up her spine.

"The launch codes," the one behind her asked.

Her first reaction was to snort derisively, and she was about to do just that when the one who kept leering at her pulled a knife, small but wicked-looking, from his pocket. He came to her, grinning wide.

She wasn't quick enough to dodge the vicious slash. A burn flared on her cheek. She jumped back. She screamed. Or thought she had. The hand she put to her face came back bloodied. As though she'd developed tunnel vision, all she could see was the blood on her hand, glistening like red ink.

Someone said something. She didn't understand. For the first time in her life, she had nothing to say. How had she ended up in such a mess? All she'd wanted to do was get a few extra credits to offset the cost of running a one-woman cargo freighter. It'd felt like a good idea at first, transporting illegal meds destined for Shangwu's underground market. It'd been easy too. All she'd had to do was nod at the young woman who'd approached her during her regular maintenance check, then pick up the stuff sitting in neatly piled containers on a deserted mining colony. Too easy.

The gravity of her situation really sunk in. These guys were going to kill her when they no longer needed her. Or no longer had a use for her. Stuck in deep space with five thugs....

Everything happened fast.

A fist-sized piece of brick hit the knife-wielder in the head with a sickening, muffled crunch. He hadn't even hit the pavement before a black blur rushed in front of her. Knife in hand, a tall man dressed in black grabbed her by the wrist and

propelled her in a wide arc until she crashed against the hull. He backhanded her client, who spun hard, then waited for him with a fist the size of a loaf of bread.

She didn't see it happen. The knife flashed by, side to side, twice. A red geyser of arterial blood arced a few feet in front of her former client. He didn't even make a sound as he curled in on himself then crumbled onto his knees. His mouth worked silently like that of a fish out of water.

Eddy faced the remaining men. His expression remained impassive as he dispensed death. Punches and kicks, each economical and lethal, quickly took care of two thugs, who'd only had time to reach inside their jackets to produce whatever weapon they'd happened to carry. Never had time. They died before they fell. The last, backpedaling furiously, turned tail and ran, undoubtedly thinking he'd be safer this way than facing the silent killer.

Eddy ran after him.

Maxine could only watch, petrified by fear and horror, as he quickly overtook the thug and tackled him. Not a sound reached her. After a short but violent struggle, Eddy stood, turned his back on the man, who lay very still, and joined her by the ship's hull. Blood dripped from the end of the small knife.

He leaned into her, said something. He'd had blue eyes, hadn't he? They were gray now. Storm cloud gray. Like ashes.

"You—he was running away. You killed him?"

Her vision narrowed to a sliver. She felt herself slump against the rusty hull. Everything went black.

Unclaimed: Chapter 4

Sounds came back first. Then light. It stabbed into her brain when she cracked her eyes open to find Eddy bent over her almost close enough for a kiss. Fire burned her cheek.

“Don’t move, okay?” His voice sounded tight.

She meant to nod her agreement, but remembered he’d just told her not to move, so she croaked in reply. Her throat was parched.

He was doing something to her cheek, something that involved all his faculties for he stared hard, his mouth a thin line of concentration and effort.

“Shit,” she managed to growl.

Without a word, he finished doing whatever he’d been doing, then turned his back to her. She heard the sink going and water splashing. They were in her galley. He came back into focus with a towel in his large hand, and pressed it to her forehead, gently, as if she were a bird. Shame piqued her pride.

“I’m okay,” she said weakly, holding on to his wrist for support as she sat. He’d laid her on the table. Her feet dangled from the end. “Really, I’m okay.”

“You’re okay now,” he snapped. “What you did was stupid and dangerous.”

“I had no choice! I need those credits.”

“Enough to die for them?” He turned his back to her once more, rummaged around the kitchen, and then gave her a dishcloth filled with ice cubes. “Put that on your cheek.”

She did. “Thanks.”

He didn’t reply, just sat on one of the chairs and stared at her. His five o’clock shadow had deepened, as had the line between his eyebrows. He looked pissed.

After a while, he shook his head, murmured something as he looked up above his head.

“I did what I could,” he said, his voice much gentler. “But there’s going to be a mark.”

“You’re talking about my face or my ego?”

“Both, I bet.”

Maxine tentatively slid down so she could stand. He seemed to be fighting hard not to lend a hand, so she silently thanked him with a small nod. He was trying to preserve whatever shreds of dignity she had left, and Maxine appreciated the gesture.

“How long have I been out?”

He shrugged. “A few minutes. Half an hour. But we should get going.”

“Why?”

“Because half a dozen bodies lying around the space port has drawn attention.”

The situation seemed to return to her full force. Horrific visions of what he’d done filled her mind’s eye when she looked at him, then quickly passed. She stood so fast she saw stars.

“What? We haven’t left Shangwu?”

“What the fuck was I supposed to do?” he snarled, standing also. “I can’t pilot that thing, so I just locked the hatch and patched you up. This I know how to do.”

Her world vacillated. She fanned her hands, clutched his when he slipped it in hers. “Locked—locked the hatch? Is someone trying to get in?”

“I don’t think it’s the police. I’ve taken a look out the porthole. They look like slime balls to me. But they’re insistent.”

He didn’t look overly concerned.

“Argh, man, Eddy!” She tried to run out of the galley, hit the doorjamb on the way out, and slapped at his hand as he tried to steady her. “We have to get the hell out of here! Man, oh, shit, if the police link me to this, they’ll pull my license! I’ll be banned from the system! I’ll go broke—I’ll have to sell the ship—”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.”

She froze, heart beating like mad. For a split second, she met his gaze and saw the man’s need burning in his eyes. Need for companionship, for affection. For more. They had no time but she made some for the man who’d just saved her butt.

Maxine cupped his stubbly chin. “I won’t kiss you for obvious reasons, but if we get out of this mess alive, I’ll make sure to thank you properly. Now help me get to the bridge so I can get my old clunker off Shangwu and into deep space. With any luck, we’ll make it to Boxing Day in one piece.”

Eddy had never known a woman’s eyes could tell him so much. Maybe he’d never taken the time to get to know one. Maybe he’d never cared to. Not now. He did want to know Maxine, wanted to know every angle of her. That she wanted to “thank him properly” made him horny as all hell, but to cheapen her gift to just sex would be the rip-off of the century. Despite their precarious position and with bad guys pounding on the front door—literally—she’d still taken the time to look at him, really look at him right down to his core. She could’ve ignored the moment but chose not to. She could’ve held on to the horror of what he’d done, but got past it. If that was all they’d ever get, it’d be enough for him.

Thank him properly. Ha. In his book, she’d already thanked him.

So he made damn sure the coast was clear when she rushed along the passageways. He opened hatches for her, spun her seat with a brusque jerk when they

reached the bridge, then sat in the one next to it, ready to follow orders. It was her ship. She knew the drills. He knew nothing, was from a different era altogether. But it wasn't just because of the changing times. He'd follow her off a cliff if need be, because he'd come to trust her. She hadn't given him to the authorities when it would've been easy to do. That counted for something.

Her hands flew over the consoles. Lights turned on, buzzes and whirs swelled until he felt he was inside a giant waking up.

"You make sure that line never reaches the red zone, okay," she said out the corner of her mouth. A bloody fingernail tapped on a round dial by his left knee. "If it does, we're toast."

He stared at it hard enough to melt the thing. "What is it?"

"Fuel mix. I'm about to do something this ship has never been intended to do."

"Which is...?" Still, he stared at his lone dial, willing that tiny black line to stay in the green.

"Jump to FTL right from a space port."

He didn't know much about space travel but he equated what she'd just told him to a plane doing a loop right off the tarmac. Outrageously dangerous. Reckless even. And damn it if that didn't make him even hornier!

A genderless, computerized voice calmly declared their clearance to depart had been denied.

"They have connections in the tower," she snarled. "Dammit."

"Fuck them. They can eat our dust."

She turned, seemed to want to grin and grimace at the same time. Her cheek must hurt like a bitch. He hadn't found anything for the pain. She was quite the little trooper.

Heat from the all-consuming hatred at seeing her under attack returned a hundredfold. He couldn't believe she'd made that kind of drop without checking her clients first. He understood desperation and costs and all that, but she'd almost thrown her life away. The thought froze his blood. He couldn't lose her, not after this, not when he thought that he might have found someone with whom he wouldn't mind spending some time. A lot of time.

So he'd killed them all. Gladly. Quickly for her sake, because he would've made it last. That asshole with the knife would've hurt long and hard for what he'd done. But as much as retribution had always tasted good to him, he didn't want Maxine watching.

From the way she grabbed the control stick and kicked the pedals, he knew she'd just gunned the engines. A deep vibration shook them. Something rattled under

their feet. Metallic sounds. In the view screen, the station didn't move.

An alarm started bleeping continuously. It got on his nerves bad. "Can't you shut that thing up?"

She didn't reply, but instead bent over the console, the control stick in a white-knuckled fist. The black line on his dial crept up, up, toward the red zone.

"The line's moving."

"What's the number?"

"Five point two."

"Christ." She punched the console. "They won't release the mooring clamps."

"Take them with you then."

"Eddy, for Christ's sake..." The rest trailed off when a mean sort of grin turned her luscious mouth into the sexiest thing this side of the sun. "You know what, I will. Hang on!"

Eddy grabbed the armrests just in time to prevent the sudden roll from projecting him halfway across the bridge. A godawful metal-on-metal noise reverberated underneath them, followed by a series of moans like a beast dying. With a thunderous grating sound, Maxine's ship finally tore through whatever held it to the docks.

The ship lurched violently. It was all he could do not to become a meat missile as she maneuvered the mammoth with the practiced ease of a veteran, the precision of a surgeon, and the recklessness of a daredevil. That tower full of antennas coming right at them—Holy shit!

"Hang on!"

"To what?" The black line was about a hair away from the red zone.

"We're good," she repeated several times. Sweat pearled at her temples and on her upper lip. He wouldn't mind licking it off for her.

"Five point four," he announced, trying to sound calm when all he wanted was to get a gun and shoot something. Anything.

"Prepare for jump."

Jump?

With the computer voice admonishing them that their clearance to depart hadn't been granted yet, Maxine piloted her cargo freighter a few hundred feet off the concrete docks, flicked a switch then leaned back in her seat. Eddy's back had just connected against the vinyl when a brutal forward momentum plastered him against the backrest, his innards squished, it would seem, right along his spine. Goddammit, that thing had some pull!

Alarms wailed, steam hissed from a pipe overhead, the deck buckled in a corner and for a split second, every last console on the bridge blinked out. For a scary

second, they sat in utter darkness, floating in the dead of space. Then as abruptly as it'd begun, it all stopped. The whirrs, the alarms, the clunks and rattles. Silence settled around them.

"Whew."

He nodded. "Damn right, whew. What the hell happened?!"

"FTL. Faster Than Light."

"We got faster-than-light on this ship?"

"Yeah." Maxine turned to him, sweaty and pale with a bleeding bandage to her cheek, and shook her head. "I'm in deep shit."

"No, we're in deep shit."

"I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

"I got myself into it," he replied, coming out of his seat in a flash when she stood. "Steady there. Are we good for a while? I mean this thing will fly itself?"

She nodded. "Autopilot. But I haven't set a course yet. I don't even know where to go."

"I do. To bed."

His protective instincts had just kicked into high gear. For the first time in his life, Edmond Cabanesty wasn't tasked to kill, to infiltrate, to extract or to torture. Instead he was going, out of his own initiative thank you very much, to protect someone. And damn the torpedoes!

The thought appealed to her, it really did. Only she was wired like nobody's business. Waking with Eddy patching her up then breaking out of Shangwu's airspace like a madwoman had fired her systems, to say the least.

Her body needed rest but her mind raced with the consequences of her actions. And Eddy's. They'd left a bloody trail behind them, one sure to attract the wrong kind of attention. Plus, she still had that illegal cargo onboard. Argh, shit. Good thing her parents didn't know the sort of stunts she pulled with their old ship. They would have a heart attack. Understandably. Where the hell would she go now? And Eddy was stuck on her ship. What a mess. The sheer weight of her situation finally won over the adrenaline. Fatigue curved her spine.

"You know what," she said after a while. "I think you're right. I'll get a shower then hit the mattress, if you don't mind."

Eddy, it turned out, wasn't the Cro-Magnon she'd initially thought he was. He attended to her like her very own male nurse. When she'd had a shower—burning hot, the way she liked them—brushed her teeth and lay in bed, she smiled at him as he stood in the doorway. Only the day before, he'd been ready to shoot her in the

ass.

“What?” he asked, scowling.

“Nothing. Goodnight.”

“Same to you,” he replied in a gruff voice that suited him so much.

She woke to the smell of coffee. And the sound of... Christmas music? Maxine realized she wore her penguins PJs again, and that her slippers waited for her by the side of the bed. She slid them on and padded to the galley to catch Eddy in nothing but boxer shorts, busily making a big ol' mess of things. She was no chef herself, but she could tell he was even worse. Plus, he kept banging things together and cursing under his breath.

But the sight of his V-shaped naked back, that glorious butt and muscled thighs tightened her pussy with need both urgent and deep. She wanted him so much it hurt.

“Hey,” he said without turning around.

How the hell had he heard her?

The table had been set for two. That never happened. She preferred to keep the boyfriends on-station rather than let them invade her space and leave the toilet seat up. But Eddy was different. One, she'd taken him onboard, even if the situation had been a bit unusual. And two, she wouldn't mind if he stayed a bit.

“Hey. You've been busy,” she said, suddenly shy about entering her own galley, which she'd basically known all her life.

“Yeah,” he replied, throwing a look over his shoulder. “Your crew of little elves helped me. Sit. Coffee is on the way.”

Ah, yes, her “crew.”

“Why did you come back?”

The blunt question froze him as he was about to pour powdered milk into two red mugs. His shoulders tensed. “I was trained to smell shit from a good distance. And you were knee deep in it.”

“You were trained to kill, too.”

“Yes.”

No bravado, no male pride. Just the truth.

“When I know you better, will you tell me why you were exiled?”

“Will I be around long enough for you to know better?”

“I hope so.”

His shoulders relaxed. He finished preparing the coffee, brought one mug to her and kept the second, which he sipped with his gaze seemingly lost in his own

world.

“Thanks.”

Eddy nodded.

For a long while, she drank in silence, just enjoying the moment while trying not to stare at the muscled god of male beauty standing a foot from her. The rich aroma—humble instant coffee but which she hadn’t had to make herself, so it was divine—floated to her. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

“Christ.”

“What?” she asked.

He put the mug on the table, took hers as well then gathered both her hands in his. Scars covered his thick knuckles.

“Look,” he began slowly, obviously picking his way as he went. “I’m not the nicest guy around. I kill people for a living. That’s what I do. Did, anyway.”

“I don’t—”

“Let me finish, Maxine. I doubt I’ll ever work up the nerve to spill my guts twice.” Blue eyes flashed when he leaned into her, capturing her attention, her senses, everything. “I know what my file says, but I’m not a monster, Maxine. I did bad things, yes, for my government, because they needed to be, and because I was trained to do them. I’m not trying to weasel out of those. But some of the stuff they listed isn’t true.”

“Which ones?” she asked tentatively.

“They pinned a civil war on me when all I did was take out the bad guy. Which I’d been tasked to do. But when things spiraled down, I was trussed up and offered on a silver platter.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You think they let me speak? Nah, after the ‘trial’, more like a circus, I was sent to a military jail, went to sleep one day and woke up on your ship.”

To know he’d been made a scapegoat riled her sense of justice. Unless he lied. She doubted it. Edmond Cabanesty might have been a government operative with some seriously lethal skills but she didn’t pin him as a liar. To her, it made all the difference.

He cocked his head when she said nothing. “Didn’t I tell you quiet women bore me?”

They shared a quick smile.

The air quickly charged with sexual energy when he touched her chin, her bottom lip, his index finger so hot against her skin. She sighed deeply, closed her eyes.

“I gave you an out but here you are.”

“We’re on my ship.”

He signed. “What else do you want from me?”

“You were about to spill your guts, I think.”

His mouth landed on hers. He scooped her up in his arms as if he’d done this all his life when she suspected he hadn’t. Edmond Cabanesty didn’t look like the kind of man to scoop his lovers up this way.

“Your cabin?”

“Ours for now. Unless you want to sleep in the hold.”

“Sleep is the last thing on my mind.”

Maxine had no idea how they made it back to her cabin without breaking a leg. They came close to disaster a few times when she tilled his back and when he plastered her against the bulkhead for a deep, searing kiss. But they made it. Not both her slippers did, though, because when he unceremoniously dropped her onto the bed, she put her one naked foot against his belly before he could bear down on her.

As much as his towering presence, menacing mien and intense eyes were physically intimidating, now that she’d seen a sliver of his gentler side, Edmond Cabanesty no longer frightened her. Actually, his size titillated her.

A tent had formed in the boxer shorts. She took her time visually appraising him, that killer from the past who’d turned out to be her savior. Would he become more?

“Did I pass the inspection?” he asked through clenched teeth, finally a point of male pride showing through the stoical exterior.

“Let me see,” she began, teasing. “Turn around.”

When he suddenly buckled her knee with a sharp twist of his wrist, Maxine prepared for the crushing weight that never came as he dropped on her but landed on his elbows, which created a sort of cage around her made of muscle. Not a bad place to be, all in all. He didn’t even touch her but she humph-ed just the same.

His eyes blazed like blue laser beams. “It’s against accepted conventions to torture a prisoner.”

“That’s what you think you are here, my prisoner?”

He grinned a feral one that pulled his lips to one side. “I meant you.”

Maxine couldn’t help the twitch of thrill that poked her. Spasms tightened her pussy, which forced her to curl her pelvis in hopes of pressing it against him. He was too high over her, still holding the push-up-like position. Muscles bunched over his shoulders.

“So I’m your prisoner, now? On my ship?” Maxine asked through a forced smile. Needs were fast becoming more pressing. She wrapped a leg around his to

force him down. He didn't even move.

"Not really. I think you're my Christmas present. I've been a good boy for, what, a couple centuries?"

"You were in stasis!"

"Exactly."

He interrupted her laugh with a passionate kiss before finally letting his weight settle down on top of her, which she welcomed with nails and teeth and mewling sounds deep in her throat. That he seemed just as desperate and fervent as she was swelled her heart and gave her hope.

He pulled away to look at her. His lips glistened.

"This time, I want to see every inch while I'm making love to you."

Making love, not fucking, not screwing, not having sex. She liked the sound of that.

While he watched with the intensity of a bird of prey, she unfastened the remaining buttons on her PJs. The soft fabric brushed against her nipples, teasing, making them hard, rendering them throbbing garnets that must have had quite the impact on Eddy when he saw them. His nostrils flared and his lips parted as he watched her slip her top over her shoulders.

She'd never had such an impact on a man. Flannel could do that? She wasn't even sexy. More a big kook than anything, with fingernails bitten down to the quick, an upcoming scar on her cheek, frizzy hair and freckles. Just the freckles ought to kill the sexiness for any guy. Girl next door, wholesomeness and all that.

But Eddy didn't seem to view her as the epitome of the tomboy when he sat back on his heels and watched her take her bottoms off.

"Maxine," he murmured, took a deep breath. "You're a goddess."

"You saw it all before," she countered, her cheeks growing warm. "You put the PJs on, remember?"

"It's not the same. I wasn't even looking half the time. This is different. This is for me."

Even if the remark had been worded like a declaration, it still sounded like a question, with a slight raise at the end, as though he wanted to make sure it was, indeed, for him that she undressed.

"It is, Eddy. It's for you." She smiled when she kicked the PJs up over his head. "And it's for me too. My Christmas present."

She acted brave, but inside, she felt anything but. She'd undressed for lovers before, but never like this, never in front of a man who looked about to pounce on her or have a heart attack. Sweat pearled at Eddy's temples. A damp spot darkened the

apex of that circus tent in his boxer shorts. All of it for her.

He nodded. Then his eyes narrowed. He tucked his bottom lip behind his teeth.

“Where’s that Alfonso?”

Maxine’s heartbeat doubled. “You m-mean Alonzo.”

“Yeah, him. Where is he?”

“Under the pillow, all nice and clean.”

“Get him for me.”

The commanding tone didn’t even rile her. It would have with anyone else. But with Eddy, she’d make an exception. She slipped her hand under the closest pillow, retrieved her bronzed god, then proffered it for Eddy to take. He shook his head.

“You do it.”

He bent over to kiss her everywhere, her face, her neck, her breasts and nipples, avoiding only the injury on her cheek. Maxine twisted Alonzo’s base and sighed when the vibrations spread through her palm. She gently ran it down Eddy’s chest.

The man’s hands had to be the best-kept secret in the system as he caressed and squeezed, trapped and teased, and when he slipped one between her thighs, Maxine arched off the mattress.

“In a hurry?” he murmured in her ear, licked her lobe, sucked it in.

She didn’t even reply, just made sure, damn sure, he didn’t leave without bringing her a few good notches closer. Alonzo whirled its little heart out as she pressed it to her vulva while Eddy made room for her toy. She centered on her clitoris, round and round, and Eddy took care of the rest.

Sharp little tingles began at the base of her spine, flared outward, up her back, down her butt and over her cleft. Juices made Eddy’s hand and Alonzo the most erotically satisfying teamwork ever. With a finger, he penetrated her, slowly, gently, all the way to the knuckles, then retreated so he could gather her juices. Maxine pressed her toy harder and closed her eyes.

Lights popped at the edges of her vision, like tiny coronas of amber suns bursting. Closer now. Like a wave swelling, an orgasm grew inside her, then became too big to contain. She let it out, let the surge take over and abandoned herself to its fury. Spinning, roiling, engulfing her body. Maxine climaxed just as Eddy’s finger became two, just as he took her toy from her and tossed it aside, just as he crushed her under his great weight and pinned her beneath him. She filled her cabin with his name over and over.

“Maxine,” she heard him snarl in her ear. “My Maxine.”

The wave subsided. The suns behind her eyelids dimmed. She opened her eyes and caught Eddy staring at her, looking half proud, half amazed. With tingles of

after-climax still tightening her limbs and pussy, she pushed against his shoulder until he'd taken the hint and rolled onto his back.

"My turn," she said, kneeling. "I said I'd thank you properly."

"You already have, Maxine." He smiled unguardedly, with his mouth and his eyes. He really did have a nice smile.

"That's what you think."

The grin turned into a grimace of shock when she fisted his cock and pumped him once, hard. Then she literally threw herself at him and wolfed his thick cock into her mouth as fast and deep as she could without triggering a gag reflex. He gasped, fisted the white-and-red Christmas sheets with both hands. In counter-clockwise movements, she brought her hand down while she sucked the glans and licked the pre-cum off. The taste of him, like seawater and honey, made her salivate. She'd already swallowed his cum before, as shocking as it'd been. She usually reserved such a treat for longtime lovers.

"Spread your feet," she said between sucks.

Eddy hurriedly did so she could have some room to kneel in between them while still keeping his cock in a wet and unyielding fist. She lipped and sucked, licked every ridge, every vein, every smooth angle, one hand pumping and the other squeezing his balls, until she could tell he was close. Then she stopped.

Eddy let go of the sheets so he could grab at her wrist and pull her down on him. His mouth ravaged hers. She let him.

By the strength of his arms alone, he gripped her waist, yanked her up over his face so he could tongue-fuck her as she'd never had it done before. She couldn't help the long moan swelling out of her. Grinding her pussy against his face, she grabbed the metal headboard and hung on.

Maxine's voice rose in direct proportions to the climax about to hit. "Ahhh."

When tingles turned into sharp little jabs that clenched her pussy, she readied for it.

But Eddy stopped.

"Hey!"

She pushed her sex against his face harder but could only groan in frustration when he slid her back down and stood by the bed. He positively towered over her.

Maxine, to show him she could take care of herself, thank you very much, reached for Alonzo but never came close as Eddy grabbed her hips and anchored her there in front of him.

She almost cheered! She couldn't possibly have spread her knees any wider, or any quicker, as she did when she readied for the kind of taking she knew was in

store for her. On all fours, with Eddy plastered behind her, Maxine braced herself.

She'd expected force, dominance and even greediness. Men could only be pushed so far before the alpha gene kicked in. What she received instead proved to be the slowest, tenderest, most precise penetration, one that felt as though it'd last forever. Eddy glided in on a sigh, which she echoed with her eyes closed.

Then it hit.

With her pussy stretched around him, so thick and hot and smooth, pleasure descended over her like a steamroller that extolled from her a long cry and a series of pulsations that made her clitoris the center of her universe. To her chagrin, he pulled out almost at the end. She thought he was done, even if she couldn't feel his cum pulsing into her.

She was about to roll onto her side when he thrust back in. Hard. A gasp left her. The another when he took her again. His unyielding hands gripped her, anchored her to him. Her voice rose to keens. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Each penetration a small conquest.

"Oh, God, oh...."

His voice joined hers as he pounded himself into her flesh. She felt a finger rub her anus, round and round, dipping to her pussy to gather her juices then coming back. Each demanding push rocked the bed against the bulkhead. She stretched her knees, braced her arms.

"Oh, God! Yes!"

Eddy's cock branded her, claimed her, unfurled her to the limits. And when an explosive penetration ripped a ragged cry from her, Maxine thought someone had snuffed out her world. That she'd been reduced to nothing more than a collection of nerve endings, each presently exploding in fierce eruptions.

When her lover slowed his cadence, panting and gasping for breath, Maxine collapsed onto her side and took Eddy with her. Spooning had never felt so good.

Sweat and their respective cum linked them.

"Eddy," she gasped, swallowed hard. "Man, Eddy."

"Shh," he murmured in her ear, kissed it. "Sleep."

She chuckled.

"You know what you need?" he mumbled in a low voice, yawned.

You. But she didn't say it. "No, what?"

"Someone to watch your back."

"Watch it or wash it. I think I heard wrong."

He sighed contentedly as shifted his leg so their spooning fit even better. "Watch it, wash it, rub it. I'm your man."

“How much would that cost me, your expert services?”

Eddy kissed the back of her head. “You fly that thing and keep me warm at night. I’ll deal with the clients once I figure out how things work nowadays. How’s that?”

She stuck her right hand out over her head, which he wrapped in his. “Deal.”

He shook it, then brought it behind her head so he could kiss the top of hers. “Deal.”

“Now, where’s that mistletoe? I’m feeling festive.”

Eddy groaned behind her. “Isn’t Boxing Day today? I sure feel KO’d.”

Post-orgasm pulsations still tingled down there. “Awww, you poor man.”

“You wait ‘til I get my strength back, Miss Scrooge who makes a guy work that hard on Christmas.”

Maxine only grinned as she cuddled closer. Suddenly, the nature of her cargo, the fact her client’s associates would undoubtedly want a word with her and basically everything and everyone could go to hell on a double-decker. She had Edmond Cabanesty to protect her, hopefully for a long time to come. And that was one hell of a Christmas present.

So Santa hadn’t forgotten her after all. Even if he’d forgotten to put a bow on Eddy’s head. Or somewhere else....

About the author:

After a twelve-year career in the Canadian military (army), where I learned English and the many uses of parachute cord and gun tape, I decided to recycle my skills and become a writer. Of erotic romance.

What can I say? I'm a late bloomer. To know more about my books, my real-life adventures or my opinions about nothing important, visit me at nathaliegray.com.



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