

Loose Id

HUNTING MILA



Melissa
Schroeder

Praise for the writing of Melissa Schroeder

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: For Love or Honor

From beginning to end, the action is nonstop in *For Love or Honor*. In 63 pages you will find a fast-paced mystery and plenty of steamy love scenes.

-- Patricia Green, *Romance Reviews Today*

I truly enjoyed this quick read from the beginning to the end. Ms. Schroeder has created a wonderful beginning to the Bounty Hunter saga and I look forward to her next installment.

-- Contessa, *Romance Junkies*

Melissa Schroeder is well known for writing a tight, exciting, hot story, and this one is no exception... Plenty of action, hot loving and a twist or two will have the reader on the edge of her chair waiting for the climatic end.

-- Valerie, *Love Romances*

This erotic mystery will entrance you from the first word...The author has blended romance, mystery and a futuristic tale that will have you anticipating the next book in the series.

-- Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Ms. Schroeder has a way of weaving romance, seduction and intrigue in a story that keeps you on the edge of your seat. I loved the banter between the two characters in the story. I was sorry to see the story come to an end, but I am sure there will be more to follow.

-- Cherokee, *Coffee Time Reviews*

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: For Love or Honor is now available from Loose Id.

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Melissa Schroeder

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and some violence.

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Dedication

For Kally.

The Goose to my Maverick. The Patsy to my Eddie. You're the best friend a hussy like me could have.

Love,

Mel

Chapter One

The cloak of silence that filled the room usually suited John Hunter. He tended to avoid any kind of unnecessary conversation. People were a nuisance to be tolerated, and he tried his best to shun acquaintances who felt the need to talk. This was different. But then, he never felt comfortable about his birth father.

“I’m glad you answered my request,” Lord Franklin Westing said.

Irritation threaded his voice. Aristocrats hated to ask for favors. Even from their bastard sons. He sat behind his desk, dressed in the habitual suit, his hair neatly trimmed, his face showing little evidence of his age. Hunter knew this wasn’t easy for him, and that made the trip back to Earth worth it.

Hunter, being the ass that he was, decided to push his father’s anger.

“I thought it was more like a royal summons.”

The only telltale signs of his father’s anger were the narrowing of his brown eyes and the tightening of his lips. A few seconds passed. The only sound in the room was the ticking of an antique clock as the men stared each other down.

His father conceded, but only to ask the favor. “Be that as it may, I need help with a matter that I know is in your area.”

“My area?” *And just how the fuck did he know about it?* Hunter’s job was covert, and he was constantly working as the quadrant’s Director of Operations. Most people thought he owned and operated an outpost for travelers.

His father laughed without humor. “The job I hold affords me knowledge of many operations.” He paused, as if measuring what to say next. “I’ve known about your work for a while. But that is neither here nor there.”

“Of course, sir.” Sarcasm dripped from Hunter’s words, but once again his father ignored him. “So, what is it that you need help with?”

“I suppose you’ve heard about my upcoming marriage?”

Hunter nodded.

“Well, it seems that my soon-to-be-stepdaughter has gone missing.”

“What do you mean, *missing?*”

He cleared his throat. “Janet, Mila’s mother, said she hadn’t seen her in a while. The girl is a bit on the wild side. She rarely stays here on Earth. Usually doesn’t contact her mother for months at a time.”

“How long has she been gone this time?”

“Janet isn’t sure.”

Hunter didn’t say anything at first. The fact that this woman wanted him to go find her irresponsible party-girl daughter irritated him. That the request came from a father he wanted nothing to do with, well, that was just icing on the cake.

“Her mother isn’t sure when she left? Doesn’t she know what her daughter does, who she socializes with?”

“John, I’m not the one you should be angry with, and the truth is, Mila is an adult. What she does and where she goes isn’t our business. At least it wasn’t until I received this transmission.”

Hunter took the digital transcriber and clicked the “on” switch. The message was clear and concise.

Five million Earth dollars, or you'll never see her alive again.

“I wouldn’t bother you, but I know the work that you do for the government has trained you for search and rescue. The last report from the men I sent to find her was that she was in your quadrant.” He sighed and, for the first time, looked all of his fifty-eight years. “Janet is so upset that she’s sedated. We always knew the girl was a bit wild, but we had no idea something like this would happen.”

“You have any leads?”

“The only thing my investigators could find was that she was seen with a couple of Nikiraki’s men.”

Every muscle in Hunter’s body tensed, his blood freezing over. “Nikiraki?”

His father nodded, his gaze never wavering from Hunter’s. “That’s all we can find out. She was seen with them, then she wasn’t.”

“What the hell is she doing hanging around scum like Nikiraki?”

The older man’s eyebrows rose at the anger in Hunter’s voice. He’d actually surprised himself. He didn’t know the girl, but he knew Nikiraki, knew what he was capable of. Society gals weren’t Nikiraki’s type, especially if going missing would cause a fuss.

“We don’t know. I barely know Mila. She seems to be a nice enough girl, but she has been on Earth so little since I got involved with her mother. Really, since the death of her father.”

“So, you want me to find her.”

“I ask you because I know that if anyone can find her, you can.”

Normally, Hunter figured most people would view that as a plus. In his estimation, his father had run out of options and found someone he didn’t have to pay.

“I’ll do it.”

There was no use arguing. It was better to just go along, do the job and get it over with. Franklin always got his way no matter what the situation. The only thing he hadn't won was Hunter wearing the name Westing. *That* he had refused, and his father had no choice but to accept that fact.

Franklin handed him another electronic file disk. "All the information I have on Mila from the investigators is in there. Including an up-to-date pic."

Hunter paged through the file, barely noticing the reports, deciding to read those later. He paused at the picture of Mila Simmons. A tumble of red curls spilled over bare shoulders, which were the color of fine ivory. Her full lips curved into a seductive smile. Eyes the color of jade sparkled into the camera. Hunter was sure they were altered in some way. No human had eyes with color that pure without some laser work or chemicals.

"You think you can find her?"

The worry in his father's voice irritated him almost as much as the jealousy that surged. At age thirty-five, he should be past juvenile feelings.

"Probably not too hard. Not a lot of human redheads running around my area."

His father released a breath, his shoulder muscles seemingly going lax. "Good. Janet ... she wouldn't take it well if something happened to her daughter. Mila is all she has left of her husband, and the two of them weathered a lot together. If she lost Mila, it would kill her."

Uncomfortable with his rising resentment toward the woman and her daughter, Hunter stood. He headed to the door, then without turning around, he said, "I'll let you know what I find out."

He didn't wait for his father's response, just let the door slide shut silently behind him.

* * * * *

Mila had done some stupid things in her life. At the age of five, she'd thought she knew how to swim and almost drowned. There was that time she tried to steal that telecommunicator when she was fifteen, and her mother had had to pick her up at the local law enforcement depot. Then there was the marriage that had lasted three days in bliss and five months in universal court fighting over her money. But she had never, in all her thirty years, acted as stupidly as her captors.

Mutt and Jeff. That's what she called them. Seated in a chair in the coldest damn room she'd ever been in, Mila couldn't figure out which one disgusted her more. Mutt was almost a foot under her five-foot five-inch frame, but that was common of the Derant species. What wasn't common was being almost as round as he was tall. She had no idea how he actually moved around. Every movement was an effort, his purple skin gleaming with perspiration and his breathing labored.

Jeff was a different matter altogether. Taller than her by a few inches, he was as thin as a reed and human. Kind of. She figured he might be a result of the mutant experiments gone bad. He looked human, but his teeth were canine. Long, pointed fangs hung out of each corner of his mouth, his eyes gleaming with a yellowish tint.

And then there was the drooling.

She looked away from them as they bickered about nothing in particular. There wasn't much in the room. It actually resembled a lab, but many of the fixtures were missing, along with the instruments. There were two doors. She knew they were unsecured because when she'd first awakened, she'd pretended to sleep. Both had come in and gone out without any kind of passcode. After reassuring herself that she still had the electronic file she needed, she pretended to wake up. Jackasses had no idea. It had been enough for her to notice they were careless with security and their weapons, both of which were stored to the right of her, just a few feet away.

"Did you thsend the methage?" Mutt asked. His lisp did nothing for him.

Jeff glared at him, his eyes narrowing, until Mutt cowered. “Of course I did.” He turned his attention back to her. His tongue shot out, licking his chops as if waiting for a meal. She reminded herself that stupid didn’t mean these two weren’t dangerous.

“Why haven’t we heard yet?” Mutt’s whiney voice became shrill.

The expression on Jeff’s face went from evil to annoyed in a heartbeat. He cut a look at Mutt, then sighed.

“I sent the transmission two days ago.” Again, he looked at her and smiled, although Mila was sure there was nothing pleasant in that smile. He closed the distance between them. “I’m sure we can find a way to occupy our time.”

Mila suppressed the urge to kick the bastard in the balls, as well as the urge to vomit. Either one would probably deter his plans. Or, she thought, looking at him, not. She figured that someone like Jeff liked females to be scared. Lord knew anyone who wasn’t scared of fucking a monster like him would have to be insane. So, she smiled.

He paused, apparently taken aback by her attitude. It was enough. She lifted her foot, hitting him squarely in the groin. Jeff doubled over far enough for her to then knee his face. Flying back, he howled, then collapsed on the floor. Mutt, of course, watched the whole thing without moving, his face turning a brighter shade of purple. This was the one shot she would have, and Mila took it.

Jumping out of the chair, she ran to Jeff’s gun. Her heart flip-flopped when she noticed it was a Jackson-Meyers 9500.

What a righteous piece of machinery.

Unfortunately, she didn’t have the time to “ooohh” and “ahhh” over it. She grabbed the weapon, made sure it was loaded, and faced the jackasses. Jeff hadn’t quit howling since she’d first hit him, and Mutt had walked maybe three steps and was breathing heavily.

“Listen, guys -- and I *am* using that term loosely -- this has been a lot of fun, but, well, I have plans.”

“You don’t know how to uthe that,” Mutt said between gasps.

To prove him wrong, she shot off a round an inch in front of his feet. “I hate to tell both of you, but you picked the wrong heiress to fuck with.”

Without another word, she ran to the door, smiling when it opened automatically. Dumbasses didn’t even think to lock the damn door. She leaned her head out of the doorway, looking in both directions. No guard. Stepping out, she faced the room. Jeff looked almost recovered and was trying to stand. Mutt was three feet from where she’d last seen him. The door slid shut behind her and she used the butt of her weapon to smash the instrument panel and jam the door.

She looked one way, then the other. The hall didn’t give her any clue to where she was. As she suspected, this looked like a research facility. But the halls were dark, the lighting out in places, so she assumed there was a good chance there wasn’t anyone about. Those two probably had no backup at all. Idiots. She turned to her right, figuring it was as good as the left, and started running. Those two might be stupid, but it didn’t take much to get a jammed door opened. As she turned the corner she ran into someone large. And fucking hard. She practically bounced off whoever it was.

Fingers wrapped around her upper arm, dark-skinned, and thankfully, human. When she looked up -- and it took a long time because he was a tall one -- she gulped. *Jesus*. Long dreadlocks hung about his shoulders. Even in the dimly lit hallway, she could see his strong jaw, full lips, high cheekbones, broad nose, and black eyes.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” he asked, his upper crust English threading his words.

At first she didn’t respond. No one talked to Mila that way. Especially when she was on a job.

“What does it look like I’m doing, jackass? I’m trying to get my ass out of here.”

His eyes widened, then narrowed, irritation flashing in them. There was something vaguely familiar about them, but she knew she'd have remembered meeting this man.

He took a deep breath before speaking. "Listen, sweetheart, I'm not here by choice. So, I'd appreciate it if you would shut the fuck up and just come along with me."

She wrenched her arm free, then brought her weapon up, and pointed it directly at his groin. It was a tactic she'd used more than once, because it would bring any sane man to his knees. Unfortunately, he didn't have the usual reaction human men had when faced with a gun pointed at their most prized possessions. He looked even more irritated. Moving faster than she'd expected, he grabbed her weapon, pulled it free, and then grabbed her arm with his other hand.

"I don't have time for this bullshit." He slung the strap of her weapon over his shoulder. Without asking, he just started dragging her down the hallway. She tried to dig in her heels, but he paid no attention. "Interrupt my work, freaking travel halfway to the fucking Genarla Sector just to save your lily-white rich ass, and now I have to put up with you complaining. I'll tell you something, Franklin owes me big for this."

In a flash, it hit her where she'd seen him before. Her mother's fiancé had an illegitimate son. She'd seen his picture on Franklin's desk and then a few more in his library at home. As she tried to wrap her mind around the fact that her soon-to-be stepfather had sent his bastard son to save her, said son continued pulling her down the hall. Really, he made her feel like a five-year-old.

"Like I have the time because some little debutante gets herself in trouble and needs someone to pick up the pieces so she can go to her next party."

Now that was just too much. "I hate to point this out, but I was doing just fine without you. And another thing, I was never --"

An explosion from the direction of the room where she'd left Mutt and Jeff interrupted her. Both of them looked behind them. Smoke billowed around the corner. The acrid smell

of chemicals filled the air. Shouting started, along with heavy gunfire and the sound of more than one person running in their direction. It sounded like Mutt and Jeff had made some friends.

“Shit. Do you know how many there are?”

Even as annoyed as she was with his tone, she knew he was her best chance out of there now.

“There were only two in the room. I didn’t see anyone else.”

He muttered under his breath and pulled her in front of him, releasing her arm. “Didn’t you check on guards?”

“I didn’t see any, and I wasn’t going to hunt any up.”

He snorted, but said nothing else as he ushered her down the hall. Picking up speed, she began running, his footsteps sounding behind her.

“Turn right,” he said when they reached another corner. She complied, but shots rang out behind them as they turned the corner. “Dammit. Pick it up, Mila; we gotta get to the ship.”

She looked over her shoulder and would have cursed at him, but that was when she noticed the guard droids hot on their tails. Damn. Droids were the worst because they could care less about getting hit. Flesh-colored rubber covered the metallic base. Once they spotted you, you were shit out of luck. They just came at you until they malfunctioned. Another rain of shots bounced off the walls, sparks flying off the metal. She turned her attention to the expanse of hallway in front of her. Using every ounce of the adrenaline pumping through her, she concentrated on getting the hell out of there.

“Mila, get to the end of the hall, hook a left,” he shouted over the continued gunfire. She could barely hear him, but she knew better than to slow down or stop. She nodded. “The doors to the hangar are there. No code, it should open. Can you start the craft?”

“Yeah.”

She didn't even think to argue. It wasn't a new situation for her, and she knew how to handle herself -- probably better than he would expect. As she turned the corner, she caught sight of him out of the corner of her eye. He stood, legs braced apart, the butt of his firearm against his waist as he held off the droids. A thrill of heat lanced down her spine, but she ignored it and ran to the craft.

Knowing their time was limited, she rushed up the ramp leading into the craft. She didn't even pause to sigh over the fact he had a Spindel 9345, black and gold, the latest and fastest of the smaller crafts. Once on board, she checked out the confines, reassuring herself no one had snuck on board. When she reached the cockpit, she jumped into the captain's seat and flipped a few switches. The engines flared just as her friend came rushing toward the craft, a barrage of shots bouncing off the walls around him, a few even hitting the ship. He disappeared beneath the front of the ship and a moment later she heard his footsteps on the ramp. She pushed the switch to close it as soon as she heard him inside the ship.

Droids began pouring into the bay area as they continued to fire on the ship. Knowing it was only a matter of time before they hit something vital, she decided to take off without waiting for her "savior" to get to the cockpit. She flipped a few more switches and took hold of the steering mechanism. The thrust of the engines was almost deafening in the small bay, even from inside the ship. Ignoring it, she pulled the ship around, barely missing one of the walls.

A crash sounded in the back of the craft.

"Where the fuck did you learn to fly?"

She ignored his comment as she flew out of the bay, sliding between the closing doors. As she sped away, she checked the sensors, noting that they didn't seem to have a tail. They apparently didn't expect her to have a way out of there, and if it hadn't been for her friend, they would have been right.

Angry footsteps sounded behind her.

“Woman, you don’t know how to fly.”

Glancing back at him, she noticed a trickle of blood running down the side of his face. She smiled sweetly.

“Bash your head?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yeah, thanks to your flying skills. Get up. I’ll take it from here.”

She wanted to argue, but the look on his face said he might just punch her. After hitting the autopilot, she stood and moved aside to let him take the seat. Their bodies brushed and hers reacted. It was really normal after what they had been through, the adrenaline coursing through her, the thrill of the chase. Not to mention the masculine scent of him -- musky, sweaty man.

Oh, Lord. Her nipples tightened. She loved a man who liked action, in and out of the bedroom. Arousal hummed through her. Reminding herself it was just an occupational hazard didn’t seem to help. Mila always liked a good chase and a good fuck afterward. But the moment passed as he collapsed in the chair. He apparently was oblivious to the sizzle she felt.

“Now, I remember why I avoid debutantes.”

Mila didn’t bother hiding her irritation. She was thankful he’d shown up when he did, but she knew she’d have figured out a way to get out of there. She always did.

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

For a few seconds, her friend said not a word. Then he leaned in, bringing his face within inches of hers. Even irritated as she was, she couldn’t help but notice that he was a beautiful man with high cheekbones, dreadlocks, blacker-than-sin eyes, and full, sensuous lips, even if those lips were sneering at her. He almost made her sigh. He’d taste as good as fresh strawberries in spring. Dressed all in black, his shirt clung to the contours of his chest, accentuating his pecs.

She'd love to run her hands, her mouth over his chest. Another flash of heat spiraled through her. Liquid heat filled her stomach and then dropped between her legs. She shifted, the fabric of her pants rubbing against her already-sensitized skin. Lord, she would love to have him, take him, be taken by him. The hum of arousal strengthened, her pussy throbbed. It was a fantasy that she definitely wanted to bring to reality.

Then he ruined it by opening his mouth.

“Guess what, Mila? I don't care. I'm doing a favor. One I don't want to do. If I were you, I'd sit down and shut the fuck up, or I'll make sure you can't talk one way or another.”

Chapter Two

His head throbbing, John leaned back in the chair, relishing the fact that he'd finally achieved something he would have thought impossible just a few moments earlier: a speechless Mila.

Unfortunately, it didn't last. "What's your name?"

"John Hunter."

She paused. He knew she was trying to think of something to say, formulating a way to irritate him. Women like her always did. He closed his eyes, hoping to ward off her verbal attack.

"Well, Mr. Hunter, apparently you've been misinformed." Her tone was as sassy as that cute ass of hers. "I come and go as I please. See, apparently you missed it, but a few centuries ago, women gained certain rights. You know, we do have brains, and I'm not going anywhere with you. Drop me off on Gedreia. I'll take it from there."

Jesus, she never shut up. And she was *loud*. He'd forgotten her father had been American. That accent of hers was irritating the hell out of him. To top it off, the gash in his head hurt like hell. And with each word she uttered, his head throbbed.

Small-boned, Mila probably fooled a lot of people. If she never opened her mouth, a person would think she was delicate. *Debutantes*. He particularly hated high-maintenance women. Opening one eye, he studied a fuming Mila. Yep, high-maintenance.

He closed his eye. "Mila, Lord Westing wants you home on Earth, ASAP. I don't want to be bothered by him again. I've more important things to do."

He just hoped he hadn't missed his meeting with Robbie Masters. And if he didn't get back to his job, there would be hell to pay. His attraction to her was confusing and unfortunate. He didn't get it. She wasn't his type.

Pain in the ass, tiny, and a mouth big enough to drive him up the wall, but he was attracted all the same. There was a moment when their bodies had brushed that he'd wanted nothing better than to bend down and devour her in one huge bite. He sighed. It had to be the adrenaline. Any woman would have turned him on. It didn't help that she was gorgeous and smelled like sin.

"I don't care what he wants. I have ... stuff to do. Much more important than reassuring your father."

"I don't care what party you have, what your plans are. You're going to Earth. He wants you there, and I want him off my back."

There was silence for a few seconds, but it didn't last long. "I can handle myself."

"Really? Yeah, you would've handled those fucking bastard droids by yourself." He snorted, then opened his eyes. "What the hell were you doing there, anyway?"

She frowned. When she spoke, he didn't miss the sarcasm lacing her words. "Let me see ... hmmm. Well, I thought it would be fun to be drugged and then kidnapped, threatened with rape because, oh, you know, I *love* the thrill of it all. Parties have just gotten so blah. It's all the rage among the elite. Why, I heard last week that Lady Childress paid large sums of cash to be kidnapped."

He controlled a bubble of laughter that threatened to escape. He didn't want to have anything in common with her, but for some reason they seemed to have a similar sense of humor. Just the devilish spark in those jade eyes sent another wave of lust spiraling through him. He ground his teeth and didn't say a word. With a huff, she stood and walked to the back of the craft.

"Where the hell are you going?"

He watched, transfixed by the sway of her hips. Her black suit hugged her like a second skin. The tumble of red curls kept rhythm with her ass as she walked.

"Don't you Brits fall apart if you don't have your damn tea on time?"

"You're making tea?"

He wasn't thinking straight, wasn't even paying attention to what either of them was saying. There was something about a woman with generous hips and a full, rounded ass ... After much concentration, he was sure she wasn't wearing anything beneath her pants.

The only thing that saved him from jumping her was that fucking mouth of hers.

"No, I'm not making tea, you jackass."

She opened a few cabinets and then bent at the waist to grab something out of one of them. Jesus, she was one fine-looking woman. The pain lessened in his head as he tilted it one side to study the view she presented. He sighed. It had been a while since he'd had a woman. And no matter how irritating Mila might be, he would bet she was good in bed. Women like her tended to be -- they just weren't worth all the baggage.

"I'm getting you something for your head."

When she pulled her head out of the cabinet and unbent, she looked at him, where his attention was focused, and rolled her eyes.

"All men are the same."

"No, we aren't."

She snorted as she walked forward. "Yes. Males, I should say."

Stepping in front of him, between his outstretched legs, she leaned forward and looked at his wound. The scent of her, something musky, alluring, and damn arousing caused his head to spin. She dragged her teeth over her bottom lip while she looked him over. He wanted to taste her right there. Just to start with. Sharp and vicious, arousal speared through him. He loved full lips on a woman. The way they felt on his, as they glided over his skin, wrapped around his dick. Just that one thought sent a shot of heat through his blood, and his cock twitched.

“Tsk. That is pretty bad. We better clean it out. This might sting a little.”

She sprayed some antiseptic on his gash. The sharp flash of pain dimmed the pounding in his head and pushed aside any fantasies he’d conjured up.

“Bloody hell, woman.” His stomach roiled, and for a second, he thought he would embarrass himself.

She chuckled. “Ahh, again, just like a male. Shut up. Going to clean up some of the blood, then I’ll attach the fusing strips in a second.”

Gritting his teeth and closing his eyes, he weathered her ministrations. It took just a few moments, but by the time she was done, the pounding had intensified threefold.

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

He grunted as he struggled to concentrate. But his mind kept moving away from the present ... drifting.

“Why don’t you lean back in your chair?” She moved to his side, as he complied with her suggestion. “This should just take a second, but it hurts a bit. And you don’t have any pain killers.”

As she placed the fusing strips on his head, his mind began to drift, his body floating. He had to keep his focus because there was no way in hell he was leaving his ship in Mila’s hands.

It was his last thought before his world faded to black.

* * * * *

Mila studied Hunter as they approached Gedreia. The iridescent lights from the control panel cast a strange glow on his skin. He'd been out cold for a couple of hours, and she was beginning to get worried. She didn't know he'd pass out like that when she used the antiseptic/pain killer spray. Taking into account his muscle, with that height of his, she'd been surprised he'd been sleeping as long as he had. At first, she used it to her advantage, but her concern grew as he'd continued sleeping. And well, she figured she felt a little guilty for lying to him about the painkillers. Not much, but a little.

Sighing, she flipped a few switches and waited for approval for landing from the docking station. She hated this planet. It was barren, cold, and filled with some really scummy people. Scummier than she was used to and that meant a lot, considering some of the work she did.

Most of the planet was covered by huge fields of ice. Few places had inhabitants, but when they did, you didn't want to know them. Creatures who chose to live in a place like this were best avoided. They represented some of the most degenerate criminals in the galaxy.

Her first assignment as a courier had brought her to the planet. She shivered, remembering just how badly that deal had gone south. It hadn't been her fault, but it left her with more than a few nightmares. Since then, she'd refused anything attached to it. Robbie Masters, her supervisor, had made sure she hadn't returned to the freaking planet.

Masters wasn't going to like the latest developments. She knew her mission was a level eight. It was the highest security level they'd trusted her with. And just look how it got fucked up. She also knew that John Hunter was the name of a contact.

Damn. It figured. He was the go-to person on Dranirick, the supervisor for the quadrant, and a close personal friend of Masters. This would not look good on her report and damn Franklin for sending his son.

It wasn't like it was her future stepfather's fault. No one, not even her mother, knew of her work. Hell, she was referred to by number in the Agency. Hunter wouldn't have any idea she was an agent. And now, all that was in jeopardy. If Hunter told his father, then his father told her mother ...

Christ. That would be a mess. Mila's father had died while on assignment. Not that anyone had told her he had a secret life. It was by accident that she found some electronic files while cleaning out a vacation home her parents had kept on Venus. But she knew her mother wouldn't be happy to know that her only child was now running with the same crew her father had before his murder.

The seat squeaked as Hunter moved, and she turned her attention to him. Relief mixed with apprehension as she watched his eyes open. Confusion soon cleared into annoyance as she watched the comprehension dawn.

Those same eyes narrowed, his gaze pinning her with a mean stare.

"You gave me something."

He didn't ask. Which, she had to admit, showed how shrewd he was.

She sniffled. "I am sooo sorry, Hunter. I didn't mean for it to knock you out. Men will not take painkillers, and I thought it was just that. But apparently you had a reaction to it. I've been ever so worried."

From the look on his face he wasn't buying it, and she was worried she'd have to cry in a minute.

He shook his head and groaned. "Damn, now I'm groggy. Didn't you worry I might have an allergic reaction to it, or something? You just hand out medicine willy-nilly?"

She put on her best *I'm a stupid little rich girl* smile. "I figured it was yours if it was on your ship."

And she had needed him out of the way. She had work to do, and she didn't want to be dragged back to Earth. From here, she could catch a hop to her destination.

“Cut the shit, Mila.”

Damn, busted. She didn't like a man who could see through her act, and the only other one who had was Robbie. She frowned at Hunter.

“You might be able to pull that act with someone else, but it isn't going to work with me. Now, where are we, and how much do I have to hurt you?”

She snorted and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. It annoyed her that she was attracted to him, but she never fell into bed with a wimp. As she watched him fiddle with the controls, his fingers moving over the switches with practiced grace, she had to admit he definitely wasn't a pushover. And he was smart, which made it worse. The electronic voice of the computer at the docking station brought her out of her thoughts.

Prepare for docking.

“Docking?” He studied the landscape in front of them, then glanced at the computer readout, and cursed. “Mila! You went to Gedreia when I specifically told you not to. If you think I'm going to buy that act, think twice. I had your number the moment I met you.”

And, thought Mila, that might prove to be a problem.

* * * * *

His father owed him. He owed him big. Like never bothering him for the next decade big, thought Hunter. This woman wasn't just high maintenance and a pain in the ass. She was going to get them killed.

“There is nothing wrong with Gedreia.” She had the nerve to sound offended.

Gedreia was spectacular, if you didn't mind scum. And he had a feeling little Miss Mila Simmons wouldn't like grubby little hands on her lily-white skin.

Flipping the switches to allow for computerized docking, he thought about the things he would have to go through to get them off-planet before the end of their day. Sighing, he

realized it was going to be complicated. Gedreia had a three-day rule, meaning they could be stuck here awhile.

He was known here, and not in a good way. Last time he'd been here, he'd upset a few government officials by hauling off one of their members on charges of corruption and murder. It didn't help that Nikiraki got off without punishment and now roamed free. The trail of dirty business and suspicious deaths of business associates had the Agency hopping to keep up. And thinking that reminded him of what his father had said about Nikiraki.

He glanced at her as she pretended to study the action of the docking. Knowing her kind like he did, she was probably keeping an eye on him, looking for a chance to escape once they docked.

"What the hell are you doing hanging around Nikiraki's men?"

She looked him over. "I really don't know what you're talking about, or who that is."

Sniffing, she turned away. He grabbed her arm and gave it a yank.

"Mila, you are on my last nerve, woman. I know you were seen with his men. He's scum, and anyone who works for him is scum. So, tell me why you've been hanging with them."

One eyebrow rose. She looked down at his hand, then back up. The banked anger he saw flash in her jade eyes made him lose his train of thought. The woman had a spirit he had to admire. Unfortunately, it also attracted him. He shook his head, trying to push those thoughts aside. He watched as her gaze continued to bore into him. She had the princess-to-peasant attitude down pat.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Each word was perfectly enunciated from behind clenched teeth.

"My father had reports you'd been around Nikiraki's men. You tell me if they got it wrong."

Something flashed in her eyes, across her face, that might have been panic. Damn, he hoped she wasn't tied up with Nikiraki. This could get messy, and someone like her wouldn't last a day if left to her own devices. She was in over her head where that bastard was concerned.

She twisted her arm until he freed it. "It isn't any of his business what I do. If all the men I know would get that in their minds, my life would be much easier." She sounded so irritated that he laughed in her face.

"Well, darling, you might just as well get used to it for now, because until I hand you over to my father, I'm sticking to you like glue."

Chapter Three

Mila looked around the weigh station as they stood in line to be processed. She hated this freaking planet. Twenty years ago it had been uninhabited. When scientists developed a way to survive in the harsh temperatures of the planet, it'd turned into a place people stopped on their way to things more important. Anyone who lived there was insane or criminal. Or both.

The lines were long, which increased Mila's nervousness. The miscreants surrounding them made her skin itch, but she'd be damned if she would show it. It was all Hunter's fault. He'd taken her weapon away, *again*. It made her feel ... naked. Just the memory of the way it felt in her hands -- cold, hard, titanium metal -- made her heart skip a beat. It was the perfect weight for her. It wasn't too big as some of the more powerful weapons were and had just the right amount of power. She sighed and gave Hunter another nasty look. A man should never come between a woman and her machinery.

She didn't like being around creatures who would slit your throat before dinner or *for* dinner.

To take her mind off them and the jackass who was now fondling her weapon, she looked out the large windows. The view would be beautiful, if she were to see it in an ebook,

or possibly as a hologram hanging in an office. Jagged cliffs rose from frozen ground, both covered in frigid, thick ice. There were no shrubs, trees, or flowers on this planet. Nothing could survive without protection. It was, in her humble opinion, an ice-filled version of hell.

Hunter's voice broke into her thoughts. He was, of course, giving her orders.

"Stop frowning. These Estaician guards should be easy to charm. I want you to pull that bit you tried on me earlier."

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and studied the male Estaicians. Average height for a male was about seven feet; their reddish brown skin was covered with freckle-like spots that told her they'd all reached the mating age. She snorted. They did have a thing for human females. Then Hunter's comment sunk in.

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Mila." He sighed. "I don't have time for this. You and I know what you can do when you bat those fake green eyes. Now, do it, so we can get through here. Spending time in jail here is worse than a Turkish prison on Earth late in the twentieth."

"My eyes are not fake."

"Whatever you say, darling." His voice had deepened, sending her hormones bouncing.

He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her against him.

Leaning down, he brushed his lips against her ear. "I want these people to believe we're together, and not as inmate and warden. So, shut up, do as I say, and I might just save that cute ass of yours."

Mila knew she should be pissed. She didn't let anyone talk to her like that. But his breath feathered over her skin, causing heat to dance along her nerve endings. His voice flirted, even as he was telling her what to do. It took every bit of her willpower not to rub up against him like some damn cat in heat.

She turned her head to look at him and had to lean her head back to make eye contact. When she did, her breath caught in her throat at the heat she saw there.

“And just why would I want to do that? I don’t need a man.” Dammit, she sounded out of breath, like some damn fifteen-year-old with her first crush.

His lips quirked. “Now, you know I can’t let that statement go by without a comment.”

He pulled her closer and brought his face to within inches of hers. Their mouths were lined up perfectly for a kiss. All she needed to do was stand on tiptoe, and she could see what he tasted like.

“I think you do need a man, Mila. You need a man who can handle you, in and out of bed.”

She could feel the heat of him through their clothing. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she tried to think of a response. Something that would put the big, gun-stealing Neanderthal in his place. Nothing came to mind, because all she could think of was just how good it would be to taste his lips, his skin.

“Even as small as you are, I’m sure you would be a handful. And that’s something I would like. To get a handful of you.”

Oh, Lord have mercy. The man was a pain in the ass, but he had the most delicious voice. Arousal and need throbbed just below the polished surface of seduction. It made everything in her go all melty. Mila tried to gather her thoughts. She was an experienced woman who usually took the upper hand in seduction. This was wreaking havoc with her plans. Whatever the hell *they* were.

Deciding two could play at this game, Mila stood on her toes, pushed aside his hair, and pressed her lips against his ear. Every muscle in his body went rigid at the contact, and after a moment, he sighed.

She smiled, enjoying his reaction. “Really? I rather thought you wanted to strangle me.”

He chuckled. Deep and rich, the sound of it sent a delightful shiver down her spine. Sliding his hands around her waist and then down to her ass, he lifted her and pressed her sex against his cock.

Oh, my. A gush of liquid filled her pussy. Without a thought, she slid her arms up over his shoulders, beneath his hair, touching his bare skin.

He took a few measured breaths before answering. "If you want to know the truth, love, I switch back and forth between wanting to throttle you and fuck you. It's a new and interesting experience."

Damn. What was it about that upper-crust English accent that had her creaming her panties? Well, that is, she would be if she were wearing any. She drew in a deep breath as she nibbled on his ear. The scent of him -- raw, sexual male -- had her head spinning faster. Need coiled in her tummy. She wanted him. There was no one else to quench her thirst for hot, fast sex. Just Hunter. As she nipped at his jaw, she slid her hands down to his ass.

He groaned, then pulled away from her so fast she almost went reeling backward. She stumbled, trying to regain her balance, and shook her head a few times. The stream of profanity that came out of his mouth brought her back to reality. She looked around to notice that few of the other weigh station patrons were paying attention. Something like this was probably a daily occurrence for this place.

Closing her eyes, she tried to gather her thoughts, but her head still whirled with thoughts of what exactly she would have done if they'd been alone. Jesus, they were in the middle of a weigh station, she'd escaped a few particularly mean gunrunners by the skin of her teeth, there were probably more people after her, and she was practically dry humping Hunter in public.

Very professional for an Agency courier, Mila. If Masters ever found out, she'd be toast. She glanced at Hunter. He was breathing as deeply as she and looking anywhere but down at

her. Every muscle in his body seemed clenched as if ready to attack. She sighed. Damn if she still didn't want to be the one he attacked.

She opened her mouth to apologize. Before she could utter a syllable, Hunter grabbed her arm -- and boy, she was getting freaking sick of that -- and dragged her behind him.

"Don't say another bloody word." He stepped around a rather nasty-looking Redeunart. "I ... you ... just forget it. Forget everything."

Forget it? Jeez, it was going to be pretty hard to do that. Her nipples were still hard, her pussy throbbed. It had been bad enough after that firefight, but now, knowing what he tasted like ... She sighed again. Sin. He was candy-coated sin, and she wanted to lick him down to his soft, gooey center.

Her head started to clear, and she realized they'd been left behind as the line moved up. Mila knew she should be embarrassed, but for some reason she wasn't. It was probably due to lack of blood in her brain.

He pulled her in front of him and then rested his hands on her shoulders. Mila couldn't help the leap in her pulse or how her mind drifted to the image of those hands sliding against her bare skin. He didn't talk again until they reached the front of the line.

"The one there who's been watching you, he's in charge."

She knew that, but she didn't say it. She'd spotted him a few moments earlier. Like she needed help getting out of a tight situation.

"Now, remember, don't play it too well, or he may want to take you to the observation room."

She snorted. "Like that would matter. At least I could work off some of this energy."

His fingers tightened on her shoulders, then he leaned closer. "Don't even think about it, Mila. No one gets a taste of that pussy before I do."

Oh, she wanted to call him all kinds of names. But ... she wanted him and what she was sure he could do to her more. Just the promise in his voice brought a procession of images dancing through her mind. She drew in a deep breath.

“Next.” The guard’s voice broke through her contemplation.

“You’re on, babe.”

* * * * *

Hunter watched Mila bat her eyes at the guard. The idiot fell for it. What he couldn’t understand was how no one seemed to see how crafty the woman was. Sure, she had the little woman routine down, but these guards were hardened protectors. Many of them were just a step up from the creatures they were there to catch. And now, three of them were practically drooling over her.

“Now, you see why we’ve had a tough time of it. My mother is just not happy because Johnny is ...” She glanced at him over her shoulder, smirking, then she turned back to her audience. “Well, he’s not what she wanted for her little girl. She wanted me to marry up after the last marriage was such a mess. I wouldn’t hear of it, since I think Johnny is my one true love.”

She smiled at the group, and he swore he heard a few of them sigh. One of them definitely licked his lips.

“If it won’t be too much trouble, we would like to get to our hotel as soon as possible.”

She blushed prettily, and just like that, their entry was approved. As they walked away from the group of guards, Mila was preening like some damn queen bee.

He took hold of her upper arm and pulled her along. “Knock it off, Mila. They see you acting smug, they’ll wonder why.”

She sighed, the sound filled with irritation. “Thanks, Mila. You got us through a tight spot, Mila.”

“If you hadn’t docked us on this shit planet, *Mila*, this wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“I didn’t plan to knock you out.”

“Sure, sweetheart, you keep saying it, and maybe I’ll believe you.”

They walked down the mall of shops offering anything from food to flesh. He hadn’t been prepared for this planet, so they had nothing to protect them from the weather. Most of the time, they’d be indoors. Because of the harsh extremes, all transportation was housed inside and Hunter didn’t like to be caught unprepared.

He glanced down at Mila. More than once, he was asked if she was for sale. He was amazed by her composure. The lowest scum in the sector loitered around the dark recesses of the dingy, dank hallway. Mila appeared not to give it another thought. Anyone would think she was on the way to a royal ball. Not once did she flinch, but he did feel the muscles in her arm contract as she opened and closed her fist.

Contradictions. The woman was one big contradiction after another one. Instead of being scared or appalled, he knew she’d beat the hell out of some of the jackasses, if given the chance. And she did seem to have a hard-on for guns. She pouted for nearly an hour after he took her weapon away. It just didn’t seem to add up. He brushed aside his thoughts and steered her to a clothing shop he knew.

He released Mila’s arm and allowed her to walk in first, parting the fur draping in front of the shop for her.

An old-fashioned bell tinkled at their entrance, and a moment later, a balding gentleman stepped into the shop from a door leading to the back. Portly, a pair of glasses from the twenty-first perched on his nose, and sporting the same damn unruly white beard as the last time Hunter had seen him, Sterling Wainwright smiled the moment he saw Hunter.

“Hunter! What the hell are you doing here?” His bright blue gaze took in Hunter, but settled on Mila. His smile widened and he walked forward. “And who is this lovely young woman?”

Hunter rolled his eyes when Sterling took Mila’s hand and kissed it.

“Mila, Sterling Wainwright. Sterling, Mila.”

Sterling gave him a knowing smile, then turned his attention back to Mila. “I didn’t know you were in the area. You almost missed me. I’m heading back to Earth day after tomorrow.”

A niggle of irritation chased down Hunter’s spine as Sterling didn’t let go of Mila’s hand. And Mila, idiot woman, was smiling at the older man as if he owned the world. “I thought you hated it down there, Sterling.”

“I have to be there when my first grandchild is born. Can’t miss that.”

“Damn, I forgot about that. When is Libby due?”

For a moment Sterling apparently forgot about Mila, although he did tuck her hand into the crook of his arm as he faced Hunter. “There are still a few weeks left, but I want to make sure I’m there when the little one shows up. Libby is always early with everything else ...” He shrugged. “Saint and Libby are still arguing. She saw no reason to go back to Earth. In all the years I’ve known the Saint, he’s been one to take chances, ride by the seat of his pants. He threw a fit and insisted that they head back.”

Hunter laughed, thinking of his friend Brady St. James, otherwise known as the Saint, and his by-the-rules wife, Libby. “I just can’t picture Saint getting bent out of shape.”

“Well, when you fall in love, things change. Right, m’dear?” He patted Mila’s hand and she smiled at him.

“I wouldn’t have any idea, Mr. Wainwright. I’ve never been in love.”

Sterling gasped theatrically. “Not ever been in love? What is wrong with the men you know?”

She leaned over and in a stage whisper said, “When you hang around with the likes of John Hunter what do you expect? No romance. Look where he brought me.”

“Cut it out, Mila. You pout at him like that, and he might just melt. And, Sterling, she isn’t going to float away. You can let go of her now.”

She smiled. “See what I mean? He lacks good manners.”

“Mila, dammit, I don’t have time for this.”

Taking a deep breath, he ordered himself to concentrate on the mission. He refused to give in to the uncomfortable feeling racing through him. *Jealousy*. For some woman who made him want to throttle her as much as kiss her. Shaking his head, Hunter turned his attention to Sterling. When Hunter looked down at Mila’s hand on Sterling’s arm, the old man chuckled but didn’t relinquish his hold.

“What can I do for you, Hunter?”

Pushing aside the primal need to grab Mila’s hand and tear her away from Sterling’s grasp, he concentrated only on Sterling.

“We need some outer gear. We should be on planet just for the required time.”

“Required time?” Mila asked.

He ground his teeth, then answered without looking at her. “Mila, everyone knows that there is a three-day wait to get off this damn planet.”

When she didn’t argue immediately, he glanced at her and then paused. All the color had drained from her face. This was not typical of Mila, at least in the short time he’d known her. From the first moment she ran down the hall, all that red hair flying behind her and holding a gun almost as big as she was, she’d been the master of her emotions. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was afraid.

Every instinct urged him to pull her into his arms and offer her comfort. He ignored it, knowing it had more to do with wanting her beneath him than actually comforting her. And he never let sex muddy his tactical thinking.

“When ...” She paused and then licked her lips. “When did they start that?”

He cocked his head and studied her for a second or two before answering. “About a year ago. There was that massacre of colonists in the Renuar sector after Desick mercenaries came through unchecked. The public threw a fit, and the council had plans to take over the planet until their own government came up with this plan.”

“So that means we’re stuck here for three days?”

Hunter wanted to snap at her. Because of her actions they were stuck. And this wasn’t the friendliest planet. To top it off, he had to find some way to get a secure connection to contact Masters. He had work to do, and now he was stuck with a party girl. He fought the urge to wrap his fingers around that slender, ivory neck and squeeze. The only thing keeping him from that satisfaction was her expression. If possible, her face had paled another shade. Her voice, usually so damn loud, was barely above a whisper. Her reaction wasn’t anything near what he expected. Yes, she could be pissed about missing some event, but not this. She stood staring out of those amazing jade eyes, unseeing. It was as if she were in shock.

“Yes, we’re stuck here for three days -- and not only three days. We have to be here for three sunrises and three sunsets.”

She blinked at his harsh tone. “Oh.”

That was all she had to say? She’d caused him major problems, aggravation, and sexual frustration, and she had one word to sum it all up. It figured.

Sterling, being Sterling Wainwright and a pain in the ass, wrapped his arm around Mila giving her a reassuring squeeze. “Now, Mila. Don’t worry about it. You have Hunter, and he will take very good care of you.”

Hunter opened his mouth to say something sarcastic, but Sterling threw him that fatherly look of reproof, and he snapped it shut.

“Why don’t you go freshen up, Mila?” Sterling led her through the drapes as his voice floated back to Hunter. “Right through there, my girl.”

When Sterling came back in, he frowned at Hunter. “You weren’t being very nice to your lady friend.”

“She’s not my lady friend. She’s to be my new stepsister, if you must know, and my father wanted me to find her. I did, and this is what I get for it.”

“Hmm, I heard he was remarrying. An American?”

Hunter nodded. “I haven’t met her, but I doubt it’s high on her priority list of things to do.”

Sterling studied him, his gaze steady and almost unnerving. “I doubt that, Hunter. But even so, Mila has a reputation.”

“Reputation? I believe it with that mouth.”

Sterling chuckled and ambled over to an oversized chair, collapsing on it with a grunt. “I don’t mean like that. Although, she does have a reputation for telling people exactly what she thinks of them. Of course, I met her a few years ago, when she and Robbie were involved.”

Every muscle in his body froze, his mind concentrating on that last phrase. “Masters? She was fooling around with Masters?”

“Yes. In fact, they lasted quite a long time. Well, for Masters, anyway.” He poured hot tea into an antique ceramic mug. “Tea?”

Hunter shook his head still trying to come to grips with what he had just learned. Something he didn’t recognize swept through him. Something that made him want to find Masters and wrap his fingers around the bastard’s neck. Because he clenched his teeth, Hunter’s words came out harder than he intended.

“I’d never guess Robbie had a craving for the socialite set.”

Sterling chuckled good-naturedly. “Oh, he never did. But then, he knew her father, so I think they met that way. It was when he was working undercover on that Sedilic terrorism probe. I remember meeting her then ... must have been three years ago.” He took another

sip, then pursed his lips in thought. “I didn’t recognize her at first, and apparently, she didn’t recognize me. I thought it odd, because you know Robbie, not his normal sort of woman. He doesn’t like them with brains.”

“No, he doesn’t.” And just how did Robbie know her father? He’d thought her father a diplomat from a rich family. He would have questioned Sterling further, but stopped for two reasons. One, Sterling probably didn’t know much more, and if he did and didn’t volunteer it, the cagey old bastard wouldn’t share. Secondly, he realized that Mila had been gone for a while. He studied the drapes. “There isn’t a back way out of here, is there?”

Sterling’s eyes widened at the comment. “No, there isn’t. Not one she could find on her own. Besides, she wouldn’t last five seconds in that weather. If she tried to run, you’d be transporting her back for a funeral.”

Just the thought had his blood running cold. Lord, she was stupid enough to do it, he thought, as he strode in the direction Sterling had taken her.

“Hunter, don’t be ridiculous. She wouldn’t try to get away from you.”

Hunter snorted as he rapped on the bathroom door. Yeah, the woman would like nothing better than to lose him. He didn’t even try to reason out that idiocy.

“Mila, come on, I don’t have time for this crap.”

Silence had his stomach dropping to his feet. She wouldn’t be stupid enough ...

Hell, yes, she would be. He punched the button to open the door. It slid open, and a chill slithered down his spine when he found the room empty.

Chapter Four

This, thought Mila, was getting old. Her captor muttered something under his breath. She tried to gain satisfaction from the fact he was irritated by the weight of her. But it was hard. And cold. So fucking cold.

One minute she had been sitting on the floor crying, because there had been no way in hell she would have done that in front of Hunter. The next something was thrown over her head. Before she knew what was going on, she was being carried away. She'd screamed and kicked and cursed. And it had done no good. They hadn't gone very far, and she suspected they were still in the building that housed the weigh station.

She was dropped onto something hard, and she winced. Jesus, couldn't she at least get some gentle kidnapers. She was going to be bruised from head to toe before she made it to Robbie. And it was her own damn fault for getting them stuck on this Godforsaken planet and then feeling sorry for herself. After all the years she'd been working as a courier, she should know better. At this point, she doubted she would have a job next week. If Robbie heard about this, he'd pull her clearance. He'd always worried she was too susceptible because of her social status. Up until now, it had worked in their favor. People tended to think she was a bubble-headed idiot. And she used it against them.

She sighed, pulling herself out of her thoughts and back to the situation at hand. Still covered with the fur, or what she suspected to be a synthetic fur pelt, Mila didn't move. Just listened.

"They said top dollar, right?" a high, whiney voice asked.

The only answer it got was a grunt. Well, at least it wasn't Mutt and Jeff. But then, these captors might be a bit more dangerous. Mutt and Jeff were about as dangerous as a three-year-old running with scissors. Her smirk faded when she heard the next comment.

"What do you think Nikiraki wants with her?"

"I have no idea, and I don't give a damn."

Holy Moses in a dress. She was in deep shit. If Nikiraki wanted her, he'd made her, and the operation might have been exposed. And who knows what else was jeopardized. Certainly anyone she worked with. Damn, this was not her week. She would have to get hold of Robbie. And he was going to kill her. Then she wouldn't have to worry about this anymore, because she would be dead. Great.

She needed a way out. If the jackasses who captured her this time were hanging around the building, they weren't that bright. But then, considering it was probably forty below outside, she could understand. They'd tied her hands, but not her feet. But the way the pelt covered her, she couldn't see to gauge her chances of running.

Before she could figure out a way to escape, the shuffling of feet brought her out of her thoughts.

"You coded the door, right?"

"Of course I did."

As soon as idiot number two said that, several shots rang out. The sound of the door sliding open caused her heart to plummet. Fear coated her stomach with a thick layer of ice. There was always a chance it was help, but the way her luck had been going, she knew it would be Nikiraki's men.

Relief poured through her when she recognized Hunter's voice.

"I think you have something that belongs to me."

She sighed and decided getting upset by his wording would be stupid. She'd be right, but knowing him, he'd leave her to her own fate just to pay her back.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

She heard a grunt, then feet shuffling again. There were two cries of pain, one long moan, and then, silence. A moment later, she was lifted off the ground, much higher than she had been before, and draped over Hunter's shoulder. The heat of his body warmed the front of hers, and it wasn't until that moment she realized just how cold she'd gotten. It didn't make his actions any less annoying.

"Hunter! Put me down."

He ignored her, only answering with a grunt. She struggled, kicking her feet and wiggling her bottom, trying to convince him to let her walk. His arm clamped tighter around her legs, and his hand pressed against the small of her back. The relief she'd felt just moments earlier was now replaced by irritation.

"Woman, settle down. I can't let you out of that wrap, or you'll freeze."

Knowing that was true didn't make her any happier about being carted around like a side of beef. She stopped her struggles, waiting until she could let him have it. The man had some nerve. He shows up, gets in her way, complains about her flying skills, and then has the freaking nerve to treat her like baggage. That he was right didn't make any difference.

As he walked up a set of stairs, he jostled her with each step. To take her mind off the numerous bumps and bruises, she warmed to her anger, thinking of his actions. Okay, so he had saved her. It didn't mean he could tell her what to do.

What did he say to her last set of kidnappers? Oh, yeah ... She was something that belonged to him. The nerve. Mila didn't belong to any person.

The moment she felt the heat, she knew they were inside. She couldn't stop the sigh of complete and absolute pleasure at feeling her body warming. He continued to carry her down what she figured was the back hallway to Sterling's store.

"Ahh, you found her. I told you she didn't run away." Satisfaction laced Sterling's voice.

"No, but she met with another couple of kidnappers." Hunter dropped her onto her feet, then pulled the wrap off her. He was frowning down at her, but there was a hint of worry in his gaze as he studied her. "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

She smiled at him. He *had* been worried about her. "No."

"Good. Now, what the hell did you do this time?" By the time he finished the sentence his voice had raised to a shout.

"Just what the hell are you implying?"

"Hunter, now, I'm sure Mila didn't do anything wrong." Sterling stepped forward to offer her some help.

Hunter whipped his head around, ignoring her and concentrating on the older man. Sterling took a step back, and when Hunter turned his attention back to her, she knew why. The death look he gave her had her wanting to take a step back. She didn't, because there was no way in hell she would let him think she was afraid of him. Which at the moment she was, but it was all about appearances.

"I don't want to hear how anything wasn't your fault, Mila. Just you breathing apparently attracts trouble. What I want to hear is what we are going to do for the next three bloody days stuck here on this planet."

He pronounced each syllable as if concentrating on saying them was the only thing keeping him from throttling her. She opened her mouth to tell him just what he could do for the next three days, but Sterling interrupted her.

"Now, Hunter, if you wanted off the planet, you just needed to tell me."

Both of them turned to look at him. A conspiratorial smile curved his lips as he bounced with excitement. "I probably have a way to get you out of here."

* * * * *

The dulcet sounds of the female Densuit singer filled Nikiraki's office as he studied the men in front of him. Two of the most disgusting creatures he'd ever set eyes on. One so damn fat, he couldn't move without heavy breathing. The other left a wet spot on the Persian rug from his drool. Bruising marred both their faces.

They clashed with the opulence of Nikiraki's office. He'd surrounded himself in the richness of the late twentieth century. Deep, rich red carpeting, lush leather chairs. It hurt to look at his two visitors.

"So, you say you have no idea who helped Mila Simmons off the satellite station where you were holding her?"

At first, neither idiot said a word. They both glanced at Nikiraki's guards who stood a few feet behind them. His men didn't even acknowledge their captives.

"No," the fat one blurted when he turned around. After a few moments, he released a sigh as if relieved he hadn't been struck down for answering.

Nikiraki, being the kind of man who liked to build the tension and watch the worm wiggle, rested his hands on the arms of his antique leather chair. "He just showed up and took her away?"

"Oh, no. She'd gotten away from us and apparently met up with him somewhere else."

Nikiraki smiled as he heard his guards chuckle.

"Mila Simmons? Little Mila Simmons, who is what, maybe five-foot-four? She can barely weigh one hundred pounds."

"She's th crafty."

Yes, she was. She had information he wanted, and he was sure she didn't even know it. Dammit. All these years and he had been close. So close.

"Is there anything you want to add?"

He asked the question knowing they didn't have anything else. The confirmation he'd been wanting from the two losers had not come, even though he knew down to his bones who had been there. When both of them shook their heads, he smiled at them and signaled to one of his guards.

"Gerald will see to your comforts, gentleman."

As he watched them shuffle out of his office, he signaled to Gerald to make sure neither of them made it through the night. The other guards followed them out, and when the door slid shut, Nikiraki let loose a pent-up growl of frustration. Unable to stay seated any longer, he stood and paced in front of the large window that looked down onto his gaming hall.

This one bit of information had haunted him for years. He knew he had a reputation for being ruthless, that many people in law enforcement knew he was dirty. A wry smile curved his lips as he stopped and watched his patrons. It drove most of the assholes crazy that they couldn't pin anything on him. Not once had they linked him directly to any crime. Oh, they knew he had his hand in illegal operations on and off Earth, but the idiots fumbled around, looking to connect him. There had only been one person who had found that link, and he'd died protecting where he'd hid it.

Michael Simmons. Nikiraki's fingers curved into the palms of his hands as he thought about the bastard. Fucker. Twenty years of hard work. Nikiraki thought of the one-room, dingy flat in East London where he'd lived during his childhood. He'd come a long way, wheeling and dealing and literally killing the competition. And not once had he been caught.

Not that they hadn't gotten close, but agents had short life spans if they didn't take the bribes he offered. Only Simmons had been able to find concrete evidence and had died

protecting its location. Many people would find that admirable, but Nikiraki thought him an idiot. The murder of a Martian diplomat wasn't big in the scheme of universal events. But Simmons had had the proof, and now his daughter had it.

Nikiraki flexed his fingers, thinking of wrapping them around Mila's slender neck. A shot of excitement raced through him, warming his blood. Imagining her gasping for air, begging for her life, caused his dick to harden. She would make a pretty victim. That, he was sure of. But he would make sure before she died, before she took her last breath, that she knew he'd been the one to kill her father. He deserved that satisfaction.

Rubbing his hand over his erection, he started thinking of calling one of his girls up for a blow job when his transmitter beeped. He hooked it onto his ear.

"Nikiraki."

"Sir, we got here about ten minutes ago and found the men who'd called about the bounty on the Simmons woman."

"And, did they have her?"

"If they did, they don't now. They claimed they had her when a man showed up to take her away. They're pretty bruised up, so there is a chance they were telling the truth. There were reports of a red-headed female checking in here about four hours ago."

Irritation inched down his spine. "Dammit. Is there not one competent kidnapper left in the universe?"

"Sir?"

"Take care of the idiots and then find out if anyone knows where they are. They have three nights and days that they have to stay on the planet. Not easy to hide there."

"Yes, sir."

"And make sure when you do find her that she makes it here to me alive. I want to see her."

"Of course, sir."

He turned his transmitter off and pressed his intercom to the front desk. After ordering the whore he'd thought about earlier, Nikiraki collapsed in his chair and ground his teeth. He would find Mila Simmons and the evidence her father had had. Once he got the computer chip, he would definitely take great pleasure in killing another fucking member of the Simmons family.

* * * * *

Sitting at the computer console sending a transmission to Masters over a secure network, Hunter ignored Mila's latest sigh as he had the three previous ones. He was sure he'd do her bodily harm if he talked to her. His emotions had been running the gamut since meeting her. Irritation, attraction, and now, the newest, fear.

He really didn't know how he felt about that one. Nothing had ever scared him as much as finding that bathroom empty. Knowing deep in his soul that she hadn't willingly gone out into the kind of environment that would kill her didn't matter. Because that meant someone had taken her. And dammit, he didn't like to remember the almost mind-freezing, blood-curdling terror that had consumed him as he searched for her.

"How long do we have to stay down here?"

There she went again. Talking. He couldn't look at her, because seriously, he didn't know what he would do. It could range from killing her to fucking her, and he wasn't sure which would be worse.

"I don't know."

She sighed again. He ground his teeth. Just that breathy little sound of hers had his cock at almost half-mast.

"I thought we would just have to wait until we cleared airspace."

"No. We have to stay hidden until we get out of this sector. They have a tendency to board ships to check them out, and Sterling doesn't have the best of reputations."

She snorted. The sound both aroused and irritated him. It was a strange and unpleasant mix for him. Women attracted him for a variety of reasons. Their looks, their brains, their pleasant personalities. Mila had the first two, but she failed miserably on the third. It didn't seem to matter. As long as she was within ten feet -- no, twenty -- he was raring to go.

"Sterling has a reputation for being a fortune hunter. You don't think they'll try and search this ship?" Sarcasm laced her voice and irritated him even more. It sunk under his skin, itching him in so many different ways he wanted to scream.

Calling on all his control, he said, "Sterling explained that. He said this room is brand new. No one knows about it, even though he's been using it for several months with no problem."

He heard the scrape of the chair against the metal floor and the sound of her pants against the seat of the chair when she moved. He still didn't look behind him. If he did, Hunter was positive they would fight. He didn't have the energy. Each argument they had drew him closer to her. It was like some kind of sick, arousing, mating dance that pushed him closer to the edge of control.

Hunter prided himself on his control. Cool under pressure. He was well known within the Agency for it. Masters was known as the seducer. A man who could talk himself out of any situation, no matter how dire. Hunter was known for being cold-blooded and calculating, and for not batting an eye at killing for the job. Hell, it was the reason many called him "Ice" behind his back. Truthfully, he'd always been proud of that nickname.

And it was all going to hell, thanks to some five-foot-four, one-hundred-pound smart-ass.

"You know, you might have more friends if you weren't so antisocial."

He let that comment roll off his back. She was trying to get a rise out of him. He could tell it from the tone in her voice. Concentrating on the message he was sending, he tried to

ignore the fact that they were stuck in the hidden compartment for at least an hour or two. There was no one shooting at them and dealing with each other would be dangerous.

“I don’t understand why you are the way you are. Your father is nice. Well, he was the couple of times I met him. He’s a gentleman.”

She had to pick the one thing he hated most to talk about. “I’m his bastard son, so I don’t know what you expected.”

There was a beat of silence, but he knew she wouldn’t let it go. “There’s a difference in being born a bastard and then living up to the name by your actions.”

He pushed *send* on the computer, then twirled the stool around to face her. She was frowning at him, her arms crossed beneath her breasts. A little wrinkle formed between her eyebrows.

“Mila, if you want a fight, pick someone else. I’m just not interested.” Which he knew was a lie he hoped she bought. Because, even now, even knowing that she was dangerous, he wanted to fight with her. And then he wanted to fuck her. A ball of heat coiled in his stomach, his fingers itched to slip off that suit and see just how soft her skin was.

She sniffed, then turned away to study an ezine someone had left on the table. “I’m not trying to fight with you. I’m trying to have a discussion about your personality, what little there is of it.”

“I have a personality.”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, snorted, then returned her attention to the ezine. “No comment.”

“No, really, Mila, I want to know what you think.”

“No, really, Hunter. I’m not interested.”

She used the princess-to-peasant tone that grated on his nerves and had him on his feet and striding toward her. Before he could think, he had his hands on her arms and was

pulling her out of the chair. It tumbled over behind her, crashing to the floor. He lifted her off the floor high enough so that they were face-to-face.

“You’re pushing your luck, woman. I’m trying to save us both from a lot of irritation, but you just have to keep pushing my buttons.” His voice had lowered to a threatening tone, one that usually had suspects pissing their pants. Instead, Mila just raised one eyebrow and said nothing. “I mean it, Mila. If you push me over the edge, there will be no coming up for air until I’ve had my fill.”

She smiled. “Is that a promise or a threat?”

“Both,” he muttered just before pulling her closer and pressing his mouth to hers.

Chapter Five

For a moment, Mila didn't -- couldn't -- respond. Her mind went completely blank, just for a split second. Then, in the next, a wave of heat shot through her, and she wrapped her arms and legs around Hunter and returned the kiss.

Oh, God, he tasted better the second time around. Hot, gooey fudge. Decadent, high calorie, and so completely bad for her. She couldn't resist him any more than she could her favorite ice cream topping. At least she wouldn't gain ten pounds with this treat.

Liquid heat gathered in her belly and then sank down to her pussy. The moment she moved against him, she felt his cock, thick and hard, and the thought of that slipping inside her pussy sent a gush of cream there.

Without breaking the kiss, Hunter stumbled over to the table and dropped her on the cold metal surface. He cupped her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks as he continued to devour her mouth. She moved her hands down his chest, past his abdomen, then around his waist and down to cup his ass.

He groaned against her mouth. The desperate sound spiraled through her, heating her blood to boiling. She protested when he pulled away from her, but then moaned his name as

he kissed a hot wet trail to her ear, taking the lobe between his teeth. Even as her body shuddered, she was pushing her boots off, then circling his waist again with her legs.

One hand slid behind her to take her weight as he unzipped the front of her suit. He laid her on the table and then did ... nothing. She opened her eyes to find Hunter staring down at her.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.”

She’d been called beautiful many times, especially during sex. This time, it was different. Hunter’s harsh tone told her that the admission didn’t come easy to him. He reached out and pushed the black fabric aside to reveal more of her breasts. Her nipples tightened as he brushed the backs of his knuckles over the sensitive skin surrounding them.

“Like fine ivory. Porcelain.”

She looked down and watched as he cupped both of her breasts, his fingers spread out. She was struck by the contrast in their skin tones. Then, he squeezed, and she closed her eyes, moaning his name.

“Ahh, you like that, do you?”

He moved forward, dropping one hand to the table, taking her nipple between his fingers with the other. As he leaned closer, she drew in a deep breath, taking in the scent of him.

She could detect the musky undertone of hard-working male that mixed with the unique scent that was Hunter. She was sure she would recognize it anywhere. Hot, aroused male intertwined with something even more primal, something that spoke to her soul. Something that, no matter where she was, she would know instantly.

Mila figured if she had even a second to contemplate that thought, she would probably scare the hell out of herself. But the next instant his lips were on her skin, her breasts, and every other thought fled as pleasure spiked through her. He took her nipple into his mouth,

scraping his teeth over the tip, just lightly enough to drive her insane. She slipped her hands into his hair, her fingers threading through his dreadlocks.

He moved from one breast to the other as she tried to tighten her legs around him. Hunter had other ideas. Releasing her nipple, he stepped back from her. She opened her eyes just as he shoved the suit off her shoulders. The next moment, he lifted her off the table, pulled the fabric free, and tossed it behind him.

When he put her back on the table, Mila shivered as her hot skin came in contact with the cold metal. Leaning back on her elbows, she watched as he picked up the chair she'd been sitting in earlier and placed it between her legs. Once he settled in it, he placed a hand on each thigh, spreading her legs wider. She liked the way his darker-toned hands looked against her skin.

He kissed her thigh, then said, "Well, what do you know? A real redhead, huh?"

She chuckled. "Your ability to piss me off and arouse me at the same time is amazing, Hunter."

When he looked up at her, her breath caught in her throat. His lips curved into a seductive smile, his eyes darkened with desire.

"It seems we do have something in common."

Her laugh ended on a moan when he bent his head and licked her slit. Hunter looked back up at her and licked his lips.

"Love, you even taste expensive." She frowned at him, and he laughed. "You taste as sweet as a French pastry. Sweet, luscious, cream-filled decadence. I know I shouldn't indulge, but damn, giving in feels so good."

The words slid over her, his voice deepening with each word. Her nipples tightened further. Her heartbeat increased as every thought other than Hunter dissolved. Hunter leaned forward again, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Humming, he slipped his hands beneath her ass, lifted her, then took her in his mouth again. Another flood of cream

filled her pussy as his tongue slipped inside her. With each thrust, her body wound tighter, racing to reach the pinnacle. But the moment she thought she would explode, he moved away. Before she could protest, he replaced his tongue with his finger.

He built the passion again, pushing her just so far, then pulling back. Then he added a second finger. Her body trembled, screaming for release.

“That’s it, Mila. I want to watch you come apart.” Passion had deepened his voice, his accent even more pronounced.

He placed his mouth on her again, as he continued to move his fingers. One lick against her clit pushed her until she catapulted over the edge, her body convulsing with her orgasm.

“Beautiful.”

As her body floated back down, Mila stretched. Every muscle in her body felt relaxed, satisfied. In fact, it was as if the tension of the past few weeks had been erased. When she opened her eyes, Hunter was standing. He grabbed hold of the waistband of his pants and opened them with a jerk. His cock thrust forward from a nest of black hair. A pearl of pre-cum wet the head of his shaft, the creamy color more pronounced against his dark brown skin.

Mila sat up and reached out, wrapping her hand around the base of his cock. He bent his head back and groaned as she moved her hand up, swiping her thumb over the top. Lifting her hand to her mouth, she waited until he opened his eyes and then licked his cum off her thumb.

She hummed, then said, “Speaking of sweet cream filling ...”

His nostrils flared, causing her to laugh. Taking his cock in her hand again, she continued to stroke him, as she caressed his balls with the other. He allowed her only a few pumps before he moved her hands off him. Deprived of making him lose control, she shot him a dirty look.

“No, I want to be deep inside you when I come.”

She didn't get a chance to argue with him, before he was pulling her off the table. He sat in the chair again and then placed her on his lap. Taking his cock in hand, he looked up to her. The heat, the wanting, the bare need she saw in his eyes caused her heart to flip-flop. Without breaking eye contact, she rose and slid down on his cock.

Oh, God. She closed her eyes as sweet pleasure stole through her. She couldn't think of anything but the way it felt to have him inside her. Slowly she began to move, taking more of him in each time she descended.

His hand slid up her body, cupped the back of her head and then pulled her down, taking her mouth in a bruising kiss. She could taste herself as she thrust her tongue between his lips. His hands moved to her breasts, teasing, caressing, then pinching her nipples. Another bolt of electricity lanced through her. Soon her rhythm increased, her body already coiling, racing toward another orgasm.

Suddenly he rose, dumping her back on the table, breaking the kiss, and thrusting into her high and deep. He pulled back out as she looked up at him, catching his gaze. Without breaking eye contact, Hunter thrust into her again. Her body exploded, breaking into a million shimmering pieces, this orgasm more powerful than her first. Hunter increased his momentum, and seconds later he followed her, her name on his lips as he pumped himself into her.

* * * * *

Hunter had never been so relaxed in his adult life. Every muscle felt loose and languid. He didn't know if he would ever be able to move. Soon after they made love, Hunter had pulled Mila off the table, and down onto his lap as he sat in the chair. He knew he should be pissed at himself, but he felt too good to care at the moment. Even so, he knew it wouldn't be long before Sterling popped in to give them the green light.

"Mila, love."

She mumbled something, not opening her eyes, then snuggled closer. Her head rested just beneath his chin, her silky hair tickling his skin. Who would have thought the smart-ass liked to cuddle? But she did. The moment he'd pulled her off the table, she'd settled on his lap and promptly fallen asleep.

He really didn't mind. For the first time since he'd run into her, Hunter had time to study an unanimated Mila. Without her mouth moving nonstop, he noticed the shape of her lips. The lower one curved out more than the top, creating a pouty look. They were soft pink, the perfect complement to her ivory skin. Her turned-up nose fit her personality, as did the dark lashes that surrounded those enormous green eyes.

That combination, along with her small stature, probably fooled a lot of people. His lips curved as he thought about his first impressions, and second ones. She might irritate the hell out of him, but she gave as good as she got.

Brushing her hair back, he leaned forward and nibbled on her ear. She squirmed and mumbled something again. Her arms slipped around his torso as she pressed closer. His cock, still inside her, hardened again. He kissed down the side of her neck, nipping at the tender skin. She moved again, more a swivel of her hips.

"Hmmm." Her voice vibrated against his chest. "That feels good, Hunter."

Irritated and aroused, he laughed. "I should have known you wouldn't rest long."

"I just needed a few minutes to recharge." She squirmed and then giggled. "Apparently you did, too."

She sat up, raised her hands above her head, stretching. It brought those beautiful breasts mouth-level for him. Hunter just didn't have it in him to resist. He took one raspberry nipple in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the tip, then sucking hard. She moaned and began to move as her hands curved around the back of his head, holding him close.

Jesus, she felt good. Each time he slid into her, he thought he'd gone to heaven. Moist heat surrounded his cock, her muscles claspng him tighter than his own fist could. She moved slowly, going almost all the way down on his shaft, then lifting off again before he was satisfied. He growled in frustration as she continued her movements. It was sweet madness, and he could only take so much of it.

Grabbing her hips, he pulled her fully down on his cock, and held her there. He looked up at her, and she smiled. Something moved within his chest, something he wasn't completely comfortable with. Releasing her hips, he slid his hands up her body, into her hair. He pulled her closer, pressing his mouth to hers as she began to move. This time, though, urgency marked her movements, faster, deeper, more out of control. All the heat that had gathered in his stomach slid to his cock. The moment before he exploded, she came. All those tiny muscles in her pussy clamped down hard on his cock, pulling him deeper and draining him.

She collapsed against his chest. He ran his hand down her spine, and she shivered.

"Stop. It's cold in here."

"I'm not cold."

"Of course not, you have clothes on. I'm naked."

"Why, yes, you are, Ms. Simmons."

She sat up and he groaned.

"Woman, I don't have it in me to give you any more pleasure." She lifted an eyebrow and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. He laughed. "Okay, maybe. But Sterling is probably going to be here any minute. And while I won't mind being known for my prowess, I thought you might get a little embarrassed."

"Oh, okay, but wherever he stops next, you better prove your worth."

He lifted her off him, setting her on the table. After righting his clothes, he watched her dress.

“I wish he was going straight to Earth, but he has a few stops on the way.”

She paused in zipping up her suit, but continued without comment.

“Mila, I told my father I would bring you back.”

She sighed as she hopped off the table. “Can’t you just tell him you found me, and I’m fine?”

“What are you hiding?”

“I have no idea what you mean, Hunter.”

In two steps he was standing in front of her. Grabbing her arm, he yanked her up. “I can’t believe this. We just got through making love, not once, but twice.”

She smiled at him, her dimples in full force, her green eyes sparkling. “And it was *amazing*.”

Momentarily, he was sidetracked by the dreamy look on her face and the way her voice had deepened over the words. He shook his head and then her.

“Don’t do that. I can’t think straight when you do.” She opened her mouth, but he continued on. “What I was saying is, I thought you could trust me.”

Her smile faded and, dammit, that guarded look came back in her eyes. “There are some things I can’t tell you, until I clear it with someone else.”

He dropped her arm and stepped back. “Don’t you understand that I can’t protect you if I don’t know what to look for?”

She shook her head. “Hunter, I can take care of myself.”

Before he could tell her that he wanted the job, the door slid open, and Sterling bounced through.

He was smiling until he saw the expressions on their faces. “I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?”

Mila smiled at the older man. “No, Hunter and I are having a difference of opinion as usual. Where are we?”

“We should be docking at Yensletar soon.”

She nodded. “Is there a bathroom? I’d like to freshen up.”

After Sterling gave her directions, and they were alone, Hunter tried to ignore the older man’s penetrating gaze. But in the last few years since Libby and Saint married, Sterling had forced himself into Hunter’s life, showing up and bothering him.

“She doesn’t seem very happy, especially considering what went on here,” Sterling said, waving his hands around indicating the room.

“Please tell me you didn’t spy on us.”

Sterling chuckled and then sat down in the chair in front of the electronic panel. “No, but I could feel the sparks coming off you two. A lot of heat there. Still is.”

Hunter sighed when he realized Sterling wouldn’t let it go. “She isn’t telling me the whole story. She won’t go back to Earth, as any rich, party girl would want to do.”

“She isn’t your typical rich woman, Hunter. You know that.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to sort through all the contradictions. “I know. I just don’t know who’s after her. She’s mixed up with Nikiraki.”

The older man’s eyebrows rose. “Not a nice man. Dirty as they come.”

“And slimy enough to get away. There’s something she isn’t telling me, and it puts her at risk.”

“Are you telling her everything, Hunter?”

“What the hell do you mean, Sterling?”

“Listen, I’m not stupid. I have my ear to the ground. I know you aren’t just a humble outpost keeper.” He shrugged. “You and I both know how high up you go.”

“She’ll find out soon enough. Masters is meeting us when we dock on Yensletar.”

Sterling chuckled. "So, you called on Masters?"

"I was supposed to meet up with him and one of his operatives."

"So, you are going to take a woman you are involved with --"

"I'm not involved with her."

"Son, you made love to her. That's involved for a woman." When Hunter started to argue, Sterling continued. "Here is this woman you made love to and then fought with, and now you're going to meet up with your friend."

"Yes."

"Her ex-lover."

Ahh, shit. "I forgot about that."

"Yes, I just bet you did."

* * * * *

Within an hour, they were walking down the ramp out of the craft. Yensletar was an easy planet. There was a check-in process, but Hunter made sure Masters had cleared the way for both him and Mila.

When they reached the bottom of the ramp, Sterling gave Mila a hug, enveloping her in his two large arms. Releasing her, he looked at Hunter and smiled.

"I'm sure you two will muddle through somehow. Of course, Libby would probably beat me if I didn't tell you to be careful."

"Thanks, Sterling."

Mila and Hunter stood side by side as they watched him walk back up the ramp, singing an Irish ditty.

"He reminds me of my grandfather."

"Sterling would love that."

Mila laughed. "He used to sing dirty drinking songs to make my mother blush."

"And she would be appalled if she knew her daughter sang them off key when she's had too much to drink," said an amused voice behind them.

Mila whirled around and gasped. "Robbie? What the hell are you doing here?"

The next moment she was jumping forward and into his arms. Hunter had to stand there and bear it, even as he fought the urge to separate his friend's head from his body just for touching Mila.

"Hunter here got hold of me, told me to meet you here."

He set her back on her feet and smiled down at her. The warm intimate look had Hunter biting back a growl. The next moment, Masters's too-perceptive gaze settled on Hunter.

"So, now that we're all here, I guess we should have our meeting."

Hunter's mind, still concentrating on the way Robbie's hands caressed Mila's shoulders, took a moment to figure out what he was talking about.

"Masters, we're missing our third party."

Robbie studied him for a moment, then turned Mila to face Hunter. A frown wrinkled her brow, and she shot Masters a dirty look.

"Hunter? Meet our third party. Or as you know her, number 335."

Chapter Six

Mila wanted to kill Robbie. Instead of giving her time to ease Hunter into accepting her position, Robbie threw it at him with all the tact of a cold bucket of water. From the stone face Hunter had been wearing for the last thirty minutes, he wasn't happy with the information.

The harsh overhead light in Robbie's room revealed nothing to her. Hunter held on to that impassive expression as he sat in a chair situated next to the dresser. He hadn't made eye contact with her either, which really worried her. She couldn't detect what he might be feeling.

The second time they'd made love, there had been something there, some kind of connection. Not that she thought it was everlasting love. Mila didn't believe in notions like that. Still, she worried that now he would want nothing to do with her, and she wasn't sure she could bear that. She was sure she'd lost his trust. And Lord help her if he found out about her and Robbie.

"So, what did they give you to bring?" Robbie asked.

She turned her attention to Robbie. Sitting on the bed, he smiled at her as if she owed him some kind of gratitude. Jackass. She'd get him back for this.

“It’s just a file. I have no idea what it is, as usual, and as per regs, I haven’t looked at it. But they did say it was a level four.”

Both men narrowed their eyes and studied her. She wanted to laugh, but didn’t. You couldn’t find two men so different in personality, except when it came to the job. They handled it differently. Robbie flirted, charmed. Hunter bulldozed his way through, scaring the hell out of anyone who dared disagree with him. But looking at them right now, you’d have no idea their personalities were so diverse.

“Level four?” Robbie asked and flicked a glance at Hunter, then back to her. “You’ve only done up to level two.”

She nodded. “Don’t you know what it is?”

He shook his head. “No. I was supposed to make sure you made it to another contact, which I thought odd. I assumed you’d be able to tell me something when you got here.” He turned his attention to Hunter. “You have any idea what this could be about?”

Hunter shook his head. “No.”

She scraped her teeth over her lower lip trying to come up with a reason. All of this was decidedly odd. Even Vivica, the agent who’d briefed her, had been confused about it.

“I have the file, if you want to look at it. I can’t; my security level isn’t high enough.”

Both men nodded, Hunter avoiding eye contact again. She sighed, knowing that he was pissed about her “deception.” She asked for a knife, and when Robbie offered up his twentieth-century Swiss knife, she laughed.

“One of these days you’ll realize we’re in the twenty-second century.”

Carefully, she separated the fabric at the seam on her left wrist. Once it was open, she handed the knife back to Robbie. She slid her finger between the layers of fabric that made up the tiny pocket. When her finger brushed the edge of the disc, she eased it out and then passed it to Robbie.

“You weren’t briefed on this at all? Why they might have stepped up your clearance?”

“Nope. You know Vivica was kind of confused by it, too.”

Robbie retrieved his electronic reader and popped the disc in. “Vivica?”

She sighed. “Agent Harris.”

He laughed. “Oh, yeah, I forgot that was her first name.”

As he pulled up the file, the strained silence filling the room had Mila itching to leave. Hunter still wasn’t making eye contact, and Robbie was frowning over his reader. As the stillness continued, a ball of tension curled in her stomach.

When she couldn’t stand it any longer, she asked Robbie, “Do you have a room for me?”

He nodded, not looking up from the reader. “Across the hall. They have your thumbprint on record so you should be able to unlock the door, no problem.”

“I’ll leave you gentleman to it, then.” Unwilling to look at the detached expression on Hunter’s face any longer, Mila hurried out.

Robbie was right. Her door unlocked without any problems. After ensuring the door locked behind her, she took in her surroundings. It was a mirror of Robbie’s room, with a massive bed, a couple of chairs, and no windows. Needing to relax, she dragged herself over to the bed and collapsed. Every muscle in her body ached, she was sure of it. As she closed her eyes, she started to wonder just what the hell Hunter was thinking.

What was she thinking? He was pissed, even though he knew the regs as well as she did. She couldn’t reveal her job except in a life-or-death situation, even to an agent. It’d been close, but not that close. The kidnappings had more to do with her being the daughter of a wealthy woman.

She ran a hand through her tangled hair, wincing when it caught on a tangle. Worrying about it wouldn’t get her anywhere. She needed to clear her mind. Clean her body. She felt grungy. After stripping off her clothes, she stepped into the shower, allowing the hot water to coax the tension out of her muscles. Getting the dust from the last several

days off had her mind clearing, her body relaxing. After drying off, she slipped between the covers on the bed, and within moments, she drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

“You want to tell me how you hooked up with Mila?” Masters asked as he studied the closed door.

Hunter grunted. He couldn’t formulate an answer because he was too angry.

“Once again, your conversational skills fail, John.”

“Fuck off, Masters.”

“Not much better.” But he didn’t push his line of questioning. Masters knew him better than most people. Bugging Hunter only led to a bloody nose. Masters had already learned that lesson a few years ago.

Masters pressed a few buttons on his reader and frowned. “This makes no sense at all.”

“What?”

“These are just directions for me, which I already have.”

Hunter stood, a knot forming in his stomach. Inefficiency reigned at most government agencies. The Agency wasn’t beyond doing some stupid things, but this made no sense whatsoever. He took the reader, and sure enough, that was all that was in the file.

“You’re right; it makes no sense.”

Masters sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. It took a moment for Hunter to notice his friend wasn’t acting in his usual manner. There was something off.

“I don’t know, Hunter. There was a lot of hubbub a few weeks ago. I have no idea what it was about. I do know that my supervisor and several generals were called in for some huge meeting. When Collins returned, he didn’t discuss it. Just gave me instructions about meeting up with Mila.”

“And you have no idea what’s going on?”

He shook his head. “No. I do know that a few people have been a little jumpy since the last go-round in court with Nikiraki. Then there was that failed coup in the Editon Sector. We lost a few agents. Headquarters has been twitchy about secrecy ever since.”

Hunter’s position allowed him top-secret clearance, as did Masters’s position, but apparently it wasn’t enough for them to be privy to what was going on. But ... Masters was acting odd, secretive.

“You sure you don’t know anything?”

Master’s shot him a dirty look, his green eyes sparking with animosity.

“I would tell you, Hunter.”

He narrowed his eyes and studied his friend. “What the bloody hell are they up to?”

Shaking his head, he sat down on the bed. “Hunter, I have no idea.” He held up his hands as Hunter approached him. “I’m serious. All I know is that I was supposed to take her to Sindlestar.”

Hunter stopped in front of Masters, grabbed hold of his shirt and pulled him to his feet. “You better be telling me the truth. If not, I’ll make sure you think twice about lying to me.”

For a second, Masters looked like he would beat the hell out of Hunter. Then, his face transformed. His lips curved and he laughed. “Well, well, well.”

Hunter released him, practically tossing him on the bed, which wasn’t easy with a man of Masters’s size. He landed with a grunt and a curse but he was still laughing at Hunter.

“Who would have thought John Hunter would fall for a rich woman.”

Irritation slithered into his gut along with a healthy dose of wariness. “You don’t know what the bloody hell you’re talking about. I promised my father I’d get her home.”

“Hmm, yeah, you always do your best to please your father.” Sarcasm laced his words.

Hunter paced away, trying to ignore Masters’s perceptive eyes. Curling his fingers into the palms of his hands, he resisted the urge to punch a hole in the wall, or the pretty boy’s face.

“It’ll get him off my back, and apparently, his fiancée will be forever in my debt.” Even to his own ears, his voice didn’t sound that convincing.

“So all you see her as is your soon-to-be stepsister?” He paused, apparently waiting for Hunter to make a comment. When he didn’t, Masters rolled on. “And I figure if you were with Sterling, he told you about Mila’s and my past relationship. That old man can’t keep a secret to save his life.”

Hunter grunted again.

“And you aren’t involved with her.”

Hunter remained silent, even as anger burned a hole in his stomach. He refused to take the bait. Answering questions about his personal life wasn’t something that Hunter did on a regular basis. It was one of the reasons he preferred not to make friends, and Masters was edging closer to the not-friend category.

“Ahh, so if that’s all it is, I guess you don’t mind bunking down here alone.” He smacked his lips. “Mila won’t mind letting me share her bed.”

Before he could see through the red haze that clouded his vision, Hunter whirled around and had Masters by the collar again. He lifted Masters off the ground, bringing his own face to within inches of Masters’s.

“You so much as fucking think about touching her, you can kiss your pretty-boy face goodbye.”

Masters smiled at him, not looking at all scared. Irritation replaced a bit of Hunter’s anger because he realized that Masters had been messing with him, and he’d fallen for it.

“Fuck it.”

He tossed Masters back on the bed and walked to the door. As the door was sliding closed Masters yelled out, “Make sure to give Mila a goodnight kiss from me.”

As he pressed his thumb on the keypad, Hunter scowled. He hadn’t fallen for Mila. He wanted her; that much was not in doubt. Sharing just wasn’t his style. After they were

through, he really didn't care if she wanted to fuck Masters's brains out, he thought as he walked through the doorway.

So why the hell does that thought make me want to beat the hell out of one of my best friends?

Because he couldn't bear the thought of another man touching her, that was why. Bloody hell. He stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes. He didn't want entanglements. Women expected strings. He wasn't good with them. Other than Masters and Saint, he had few friends. He liked it that way, dammit. It didn't matter that she'd never asked about the future. She never asked about his intentions. And, he thought, just why hadn't she asked for them?

Why the hell did he care?

He opened his eyes and stomped past the entryway and bathroom. Then, he stopped short when he saw her. The light of the two moons shone through the window, illuminating the room, but not enough for him to see clearly. He walked closer, never taking his gaze from her. Crouching next to the bed, he studied her face, noting the dark circles beneath her eyes. Damn, even for an agent she'd been put through a lot. It was still hard to accept that she was a courier for the Agency. He'd missed all the signs -- her knowledge of planets, weapons, her ability to think fast in nasty situations -- but Hunter couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of Mila coming into contact with the scum couriers came into contact with.

Lightly, he brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek. She smiled, her eyes still closed. Again, he felt the shifting in his chest, but brushed it aside. He moved his hand away. She frowned and mumbled something under her breath, then rolled over, presenting him with her bare back.

Something hot and possessive stirred deep within him. He'd always kept sex light. Women were expendable, but there was something that made him want to make sure any

male within a hundred feet of her knew she was his. And even though it was temporary, he still wanted to have that connection. To make her understand.

He rose, and after setting his weapon on the bedside table just within reach, he stripped out of his clothes. His body was already humming with arousal, the need pounding through him. Slipping into bed beside her, he slid his hand around her waist and pulled her against him. For a few seconds, he lay there, enjoying the feeling of her skin next to his.

Slowly, so as not to wake her just yet, he moved the sheets off the two of them. As he ran his fingers over her hip, he enjoyed the contrasts of their skin tones. He rested his hand there, just on the fullest part of her hip, and marveled at how small she looked with his hands on her.

She wiggled her ass, trying to get closer. He groaned and then he heard it. The muffled giggle.

“You think that’s funny, do you?”

She nodded as he slipped his hand over her belly down to her sex. He kissed the back of her neck, breathing deeply. Damn, she smelled good. Clean, aroused female. As he pressed his hand against her pussy, she moved against his cock. Already hard, the slight brushing of her ass against him urged a drop of cum from him. He slid one finger into her and closed his eyes as her muscles clamped down hard.

Jesus. His dick twitched against her ass as he began to move his finger in and out of her. With each move, his finger dampened more. Her moans grew in volume. As he felt her muscles clench, preparing for her orgasm, he pulled his hand away. The string of obscenities that came out of her mouth made him smile.

“Who would have guessed that you had the mouth of a merc?”

Before she could respond, he flipped her onto her stomach and kneeled between her legs. Even in the pale moonlight, he could appreciate the beauty of her skin. She looked over

her shoulder at him. Mesmerized, he watched strands of her hair slip over her shoulder and onto the bed.

“Getting an eyeful of my ass there, Hunter?”

“And a bloody fantastic view it is.”

Bloody perfect, he thought as he caressed her heart-shaped bottom. He cupped the fullest part of each cheek, reveling in the silky feel of her skin. Then, as he felt her relax, he lifted it and slapped her. She squealed, then moaned as he leaned down and brushed his lips against the spot. He placed open-mouthed kisses on her stomach as he moved up her body, scraping his teeth against her skin -- then licking the spot. By the time he reached her shoulders, both of them were quivering. Grabbing a pillow, he lifted her, then shoved it beneath her hips.

He took his cock in one hand and slipped the other between her and the pillows. Positioning himself behind her, he slowly moved into her. When he was in her to the hilt, he took hold of her hips and began to thrust. She tried to pull herself to her knees. He pressed a hand on the center of her back and held her still. When she stopped struggling against him, he moved his hand back to her hip. With every measured stroke, he thrust higher, deeper, but kept that same steady rhythm.

Slipping one hand around her abdomen, then down to her mound, he pressed one finger against her clit. Her muscles clenched, pulling his cock deeper with each stroke.

“Oh, Mila, yeah, baby.”

He pounded into her, and in the next moment, everything exploded as he thrust one final time. Every muscle locked, as he poured his seed into her.

Moments later, he was pulling the covers back over them as Mila snuggled next to him. Other than the bone-deep satisfaction of making love, Hunter had accomplished nothing. They had not talked about her duplicity, or just why she was doing this work. It was dangerous.

And at some point, he knew he was going to have to confront just why the hell he couldn't seem to get her out of his system.

* * * * *

Nikiraki bit back his irritation as he listened to the report his assistant was conveying.

"Where is she?"

"There is no sign of her at the weigh station. She was seen there, that's where our two men captured her. But she was never seen leaving there. She didn't rent any kind of vehicle. And there's a report she was seen with John Hunter."

A shiver of fear slashed through his aggravation. "Hunter?"

"Yes. Our local agents took the description of the man she was with. I'm pretty sure it's him."

Nikiraki curled his fingers into his hands, trying to calm his nerves. Dammit, John Hunter. He should have suspected it, since Hunter's biological father was marrying Mila's mother. And fuck, the man had been relentless the last few years. He had a small hope that Hunter was there just to get Mila back to Earth for her mother. Maybe he didn't know the treasure of information she carried. If he did know, Hunter wouldn't hesitate to use the woman to get that information.

He shook himself out of his thoughts. "Is there anything else?"

"We thought you should know that Sterling Wainwright left the planet about thirty minutes before we showed up."

Damn. "Was there a record of where he was going?"

"Yes, sir. He apparently signed off he was heading back to Earth. The guards said he made a big production about returning for the birth of a grandchild."

"Thank you, Deleyn."

Nikiraki shut down his earpiece before his assistant could respond. The burning in his stomach started again. He rubbed his hand over it, trying to ignore the ulcer his doctors claimed he had. Too much stress, they said.

He snorted. Yeah, stress. He fed on stress, and it had always made him stronger, sharper. But since he found out about the existing evidence, life had been shit. The only way out of this would be to take out Mila Simmons, and if Hunter got in the way, Nikiraki would figure out a way to take care of him, too.

John Hunter.

The added stress in his life definitely had a name, and that bastard would deserve what he got.

Chapter Seven

Mila stirred, stretching her arms above her head. She wiggled her bottom when a warm hand held her still.

“Woman, I need some rest. Quit moving.”

His warm breath feathered against the sensitive skin just behind her ear. She shivered.

“What are we going to do now?” she asked. Her body was already responding to the way his fingers kept stroking against her skin. Nipples tightened, and heat curled in her stomach.

“I thought maybe a hot shower. You could wash my back.”

She grinned. “No. What I mean is what are we going to do now?”

He didn’t respond right away, his hand paused against her breast. Then he said, “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“Masters and I didn’t exactly talk about it.”

She mulled that over as his fingers brushed her nipple. Just a few strokes and her nipple was hard, her body stirring.

“What did you and Robbie do?”

“Talked.” He nibbled on her ear. “Fought.”

“Fought? What would the two of you have to fight about?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead he nipped at her neck. Her mind began to drift, her body started to warm, soften to his touch.

“You know, you can seduce me all you want, I’m still going to expect you to answer those questions.”

He chuckled. “Fine, but I need a shower first.”

After jumping out of bed, Hunter pulled her up, swinging her into his arms.

“Oh, my, Hunter. This is almost romantic.” She fluttered her eyes at him, and he laughed.

After dumping her on the counter, he switched on the bath water, then turned back to her. “Romantic or not, it is the only bloody way to get you in the tub.”

As the steam quickly filled the bathroom, she looked up at him. He no longer looked like the cynical smart-ass. Well, not much. He was smiling at her, not sneering. His eyes were warm, and the way he was looking at her made her heart turn over and drop to her stomach.

“Mila? Are you alright?”

Oh, Christ, she was falling for the jackass. She didn’t get attached. It was a rule. Panic clogged her throat and she tried to swallow. Good God, she barely knew him. Sure, she knew he was strong and honest. She could count on his fast mind and quick hands. And she knew she would trust him with her life.

That didn’t mean she was in love with him.

Oh, bloody hell, it did.

She didn't trust men, because, well, they were men. But she trusted Hunter. She was in trouble.

His fingers brushed against her cheek, bringing her out of her thoughts. "Love, are you all right?"

She shook her head, trying to push away the thoughts and the terror they brought with them. Summoning up her will, she smiled at him. Concern darkened his eyes. A frown marred his sensual lips.

"I'm fine, Hunter. Just a little tired."

He slid his hands over her shoulders, massaging, comforting. It had been so long since someone had done something for her comfort that didn't have some kind of reward attached for them. But as sure as she knew that the Firenzia 500 was the best small handgun in the universe, she knew that comfort was what Hunter was offering. He was aroused -- there was no doubting the evidence -- but she knew that at that moment, his concern centered on her comfort.

Tears welled up, her breathing hitched. She looked up at him. His frown deepened.

"You've been running on empty for a few days, love. You just need to let me take care of you."

Cupping her face, he brushed his mouth against hers. Not a demanding kiss as before, but just as potent. The tender touch had her heart beating faster, her nipples tightening. A lump of emotion clogged her throat.

His hands traveled down her body, gliding against her skin, barely touching her. Still, the feel of his fingers, his hands, against her at the moment was more powerful than any other time he'd touched her.

Panic welled in her chest. This was different. This scared the hell out of her.

She tried to pull away, needing to get back on the playing field where they were before.

“Hunter.” Even Mila heard the fear in her whispered voice.

Still gentle, loving, Hunter eased her against him. His sex throbbed against her as heat wound through her.

“Let me take care of you, Mila.”

She blinked, trying to focus, trying to come up with a reason to run away that didn’t make her a coward.

Sliding his hand beneath her rear end, Hunter lifted her off the counter and stood her on the floor. The understanding in his eyes twisted through her, curling into her heart, warming her from the inside out. Pulling her closer, he kept his hands on her rear, massaging, kneading, his cock heavy against her stomach. His lips touched her temple and then he was pulling away, too soon for her tastes.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her away from him. She looked at him in the wide mirror, their gazes locking as his hands roamed down her body.

“When I saw your hologram, the first thing I thought was that you were a beautiful, spoiled, rich, party girl.” His lips curved. “I’m not usually that far off with first impressions, but it really wasn’t my fault.”

His fingers caressed the underside of her breasts, then the tips of her nipples. Even in the moist heat filling the bathroom, Mila shivered. She watched, mesmerized by the sight of his hands against her skin.

“Never would have thought we were so much alike.” He continued teasing her, his fingers barely touching, but still sending heat spiraling through her. “But we do have some things in common.”

The humor she heard made her smile. She continued watching their reflection, watching his hands as they moved over her body. Even with the steam rapidly filling the room and fogging the mirror, she could see his hands as they roamed. His dark brown skin contrasted with her ivory-toned complexion, making it easier for her to watch.

She sighed as one hand drifted over her belly to her pussy. Already damp, she felt another gush of heated cream as his fingers teased her slit. She reached behind him to put her hands on his ass.

“No, keep those lovely hands at your sides, Mila. I just want to touch you, not lose my mind and attack you.”

She frowned, but complied, because it was hard to argue with someone who wanted to pleasure you.

“You think we have something in common?”

He chuckled, the sound darkly delicious. “Yes. We have brilliant tempers, use four-letter words extremely well, and have hard-ons for excellent weaponry.”

She smiled, then gasped as he slid the tip of one finger just inside, then back out again. Her muscles tensed, waiting for another teasing touch.

“And there is one other thing we have in common.”

His voice thickened. He shifted his hips, and she could feel his erection against her back. Need crawled through her. She wanted him any way she could get him. His mouth on her skin, hers on his. She’d love to take that nice, fat cock into her mouth and suck him dry. He moved again, and her gaze met his in the mirror. The smile curving his lips told her he knew what he was doing. Without breaking eye contact, he slipped his finger in, then out again. She closed her eyes as her pussy muscles clenched, begging for another teasing touch.

“What else do we have in common?”

She could barely get the words from between her lips as her body throbbed. As Hunter continued teasing her cunt, his other hand pinched her nipple. With each squeeze, heat shot straight to her pussy.

“We can’t keep our hands off of each other.”

Chuckling, she sighed as he slipped a bit more of his finger between her pussy lips. He leaned down, placing his mouth against her shoulder. His hair draped over her, tickling her skin as he kissed his way up to her neck.

He pinched her nipple again, and she moaned.

“You like that, love?” His breath feathered over her ear. “You know, I never knew a woman who could get so hot, so quickly.”

His teeth scraped over her earlobe before he licked it. He added another finger as he slipped inside her pussy again.

“From the moment I saw that picture, I wanted you. After meeting you, it was hard not to tear your clothes off and show you exactly what to do with that smart mouth.”

Each time he entered, her body readied, drawing closer, but just as she was sure she would come, he would slip back out. Tension built, her body clamoring for release.

“So wet, love. You know what it feels like to slip inside you? Feel your muscles clamp on my cock?”

He took her hand and lifted it to his mouth. Taking one finger in his mouth, he gently sucked, drawing harder with each thrust of his fingers. Soon, he dropped her hand, returning his to her breast.

“See, all dark, moist. Nothing like it in the world, Mila. Nothing feels like slipping into you.”

“Hunter.” Her moan was half demand, half plea. Arousal throbbed, her body heated, her mind blank of everything but reaching the pinnacle and jumping over for a freefall.

“What, love? Do you need to come?” Again his mouth was on her skin. One of his dreadlocks slipped over her shoulder and teased her nipple.

“Yes.”

“Hmmm. Open your eyes.”

She obeyed, meeting his gaze in the fogged mirror. He flicked his thumb over her clit, then pressed hard. As she shot over, her body convulsing, he pushed both fingers into her and cupped her breast. Even as her orgasm faded, he touched her clit again, and she shot up and over again. Closing her eyes, Mila let the heated pleasure wash over her, through her.

As she came down he moved his hand away, then lifted her up and over the edge of the tub. Her muscles were so relaxed from her orgasm, she could barely stand up. She just wanted to lie in the tub and drift off to sleep. There was no way she would feel this satisfied ever again. Mila knew there was no way she would be able to handle another explosion like that. She just didn't have it in her.

Hunter joined her, lifting her up against the wall. He slipped his hands beneath her bottom and entered her in one swift, deep thrust. Without hesitating, he began to stroke. He moved his mouth to her breast, sucking on her nipple, scraping it with his teeth. And, just like that, her body quickened, responded. The arousal she thought she wouldn't be able to handle built. The heat of it twisted through her, throbbed in her pussy.

He took her lips in a hard kiss, his tongue slipping between her lips. Pulling back, he watched her as he shoved higher, pushing further. Water sluiced over them, dripping unnoticed as he slipped his hand between their bodies. She closed her eyes as she came again.

With a moan, he thrust into her, then stilled, as he followed her.

* * * * *

Hunter's heart still hammered as he leaned his forehead against the shower wall. Water continued to beat down on them. He felt Mila's lips glide over his shoulder and smiled.

Slowly, because he was much too relaxed to move fast, he pulled away, then set her on her feet. Hunter smiled down at the picture she made. She leaned against the stainless steel wall, her eyes closed, a secret smile curving her lips. Water, or possibly Hunter, had tangled her hair, but now it was plastered against her head. She was a mess.

When he lifted his hand to brush the wet strands out of her face, he noticed his hand still shook. Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath and willed away the unfamiliar feelings coursing through him. The panic that had chilled him to his bones at the sight of her tears had left him uneasy and unsure. He couldn't handle a woman's tears any better than any other man. But it had gone beyond that. Mila's tears had curdled the contents of his stomach.

Tears from a strong woman like Mila were scary. He didn't know what had moved him, but something deep inside, something he still wasn't comfortable with, urged him to comfort her. It was almost primal.

He didn't know what the hell had upset her, but whatever it was, he'd wanted to smash it, destroy it. And that just wasn't like him.

"Hunter, the water's getting cool." Her voice held the sleepy, contented tone of a satisfied woman. Well, at least that was something.

He turned off the water and, grabbing a towel, dried her, then himself. Lifting her into his arms, he stepped out of the tub and walked out into the bedroom. After placing her on the bed, he slipped between the sheets beside her and pulled her into his arms. Her easy, steady breathing told him she'd passed out and with good reason. He looked down and saw her hand on his chest, just over his heart.

Don't borrow trouble, Hunter.

Easier said than done, he thought, as he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

* * * * *

Hunter strapped the MJ 4000 on his thigh and tried to ignore Mila's irritation. It was hard, because she wouldn't shut up. Nothing new in that.

"I want to know why I have to take the hand gun."

"Mila, you can't hold onto the laser rifle. It's too big for your tiny hands."

She looked at them and frowned. "They are not."

"Don't think of arguing with her on that one, Hunter," Masters said as he walked into their bedroom. "Mila would argue with a dead man about the state of his health."

She rounded on Masters, and Hunter decided to step in before she lashed him with her temper.

"Really, Masters, all you have to know is how to handle her."

"Handle her?" she asked, her voice rising an octave. "And you know all about it, do you? I don't know how you *handle her* when you won't shut up half the time."

"You think Hunter talks too much?" Masters asked.

"He talks constantly, mostly about what I'm doing wrong, or how I'm screwing everything up."

"I do not."

"No one ever complains about Hunter talking too much. In fact, it's usually the opposite." Masters's remarks were ignored by both of them.

She took a step closer to Hunter. Damn, she was brave. Smiling inwardly, he took a deep breath and enjoyed the clean feminine scent of her. "Yes, you do. You complain more than some old biddy. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were a hundred years old."

"You know," he said, enjoying the heat of temper flowing through him, "I have no idea just how you heard my complaints since you never shut up."

She rose to her tiptoes, bringing her face within inches when he lowered his. "I do not talk too much. And I don't screw things up."

Her voice was lowered in a threatening manner, and God help him, a shot of lust threaded into his anger. He could tell by the darkening of her eyes that she felt it, too.

"Maybe I should take care of Mila, and you go on ahead, Hunter."

Without looking at Masters they both said, "Shut up."

“Hey, I do outrank you, Mila.”

She shot Masters a nasty look. “Butt out, Robbie.”

Hunter took one last deep breath, then stepped away. “We don’t have time for this. Masters here says that we’re supposed to get to Sindlestar where they’re going to debrief you.”

She frowned at him again. “Don’t either of you know what’s going on?”

“No. The file gave us little to no info on what they wanted you to do.”

“Did Harris give you an indication what it was about?” Masters asked her.

“No. In fact, she acted a little confused and said they had kept her out of the loop on this one.” Mila shrugged. “She said it must be pretty big if she wasn’t briefed on it.”

Masters chuckled. “Yeah, Harris likes to think she knows everything. But it is odd. I guess we’ll find out when we get there. I’ll meet you all down at the dock.”

He left without another word. Mila opened her mouth to argue, but Hunter wasn’t having any of it. He slid his arm around her waist, lifted her closer, and silenced her arguments with his mouth.

As usual, a blast of heat shot through him. His mind spun as her tongue slipped into his mouth. By the time he set her on her feet they were both shaking.

“We don’t have time for this,” he said and was appalled when his voice shook. He cleared his throat.

She threaded her hands through her hair. When she spoke, her voice wasn’t any steadier than his.

“No. No, we don’t. But I really want to.”

He groaned. “You’re a dangerous woman.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

* * * * *

The ship Robbie flew was one of the best in the fleet. Mila knew it was part of his cover as a gunrunner. Most people thought he made a fortune selling weapons illegally, and to keep the story up while on assignment, Robbie was lucky enough to get the best of everything. Including the ship. It had all the bells and whistles and hauled ass like nothing she'd ever been on before.

The moment they were airborne and cruising, Hunter disappeared to contact his father. She figured he wanted to be sure her mother didn't worry. So sweet, even though he was still being a pain in the ass. Before he left Robbie and her alone, he gave Robbie a nasty look, and gave her a quick, hard kiss and a pat on the ass.

She would have yelled at him if her head hadn't been spinning and her hormones singing. By the time she had her wits again, he was gone.

"You and Hunter, huh?"

She slanted Robbie a look. He looked the same as when she'd met him all those years ago, except for a few laugh lines around his green eyes. In fact, those made him even more attractive, which was Robbie's luck. He always landed on his feet no matter what the situation.

"Don't start, Robbie. I'm not in the mood."

To escape his curious study, she walked to the galley for a snack. She found some water and dried fruit by the time he finally joined her.

"I take it you don't want to talk about it."

She snorted. "Really, why would you guess that? I mean, I always talk over my present lover with my ex-lovers."

When he didn't reply, she looked at him.

"It is just that the two of you are exactly alike."

"Are you on drugs? We're nothing alike."

She munched on her fruit, then took a swig of water.

“Mila, I know both of you better than you know yourselves. You’re stubborn, sarcastic, and two of my best friends in the world. I just know you -- and I know him. Neither of you want long term.”

Something cold slithered into her chest. “Yeah. You have that right.”

He cocked his head. “No. What you didn’t want was forever with me.”

“Robbie, you didn’t want forever with me, either. You were confused.”

Crossing his arms he nodded. “Yeah, I have to agree with you on that one.”

“And I was married once.”

“Yeah, and how long did that one last?”

Irritation lanced through her. It was hell arguing with someone who knew you too well. “He was an asshole. As are most men.”

“But not Hunter.”

She drew in a deep breath and was appalled when her voice caught when she said, “Not Hunter.”

“Oh, baby, don’t.”

The panic in his voice made her laugh. She sniffled and then fought back the tears.

“Don’t worry, Robbie, I won’t fall apart on you, and I definitely won’t let Hunter know the truth.”

“And what would that be?”

“I’m in love with the jackass.”

“Oh ... well. Why are you telling me?”

“Because Hunter would run in the other direction if I told him.”

He smiled. “You’re right about that one. What’re you planning on doing?”

“Nothing.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but Hunter walked into the galley. “What’s going on?”

She smiled at him. “Nothing. Did you get hold of your father?”

He nodded. “Your mother was happy to hear you’re safe. She wants you home.”

“Well, let’s get our asses in gear, find out what the hell is up on Sindlestar, and then I can get back home.”

Chapter Eight

The moment they stepped onto the dock on Sindlestar, the tension doubled. Hunter knew down in his gut something was very wrong. The Agency was up to something, and somehow Mila figured into it.

He glanced at her as she settled her handgun in the holster at her side. Since he'd come upon her and Robbie talking in the galley, she'd been the same, but different. He wasn't sure what went on between the two of them, but something had. It gnawed at his gut that they might still have feelings each other. Hunter didn't like feeling like the fifth wheel.

Robbie strode in front, Mila followed, and Hunter brought up the rear as they entered the customs house. They had nothing to claim, so it was relatively easy to make it through all the checkpoints. Once outside, Mila smiled.

"I love this place," she said, looking around.

Hunter had to agree as he took in the tropical flowers surrounding the entrance of the station. Large, palm-like trees lined the road leading out of the lot, their purple leaves swaying in the gentle wind. The tropical scents of coconuts and jujercots filled his senses. Sindlestar was a resort planet. It had no other means to support itself, just the millions who spent a fortune to vacation there during the year. Temperate climate, white sand beaches,

and every debauchery imaginable ensured the locals would never go broke. A light breeze lifted Mila's hair. The scent of her intermingled with tropical fruits, and his body heated in response. Like a fucking stallion scenting his mare.

Even now blood drained to his groin. He shook his head, knowing he had to keep his wits about him. There was something going on here. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was something tied to Mila. Something the Agency wanted to accomplish, and if she was in the way, they wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice her.

"Where to now, Robbie?" she asked. Her voice showed no worry whatsoever. Cool, clear, as if she were asking where to shop for the latest handgun. But he knew better. He sensed her tension.

"We're supposed to meet an agent at the bar here and then I guess we'll find out."

Once they were on their way in an autocraft provided by the Agency, Hunter tried to keep his mind on the job and off the woman in the backseat.

"Can you think of anything the Agency would need you for?" Masters asked.
"Anything about your father?"

He sensed her stillness. "You know about my father, Hunter?"

"Yeah." He didn't turn around.

Masters smoothed over the tension. "Wainwright told him. The man never heard a rumor he doesn't like to share."

Hunter looked over his shoulder at her and nodded. She sighed.

"I have no idea. I didn't know until a few years after his death. We were always told he died in an accident. Now, I'm not so sure." She shrugged. "Daddy was a diplomat. And apparently he worked for the Agency when he took trips. It was how I met up with Robbie."

"Do you have anything of your father's?" Masters asked.

"Not on me. I mean, if the Agency wanted something from me, something of my father's, wouldn't they need to tell me? I wouldn't know to bring it with me."

Uneasiness curled into his stomach, and he said, “I don’t know what it is, but I’d wager your father has something to do with this. Do you know what he handled?”

She smiled sadly. “He was a courier like me.”

“Don’t worry, love. We’ll figure it out.”

Nodding, she returned her attention to the window to watch the scenery. He studied her as she frowned. Her mind was working overtime, thinking about every conversation she’d had with her father, trying to discern any hint of what this all might be about.

As the buildings they drove past turned shabbier, Hunter’s instincts were ringing with warnings. They’d never failed him before. And now, he thought, glancing at Mila, it was more important than ever.

* * * * *

Cold fear slithered down her spine and settled at the base, chilling Mila. She stepped through the door to the club, her mind taking in the surroundings, and her worry increased. She’d been in some dives in her life, but nothing competed with this one.

Techno music bounced off the walls. The stench of opius, a drug similar to opium, filled the room. She took in the other patrons and refused to shiver, to show fear. These miscreants would cut your throat, steal your money, and she thought, sliding her hand onto her holstered gun, fondle your weapon.

She followed Robbie as he stepped past a group of mercs. The three men, all human, made some perverted comments and grunts as she passed, but when they noticed the death look Hunter shot them, all of them went silent. Biting her lip to keep from smiling, she continued on, hoping that Robbie actually knew where he was going.

He approached the bartender. Mila tried to lean closer to hear their conversation, but the music and the murmur of conversation made it impossible. The bartender took the money Robbie offered and handed him a key.

Masters turned and faced them. He motioned to the back of the club with his head and started off in that direction. Mila looked at Hunter, who shrugged and waited for her to follow Robbie. As they continued back, the music began to irritate, her brain pounding in rhythm. By the time they reached the room, Mila was ready to scream. She wanted this over, and for the first time in a long time, she wanted to go home.

Robbie unlocked the door and stepped inside. As she walked past him, she sighed when she realized it was empty save for a few chairs and table. Once Hunter entered, the door slid shut and Robbie grabbed the file on the table. After slipping it into his reader, he frowned, an angry flush working up into his face.

“Fuck.”

“What’s wrong, Robbie?”

The door slid open to reveal Nikiraki. “What’s wrong is that your friend Robbie just realized he fucked up.”

Chapter Nine

Hunter cursed inwardly. He should have known. Studying Nikiraki, he realized that the years were gaining on the man. His black hair was now threaded with silver. Hunter knew the bastard regularly paid for laser surgery to keep his face unlined. But there was something in his gray eyes that told Hunter the man was on his last leg. Sweat beaded on Nikiraki's forehead, making his light skin appear clammy.

"So, the Agency's little game failed." His voice held the barest hint of his lower class London upbringing.

"Game?" Robbie asked.

The smile curving his lips had nothing to do with humor. "Yes. See, they know Mila has something I want. They thought to dangle her in front of me."

"I don't have anything you want." Mila said.

His gaze roamed over her. "I could argue with that, but it isn't all I'm interested in."

She shook her head. "Nikiraki, you've gone off the deep end. I have nothing for you."

"You know, I knew your father." She stilled, and Hunter wanted to kill the bastard. He was trying to play her, and apparently, he knew her weaknesses. "He was a pretty smart man. Not smart enough to win, but intelligent enough to play the game."

“This has to do with my father?”

He stepped into the room chuckling. “Yes.” His guards followed him. The door slid silently shut.

“Yes. Your father was a pain in the ass. And he had something I wanted. I thought, well, until recently that it had gone to his grave with him. Until the rumors began to circulate.”

She moved her hand to her weapon and panic chilled Hunter’s mind. If she tried to kill the bastard those two guards would kill her before she could even get the gun out of its holster.

“I wouldn’t try that, Ms. Simmons. In fact, maybe you and your two friends should hand over your weapons.”

Mila hesitated, then handed her gun over to one of the guards. Masters complied, as did Hunter, both of them handing over any visible weapons. Hunter was sure they’d be searched, but the guards stepped back, not once touching them. His uneasiness increased.

“Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Your father. Well, we had a few dealings.” His tongue shot out over his lips. “Let’s say I got to spend his last few moments with him.”

Hunter glanced at Mila. Her face paled, her fists curled, but nothing else showed her worry.

“He was a brave man, but then, he got caught fucking with me. And people who fuck with me, end up getting fucked.”

She cocked her head and said, “And why the hell do you think I care what a little piece of shit like you says?”

Nikiraki’s smile faded. “Really, my dear. Spending time with these two must have influenced you.”

She righted her head and then shook it. “No, I’m pretty sure that before I met either of them, I would have known you were a pissant.”

Anger flashed over the man's face and a flush of color rose from his neck. He glanced at Hunter. "A woman who spends her days with a bastard, letting him touch her, well, she has no taste, does she?"

"I think you're forgetting where you come from, Nikiraki," Hunter said, trying to keep his attention. "Or should I call you Nick?"

His eyes narrowed as he studied Hunter.

"Nick?" Masters asked.

"Yeah, see, what a lot of people don't know is that Nikiraki is actually Nick Roarke. Bastard by birth and in personality."

Nikiraki's nostrils flared and anger flashed in his eyes. "Yes, many people don't know about that, but you do. One of the things I always hated about you was the fact you knew my background."

Hunter smiled, glanced at Masters, then back at Nikiraki. "Yeah. Not many people know you're the son of a whore." Rage poured off Nikiraki, and Hunter decided to push him over the edge. "I wonder if she actually knew who your father was, or are you the son of one of her johns?"

Nikiraki took a step forward, which surprised Hunter. The man didn't do the dirty work, especially with someone who would kick his ass. He tended to only hurt those who couldn't hurt him. As Hunter watched, the bastard got hold of himself. He stepped back and ordered his guard to take care of Hunter with the flick of his hand.

The guard approached him, and Hunter smiled, thinking life sometimes was just too easy. The Simian raised Hunter's weapon and struck Hunter against the jaw. Pain exploded as he fell to the floor. Mila screamed out, but Hunter tried to ignore her distress as he shook his head trying to clear his vision. He reached down to the pocket in his pant leg and retrieved his weapon.

In the next moment, all hell broke loose. Hunter lifted his handgun and shot the fucker who'd hit him. Masters had been prepared. He pulled his weapon out and shot the other guard, who had been leveling his weapon on Hunter. Both of them turned to Mila and Nikiraki. Hunter's blood turned cold when he saw the bastard had Mila by the throat, her handgun against her temple.

"Ah, I see I have your attention." The smugness in Nikiraki's voice made Hunter want to beat the living hell out of him. "See, I could care less about you and pretty boy here. What I wanted was Mila Simmons and the information she holds."

Hunter couldn't look at Mila. If he saw any fear, any pain, he'd lose control.

"I told you I don't know what you're talking about."

Trying to look nonchalant, Hunter wiped away a smear of blood from his mouth. He hadn't realized he'd been bleeding, but guessed it'd happened when he was hit. Keeping his temper cooled and his feelings disengaged was the only thing that would save Mila. He couldn't let the fear clawing at his throat show. Nikiraki would know he had him.

"What is it that she has, Nick? Maybe we can make a deal."

"Hunter?" Masters asked. "Why would you want to deal with scum like Nikiraki?"

"We understand each other."

Nikiraki smiled, a slight curving of the lips that reminded Hunter of a mongoose who'd just scored some great leftover food.

"Yes, pretty boy." Nikiraki's hand twitched, drawing Hunter's attention to his hold on Mila's neck. His fingers tightened around her neck, digging into her flesh. "Hunter and I understand each other. What I want is a file."

"I don't have a file. I have nothing from my father on me." Her voice was thin, as if every word hurt, and it took all his control not to explode and go after the bastard.

"Ah, but you do my darling. Your father had pictures -- proof -- that I'd been involved in a little assignation a few years ago."

“If he did, I don’t know where it is.” Again, he could barely hear her over the beat of the music.

“I guessed that, Mila. See, about a week before your father met his maker, you had an orthodontist appointment.”

“Fuck, why the hell are we chatting about Mila’s teeth? Hunter, you can’t seriously be thinking of giving in to this bastard.”

He’s holding my whole world hostage. He didn’t say the words, because then, Nikiraki would know he had him. Right now, he just thought him a bastard, out for the money.

“There is no such thing as too much money, Masters. You should know that in your business.”

Nikiraki laughed. “I had thought you’d been, let’s say, attached to Ms. Simmons.”

Hunter smiled, although it hurt like a motherfucker to act so cool while wanted to beat the son of a bitch to a bloody pulp.

“Attached?” He shook his head. “No. She’s a good fuck, but she’s not that good.”

And he prayed she would forgive him for his harsh words, when it was all said and done.

“Really?” Nikiraki said. The interest in his voice curdled Hunter’s stomach. “I had no idea such a Miss Priss would be good. Maybe I’ll keep her around for a while.”

Fuck. He should have seen that one coming. “And have the Agency on your ass? You know my father will pull out all the stops looking for her to make his woman happy.”

It was then that they heard shouts out in the bar, gunfire, the sound of scattering patrons. The music stopped abruptly. At least the Agency was predictable.

A grim smile curved his lips now that he knew they had Nikiraki.

“What the fuck is all that?”

“That,” said Masters, “is the Agency making sure they get you and the information in the same spot. The information wasn’t going to do them any good without you, and vice versa. Bastards.”

Hunter felt the same hatred of all the games the Agency played, but he would worry about that later. He had to make sure that Mila made it out alive. Experience told him the Agency wouldn’t worry about that unless keeping her alive was needed for the information.

A banging on the door made Nikiraki jump, his hand convulsing on Mila’s neck. It was then that Hunter looked at her. The understanding he saw in her eyes warmed him. She knew the game and would play it.

“I have what they need, including two of their agents.”

Hunter glanced at Robbie, who looked startled, then back to Mila and Nikiraki. “No, you have three. Well, two agents and a courier. See, the Agency knew she had something, probably not when they hired her, but they figured it out somewhere and plotted against you. And you walked right into their trap, you stupid bastard.”

Nikiraki pulled the weapon away from Mila’s temple and aimed it at Hunter’s chest. Mila pulled up her arm and shoved her elbow back into Nikiraki’s stomach. He immediately released her. As she drew in a deep breath, she turned on the bastard and kned him in the face. Nikiraki fell back, screaming. Blood spurted out of his nose, and he dropped his gun. She bent over to retrieve it and leveled it at him,

“I don’t like anyone touching my fucking weapon, you bastard.” Her voice was just above a whisper, hoarse from Nikiraki’s abuse.

Hunter walked to her and drew her into his arms. Masters hurried over to the keypad and started to work on unjamming the door lock. When Hunter pulled away and cupped her face, every ounce of the fear he’d felt rushed forward.

“Oh, God, Mila, I’m so sorry, love.”

He bent his head to kiss her just as he heard the sound of metal scraping. Both of them looked at Nikiraki as he pulled up a small handgun and aimed it at them, directly at Hunter's chest. As he fired, Mila shifted her feet, putting herself in front of his heart. The gunshot propelled her backward into his chest. He grabbed her to keep her from falling as he aimed his weapon at Nikiraki and fired. He hit the bastard in the shoulder, causing him to drop his weapon.

A split second later, another shot rang out from Masters, clipping the bastard in the thigh. As Nikiraki sank to the ground, howling, the door opened to reveal agents. A woman with dark hair and a grim face started barking orders to everyone as Hunter fell to his knees, pulling Mila against him.

He felt her for her pulse and breathed easier when he felt it beating strongly. He cradled her against his chest.

"Hunter, I can't breathe," Mila said, her voice muffled and sounding a bit amused.

Relaxing his grip, he looked down into her face, and a wave of fear swept through him when he saw how pale she was. The activity around them, people shouting, Nikiraki screaming like a girl, orders for a medic, all faded as he studied her face. Pain glazed her eyes.

"Don't look like that. I'm not going to die. Not until I beat the hell out of you." She still sounded like a foghorn, but she did sound a bit stronger.

"Beat the hell out of me? What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"A good fuck? A good fuck?" Her voice gained strength with her irritation. "You, jackass. You deserve a good swift kick in the ass for that one."

"Mila, I didn't mean it. You know I didn't."

"Of course I do, you jackass."

"Quit calling me jackass."

"Bite me."

"If you two lovebirds want to stop for just a moment, the medics finally showed."

Hunter didn't want to let her go, but knew he had to. A medic knelt down beside her and smiled.

"I'm going to have to put you under for this."

She nodded as he pulled out the needle. Within seconds her grip on Hunter's hand relaxed, and the pain seemed to fade from her eyes.

"Hunter?"

He leaned closer, and she said to him, just loud enough for him to hear over the clamor around them, "I love you, jackass." She chuckled; then her breathing deepened and evened, telling him the drug had worked.

He pulled himself to his feet and looked down as the medic did a quick fix-it job on her, stopping the bleeding. He noticed the blood on his boots and realized she'd bled heavily, and his worry increased tenfold. As they got her on the stretcher, he noticed Robbie arguing with the woman who seemed to head everything up.

"I didn't know what the hell was going on, Robbie. If they didn't tell you, they definitely weren't going to tell me."

"Really? You're the one who sent her."

"I know, but they didn't tell me until I got here what it was all about, and that was about two hours ago. You weren't answering your earpiece. What was I supposed to do?"

Robbie took a step closer to the woman. "Harris, if something happens to her, I'll hold you responsible."

"Wrong," Hunter said, his angry voice causing everyone but the medics to look at him. He stepped over one guard to make his way to Masters and the woman he presumed was Agent Harris. "I'll hold you all responsible, including you, Masters. The Agency and all their bloody games can go to hell. If you think I don't have connections to make your life hell, and that means all your superiors as well, think again. I may be a bastard, but I'm the bastard of a very powerful man."

He watched grim acceptance wash over Masters's face, and Agent Harris nodded, even as she paled. He wanted to take them down and hurt them as much as Mila had been hurt. All of this would have worked better, faster, no injuries, if the Agency had just told them what the hell was going on.

Before he could continue, the medic said, "We're losing her, dammit. Get the heart regenerator going."

Chapter Ten

Mila woke to pain. Hot, searing, mind-numbing pain, radiating from her shoulder. She didn't want to be there; she didn't want to feel it. Her stomach roiled. She swallowed, trying to control the bile rising in her throat. Even as she did, the pain seemed to increase, shooting through her. Her mind raced away from the pain, pulling her back from it, trying to protect her, but there was an insistent voice.

"Mila, love, wake up."

She opened her eyes and bright light burned them. Immediately, she shut them.

"No. Love, you have to wake up."

She shook her head even as her heart warmed when she recognized Hunter's voice.

"The doctor wants to have a look at you."

A strict female voice sounded from a little further away. "Mr. Hunter, I told you this would be better if you would wait outside."

"And I told you to fuck off, doc."

She smiled, something she was sure just a few minutes ago she'd not be able to do. Without opening her eyes she said, "Hunter, I'm fine. Let the doctor take care of me and then you can come back."

He seemed to hesitate, then he leaned down and brushed his lips against her forehead. "I'll be right outside the door."

"You're a very lucky woman, Ms. Simmons," the doctor said as she began to run her tests.

Mila snorted. "Yeah, I bet you say that to all your gunshot victims."

* * * * *

Masters watched Hunter pace the corridor, as he had for the last day and a half. He'd told the pretty boy to leave, but Masters just kept hanging around.

"Hunter, they told you she was going to pull through."

He ignored him as he had before. Hunter was itching for a fight, still angered by the impotence he'd felt in those moments when Mila wasn't breathing and by his inability to punish anyone for it. He didn't want to take it out on Masters as he had done before.

And the worst part of it was that it had been his fault. Instead of reassuring himself that Mila was okay, he should have been detaining Nikiraki and searching him for weapons. His failure had almost killed her.

He stopped pacing and closed his eyes. Remorse, fury, and pain twisted together and washed through him. He'd proven in that moment he wasn't good enough for her. Knowing what was coming next, what he had to do, was going to tear him apart. It would hurt her and in doing that, Hunter wasn't sure he'd survive with his sanity intact.

"I know you're blaming yourself, Hunter. But you can't. Both of us are at fault. None of it would have happened this way if the Agency hadn't handled it the way they did. Hopefully, it will bring out some of the problems, make sure things get cleaned up."

He opened his eyes and shot Masters a dirty look. "I'm sure Mila is happy to be of service."

“Hey, if you want to fault someone, fault her father. What he was thinking when he had that file stored in her filling is beyond me. He started this fucking chain of events.”

Hunter wanted to argue with him -- that and rip Masters’s arms out of their sockets and beat him on the head with them -- but knew it was his own failure that was urging him to do it. He knew he’d screwed it all up, proving in those moments that he wasn’t the man for Mila.

The door slid open, and the doctor, a diminutive woman of about forty who commanded her floor like a storm trooper, stepped out into the hall. Her gaze immediately zeroed in on Hunter, and she approached him. The frown she was sporting would have had him worried if he didn’t already know she hated him. He’d made her life a living hell the past two days.

“Mr. Hunter. I am pleased to tell you that Ms. Simmons is doing just fine, and there is no worry she will pull through. The loss of blood was bothersome, but we had no trouble replacing it with the synthetic. Her body didn’t seem to have a problem with it. So many times there are people who reject it, but she seems to be doing fine. Now, you can go in there, but I warn you, don’t tire her out.”

She looked over his shoulder at Masters. “Both of you look like shit. You need a good shower, food, and a change of clothes.” With that, she turned on her heel and headed down the corridor, sending interns and nurse’s aides running for cover.

“She’s one scary woman, Hunter.”

For the first time in over thirty-six hours, Hunter smiled. “But she’s the best there is.” As fast as the smile appeared, it faded as he realized the task he had ahead of him. His father and Mila’s mother would be here any moment, and he knew they would take over her care, see her back to Earth.

Without another word to Masters, Hunter went to her door and entered Mila’s room.

Her eyes were closed. She was still too pale for his liking, but the doctor told them that was common for the first couple of weeks after a transfusion with synthetics. It made the bruises on her neck stand out even more.

“I know you’re going to yell at me, Hunter. I just don’t have the energy to listen to you.”

He would’ve smiled, but knew he’d break if he did. “Well, I guess that put me in my place.”

She smiled, then opened her eyes slightly. He approached the bed knowing what he had to do; the pain he would cause her would be more acceptable if he didn’t hide in the corner.

He sat in the chair next to her, although he knew she wanted him closer. If he were closer, he’d never be able to do the right thing. She looked so small on that bed, her red hair a tangle of curls against the white pillow. The occasional beep from a monitor sounded in the room. The scent of flowers and medicine intertwined, causing his stomach to roll over.

“Your mother and my father should be here soon.”

“How did my mom handle it?” She closed her eyes, as if the effort to keep them open was too much.

Not being able to resist, he reached out for her hand, but instead, took a few strands of her hair. “She was upset at first, but once my father reassured her all was well, she was a little bit miffed. In fact, don’t be surprised if she gives you a piece of her mind.”

A small smile curved her lips. “My father was the diplomat. I look like him, but I act like her.”

He chuckled, even though it hurt. “Does my father know about that?”

“I expect your father knows about more than you know. He’s not a stupid man.”

Her smile faded and she opened her eyes. “What is it you’re avoiding, Hunter?”

He dropped her hair and looked at her. "Since they should be here within an hour, I'll be leaving today."

She didn't say anything, only stared at him. He thought she might get mad, yell, curse, maybe cry, but he hadn't expected silence.

"Ah, I can see you're trying to work it out." Indifference sounded in her voice, almost as if she were bored.

Anger at the situation, at her, burned in his gut. "What the bloody hell do you mean by that?"

"You expected a scene."

He hated that she could read him so well.

"No, I didn't."

"Yes. You did. I may be a pain in the ass, but I'm not stupid, Hunter. You're leaving for good."

He wanted to curse at her, yell at her for acting like an unemotional twit. But he clenched his jaw.

"You definitely make it easy on a man."

"Yeah, I guess it would be easy if there was a man in the room."

He narrowed his eyes. "Watch yourself."

"What are you going to do? Shoot me? Oh, sorry, too late." Sarcasm threaded her words. "Listen, Hunter, go. Don't feel guilty about being a coward."

"I'm not a coward."

"You are. And you have one thing wrong. I'm not easy on a man. You're going to regret this, tomorrow, next week, next year, but I'm not going to fight it. You want to be self-destructive? Go right ahead. I don't have the time or the energy to waste on you."

He stood and turned to leave.

“Before you leave, Hunter, just remember, you had this chance, and you fucked it up.”

Before punching the button to open the door, he paused, looked over his shoulder and said, “If you think I don’t know that, you aren’t as smart as I thought you were.”

Hunter opened the door and stepped into the corridor, resisting the urge to run back through the doorway and beg her forgiveness. Hollow pain shifted through him as the door slid shut. Masters sat in the same chair Hunter had left him in. He searched Hunter’s face for a second, then gave him a resigned look, telling Hunter that Masters knew what he’d just done. Before he could say anything, Hunter heard a shout down the hall.

Turning, he saw his father striding toward them, trying to keep up with a small woman. Before he could react, she threw herself into his arms and began crying.

“Tell me she’s okay.”

He studied the bent head of the woman who, despite her size, had almost pushed him over when she jumped at him. Threads of silver intermingled in the blonde hair that she’d had pulled back into a simple chignon. Bewildered, he looked up at his father. “John, meet Janet, Mila’s mother.”

Her arms tightened around his waist, and he patted her back awkwardly. “She’s fine, Ms. Simmons.”

She pulled her head back and stared up at him. Tears welled in her eyes. Red nose, dark circles under her eyes, and her fearful look didn’t diminish the beauty of Janet Simmons. She gave him a small smile. “Call me Janet.” She sniffled. “Thank you. She’s all I have left.”

“What am I?” his father asked.

She stepped away from Hunter and went into his father’s arms. “You’re my love. She’s my baby.”

Hunter’s father looked at him, his gaze never leaving his face. “I know exactly what you mean.

Uncomfortable, he shifted from one foot to the other. “This is Robbie Masters. He was there with me, helped get us out of the situation.”

“Someone is going to pay for putting our babies at risk, right, Franklin?” Janet’s voice had gone from tearful to bloodthirsty in a second. “I want someone’s head.”

“Oh, my God, you *are* like Mila.”

She smiled, then dissolved into another fit of tears.

Patting her shoulder, his father bent his head and murmured something too low for anyone else to hear. She nodded.

“I’ll be back in a moment, gentleman.”

She turned to leave, stopped, hugged Hunter again, then hurried down the hall.

“Wow, she’s got to be a lot of work, sir.” Masters made that observation as he watched Janet scurry away.

His father smiled. “Worth it all, my dear boy. Now, Hunter, tell me how’s she doing?”

“Awake and alert. She lost some blood, but she’s going to pull through, no problem. And she might just be pissed as hell.”

“At you?”

Hunter nodded and his father sighed.

“I won’t pry.”

“That’ll be a first.”

“But I will say that Janet might hurt you if she knew.”

“Don’t worry, I was on my way out the door.”

Pain washed over his father’s face, then dissolved, replaced by the diplomatic smile. And for the first time ever, he felt like the bastard he was for causing his father any harm.

To escape he said, “I’m heading back to Earth tonight to tie up some loose ends.”

Franklin nodded. “Thank you, John. I appreciate it and so does Janet. And ... I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Just make sure she’s taken care of.”

He strode down the hall without looking back and decided, before anything else, he would get shit-faced drunk. Robbie caught up, took one look at him and said, “I know a great bar.”

* * * * *

After Hunter left her, Mila was sure she’d fall apart and start crying, but she didn’t. She figured she was too numb. Everything that had happened had really been almost too much. She had no idea of the amount of drugs in her system, so that might have had something to do with it.

Truth be told, she was angry, not sad. Not really. How could he just walk away? Jackass.

But, the moment the door opened, revealing Franklin and her mother, she couldn’t stop the tears. Her mother rushed to her bed and bent to hug her. It took all her strength to lift her arm and return the hug, but Mila did it. Lily of the valley surrounded her; the familiar scent was the one she always associated with her mother. She breathed it in and more tears spilled over and coursed down her cheeks.

“Oh, mama, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Baby, tell me you’re okay.”

Her mother pulled back and wiped the tears from Mila’s cheeks.

“I’m fine. I’ll need some physical therapy and will have a nifty scar, but I’m fine.”

Janet sighed, as if she’d been holding her breath until that moment. Then, the benevolent mother disappeared, replaced by the mother of her childhood.

“Just what the hell were you thinking, Mila Simmons?”

She heard Franklin chuckle. Glancing over her mother's shoulder, she smiled at Hunter's father and was struck by just how alike they were. No, with his cool, aristocratic looks, slim build, he didn't look much like his son, save for those black eyes. But, their smiles -- they had the same smile.

"Hello, Franklin."

He nodded in her direction. "Hello, Mila."

"Don't try to distract me, Mila Louise Simmons." Her mother's stern voice made her frown.

"You know you're in trouble when she uses all three names," Franklin quipped. Janet shot him a look over her shoulder that had him stepping back. "I'll get you something to drink, love. Good luck, Mila."

Once they were alone, her mother kept staring at her, so she gave up. "I wasn't thinking, okay?"

"You know, I get blamed for your personality. Your father used to say that you were wild just like me. That you said exactly what you felt like saying, didn't matter who was in the room."

"Did you know about Daddy?"

Her mother frowned. "No. It's bad enough that he actually had a double life I didn't know about, the sneaky ass, but to do what he did to you, putting my baby in jeopardy ... If he wasn't already dead, I'd strangle him."

Mila couldn't help the bubble of laughter that escaped. Her mother looked at her, surprise lighting the features of her face, then joined in.

"You're father was a piece of work. Sneaky. But worth every headache he gave me. Franklin reminds me of him."

Mila nodded and then dissolved into sobs. Janet rushed forward, sitting on the bed next to Mila and taking her in her arms.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it.”

“No. Daddy deserved it. I just ... it’s been a long few days.”

“You’re telling me. It’s John.” Her mother didn’t ask. There was one person who knew her better than anyone, and it was Janet Simmons. It was because they were two peas in a pod.

“Yes.”

“I can go hurt him.”

Mila chuckled. “No. I would hate it if you made him cry.”

Janet stroked Mila’s hair. For a few minutes, Mila accepted the comfort her mother always offered without hesitation.

“I love you, mama.”

Her mother kissed the top of her head, then settled her cheek there. “So, tell me, what did John do?”

“He thinks he isn’t good enough. That what happened was his fault, but that’s not really it. He’s using that as an excuse. He’s a coward because I told him I loved him.” She tried to be brave and not cry, but the catch in her throat and her mother’s soothing voice caused everything to surface ... and shred her heart again. “He threw it all away, just like that.”

“Oh, baby.” A wealth of understanding sounded in her mother’s voice. Even as Mila’s heart ached, the warmth of her mother’s love crept in, helped her accept. “Men are jackasses.”

She sniffled and said as she drifted to sleep, her head on her mother’s shoulder, “Yeah, men are jackasses.”

Chapter Eleven

Two months later.

“I’m not sure if I’m in the mood to help the Agency or you, either, Robbie,” Mila said, as she studied him over her morning cup of coffee. He’d shown up about ten minutes ago, begging for her help on some kind of undercover thing.

“You won’t be doing much. I just need someone who can handle herself to play my woman.”

She snorted. “It isn’t a part I want. Been there. Done that.”

His eyes narrowed. She’d rather have that mean look than the concern she’d seen every day for the past two months.

“Not really. Just ... I need a woman people would expect me to be with. You would be that. But not many women who look like you do can handle themselves.”

She studied him, trying to ferret out any hint of another reason, but saw nothing. “I’m not sure I can handle it, Robbie. My shoulder is still tight.”

“Mila.”

She grinned. “Okay, but you tell my mother. She’s not going to be happy.”

“Tell her it’s a vacation.”

“Not going to work.”

He shoved a hand through his hair impatiently. An action that was completely out of character for Robbie.

“We’ll figure something out.”

After he left, she tried to figure out his cryptic comment. There was something else going on here, something he was doing that she didn’t know about. It made her uneasy, although she knew he’d never do anything to hurt her on purpose. The report on the mess put the blame at the Agency’s feet, and several supervisors had been relieved of their duty. Dangling the soon-to-be stepdaughter of Lord Westing like a carrot to catch Nikiraki didn’t set well with the government.

The work would at least get her mind off Hunter. She didn’t expect him to show, but that didn’t stop her from looking for him everywhere. Every day it was getting easier to deal with the pain. It didn’t make her any happier. She’d used her hurt, her anger, to work through her recovery. The physical therapy had damn near killed her, and she’d used her rage against Hunter to spur her on. She wouldn’t sit around feeling sorry for herself. She’d show him just what she was made out of.

At some point, she just hoped the pain she felt each time she woke and didn’t find him in bed beside her would fade.

* * * * *

Hunter growled when he heard the knock at his door. He wanted to be left alone. In the past two months, more people than he thought he knew stopped by to bug him. Supervisors from the Agency begging for him to return had been in the first group. He refused. They kept calling.

Next had been Sterling, who had cigars in celebration of the baby girl Saint and Libby had. Yes, he was glad everything turned out fine, and yes, he thought Maribeth was a beautiful name, but it didn't mean he wanted to fucking talk about it.

No sooner had he left than Masters had shown up. All he could talk about was Mila, her recovery, and if the pretty boy hadn't brought the fine brandy he'd offered, Hunter would have kicked him out. Instead, they got shit-faced drunk again, as they did the night he left Mila.

Cursing, he walked to the door. Cursed again when he looked through the peephole and saw his father.

He opened the door and shot his father a nasty look. Without saying anything, he turned and walked back to his kitchen. The sound of the door shutting told him that Franklin wasn't put off by his chilly reception.

"Christ, John. You're a wealthy man. Why do you live in the sticks in a shack?"

He heard the humor in his father's voice, but ignored it.

"Because I don't like people. Living here makes sure anyone who comes to see me really wants to see me."

His father just smiled at him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was ordered here." Without invitation, he went to Hunter's refrigeration unit and started looking for something to eat. "Don't you keep anything unhealthy?"

He grunted, picking up his green tea and sipping it slowly.

His father pulled out a jujuapple and shut the door. Biting into it, he chewed noisily for a few moments. Since his father seemed to be waiting, he took the bait, figuring it would get him out of the house faster.

"Who ordered you here?"

“It was killing you, wasn’t it?” He took another bite, munched, then said, “Your future stepmama ordered me here.”

“Why is that?”

“First, I want to talk about other things.”

“If you mean my mother, she’s off limits.”

“Then go away, because I am going to talk about her.” He sighed and finished off his fruit, throwing the core in the sink. “You know I fell in love with her the moment I saw her. She was shopping at Harrod’s, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was so happy, so jubilant.”

“And when things got nasty, you split.”

“No. I assumed she told you that. Until now, I wanted to let you believe that, because I loved her.”

Hunter didn’t want to hear this, hear his father wax on about a woman he wouldn’t marry, even when she found herself pregnant. He didn’t want to accept anything except what his mother had told him. But he realized with each passing year, that his mother had had problems.

“I can see you don’t believe me. But I did. Christine was so wonderful. She made me think I could do more with my life. Then she found out she was pregnant. I wanted to marry. I know she told you differently, but I did. Her background didn’t matter, and the things I wanted to do, that I did do, had less to do with my title and more with my quest in the scientific field.”

“And she turned you down?”

“Yes. When I insisted, tried to force the issue, she threatened to disappear with you. I couldn’t have that, and thought maybe after you were born, her erratic behavior would improve. The ups and downs while she was pregnant were ... scary.”

Apparently needing to do something with his hands, Franklin went to the microstove and ordered up some green tea for himself.

“She did improve. For a few years. I wanted her to take medication. She wouldn’t.”

“Mum didn’t trust it.”

Franklin chuckled. “Yes, she told me that more than once.” The bell dinged and he retrieved his tea, then took the stool opposite Hunter. “So I did what I thought would be best and played along. I had no idea how bad it had gotten until you’d left for school.”

The memories of his adolescence came rushing back at him. Her mood swings -- happy one day, near suicidal the next. When he left for college two years early, thanks to his quick mind, he hadn’t thought about learning -- just escape.

“When she committed ...” Franklin’s voice faltered, and he took a sip of tea. “When she was gone, you were so angry. You didn’t want to see my side, and I didn’t want you to think ill of Chris. I loved her.”

Looking at the man he’d despised most of his life, Hunter realized that what he’d said was true.

“I often wondered why you didn’t marry.”

“I couldn’t. I thought I’d failed, that there should have been something I could have done, something I could have said that would have saved Chris from herself. In the end, I couldn’t. It wasn’t until I met Janet that I started to think it might be possible to fall in love again.” His voice lightened. “Well, truthfully, she wouldn’t leave me alone. Showed up at work on loan from the U.S. government and told me to quit acting like a bloody stick-in-the-mud.”

Hunter chuckled. “Mila’s right. They are a lot alike.”

His father sobered and studied him for a second. “And we’re a lot alike. I know that you left Mila because you think it best.”

“I let her down.”

“You told her to be a courier, to ignore your warnings to return to Earth, to jump in front of you?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Mila.”

Still, two months later, the shaft of pain that had ripped into his chest when he left her, oozed. “She thinks she bloody knows everything.”

“Yes. But in this case, she’s right.”

Hunter frowned. “No, she’s not.”

“I was ordered here by Janet.”

It took a minute for Hunter to catch the switch in topics. “You let a woman tell you what to do?”

“Like you said, the two of them are a lot alike.”

“And why did she order you here?”

“Mila is going on another assignment and won’t listen to either of us.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Exactly. And Masters is on my list of people to visit. I can’t believe he convinced her to go undercover.”

“I’ll kill the bastard.” He was up and moving to his bedroom to pack. “Have they left?”

“No. We have another day to get back.”

Blind rage and fear made it hard to remember just what he threw in to take with him before he shut the case. He grabbed a weapon and joined his father in the entryway.

“Janet and I really appreciate this, John.”

“You’re going to owe me big, Franklin.”

As he headed out the door, he didn't even try to guess at the strange smile on his father's face. He concentrated on exactly what he'd do once he cornered Mila. Bloody hell, he didn't go through all this pain just for her to screw it all up.

And he would make damn sure she knew it.

* * * * *

Mila heard her doorbell and rolled her eyes. Robbie was over an hour late. When she opened the door, though, she found Hunter standing there, a dark expression on his face. Before she could close the door, he stepped through the doorway and stalked her.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm here because my father was ordered -- yes, ordered by your mother -- to come get me. Seems they're a little upset because you're going on assignment with Masters. Who, when I find him, is going to have a conversation with my fist."

She stared at him, her mind still trying to come to terms with the emotions racing through her. Anger, pain, and jubilation. It was a confusing mix. He looked tired, and he looked beautiful, damn him.

"My mother doesn't know about this. Robbie said he'd take care of it."

Hunter snorted and stepped closer. She hurried around the other side of her breakfast table.

"Once again, Masters strikes. He didn't. You're mother got a whiff of it, and because my father can't say no to her, he came and told me what was going on."

"It's none of your business."

"It bloody well is my business, woman." He fairly shouted that comment out.

"You gave up that right." She embarrassed herself when her voice hitched on the last word.

“Oh, love.” Hunter’s features softened, and he came around the table. She inched away, but not fast enough. He grabbed her arm and pulled her against his chest.

“Let me go,” she said, without much conviction, as she struggled against him. It was hard to be convincing when it felt so good to be held against him, allowing his body to warm her.

“Shhh.” He stroked her hair and settled his chin on her head. “I’m a jackass.”

She didn’t respond, couldn’t. The tenderness she heard in his voice, the plea, was her undoing. She began to cry.

“I don’t know what to say. I thought I was willing to give you up, but ... I can’t.”

She pulled away and looked at him. The pain she saw mirrored in his eyes warmed her as much as it angered her.

“You were going to give me up?”

“I thought it best.”

“Who died and made you the emperor?”

He frowned and opened his mouth to argue, but nothing came out. Fear flitted over his face and he drew in a deep breath.

“I couldn’t take it, okay?” He shouted the words as he paced away from her. “All I could see was that bastard with his hands on your neck and you fucking dangling there. And then, you jumped in front of me ...”

He paced back to her, leaned down toward her. “You will not go on another assignment, and I’ll make sure of it.”

She would have been mad and yelled back, but joy burst through her at his ranting. The ice that had encased her heart melted as love for the jackass warmed her.

“And what makes you think you’ll have that right?”

“Because I love you, dammit. And that’s that.”

There was a second of stunned silence, then she giggled. His eyes narrowed.

“I love you, too.”

He straightened away from her, said something under his breath about pain-in-the-ass women, then grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him.

“Hunter!”

He entered her bedroom. He picked her up and tossed her onto the bed, and before she could respond, he was covering her body with his.

She was going to argue with his tactics, when he took her mouth in a bruising, mind-spinning, luscious kiss. By the time he pulled away, both of them were breathing heavily.

“Now, Mila. Let’s get some things straight. You do a job, I go with you. Not Robbie.”

“I’m not sure.” And before she could stop it, another dash of tears blurred her vision. “You have to promise not to hurt me again. Because I thought I was going to die when you left.”

As one tear rolled down her cheek, he bent his head and licked it. “Oh, love, you were right. I couldn’t handle seeing you in pain. I wanted you safe. I thought if I left, if I disappeared, it would be easier. But it wasn’t. I couldn’t drink you away. Haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in two months.”

She smiled. “Good. I hate to think I’ve been suffering alone.”

He returned her smile. “I love you, Mila.”

“I love you, too, Hunter. Even if you are a jackass.”

He chuckled. “Now, how about I make that up to you?” he asked as he started sliding down her body, undoing clothing as he went. His lips moved over her skin, her body responded -- pleasure winding through her, heating her blood. Love and lust entwined and warmed her soul as she felt his teeth nip at her inner thigh. “I think you deserve to be treated very well.”

As he pressed his mouth against her sex, she sighed and said, “You do have a certain way about you.”

 THE END 

Melissa Schroeder

Born to an Air Force family at an Army hospital, Melissa has always been a little screwy. She was further warped by her years of watching Monty Python movies and her strange family.

From the time she read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the seventh grade, she dreamed of being a writer. After years of struggling, trying to write short stories filled with angst, she finally listened to her college writing instructor, and allowed her natural comedic voice to shine through. She counts Jayne Ann Krentz, Jenny Crusie, Stephanie Laurens, Julia Quinn, and Lori Foster as influences in her writing.

She is a military wife and mother to two military brats and an adopted dog daughter, and lives wherever the military sticks them. Which, she is sure, will involve heat and bugs only seen on the Animal Discovery Channel. In her spare time, she reads, cooks, reads, travels, reads some more, and dreams of living somewhere the bugs die in the winter.

She LOVES hearing from her readers. Visit Melissa on the Internet at <http://www.authormelissaschroeder.com>.