

ELLORA'S CAVE AEON

THE HUSSIES
CASSIOPEIA

NATHALIE GRAY

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Cassiopeia

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Prologue

Myth, magic or legend? There have been Hussies since before time was measured in days and minutes. Women who fought bravely alongside their mates with sword and axe, warriors whose courage changed the world around them. Led by the first Hussy, Danu, these fierce fighters discovered their inner strengths, summoned reserves they didn't know they possessed and passed into the fabric of legend with their daring exploits.

Since that time, myths have been spun around the Hussy Warriors—tales told by firelight, whispered from mother to daughter—eventually to take their place amongst the mystical fables that shape our souls.

But the essence of a Hussy remains strong in the hearts of so many women. Heroines who don't realize that within them lies the power to make a difference, to effect change, to use their passion every bit as skillfully as Danu wielded her sword so long ago. Warriors in different times and different places, who love as deeply and desire as desperately as any woman ever has, seldom knowing that their desire will impact not just one man, but so much more.

Therein lies the magic of a Hussy. To right a wrong, turn a frown to a smile—to positively change those around her. To love a man with every fiber of her body, to learn from that love and to grow stronger because of it.

Whether in the past, the future or the here-and-now, there are Hussies around each corner. They may not even be aware of their Hussy destiny. But one thing is certain—when passion knocks on their door, lives will change for the better. And when it comes to their one special hero? Well, he's in for the ride of his life.

Which leaves one unanswered question...are *you* a Hussy?

Chapter One

Alarms buzzed like swarms of insects. She ignored them just as she did the array of blinking lights telling her to either slow down or risk losing the ship and its intelligence data. To her right, the nav console on the clunky old cruiser winked a few times as if trying to warn her contact was imminent, giving her a few precious seconds to lock her elbows, dig in her heels and brace for impact. Because if the little ship could do something better than any other spacecraft throughout Cassiopeia System, it was landing on a token. And land it did. Hard.

“Cassiopeia Station, this is the *Lazarus*,” she sub-voiced in the comms unit strapped to her throat. Unlike other pilots, she hadn’t installed any hands-free receivers—plus, she didn’t have the kind of money to retrofit the ship’s entire electrical grid—and still relied on actual microphones and ear buds to communicate. Obsolete technology for an old-fashioned gal. But still worked like a charm. “I’m powering down.”

In the viewscreen above her, a scowling man’s face appeared in shades of green and blue. Static from the asteroid belt she’d just cleared still messed transmissions, the main reason communication in these parts had to be done “in person” via uploads and not remote over the links. “Can’t you wait for clearance like the rest of the couriers out there?”

She offered him her notorious lopsided grin, which she’d perfected over the years. Part of the carapace she’d built around herself to project only Jackie Clark, the cool, tough courier pilot, while she kept the mellow and jovial Jacqueline private. “The rest of the couriers aren’t up to my standards, now are they, Tower?”

Her demanding standards were what kept her above the competition. They also made it possible for her to fulfill the many professional, financial and familial obligations with which she constantly juggled.

He shook his head but smiled. A grumpy old bear. “Yeah, yeah, that’s what you young pups all say. Meanwhile, it’s Tower who makes sure you don’t crash into each other.”

She winked at him. “And that’s why we all love you so damn much.”

“I bet you say that to all the Towers out there.”

“What Towers out there?” she replied, cocking her head. “Are there any others out there? You know you’re the only one in my heart.”

“Just transmit the damn data, would you, and stop tormenting an old man.”

She grinned, kissed the air. “Standby for data upload.”

The station controller rolled his eyes then reached for something below the viewscreen on his end. “Upload links open. Transmit when ready.”

“I love you.”

Tower’s belly laugh was the last thing she heard as Jackie flicked the comms off then uploaded the data for which she’d risked life and limb. Again. She’d run the lucrative route for years, couriating data to and from Cassiopeia Station—through the deadly asteroid belt—and its various outposts, kept the channels open, the info flowing, because in the dead of space, intel was everything. It meant life or death on certain faraway outposts. She should know. Her parents, who used to run a shuttle service, had become trapped on an outpost when a killer flu outbreak had decimated its population, forcing authorities to seal the airspace. None of the relief runs had arrived on time. They’d both become sick, had never really recovered, lost the business, everything. She’d had to quit her job to be near them. Now six years after and with both of them in a comfortable sanitarium, she was still paying the medical bills. The least she could do.

She hadn’t picked up the shuttle business. No money in it. And with both parents under her care, she needed every single credit. Since remote communication was quasi impossible in these parts because of interference, business was booming. Jackie, with her fleet of one ship, the lightweight class *Lazarus*—moniker given by the station’s mechanics for her ship’s propensity to rise from the dead—had made it her job to

deliver the data on time, every time. No cosmic storm or solar flares would keep her on the ground. She'd flown when no one else had, taken assignments no one else could and made a name for herself as one of the few couriers who got the job done. Not bad for a thirty-four-year-old who'd started her company with nothing more than willpower and little collateral for a loan. No one could match her now. Well, except for one other courier.

Jackie closed her eyes for the sheer pleasure of visualizing him. Had she not been up to her eyeballs in bills and responsibility, she would've enjoyed taking a sip of *that* drink.

Terrence "Ty" Weller.

Former colleagues, they'd both started out working for one of the large station conglomerates, spent years brushing elbows and sitting in each other's still-warm seats when switching runs. But if he'd always made her engines rev in every sense of the word, she'd never acted on it. No time for relationships, no energy for anything else but her job and her parents. She didn't want to add another pin to her juggling act. Plus, he wasn't her type. She liked her boyfriends a bit more docile, safer. Ty was anything *but*. She'd never forgotten him though. No way, no sir. It was that voice...

When the data upload terminated, she switched main power off, stretched her tired frame—that'd been one bumpy ride, even by her standards—then stood to get circulation back in her swollen feet. No time to get DVT syndrome. She made a point to exercise as often as she could between runs, not only because gravity was starting to clutch at her butt a bit too firmly, but also to maintain the outward manifestation of the take-no-bull woman. She couldn't very well let her competitors see the softer side of her personality lest they take advantage. Couriering was a dog-eat-dog business. She couldn't afford to lose her reputation, which generated a good portion of the contracts.

As if *Lazarus* meant to remind her he needed parts and a little TLC, steam hissed out of a recently repaired pipe right above her head. Duct tape peeled from the exposed crack.

"I know, babe, I know," she murmured with a pat to the pipe, making a mental note to get to it as soon as the credits were transferred in, which shouldn't take too long with her current client, who always paid well and on time. She'd also need to send some forms back to the sanitarium for added features to her folks' place—another two hundred credits a month right there—then close the books for the fiscal year, revise her budget, remind the dock authorities to update their database—because they *still* had *Lazarus* as medium-class—grab some real food. Maybe try to squeeze a date in edgewise. Ha.

She hadn't taken another step when the comms bleeped at her. The gym would have to wait.

Adrenaline spiked as she rushed back to her seat and turned main power then the viewscreen back on. A face she knew well appeared, distorted by static, straightened. Her best client, architect to the rich and demented—Raymond H. Hillier. He was smiling. Good.

"Jack," he said, his accent still a mystery to her. Something like French but less clipped. Belgian? What did Belgians speak anyway? When he said it, her name sounded like *Jawk*. "Did you just arrive?"

"I did. To what do I owe the pleasure of your fine self in my viewscreen?"

Ray laughed. "Always so smooth. I have a run that requires your expert handling. And this one will pay about two point six, if you are interested."

Her heart thudded once hard then resumed its normal cadence. At two point six mil credits, she'd deliver sewer sludge with her bare hands. "I am very much interested. Can you give me some details?"

"It is a tight deadline," he began, taking his time, smoothing his salt-and-pepper mustache. "And you will run with another courier as backup—"

Backup equals delays, equals loss of profit and control, equals big heap of trouble...

"Excuse me," she cut in through a tight smile. "I don't really need a backup."

He shook his head. "No, but *I* do. You run the first upload then Terrence will run the backup in case of... Well, you know, fiery death and all that."

"Terrence Weller is my backup?"

"Have you worked with him in the past?" He smiled, a smug, mustachioed cat sitting on the fence.

"Yes."

She had more to say but her pride had to take a backseat to her business sense, which, luckily for her, tended to kick in whenever an outrageous amount of credits was mentioned. She *needed* those credits.

Ray picked lint from his black shirt lapel. "This run requires the finest couriers in the system. You both are it."

She offered him her infamous grin. Wondered if he could tell she'd rather chew bees. "I would work better alone, Ray."

"I disagree. Quicker perhaps, but not better."

Jackie fought against the impulse to slam her foot in the screen and instead clamped her mouth shut for fear she'd say something that would lose her the contract. *The client is always right. The client is always right. The client...*

Deep breath.

She'd always had a temper. Her mom's side, or so her dad maintained. Then again, each parent claimed she'd inherited her big mouth from the other. But over the years of running her own courier service, she'd learned a thing or two about human nature and business. First, everyone had their own agenda and deadlines and tried their best. Second, no one wanted to deal with attitude. And third, with a bit of age had come the sagacity to realize she'd attract more flies with honey than vinegar. Plus, sometimes a woman had to learn to just *breathe*.

"At two point six, I figured it would compensate for the aggravation of working with another courier. Perhaps I should secure a differ—"

"Just a moment, if you would," she interrupted before he could cut her off at the knees and offer the astronomical sum to a competitor. "I'm feeling a bit of a catch here, Ray. If it's anything illegal, you know I won't touch it. A woman has her standards."

His eyes narrowed while he grinned. Oh, he had her and the arrogant jerk knew it.

"It could not be more legal, I assure you. You've heard of that new station going up off the nebula? I'm bidding for the spaceport's contracts. So I need plans from my chief designer and he is on Titan Five right now. It's the deadline that is driving up the price. It is tight, as I mentioned. Twenty-four hours to get the data from Titan Five then back here."

"Twenty-four hours," she repeated calmly, smile still in place, even if on the inside she was yanking her hair out by the fistful. That was an *insane* deadline, even for her. Barely time to reach the destination, refuel and race back.

"Two point six mil, Jack. If you need time to think about it..."

"You *know* I'm the only one who can handle that kind of run. I'm on."

"You *and* Terrence."

Had this meeting been conducted in person, she would've needed several deep breaths not to punch his lights out. With a forced, "My pleasure, goodbye, Ray," she cut the comms link then stomped across the plated deck.

A backup. Ugh. She'd have to fly with someone else, adjust her ways, change what worked to suit another's style and agenda. Relinquish a bit of control to another. No time for that.

Jackie pinched the bridge of her nose against the mounting pressure as she paced back and forth. There never was any *time*. She needed a clone.

"Breathe," she said out loud.

Unless he'd changed and gone soft, Ty was more than capable, but he'd better make sure because she couldn't afford to take him by the hand. Twenty-four hours to fly through the dreaded asteroid belt twice, or the "Valley of Death" as someone had aptly

dubbed it, download the data from the source on Titan Five Colony then rush back to Cassiopeia Station to upload it to Ray's account. Demented.

"But two point six mil."

She whooped, punched the air in a one-two combination. That'd take care of the hospice's bill for the rest of the year, maybe leave a little extra for some parts for her ship. And so opportune.

Fifteen minutes later, showered, fueled up on caffeine and only slightly less agitated, Jackie was pacing the cramped flight deck of her cruiser when the comms console bleeped. Punctual. They'd never really done runs together, had only worked around the other for a couple years before she'd had to fly to her parents' bedside. But from what she remembered, Ty's punctuality was only second to his bad temper. There'd been couriers who'd refused to fly with him. She could understand. The guy was scary. Sexy as all hell, but *dangerous*.

She pressed on the Receive button, eyes on the screen and fighting down the eagerness of seeing his face again. In disappointing audio only, her viewscreen showed a place-holder logo depicting an eagle in flight, its taloned feet clutched over a scroll. She'd much rather have visuals too, just to get a look at him. Had he changed over the years? Was he as handsome as before or had time been unkind to the man who'd so thoroughly made her hot around the collar?

"Clark here," she said as she strapped the sub-voicer to her throat. "How have you been?"

"I couldn't have been better without breaking some law," came the throaty voice she remembered so well. Like a harsh whisper in the throes of passion. Shivers made her roll her shoulders. He sounded just the way she remembered. "You? Life treating you well?" he asked.

"Up until now, yes," she said through a grin.

"As charming as I remember."

"Well, I'm glad I made a lasting impression on you." And she had the whole-body frisson to prove it. He chuckled. Things weren't turning out to be so bad after —

"You sure did, gorgeous," he went on.

Gorgeous...?

"Did you just call me 'gorgeous'?"

"Nope."

"Yes, you did. You said 'you sure did, gorgeous'. That's what you said, *Terrence*."

Another chuckle. "What, gorgeous? You gonna sue me for emotional distress? And the name's Ty, you know that."

"Ha! I only wish I had time to sue." She dropped her voice a notch. "But I *am* going to make you eat my space dust, Mister."

"Mmm. I'd eat anything of yours you want me to."

She hadn't remembered *that* part. When had he become flirty? Maybe the big scary guy had mellowed over the years?

The loaded remark created pleasant tingles all along her spine. That voice hadn't changed one bit, just as sexy and seductive as she remembered. To this day, nothing had ever compared to the physical reaction that voice could trigger.

"Did you get the brief?" she asked, pinching the flight suit's collar to vent out some of the heat. "Are you ready to roll?"

"I did and I am. I'm about to rendezvous with your ship's coordinates. Should be able to see me on your viewscreen right now. *If* your ship has 'em. From what I can see, it belongs in a museum. You sure you'll be able to keep up in that old thing?"

"Old thing, huh?" she muttered as she spared a glance at her nav console, spotted the tiny yellow dot with its tag and nomenclature shooting toward her position just out of the station's airspace. The guy's ship was *fast*. Damn him.

"I have you on my radar."

"Good, I like being on a gal's radar," he replied, and even if she couldn't see his face, she knew he was smiling. Having fun at her expense. "Makes me all kinds of tingly."

"I'm powering up now. Try not to get lost, *Terrence*."

"Same to you, *gorgeous*."

Just to show him she could pull her own, and *Lazarus* still had it in him despite the repairs, the duct tape and the years, Jackie fired the boosters in a brusque flare that made her old ship groan and creak in protest. Pitch up, left wing down, she tore out of Cassiopeia airspace as if her tail were on fire. Had to keep the reputation intact. Couldn't back down and roll over. Appearances were everything in her business. As much as she enjoyed the man's voice and hot body, Ty still remained a competitor.

"Damn! Thanks a lot," she heard Ty grumble over the comms. "You just wiped out half my starboard fore sensors."

Jackie quickly stamped down the spike of guilt. "Sorry, Ty. I'll slow down for you, okay?"

All she heard was a muttered comment that contained several variants of the *f*-word. She hadn't technically meant to fry his sensors, only show him she could pull her own weight, that her reputation wasn't fluff but deserved and earned. That standing put food on her table.

Maybe she'd buy him a beer or something, make it up to him after the run. Possibly negotiate him a couple of sensors from her suppliers, who could get them cheap and fast. With two point six mil credits in her pocket, she'd be able to afford a few extra sensors.

Jackie leaned back as Gs accumulated and pressed her into the synthetic leather seat, which creaked and rattled on its steel pedestal moorings. Somewhere below deck, a *thunk* reverberated. Her ship would need some extra love after this run. She hadn't even had time to fix the burst pipe whistling not far behind her. Next break. Two point six million credits wouldn't come her way anytime soon. And even if she had to put up

with another courier as backup—the infamous Terrence Weller on top of things—the money more than made up for the irritation. And the danger. Crossing the asteroid belt twice in twenty-four hours, after an earlier run, was like poking good fortune in the eye with a sharp stick. Both eyes even.

She had to grudgingly admit to herself Ty was one fine pilot. Always had been. He maneuvered his much larger and newer, fancier, shinier—damn him—ship in smooth rolls and precise banks, sometimes coming so close to her hull her prox alerts would bleep. He did it on purpose too, of that she had no doubt. Although to be fair, she *had* acted like an ass for powering up so fast and so close to another ship.

“So,” Ty crooned directly into her skull because of the ear bud. “You left in a hurry. Last I heard, you were on a run for New Bombay. And unlike the cat, you never came back.”

Despite the separation years and a hectic lifestyle provided, she could still see it in her mind as vividly as if it’d happened that morning. She’d been halfway to her destination when she received the urgent news about her parents’ situation, the desperate call for couriers to bring in aid, the government dragging its feet, claiming red tape and whatnot. She’d quit the same day, transferred the cargo to another courier then spent months at the hospital feeding jelly to her mom and dad. And the smell. Their poor, ruined bodies. Her mom who’d been pleasantly plump before her illness, and her dad with his mischievous grin, which she hadn’t seen since. They did better now, of course, but the memory of their frailty still followed her around like a disproportionate shadow. Every call could be The Call.

Jackie shook her head as if she could dislodge the old fears. “Life happens. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah. What’ve you been up to all that time? Married? Kids?”

“No. You?”

A quick bark of laughter. “You think a gal would put up with my shit?”

“Not really.”

"You didn't have to agree."

"But I'm so agreeable."

"Now that, I honestly don't remember about you," Ty replied, teasing.

Jackie laughed, couldn't help it. Neither could she help the fire from spreading over her back, up her neck and to her cheeks. His voice had always had that effect on her. "Let's hear what else you remember then."

"Let me see," he began slowly. She heard a wet sound over the comms and guessed he was doing something with his mouth, which produced another wave of liquid fire and a fine spike of sexual energy. "Bad temper, big mouth, hot body. And a cute little dimple when you go sulking off."

"I do not sulk."

"You do, gorgeous." He must have done that thing with his mouth again. The wet sound revved her engines as bad as his voice. "Sexy."

She didn't sulk, did she? That would neutralize all the hard work she put in her reputation, let people see the tender inside. Not acceptable in her line of business. That she had a temper was no news flash, but that she was inherently a gentle soul could hinder her. As a chief competitor, he might get ideas, take advantage.

But she did *not* sulk. Of this she was sure.

"You're tailing, gorgeous," Ty remarked. She realized she *had* slowed as she overanalyzed his remark and did tail his ship by a couple of miles. "You like coming in from behind?" he added.

Men. "Would you just focus and stop thinking about behinds?"

"Oh I am. I'm very, very *focused* right now."

When she didn't reply, he chuckled. Probably proud of himself too. The next twenty-four hours would feel more like years. She reclaimed her spot as first courier with Ty keeping his ship a tight quarter mile behind. Jackie wondered what he thought of playing backup. Not letting the order of their ships – and Ray's calling sequence – get

to her head was, well, kind of hard. He'd called *her* for first position. She was the main courier, not the backup. The years of hard work and sacrifice were paying off. Financially anyway.

After a couple of light-years, they approached the asteroid belt. Most couriers and civilian ships traveled *around* the dangerous zone, which meant twice the time and twice the fuel, and not right *through* it. But in her business, time was money. She couldn't afford delays. Plus, sometimes the data needed to get there fast—like medical or diplomatic stuff—and couldn't be distributed through the regular, governmental channels. Too slow. She should know. Hence the need for folks like her. Pilots reckless enough—or dumb enough, depending on the point of view—to courier the goods.

On her screen, the asteroids resembled a ribbon of tiny chunks of ice and rocks circling a giant gas planet—even if in reality the “tiny” chunks were the size of skyscrapers. She'd always loved that planet, loved its marbled colors—coronas of blues and greens and purples—with its roiling surface of hydrogen and helium. Like a giant Saturn.

The belt's twinkling made Jackie's eyes water so she glanced at the other ship and grinned when, given the iridescent light, she found it resembled a long silver penis with stunted wings and a trio of supercharged boosters at the base. The imagery made her chuckle. Pretty much summed up Terrence Weller. A big dick. Ha.

But that voice...

Jackie pulled at her collar to let some of the heat out of her one-piece flight suit. A guy with a voice like that could whisper all kinds of things in her ear. She wouldn't mind!

“Are you ready, gorgeous?” His gravelly voice filled her brain, tightened her nape and caused serious heat to flare out of her suit.

All she could manage was one word. “Yes.”

“Mmm, like the sound of that.”

“I thought you preferred the sound of your own voice.”

He laughed. "Got some tongue on you, Clark. I like that."

"So do I."

"An invitation?"

"Not really."

"That's too bad then," he said. "See you on the other side."

"If you get pulverized, can I have your ship for parts?"

"And if *you* get mashed up, can I get your— oh wait, your ship's crap. Never mind. Switching to short range."

After she likewise switched the comms relay to short-range so the belt wouldn't cause interference, Jackie muttered a curse. "Har-har."

Chewing her lip, Jackie killed the main engine and prepared to enter the "Valley of Death". Nothing like a good, scary moniker to secure people's undivided attention. It sure had hers. She'd learned early in her career to respect big, giant rocks floating in space.

For the first couple of hours all went well. She'd use the gravitational pull to dodge smaller asteroids, fly around those too large or too quick for her to match with brusque, economical half bursts. Behind and a quarter mile to portside, Ty preferred to give full bursts of attitude jets instead. Must have plenty of fuel in that fancy ship. Yeah, well, *Lazarus* would still make him eat space dust.

"So far so good," he said. His voice sounded tight. She wondered if he stuck his tongue out when he concentrated. The incongruous thought made her snort a quick laugh. She shouldn't think about his mouth. If she remembered correctly — and dammit, she did — it was luscious...except when he was pissed, then it'd thin to a menacing line.

"Something I said?"

"Would you just leave me alone for a second?" She fired a quick burst of attitude jets. Perfect timing.

"Ouch. I'm not used to women telling me to leave them alone."

"Oh and humble too."

"As humble as you're charming, gorgeous."

One of her prox alerts beeped so she changed headings, prepared to swerve over the large spinning asteroid coming at her when in one of her viewscreens, she spotted another smaller rock twirling behind its large companion, effectively hiding in its shadow. Tricky little thing. The size of a shuttle but still large enough to make a nice dent in *Lazarus*. But she'd seen it and would adjust course accordingly.

"Front and center," she remarked, all business. "Be careful."

"Got it."

Behind her, Ty didn't adjust course. For some reason, he'd decided to play chicken with ten tons of silicate, iron and nickel traveling at fifteen point five miles a second. What was up with him?

"I said front and center," she repeated, leaning forward to tap her O2 gauges. Had to have the right mix or *Lazarus* would go *boom* and wouldn't rise from the dead again.

"I said I got it, gorgeous."

At one thousand feet away, she lifted her wing, let the smaller asteroid pass under then leveled off a split second before all kinds of bells and whistles filled her deck.

Damn!

Both hands went flying over controls at once. But no lights flashed other than the prox alerts, which would blink until she'd cleared the veritable space minefield. It took her a second to realize the cacophony of warnings came through the comms. From Ty's ship not hers.

"What's going on?" she sub-voiced, leaning forward to take a look at the rear viewscreen. "Pitch up!"

"Motherf—"

Static drowned the rest of his snarled reply. Even though it hadn't happened on her ship, she still felt a weird shock traverse her and a sense of alarm she'd never experienced before.

Oh. Shit.

The smaller asteroid had just collided with Ty's ship. A glancing hit on starboard, right where he'd said her little stunt had fried some of his exterior sensors.

"Are you all right?" she yelled to be heard above the shrill sirens of his ship. Judging by the sound, hull integrity had been breached. Double shit.

"I'm losing O2!" he roared. "Breach imminent!"

Guilt flooded her judgment for a good second. She'd crippled him right out the gate. It was her fault he hadn't seen the smaller asteroid coming. She didn't mind giving him hell and all that, especially for old times' sake, but she hadn't meant to destroy his ship and kill him.

"Suit up! I'll get you!"

"Are you nuts?" he snarled, still obviously fighting with his controls when he should've been trying to get the hell out of his doomed ship.

"Suit up!"

"There's no *time* to put on a motherfucking suit!"

Damn.

He couldn't escape his ship without a suit, didn't have time to put one on in the first place. They needed a way for him to get out...

An idea struck her. A crazy, dementedly dangerous idea. They'd only have one shot at it, and if he didn't take it now, he'd end up an icicle stuck to his seat. She wasn't prepared to live with that kind of weight on her conscience. She might be considered a ruthless courier, all business and nothing else, but that wasn't her inside, that wasn't Jacqueline. And she sure wasn't a killer!

“Pitch up!” she yelled in the mike strapped to her throat. “Roll forty-five degrees to starboard side!”

Even if he must have been wondering what she meant to do, he rolled to the right and lifted his left wing at forty-five degrees, effectively presented his ship’s belly to hers. The coupling hatch gleamed like black ink on the silver underbelly.

“Unlock your hatch!”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Jackie cursed. “Unlock your goddamn hatch, Weller! Now!”

He must have understood her plan—and appropriately thought she’d had something stronger than milk in her cereal that morning—but the man still maintained his course, belly-up her side while she mirrored the position. With good fortune willing, their bellies and hatches would meet in the middle. He’d have ten seconds tops to unlock his hatch, transfer ships then crawl out of her airlock and onto the main deck. If he failed at any of it, his ship would detach, spilling its content—Terrence Weller included—into space for her to watch. Not acceptable.

“Keep it steady,” she said for no good reason other than the need to let some steam out. “Keep it steady...”

“I *am*!” he growled, cursed when another alarm added its high-pitched self to the mix. “Fuck! Losing fuel now too!”

But he clung to his heading and attitude, kept his hull presented to her as two birds would flying side by side with their bellies about to touch in the middle.

Twenty feet.

God, she’d never flown this close to another ship before. One tiny miscalculation or twitch of the hand and Ray would have to find someone else to get his precious plans.

Ten feet.

Such a tiny target.

Five.

Prox alerts blared by the time his ship's belly connected against hers. A deep *thunk* reverberated when the mooring clamps snapped into place. She felt *Lazarus* slow down with the added mass and drag.

"Do it! Now!" she yelled under the strain of keeping both ships in position.

Three hundred miles ahead and coming at them at an angle, an asteroid the size of a small planet lazily twirled. If it hit, they wouldn't suffer long. Like bugs on a windshield.

She heard him curse then nothing but sirens and alarms wailing. For a few seconds, Jackie wondered if he'd made it. Where the hell was he? She had to jettison the dead weight of his ship or risk joining it when the asteroid hit. On the dirty chronoclock taped to the nav console, ten seconds became nine, eight, seven.

"Come *on*," she snarled, bent over the controls, ready to retract the hatch and blow the other ship off.

Her ship's airlock light blinked on at the edge of the screen, warning her someone had activated it from the outside. Good man.

Six, five, four...

"Shit... Come on, come on, come *on*!"

Jackie put her thumb against the button that would start the jettison sequence, hoping he'd made it. The airlock light blinked off. If he'd failed and gone back to his ship, or hadn't had time to crawl into the pressurized portion of hers, then there was nothing she could do. She should've already changed course to avoid the now-looming asteroid.

Three, two, one.

"Sorry, Ty, I just can't wait anymore."

Jackie thumbed the control. With a pair of *clangs*, the mooring clamps opened, releasing Ty's ship, and with a loud *pof*, her hatch retracted into her vessel's belly, which sent the other craft rolling away, its own hatch gaping wide.

"Shit, shit, shit," she hissed as she re-pressurized her airlock. What if he hadn't made it? What had she done! With trembling fingers, she pressed the internal comms. "Ty? Are you there? Ty?"

Ominous silence answered her.

Sweat dripped from her temple down along her jaw as she fought against the urge to check below deck and ascertain his physical state. He'd be pissed off, of that she had no doubt. His temper sure hadn't mellowed *that* much, despite the new flirty side. But what if he was badly hurt? Dying in her airlock?

She tried the internal comms again. "Ty? Damn, Ty, respond!"

What if he hadn't made it? Maybe he was floating in space, cursing her with his last breath.

A sound behind her caught her attention. She spun the seat on its pedestal so she could partly face the hatch and still keep an eye on the consoles. Her breath caught.

A man was stepping through the hatch.

He wore a synthetic and oh-so-shiny black T-shirt stretched over a partitioned chest and belly of perfect proportions and symmetry, and olive-green cargo pants that highlighted one fine pair of muscled thighs. He stomped onto her flight deck in black military-issue boots. She'd forgotten just how *big* he was in person. If she'd thought he'd mellowed with the years...how wrong she'd been. Terrence Weller had become even bigger, dangerous-looking and scarier. Still the same six feet of shaven-smooth head and face, wicked-sexy mouth stretched over a rictus of rage that would've made her mother sign herself. Twice. He'd added an eyebrow ring to his looks, but the rest was unchanged. The same wolfish expression on his hard face and lean lines, the same fire glowing like coals behind his dark eyes. He'd always reminded her of an actor back in old 2-D movies, a Vincent, Vince something with a last name like "fuel". Very large, very scary. It was hard to think beyond that point.

And he didn't look happy one bit.

Chapter Two

So there she was back in his life again. Jackie Clark.

Damn, how long had it been? Six years and some change? For the two they'd worked together at a now-defunct courier conglomerate, he'd walked around in a constant state of horniness—and crankiness—because the ambitious, driven, take-no-bullshit little firebrand had embodied everything he enjoyed in women. A tough exterior and, he suspected, a soft inside. Loved that mix. But before he'd cleaned up, worked out a few details in his life—details like clawing his way out of some bad company and worse connections, maybe even a bit of organized crime somewhere in the mix—she'd pulled a disappearing act on him. One day she was there and the next she was gone. He'd learned afterward his favorite pilot had started her own biz. Figured she didn't need ghosts of the past to tag along and had left it at that. But shit, Jackie had stirred his blood in a serious way.

His blind spot.

And now she'd just cost him his ship. The one thing he owned fair and square, the one damn thing his failed manufacturer of an old man hadn't been able to drink or gamble away, the means to pay for his baby sister's education. If one miserable Weller could claw up to being a doctor, an honest and meaningful job for a change, he sure as hell was going to help. Lydia *would* graduate top of her class if he had to beat the shit out of the dean, *would* go on and make her professional worrier of a big brother proud and maybe even put a bit of shine back on the Weller family crest. Because as it stood now, they had a crooked industrialist, a former drug runner and a nonexistent mother who'd run off with a guy half her age after the birth of her "surprise" child Lydia. At sixteen, Ty had basically raised her. Not that he blamed his mom for dumping his old man. But leaving the kids behind?

His ship had been *every-fucking-thing*. And now it was gone. Murder on his mind and in his hands, Ty cleared the low-hanging hatch. His rage filled the flight deck almost like a physical thing.

He had plenty of reasons to kick her ass from here to Cassiopeia Station and back again. A good round of size-twelve boots would do her good, the mouthy little shit. Mouthy, spicy little hottie. *That* he remembered perfectly well. How could he have forgotten when the gal had become the barometer by which he'd measured all other women? Right now though, he didn't care if she'd become even sexier with some years to her.

Yeah right.

Damn hormones. During the two seconds it took him to clear the hatch and come face-to-face with the reason he was now a penniless nobody with not a single goddamn rivet to his name, his rage mutated into something completely different. He went from wanting to kill her with his bare hands to fighting the hard-on triggered by the vision in front of him. That she still sat in her seat, clearly unimpressed, only poured jet fuel by the gallons on the inferno burning his balls. Christ, just his luck. He should've expected it. Nothing was simple with Jackie Clark around. And he was now stuck with her on a tiny, tiny ship. Fuck.

"You," he snarled, leveling an accusing index finger at her. He was so goddamn pissed, he was shaking all over. "You... You..." He'd never called a woman the names that piled into his mouth and wasn't about to start now, but dammit if he wasn't burning to. "Your little stunt..." He puffed a few times to let some of the steam out. "It just cost me my goddamn ship."

She sat there still, the determined expression he remembered, five and a half feet of—short, nowadays—hair, almond-shaped dark eyes, pinched mouth and attitude. He'd called her his Asian Goddess of Fury. No change there. She wasn't a bombshell by any stretch of the imagination. Never had been. Jaw too square, smallish breasts, unstyled hair still damp from a recent shower and starting to stick up in places—the

whole fucking flight deck smelled of soap and wasn't helping his focus. Nothing beat eating pussy that smelled of soap. Mmm. But what she lacked in fashionable beauty, she'd always more than made up for in intensity and physical strength. In the tight flight suit the color of a dirty sky, she had shoulders that'd put swimmers to shame. So she'd gone to the gym too, added some inches to her, gained a bit of welcomed weight. He loved good strong shoulders in a woman, made perfect anchors when they sucked his dick. The vision of Jackie on her knees, fucking his cock with her mouth, burned the last of his failing neurons. Plus, she had freckles. He had *loved* those from the start. What sort of man didn't want to fuck a gal with freckles!

He shook his head to scramble the stupid images. Shit on a stick! "You fucked everything up, Clark."

"No, I didn't," she replied, clearly awed after she threw a quick glance at the console. "Look at *that*."

The screen that showed the planet's curvature and part of the asteroid belt must've been older than both of them combined. To his shock, he spotted his ship twirl clear of the asteroids through some cosmic twist he couldn't explain and float belly-up just outside the danger zone. By a cunt hair, but still in the clear. Too bad couriers couldn't fly in lower orbit since it wasted too much fuel fighting against the gravitational pull. Instead they had to fly through the belt, figuratively running across a twenty-lane boulevard and hoping no car would hit them. Although his ship had just managed it without pilot or propulsion.

To his utter amazement, within seconds his ship had entered the gas giant's lower orbit right below the asteroid belt where it'd remain until salvagers came to tow it after the thirty-day wait. Without a ride, he wouldn't be able to claim his ship back.

"Well, fuck me."

She cleared her throat. "You can find a ride to get it back. I'll get you one."

He gave her his best glare. "If you feel as stupid and guilty as you look, then that's a good first step, Clark, because you ought to."

“Look—”

“No, you ‘look’! You think I have a spare ship waiting at home, all nice and shiny?”

His tone must have raised her hackles because she stuck her chin out at him. Old times. He’d enjoyed watching her take a few strips off people when they’d crossed her. “Hey, it was an accident, okay?”

“An accident my ass. You powered up not even a hundred feet in front of my nose. You did it on purpose.” He wondered for a crazy second that had nothing to do with the present situation, if she enjoyed being on top. He loved watching his lovers bounce on him. The larger the breasts the better. He had big hands, he could manage.

Black eyes narrowed to slits. Her cheeks were flushed while that dimple he’d loved deepened. Sexy.

“I didn’t mean to wreck your sensors, Ty!”

“Yeah, well, you did. So now what?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed, threw her hands up.

He cut a glance at the screen again, followed his ship’s leisurely journey. He’d just hightailed it out of his ship for nothing? Maybe he could’ve saved it, stayed a few seconds more and try to fix the breach. The more he thought about it, the more he knew fixing his ship in time wouldn’t have happened. He would’ve died of asphyxiation or explosive depressurization, sucked out into space with the rest of the loose bits floating around his ship. Or crashed head-on into the asteroid he hadn’t spotted in time since she’d goddamn fried half his sensors right out the gate.

Cocky little bitch. He should kick her ass. Yeah. Give it a good bite too just for the fuck of it. Maybe a lick.

But.

There was always a but.

Even if she’d created the problem to begin with, Jackie Clark had still come and helped when it would’ve been easy to just sit back and watch the lightshow. Hell, that’s

what *he* would've done in her boots. Sit back, get some popcorn and a cold beer, watch the competition go out in a hail of titanium rivets. That was the Jackie Clark he remembered. Nothing came for free with her. But she'd just put her own ship and life in danger when she realized he hadn't seen the asteroid as it twirled at him and stayed put for the most dangerous and harebrained space transfer he'd ever heard of. Switching ships in the fucking Valley of Death. Well, shit, if that didn't turn a man on, he didn't know what would. His cock thought so too and hardened at the idea. Still, he owed her one and was about to deliver it.

Ty stalked to her seat, leaned on both armrests and put his face right up to hers. If she was impressed, she didn't let it show. The smell of soap dispersed his chain of thought for a good five seconds. Christ. "I have half a mind to kick your ass for what you did."

"You try, big guy," she snarled, lowering her chin.

The way she put a nonchalant hand over the harness buckle told him he'd get one good shot before she kicked his balls. But that'd be all he'd need, really, one shot.

So that standoff, it's going where again, hero?

"You think I wouldn't 'cause you're a woman?" He hoped he didn't look as off course as he felt. He *wouldn't* hit a woman of course, but he couldn't very well let her think she had the last word. Hell no!

She narrowed her eyes, cocked her head. "Oh, I'm sure you can beat on a woman with no problem. You always looked the part to me. Even more so now with that fancy ring."

Hey.

A prox alert saved him from replying to the cheap shot. He wasn't a woman beater. He may only be a couple of notches up from thug—his old man liked reminding him of that among other things—but he wasn't a brute.

"Your ship's talking to you," he snarled, hooking a thumb at the flashing console. Saved face at least. He straightened, crossed his arms.

She peered over her shoulder, cursed. “Hang on!”

Before he could – and to what should he “hang on” anyway, the flight deck was the size of his closet and just as dumpy – she’d whirled her seat around, furiously clicked on the console with one hand while she gripped the control stick with the other. Not imagining it was his dick was pretty damn hard. His old crush was coming back full force and he suspected there wouldn’t be a damn thing he could do about it.

He felt Gs accumulating then grunted when she rolled to the left, ignored the cacophony of signals and alarms her stunt had caused, ignored *him* as well when he went flying across the deck to bang against upright consoles and become tangled in wires.

“For fuck’s sake, Jackie!”

But she had her hands full. On the screen, a cluster of asteroids was coming at them hard and fast. Instead of veering away and flying up around them, as any pilot with half a brain would’ve, the crazy woman leveled off, aimed dead center.

“What the – ?!”

He barely had time to curse when she flew her old clunker between the three middle asteroids, right wing straight up. At the last possible second she rolled to avoid the rest of the chunks hurtling at them left, right and sideways. Shit. Shit. He’d postponed dying on his own ship only to be blasted into bits on someone else’s? Crazy woman. But he had to admit her fine handling had just procured him with one thrilling jab of sexual energy to zing up his thighs and tighten his dick even more. He loved women with balls. Well, not *literally*.

She turned back, noticed he wasn’t where he’d been before her stunt then offered him a lopsided grin that just about made him want to pounce on her and chew her clothes off. He was *so* getting inside that flight suit. The sooner the better too.

“Are you okay, Ty? You look pale.”

“When we’re in the clear, I’m gonna show you just how ‘okay’ I am.”

A slow grin rounded her cheek. "Is that right?"

"Hell yeah!"

She still smiled. This time, a wicked lift to her lips and a glint of something raw in her gaze made him salivate. She was just as turned-on as he was. Well, the little vixen.

Maybe he should've pursued the matter back when they worked together and gotten her out of his system, scratched the itch once and for all since it didn't seem to be going anywhere. He had his chance now.

Ty turned out to be the worst kind of backseat pilot she'd ever seen. Each maneuver she executed was dissected, commented on, picked apart, cursed at. Instead of just sitting tight—on the deck too, poor guy—and shutting his big trap, Ty acted as if he had to provide a running commentary of her flying and complained the whole way through the asteroid belt, even remarking how lucky they were to be alive given her ship's age. It had nothing to do with luck, dammit. She should've spaced his cute butt instead of taking him onboard. Finally, they cleared the danger zone, which allowed her a good roll of the shoulders to alleviate the tension. Mostly caused by her "passenger".

Standing, she turned to him just as he peeled himself off the deck, massaging his shoulder and grumbling curses about the lack of "proper seats on this goddamn old clunker". Always complaining. She took the comms unit from her breast pocket, pulled out the ear bud and unclipped the mike from her throat then tossed everything on the seat. A couple of hours on autopilot to wind down before they reached Titan Five, collected the data then rushed back to upload everything to Ray's account. She needed even more coffee and lots of it.

"Do you ever stop talking to breathe?" she snapped.

"Learn to pilot and I might," he shot back, blocking the hatch when she aimed for it.

"I'm an *excellent* pilot."

"In your dreams, maybe. You almost killed us half a dozen times, for fuck's sake. I don't remember you being so damn reckless."

"Those were calculated risks. And this is the gratitude I get for saving you?"

"*Saving* me? After you all but blinded me?" he snarled, his anger filling the tiny flight deck.

Something else also filled her space—lust. Even after six years, she still thought he was the sexiest guy this side of the Falcon Nebula. Tanned and muscled, stubborn and loud. The shaven head, wicked mouth and new eyebrow ring didn't help either.

"You know what they say, if you can't take the heat..."

His dark eyes narrowed dangerously and she knew she'd pushed a button a bit too deep. Ty took a step. Just one. But it almost made her take one back. Almost. Only pride riveted her to the spot despite every instinct clamoring for her to put as much distance as possible between the large angry man and her.

"I've got plenty of heat, don't worry about me. But that's my ship out there that I paid with my own cash, floating belly-up like a dead fish. And you're gonna pay for the repairs or find me a salvage crew to get it back."

"As if I have that kind of credit in my pockets?"

"Not now," he replied with a triumphant sort of smile that didn't sit well with her. "But soon you will. You're about to get two point six mil, if I remember correctly, and a whole lot of time off if I report your ass to the guild."

"I'm getting one point four," she replied without meeting his gaze. "And the guild has better things to do than take care of creaky wheels." Inside, she cringed. She didn't need another row with the couriers' guild, who were waiting to find an excuse to yank her permit. Damn.

"You were never a good liar, Jackie. I guess that can be a good thing. Depends who you hang out with."

He took another step. Stood barely a couple of inches from her, clouded her judgment with his male scent and gorgeous mouth and perfect chest underneath the tight black T-shirt. What he could do with that mouth...the stuff of dreams. As she had then, she again wondered what sort of women he preferred, how many girlfriends he'd accumulated, if he was a talker in bed, but also the sort of upbringing that made a man such as Terrence Weller. He wasn't trouble or some cookie-cutter rebel. Neither did he portray a "bad boy" image for the simple reason that Ty was a *man*, not a boy, with no affected bravado. The cloud of menace permanently hanging over his head, it was for real. His unusual sort of beauty transcended every stereotype.

"You're getting the same cut I am," he went on in that hoarse voice, which did nothing to help her focus. "But the deal's changed now. You're gonna give me half so I can get a salvager to tow my ship back. Then you're gonna finance the repairs too."

The pleasant tingle of sexual awareness evaporated like fog in a wind tunnel. Who did he think he was? Her temper had never flared so bad, so quick. She planted her fists on her hips. Heat wafted out of her zipped-down flight suit. "*What?* Finance your repairs?"

"Hell yeah." He cocked his pierced eyebrow, took a good look from her boots to the top of her head. Which was about to blow off with the mad she was working on. The gall!

"Are you out of your *mind*?"

Ty gave her another pronounced once-over, his mouth curving at one corner. Oh hell, that was one sexy smirk. "You don't wanna know what's on my mind, Jackie. Let's just stick to the biz, okay?"

"I have connections, I'll see what I can do, but you're not getting half my cut. As for your mind," she went on, letting her gaze travel down the length of him the way he'd just done with her. "I know exactly where it is."

Where her own had been the entire time. In the gutter.

"You do?" The sexy curve to his mouth accentuated. "It means yours is there too."

"No, it doesn't," she replied a bit too fast. The heat of anger turned into something else. She swallowed.

"You're such a bad liar. Always were."

Jackie crossed her arms just in case she didn't appear composed enough—which was a lie, damn him. She wanted him in a bad way.

Ty looked down at himself, grinned as he patted his crotch. "What can I say, I've always had a weak spot for you."

He had?

"A weak spot?" she retorted. "For me? Since when?"

"Since I saw you demolish that locker door," he said before tucking his bottom lip behind his teeth. It gave him a predatory air. She loved it. "Remember that one? In the cargo bay. You were trying to get into your locker and it wouldn't open?"

"I remember." Her supervisors had deducted her pay for the repairs. She'd been in a hurry. The story of her life.

"Turned me on hard enough to see stars," he said. "Like right now."

Her gaze slid down his chest and belly, both of which looked rock-hard and tantalizing enough to touch, down to his crotch again where a lump strained the cargo pants along the inside of his muscled thigh. Her palms itched to cup all that hot man. His T-shirt looked as if it'd been painted on, shiny black with the synthetic fabric.

"See something you like?" he asked, pierced brow arched. That throaty voice was doing wonders to her imagination again. Having a guy with a voice like that could probably make her sweat just by whispering wicked things in her ear.

She shrugged, all cool composure even if inside she'd become a hormonal mess. "Do *you*?"

"You *know* it."

"Mmm, I don't know," she replied. Rising blood pressure began a rhythmic *whoosh-whoosh* in her ears. "You can never tell with these things."

She stopped breathing when he extended a hand, pinched the lapel of her flight suit in thick, strong fingers then gently pulled sideways to expose a bit of her black tank top. She noticed he chewed his nails bad.

"You gals are lucky. It doesn't show when you're turned-on. Not like us guys."

She hooked her thumb in her pocket just to give herself something to do. Half of her wanted to kick his butt and get him off her ship, but the other half wanted to do very different sorts of things to her passenger, things that years before had made her call a lover "Ty" by mistake.

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not," she replied, feeling stupid for the way her voice sounded tight and tremulous. "I've changed, Ty. I'm no longer the young woman you worked with."

"You've more than changed," he replied, licking his bottom lip. "You've become even better. And it's turning me on, Jackie. You have no idea."

"Turned-on is a good thing. Natural response. Instincts. Women have all that too."

"I know, gorgeous. I *know*."

Each nerve ending felt on fire, each sweat pore prickled, each hair on her arms stood at attention. That he had her absolute attention would be the understatement of the century. With the sensualization he'd triggered then and now, with the vivid images of his body moving against hers came a wave of heat, a rush of adrenaline that left her wanting him. Fiercely. An old hunger.

"Let's say you do," he replied, his voice a notch above a murmur. His nostrils flared. "Mmm? Let's say you *do* see something you like. Are you the kinda gal who'll go and take it, or wait 'til it comes to you? Are you still the Jackie Clark I once knew?"

"What do you think?"

Don't look at his mouth, don't look at his mouth. She couldn't focus and play cool cucumber if she looked at his wicked, sexy mouth. Never could.

He crowded her against the bulkhead, his wide chest and shoulders so tempting in the black T-shirt, his chin angled downward at her and mouth slightly parted. Tease.

"I think you want the same thing I do. For me to take your clothes off and not do it slowly. My hands all over you and my mouth clamped to your pussy. That's what I think you want."

Her breathing quickened. She cocked her head to the side. "Is that so?"

Ty nodded. Diffused light from the consoles played with the hard lines of his face and cast his eyes in pools of shadow. After he licked them, his lips glistened. "That's so. You want it as hard as I do. Question is, you gonna do anything about it, or you gonna let me get the ball rolling?"

He closed a bear paw of a hand over hers, raised her fingers to his lips so he could run the pad of her thumb against his bottom lip, back and forth and again before he wrapped his mouth around it. A flash of teeth made her stop breathing. "I like your taste."

She could only lick her lips in response. No words. No thoughts other than the two of them rolling around on her deck.

"I wonder what else I can taste, huh, Jackie? Your breasts? Your cunt?" The raw word was like a tiny whiplash. He'd done it on purpose too.

"Why don't you find out," she whispered, her voice shaking like the rest of her.

"A challenge?"

"An invitation."

A predatory grin stretched his mouth. Ty pinched her zipper then pulled it down. Each hook releasing sounded like tiny thunderclaps. His smell came to her, male and strong. Faint rustles from his clothes caressed her like a breeze. The whole of him—his smell, the way he sounded, his animal magnetism—fired every sense in her. Violin strings pulled to their limits. She wanted this. Had wanted it just as hard so long ago. Hadn't done anything about it. Not this time.

"Does that mean I get to take what I want?" he asked.

"I think it does."

"You *think*?"

"I *know* it does."

He wrapped a hand around her nape and hoisted her up to his face for a conquest more than a kiss. Being dunked in a volcano wouldn't have felt as hot! She shivered.

Ty's mouth captured hers, moistened lips perfect for the kind of feast she had in mind.

God, that mouth!

Growls rolled in his chest like distant thunder. Rough and demanding, his hands closed over her shoulders. She *mmm*-ed into his mouth when he crushed her to him. But he pulled away almost immediately.

"Not that I have anything against the idea of babies, but just so you know, my implant is still good for two years."

"Good to know," she replied.

Jackie was still grinning when he resumed his activity. Pawing blindly, she found the spot where he'd tucked his T-shirt into his pants, yanked high so she could snake her hands underneath and rake her fingernails all over the glorious belly, all compact and as hard as she'd imagined it'd be. Just divine. Spasms tightened his sides and pecs as she dug her fingernails in, tilled his skin.

Ty pulled his mouth away again. His eyes were dark and intense when he looked down at her. Wicked lips glistened. "Got a shower on this piece of space debris?"

"Why? You don't like the smell of a woman?"

He grinned wide. She'd worked with him for a couple of years yet never seen him smile. Not once. "I like the smell of a woman just fine. It's the stench of sweaty man that turns me off. Want to be squeaky clean if you're gonna suck my dick."

She huffed and puffed for a good two seconds while he just grinned and basked in the joy of his good comeback. "What makes you so sure I will?"

His cocky grin widened. "It's the best in the system...or so I've heard."

As much as she'd love to kick his oh-so-deserving butt, she'd more likely bite and lick it first. *Then* maybe she'd kick it. Ha.

"You're just like I remember, Terrence Weller, you arrogant ass."

"You've no idea." He trapped her mouth under his, licked then sucked her bottom lip before pulling away. "Shower, gorgeous. Lead the way."

Hands tugging each other's clothes, they barely managed the cramped passageway leading to the broom-closet-sized bathroom, complete with tiny showerhead sticking directly out of the bulkhead.

He stopped in the hatch, turned back to her then proceeded to yank his T-shirt off—muscles played under his tanned, shiny skin, rippled with loose strength over and behind his shoulders when he sent the shirt flying over her head. Even if his thighs were thick with muscles, the width of his torso still created a wide and striking V.

Ty fisted his belt buckle, froze. "You just gonna stand there and watch?"

A big smile was her reply.

With a chuckle he unclipped the belt then unceremoniously dumped his pants down around his ankles, stepped out of the wide cargo pants, boots and all. The Best Cock in the System—or so he'd boasted—bobbed in a teasing invitation when he bent over and unclipped his boots before kicking each off.

"So?" he asked. "Did I lie?"

Jackie didn't think she could answer without betraying the depth of her hormonal response to him so she just shook her head.

After he tossed everything out of the tiny cubicle, he turned away from her to work the levers and tune the shower to a nice and strong pulse. Offered her a splendid view of his tight, round butt—as tanned as the rest—and legs made for long, hard rides.

Jackie leaned on the bulkhead for the simple delight of watching him move. He had maybe five minutes worth of hot water before it'd turn glacial. Her water tank had never been designed to accommodate the needs of two crewmembers.

"Care to join me?" he tossed over his shoulder as he grabbed the tube of shower gel and squirted half of it in his hand. Even this small gesture caused muscles on his wide back to ripple and cord. After he was done washing himself in brisk, economical rubs, he let the tube fall where it may. Men.

She would *not* pick it up even if the urge was strong. She enjoyed her affairs a certain way, had to keep things organized, life compartmentalized, finances balanced, had to keep juggling the many pins. Otherwise, everyone who depended on her would suffer. "I already had one."

"So?"

Before she could move out of the way, he turned, reached out of the tiny shower, closed a block-like fist over the lapel of her flight suit and yanked her inside with him.

"Hey!"

But his mouth clamping over her throat and his free hand cupping her ass quickly silenced her angry retort. The guy could do things with that mouth. She couldn't wait to see what else he could do with it.

Ty bit down on her lapel, tugged then let go. "Get rid of that before I chew through it."

"You do it," she retorted just to see a reaction.

Growling, he yanked her flight suit open then over her shoulders, tugged asymmetrically and made a mess of things as he tried to pull the wet, clingy garment down her arms. The man had such finesse...not.

"Do you need help?" she asked then teased his throat with a quick lick.

"No, but your tailor will when I'm done with the damn thing."

To put him—and herself—out of his misery, she rolled her shoulders as water made a tight mess of her clothes. Finally she wrestled them off with Ty's enthusiastic help. With a triumphant curse, he sent it flying out of the cubicle.

"Don't move," he said, placing a large hand over her chest and pressing her back against the polymer panel. "Damn, gorgeous. *Damn*. You've any idea how hard I've wanted to see this? How bad I wanted to push you into a tight corner and have my way with you?"

His hungry gaze produced frissons up her spine as he stopped to eyeball her in a way no man had done. He didn't merely *look* at her, he *consumed* her with his hungry gaze. Jackie shivered.

"Take the rest off... I get to watch," he said, thumbing a piece of hair from her forehead.

She kicked out of her boots and soon stood in just her underwear and tank top that was plastered against her, molding her hard nipples. Water fell in rivulets out of the shower stall and spread on the bathroom floor beyond the ledge. She didn't care. Already the water was running a bit cooler.

"You forgot something." He indicated with his chin her tank top and panties. "If I do it, you might not be able to wear them again."

"What? You get carried away?"

"Not often. But for you, I'll make an exception." The glint in his eyes turned predatory. "Take them off."

She did. Because his tone thrilled her, the anticipation stimulated her. And because she *wanted to*.

Naked, she stood in front of him, close enough to touch yet neither made a move.

"Better hurry before the hot water goes," she said, wiping droplets from her face with a shaking hand. Adrenaline pumped her veins. She could hardly stand in place.

Ty leaned back against the bulkhead, offered her the rapacious grin she'd come to like – a lot – then cupped one of her breasts before rolling the nipple with his thumb.

"Nice."

Not to be outdone, she fisted his cock. God, he was hard and hot. "Nice."

With a mocking curve to his upper lip, he tightened his hold on her nipple almost to the point of pain. "*Very* nice."

She gave him a brusque pump, which tore a growl from him. "Same to you."

"You're playing with fire, Jackie."

"What makes you think I'm playing?"

A wide grin was the last thing she saw before he bent over and filled her face with his, her mouth with his. Tongue, lips, he took it all. She opened wide, curled her tongue into his mouth then sucked his bottom lip. He tasted of cinnamon and oranges.

While he kissed her, she was happy just to fill her hands with various parts of him. Just divine.

"Getting your hands full, eh?" he asked, pulling back. Manly pride and something else shone in his dark eyes. Satisfaction and...joy?

All of a sudden the water turned glacial.

Ty let out a thunderous "*Fuck!*"

Jackie squealed as she plastered herself against the side of the tight shower but couldn't go far since he'd wrapped an arm around her waist and forced her to him for a kiss that devastated her self-control and inhibitions.

While he kissed her, she felt him paw blindly along the wrong wall for the levers. She could've helped, but that would've meant taking her mouth away from his. A bit of cold – glacial – water never killed anyone. Not quickly anyway.

After a while, Ty pulled away. "How do you turn that motherfucking thing off?"

Some bit of gymnastics was needed for her to squeeze around his bulk until she stood next to the levers. She reached around him, shut the water off but yelped when he

caught her arm and forced it behind her then captured the other as well. Both her wrists fit easily in one of his hands.

“Mmm, Jackie, Jackie, Jackie,” he growled, gaze roaming. He leaned into her, put his mouth against her ear. “I like you this way, all curved back and ready. Like dessert. I *love* dessert. Ever licked cream off a lover’s skin? Or sucked honey off a guy’s dick?”

Jackie closed her eyes and enjoyed the pressure of his hand around her wrists, how his cock pressed into the junction of her thighs, so hard and hot. Ready.

“I don’t have any honey on me,” she taunted. “Sorry.”

“Oh but you do, Jackie. You just watch me.”

The pressure around her wrists changed as he pulled downward, curved her back with kisses until she’d knelt in the shower stall with her spine bent and her breasts exposed to his hungry mouth. Moaning and keeping her eyes closed, she took his licks and bites, sucks and languorous kisses as he followed her descent, bent almost in half. Looming. She loved it.

He abandoned her wrists. She felt him straighten. Something hot and silky-smooth touched her on the mouth.

“Take it,” he said.

She did.

Chapter Three

Ty could swear his toes had just curled back hard enough to touch the top of his feet. Hot damn! When her lips tightened around his cock, he almost failed at suppressing the urge to push her down on all fours and have some seriously rowdy wrestle-sex. He knew she could take it too, built like she was, all wiry strength and shoulders. Little tigress.

After a hard suck that made him hiss, he ran a hand in her hair, closed a loose fist against the back of her skull so he could sink in slowly, pull out, show her the rhythm he wanted. "You like dessert too, hmm?"

From slow and leisurely, her fist began to pump hard and fast.

Ty opened his mouth on a long, silent exhalation. "No need to rush, gorgeous. Plenty to go around."

But shit, if he didn't watch it, he'd come within the minute. Not his best performance. He couldn't believe he was having wild bathroom sex with an old crush and chief competitor. Ha! Man, he loved how Jackie's attitude matched his own. Always had. But just as he'd suspected back when they worked together, she didn't tell the whole story, let folks see the real deal. There was something more to the mouth and piloting skills. Layers that ran deep underneath the hard façade. As if she were trying to keep everyone away. What did she have to hide, he wondered. He'd never been nosy. That'd imply he cared about someone other than his baby sister and himself, which he didn't. Right?

Right.

Still, maybe he ought to scratch at Jackie's veneer, see what color showed up underneath the hard gloss. Just out of curiosity of course. Something he may be able to use later on. Not because he gave a damn. Yeah...

When she sucked particularly hard on the end of his cock, he looked down and caught her staring back up at him, one eyebrow arched. Oh prideful too, eh? Didn't want all her good work going to some guy who didn't appreciate? Well, he'd *show* her just how much he did appreciate her handling.

Before checking with her, he popped out of her mouth, grabbed her by the armpits so he could hoist her up and plant her against the bulkhead then knelt in front of her.

"You move from there," he said through a grin he knew was far from genial, "I just might spank your cute ass. Got it?"

She just snorted a very unladylike laugh and kissed the air in his direction. Fuck, he liked women with fire in them!

"You're gonna regret that, Clark."

"Bite me."

"Okay."

He did. On the inside of the thigh. She gasped and was about to smack him in the head when he caught her hand midway, reversed it then bit the inside of her wrist before placing a tender kiss on the mark. She let him do all that. He didn't scare her one bit apparently. Her, a gal alone in space—for some reason, it bugged him she'd fly courier runs without backup. He looked up at her. And as if two women were staring back down at him, he saw a duality he'd never taken the time to notice before. The hard and tender, fun and stoical, the tough pilot and warm woman.

Could she get any sexier?

Now that he looked at her, really *looked* at her, there was a third layer. Pain. He could spot pain two hundred paces away. He'd dispensed and taken quite a bit of it in his stupid years running drugs. Had it always been there, he wondered. Something recent? What?

His macho pride reared its antennas. Had a guy messed with her? Fuck, just the thought... He'd rip the jerk apart.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked. And just like that, the iceberg that was her personality sank a bit further, hid a bit deeper underneath the surface. A glimpse. Barely.

"Trying to picture you outside a pilot's chair." Keep it nice and safe. Didn't want to spook her.

Jackie smiled. "And?"

"Pretty damn hard." He kissed her belly, licked it. "You wear dresses sometimes? Short ones so your guy can take you with the thing on?"

Oh, she liked *that*.

"I love it," he went on, fanning the flames. "Fucking with clothes on."

A shiver pebbled her skin and made hard points of her nipples. He trapped one, rolled it, exulted in the moan of pleasure he triggered from her.

"Ever tried it?"

"No."

"You've had boring guys."

She shrugged. "Haven't had one of those in a while. No time."

The thought couldn't even take root in his skull. No guy in a while? Were they all fucking blind? Dumb? Both? Who wouldn't want to score a woman like her? Everyone needed someone to take the slack, to hold the light while the other fiddled under the hood. She did. He did. Everybody did. He had Lydia, who tormented him with threats of blind dates—"You're so *old*, Ty, you need a woman soon". Who did Jackie Clark have? He couldn't remember her making a single mention of family or friend. She hadn't hung out with any of the gals, hadn't dated any of the guys—he would've known right away and probably would've gotten drunk over it like the true ass he was. Had she no one? "Well, we have some now. Not much, but some."

Terrence Weller decided he wanted a whole lot more time with her. Not just a couple hours in the cramped bathroom of her ship.

“Make me a bit of room, would you?” he asked after he kissed her navel then placed another—a wet and noisy one—on her pussy. “Right here.”

She hooked a foot over the shower ledge and slowly rubbed both hands downward over her belly, spread herself for him. Oh the tease. Skin shiny with water made him lick his lips. This was going to be a feast.

As soon as his mouth touched the sweet, wet cunt the color of an exotic flower, plentiful honey rewarded him.

“You were waiting for that, weren’t you?”

Even though she didn’t say anything, she replied with her expression. Nothing beat a woman going all dreamy at his handling.

So he gave it to her again. A wide lick. “You like that, hmm?” he mumbled against her tender flesh.

Rosy and malleable, he made her pussy his by rubbing the skin upward with his thumbs, stretching the hood off the little pearl so he could flick his tongue at it, make it all nice and tight for him. Her belly tightened then concaved. She was liking this a lot. Good girl.

“That’s it, show me how you like it.”

He licked her. Sucked her in deep. Repeated the actions over and over again. More honey dribbled onto his fingers. He spread the nectar then filled his face with it. Ty couldn’t help the growl that sounded like a goddamn supercharged booster with no off switch. He just couldn’t stop himself. He had to let the extra energy and appreciation out some way. Jackie smiled, eyes closed, bottom lip tucked between her teeth. He made her wetter than wet, then when he knew she was ready, introduced a finger into her, reversed his wrist so he could rub that special place the ladies liked. A soft moan left her.

“You like?”

“Mmyeah.”

"What was that?" He rubbed her frontal wall while sucking on her clit. Oh, she liked *that*! Her hips started working. Push. Push. "I said, 'what was that?'"

She scowled, showed her teeth. "Just... Ohhh."

"Yeah," he replied through a grin. "That's what I thought."

"Don't stop," she whispered, gave his head a little smack. The clack of wet skin on skin made him grin. "Don't you *stop*."

"Or what?"

She moaned, furiously rolled her hips.

She didn't need to warn him. He didn't stop. Couldn't have. Stopping himself from eating her out wasn't something he wanted to even consider. She tasted too damn fine for starters. Like honey, salt water and something deeply feminine. A lethal cocktail. And on top of her fine taste, he loved, just *loved*, how she responded to him, how he could make her writhe and shake just with simple touches. As if he could reach through that armor she wore, the one she seemed to have built directly around herself instead of having slipped it on. Built with no closures or moving pieces in case something snuck through and hurt her. Through their sexual encounter, Ty felt as if he could touch the woman inside the armor. Using sex not as a weapon, but as a *key*.

He spotted her thighs cramping, hips working harder. She was close. Real close. Slowly, Ty introduced a second finger. Instead of licking her clit, he sucked on it. Hard.

She gasped, pulled herself up and wide for him, legs shaking, belly too. In her own little world. The wave coming, swelling. He loved watching his lovers come. Such a treat. Still, her eyes were closed. Had to change that. Had to see them.

"Look at me."

Twin black suns nearly blinded him by their intensity when she angled her chin downward. Against her skin the color of wet sand, her almond-shaped eyes resembled two shards of polished basalt. He'd seen ancient death masks with eyes like those. The passion, the quiet wisdom, the "I could kill you with my pinky but it'd mess my hair".

Except hers also betrayed a great pain. Fuck, he'd give an arm to fix it. Then again, maybe he shouldn't even dare trying.

"Are you close?"

She nodded, made a soft mewling sound deep in her throat.

"How close?" He licked her pussy once, hard, then again. Pumped his fingers. "How close? Tell me."

"Close..." she whispered then bit down, lolled her head.

With his thumb he kept her nice and tight for him, sucked her clit in and used his tongue to roll it against his upper lip. Bingo.

He pulled away, growled, "Let me hear it."

"Ah... Ah... God..."

Ty felt pitiless so he continued his tongue work even though he knew she was past the point of no return. Just wanted to make sure she was going to crash through the wall, not just hit it head-on.

"That's it," he breathed over and over. Honey rewarded him in shiny ribbons. "That's it."

A gasp left him when her pussy clenched around his fingers. Damn hard too! Even the skin outside pulsed against his lips. He kissed her while she came, licked the juices that glistened on his hand and closed his eyes so he could savor the feel of her squeezing around his fingers like a wave of flesh, an adjusted sheath, a perfect home.

Something he'd never had. But the devil knew he wanted.

Jackie thought she was going to explode. Literally disintegrate into a million shards. She'd never, ever had a man eat her out with such greed before. Ever. As if he were afraid to run out, starve to death.

The violence of her orgasm both shocked and rocked her. She came and within seconds came again because he'd kept his fingers there, deep in her, his mouth clamped onto her sex, licking, sucking, kissing. Fucking.

But for the most part, it'd been his eyes. She'd been busy enjoying his handling until he'd told her to look at him. Commands had never been something she'd taken from men. Especially not in bed. She knew what she wanted and how to get it. But so did he, it would seem. Those eyes... They'd pulled her in.

No, that wasn't it. Ty had let himself into *her*. Not just physically. As if he'd been able to see inside her head, her heart, sift through the layers of defenses, somehow navigated the minefield she'd set around herself. Maybe he could tell the whole of her wasn't exactly the sum of its parts, that something was missing, a sliver that she kept all to herself. So much more perceptive than she'd given him credit.

Ecstasy rippled through her, tore a moan that emptied her lungs. The intimacy, the sharing of sensations, of their bodies, had tilted her into the abyss. And into it she still roiled now, twirling, blind, deaf, lost, like a cork on a raging sea, a leaf in a tornado, spinning and confused yet centered as never before. He did that to her, steadied her. Like a pillar. Jackie Clark needed neither security nor sheltering—she'd always provided her own—but something solid on which to lean occasionally was nice. Very nice.

She tried to reach down to caress his face, but he kept her pinned with a hand pressed against her sternum. "If you move from there I'll spank your cocky ass."

Heat flushed her cheeks. "Don't stop," she growled at him while she reached for his face again. "Just don't—"

"I warned you. Down," he snarled, pulling on her wrist. "Down on your knees."

Jackie didn't have time to protest as he pulled her to the hard deck, bent her over, torso sticking out of the stall and backend to him.

She bumped her shoulder on the door, cursed. "What the hell—"

A cry left her when he stretched her wide and shoved his face between her thighs. So this was his idea of spanking? A hot mouth then cool air provided titillating contrast. A split second after, the clack of wet-on-wet skin. Heat radiated from her butt up her back.

He'd slapped her butt? Had actually *slapped* her butt?!

"Hey!"

"Just like I thought," he whispered, bending over her to put his mouth by her ear. God, that throaty voice. "There were times I'd look at you and my hands would be tingling...*tingling*, gorgeous. Because I could imagine what it'd be like, what you'd feel like. I couldn't even think straight around you."

His voice filled her brain with vivid images at the same time as it emptied her mind of any coherent thought. All she knew was that she wanted. Everything. All of him.

"More," she whispered, chewed her bottom lip. Cut a glance over her shoulder and caught the intense look in his narrowed eyes. He positively towered over her. Muscles bulged when he shifted his weight. From whisper her voice hardened. She knew what she wanted, always had. "Give me more."

"If you ask for it, it's not a spanking, is it?"

"I won't *beg*," she retorted.

Another sound smack on the butt. A half whoop, half gasp escaped her.

"I know you wouldn't."

Tingles rippled outward from her butt to her back, which he kissed tenderly, on occasion raking his teeth over her shoulder or neck.

He slapped her butt again, lighter, more like a tap, but this time landing closer to the center. She huffed a cry, curled her spine upward. "You call that spanking?" she taunted, chuckled.

"No, that's just having fun." He pulled back, licked his way down her spine. While she watched, he knelt behind her and wrapped his big hands around her hips, thumbs digging into her cheeks. Electrifying.

"When I start," he murmured, eyebrow cocked high. The same arrogant ass—good-looking, stubborn, skilled, lovable in a gruff way—she'd enjoyed so much. "You'll know the difference, believe me."

"What are you...? Oh Jesus."

He'd just pushed his face between her butt cheeks hard enough to overbalance her and licked her in one hard pass, front to back. She shuddered, stifled a moan. Fire accompanied his mouth.

"You liked that?"

She didn't even try for smug or proud. "Yes! Yes!"

He brought her there again. Right against the edge. Let her breathe a couple times, let her rest. Then again. She let out a long moan. Pure torture.

"Push against me, gorgeous," he said behind her.

She did. So close. A mere touch would send her over. But instead of continuing his masterful tongue work, he proceeded to kiss her lower back, the insides of her thighs, her spine.

"Stop that," she panted. "Do what you did before."

"No."

"Come on. Dammit!"

"Next time I tell you to stay put, you going to or not?"

The wave receded. She was going to lose it. Damn him. Jackie reached between her legs to finish the job herself but he caught her wrist, planted it behind her back. Without the support, she collapsed on her side.

"That's cheating, gorgeous. Can't have that."

Before she could share with him what was on her mind, he flipped her leg up, hoisted her against him. On a long snarl, he took her. Hard and quick. She cried out his name. Maybe. She wasn't sure. All she knew was that he'd popped back out, leaving behind fever-like heat that spread wider, deeper. On a long contented moan, she came.

While she did, Jackie felt him gently rub her vulva with his glans, slowly back and forth. Fire subsided, spasms became light tingles.

"My turn for some dessert," he remarked, gave her cleft a quick tap that made her groan then stood.

"Come over here then." She patted the deck in front of her.

Grinning ear to ear, he padded around her, managed the cramped bathroom without knocking any of her things off the narrow shelves then stood with his feet—*huge* feet—wide apart, cock bobbing.

She patted the deck again.

With a roll of eyes, he went down on one knee. "You always so damn difficult in bed?"

"Only when it's good."

He seemed about to say something but just nodded, licked his upper lip when she fisted his cock and ran her palm up and down, rubbed the tip with her thumb, spread the drop of pre-cum around his glans. Into her mouth she took him. Deep. She heard his gasp, felt the shudder traverse him.

"Motherfu—" he growled.

Jackie gave him the ride of his life. With energy that bordered on frenzy, she sucked his cock as if there were no tomorrow. She rolled her fist around his shaft, licked his glans in quick little passes then slow, measured ones, tapped it against her tongue, moaned loudly as she worked her jaw to accommodate his girth. Perfect shape for her. Just wide enough, just long enough. And hot enough to burn her lips.

Ty pushed against her shoulder. "Okay, okay, goddammit. We want to keep some for later, right?"

"I don't know," Jackie replied, licking her upper lip. "Do we?"

"Oh you little..."

She yelped when he grabbed her by the crook of the hip and flipped her end to end so her butt was plastered right against his lower belly, his hands all over her breasts while his thighs nudged hers so she'd spread wider. Wild sex in her ship's tiny bathroom. Like teenagers in the back of a shuttle. The comparison made her chuckle.

"Something funny, Clark?" A trace of irritation laced his hoarse voice.

"Nope, proceed."

Without warning, he pressed his cock against her entry. Slid in all the way. She'd expected fire but couldn't be prepared for the inferno melting her from the inside out. He was so hot, so *hot*. Burning. So good. Her moan filled the tiny space. But he pulled out.

She turned, caught the look of triumph in his eyes. "Hey!"

"You want it, you're gonna have to tell me."

"I already did," she snapped as she rolled her hips back to rub herself against him. So slick and hot.

"I forgot."

The voice alone could do wonders to her libido. But Jackie still wanted what he'd taken from her. Namely his cock. "Come on, Ty. Don't tease."

"But I *love* teasing." He pushed all the way under her so their flesh rubbed in all the right places.

Fever. Cramps. Her senses rioted. "No more teasing."

The finality of her tone must have convinced him to deliver and right this instant or there'd be hell to pay.

"You're right," he said. "No more teasing."

He thrust hard and deep. Lifted her knees off the deck.

“Ah!”

“Again?”

“Yes! Yes!”

The inferno spread through her entire body. Despite the discomfort on her kneecaps, pleasure rippled along her back and thighs, down in her pussy, tightened her breasts. As if she experienced an out-of-body episode, she heard her voice rising. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Crescendo, higher still. His cock filled her, stretched her, branded and claimed her. She took him in. To the end of him—of her. The wave rose. Blocked out everything else. Ecstasy hit. Fire consumed her inhibitions and alertness and reduced her to nerve endings and lungs.

Her voice was like a whip on his lower back. Ty didn’t think he could give it to her any harder, deeper and with more energy than he already was. To the last ounce and inch, he imparted to her pussy the fire in his lower back and thighs, in his belly. Transferred and communicated through his body what burned him inside. Everything. Teasing lick of flames. Sensualization. Spurred by the sight of her ass jiggling for the force of his thrusts, he pounded. Pounded.

Shit. He wouldn’t last long. Had already lasted a helluva lot longer than he thought possible given the serious case of fuck-fever that had descended on him. Years worth of it.

His legs burned—his balls and belly. Yet she wanted more. Yelled for it, snarled and whispered demands and threats.

A split second later he felt the wave rising. He came. Fuck, he *exploded*.

His roar surprised him. He’d never been the screamer type. But in the one second of blinding clarity, of pure ecstasy, he emptied his lungs until they burned, until his diaphragm hurt.

The world spun around his head. “Jackie...”

He tried to brace himself, failed. As if he’d been shot, he collapsed on his side, taking Jackie with him, their bodies still writhing in the throes of pleasure. Nothing mattered more than touching her, to keep touching her. Not the hard lumps under his shoulder nor the cold deck against his hip. Not the fact he’d probably lost his ship for good, nor how he was already thinking about the next time they’d have sex. He wanted there to be a next time, dammit. Wanted it and would have it.

Because in that one moment he knew, probably had known all along. She was special. Jackie Clark wasn’t like any other woman out there. He’d been a damn fool for not making a move back then, and doubly a fool if he didn’t latch on to her now. Ty had many faults—he was his old man’s son after all, despite Lydia’s claims he was a good guy trapped inside a part-time asshole—but making the same mistake twice wasn’t on the list. He *never* made the same mistake twice.

* * * * *

Jackie had always enjoyed the view of Titan Five from the spaceports. Cylindrical habitats stuck on top of one another like piled logs with blue lights all around the circumference resembling bracelets of sapphires.

Sitting at her controls, she kept the station on the main viewscreen. By her side, Ty, standing, scowled still. A few minutes after uploading Ray’s data from his chief designer, she’d inquired to Tower about salvage teams. Unfortunately, they were informed none would be available for weeks.

Jackie sighed. Another thing she had to fix. So many of them. Just for one day—a week was too much to ask—she’d like to lie down somewhere nice and warm and not have to organize, classify, calculate and forecast anything. Maybe even keep a weekend to herself instead of playing cards with her folks.

What the hell was she thinking?

“You okay?” he asked without turning toward her.

Jackie pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yeah. Can't wait to get home, that's all."

He straightened, tucked his T-shirt back into his cargo pants. Muscles corded enticingly on his shoulders. Despite the hours and light-years since their disorderly tryst in her bathroom, she could still feel him everywhere. "Where's home?" he asked.

"Cassiopeia, Level Four. You?"

"My ship."

Renewed guilt made her swallow hard. "I'm really —"

Ty held up his hand. "We'll figure something out. *If* your ship can take us back to Ray and his fat bank account."

Jackie couldn't help the defensive reaction. "*Lazarus* is a good ship."

"Fifty years ago, maybe."

"Hey."

Ty turned to her, rubbed his shaven skull hard. "I'm cranky right now, okay, sorry. I *need* that ship. It's Lydia's ticket, you know. Her ticket out."

"Lydia?" Her voice came out like a subdued squeak that instantly shamed her.

But it seemed to please him because he gave her one of his dark half grins. "My baby sister. She's going to be a doctor." Pride sparkled in his eyes. "She's going to make something of herself."

"I didn't know you had a sister." She didn't know the first thing about him.

Actually, she'd known *of* Terrence Weller for years. Had thought she had him figured out. A driven courier, a skilled pilot, a man too hot to touch. But Jackie realized now she hadn't understood the first thing about him, that a depth of character lurked beneath the rough shell, the badass attitude. He was still the big scary guy with whom no colleague had wanted to fly. But a sensitive streak ran through him. A sliver of blue sky between thunderclouds.

"She's twenty, studies at the Reykjavik School of Medicine, back on Earth where we're from."

"That's a very prestigious school," Jackie replied with a nod. Must cost a fortune. She was shocked a courier could afford the tuitions alone, never mind the residency programs and cost of living on Earth. Ty must have been sending three quarters of his earnings down that way. Not unlike her. The age difference between the siblings also surprised her. Ty was at least in his mid-thirties.

"Lydia surprised *all* of us," he said with a tight smile. "I was sixteen when she was born, so I was old enough to see the storm coming. I took care of her when my folks finally split. It'd been years in the making, so no big shock. I did what my old man should've done, made sure she had a clear shot at a good life, properly beat up her first boyfriends, that sort of things."

She smiled. "The best part of a big brother's job, I'm sure."

"Damn right. Plus, if you're not there for those in your family who deserve it," he said with a shrug, "what the hell good are you to anyone?"

Jackie's heart skipped a beat.

Her reaction to his comment must have surprised—and intrigued—him since he faced her, cocked his head. "Is that why you were always pulling double shifts, why you're running the belt nowadays? Need the extra credits? You're taking care of someone?"

"No."

Those were her affairs. Not anything she wished to share. Before she could weasel out of the situation, he turned his attention to the consoles. Jackie suspected he'd done it on purpose and was thankful for it.

"What's going on now?" he remarked, pointing at the rising numbers on the temperature dial. "We're not even off Titan Five and your ship's overheating?"

"*Lazarus* is always within that range. It's normal."

"For you it is," he grumbled, crossed his arms. Jackie yawned, sat straighter at the console then maneuvered *Lazarus* out of the docking station, computers full of Ray's

data, and soon, her coffers full of his credits. It'd taken her a bit longer than usual to reach Titan Five, download the data, fuel up then get ready to head back home. They'd hit a traffic jam minutes before reaching the station's airspace. A backup of ships worth ninety minutes because of solar activity at the edge of the system messing with transmissions. Waste of time. But what a ride it'd been. In every sense of the word.

"You gonna answer that?" he grumbled.

She snapped out of her mental trip to find the nav console bleeping at her. "Reports indicate heightened solar activity," a female Tower said after Jackie activated the link. The voice sounded like her Aunt Flora's. Nasal, annoying but well-meaning. "All ships are advised to stay in port."

"Copied, *Lazarus* out," Jackie replied then cut the comms. She didn't need Aunt Flora to fly her run back home. She knew the way with her eyes closed. Half closed.

"You always fly blind?" Ty asked, coming to stand right over her shoulder. The heat of his body close to hers scattered her neurons. "She just said there was solar activity, something's going on. A storm probably. Tune on the news so we can see what's up."

"It's just some solar activity, not a full-fledged storm. Otherwise she wouldn't have just 'advised' us to stay. We have time to make it to Cassiopeia."

"Still, I wanna know what the hell's going on." He reached over her shoulder for one of the smaller viewscreens, froze midway. "Old habits," he said a few inches from her ear. "Not my ship."

Heat flared out of her suit. God, would she ever get used to that throaty voice? "That's...um, that's okay." Still, that he'd ask first pleased her.

After a long, sexually charged look that made her hot and ready for more—no time, dammit, they had a run to do—he tuned the comms to Titan Five's civilian channel, which filled the slate-gray panel with first static then images of a newsroom.

"You think they have dirty movies on?" His chuckle raised the hairs on her arms. "Maybe we could make our own, hmm?"

“Then sell them for profit...or not.”

A frisson tightened her nape when Ty leaned closer, put his mouth right against her ear. His scent filled her nose, her brain. He smelled like man. “How ‘bout I spank your cocky ass here and now, hmm? Bend you over that console right there? You think we’d make profit on *that*?”

With meaning plain on his face, he licked his hand from palm to fingertips, slapped his thigh. Despite the cargo pants, the clack reverberated once. In spite of herself, she started. Prickling like hot needles poked her along the inside of the thighs. That could’ve been her butt. It *had* been her butt only a couple of hours ago. A spike of adrenaline and thrill shot down her spine. He could make her hot with just a few whispered words and a cheap trick. It was that throaty voice! And the hot body, and the attitude, and... Yeah, well, the whole package.

His pupils and nostrils dilated when she leaned away from him so she could stare fully into his face. “Are you making me a promise or a threat?”

“Which one would piss you off the most...*gorgeous*?”

Had she been hooked to medical machines right now, her blood pressure would’ve broken records. Wasn’t all bad either. “Oh you big—”

An image on the news caught her attention. A reporter was interviewing a woman in a white HAZMAT suit tied at the waist. White for medical situations, Jackie remembered. Orange meant industrial.

The images mixed with those of another “expert” six years before in a likewise white HAZMAT suit, telling everyone that Nova Luna colony airspace had been sealed, trapping everyone inside. And aid *outside*.

Jackie remembered even now, years later, the exact feeling in her gut when she’d realized her parents had just shuttled relief workers to the site. The sinking, the downward spiral. Then it’d been fighting all the red tape, the waiting, the excruciating pain of watching her parents’ ruined bodies on gurneys in the halls of overcrowded

hospitals when governments had allowed the sick off Nova Luna. Crushing bills. Humiliating insurance questionnaires that wanted details no one should share.

Above all, the fear that something should happen to her, the only child, her parents would not only live in medicated misery but in wretched poverty as well.

Jackie's eyes stung as she looked away, cleared her throat.

"Doesn't look good," Ty remarked. Even if he wasn't looking at her, she knew he was watching her reaction.

She tried not to give him any. Failed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm good. Just tired."

"Being tired doesn't make you look like you've seen ghosts, Jackie. It makes you dull, stupid, slow. Cranky, in my case. But not the way you look now."

"I said I'm *okay*," she snapped.

For a long time Ty just watched her as a hawk would, leaning over the console, gaze intent on her face as if he waited. For what, she didn't know, wanted to believe she didn't care either. Such a lie. She cared what he thought. In fact, she'd developed something of a small crush on him. Too bad she didn't have the time to do anything about it. She couldn't let him see inside. That was for her alone. Not something to share with a man—a competitor, for God's sake!

Breathe, she mentally scolded.

"If you say so," he said at length, straightening.

If he had raged and complained, cursed or acted like a frustrated macho, it would've been easier to deal with. Jackie was used to those reactions, had become adept at fighting the pushy, straight-arming through doors. What she hadn't dealt with before was a man—especially one like the "scary" Ty Weller, who had terrified other couriers—to show such empathy and restraint. Such understanding and patience.

"I'm okay," she repeated, calmer. "I don't like these things, I don't like how they're dealt with, you know. All the damn red tape while folks suffer."

He nodded, eyes narrowed pensively as he turned the screen off.

Prox alerts bleeping saved her from trying to claw her way out of the hole into which she'd let herself slide. Again. The asteroid belt and the gas giant loomed in front of her prow. Still light-years away but already menacing. She had to snap out of it.

"Okay," she said. "Here we go."

They were about to enter the dangerous part of their journey back and she needed all her faculties intact. As much as the haunting images of both tragedies allowed.

Jackie tried to keep the positive in mind. Within hours she'd have her account full of credits.

And Terrence Weller wouldn't have a single thing. No ship, no livelihood. His baby sister may not become a doctor after all. Maybe he'd feel the way she would if she could no longer afford the private sanitarium where her folks resided. Damn.

She sighed. But what else could she do? She'd already taken him onboard, promised to help with the salvage. What *more* could she do?

"What do you say I man the nav side while you fly this old clunker?"

"I don't need —"

"Did I ask if you needed help?" he snapped. "No. I said you mind if —"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. You man the nav. If it'll help you shut up, do it."

He kissed the pad of his middle finger, extended it to flip her the bird then blew the "kiss" toward her. "Don't turn me on, gorgeous, I can't focus when I'm turned-on."

She snorted a laugh. How could he do this? Make everything just blink out? As if the two of them on her flight deck were her entire universe?

He grinned wide when she shook her head, made room for him to work the nav console by her right. Frankly, in her condition, sleep-deprived and fighting the effects he had on her, she didn't mind his help flying through the dreaded asteroid belt,

especially since a thick cluster of building-sized rocks was coming at them hard and fast. Millions of tons of silicate, iron and other hard things that made space ships go *crunch*. Yet she wouldn't have it any other way. Those were the runs that paid the best.

"Okay, we're there," she said. Excitement made her voice high-pitched.

Five thousand miles off her prow, the asteroid belt's outer ring, populated with smaller chunks. Every last one still big enough and hard enough to pulverize *Lazarus*.

"It's turning you on," Ty murmured, licked his upper lip. "We've got a hail of incoming boulders and you're getting wet. Damn, you're something else, Jackie Clark."

She took the compliment for what it was and reciprocated with a provocative eyebrow wiggle that seemed to momentarily make him lose his focus. The lump in his cargo pants also betrayed his state of mind.

"When this is over..." he said. His feral expression finished the statement.

Jackie shivered. When this was over...

"Heads up," Ty went on, all business as he stared hard at the console over which he stood. No co-pilot chair. Never intended to *have* a co-pilot in the first place. Not that she disliked the idea of backup though, even if at first she'd hated the notion of relinquishing that much control over her schedule. Losing control meant delays, loss of profit, more problems with which she'd have to deal. "Starboard, two thousand miles. A big one."

Big indeed.

She knew stations smaller than this baby. Damn. She fired the thrusters at half capacity, cleared the Big One, as Ty had justly dubbed it, only to meet its family trailing behind. A veritable cloud of them.

"We need to get the hell out of here," she announced before gunning the engines for three seconds. A full burst that pressed her into the seat. By her side, Ty grabbed one of the rods holding the viewscreens in place and used it as a Holy Shit Handle, held on while he kept working navigation with his free hand.

"There's a clear spot two point one miles wide," he said. "Gonna be tight."

"Heading?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Hang on."

"With your fine piloting, damn right I'm hanging on."

She laughed as she entered into a lazy spin, cleared the massive cluster of asteroids, her left wing coming within hundreds of feet of the closest one. Close. The prox alerts concurred with that. She silenced them. Damned screaming banshees.

"You know what Russian roulette is?" he asked without taking his gaze off his work.

Jackie banked left, leveled off. A quarter burst then attitude jets at full capacity. "No. What's that?"

"Folks used to play it. Half a mile, portside, nice and steady, that's it. Put a bullet in the chamber and spin it, point the gun to your head then see if you're lucky. Damn, you came close!"

"You think that's close?"

Just as she cleared the last asteroid, the milky white and smoky blue gas giant's curvature, all thirty-seven thousand miles of it, allowed for a look at its lower orbit. A flash of silver caught her attention. Guilt stabbed her deep. She recognized that shape, the silvery hull.

Ty's crippled ship.

Chapter Four

Just as when she'd watched the news, her expression changed from the tough-as-nails pilot who could make his balls cramp with just a look, to what he was presently seeing. A wounded soul.

The same pain he'd glimpsed when they'd had sex...though not just a glimpse now. Pain and something else—fear? What could possibly frighten the toughest woman he knew? But she *was*. He could tell. Something frightened her to the core. Of course, his macho side decided he should fix that right this instant and damn the torpedoes.

"Hey," he said gently. "You all right?"

She shook her head, pointed to a spot near the upper right corner of the screen. "Your ship." Her voice was subdued.

He took a look at the screen. Tensed.

"Yeah," he snarled, taking his gaze off the screen before he popped a vein. "That's my ship all right."

She'd royally screwed him, hadn't she? In every sense of the word. He should be mad at her. Which he was. Hell, he should be *madder*. Lydia's semester was ending, which would give him barely three months to find enough money for her residency placement in the fall. Fuck. Maybe he'd have to do the kind of runs that had landed his ass in trouble back in his stupid years. Hell no. There had to be another way.

"I'm sorry, Ty," Jackie said with a quick look his way. "I really am. I'll make it up to you, okay?"

Sleeplessness stung his eyes, made him ornery as all hell. "Just fly the damn thing, would you? I'll figure something out. I always do."

"It's my mess."

“Oh what, now we’re going to argue for whose fault it is the most? For fuck’s sake!”

Thing was, he didn’t feel the rage he ought to. Why the fuck wasn’t he enraged at Jackie’s little stunt? She’d cost him his ship. He wouldn’t get the agreed-upon cut. Plus, he’d have to mount a salvage run, hire someone, the works. It’d take days, weeks. But he’d make sure Jackie Clark defrayed some of it. Her fault, after all. Fucking right.

He cut a glance down at her, the way she sat hunched over the control stick, white-knuckled fist around it, thumb ready to fire the boosters, feet on the pedals, eyes on the target. A study in determination. A picture of focus. And in his book, the cutest chick he’d ever met, just as he’d thought when they worked together years ago.

What had she done to him? Crippled his ship and male ego as thoroughly as she had wormed her way into his head. He should *hate* her for half of what she’d done, potentially crippled Lydia’s future. But he didn’t and that was that.

In fact, he was starting to like her a lot, despite the bristly carapace—or probably *because* of it.

Already he was getting a hard-on just remembering what they’d shared. Never mind what the future held in store. Because he *did* intend to spank her ass good, give the cocky little shit her due. He’d love every second of it.

After a colorful curse—that could be done to goats?—Jackie checked her watch, grimaced. There was plenty of time left to reach Cassiopeia Station, why did she look as if they were out? She muttered something he didn’t quite catch, leaned closer to her workstation. Then out of the blue, changed headings, aimed straight for the planet.

WTF?

He spread his feet wider for the change in velocity. The woman needed another damn seat on this old clunker. “Hey! What the hell are you doing?”

“Watch our back,” she replied.

“Where the *fuck* are you going?”

“I always clean up my own messes.”

"And that's supposed to tell me what? Six o'clock, right on our tail." He gritted his teeth when she cleared the asteroid with a powerful burst of boosters and a deft roll that made his innards churn.

She turned to him. And he knew.

"You're *nuts*," he breathed, half awed, half disbelieving.

She didn't intend to...

A roll of the eyes, another inspired curse. "*I am nuts*."

"You can't do that," he growled, shook his head. "Hell, even *I* can't do that."

"I am...correction, *we* are." Eyes like twin dark suns stared right into his heart and soul.

It'd been more than a crush he'd had on her. Denial wouldn't work anymore.

"Fuck!"

Like a bullet, she shot straight for lower orbit, prow dead center as though she meant to fly right through the gas giant – which she couldn't do of course. But the aim was the same. Within seconds, the asteroid belt was behind them and every system on the old ship was bleeping, wailing, chiming their little hearts out as she fought against the planet's gravitational pull. His nav aids indicated they had to either level off or become a hunk of burning metal on their way to a fiery death.

"You intend to kill us quick or slow?"

"You're not afraid, are you?" Despite the bravado, he could see fear in her gaze, in the way a muscle twitched along her jaw.

"Nah," he replied, hiking his belt buckle higher. "Just wanna make sure you know what you're doing."

They exchanged a smile and a nod. If they came out of this alive, he was taking the woman out on a proper date before fucking their respective brains out.

Feet wide, hands on the only thing he trusted could take his weight, Ty licked his bottom lip, let out a curse just to take the edge off. “Did I ever tell you I love crazy women? Always have.”

She didn’t reply, only kept flying toward the very, very large planet. It was kind of pretty, now that he had all the luxury in the world of staring at its blue, purple and green roiling surface. On the main viewscreen, the planet grew, filled every pixel. At the upper right corner, growing as well, his ship. Goddamn, she really was going through with this.

“Jackie,” he started, shook his head when she pulled on the control stick, executed a hellishly tight hairpin that made him feel as though he weighed four hundred pounds. Fuck, he wanted a seat already!

“Even if you retrieve my ship, there won’t be enough time to make it back to Cassiopeia,” he finished.

“I know.”

“You realize what it means.”

“I do.”

So she *had* changed. He’d never known Jackie Clark to do anything for free.

“Even if it’s all your fault,” he said, grinning when she threw him a quick, murderous glance. “I’ll make it up to you. How ’bout steak and sex? My treat, both.”

“Terrence Weller, you guide me through this next run, and I swear it’ll be a date you’ll always remember. Now you’re my eyes.”

And her willing sex slave, but that he didn’t say out loud. Had to preserve some bit of dignity, right? It was enough he felt all choked up over her crazy stunt. She was one in a million, and if he had his say, all his.

Sweat trickled down her temple as she licked her lips, gave little jerks to the joystick to bring them in gradually—or as gradually as one could flying a ship to rendezvous

with another while in low orbit. Twenty miles. Fuck, the planet was pulling them in hard.

"Forty-five degrees, forty-four, forty. You know that spanking... I wasn't yanking your chain. You're getting one."

"Already did."

"Then you're getting another."

She laughed. "Bring it on."

He'd never been so damn turned-on. He could die in the next minute. They could crash into his ship, or miscalculate and nosedive toward the planet, the ship could disintegrate within minutes, seconds, but he had never been so turned-on in his entire life. Jackie Clark had gotten under his skin. And he guessed she'd snuck into another tight spot as well...his heart.

Well, wouldn't Lydia enjoy tormenting him now!

"Ten miles," Ty warned. If his face became any tighter, it'd crack down the middle.

She could relate. She was basically going against every pilot instinct and training, every trait of human nature. No one had ever attempted what she — *they* — were about to do. Recover a ship in low orbit without the benefit of tractor hooks and a salvage team. A ship-to-ship operation. Nuts. Crazy. Suicidal. And the one option in the repertoire of choices that didn't make her feel as if she were taking the wrong turn in her life. She *had* to get Ty's ship back, right the wrong she'd done. She *had* to do it.

"Nine! Damn, Jackie...eight, seven."

She readied her mooring clamps. A deep *thunk* indicated they'd extended out of her ship's underbelly, ready to latch on. If she missed by a lot, she'd send both ships twirling toward the gas giant looming in the viewscreen. If she missed by a little, she'd puncture his ship or it'd rip her own hull, sending everyone to the pearly gates with their guts in their hands. If she didn't miss, maybe, just maybe, they stood a chance of

making it back to Cassiopeia alive. But not on time. Ty had judged right—there wouldn't be time to reach the station and upload the data to Ray's account. Not a chance in hell. She'd blown a run for the first time in her career, and how did it make her feel? Turned-on and proud. And that was that.

"Tell me when it's five and a half," she snapped. Sweat seeped into her eyes. She angrily wiped it off with her wrist.

He must have understood her plan—if she could call it that—since by the corner of her eye, she saw him nodding. He bent closer over the console, kissed the top of her head. "If you kill us, I'll kick your ass. But thanks all the same."

"I told you." She killed both fore attitude jets and aft thrusters. "I clean up my own messes. Always have."

"I said stop it, you're giving me the fuck-nows." He cursed, hand hovering near the controls, knowing that when she gave the signal, he'd have to work quickly and give her a split-screen visual.

Jackie blew air through pursed lips. Her heart beat so hard it hurt.

"Six miles," Ty snarled. "Five point seven five, five point five, point two five...five miles!"

"Now!"

Ty deftly switched to split screen to give her a close-up of the ships' underbellies while keeping the main view on screen...in case they wanted to see the planet coming.

With a grunt, Jackie pulled on the control stick so her prow would rise, offering her belly to Ty's crippled ship, slowing down to its speed and hopefully—with a lot of luck—fly alongside long enough for the clamps to latch on to the other's hatch.

A godawful metal-against-metal noise made her teeth rattle. Ty cursed. She did as well. A loud *clang* and the smell of smoke filled the flight deck, immediately sucked out by the emergency systems.

Ty leaned over the screen. "Half a foot...closer... Now!"

Since he had the nav aids, she trusted his timing and judgment and activated the mooring clamps just as the two ships flew perfectly aligned, belly to belly.

Even if this run would set her back several months — she'd have to fly at least eighty hours a week for a month — it'd also pay her in ways different than mere credits. It felt *right*. She was doing the right thing to the right person. He'd said himself if one wasn't there for those deserving help, then one wasn't worth much. Jackie believed in it. If she didn't help Ty get his ship back, after she'd crippled it, what sort of courier would she be? And what sort of woman? She'd worry about the financial consequences after. But one thing was for sure, she wouldn't have trouble sleeping or looking at herself in the mirror. There was just so far she was willing to take her tough-chick persona.

"Power up," he warned. "*Hurry, gorgeous.*"

Jackie gave her old ship the ride of its life. She'd never asked of her engines what she presently demanded of them — not only to tear out from low orbit, but to tow another, larger ship behind as well. But it did. *Lazarus*, all engines at maximum and entering the red zone, gradually put distance between its aft and the gas giant.

But they weren't out of trouble yet. They had to actually clear the last few light-years of asteroids before breathing a sigh of relief.

"Dead-on," Ty warned. "Two miles. Coming in fast."

She banked a bit earlier than she would've normally since she towed another ship. Perfect timing. The large chunks of death-by-pulverization harmlessly spun by their right wing.

"Well, I'll be damned," Ty said, clearly awed. "This old thing's got some life left in it."

She patted the armrest, grinned. "You did good, babe."

"Thanks, you didn't do too bad yourself."

Jackie rolled her eyes as she turned to Ty. "I was talking to *Laz* —"

The grin on him would power a station. His eyes sparkled. "You know I'm killing my badass rep for you, grinning like an idiot. If I ask for a tissue, just shoot me."

She matched his grin. "That date – when do you want it?"

The grin turned feral, the eyes blazing. "The hull will still be warm when I tear your clothes off and have my way with you. And oh, bring some honey, if you have any. I mean the kind that comes in tubes."

"Honey?"

"Yeah," he whispered, licked his upper lip. "Ho-ney."

Before her heart could regain its normal rhythm, his expression switched to business. "Cassiopeia?" he asked, fingers poised over the controls.

She gave him a quick nod because she didn't think she could use her voice yet.

Behind her, the burst pipe whistled. Things couldn't be better. In fact, right now with the man who kept calling her "gorgeous", the man on whom she'd had a bit of a crush years before, and her ship rapidly overheating, she realized her life was all right. All right indeed.

* * * * *

"What'd he say?" Ty asked as Jackie joined him on the flight deck of his crippled ship. He had weeks of repairs to look forward to. The dead of space had that effect on ship interiors.

He'd showered and shaved, changed into crisp white coveralls and none had toned down the primal, rough edge to him. A mix of rugged, outdoorsy guy and rowdy bar doorman. She loved the duality in him, always had. In portholes the size of house bay windows, Cassiopeia Station gleamed like the silver gem it was. Two hundred feet below, workers in dark blue uniforms milled along the spaceport. In a small viewscreen near the deckhead, he'd tuned to visual-only news, which showed the same haunting footage as they'd seen back at Titan Five. Jackie tried not to look at it. She didn't want to deal with his questions.

"Let's just say," she said with pretend levity, "Ray won't be calling either of us to courier his data runs. Not for a long time."

"Fuck," he snarled, shaking his head. "Best goddamn run I've ever done and still don't get a single fucking credit. That just burns my ass."

Jackie nodded, leaned on the fancy console. High tech, like the rest of Ty's ship.

She'd broken the agreement, had docked that morning and uploaded the data four hours too late, which had cost Ray the new spaceport contract for the station being built just off the nebula. He'd been *livid*. She wouldn't get a single credit, he'd yelled over the comms. Not a damn one. His accent had thickened to the point where she hadn't been too sure just *what* language he was speaking. It all meant the same to her—no two point six mil.

"How bad is the damage?" She tried not to look as sorry as she felt. One second of reckless idiocy and an entire row of dominoes had come tumbling. Not that it was all bad, considering the outcome. Both alive. Both ships relatively intact.

But both scrambling to find funds for their respective needs and responsibilities. Not her brightest moment.

"It's bad," Ty replied, grunted a curse as he peeled a piece of brittle vinyl off the backrest. The implacable cold of space had frozen it, causing cracks all over the smooth, black finish. Just his seats alone were worth a fortune each. And he had two of them. Maybe she should consider adding one, just in case...

"Anything that can't be fixed?"

He shrugged. His massive shoulder pulled at the white coveralls. The thing wasn't sexy in the least—on anyone else—but it still made her tight and twitchy. Her palms tingled.

"Everything can be fixed, when you look at it from all angles," he said after rubbing the back of his shaven head. "Anything important, anyway."

She agreed with a small nod.

"What about you?" He snapped his chin in the general direction of her ship, which was moored somewhere in front of his. "Lost anything?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I gained something."

There she was again, her expression turning dark and sad. Pained. What did she hide? Why the hell did she think she ought to carry all that crap—whatever it was—by herself? She was more macho than he was, for fuck's sake!

On the screen showing the news, he caught a short video of Red Star humanitarian ships waiting hull to hull, moored four deep and three abreast. Below the giant silvery hulls, he could recognize Mars' docks. A cluster fuck to fly at the best of times. He could just imagine the mess whatever was happening had caused.

Which brought him back to her expression. She watched the video as if part of her would rather chop her hand off. He'd offer to turn it off, but decided against it. Not this time. He was getting to the bottom of this. He hated to see her suffer this way.

"So," he said in his most teasing voice, the one he reserved for his favorite tigress. "All dressed up like that, you trying to turn me on so you can sneak in a sucker punch?"

She'd ditched the flight suit and instead wore a sexy white cotton shirt and beige cargo pants that did wonders to his imagination. A nice sturdy belt just the way he liked. Made a perfect handle for a disorderly go against the wall.

With a sigh, she turned her gaze to him. Remnants of the mysterious pain still lingered in her gaze. "No. Look, I'm sorry my little stunt cost you so much. I acted like an idiot."

Well, damn. Was that a crack he saw in her armor? There was an actual woman under all the titanium plating?

"Did that hurt, gorgeous? I bet it did. But thanks all the same."

He hooked his index finger at her, wanted to reel her in with the force of his gaze alone. She crossed the distance between them.

"Did you bring any?"

"Bring what...? Oh damn. The honey. Sorry, I didn't think— Well, I thought it wouldn't be for—" She blushed. Actually *blushed*.

Ty tsk-tsked, shaking his head. "I knew you'd forget." He slipped his hand in his pocket, produced a narrow, golden tube. He'd found it while rummaging around his galley, where the content of the cupboards littered the deck. Space was a bitch on ship interiors. "You women think guys never plan ahead. See, I did. Actually," he looked around, shrugged, "repairing my ship wasn't even on my mind. This *was*."

He stared holes into her shirt as he leaned over, put his mouth by her ear and waited, immobile, gauging. Baiting. He didn't say anything at first, just let his lips hover near her lobe then lower against that spot right under her jaw. She smelled like soap and woman. "You know what I think, Jackie Clark?" he whispered.

"What?" Her breathing sounded labored. He grinned. Just perfect for what he had in mind.

"I think," he whispered, nibbled her lobe then licked her neck. She tasted so good. Smelled even better. He loved everything about her. "I think you've wanted this for a long, long time."

She agreed with a quick nod.

"So have I. I'd fuck other women, but it was you I'd be thinking about. I'd compare and bitch to myself, I'd fill my face with their pussy all the while burning for my little Asian tigress. You have any idea what it does to a guy? Not getting what he wants? Turns them into motherfucking lunatics."

Ty circled her waist with an arm then grabbed her butt cheek. It fit his palm perfect. He was getting hard enough to hurt. Man, the effect she had on him. "I showed you mine, you know I've had it in for you since day one. Now you have to show me yours." He tried not to growl the last few words but failed.

"It was your voice," she said through her teeth. He felt her take a long intake of air. "Man, that voice, Ty... It could do things to me."

Pride would make his head too big to fit in doorways. "Like what?"

"Make me sigh, make me wet."

"Are you now?"

"Yes."

"Which brings us back to this," he whispered, holding the tube at chin level as he pulled away. "I thought I'd wait for a proper date, but fuck it, life's too short to wait for every damn last zero to align. What d'you think? You want to wait?"

If she shook her head any harder, she'd worry him.

He unscrewed the cap, reversed it to pierce the tube's metal membrane. A golden pearl pushed out. He let her see it before bringing the tube up against her bottom lip. She licked the golden drop off.

He pulled away by a step so he could see her better. "If I told you to take your shirt off, would you?"

A nod. Quick and firm. No hesitation there.

Ty made a conscious effort to not stop breathing. "Take it off."

Hands shaking, she unbuttoned her shirt then shrugged it off. The cotton made a soft rustling sound as the garment crumpled to the deck. Her skin around the white camisole shone and looked freshly creamed. Nipples tented the slinky fabric. No bra? His palms tingled.

She stood proud and strong, the tough cookie and brazen pilot, held his gaze. The iceberg had once again sunken underneath the surface. He wouldn't let her carry it all by herself. Too much for one person. He was there, wanted to help, meant to stick around for the long run if she let him.

"Do you like it when your guy looks at you while you're taking your clothes off?"

"I haven't had that sort of time lately."

"Why not? What's more important than this?" He gestured at her from head to toe. "I'd let nothing get in the way of this."

A half-resigned, half-defiant expression tightened her face. Clearly, there was a battle going on beneath the surface. "I have people who need me. It takes a lot of my free time."

"People? What, you got a tribe somewhere waiting for the huntress to bring back the bacon?"

Jackie snorted a laugh, shook her head. "My parents."

Ty logged the small victory then gave her that crooked grin he knew she liked. "Are you cold?"

"No, why?"

"Then you can take that off too." Jackie slipped the camisole over her head, dropped it on the deck between them. Not a stitch of rebellion. They both wanted the same thing.

His balls cramped painfully. He was turned-on like never before. But he had to get inside that armor. He didn't mind using the moment. Ty refused, just *refused* to let her stew in whatever was bringing her down. He liked her too much.

When he approached, he almost popped a vein just watching her nipples grow gradually harder-looking and tight. Goose bumps pebbled her belly and shoulders. Ty tucked his bottom lip in, bit down hard so he could keep his cool while he dropped a single pearl of honey on one of her collarbones, let it slowly make its way down to her breast. Her belly quivered. Oh he had her now.

Without giving her time to process the movement, he leaned into her abruptly, gave her breast a quick, hard lick. He heard her grind her teeth, let a soft moan out through the nose.

"Your folks are lucky to have a daughter like you who takes care of them."

"T-They took care of me...oh God, do that again. They did it for me. It's my turn."

He pressed another drop of honey on the same breast, licked it again, trapped the nipple so he could flick his tongue underneath it, even allowed himself a bit of teeth action. Not hard.

"I don't have a brother or sister," she murmured. He saw her close her eyes, let her head loll back. The skin of her throat looked too damn tempting to ignore. He licked her in a long, slow pass. "I'm all they have."

"They're older, are they?" Honey in that dip between the collarbones. A series of little bites upward. She shook from head to feet.

"No, they're —" She stopped abruptly.

Ty wanted to curse. More honey then? No problem. She arched into him when he applied a bead of golden torture to each of her nipples. Ty could swear he'd drop dead on the deck if his heart beat any faster, any harder. But he fought the primitive urges to bend her over and take her. He wanted her to do it first. She had to let him in on many different levels.

Jackie sighed. "They're ill, very ill."

Tongue and lips against her throat, he set the tube on the console behind her so he could fill his hands with her butt, squeeze it, use it as an anchor to hoist her in against him, bend her back.

"Something recent?" he asked between kisses to her nipples.

"Six years ago. They were on Nova Luna."

Oh shit.

A wave of sympathy choked him as suddenly and as powerfully as if someone had tied a noose around his neck and yanked on it. Nova Luna was where a vicious killer disease had wiped out almost everyone on either end of the age spectrum. The very young and very old hadn't been able to fight it. Her folks must have been built from tough stock to survive the disaster that had closed the colony down and cost the elected

government a few fistfuls of feathers for their handling of it. Dragging their feet didn't begin to apply.

"That's why you quit your job," he murmured, understanding dawning on him. "That's why you had to leave."

He could just imagine how a professionally driven and proud woman must have felt leaving her life behind to take care of ailing parents. She'd done it without hesitation and now obviously held no rancor. As he'd told her, if one weren't there for those in one's family who deserved it, one wasn't worth shit. In his book, Jackie Clark fucking *rocked*!

"Ah!" He'd bitten her breast, not hard but obviously enough to thrill. "Yeah, I had to. Had to be close. Spent days camped in my ship waiting to go...they wouldn't open the airspace." Anger hardened her voice.

"They didn't want more people getting sick."

"No!" she snapped. "That's not it at all. They were just trying to buy time—at the expense of those on Nova Luna—so the authorities could spin the news. Hide their shame and their mistakes."

"Like what?"

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

Ty abandoned her butt to gather her breasts, which he squeezed and molded, to her obvious delight, rolled the nipples against his thumbs, gave quick little licks. "What, they dragged their feet? They didn't process visas quick enough?"

"The airspace!" she growled, kicked the deck. "They closed the airspace too soon, damn them! I was there! Right *there* in orbit!"

Terrence Weller had never shied away from anything or anyone. And he wouldn't now. When something *had* to be done, it had to be done. But damn, it'd hurt both of them.

"They sealed the place too soon or you got there too late?"

Jackie froze.

"You asshole!"

Ty wasn't quick enough to parry the first punch to the snout but when the second came a split second after, he was ready. With the taste of blood on his tongue, he grabbed her just as she swung for a right hook that would've done some damage to his good looks and yanked her to him. But she fought him. Good God she fought him. Knees in the crotch, remaining fist flying. She spat curses and threats.

"What the hell do you mean, too late?!" she cried, trying to squeeze out. "What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Is it why there's always this cloud following you around? Huh?"

"Fuck you! I don't owe anyone anything!"

Ty cursed when she managed to slip an arm out of his wrist lock and landed another punch, this one in the solar plexus. He *oomph*-ed and quickly used his weight to pin her against the console ledge.

"Yes, you do," he growled back. "You owe it to yourself to toss that baggage. There's no need for any of that shit."

"Shit?" she snarled. "You're calling my life and my choices 'shit'?"

As tough and as strong as she was, she just couldn't fight gravity and the laws of nature. It must have burned her ass, but she couldn't dislodge him. For a terrible moment, Ty used every parcel of strength and every fiber of muscle to make a cage of himself around her, a frame within which she could rage and vent, curse and rile against everything.

Why couldn't she have arrived earlier, she asked through a snarl. Who'd take care of them if something happened to her? Who did they have but her? What made it okay for the authorities to close the airspace knowing they'd just added to the death toll? How could she keep going at the rate she did, juggling more and more pins? Why did he do this to her? Did he hate her? Had she done something to him?

For a terrible moment, he took within himself the hurt, confusion, despair, guilt and hatred. He took the fear as well. All into him.

Sweating and shaking—the woman could *kick*—he felt her grow limp in his arms. Then start to tremble. He closed his eyes and took that as well. The tears.

Jackie hadn't cried so hard since she'd first learned of her parents' fate. Hell, she hadn't even cried that hard *then*. Damn Terrence Weller. She hated him.

The thought stopped her cold.

She didn't hate him. How could she? She now realized what he'd done. She knew she wouldn't have let him in any other way, that she was much too proud and stubborn to let someone just waltz in. He'd had to use other means, trick her. With the best of intentions. Knowing she could push him away for good. He cared enough to try to help. God knew she never let anyone even *try*. But Ty had forced her to let him. She *could* hate him. Maybe should. Chose not to. Life was all about choices, wasn't it? This rough man, this big, scary guy who'd always intimidated her had a gentle streak inside, a kind and generous angle—a great older brother and now a dear friend to her—to the hard rest of him.

Sweat and tears linked them. In their struggle, he'd kept his cheek plastered against her forehead, his muscled arms around her to pin hers, had even managed to squeeze in a thigh between hers. God knew she'd landed a few good kneecaps in his crotch. And some punches. He'd stayed there for who knew how long as she'd thrashed and fought. It was gone now. The fight, the rage. She wasn't sure what remained. But it felt good, whatever it was. It felt...just *liberating*.

Panting, she repeatedly bumped her forehead against his upper chest. A soothing rhythm. So solid. Comforting, a constant. Something on which she could lean.

Jackie acted before her brain could convince her to stop. She angled her chin high and kissed the rough skin of his throat. She felt him shiver, loosen the bear trap. Circulation tingled down her forearms and hands. Panting still, she fisted his coveralls

on either side of his lower back to keep herself against him. More kisses to his throat, his chin and perfect jaw.

When she turned her face to his and saw him looking back at her, she knew why he'd done it. It was there, all over his face, in his dark eyes that had grown red and watery. His bottom lip looked swollen. He didn't seem to mind or to care.

She meant to say "thank you" but knew it just wouldn't convey the depth of her appreciation for what he'd done, the affection she felt for him. Instead, she'd *show* him.

"Kiss me," she whispered, voice too raw to speak aloud.

When he bent over her, abrupt, territorial, Jackie gasped. The heat of his mouth closing on hers triggered painful cramps of anticipation down below.

"Kiss me," she went on as she pulled from his mouth to nibble his chin. "Like you did. Everywhere. Kiss me."

Ty relaxed his unyielding hold to cup her butt and bend her back. To show him she wanted this, that she trusted him and realized—appreciated—what he'd done, she let herself go, let him call the shots. Within seconds he'd reduced both nipples to throbbing points again, just as he'd done with the honey. He licked and bit, sucked and kissed. The faint remnants of honey reached her nose, made her close her eyes and sigh in contentment.

"Ty," she whispered. "What you did... Thank you."

"Shh."

He spent a long time kissing and loving her breasts and her throat, at times gentle, others with primal intensity. She loved it all. Patiently waited for more. Instead of *taking* what she wanted, as she usually did, as the tough Jackie Clark always did, Jacqueline would wait for it. A nice change. All about choices.

"Maybe I should kick things up a notch if you're falling asleep," he remarked before capturing her mouth with his.

Heat. A firestorm of stimuli.

With his mouth that still tasted of honey and man, and with his pitiless hands he claimed her. Arching to give him room to maneuver, Jackie grabbed the console ledge digging into her lower back. Grabbed with both hands and let her head loll backward. Ty took the invitation, the temporary surrender. Took everything she gave him because he must have known a woman like her didn't give often. Not that sort of gift, anyway.

"You have no idea," he growled before covering a nipple with his mouth. Jackie moaned when he sucked hard, tugged then let it slip. "You have *no idea*."

A long, dry sound made her look as he zipped his coveralls down to his crotch, hurriedly shrugged them off to reveal his hard and muscled body still smelling of soap. Smelling of Terrence Weller.

With lust making his eyes twin shards of obsidian, Ty slipped a hand into her pants, fisted the waistband and belt then yanked her to him, arced her spine in a C and made her feel like an offering. Something that should piss her off but didn't. Choices.

"You've been keeping me on my toes," he growled.

He licked his lips as he let his gaze travel down to her exposed breasts. His fist tightened even more as he hoisted her higher against him by the fistful of pants. His shoulder and biceps bulged with the effort.

"Did you enjoy it, gorgeous? Keeping me on my toes?"

She nodded, licked her lips. God, she *had*.

"Well, now it's my turn."

Jackie gasped when he whirled her around, plastered himself against her, trapped her there while he worked her belt and the closure of her pants with one hand, rolled a nipple with the other. She'd never had a man treat her this way. Never *allowed* one to do this to her. He'd gone from the patient man who'd let her punch him on the snout and knee him in the crotch, to the fierce lover who'd take what he wanted and set her blood to boiling. She loved both.

Cool air greeted her pussy when Ty pulled her pants and panties down around her knees. His muscled thighs pressed against the back of hers.

"Spread your feet," he whispered in her ear.

She was barely able to draw breath. Visions filled her mind's eye. Heat everywhere. Jackie frantically kicked off the flip-flops, pulled a foot out of her pants so she could widen her stance and curl her butt up against him. With a hand both precise and forceful, he followed her natural curve and pressed his palm against her cleft. Juices slicked it.

"Mmm, all that for me?"

"You worked hard for it," she replied half teasing. "It's all yours."

Fingers found her clit, proceeded to rub 'round and 'round, front to back. Heavy then light. Quick then slow.

"I did," he murmured with that voice of his. "But then again, it wasn't really work, was it?" He accentuated the pressure. "You like that?"

"Yes," she gasped. "Don't you stop."

"You're not calling the shots, gorgeous. I am. And now that a couple of things are settled, I think we need more honey."

She actually heard the squirt a second before he licked a long, leisurely pass up her spine. Cramps made her thighs feel as if someone were trying to force them in tight while she struggled to keep them wide. Stars popped around her peripheral vision. Still Ty's fingers worked her. He slipped one into her. Then another long lick up her back.

"Oh God!"

"Believe me," Ty murmured behind her. "He has nothing to do with this."

One finger became two. In and out. Another moan escaped her. Then another, louder. Her clit throbbed, hardened. More juices. More honey. Precursors of release constricted her cleft. After the emotional roller coaster, her senses already fired, it

wouldn't take long. Close now. Ty abruptly pulled his hand away. For a split second she arched her butt impotently. Come on.

The clack of skin against skin shocked her. Heat hit right after.

He'd slapped her butt again?! Fever spread from her stinging cheek to her sex. With a ragged cry she came.

"Yeah, that's it," Ty growled as he anchored her by the hips. "Let me hear it!"

She'd never screamed so damn loud. Fingers returned to her clit, rubbed, rubbed, claimed and thrust. Another wave rose.

"Take it," she pushed through her teeth. She couldn't curl her butt any higher so she leaned forward low, spread her legs wider. She'd emotionally given herself to the friend he represented. Now she wanted to do the same physically. To the man, the lover. "Take me...come on...do it."

He did.

The force of his initial penetration lifted her heels off the deck. She cried long and hard. Pleasure ripped through her, pleasure and mind-blowing heat. From her pussy to her anus. From her nipples to her belly. As if she'd been dunked in hot water.

He matched her cries with low grunts. Pulled away then pushed back in. Pounded himself into her as if he wanted to dispel any lingering whispers of her pain and fear and replace them with his attention and skill. Distended her flesh and claimed it with his heat and his strength. Jackie's raw voice broke when the rhythm accentuated. Despite the brutal thrusts, Ty kept his hands against the edge to make them a buffer between her hipbones and the metal console edge. Again showing the kind man inside the rough exterior. Jackie was starting to like that complex man more with each passing second. Maybe more than like.

"Take it!" she urged over and over.

Then as abruptly as he'd taken her, he left her standing there, burning for his touch, for his cock deep in her, feeling him move.

Before she could voice her frustration—and she had an earful for him—Ty grabbed her wrist and yanked her back against him. Just as she thought they were about to fall and hit the deck hard—that'd leave a good mark—he collapsed into his ruined seat, took her with him. She landed sideways, knocked her knee against the armrest.

"Come on," he pushed through his teeth.

Shocked at how long she could last without losing her edge—she'd been so close to coming—she lifted a knee, bit her lip when he took the opportunity to lick his hand and rub her cleft, then sank around him.

Fingers digging deep, he grabbed her hips. "I've been wanting to do this from the get-go, gorgeous." His mouth curled up wickedly. "Been wanting you to *fuck* yourself on me."

Fire spread as she lifted herself off him then sank back down. Slow and measured, nice and methodical. He accompanied her sigh with low groans that swelled his wide chest even more. One hand around his nape, she took him in again, deep and steady.

"Faster," he snapped, bucked up.

A gasp escaped her.

With her thighs burning from the effort, she pulled up almost high enough to separate, but as she stopped there at the apex of slamming back as had been her first instinct, she rolled her hips as she came down, effectively corkscrewed along his shaft. His eyes flared, as did his nostrils.

"Oh you little..."

Jackie did it again. This time she hadn't fully extended her legs when Ty bucked prematurely. Another buck. She stood poised, using his strong neck as an anchor, an armrest for support.

Skin against skin. The wet clack of primal lovemaking. The smells of it too. Musk, honey, sweat. Adrenaline pumped her veins. Stars fizzed at the edge of her vision. She

bit down as she slammed back against his muscled thighs, which he'd widened. Her flesh felt sticky with her cum and the honey he'd slathered there.

"Come on," he snarled. His hands became vise grips. "Take me deep."

Both cried out in unison. Jackie could no longer control her movements as Ty wrapped an arm around her, tipped her far back and proceeded to take her deep. Deeper. Hard. Harder.

She abandoned all pretense at control. He could take it all. It was his anyway. Fire licked her pussy. Her clit. Her voice took on a raw quality. His name resounded over and over. And still Ty fucked her with renewed vigor. Voice hoarse, he said things to her, taunted and teased, threatened her with even more pleasure.

The deck hit her on the back. She *humph*-ed loudly. They'd fallen over with him on top. She hadn't even felt the movement.

God, he was heavy. She loved the pressure, the hard body crushing her. It must have been murder on his kneecaps and elbows, but he didn't seem to notice or care as he pushed in, retreated, claimed her again. She used her voice as she would a whip, urging him, taunting him, challenging Terrence Weller to do it, to take her, to take it all. He did. God, he did.

From rhythmic and powerful, his hip work became erratic and wild. One last thrust that rubbed her clit before a veritable firestorm engulfed her. She might have cried out his name. Jackie wasn't sure. Except that as he came, as his cum jetted in burning-hot salvos and she herself climaxed violently, nothing had ever felt so vivid and vibrant. Like a bright summer day after a long, gray winter. Colors, sounds, smells of him and the feel of his powerful body plastered against her, his hands working their way underneath her head and neck so he could encircle her for a long embrace, literally wrap himself around her. She'd never felt so sheltered. This was the true gift he'd given her. Liberation. The realization she wasn't alone to tackle all of the responsibilities, that if she needed it, she had someone there to help. Ty Weller.

"Gorgeous," he hissed, swallowed hard. "Damn, gorgeous, it's like..." He cursed, gave her a squeeze-grunt combination. "It's like I've been meant to do this all my life. Crazy."

Crazy. She smiled. She probably was. For him. For what they could do together.

After a chuckle, he kissed her head. "When I can fire two neurons together again, I'm pushing you into my shower and getting you all nice and soapy. Mmm."

She closed her eyes, grinned. "'Mmm' is right."

A *whoop* left her after he pulled a hand from under her, squeezed her butt. "We make one helluva team, Clark," he panted, pressed on his busted bottom lip with two fingers. "And who knew you could hit like that! Shit!"

Heat rushed to her face. "I'm sorry, Ty. It was just... It just all came out at once. I didn't mean to."

"I had it coming. Actually, I wanted it. I'm just not the kind of guy who'd let his woman carry all that shit around alone."

"His woman?"

"Hell yeah. Even if it was the most dangerous and stupid—in a *good* way, gorgeous, don't look at me like that—bit of flying I've ever seen, you got my ship back and saved me from having to sell my ass as a sex slave to pay for Lydia's schooling. Doesn't get better than this. So you *are* my woman now."

What could she say to that? Face flushed and heart beating madly, she peeled the hand from her butt and kissed the ruined skin of his knuckles. So many scars. She closed her eyes briefly to better feel him still deep in her, nice and warm and slick. "I feel I should thank you again. You're a good man, Terrence Weller. I don't care what anyone says."

Ty chuckled, kissed her sweaty forehead. "Did I tell you, you have the finest ass I've ever seen?"

"Yes, you did."

"Liar. You're such a hussy."

"Thank you."

They shared a quiet laugh as he pulled out. But instead of leaving her, he kissed his way down between her breasts, helped her sit up then gave her a bone-crushing hug.

"I have a proposition for you, Jackie Clark." His sweaty chest and shoulders glistened in temptation. She wasn't the only one getting "all nice and soapy" later on.

"What do you say we pool our resources, your skills, my connections—"

"I have connections too." Old habits die hard. She'd have to learn she didn't need to be the rough and tough courier around Ty. She just needed to be herself. Sometimes hard, sometimes soft.

Ty rolled his eyes. "Would you just give me a moment?"

He retrieved his coveralls, shook them out so he could make a blanket of them then patted the deck. With a grin and a shake of her head, she leaned on her elbow, sighed with contentment when he did the same facing her. From her position, she could see the consoles and the viewscreen across the flight deck, the news was still on. The old rage didn't burn as much as it once did, but still stung. Jackie willed it to subside. She willed herself to accept that she couldn't control everything, that she had someone who'd be there for her. She didn't know for how long and wouldn't ask, but if she knew Ty Weller the way she thought she did, he'd be there for the long run. As stubborn as she was. More.

"You were at the point where we 'pool our resources'," she began.

"Yeah, and I'm not even trying for the sexual innuendo, if you can believe that. Not bad, Weller, not bad." He energetically rubbed his head. "Okay, it's like this—and please don't interrupt me, gorgeous. It's not every day I make this sort of proposition. So. We pool our resources, a sort of co-op, see, then each run gets us, say, forty-sixty depending on who got the call first."

"Fifty-fifty."

"Christ. Fine, fifty-goddamn-fifty. Happy? Where was I? Oh yeah, spanking your ass."

"You already did that." She tried to tame her chuckle, failed.

He pointed to his temple. "Making a list here, that's two spankings for you, Miss Gorgeous. So, what do you say? You in?"

Ty stuck his hand out, his expression a mix of hard competitor and loving man. She raised herself a bit to shake it.

With the angle she could read along the bottom of the screen a banner scrolling in blood red. *Breaking News – deadly virus decimating Livorno outpost – Red Star humanitarian organization is powerless to reach the region due to solar storm...*

Instead of shock and powerlessness, a feeling of intent filled Jackie. Something snapped into place. Everything would be all right. She knew it with the same unshakable certainty that had made her fly her ship directly at a gas giant to retrieve Ty's crippled craft.

"I'm in, Terrence Weller." With a nod, she shook his hand.

"And someday, you're gonna tell me why you flew your old clunker right at a gas giant."

"To get your ship back. It was the right thing to do. My mess to fix."

Ty arched his pierced eyebrow. "See? I don't remember you being like that. You never did anything for free."

"People change. They grow. They start to like someone and things change."

Ty arched his pierced eyebrow. "'Like someone', hmm?"

"Hey, you showed me yours, now I'm showing you mine." She punctuated "yours" and "mine" with a jab of her index finger in his chest. "And what's with the ring?"

"You don't like?"

"I do, makes you look all rebel and wicked."

Big grin. "Ha. Lydia thinks it makes me look too scary. I'll make sure to tell her it's working with the ladies. Or better yet, you tell her."

She hadn't lost the emphasis on the word "you" and recognized an invitation when one was offered to her. "I'd love to meet her. And it's on the way to Livorno."

"Why Livorno?"

Jackie pointed at the news screen.

He craned his neck and looked back. "You want to get involved in that?"

"I think they'll need all the couriers they can get because that storm's keeping the bigger ships from flying. Ours can handle the solar activity. I think we should do it."

Ty shrugged. "Mine can, but yours? I don't know." A punch on the shoulder made him laugh. "Shit, gorgeous, can't a guy make a fucking joke? And the pay must just suck."

"Maybe, I'm not sure. Red Star is known to contract couriers all the time to deliver cargo and data to remote regions." She took a long look at him, the man who'd been so intimidating and seductive to her a few years ago and who'd now become someone very important to her. Special. Cherished. "It'd be the right thing to do," she went on. "We should help."

"Why do I get the feeling we're about to put our asses on the line to help the widows and orphans and puppies everywhere? For fuck's sake, we just got here. My ship isn't even in flying condition yet."

"I'll help." The way he'd helped her get rid of the rage and the fear. "Plus, I owe you."

His expression turned serious. "Don't you say that. You don't owe me anything. Clear? If I'm hanging around it's because I like it, not because I'm waiting for you to pay up."

Affection growing by the minute, Jackie nodded, cleared her throat to give herself some countenance.

He grimaced. "You gonna cry?"

She loved the way he could change from affectionate to dominating, from gentle to rough, sensitive to playful.

So she followed him there. Giving him the infamous lopsided grin, she fanned the air. "Danger and adrenaline," she yawned theatrically, "scary stuff, I know."

"You calling me a chicken?"

"Me? Never."

A sparkle appeared in his eyes. Then in the way she'd come to love, his expression again did a three-sixty and turned from genial to feral. He reeled her in, put his mouth directly by her ear. "So tell me, gorgeous, any guy out there who thinks you belong to him? Anyone who needs his kneecaps looked at?"

"Just one, but he's a large, irritable man with no hair and a big mouth."

He pulled back, huffed a curse. "Hey, I *shave* it."

Jackie chuckled. Her life hadn't been boring so far. She had an idea it'd become even less so with a man like Terrence Weller on her radar screen.

"Argh, Christ, I guess we should get some sleep before we fix our ships and play saviors to the thankful-but-penniless masses."

"Sleep?" she replied, knowing her grin would do its job.

"Never mind."

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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