

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? This is a restricted area.”

Still clinging to the grab bar, Rayna glanced up at the captain’s face. His expression didn’t match the censure in his words. The furrows between his brows didn’t look like anger, but she couldn’t quite interpret their true meaning.

“For a pirate ship, you sure have a lot of rules.”

“Discipline is necessary no matter what kind of ship it is.” His lips curved upwards. “Now answer my question.”

Sam Murphy really was a fine-looking man, a dangerously fine-looking man, with those green eyes and a face that belonged in holovids rather than on the deck of a real ship. But damned if he was going to back her up, even in zero G.

“You saw what I was doing; I was working out. The ribs have healed—almost. I didn’t think I’d have to ask permission, especially since I was back here with the waste processors.”

Murphy leaned in closer. In spite of herself, Rayna inhaled and took him in. God, he smelled good—like . . . the first breath of fresh air dirtside after months on a ship. For a second she was lost, drifting as surely as if she had let go of her mooring on the hull.

“This is *my* ship, Little Bit.” His voice was a seductive purr. “You need permission for everything.”

Heat flashed from the top of her head to the bottoms of her feet. Rayna meant to shout, but her voice came out in a matching sultry whisper. “Why you puffed up, self-righteous, arrogant—” She got her hormones in check and started over. “Control seems to be your middle name, Murphy. Well, let me tell you something: I joined Rescue because Independence is mine.”

“Do I have to remind you you’re a guest on my ship?” His expression had tightened into a smoky scowl. “The one place I have plenty of room onboard is the brig—maybe you’d like accommodations there.” His eyes held hers like he meant it, but a muscle jumped in his jaw. His tell, she realized. He wanted something quite different for her. That heat flashed through her once again, and this time she was certain it had nothing to do with anger.

*Damn it.*

“All right, yeah, I saw the big ‘Keep Out’ signs. But every other square centimeter of space on this tug is occupied. I needed a workout, and zero G is a good place to get started. I didn’t think anyone would be back here.”

His expressive face changed yet again, the hard lines around his mouth and eyes going soft as the tension drained from him. “Any day but today you’d have been right.”

“What’s different about today?”

He scanned the empty hull space before he answered. “The ship’s on lockdown; I’ve ordered a full security sweep.”

Understanding dawned. All that bluster was because Murphy was feeling protective. She looked up at him and, yep, there it was, shining from those eyes, despite his stern refusal to smile.

But just because her body responded instantly with eager anticipation didn’t mean her mind should be onboard with this program. Seriously, how would it ever work between them? He was a pirate, for chrissake. According to him, she was an interfering bleeding heart. The only thing they had in common was a disregard for authority, and they would never even agree on the reasons for that.

Oh, but, damn, he smelled so good. He kept floating closer, and she was so tired. She wanted to let go and settle into those arms.

“You miscalculated.” His arm was around her shoulders again, his lips against her ear.

“What do you mean?” Her protest came out in a breathy murmur.

“You’re exhausted. You weren’t ready for this much exertion.” He was so close, so warm, encouraging her to let go. “I bet you didn’t ask Doc Berta for permission either.”

She finally gave up and transferred her hold to him, arms and legs wrapping around his hard body. He hooked both feet around the handholds below them, anchored one hand and used the other to clasp her to him; she was so small in comparison, his arm stretched all the way across her lower back.

She looked up at him, lips inches from his. “I don’t ask permission for anything.”