

Captivated By You

By

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Chapter One

In her life as a covert agent, Rhea Stevenson had done a lot of things she hated: cozy up to cold-blooded killers, make goo-goo eyes at drug lords, pretend to be a Russian mail-order bride, walk unarmed in a low-cut, almost nonexistent dress into a nuclear arms deal.

But nothing in all her years as an agent had ever prepared her to do...

This!

“You want me to do what?” she asked Tee, the managing director of the Bureau of American Defense, or BAD as it was known to most of the people who worked there.

A shadow antiterrorism agency that most of the country didn't even know existed, BAD had a lot of “interesting” people in it, and Tee was definitely one of the more colorful characters. At five feet even,

Tee shouldn't have been intimidating at all, and yet the small, beautiful Vietnamese-American woman held a look to her that let anyone know she was far deadlier than any cobra.

And she was.

Tee gave her a flat, emotionless stare. "You're going to be a dominatrix."

Rhea couldn't do anything more than gape as she heard male laughter from the desk in the office cube across from hers.

Her gaze narrowed as a bad feeling came over her. "And whose bright idea was this?"

Ace rolled his chair back so that he could look from the entrance of his cube into hers. He smiled at her like the Cheshire cat.

"Oh, no, no, no," Rhea said firmly as she handed the file folder back to Tee. "Not on your life. Let Agent Hotshot over there go in with studded leather and whips. Then the deviants can hang together."

Ace, who really was sexier than any man had a right to be, gave her a hot once-over. "I can't, love. I don't have the ass for it. But you on the other hand..." His dark blue gaze dipped down to her hips and his smile turned lecherous as if he was imagining cupping her derriere.

Rhea wasn't sure what she hated most, the boldness of that look or the way her body reacted to it. And yet her body always betrayed her with this man. She'd never understood how a woman could be both repulsed and turned on at the same time.

Surely something was seriously wrong with her.

"Is this not sexual harassment?" she asked Tee, even though a part of her was humming in excitement. "You know, I do have friends in the EEOC."

Tee looked rather amused by her question. “Well, in this case, Ace is right. We need a female agent to pose, and Ace thought you’d be the best one for it.”

Rhea directed a gimlet stare at him. “I’ll just bet he did.”

Ace got up and sauntered toward them to stand in the cube’s doorway. At six-two, he towered over Tee. The look on his handsome face was that of a kid at Christmas. An image that was helped by his tousled, dark blond hair and teasing, blue eyes.

He cast a devilish grin at Rhea. “Ah, just think, Rhea. You...me...chains and whips...Recipe for a hot night, huh?”

Recipe for a disaster in her opinion. “Recipe for a nightmare, you mean. I wouldn’t do this for all the money on the planet. Sorry, Tee, get yourself another agent for this.”

Tee sighed irritably. “We need you, Rhea, you’re the only one in the home office who fits the profile. Put aside your personal distaste and work with Ace just this once.”

“I am not going to take my clothes off around him even if I do get the benny of beating him.”

Arching a brow, he folded his arms over his chest. “But would you do it to stop a known terrorist?”

Rhea paused at his words. That was her one hot button, and everyone in the agency knew it. They just didn’t know why. The reason was private and personal, but she had spent her entire adulthood on a crusade to stop such needless violence. That one word could get her to do anything.

Even take her clothes off around Ace Krux, male god, personal demon.

“That’s another reason we thought you would be perfect,” Tee said solemnly. “We all know how you

feel.”

No, they truly didn't. Rhea took the file back. “Do I have to work with Ace?”

Tee shrugged. “It's his baby. He's been working on the case for a year now and knows all the ins and outs.”

“Don't worry, Rhea,” he said. “You'll feel differently after you see me naked.”

She snorted at that. “Yeah, someone remind me that I better bring along gallons of Pepto-Bismol, an industrial bottle of Tums, and some bicarbonate.”

Ace rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right. Like you wouldn't sell your soul for a shot at me.”

Rhea pulled her weapon out from the holster at her back, then ejected and checked her clip. “You got that much right.” She slammed the clip back in and switched the safety off. “You want a ten-second head start or can I just shoot you now?”

Tee shook her head at Ace. “Why must you always torment her? One day, she really is going to shoot you and I just might authorize it.” Tee turned back to her with a warning stare. “Put it away, Rhea.”

Grumbling, she reactivated the safety and complied.

“Ah, she wouldn't shoot me anyway, Tee. She's just covering her infatuation for me by being a hard-ass.”

Rhea stood up to confront him. “You know, Ace, you're not nearly as irresistible as you think you are.”

“Sure, and just how many times have you dreamed about having me naked and in your bed?”

Rhea counted to ten in her head and forced herself not to rise to his baiting. But the worst part of it all was that he was right. She did find him physically attractive, but the minute he opened his mouth, she wanted to gag him.

“Oh, yeah,” she said sarcastically. “You set my entire world on fire. Oh, baby; oh, baby. I must have your hot bod. Why don’t we just strip naked and do it right here in the cube?”

Hunter Wesley Thornton-Payne stuck his handsome, albeit pompous, blond head up over the wall of the cube beside Rhea’s. “Jeez, people. Could you cut the crap? You know some of us are actually trying to work over here.”

“Since when do you work on anything other than your stock portfolio, Payne?” Carlos Selgado asked in his accented voice as he popped up over Rhea’s other wall to glare at Hunter. “Some of us are enjoying the fireworks.”

“My name is Thornton -Payne,” Hunter corrected.

Ignoring him as he always did, Carlos looked over at Tee. “If Rhea is really going to get naked, can I bump off Ace and take over his case?”

Tee gave them all a withering glare. “Agents, down, or there will be a vicious virus that attacks the payroll system and locks you all out of the loop. It’s called the Pissed-off Tee Virus and it could make it so that none of you get paid for at least six weeks...maybe more.”

Carlos and Hunter immediately vanished.

Tee turned back to Rhea and Ace. “You two, play nice.”

Rhea scoffed. “Play nice? I’d rather pet a scorpion, bare-handed.”

That devilish grin returned to Ace's face as he raked her with an appreciative stare. "I'll show you my stinger if you'll show me yours."

She screwed her face up in disgust. The man was truly a reprobate.

"Hey, Carlos," he called, "you used to do a lot of work with scorpions. How do they mate, anyway? You know they got those stingers and claws and—"

"Enough with the mating rituals of scorpions," Rhea said from between clenched teeth. "Why don't we discuss the praying mantis instead? You know, the female rips the head off the male. She's a wise woman."

Ace wagged his eyebrows at her. "Yeah, but what a way to go, huh? If you've got to die, it's always best to go out with a good bang."

Tee cast a withering stare at them. "Yo, Marlin Perkins and crew, let's get back on topic here."

Ace leaned nonchalantly against Rhea's desk and folded his arms over his chest. "Okay, we'll get back on the subject now and save the banging for later."

Rhea just continued to glare at him. This was one of those times when she really hated this man.

But then Thadeus "Ace" Krux was a man of many talents. He could scale a building in a manner to make Spider-Man proud. He could drive better and faster than Jeff Gordon and Mario Andretti combined. He could construct a lethal bomb from an empty Coke bottle, a piece of tissue, and simple household cleaners.

Most of all, he could render any woman on the planet speechless at first glance.

It was a hell of a combination that was deadly to any woman's defenses. He had the sleek, seductive movements of a beast in the wild. The smile of Don Juan and the intelligence of Einstein, all of which was packaged into the body of a Bowflex ad model.

He was the epitome of everything she found desirable in the male species....

And everything she despised.

His calm, cool, rationality bordered on dispassionate. His arrogance knew no bounds, and his ego...

Someone really needed to take him down a few notches.

Since he seemed to live for no other purpose than to torment her, he was completely distracting to her peace of mind.

"So has she racked him yet?" Joe asked as he joined them.

Barely in his thirties, Joe was young to hold the position of senior director for such an important agency, and yet Rhea couldn't think of anyone more suited to controlling the motley, often illegal bunch that made up the BAD task force.

For all his youth and handsomeness, Joe was even more lethal than Tee. He never compromised, never took prisoners. Something that was at odds with his pretty-boy features.

He had on a black leather shoulder holster with the ivory handle of a .38 Special peeking up (Joe had once said he liked being cliché on the surface), but it was the stiletto he kept strapped to his calf that he was most famous for using (that was for the surprises he liked to give after someone mistook him for cliché).

His shoulder-length, dark brown hair was worn in a ponytail, and for once he had the sleeves of his blue dress shirt rolled up to show off the telltale colors of the dragon tattoo he had on his left forearm—a

remnant Rhea had once been told by Tee of the days when Joe was a member of a vicious New York street gang.

“Does this mean I have your permission to rack him?” Rhea asked Joe.

Joe gave Ace an amused smirk.

Ace snorted. “I don’t think so. Remember, I do know where you live and sleep.”

“Yeah, but not even you could get past my security system.”

Joe was probably right. His specialty was wiring and demolition work. He could booby-trap just about anything. It was a special talent that Rhea couldn’t imagine a New York City boy acquiring legally.

“So who are we after, anyway?” she asked, opening her folder.

“Lucius Bender,” Ace said. “Ever heard of him?”

Rhea nodded. Of course she had. It was a case she’d been begging Joe for, and why he’d assigned it to Ace she couldn’t imagine. She was twice the agent he was. At least she was when it came to research and reconnaissance. When it came to physical case execution, Ace had her beat only because the man had a flagrant disregard for human life, especially his own.

“He arms a lot of the West Bank terrorists,” she said.

“Yeah,” Ace agreed. “I’ve been aching to nail this bastard since I worked for the Secret Service and one of his flunkies made an attempt on the president’s life, but he’s slippery as hell and we haven’t been able to pin anything on him. The IFT just told us that a few days ago the German authorities picked up his favorite dominatrix, who they’ve had under surveillance for contraband. Now the brothel she worked in is looking for a replacement.”

“And I’m the replacement?” Rhea asked.

Ace nodded.

Joe reached into her folder and pulled out the most recent photo of the bald, unattractive, middle-aged man for her inspection. “The GA have a bug in Ute’s cell where she’s been talking with other cellmates about Bender’s odd habits. Seems he likes to talk a lot during his beatings, and one of the things he brags about is how many terrorist acts he’s either funded or committed. He has a thing for women who look like Bettie Page, so we want to send you in as Latex Bettie, his newest toy. You go into a wired room, get him to confess, and then we come in with the GA and arrest him.”

It sounded simple enough. Too simple in fact, and nothing was ever that simple.

“All I have to do is beat him?” Rhea asked suspiciously.

Joe nodded.

“He’s a real fucked-up bastard,” Ace said as he showed her another photograph of Bender at a party with a dark-haired, Bettie Page-looking girl who couldn’t be any more than fifteen...and that was stretching it.

“Okay. If this will get him off the street, then hand me the thong and stiletto heels.”

“You’re killing me, Rhea,” Carlos said from the other side of the wall.

Rhea huffed audibly at the comment. “Go to work, Carlos.”

“Joe?” he called over the wall. “I want a transfer to Ace’s case.”

“Why, Carlos?” Joe asked. “You aching to wear high heels and a woman’s thong?”

“Hell, no.”

Rhea cleared her throat to get Joe’s attention. “So how do we prep this?” she asked.

Ace smiled. “Me and you are meeting with a coach to learn about bondage and dominance. You’re going to be the mistress and I get to be your slave.” He looked to be enjoying this way too much.

“You really are a perv, aren’t you? Admit it?”

Ace laughed.

Joe rubbed his head as if they were starting to give him a migraine. “Since the two of you are going to be extremely intimate over the next few days, why don’t you leave early and have dinner together tonight so you can discuss the case and get to know each other before you actually get naked.”

Now she was the one developing a migraine at the prospect of what this assignment entailed. “Thanks, Joe,” she said sarcastically.

“Anytime, Rhea. Hell, I’ll even let the two of you put it on the company card.”

She gave him a droll look. “You’re just so damned generous.”

Ace indicated the way to the door with a tilt of his head. “Are we taking him up on it, Rhea?”

Rhea took a deep breath as she fought an urge to run in the other direction, but this wasn’t about her

and Ace and his obnoxiousness. It was about stopping a cold-blooded killer who didn't care whom he hurt.

For that, she was willing to do anything. Even put up with the most arrogant male in existence.

She looked at Tee. "I do get to beat Ace, right?"

"He'll be your slave for training. I say make him cry for mercy."

Ace looked completely undaunted by the prospect. "Beat me, hurt me, call me Ralph."

"Yeah, call you Ralph. I'll be lucky if I don't 'ralph' from the sight of you naked all right."

"Ooo," Ace said in an appreciative tone. "Swift on the uptake, Stevenson. I'm impressed."

Before she could respond, Ace returned to his cube and grabbed his jacket. Rhea went ahead and shut down her computer while Joe headed back to his office.

Tee opened up the folder again and sorted through the papers until she found one in particular, which she handed to Rhea. "This is the dossier for Bender. Memorize it while you learn to beat the crap out of him."

A distinct, evil glimmer in her eye said Tee would enjoy being in Rhea's position. "If you want this so badly, why aren't you doing it?"

"Because he doesn't have a thing for short Vietnamese women. Wish that he did though."

"Me too. The thought of going in, in nothing but a teddy doesn't appeal to me."

“Don’t worry. We’ll cover you.”

And they would too. BAD always took care of her own. “I know.”

Tee stepped back as Ace rejoined them.

“You two have a nice night and get friendly.” Tee handed a small business card to Rhea. “First thing in the morning, I’m having the instructor meet you at your house where I’m sure you’ll feel a little more comfortable. In the meantime, I want you two to get into character early. This is the address for an adult store here in Nashville. Head over and stock up on toys.”

Ace gave that wicked grin of his as he gave Rhea a once-over that made her stomach tight. “I’m definitely up for it.”

Rhea was completely unamused by his humor. “You better be down for it.”

She took the card from Tee, then looked up at Ace. “You are really enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. So what’s first?” Ace asked playfully as he took a step toward her. “Dinner or sex?”

“Excuse me?”

He took the card from her hand, letting his fingers brush hers in a warm caress, and smiled like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “C’mon, Rhea. Have you ever been to an adult store before?”

Hardly. Kinky sex had never appealed to her at all, and she’d heard enough tales from her odder friends to know she had no interest in haunting adult stores for the aids they provided. “Have you?”

He looked completely unrepentant. "I'll plead the Fifth to that."

"I knew you were a pervert."

"Hey, it's not my fault the customers took me along whenever my dad made them watch me."

Rhea shook her head as Ace stepped back, then led the way from their offices toward the elevator bank.

Ace's father, Alister Cross, was a renowned director who had won several Academy Awards. Ace's grandfather, Osker Krux, owned one of the largest movie studios in the world, and Ace's younger brother was an Academy Award-winning special FX guru. Ace himself had once been a stunt double before he'd gone on to work for the Secret Service.

"You know, I've never understood why you're a BAD agent anyway. Why didn't you follow your family's business?"

He shrugged. "Movies are boring. Actors are fake and I figured if I wanted to live my life on the edge, I might as well be doing it for real. Why take a chance on dying from a blank gone bad when I can dodge real bullets intended to kill me and save the world?"

In a weird way that made sense to her, and she actually managed a grudging respect for him.

"What about you?" he asked as they waited on the elevator. "What made a respectable CIA agent follow Joe to a shadow agency that has no known ally?"

"I respect the hell out of Joe and Tee and their agenda, and I didn't like all the rules of the CIA." That's what BAD was best at. No rules to bind their hands. Each agent was licensed as a civilian contractor. They were funded under the Treasury Department and hidden away as a federal insurance agency, which in an ironic way they really were. Only "insurance" took on a whole new meaning for them.

In reality, they were an antiterrorism special task force that no one other than the president knew about. The individual agents answered to Joe, and he answered to the head man alone.

No one else knew they existed and they all liked it that way.

The elevator doors opened.

Ace stood back to let her enter first. She didn't speak again until they were enclosed inside and he'd pressed the button for the lobby.

"Besides," she said, continuing their conversation, "I like the different kinds of agents we have. You guys are a lot more fun than the other agencies."

He laughed at that. "Yeah, we're not your average crew."

Rhea smiled as she watched Ace from the corner of her eye. Even though he worked her last nerve into an apoplexy, she had to admit he was incredibly sexy standing there with his hands in his pockets while he looked up at the floor numbers overhead. Something about him was absolutely irresistible.

Too bad he knew it.

His presence was mammoth in the elevator, or then again, anywhere. He was one of those rare men who possessed an aura that was intense and all-encompassing.

As much as she had tried to stay angry at him for his pomposity, there had always been a tiny part of her that was attracted to him. A really tiny part.

When he was silent and serious, he was actually breathtaking, which had always made her wonder just how many hearts he'd left broken.

“So tell me, Ace. When was the last time you went out with a woman on a date?”

He looked at her. “A real date or an I’m-pretending-to-be-someone-else-and-am-prying-you-for-information date?”

“A real date.”

He let out a low whistle. “Probably a year. What about you?”

She sighed wistfully at the painful truth. “Three years, at least.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “Our job doesn’t exactly lend itself to dating, does it?”

“No. I’m never sure what to say when they ask me what I do for a living. Most guys are heavily intimidated by the thought of dating a federal agent.”

He snorted at that. “I tell women I’m a federal agent and they laugh and think I’m handing them a line. So I usually make up bullshit about being a salesman or something.”

The door opened. Rhea walked across the lobby as she continued to smile while thinking of Ace in a bar with some giggling woman who had no idea just what the man was capable of. He was incredible in the field. He could speak a dozen languages fluently and held no fear of anything.

While in the Secret Service, he’d been shot three times and had brought countless criminals to trial. She was actually amazed that Joe had been able to pry Ace loose from their clutches. He’d been a celebrated hero to his group.

“You want to ride with me?” he asked.

She shook her head vigorously no. "You can ride with me. I've seen the way you drive."

"What?" he asked, his face a mask of innocence. "I have a perfect driving record."

"Only because you charmed your way out of the last three tickets you got," she reminded him.

"Those were minor speeding offenses."

"Sure they were. And I'm a three-armed alien."

Her words seemed to only amuse him. "Fine, Cha-Cha. You drive."

She frowned. "Cha-Cha? As in Shirley 'Cha-Cha' Muldowney?"

"You know racing?" he asked as if surprised by her knowledge.

Rhea nodded. It wasn't something she ever really mentioned to anyone, but then the topic seldom came up. "Are you kidding? She's the first and only female Top Fuel Champion in NHRA history. When I was a kid, I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. My father was an old friend of her crew chief Connie Kalitta, and I actually have her autograph. Oh, I love that woman!"

"Then why is it you now drive like an old lady?"

She scoffed at that. "Old lady, nothing. I can J-turn a bulletproof Lincoln limo with the best of them."

Ace chuckled at her reference to agent training where they all learned how to handle a variety of vehicles under stressful circumstances. One in particular that all BAD agents had to pass was the ability to jump into anything available and drive it out of any possible danger including heavy artillery fire, grenade and

bomb attacks.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "You still drive far too cautiously for my tastes."

Rhea shivered at the unexpected sensation of his breath on her skin and did her best not to think of other, much more intimate things that would cause him to be so near her.

And she had the distinct impression that he wasn't really talking about the way she handled a car.

Unwilling to go there, she led him to the parking deck where she had her red Mustang parked.

Ace didn't say anything as they got in and headed out.

"Do we really have to go to the sex shop?" she asked, even though she knew the answer.

"That depends. You got any whips and chains at home? And if you do, I will definitely have to change my opinion about what Agent Rhea Stevenson does on her days off."

Rhea groaned. "The only chain I have is the small gold one around my neck, and as for whips... Do half-empty containers of Cool Whip count?"

"It does for what I have in mind."

She let out a tired breath. "Does everything I say to you have to do with sex?"

"Since you're supposed to dominate me, baby, yeah."

Ace watched her stony face while she wove her way through traffic in a much more sedate way than he would have.

Rhea was a hot woman with a cool exterior that he'd wanted to melt for quite some time. But then business and pleasure didn't mix well. He knew that better than anyone and yet he couldn't help wondering what the petite brunette would taste like.

What those lean, supple limbs would feel like wrapped around his.

She was beautiful. Not so much in her looks, but in the way she could make him feel better by doing nothing more than smiling at him. She was extremely quiet and seldom said much even when her phone rang.

While in the CIA, she was supposed to have been one of their best field agents.

But in the last three years since BAD had come together, she hadn't taken many field assignments. Most of her work was done online, making Ace wonder what she'd be like undercover.

In more ways than one.

He'd always had a theory that silent, quiet women were much more uninhibited in bed. But since he hadn't known that many who were quiet, he'd never been able to test his theory.

She glanced over at him. "What are you thinking?"

Ace fell back into his standard male reply. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Then why do you look like the cat eyeballing the canary?"

He gave a wicked grin at that. "Okay, so I was thinking of you dressed in black leather, wielding a whip over my naked ass."

She didn't look at him as she made a left turn. "I think I like 'nothing' better."

"Excuse me?" he asked, stunned and excited at her words. "You really want to whip my naked ass?"

"No!" she snapped sharply. "I said I like 'nothing' better, not I'd like nothing better. Oh, jeez, Ace, grow up!"

He continued to smile at her, which was something he didn't do around many people. There was just something about her that attracted him against all common sense or reason.

Not even he fully understood his incessant need to tease her. Other than the fact that he thoroughly enjoyed her snappy comebacks and the way those brown eyes would flash at him whenever he made her angry. It was almost as sexy as foreplay.

Almost.

"I figured you would, which is why I said 'nothing' to begin with."

She slid a censoring look to him. "I can't believe I'm going to do this."

"You? I'm the practice slave. I think if anyone should be embarrassed, it should be me."

Rhea glanced at him as she pulled into the parking lot of the large blue building covered in tripleX's that had no windows whatsoever. "Look, Ace, it's your home away from home."

Rhea stood in the doorway of the adult novelty store as total horror engulfed her. She'd never seen anything like this in her entire life. Cages were set up in the corners with mannequins dressed and chained in the most sexually graphic manner imaginable. Did people really use this stuff?

She paused next to a display of penis-shaped suckers and scowled at them.

“What’s wrong?” Ace asked as he brushed past her into the store.

It was all she could do not to gape. “Where do I begin?”

He shrugged nonchalantly as if missing her point. “Well, we could begin with one of the swings over there.”

Rhea couldn't help gaping now as he pointed to something that looked as if it had come from the planet Porno. The large, black contraption held a spread-eagled female mannequin completely subdued and gagged.

Yeah...

Unwilling to let him know she was bothered by it, she quickly recovered her facial expression and paused at the display of leather blindfolds and masks that were covered in spikes.

“Can I help you?”

Rhea actually jumped at the sound of the shaky female voice behind her. She turned to see an elderly woman with white hair and black-rimmed glasses staring at her. Jeez, it was someone's grandma! She even had the black SAS shoes and a white dress with little, dark blue flowers that matched her dark blue sweater. She looked kind and frail.

Why on earth would she be here working as a porn store clerk?

“No. Just... looking.”

The older woman laughed and lightly patted her arm. “This must be your first time, sweetie. Just relax and have fun. Don’t let me worry you, I’ve tried most everything in here, so if you have any questions, please let me know.”

“Um... yes.”

Grandma smiled as she watched Ace. “Well, you’re a lucky woman to have that for a playmate. Why, he’s simply delish.”

Delish? Grandma knew delish?

Okay, I’m in an episode of Twilight Zone with Grandma as the zookeeper. Just go with it, Rhea.

Grandma continued to study him. “You know, he reminds me of my dearly departed Herbert. Oh, hon, he was the best. He just lived for sex. Would throw himself into it anywhere, anytime. In fact, we once got arrested for indecency on a subway while we were in New York.”

This was way too much information.

“Have you two been arrested yet?”

“No,” Rhea answered quickly and honestly. At least she hadn’t been. With Ace... well, she wouldn’t make a bet on it.

“Then you two ain’t doing it right.” Grandma winked at her.

Grandma was without a doubt the most frightening thing in this store.

“Oh, you’ll like those,” Grandma said to Ace, who had paused two aisles over. “The strawberry are the best, though my Herbert liked the lemon-flavored.”

Rhea looked to find Ace examining packages of edible panties. She inwardly cringed as he inspected them. “Don’t even think it, Ace.”

He held up one of the packages. “They have grape.” Then he looked to Grandma. “You ever try these?”

“The grape isn’t the best. They have a bit of a bitter taste to them.”

Ace put them back. “You said to try the strawberry?”

Rhea’s gaze narrowed as he picked up a package. Fine. Two people could play that. “You also have whips, right?” she asked the woman.

She nodded.

“Do you have nice, spiked ones?”

“Absolutely, sweetie.”

“No!” Ace said, putting down the panties and moving back toward Rhea. “No spiked nothing.”

She arched a brow. "I can't believe I've finally found something to make the big, bad Ace craven. What on earth could make you fear spikes?"

"A Goth girlfriend in high school who left lasting scars on my flesh. I don't ever want to cozy up to another porcupine as long as I live."

Rhea was amazed he'd admitted that. "You went out with a Goth chick? How unlike you."

"Not really. I always had a thing for women in leather." He looked meaningfully at a mannequin dressed in an extremely revealing leather corset that left its breasts bare except for two tiny leather pasties.

The expression on his face said he was picturing her in that getup.

Rhea decided to play fire with fire. Determined, she walked over to the rack of leather Speedos, which would have to be laughable on any male no matter how sexy or fabulous he was. She picked up one that was of a thong design and looked back at Ace, who grimaced.

"Trust me, baby, that would be like trying to cover two bowling balls with a slingshot."

"Oh, that's disgusting!"

He flashed her one of those taunting smiles. "But it makes you curious, doesn't it?"

She hated to admit it, but he'd won this round. "No, it just makes me pity whatever woman ends up permanently shackled to you. Do womankind a favor, Ace, get neutered."

"Oh, no, honey," Grandma said. "No one should neuter something as fine as him. Take my word for it. I've seen lots of handsome men in my day, but yours... He's definitely worth keeping around."

“See, she likes me.”

Rhea bit her tongue to keep from saying Ace should train Grandma for Bender. But rule one was never to disclose an agent’s mission to an unknown no matter how harmless he or she appeared. Words could kill even faster and more effectively than a handgun.

Rhea took a deep breath and looked around. “So what appeals to you, Ace?”

He picked up a jar of chocolate body paint that even came with its own paintbrush and came to stand next to her. In that moment, there was something extremely compelling about him and the soft way he was looking at her. “Rhea al dente.”

An unexpected shiver went over her and she knew it was caused by the hot, seductive curve of his mouth. Ace Krux was a man to be reckoned with.

“If you like that, we have a sample,” Grandma said as she brushed past Ace.

She went to the shelf and opened a tester jar, then took a white, plastic spoon and ladled out a bit of chocolate into a small plastic cup.

When Rhea reached for it, she pulled the cup back. “Give me your finger.”

Before Rhea could really comply, the old woman took Rhea’s finger, dipped it in the chocolate, and held it up for Ace to sample. He didn’t hesitate to open his mouth and capture her.

Rhea’s stomach fluttered as his warm, sensuous tongue encircled the pad of her fingertip while he held her hand in his to keep it in his mouth. He nipped her flesh ever so gently with his teeth while he stared at her with a hot, needful look. His masculine scent of aftershave and shampoo filled her head, making her heart pound.

Never in her life had she been so unexpectedly turned on by any man. This was intrusive and rude

and...and she was dying to know what his lips would taste like.

Get a grip!

Rhea pulled her finger out. "I hope you've had a rabies shot lately."

He laughed at that, then dipped his finger into the cup. "Your turn."

"That is so not sanitary."

"Chicken?"

Rhea couldn't believe he was relying on the childhood tactic. Even worse, she couldn't believe it was working. She wasn't about to let Mr. Perfect Agent get away with it.

It was time Mr. Krux learned a lesson.

Taking his hand into hers, she opened his palm and blew her breath across it. She gave him her best "do me, hotshot" stare before she licked the palm of his hand and took the entire length of his finger into her mouth.

Ace ground his teeth to keep from cursing in blissful agony the instant she started tonguing his finger. That woman had a tongue that poets should write about.

At the very least it deserved a major letter to PenthouseForum .

Every hormone in his body fired as his cock hardened to the point of pain. And with every tiny, erotic stroke of her tongue, he hardened even more.

She growled low in her throat before she took a gentle bite of his skin, then pulled back. “Hershey’s is better.”

Ace was completely dumbstruck. Since all of his blood had drained to the center of his body, there wasn’t much left to understand her words. He only knew she’d stepped away from him and that was the last thing he wanted.

In fact, the only thing he wanted right then was to take her into his arms and taste that sweet, sassy mouth. To pin her to the wall behind her and sate the painful ache in his groin that wanted nothing more than to be naked and sweaty with her.

Rhea was a lot more turned on by what she’d done than she wanted to admit. The truth was, Ace had tasted wonderful. And the look on his face as she tasted him was branded into her consciousness. Her breasts were still swollen and heavy from desire.

How could she be attracted to him? Yeah, he looked great, but he was a pest.

Trying to distract herself, she strolled down an aisle with the most incredibly odd vibrators she’d ever seen. Some of them looked like penises and some of them just looked weird. One in particular had two penises pointing away from each other.

Tilting her head to study it, Rhea paused and frowned.

Ace gave a low, amused laugh as he came up behind her. He was so close, she could actually feel the heat from his body. Feel the intensity of his presence. He might as well be touching her for all the damage he was doing to her willpower.

“You really haven’t ever been in one of these stores before have you?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “I had no idea that these”—she gestured toward the myriad of battery-operated boyfriends—“came in so many shapes, colors, or textures. Good grief. Do people really use these?”

As his body brushed against her, she could feel his taut erection. He'd been right. He was a large man, and the thought of that electrified her as he reached for one of the illicit packages. "Yeah, they do, at least I know they use them in porn flicks."

She gave him an arched, censoring look.

He actually looked offended. "What? My cousin Vito produces porn films for a small, independent studio. Much to the horror of my grandparents, he talks about it at every Christmas party."

Relieved more than she wanted to admit, she shook her head. "You have the strangest family."

"And you've spent as much time in Beverly Hills as you've spent in adult stores if you believe that. Trust me, where I grew up, my family were the most normal ones on the block."

"And now I know why I've never made it a habit to frequent either place." Rhea folded her arms over her chest. "So what exactly will I need for this...excursion?"

Ace returned the "item" in his hand to the shelf. "I vote we ease our way into this. For one thing, no gags, since gagging Bender would defeat the purpose of getting him to talk."

"That makes sense."

Ace headed over two aisles to where they had a display of restraints. "Something simple. Handcuffs."

Rhea studied the variety of manacles they had. An un-bidden image of Ace spread out naked on her bed flashed through her mind, and in spite of what she would ever admit, she had to say it was an incredible thought.

Oh, jeez, don't make him right! He would be flattered to no end to know that you really are picturing him naked.

"Some of this stuff looks like it ought to be illegal," she said, trying to distract herself again.

Ace shrugged. "Personally, I'm not into the rough stuff, but there are all kinds out there."

"I'm just glad I'm not one of them and that I'm licensed to carry a concealed weapon should I ever have the misfortune of meeting one in a dark alley."

"Yeah." Ace grabbed two pairs of velvet-lined cuffs. He held them like a man who truly had no interest in using them.

"You really aren't into it, are you?" she asked in surprise. As gung ho and adventurous as he was in everything else, she would have thought he was a regular pornmeister.

"No. I like my sex the good old-fashioned way. Down and dirty."

She rolled her eyes at him. "You know, there for a minute, I was starting to like you."

"Only a minute?"

"You're right. It was more like ten seconds."

"Okay, for that, I vote for this." He picked up a cat-o'-nine-tails that was made of thick leather straps.

"Fine." She left him and went to the bustier rack, where she quickly found a frilly red number made out of satin and feathers. "What do you think of this?"

He grinned. "I like it."

"Good. What size are you?"

"Pardon?"

Grandma laughed. "I have his size in back."

"No!" Ace snapped. "I only have one rule in life: no drag."

"Why not?" Rhea teased. "You allergic to satin?"

"No, but this"—he picked up the thong part of it—"would give me a wedgie from hell. No, thank you."

She tsked at him, then put it back.

Ace stopped as they passed a tall, thin silver canister that held several long feathers. His look turned speculative, then wicked. "Tickle your ass with a feather?"

"Excuse me?"

He cleared his throat. "Isaid, particularly nice weather?"

Rhea screwed her face up. "Oh, please, don't tell me you're a fan of Up the Academy?"

Ace was stunned that Rhea knew his vague reference to the offbeat, early-eighties film. "So how many times have you watched it?"

"More than I cared to. It was my older bother's favorite movie in high school, and I curse the day they ever turned it into a videotape."

Ace laughed, amazed at just how much he enjoyed their verbal sparring and her unique views of the world. "Hey, I defend your brother's taste in movies."

"You would." But the dancing light in her eyes said that she wasn't as offended as she pretended.

Better still, she picked up one of the feathers and added it to the cuffs.

"You gonna let me?" he asked hopefully.

"Oh, no, you're the slave, remember? You have to do what I say."

"Yeah, but don't slaves get rewards?"

"No." She sashayed past him.

Maybe slaves didn't get rewarded, but before they finished this detail, Ace fully intended to. He'd been too hot for this woman far too long to not at least get a small taste of that wisecracking mouth.

As for the rest of her...

Ace wasn't the kind of man to let something he wanted get away from him, and he wasn't about to let Rhea tie him down without both of them getting a taste of something decadent.

Chapter Two

Rhea kept glancing up from under her eyelashes while she ate. Ace seemed incredibly focused on her.

Too focused. She was beginning to feel like a piece of prey under the hungry stare of a powerful lion. Little did he know that this bunny, much like the one in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, had sharp, vicious teeth.

She sipped her wine. “If you’re trying to make me nervous, Ace, you can hang it up. I don’t scare easily.”

He arched a brow at her comment as he continued to watch her. “I’m not trying to make you nervous, Rhea, I’m only trying to figure you out. You’re normally so cool at work that I find it amazing how much you’re not when you’re out of the Bat Tower.” The Bat Tower was the pet name of the BellSouth building in downtown Nashville where the BAD offices were hidden under the guise of a BellSouth department door in a secured area of the building that no one but their people could access.

Rhea set her glass aside and answered snidely, “It’s all the chemicals in the air there. They solidify my blood cells until I’m nothing but a statue.”

His warm laughter washed over her. Ace was a lot easier to talk to than she would have thought. Her first impression of him when they’d met three years ago had been less than flattering.

Okay, she’d hated him.

He’d shown up to work in a pair of ragged jeans with a T-shirt and a flippant attitude that had set off her ire immediately. She took her job seriously, while Ace took few things seriously—or at least it had seemed like that in the beginning.

It wasn’t until she’d seen him in action that she’d developed some respect for his abilities and learned that he really did take his job with the same grave responsibility as the rest of them.

Since he came from a Hollywood family, he was a consummate actor. But that too left her wondering what the real Ace Krux was like. How much of even this charming man eating with her was real and how much of it was an act?

He paused while cutting his steak and looked at her. "Why do I have the sudden feeling that I'm some lab experiment gone wrong and you're the scientist trying to figure out why?"

"You're perceptive. Not about being an experiment. I was just wondering how a guy like you ends up working for the government."

He wiped his mouth before taking a drink of his beer. "In a nutshell, Joe."

That wasn't what she was expecting to hear. "Joe?"

"Yeah. We went to college together out in California. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, other than anything that didn't have Hollywood in it. I didn't even know what to major in. When I started my second year, Joe was my roommate, and even though he was only nineteen, he knew exactly what he wanted. While the rest of us went out drinking and partying all the time, he stayed in the room studying."

"That sounds like Joe to me."

"Yeah. One night, I actually got him totally bombed out of his mind and found out a lot about him. He wasn't there for an education, he was there because he wanted to make a difference. He wanted his life to matter to people and he could care less if he made any money so long as he could help the people who needed it. He was the most driven human being I'd ever met, and it was the first time in my life that I ever really respected anyone."

Rhea agreed. Joe was a hard man not to respect. "I still can't understand why a guy like you wanted to save the world. You just don't strike me as an altruist."

He snorted at that. "You want to know the real truth of why I'm here?"

She nodded.

"While we were roommates, I found out that Joe had never been to DC before and that one of the things he wanted most was to see the Smithsonian before he died. It was the same year that they were doing the Star Trek exhibit, which I thought would be cool to see since one of the costumes they had on display was one my mother had worn when she played some alien princess out to seduce Kirk."

In spite of herself, she was intrigued that she had probably seen that episode a dozen times in her life without ever guessing that one of the women after Kirk would have a son who would one day end up working with her. "Your mother was in a Star Trek episode?"

"Oh, yeah. She made tons of appearances in shows and movies before she married my dad and started having us."

Rhea hated to admit it, but she was fascinated by Ace's past. He'd had quite a childhood out in Hollywood. "Given that, I can see why you wanted to go, but it was really nice of you to take Joe along."

"Yeah, well, like I said, I admired him and it wouldn't have been half as much fun alone. So the two of us were there in the Smith along with several hundred other people, including families with small children and babies in strollers, when this voice came over the intercom telling us that there was a bomb threat and that the entire building had to be evacuated immediately."

Rhea saw red at that. It was just that kind of needless panic and fear that she hated.

"I don't think I've ever been more scared in my life," Ace confessed.

"You were scared and you admit it?"

He shrugged. "Hard to believe, but, yeah, as we filed down the halls and then single file down some metal back stairs, I really did expect a bomb to go off and kill us all. I kept looking around at all the faces of the people who had innocently gone there that day for no other reason than to see a little bit of our history, and I thought, what kind of dick would blow up the Smith? I mean, I knew such things happened, but it was the first time it was personal.

"And as we stood out in the Mall, waiting for the bomb squad to search the building, I got really angry as I looked around at all the different buildings that make up the Smith and thought about the irreplaceable items each one held. All the pieces of history that could have been lost to future generations. . . The Spirit of St. Louis, the Hope diamond, the original 'Star-Spangled Banner,' hell, even my mother's costume and the Lone Ranger's mask. But worse than that were all the children who were around me who would have been history themselves. It wasn't right, and for the first time, I really understood what motivated Joe to right the wrongs of the world. So I decided I wanted to do something with my life too. After graduation, we packed our things, moved to DC, and started applying for jobs. Within six months, he ended up in the CIA while I joined the SS."

She was impressed at the timetable and their impetus, especially for Ace. "That must have been scary for you guys to head out across the country on your own."

He shrugged. "Not really. When you have the kind of money and connections my family does, there's not a lot of risk in much of anything. My dad bought me a Georgetown brownstone for graduation, so it was just a matter of finding our places in the world."

"Wow," she said sarcastically, remembering how many times in her childhood they had barely made ends meet. "It must be nice to chomp the silver spoon and know that no matter what you do, you have a safety net."

He seemed to ignore her sarcasm. "Sometimes, but if you're not careful, that safety net can quickly turn into a noose to hang you."

His perception stunned her. Ace had real depth. . . that really was the last thing she'd expected from him, and it made him all the more alluring to her. "How do you mean?"

"I've seen a lot of my friends and family end up on drugs and totally screwed up emotionally because they have no concept of how hard life is for those who lack. To them a crisis is that the detail place didn't deliver the Ferrari in time for the party and now they have to take the Bentley instead. God forbid."

She watched the way the candlelight played in his dark blond hair while he ate some of his steak. The light danced on the sharp angles of his cheeks and jaw, making her wonder what it would feel like to trace that strong jawline with her finger. She shivered with the thought of it. It had really been far too long since she'd been with a man. Even longer since she'd last felt this insane need to reach out and touch one.

Why she would feel that with Ace, she couldn't imagine. Though to be honest, he was starting to grow on her now that he was talking to her and not sniping at her.

"How is it you escaped that fate?" she asked, more interested in the answer than she should have been.

"Again, I have to say Joe. He was the first poor person I'd ever really gotten to know. Here I was stressing out over whether I should go to Cancún or Rio for spring break while he was sneaking fruit into his backpack so that he'd have something to eat over the weekend rather than starve. I shudder to think what I might have become had I not lucked out when they were handing out roommate assignments."

Rhea thought about that in silence while Ace continued to eat. He really was beginning to intrigue her with his stories.

And that terrified her.

Even so, she wanted to know more about him. "So how did you end up with the name Thaddeus?" she asked, changing the subject. "That just doesn't seem to fit you at all."

He groaned as if the name pained him greatly. "Before my dad was a director, he was a stunt double. My mother thought it would be funny to name all of us after whatever character he was playing when we were conceived."

"Really? How fun." But for her life, she couldn't think of a single movie from the time of their birth with a character by that name. "So who was Thaddeus?"

He took another drink of beer. "It's an old TV western from 1971. *Alias Smith and Jones*. Ben Murphy

played Jed “Kid” Curry, aka Thaddeus Jones, and hence my name. I suppose it could be worse. Had Dad been dark-haired, I’d have been named Hannibal after the Pete Deul character.”

She cringed for him. “Lucky you, indeed. So where did you get the nickname Ace?”

“John Wayne.”

She rolled her eyes. “I was being serious.”

“I am serious. He was a longtime friend of my grandfather’s. One night, about a year before he died, he was at my grandfather’s house playing cowboy with me. I wanted a cool outlaw name, so the Duke dubbed me Ace Hijinx, Kid Outlaw.”

A rush of warmth went through her. How sweet.

But Ace’s face turned deeply sad. “I was only eight when he died, and when my mother came in to tell me he was gone, I told her I would never use another name again. The Duke had named me Ace, and Ace I would be.”

Her heart ached for him and the pain she saw on his face. “You loved him.”

“Yeah. He was like another grandfather to me.” Ace returned to his meal.

Rhea sat quietly as she thought over all of the stories and things he’d told her tonight. “You must have had a fascinating life, knowing all those celebrities.”

He took it with an uncharacteristic dose of humility. “Yes and no. At the end of the day, fame is fleeting, and it really is true, we all get dressed the same way every day. The only difference between someone who works at McDonald’s and a Hollywood diva is the size of the paycheck and ego. I’ve seen fame destroy far more lives than it’s built.”

Yes, there was a lot more to Ace than she would have given credit.

He met her gaze, and the intensity of those blue eyes made her shivery. "I have a lot more respect for someone like Joe, who had every mark against him and yet he fought his way out of poverty, turned his life around, and made something out of himself, than I do for all the rich kids who take their trust funds and party in the Caymans. Trust me, I'd much rather hang out with the Joes of the world."

He took another bite of his steak. "So what about you? Where did you grow up?"

Rhea sighed wistfully as she remembered her small hometown. "Starkville, Mississippi. The biggest celebrity I ever met growing up was the man in Tupelo who sold Elvis his first guitar."

Ace smiled at that as if Mr. Hollywood really was impressed.

"I hope you gave that man a big thank-you."

She didn't respond.

"So what about your parents?" he asked. "You never really talk about them."

Rhea's heart wrenched as she thought about her mother and father. "No, I don't."

Uncomfortable with the turn in conversation, she cleared her throat. "So tell me about Bender."

"Let's go back to the parent thing. I've spilled my guts to you, the least you could do is tell me something about your parents." Ace watched as her brown eyes actually teared up. "Rhea?"

“There’s nothing to tell.”

He didn’t need his instincts to tell him she was hiding something. It was painfully obvious.

Before he could ask her anything else, she excused herself and headed for the restroom. Ace got up to follow her.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he pulled her to a stop in the lobby. “You’re not planning on following me into the ladies’ room, are you?”

“No. I just want to know why the thought of your parents upsets you so much. Most people don’t get teary-eyed when they think of them.”

Rhea covered her lips with her hand as she struggled with the pain that still ached raw and deep inside her soul. She always got emotional when she thought of her parents. How could she not?

It was something she struggled with every day, and not even the passage of time could take away the sting of it. That was the bad thing about senseless violence. It left a haunting mark on the lives it scarred.

She didn’t want to talk about it and yet she found herself confiding in him for some reason she couldn’t even begin to understand. “Do you remember Pan Am flight 103?”

“The Lockerbie, Scotland ,bombing?”

“Yeah,” she said, forcing herself not to get emotional. But it was hard. “My parents were on that flight, coming home for Christmas from a business trip. My grandmother, brother, sister, and I were putting up the Christmas tree, listening to the news and talking about what we’d do when they got home, when we heard about it.”

She choked as she saw that day again clearly in her mind. “My grandmother had been about to put the glass angel on top of the tree when they announced it. It was a special edition Lenox ornament that she

had guarded all my life. She dropped it to the floor, where it shattered like our hearts. My sister started screaming and I just stood there in complete shock as I stared at the broken glass on the floor, unable to move or breathe. My grandmother was so upset by the news that she ended up having a stroke later that night.”

Ace could see the agony plainly on Rhea’s face and it made his own chest tight.

The look she gave him tore through him. “Do you know what the human soul sounds like when it screams in utter agony? It echoes through your body until you’re sure it will shatter your eardrums. Only no one else can hear it. Only you do. One minute, I was just a kid, dreaming about picking out a prom dress with my mother, having my dad teach me to drive that summer, and in the next everything about my life was irrevocably changed.

“I no longer had parents to be there when I graduated, to nag me to get married before I turned thirty. No Mom for the mother-daughter tea at my sorority or Dad to help me lug boxes into my dorm room. And all because of a senseless act of violence. It is harsh and it hurts and no child should ever feel like I did in that moment. No one should ever lose a loved one like that.No one.”

He didn’t know how she held herself so composed. Nothing but absolute anguish was in her eyes.

“Two hundred and fifty-nine families were shattered that day, and I want to make sure that no one will ever feel the pain that went through me when I realized my mom and dad weren’t coming home ever again. So that, Mr.Krux, is why when you say the word terrorist, I get pissed.”

“And you have every right to. I’m sorry, Rhea. I really am.”

She nodded. “I know. Now if you’ll excuse me, I really need to go to the bathroom for a minute.”

Ace stood back and watched as she headed toward the door. She walked slowly and methodically, but he had a good idea she was going in there so that she could fall apart.

Damn. He shouldn’t have pushed. But how could he have guessed that? His stupid story at the Smith was paltry compared to hers. And people like her were why his job meant so much to him. It was what

kept him going on no sleep, and why he never wanted to get serious with a woman.

His job was stressful enough, the last thing he needed was a woman who wanted time from him that he couldn't give her.

Sighing, he went back to the table to wait for Rhea to return.

When she came back a few minutes later, he could tell she'd been crying. Her features were pinched, her eyes only a little red, but it was enough to let him know what she'd done in the bathroom.

"You are without a doubt the strongest woman I have ever met," he said, toasting her with his beer. "I really admire you, Rhea."

Rhea frowned at him as she reached for her wine and clinked it lightly against his beer bottle. "Now I'm really suspicious of you, Ace. What do you have up that sleeve of yours?"

"Nothing but bare flesh, which you will see all for yourself tomorrow morning." He winked at her, which caused her to get that familiar angry spark in her brown eyes.

Now that was much better than her sadness. If he kept her angry, she wouldn't be able to focus on anything else.

"You know, I've always read about incorrigible men, but you really are, aren't you?"

He laughed at that. "Beat me with all your whips and quips, baby."

She gave him a half-teasing, half-sinister smile. "I plan to."

"That's all right. It'll be worth it so long as you kiss all my boo-boos afterward."

“Oh, you are a quick one, Mr. Krux.”

“But the real question is, am I charming you out of your pants?” He wagged his eyebrows at her.

“You’re working on it, aren’t you?”

“I’m trying to.”

She gave him a heated once-over. “You might stand more of a chance if I didn’t know how many other women you’ve already charmed out of their pants and then danced right out of their lives.”

He held his hands up in mock surrender. “Those are all lies. I was framed.”

“Yeah, right.”

And yet she was beguiled by him and that infectious debonair attitude of his. He really was starting to charm her out of her pants, and that scared her more than the thought of dominatrix training.

She really did want him. How could she not? He had been strangely understanding about her parents, and now she realized he was trying to distract her to get her mind off it.

Ace really did have a heart and a soul underneath that trying facade.

“So let’s do some business,” she said as she returned to her grilled chicken. “Tell me all about Bender.”

“He’s a total freak. Just your kind of guy.”

She laughed. "Sounds more like your type. Maybe I should have gotten you that bustier after all."

"Stop with the bustier jokes." He shuddered. "Every time you talk about it, I get this image in my head that has scarred me for life."

"What image?"

"My aunt was one of the women who did the makeup for Tootsie. To get ready for it, she practiced on my dad. I came home from school to find him decked out in the complete getup: sequins, wig, earrings, makeup, you name it. Forget horror, that was the scariest thing I've ever seen. My dad made one ugly woman."

Rhea laughed again. "Are you serious?"

"Oh, yeah. You couldn't pay me enough to ever get me near female clothes... unless I'm taking them off a female body."

"Ace!" she growled. "Focus on something other than your hormones."

"I would try to focus on your hormones, but you get pissed every time I do."

"We are here to work."

"Yeah, but for once my work entails me getting you naked."

"I am not getting naked for you."

“Nearly naked then.”

“Ace...”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop and brief you for real.”

And for once he held to his word. They finished up dinner while he went over every nuance of the case and every sick fetish he had uncovered about Bender.

The more Rhea learned, the more she became aware of just how important it was to get this man out of commission.

After Ace had paid their check, they walked out to the parking lot and got back into her car, where he was just a little too close to her. It was hard to ignore a man whose presence dominated the small area. The warm scent of his skin filled her head and it was all she could do to focus on traffic and not those teasing lips that she suddenly wanted to taste.

“So how do I find my way to your bed anyway?” Ace asked as she backed out of the space.

Rhea gave him a hooded stare. “You don’t have enough charm, wit, or money to ever get into my bed.”

His face was a mask of wickedness. “Wait a sec. I’m supposed to be at your place tomorrow so you can tie me to your bed, remember? I can’t do that if I don’t know where you live.”

Oh, yeah. “Well, you are a superspy. You could sic Carlos on me and find out.”

He laughed. “Yeah, but Tee has the payroll. She’d be faster.”

“True, but lucky for you, I’ll make it even easier than that. I live in Franklin , down on Church Street .”

“The historic area?”

She nodded. “It’s a small 1930s cottage, painted creamy yellow with a burgundy door and black iron fence. You can’t miss it.”

“Creamy yellow? That’s different from regular yellow how?”

“It’s lighter, paler.”

She could see from the corner of her eye that he had that man face that said, “Women and their weird colors.”

They were quiet as she drove him back to the lot where he had his car parked. She pulled up beside his Viper. “See you tomorrow.”

The intensity of those eyes on her body made her hot. Feverish. “Yes, you will. All of me.” He glanced to the bag she’d tossed in the backseat. “Don’t forget to lay out our toys.”

“I shudder at the thought.” But the real problem was that after tonight she didn’t truly shudder in revulsion. She shivered in anticipation.

A foreign part of her was actually looking forward to it.

“You shudder, huh?” Ace leaned over, and before she realized what he was doing, he kissed her fiercely.

Her entire body sizzled at the taste of those firm lips against hers. She opened her mouth to taste him

fully and let the scent of warm, spicy cologne and Ace fill her head.

This man really knew how to give a kiss. Forget his gun, his mouth should have been registered as a lethal weapon. His tongue swept against hers in a promising, hungry fashion that left her completely breathless before he pulled back to give her a hot, lustful look. Her entire body was on fire and it was all she could do not to pull him back to her and taste him again.

“That was daring of you,” she said, her voice remarkably calm given the havoc of her body. “Especially since you know I’m packing heat.”

He laughed. “True, but I thought I should at least kiss you before you see me naked.” He opened the car door. “Night, Rhea.”

“Night, Ace.”

He got out and slammed the door shut, then got into his Viper.

Rhea watched as he buckled himself in. He paused to give her a devilish grin before he squealed out of the parking space and headed for the entrance.

Her body still on fire from the passion of that kiss, she followed him out of the lot at a much more subdued pace even though a part of her was racing even more than he was.

“It’s just a kiss.”

But it had been a great one.

And tomorrow she really would see him naked...

Ace pulled his black Viper into Rhea's driveway. He still couldn't believe he was going to do this. He should actually thank Bender for being such a sick bastard since Bender was the one finally giving him a way to get close to Rhea.

God help him, but he'd been in love with her since the first time he'd seen her. And she had shined him on without a second glance.

Unused to having to beg or fight for a woman's attention, Ace had walked away, wishing he knew of something to make her attracted to him. She'd always been so reserved toward him, if not downright nasty. No matter what he tried, it always seemed to be the wrong thing with her.

Until last night.

His lips still sizzled from her kiss. His body burned from the thought of having her tie him up...

You're a sick man yourself, Ace.

No, he was a desperate one. There had always been something about Rhea that set his entire body on fire. It was why he'd bribed Hunter to change cubes with him in the office. Hunter had pretended that being under the air vent was messing with his allergies. So Ace had "volunteered" to take his desk.

It had been the best and worst \$3,000 he'd ever spent. The best because it forced Rhea to acknowledge him when he was in the office. The worst because being so close to her was complete torture.

Ace pulled off his sunglasses and set them in the passenger seat.

It was the moment of truth.

Getting out, he slammed the door shut and sauntered up the driveway when what he really wanted to do was sprint. But the last thing he wanted was for Rhea to know just how badly he wanted her.

No, coolness would win this. Or if not, it would at least save his dignity.

Rhea saw Ace leave his car and saunter with that masculine, predatory lope toward her front door. He looked totally edible as he came closer to her lair.

Yes, he was sexy. Yes, he was hot, but she wasn't about to play into that overinflated ego of his. She had to be cool and dispassionate about wanting to take a bite out of that man. She should never have spent time with him last night. Somehow, he'd actually become human to her and not a total scumbag. A tiny part of her was even starting not only to like him, but respect him as well.

He knocked on her door.

Rhea clenched and unclenched her fists, then shook them in an effort to calm down. She had to get a grip on herself. Quick.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door to find Ace standing there with one hip cocked and a seductive smile on his face.

"Morning, sunshine," he said.

"Morning." Rhea stepped back to let him enter.

He gave her that wicked, charming smile. "Now this is where in Hollywood they would cue 'Bad to the Bone' to play as I entered your house."

Rhea rolled her eyes. "Oh, please! Ace, you're so bad."

"To the bone, baby," he sang.

"Stop that!"

He didn't, instead, he broke into a perfect rendition of George Thorogood. The man really did have a great voice.

Rhea closed her door. "All right, I get it."

He didn't stop; worse, he literally pinned her to the door and held her trapped between the wood and his long, lush body. He lowered his tone so that he could sing in her ear without causing her pain. His voice was low and sultry and it reverberated through her.

The pain came not from his body pressing against hers or her voice ringing in her ears, it came from the deep-seated ache at the core of her body that throbbed with a piercing need for him.

"I want to be yours, pretty baby, yours and yours alone."

That sounded too good to be true and she knew that things that seemed to be too good, always were.

"Should I get my saxophone?" she asked, trying to get her thoughts on something other than him being naked in her arms.

That succeeded in breaking his song. "You got one?"

“Yeah, I do.”

“Cool. Can you play?”

He still hadn't moved back and she couldn't move away without brushing even more of her body up against his.

If she did that, she'd be lost, as badly as she wanted him. There was no way she could feel all that hard, lean muscle and not kiss him again.

Or do something she might later regret.

She cleared her throat before she answered his question. “Not well, but I can hammer out a few notes now and again that don't make the neighborhood dogs bark.”

He laughed as he lifted up one hand to play with a stray black curl of her hair. She had to force herself not to lean her head forward the few inches it would take to bury her nose in the hollow of his throat and just inhale his spiced, manly scent.

Or better yet, lick that tawny skin that covered the hot tendon in his neck. . . .

“In that case, I need to introduce you to my little brother, Aramis. He used to torture his guitar to the point I sold it for a dollar to our gardener.”

“You did not!”

“Yeah, I did. Still have my father's handprint on my butt to prove it. Want to see?”

Rhea snorted at him even though the offer was extremely tempting. “Why does everything have to get

back to me seeing you naked?"

He smiled at her. "Ulterior motives."

The worst part was that Rhea really did want to see what he kept hidden under those clothes. She'd spent many hours last night after their kiss wondering how much of his ego was boasting and how much was true.

He dipped his head down to nuzzle her cheek.

For a full second, she couldn't move as she savored the feel of him there. But somewhere in the back of her mind, warning bells went off.

"Would you like some coffee or juice?" she asked, pushing him away before she headed toward her kitchen. Yowza, but he had a hard body. Just the brief contact of her hand on his chest was enough to let her know he was built of solid muscle.

Disappointment flashed across his face, only to be quickly replaced by a grim determination. "Juice would be great." He followed after her and took a seat at her breakfast counter while she went to her fridge.

She could feel his gaze on her body. Turning her head, she saw confirmation. He was staring at her butt as if he were caressing her in his mind. Her entire body burned.

Rhea almost dropped the juice. Tightening her grip, she pretended to ignore him and went to get a glass. "So your brother is named Aramis, huh? Your dad must have been in The Three Musketeers."

"Yes, and Aramis is grateful every day of his life that Dad didn't double for Christopher Lee."

"Why?"

“He played Rochefort.”

She laughed as she poured the juice. “Yeah, I can see where that might be bad. But had your father doubled for Michael York, Aramis would be D’Artagnan. That could have been cool.” She handed him his juice.

“Maybe,” Ace said before he took a sip. “But no one would ever be able to spell it.”

The doorbell rang.

Grateful for the interruption, Rhea put the juice back in the fridge. “That must be our instructor.”

She headed back to the door, unsure of what to expect. The woman’s name was Beullah Mueller, and for some reason she pictured an extremely rigid German woman who looked like the gym teacher from the movie Porky’s, complete with hair rolled into sausages around her head.

The reality was worse.

“Hi,” the woman said, not in a German-accented voice, but in a normal American one.

“Beullah?” Rhea asked, unsure if this was the right woman.

Surely not.

Around the age of forty-five, the woman in front of her was of average height, slender, and was dressed in pink designer sweats. She had a large, navy blue gym bag slung over her shoulder. Something about her reminded Rhea of Meredith Baxter-Birney from FamilyTies .

She looked wholesome and sweet.

Beullah smiled warmly. "I know. I look like someone's middle-aged mother and not a dominatrix instructor. But in my day... I have to tell you, I have whipped many a man's ass and enjoyed it thoroughly."

There was something extremely incongruous about that coming out of the mouth of a woman who looked as if she ought to be in a peanut butter commercial.

"Okay," Rhea said, stepping back to let the woman in. "I don't suppose I want to ask how it is Tee knew to call you, do I?"

"We go to the same spa and health club. I have to tell you that Tee is something else. She bends like a pretzel."

"Oh, jeez, now there's an image I want burned out of my memory. I'll never be able to look Tee in the eye again," Ace said as he joined them.

Beullah smiled. "You must be Ace. Tee told me to give you an extra hard time."

"I'm sure she did, just as I'm sure you will."

Rhea had to admit she didn't like the way Beullah was looking at Ace, like a starving woman staring at a steak.

Beullah waltzed into the living room and placed her bag on the coffee table. "Tee said she liked the two of you a lot and that you were ready to get more adventurous in your relationship, so here I am."

"Pardon?" Rhea asked.

Beullah waved her hand. “Oh, don’t be bashful. I’ve worked with lots of couples who have gotten bored with the missionary position and are looking for new ways to spice up their sex. I had this couple once who started out normal as pie, and the next thing I knew, they had more body piercings than Marilyn Manson and Christina Aguilera combined. He really liked feeling the cat-o’-nine-tails whip across his pe—”

“TMI,” Ace said quickly, cutting her off. “Way too much information for me.”

Rhea agreed completely, but couldn’t resist teasing him. “I don’t know, Ace. That sounds like fun. Sure you don’t want to give it a try?”

“Nothing painful comes near the area,” he said, indicating his entire groin. “Nothing.”

“Now, now,” Beullah said as she unzipped her bag. “You two have to learn to trust each other. That’s rule number one about being a couple. If you’re to have a healthy relationship, you have to learn to express your needs and fears to each other without dread or inhibition.”

So that was the story Tee was using for this. Rhea and Ace were supposed to be a couple wanting to add spice to their sex life. Nice lie. Tee could have filled them in on it first.

“Well,” Rhea said wistfully, “you know how it goes. Even the hottest piece of cheese eventually goes bad. I never thought I’d get bored with Ace, but look at him. . . My cheddar turned into Gouda on me.”

“Hey, I resent that.” Ace’s tone was offended. “I’m not the prude here. You’re the one who walks around in shirts buttoned all the way up to your nose and pants or long skirts. You know it wouldn’t hurt you to wear a miniskirt and low-cut blouse once in a while.”

Rhea arched her brow at that. Ace had been paying attention to her clothes. Who knew?

“Now, now,” Beullah said in a voice that held the full authority of a woman used to being in charge. “There’s no need in blaming each other. Two days with me and you two will know all there is to know

about how to make each other beg for your attention.”

She opened her bag wider and searched through plastic bags. “You,” she said to Ace. “Take off your clothes.”

He went completely stiff. “Bullshit.”

Beullah pulled out a whip. “Take off your clothes, slave. Now.”

“No.”

She snapped the whip at Ace, who caught it without flinching when it wrapped itself around his forearm. “Whips don’t do it for me, baby. I’m not a lion and you’re not going to tame me like one.” He jerked the whip out of her hands.

Beullah looked at him with a newfound respect. She glanced over to Rhea. “You certainly have your hands full, huh?”

“You’ve no idea.”

Beullah retrieved her whip.

“C’mon, Ace,” Rhea said. “Time to play.”

He growled low in his throat before he started unbuttoning his shirt.

Beullah smiled approvingly. “That’s it, Rhea. You have to take charge of your slave and show him who’s boss.” Beullah unzipped her sweatshirt top.

Rhea's eyes bulged as she realized that beneath that average outfit, Beullah wore a leather corset that had studded metal cups that covered her breasts.

Beullah acted as if there were nothing unusual about her state of dress. "First thing you have to do, Rhea, is get used to your role as mistress. You need to be completely comfortable in this."

Beullah pulled her pants off. She wore a pair of black fishnets that were held up by bloodred ribbons. The back of the corset was a thong that left more of Beullah exposed than Rhea had ever wanted to see.

Rhea could feel herself gaping. "I could never feel comfortable in that."

"Sure you could," Beullah and Ace said at once.

"No, really," Rhea insisted. "How about a T-shirt and..." Her voice trailed off as Beullah pulled out three small plastic baggies.

"This should fit. Tee gave me your size and told me to pick out something extra rough."

Beullah opened one bag and handed Rhea two pieces of something she would have sworn was an arm sling...for a very small child.

"Don't be bashful," Beullah said. "I'm sure Ace has seen you naked enough not to care, and you haven't got anything I don't." She looked at her speculatively. "At least I hope you don't, and even if you do, I'm sure I've seen it on someone else."

Yeah...Little did Beullah know Ace had never seen her undressed in either of their lives. But then Bender would have the same problem. She was going to have to wear this for not only a complete stranger, but a demented one at that.

Okay, Rhea, you can do this.

No, I can't.

Yes, you can. Do it.

Determined to go through with this, she started for her bedroom. At times she really, truly hated her job, and now she knew why she'd given up fieldwork to begin with.

It sucked.

"And don't forget this." Beullah handed her another red-tinted plastic bag and a smaller bag.

Rhea was too scared to even look at what it contained. Ignoring Ace, who watched her with a hot, intense stare, she crept to her room down the hallway, where she would hopefully find her courage lurking someplace.

By the time she was dressed in the tiny, shiny PVC halter top and thong bottom, Rhea had almost convinced herself that this wasn't so bad. After all, women wore less than this on beaches in Rio .

Not that much less, but somewhat less.

Of course it would help if the bottom wasn't crawling into places the good Lord never meant neoprene to touch. Rhea opened the bags to find a pair of fishnet stockings and six-inch-spike-heeled PVC boots. Oh, yeah, these looked lethal.

And poor Ace thought his padded handcuffs would be used.

“How long have you two been dating?” Beullah asked while Ace waited without his shirt on for Rhea to return.

He kept his arms folded over his chest, wondering what Rhea would look like when she came back.

“Three years,” he said to Beullah’s question. The first rule of lying was to stick close to the truth. Since he’d known Rhea that long, it seemed a safe guess.

“Do you love her?”

Rule number two, answer question with question and let the other person draw their own conclusions. “What’s not to love?”

Beullah went to her bag and pulled out a pair of tiny leather briefs. “You know, this is what you’re supposed to wear.”

He curled his lip at the thought of that little thing strapped onto him. “I’d rather keep my pants on, thank you.”

She clucked her tongue at him. “Aren’t you more sexually adventurous than that?”

If it were only a sexual relationship, the answer would be hell no. Unfortunately, more than a relationship was at stake here. If Rhea didn’t at least act as if she knew what she was doing, she’d end up killed, and since he was the one who had gotten her into this...

Expelling a disgusted breath, he grabbed the briefs from Beullah and realized brief was definitely the key word. He might as well be covering a watermelon with a Band-Aid.

Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration, but that's what it felt like.

Ace headed for the open door in the hallway that led to Rhea's bathroom. Ignoring the feminine pink-and-white-flowered decor, he closed the door, then pulled his shoes, socks, and pants off.

Just as he reached for his briefs, the door opened.

Rhea froze at the unexpected sight of Ace completely naked in her bathroom. Her heart hammering, all she could do was gape.

Hello. He was glorious!

It wasn't as if she hadn't known he'd have a great body. She did. But this...

This was heaven. He was so toned, she could see every tendon of muscle. His skin was deep tawny and inviting. Warm and delectable.

He made her mouth water.

And as she stared at him, she realized he was growing hard even before her eyes.

He cursed an instant before he grabbed a pink towel off her counter and covered himself. "Did you need something, Rhea?"

"Damned if I remember what it was now," she confessed. "I have to say, seeing you naked has totally reviled me to utter stupefaction."

He scoffed at that. "Yeah, well, I have to say, I'm enjoying the view myself."

It was time to teach this man a lesson. Rhea narrowed her eyes on him two seconds before she stepped forward and grabbed the towel he was holding. Before she could stop herself, she jerked it free.

“Hey!” Ace snapped as she danced away with it.

Laughing, she ran out of the bathroom with Ace in hot pursuit. They both skidded to a halt as they entered the living room and saw Beullah looking intimidating in her role as mistress.

Rhea didn't protest Ace's taking the towel back and wrapping it quickly around his hips.

“I'll get you later for that,” he whispered before he vanished back into the bathroom.

“Good, good, good,” Beullah said. “You should play with your slave. Torment him until he knows who the boss is.”

Yeah, but in this relationship, Rhea wasn't sure she was any more his boss than he was hers. It seemed to be a mutual game of one-upmanship.

Beullah handed her a cat-o'-nine-tails that was made out of velvet and feathers. It looked more like a cat toy than something designed for sexual stimulation.

Ace returned with the towel wrapped around his hips.

Beullah frowned at him. “Did the briefs not fit?”

“Not in my opinion.”

Before either of them could move, Beullah whipped the towel free of his hips to expose the leather briefs.

Rhea burst out laughing.

“Hey!” Ace snapped. “Galaxina, I didn’t laugh at you.”

“I’m so sorry. That just doesn’t look right.” And it didn’t. Something was profoundly wrong with a man as tough as Ace Krux wearing what amounted to a leather Speedo.

“Who is Galaxina?” Beullah asked.

Rhea struggled to subdue her laughter. “A very cheesy sci-fi movie with Dorothy Stratten.”

Beullah humphed, then dropped the towel. “Now we need to set a few ground rules. One, there should always be a safe word that the slave uses to let the master or mistress know when he or she has had enough. I think today we will use Pinocchio.”

Amusement flashed across Ace’s face. “Pinocchio? The boy made of . . . wood?”

Rhea rolled her eyes at him.

Beullah gave him a censoring glare. “You have something against Pinocchio, slave?”

“Well, no.” He gave Rhea a playful look. “I just think it’s an interesting choice.”

“Okay, then,” Beullah continued. “Just say Pinocchio to let Rhea know when she’s hit you too hard. Remember, this is for fun and for arousal. The point of this isn’t to actually hurt each other.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Ace said in a relieved tone. “Can I start this whole thing by saying Pinocchio now so that I can get dressed again?”

Rhea rolled her eyes at him.

Beullah looked around the living room. “Now Mistress Rhea, where should we tie up your slave?”

Rhea grinned wickedly with a thought. “The front yard for the neighbors to see?”

“Like hell.”

Beullah laughed. “You two certainly have the relationship, don’t you? All right, children. We’ll start simple. The bedroom.”

Ace didn’t miss a beat. “Pinocchio.”

Rhea put her hands on her hips. “Ace, c’mon, play nice.”

Unready to face the Hun with the whip, Ace crossed his arms over his chest and followed Beullah and Rhea to the bedroom in back. He paused in the doorway as he took in the white and pink perfection of Rhea’s domain. It was innately feminine.

Better still it was innately Rhea, right down to the soft, sweet scent of her perfume that hovered in the air.

His body stirred instantly and it was all he could do not to close his eyes and just inhale the seductive scent.

“We bought these last night.” Rhea handed Beullah the bag full of their toys.

Beullah scoffed at them, “Those are for amateurs.”

Ace scoffed back, “Consider me an amateur.”

As he reached for the velvet-lined handcuffs, Beullah pulled them away. “You are a very bad slave.” She handed the whip to Rhea. “Punish him.”

Rhea burst out laughing. “I don’t think I can do this. I really don’t. I’m just not dominatrix material.”

“You have to get into the mind-set. Close your eyes.”

Rhea looked at Ace. “Cover me if she makes a weird move?”

“You got it.”

Rhea closed her eyes as Beullah came up behind her. “Now picture yourself as the ultimate goddess. You have to embrace your inner womanhood and know that you rule the world.”

Rhea could see herself as empress of the universe.

“Imagine men lining up to do your every bidding. You have the power to make them want you. To need you. To do anything to get your approval.”

A woman could cozy up to that idea.

“Now open your eyes.”

She did and Beullah handed her the whip.

“Now make him serve you!”

Rhea stiffened her spine. “Get on your knees, Ace.”

“Pinocchio.”

“There is no Pinocchio for you!” Rhea cracked the whip, which would have been more effective had it been made of something other than velvet and feathers.

Ace felt completely ridiculous as he did what she ordered. But then she had to get used to this. Her life would depend on her being able to convince Bender that she was a dominatrix.

What was a little damaged ego if it saved her life?

“Now grab his hair and pull his head back.”

Rhea complied.

Ace stared up at her dark, sinister glare.

It lasted about three seconds before she burst out laughing. She rubbed his head where her hand had been gripping his hair. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No,” he said honestly.

“Dominate him, Rhea!”

The problem was Rhea didn't want to dominate him. In truth, she wanted to kiss him as she stared at him looking up at her. She knew this had to be humiliating for him and yet he was going along with it.

For her.

“It's okay, Rhea,” he said charitably. “Think of all the times I've pissed you off and you wanted to choke the life out of me.”

Strange, as he knelt there, she couldn't think of a single instance. More as if they were all an amalgam, but no one incident stood out as being all that heinous.

“This isn't about violence,” Beullah said as she watched them. “It's about trust. You don't want to hurt him, Rhea, you want to pleasure him. You have to learn what his pressure points are and learn to pull back just before you really do hurt him.” Beullah took the whip and showed her how to wield it.

Rhea practiced for a few minutes until she got the wrist action down that would enable her to slap the velvet and feathers against him until they made a popping sound.

“Now make him crawl into the bed.”

Yeah, right.

“Jump up, Baby Judy, jump up,” Rhea said, using the reference from her favorite Hawaiian Pups song. “Get on the bed.”

But as Ace climbed up her comforter, all she could focus on was the glorious sight of his lean, hard body. She watched the muscles working in his back and legs as he positioned himself on her bed.

Yeah, now that was something a woman had dreams about.

“Let your fantasies go wild,” Beullah whispered in her ear.

The only problem was, Rhea doubted seriously that the chubby arm’s dealer would ever look that good in leather Speedos.

Ace, on the other hand...

That butt begged for a nip. All too well she could imagine peeling that leather abomination off that delectable flesh with her teeth. Exploring every inch of the man that it concealed with her fingers...

Her mouth.

Beullah handed her a pair of leather manacles. “Now tie him up.”

Rhea approached the bed. “Turn over, slave.”

Ace wasn’t sure what to think as he obeyed. A foreign part of him found Rhea’s commanding tone a bit sexy. The comfortable part of him rebelled at her orders.

Luckily he had enough sense to keep playing.

Rhea grabbed his hand and secured it to her bedpost. Her hair fell against his palm as she buckled him in. She had to have the softest hair he’d ever felt, and instead of that damned whip, he wished she’d climb over him and tease him with a beating from her hair.

She walked to the other side of the bed and buckled his other hand.

Ace tried for a quick grope, only to have Rhea give him a menacing frown before she had him all buckled in and unable to get up.

That was something that made him extremely nervous. "I have a question."

"Slaves don't have questions," Beullah snapped.

"Well, this one does. In case some catastrophic event occurs and you two dropdead, is there any way for me to get out of this on my own?"

Rhea laughed. "No, babe, so you better pray nothing happens to us."

"I can see the tabloid headlines now," he muttered.

Beullah clucked her tongue. "Maybe we should gag him."

Before Rhea could say no, Beullah pulled out this strange contraption with a bright orange ball in the center.

Rhea shook her head at it. "Oh, that just looks cruel."

Beullah swung it back and forth by a leather chord as she studied Ace. "You sure you don't want to try it?"

Ace snorted. "No way that's going into my mouth until I see something legal saying it's been thoroughly sterilized and detoxed."

Rhea agreed with that, not to mention she couldn't get Bender to talk if he was wearing a gag. "I think we'll pass on that."

Her face disappointed, Beullah put it back in her bag. Then over the next two hours, she went about explaining the psychology and toys of dominance to Rhea, whose head felt as if it were going to explode from information overload.

Just before lunch, Beullah decided to call it a day.

"I'll just head on back home," she said to Rhea. "And let the two of you practice in private for a while. It'll take you a little time to get really comfortable. Just remember, baby steps. Tomorrow I'll bring some of the more interesting toys."

"Oh, goody," Ace said sarcastically from the bed. "I can't wait."

Rhea grimaced at him. "Ace, be nice or I will use the gag."

They left him tied to the bed while they went to the living room, where Beullah quick pulled on her sweat suit again. She packed up her "toys," then handed Rhea a business card. "Call me if you have any questions or need anything."

"Thanks."

She left Beullah out, then returned to Ace, who looked less than pleased that she had abandoned him.

"Yo, Rhea. Nice of you to go make chitchat at the door with Eva Braun, but you know I'm kind of tired of being locked to this bed while you've given me the hard-on from hell and nothing else, so either let me up or make Mr. Happy happy."

Rhea licked her lips as she let her gaze wander all over every single inch of that divinely male form. She would never get another shot like this one in her life. All morning she had been staring at his body, examining every inch of it, and now she didn't want to beat him. She wanted to touch him.

And it was time to take exactly what she wanted.

"That's not a very nice way to talk to your mistress, slave," she said, cracking her whip against her boots. "What's the magic word for release?"

"Pinocchio."

"That's right, Pinocchio," she said with a coy smile, "and now it's time to see if you're a real boy."

Chapter Three

Ace definitely liked the sound of that. But it seemed way too good to be true.

"Don't be a tease, Rhea. It's just cruel."

She sauntered toward him with a walk that stirred every male hormone in his body. She was truly the one hunger he'd had these last couple of years that he'd never been able to sate.

She dragged the whip across her halter that cupped her breasts to perfection. The ends of it fell into the deep valley, where it caressed her bared flesh and made him wonder what the PVC obscured. His cock jerked with need.

"Who said I was teasing?" she asked.

He watched as she approached his feet. Ace held his breath in sweet expectation of her actions.

C'mon, baby, touch me where it counts...

Now that they were alone, he let his mind go wild with what he would love to have her to do him.

She licked her lips suggestively as she raked a hot, hungry look over his body. "Hmm..." She crawled onto the bed, between his legs. "Where should I begin?"

"A little due north of your current position," he said, his voice thick and hoarse from her torture.

She arched a brow at him. "A little north, huh?" She inched her hand toward his swollen groin.

It was all Ace could do not to squirm at the thought of her cupping him. He'd never felt so alive, so on edge. So damn needful of a woman's touch.

Her hand came closer. Closer. He held his breath as she hovered directly over his cock.

Just as he was sure she would caress him, she veered her hand off and started tickling him.

Ace cursed in frustration as his body spasmed to get away from her questing hands. He wanted her blood for disappointing him like this.

"Pinocchio!" he shouted, knowing she wouldn't listen to him.

She took no mercy on him whatsoever.

Ace tried to grab her or throw her off, but being spread-eagled on her bed didn't lend itself to doing anything more than bouncing her gently. He was completely at her mercy.

“You're going to pay for this when I get loose.”

She paused in her torture. “Am I?”

Her touch turned gentle then as she brushed her hand over his painfully erect nipple. To his amazement, she gently massaged the sensitive tip with her fingernail.

Ace growled as chills spread all over him. He tried to kiss her, but she veered her face away while she continued to stroke his chest.

Rhea knew she had no business touching Ace like this and yet she couldn't stop herself. She'd wanted him at her mercy ever since he'd kissed her.

Now she had him right where she wanted him.

And he didn't seem to be objecting. It was still surprising to her just how much she had enjoyed their exercises with Beullah. She'd discovered a whole new facet of her personality that she hadn't known existed.

“You know, you've been remarkably good through all this.” He'd only complained a few times whenever she'd hit him too hard, but overall, he'd been a really good slave as she learned to wield her whip.

Ace felt his heart hammering as she continued to massage his nipple. He was so hard for her that it was painful. “You in those clothes helped,” he said, his voice thick and deep.

“Did it?”

He sucked his breath in sharply as she ran her hand across his chest, to his other nipple.

“Rhea, this really is cruel. You’ve got me way too excited to just cold-shower it.”

“No,” she said, her breath falling across his bare skin. “Cruel is having to watch you lying here looking all sexy and choice while knowing I could do anything to you I wanted to and you are powerless to stop me. There really is something very sexy about this.”

“And what do you want to do with me?”

She moved her hand lower, toward his swollen cock.

Rhea knew she should let him up. She should stop this madness immediately.

If only it were that easy. But the truth was she’d been way too attracted to him for too long to just let him leave now. Especially after the morning the two of them had shared.

“Would you let me do what I want to you?” she asked him.

“I’m in no position to stop you.”

She smiled at him.

Ace held his breath as she moved toward the small leather briefs. He grabbed the leather straps as every nerve ending in his body fired and danced.

Then she did the most shocking thing of all. She bent her head down and tongued the small zipper that bisected the briefs. The sight of her between his legs made his cock jerk. He was so aroused he was almost afraid of embarrassing himself.

Tensing his body in expectation, he watched as she slowly pulled the zipper down with her teeth. It was the most arousing thing he'd ever experienced.

The most erotic thing he'd ever seen. And it was all he could do not to pull his arms out of their sockets in an effort to free himself long enough to grab her and take her the way he wanted to.

Rhea held her breath as Ace's cock sprang free. She pulled back and used her hand to unzip the briefs all the way around to the back until Ace was completely bare to her.

He was gorgeous there.

She watched him carefully. "Beullah said you needed to learn to trust me."

"I don't trust anyone."

"No?" Rhea didn't know where she got her confidence; maybe it was because they had both been so close to naked all morning that she had gotten a lot more comfortable with him.

Or maybe it was that all she had to do was hear Ace's voice and she was immediately wet for him. Aching.

Whatever caused it, she reached around her and undid her halter top.

Ace hissed at the sight of her bared breasts. Her nipples were hard, just begging for a caress and taste.

Then to his dismay, she leaned over him and wrapped the halter around his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

“Blindfolding you. Now you really are at my mercy.”

Ace shook his head, wanting to see her. It didn't do a damn bit of good.

Rhea sat back to survey her naked, blind captive. “It must be nerve-racking for you.”

“You have no idea.”

She laughed. It was really heady to be able to study him without his intense stare distracting her.

His tawny skin was stretched tight over a well-muscled body. He was a large man, all over. Lying beside him, she touched the tip of his cock with her finger. He was already leaking.

Ace growled as she rubbed the tip of her finger back and forth over him.

“Touch me, Rhea.”

She traced the outline of veins all the way down to the base. She'd always been fascinated by the mat of hair on a man's body. Licking her lips, she ran her fingers through the coarse hair until she cupped him. He arched his back.

“Like that, do you?”

“You have to ask?”

She smiled even wider.

Ace ground his teeth as she explored him with a slow, methodical hand that left him breathless and weak. He still couldn't believe she was doing this. Rhea wasn't the kind of woman to just jump into a man's bed.

She was the kind of woman that a man took home and kept.

“If I'm asleep, don't wake me.” He hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud until he heard her response.

“Pardon?”

Her hand stopped its sweet torture.

What the hell? He'd come this far. He might as well be honest with her. “You have no idea how many times I have closed my eyes and tried to imagine what your hands would feel like on my body, Rhea. Your lips on mine.”

Rhea gently slid her hand up his cock. “Really?”

“Yes.” The word was ragged and it excited her even more than his confession.

She pulled her hand back, then laid her body over his, reveling in the sensation of all that steely masculine flesh under her. He felt good.

Too good.

Her heart hammering, she slowly explored the chiseled outline of his jaw with her tongue. She'd always wanted to taste his jawline. He was one of those men who tended to go a couple of days between shaves. Though she didn't like the look of a beard, she loved the sight of his unkempt whiskers.

He lifted his hips so that the tip of his swollen shaft was pressing against the center of her body. She hissed at the sensation. It was making her even wetter. Hotter.

But she wasn't ready to take him in yet.

Sitting up, she leaned over him and kissed that delectable, taunting mouth of his.

Ace couldn't breathe as her tongue swept against his. Her kiss was fierce, demanding, and it whet his appetites for more.

He could just imagine what she must look like sitting on his stomach as he lay completely naked, tied spread-eagled to the posts of her bed.

"Will you take the blindfold off?"

"If I do that, I might come to my senses and chicken out."

"Forget that then."

She laughed low and seductively. "Tell me what you've dreamed of me doing to you, Ace."

"I'm not sure where to start." He couldn't even begin to catalog all of his fantasies about her.

He felt her sliding off him.

Before he could speak, he felt something soft tickling his hip bone. "What is that?"

"The feather," she said a minute before she swept it over his cock.

Ace groaned in ecstasy.

"Have you ever thought of this?"

"Yes," he confessed. "I've seen you drizzle honey on those biscuits you get whenever Tee brings you lunch from the Cracker Barrel. And I've dreamed of coating your entire body in it and licking it off."

Rhea squirmed at the image in her mind that conjured. "What else?"

"I've dreamed of tasting your ..."

Ace caught himself before he said tits. Women didn't like that word.

"Breasts. Of you sliding them up and down my chest until you go down on me."

"Hmmm."

She stopped tormenting him with the feather. He was afraid he'd offended her until he felt something soft against his cheek. It was her breast. Pulling against the restraints, he opened his lips and turned so that he could taste her swollen nipple as she held herself for him.

Rhea couldn't believe she was doing this and yet she didn't want to stop. The truth was, she'd spent far too many days dreaming of him too. It was why she'd always been so surly around him. She didn't want to be just another conquest to him. She wanted to be different. Important.

You're just another one-night stand, she told herself.

No, this didn't feel like that. Maybe she was lying to herself, but somehow this felt right.

She surrendered herself to his licks until she couldn't stand it anymore. She had to taste him too.

He actually whimpered as she moved away from him.

Rhea took a deep breath. She'd gone too far to stop now and she knew it. There was no way she could go back to just being a woman in the office where he was concerned.

She wanted more than that from him. Much more.

Her hand shaking in apprehension, she pulled her makeshift blindfold off him.

Those searing blue eyes captured and held hers. His eyes blazed with passion and need.

He was splendid.

And he was hers. At least for this afternoon.

Ace licked his lips as he watched her. He'd never been more aroused in his life and he had yet to even touch her.

Her gaze locked to his, he frowned as she left the bed until she pulled her G-string off. Oh, yeah, now that was definitely what he wanted.

She leaned over him and skimmed the bottoms over his chest, teasing him with it until she reached his cock.

Her eyes still on his, she climbed up on the bed, then took him into her mouth.

Ace ground his teeth as pleasure assailed him. Not just from the sensation of her mouth on him, but from the sight of her tasting him.

How many times had he dreamed this? How many times had he glimpsed a peek of her upper thigh in her cube, then got so hard for her that he'd almost wanted to go to the bathroom and jack off just for peace of mind?

Now she was making love to him. And it was better than anything he'd ever imagined.

“Untie me, Rhea. I want to touch you.”

She took him all the way into her mouth and caressed his sack before she pulled back and finally gave in to his wishes.

Ace moaned ever so slightly at finally being free. His muscles protested a bit from all the inactivity.

But he didn't listen to them while he had Rhea in this bed. Grabbing her, he pulled her to his lips for a kiss.

Rhea sank into his arms. There was no other word for it. She felt so incredibly safe and warm here. Cocooned by his power.

She wrapped her body around his, wanting to absorb as much of his strength as she could. He felt wonderful!

She rubbed herself against all his hardness, wanting to feel every inch of his body against hers.

“Wait,” Ace said, his voice raged. “Do you have a condom?”

Did she?

Rhea panicked as she realized what they had almost done. She wasn't on the pill, and to be honest she'd been so hot for him that she was glad he had come to his senses.

Truly she was grateful.

“I'm not sure.” And she wasn't. It'd been a long time since she'd been with a man. “Do you?”

“No,” he groaned. “I don't make it a habit of traveling with them.”

That made her feeleven better. At least he wasn't one of those “on the make” guys who kept one in his wallet “just in case.”

“Hangon, let me go see if I can find one.”

Ace let her up.

Rhea raced to the bathroom and started looking through her drawers.

“Come on,” she said under her breath as she searched. She had to have one somewhere in here.

Please!

She felt his presence an instant before she heard his sharp intake of breath.

“You have the nicest ass I’ve ever seen.”

Rhea backed up out of her cabinet to look up at him. “Thanks.”

He knelt down beside her. “Can I help?”

“Yes. Hopefully there’s one in here someplace.”

“Good. You’re no more prepared for this than I am.” He gave her a scalding kiss before he pulled back and started searching frantically.

Rhea was about to give up before she finally found one. “Eureka!” she shouted in triumph.

The relief on his face was comical. “Oh, thank God.”

Rhea leapt at him. She hit him so hard, she knocked him off-balance and they both tumbled into the hallway.

Ace laughed at her enthusiasm. “How long has it been since you had sex?”

“Let me put it to you this way: it was under the former administration.”

“Ouch.”

“You?”

“Not since Sheila gave me the heave-ho.”

Sheila had been his last girlfriend, who had left him unexpectedly a little over a year ago. “Why did she leave you anyway?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“I called her Rhea while we were having sex.”

His words rang in her ears and she wasn't quite sure she'd heard them correctly. “What?”

He reached up and cupped her face in his hands. “You really don't know how much I've been wanting you, do you?”

No, and all this sounded too good to be real. “Why didn't you ever ask me out?”

“I was afraid you'd say no. At least this way, I had the comfort of believing you didn't find me a complete asshole. If I asked you out and you said no, then I'd know you didn't like me.”

That didn't sound like the Ace she knew so well. “But you're not afraid of anything.”

The look in his eyes seared her. She saw his heart. His soul. Most of all, she saw his sincerity. “That's so

not true, Rhea.”

Her heart soared at his words, but she was still hesitant. She’d been lied to too many times in the past. “Are you feeding me a complete line of bull?”

“Considering the fact that I let you tie me virtually naked to your bed in front of a complete stranger just so I could be with you, what do you think?”

“I think I wish you’d asked me out a long time ago.”

Ace hissed as she bent down and kissed him. This was a dream come true. Deepening his kiss, he reached for the condom and took it from her.

She immediately took it back. “I’ll do it.”

His heart racing, he watched as she tore the package open and pulled it out. The plastic was cold against him as she fit it over his cock and slowly unrolled it down the length of him. It was all he could do not to come just from the sensation of her hands on him.

But he didn’t want this over with anytime soon. He wanted this to last.

His entire body on fire, he trailed his hand up the inside of her silken thigh until he reached the damp curls between her legs. She met his eyes as he slid his fingers down her cleft, carefully separating her folds and touching her for the very first time.

She was beautiful and her slick, soft flesh felt incredible to him. He couldn’t wait to take her.

Biting her lip, she gently rubbed herself against his fingers as he sank one deep inside her body. It was the most incredible moment of his life. Probably because he’d dreamed of touching her more than he’d ever dreamed of any other woman.

It seemed as if he had waited his entire life for this one moment.

He ran his fingers over her, letting her wetness coat his fingers as he imagined what was to come. Of sinking himself deep inside her.

She moved forward. Ace leaned back as she crawled up his body.

Rhea couldn't wait to have him inside her. She straddled his waist, then slid herself back until she felt his hard, probing tip pressing against the part of her that was aching and throbbing most for his touch.

Ace lifted his hips and slid himself in all the way to his hilt.

She cried out in pleasure at the fullness of him inside her. "Ace," she choked, rocking herself against him. It felt so good to have him there.

He gripped her hips as he met her strokes and drove himself even deeper inside her.

Ace watched her in awe as she took control of their pleasure. His little uptight agent was as wild as any woman he'd ever slept with.

No, she was better.

She braced her hands against his chest as she ground herself against him in time to his rapid heartbeat. Leaning his head up, he took her breast into his mouth while he continued to hold her waist.

He licked and teased the taut peak, letting the roughness of it please his tongue.

Rhea couldn't think straight as she felt Ace with every molecule of her body. He was so much more than she had ever thought. He touched her like a man who actually cared for her, and it had been a long, long time since she'd felt that.

They made love furiously until her body couldn't take any more. Crying out, she fell forward onto his chest and let her release claim her. All she could hear was his heart pounding while the scent of him filled her senses.

Ace growled at the sensation of her body grasping his. He quickened his strokes as she continued to climax until he found his own moment of pure bliss.

His breathing ragged, he held her close to his chest where their hearts pounded together while his body spent itself inside her. In all honesty, he didn't want this moment to end.

It was perfect.

The feeling of her head against his chest. Her body molded to his. Her breath tickling his nipple.

If he lived an eternity, he would never know anything better than the feeling of Rhea in his arms.

Rhea closed her eyes as her heart finally slowed to a normal rate. The warmth of his body seeped into hers. In all her days of bantering with Ace, she'd never have guessed he would be like this. So tender and loving after sex.

He didn't seem to be in any hurry to get up, and the floor couldn't be all that comfortable for him.

"So what's on the menu for tomorrow?" he asked.

She laughed at that. "I'm not sure. What are you thinking?"

“I need more condoms.”

“Ugh!” She pushed herself up to look down at him. “Do you ever have anything else on your mind?”

“Food. But that only lasts about as long as it takes me to get a steak.”

She shook her head at him. “Stop playing on the bad stereotype.”

“I am a bad stereotype so long as you’re lying naked on me. How on earth am I supposed to think about anything else?”

As she started to pull away, he stopped her with a fierce, hungry kiss that set every hormone in her body on fire again. This man had a mouth that was pure magic.

He pulled back, but left his hand buried in her hair. “Thank you, Rhea,” he said sincerely, his gaze burning into hers.

“You’re very welcome.”

Reluctantly, she moved off him and headed back into the bathroom for the shower. “Want to join me?”

He gave her a hot once-over. “Pinocchio. There’s no way I can go in there and not have another round. Since there’s no more condoms...”

He was right. “Okay, I’ll just be a minute.”

Turning around, she shut the door and grabbed a towel out of her cabinet.

Rhea was still amazed that she wasn't more self-conscious around him. This wasn't like her and yet she felt so comfortable with him that it was almost terrifying.

She showered quickly, then opened the curtain to find Ace leaning against her bathroom vanity. He was hard again.

“Did you know you can see a perfect outline of your body when you're in there?”

“No.”

He moved forward and nuzzled her neck before he gently licked the sensitive flesh right below her ear. “I can't believe what you do to me,” he breathed in her ear, sending chills over her body.

He kissed her cheek, gave a light grope to her breast, then released her and entered her shower as she left it.

Rhea was so aroused that it was all she could do not to rip open the curtain and pin him to her shower wall.

He was more tempting than any man had a right to be.

But neither one of them needed her to get pregnant.

Forcing herself to dress, Rhea went to her bedroom. By the time she was dressed and had remade the bed, Ace joined her.

“Thinking of new ways to torture me?” he asked as she unfastened the restraints.

She opened her mouth to respond, but the sight of him wet, wearing nothing but a white towel, made all rational thoughts flee.

“You have to stop looking at me like that, Rhea.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m a piece of chocolate you’re dying to taste. It gives me a hard-on every time.”

She could easily see the proof of that statement. “Sorry, but it would help if you didn’t parade yourself around naked in my presence.”

He indicated his clothes, which were on her dresser, as he crossed the room to stand before her. “It’s not exactly my fault.”

“Oh, in that case, I better leave you alone while you put your clothes on.”

“I’d rather you not.”

She nibbled his chin before she pulled away. “If we don’t stop, we’re going to do something that could get us into serious trouble.”

“I know,” he whispered. “Okay, time for clothes.”

Before she could leave the room, his cell phone rang. Ace picked it up and answered it.

“Hey, Joe.” Ace cast an amused look at her, then winked. “No, obviously I’m not tied up since I answered the phone.... Thanks. So what do you need?”

Anxious as to why Joe might be calling, she moved forward, hoping to overhear something.

“Yeah, we’ll be right there.” He hung up.

“What’s going on?”

“Joe just got word that Bender’s sent out a call to his clients. Apparently he’s found an abandoned arsenal of old Soviet weapons, including some nuclear. We need to get to the office for a briefing.”

That succeeded in stifling her renegade passion. “I’ll be waiting by the door.”

Ace nodded and reached for his pants while she left him alone. Today had been a major mistake. He knew it.

As agents, they were supposed to stay detached, especially from each other. But after this morning, he wasn’t feeling detached from Rhea.

Then again, he’d never been detached from her.

In fact, he was feeling extremely possessive. The thought of a bastard like Bender seeing her in that dominatrix outfit was almost enough to send him over the edge.

He didn’t want anyone to see her like that. Anyone but him.

And how could he send her in there with a madman now?

Oh, this wasn't good. He'd never felt like this for another woman.

"Get a grip." He buttoned his pants, then reached for his shirt.

The two of them had a mission and he wasn't about to let one sexual encounter ruin it.

At least he hoped he didn't.

Chapter Four

"I knew it! Look at them. Did I not tell you that all that sniping was because they were seriously attracted to each other?"

Joe looked up at Tee's words to see Rhea and Ace through the two-way mirror of his office. Damn, Tee had been right. They were making goo-goo eyes at each other.

"Shit," he said under his breath.

"What?" Tee asked innocently.

"Work and play don't mix."

Tee gave him an arched look. "Since when?"

"Since we have to send her in practically naked to beat information out of an arm's dealer. Given the way Ace is eyeballing her, I don't think he's going to approve."

“What has that got to do with anything? Ace is a good enough agent to do what he has to.”

“Yeah, right.”

Tee gave Joe an angry frown. “You and I are best friends, and how many times have you sent me into danger?”

“That’s because you’re the Dragon Lady. You’d take the head off anyone dumb enough to cross you.”

She cocked her head at him and spoke pointedly, “I haven’t killed you yet.”

“Not from lack of trying on your part, and personally, I’d rather you kill me than make me sit down and talk to your mom. That woman hates my guts with an unfounded reasoning.”

“You keep talking like that about my mother, Joe Public, and I just might make sure that your automatic car payment gets misrouted.” She looked back at Rhea and Ace. “Trust me. This’ll be fine.”

Now it was Joe’s turn to scoff. “The last time I trusted you, I got three bullets in my back.”

“No, you got shot because you trusted me and then you didn’t listen to what I said and did your own stupid thing.”

He mocked her by screwing up his face and repeating her words back at her.

“That’s it. I’m emailing my mother to come have lunch here tomorrow.”

“No!” Joe snapped, immediately contrite. “She makes me crazy. She won’t even speak English when I’m around and I know she speaks it better than I do.”

“We will finish this later,” Tee snapped before she opened the door to let Ace and Rhea in.

Ace looked a bit sheepish as he came to stand in front of Joe’s desk, while Rhea took a seat in the black leather chair in front of it.

“So how was your morning?” Tee asked as she came to lean against the side of the desk. “Did Beullah do her job?”

Ace nodded. “Oh, yeah. They hog-tied me in a manner to make you proud, Tee.”

“Good. Pity they let you up.”

Ignoring her, Ace looked at Joe. “So what’s the new information?”

Joe shuffled through a couple of folders. “Bender’s on the move. You two are going to have to head out to Germany tonight.”

Both Ace and Rhea gaped.

“What?” Ace asked.

“You heard him,” Tee said. “I already have your flight booked.”

The news went over Ace like sandpaper. “She can’t go in alone. She hasn’t had time to prepare herself yet. Hell, she barely knows what she’s doing.”

“Excuse me?” Rhea asked, her tone extremely offended. “I think I should have beat you harder.”

He glared at her.

“Don’t worry, Ace.” Tee pulled an envelope off Joe’s desk. “You’re going in as Hermann the towel boy.”

“Pardon?”

Joe tossed Ace a passport. “You and Dieter will be right outside the room, listening in case she needs backup. Retter will be on recording detail along with Dagmar. There shouldn’t be any trouble you guys can’t handle. God knows you’ve all had worse.”

Tee handed the entire file to Ace. “You two are technically on vacation for the next few days while Rhea learns her stuff over in Germany. I’ve ordered some training DVDs for you to study so that you can learn how to beat him black-and-blue. Bender that is, not Ace.”

Rhea nodded. “Okay.”

“We don’t know when Bender is going to show up, looking for Ute,” Joe said. “But according to Ute, he always gets feisty right before a big coup, and his latest find definitely qualifies. I figure you guys have three days to a week before he shows himself. What do you think, Ace? You know him better than anyone.”

“You’re right,” he said. “He usually books time with Ute the night before he pulls off his shit. We need to get over there and be ready.”

“Then you two go ahead. Retter is already in Germany and waiting for your orders. The rest of us will follow you over there on a later flight.”

Ace handed Rhea her passport and printout for her plane ticket, then led the way out of Joe’s office.

“You don’t think they suspect anything, do you?” Rhea asked in a hushed tone as soon as they were out of hearing range.

On the way over here, they had decided that it would be business as usual for them so that no one else in the office would know what had happened.

God help them if any of the losers here ever learned they’d had sex. They would tease them to the point they’d have to kill someone.

Ace glanced back over his shoulder. “Joe’s pretty dense. Tee...I don’t know. I swear sometimes that woman can read minds.”

“Oh, don’t say that. That makes me nervous.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “So how do we handle the next few days?”

“Well, normally we’d do deep, intrinsic training...”

Ace couldn’t stop the grin that took over his face. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

She shook her head at his enthusiasm. At times he was simply evil.

But she was glad this was one of those times.

Once they reached Germany , they spent night and day together. Rhea was stunned at how comfortable

she became around Ace while she was completely naked. It was liberating to have no sense of being body conscious around him.

How could she when he seemed to prefer her that way?

“I’m supposed to be training with you tied up,” she said as Ace secured her hands, which were tied together to her headboard.

“Turnabout is fair play.”

She supposed it was.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he took one ankle carefully in his hand.

He kissed the sole of her foot.

Rhea moaned as he moved to lick her toes and to torment them one by one until she was squirming.

“I’m having my way with you, princess.” He tied her foot to the bedpost.

After he had the other leg secured, Ace stood back. He’d never thought about tying someone up as being particularly sexy, but he had to admit the sight of her tied and waiting for him turned him on a lot more than he would ever have guessed.

He slid his briefs off, then pouted slightly. “I should have tied you down on your back.”

“Too late.”

“Not necessarily.” Grinning at her, Ace slid himself slowly up under her.

Rhea hissed at the feeling of him there. She was completely open and exposed to his every desire.

She dipped her head down to kiss him while he slid his hands down her back to gently cup her butt and press her hips to his. She could feel him growing hard against her stomach.

“Hmmm,” he breathed, rubbing himself against her. “What have I found?”

Rhea sucked her breath in sharply as his rough fingers gently prodded her clit.

“You do know, I’m getting entirely too attached to you, Ace?”

“Yeah,” he said as he slid one long, lean finger inside her. “And I know that I should get up, get dressed, and go to my room.”

But he didn’t move to get up and that thrilled her most of all.

“Why aren’t you leaving?” she asked.

“Honestly?”

She nodded.

“I’m desperate for you, Rhea.” He pulled his hand away from her, then brushed the hair back from her face so that he could look at her. “I’ve been desperate to taste your body since the day you first came into the office, stumbled, and fell, flashing me those little pink panties you had on under your skirt.”

Her face flushed with heat. “You saw that?”

“Oh, yeah, and I’ve dreamed of nothing but peeling those pink panties off of you ever since.”

“And now that you have?”

“I want the right to keep peeling them off you anytime you make me hot.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “That is without a doubt the most unromantic thing I have ever heard, and if I wasn’t tied down, I’d leave.”

He laughed low in his throat as his hand returned to stroke her between her legs. “Then it’s a good thing I tied you down first, huh?”

It was hard to think straight while he touched her like this. While his fingers stroked and circled her.

“Tell me what you want, Rhea.”

“I want you inside me.”

Ace gave her a fierce kiss, then moved his lips slowly down her body to her breasts, where he took his time teasing her. Then lower and lower while her body burned for him. He licked his way to her thigh, then nipped her hip as he slid completely out from under her.

Rhea tried to look over her shoulder but couldn’t see anything.

She felt the bed dip with his weight as he moved to lean over her.

He brushed the hair back from her neck before he nibbled at her earlobe. She shook all over as his tongue teased her ear. His breath scorched her.

He slid his hand around her hip, to sink it deep in her fold before he entered her.

Rhea gasped as pleasure assaulted her.

Ace was blinded by the sensation of her warm, wet heat. He could lose himself inside her forever.

But today was their last day to play. Tomorrow Bender would show himself.

One of them could die. It wasn't something agents gave much thought to, but as he rode her slowly, that fear finally found him.

What if something went wrong?

“Ace? Are you okay?”

He placed a kiss to her cheek. “I'm fine, baby.”

Rhea moaned as his fingers stroked her while he thrust deep inside her. Still, she could tell something was different about him in spite of what he said. There was a hesitancy to his touch. A reservation.

But she didn't have long to contemplate that before her orgasm claimed her.

Ace held her tight, his fingers working their magic until the very last tremor had been coaxed out of her.

A few heartbeats later she felt him tense as he too joined her in bliss.

Rhea lay there with his weight pleasantly crushing her while he untied her hands.

“I’m going to miss our ‘training’ sessions.”

“I’ll bet you will,” she said with a laugh.

He moved to the side of her so that she could roll over and snuggle close.

Tenderly, he brushed the hair back from her face.

Rhea sighed. “I wish we could go back and do the last few days over.”

“Yeah, me too. But you know, this doesn’t have to end... does it?”

Rhea swallowed at his question. “I don’t know, Ace. A relationship is hard enough. But between two agents...”

“Dagmar and Dieter make it work.”

That was true. The two of them were married, and to Rhea’s knowledge they’d never had so much as a hiccup in their relationship.

He took her hand in his and moved it to his lips so that he could nibble her palm. “Can we at least try?”

She smiled at him. What woman could say no to that look? “Okay.”

Ace returned her smile before he kissed her on the brow. But in the back of his mind, he couldn't shake the sensation that something was going to go seriously wrong tomorrow.

Chapter Five

Ace was in position, waiting with Dieter while Rhea dressed herself for the arrival of Bender. It had taken some doing to get the Pussy Cat Club to “hire” Rhea, but after a nice long talk with the German authorities, the owner decided it would be in her best interest to let Rhea do her job.

Now Rhea was in a locker room that the dominatrixes used to garb themselves in their work attire while Ace and Dieter were outside in the blood red hallway that led to all the “service” rooms.

“Are you all right, Krux?” Dieter asked as they stacked towels onto a cart so that to any passersby, they would look like two regular workers restocking the towels for the clients.

Dieter was a tall, extremely muscular, blond German native. He'd been recruited by Joe a little over a year ago and since then had been quite an asset to their team. Having been born and bred in Europe, Dieter knew every back hole and dive in six countries. Better still, he had questionable associates who often leaked vital information to them.

Ace could feel a tic working in his jaw. “No. I don't like sending her in there alone with a psycho.”

“Relax. But I know what you mean. Dagmar never listens to me either. She is”—he paused as if searching for the foreign English word—“stubborn. Many times she goes when she should stay. But Rhea is more cautious. She knows what to do. I don't think we have anything to worry over with that one.”

Yeah, but Ace really hated the thought of her tying Bender down. The beating part he could live with. It was the “other” unknown variables that had his stomach knotted.

“Excuse me?” an extremely well-built, leather-clad mistress said in German as she came into the hallway from a room three doors down. “What is it you two do? You need to be working at getting these towels to the room and not dawdling with idle chatter.”

“Ja, we’re working,” Dieter responded, knowing that Ace’s German was flawless, but accented enough to give him away as a foreigner.

“You,” the mistress said, indicating Dieter. “I need you standing by room five after Herr Bender leaves.”

Ace’s heart stopped beating.

“Why?” Dieter asked.

She sighed heavily. “He always leaves his woman a mess. We will need to get Bettie to our doctor as soon as he goes, and you look more than strong enough to carry her.”

“Pardon?” Ace asked as his sight turned dim.

“Ja, he is not a good man, but he pays us well.”

“But I thought he was the one who liked to be tied up,” Dieter said.

She laughed as if the very idea amused her. “Who told you such? Nein, he would never allow anyone else to tie him up.” She cracked the small riding crop in her hand at them. “Schnell, schnell. He will be here momentarily.”

Neither of them moved until after she’d entered a room on the left.

“We were fed bullshit,” Ace said from between clenched teeth.

He grabbed his cell phone from his pocket and buzzed Retter, who was in the building across the street with the recording equipment. “We have a problem, Retter. My informer lied. Bender doesn’t get beaten. He does the beating.”

“What?”

Ace clenched the phone so hard his hand was shaking. “You heard me. What do we do?”

He could hear Joe in the background telling Retter what to do after Retter had filled him in on what was happening. “It’s too late to call this off without blowing our covers. Rhea will just have to go through it.”

Ace saw red. “Hell, no.”

He hung up while Retter started to yell at him.

“What did he say?” Dieter asked.

“Something I didn’t want to hear. I’m pulling Rhea out.”

“If Retter said—”

Ace cut Dieter’s words off with a staggering punch that rendered him unconscious. Ace grabbed the huge bear of a man and shoved him into the towel closet, covered him with towels, then shut and locked the door.

God help him, Dieter would beat the shit out him later.

But that was later.

Right now he had a damsel who was about to get seriously distressed.

Rhea was checking out her stockings in the mirror when the door to her dressing room opened. She frowned as she saw Ace.

By the look on his face, she could tell something was wrong. “What’s up?”

“I’m getting you out of here.”

“Why?”

“Bender is a psycho and he is going to beat you. Not the other way around.”

Rhea went pale at this disclosure. “What did Retter say?”

“I don’t give a shit what he said. Retter is an idiot and I’m not going to send you in there so that fat bastard can mangle you. This is my case and I’m—”

“This is my job, Ace. It’s what I do.”

Ace cursed in frustration. “Will no one listen to reason?”

Narrowing her gaze at him, she put her hands on her hips to let him know that she thought he was the one being unreasonable. “Ace, we have to nail this bastard. If he confesses—”

“And if the bitch lied about who gets beaten, doesn’t it stand to reason that she lied about the confession bit as well?”

“Maybe she didn’t. We have to get this guy off the street, and if this is the way, then this is the way.”

That didn’t make a bit of sense to him. “Fine, I’ll kill him and we—”

“We’re not assassins, Ace. We work by law and order.”

His fury roiled through him at that. “You don’t know Tee very well, do you? I hate to be the messenger, Rhea, but Tee is a cold-blooded killer.”

“Oh, please.”

Rhea started for the door.

Unable to stand by and watch her be hurt, Ace ran for her. He grabbed her before she could stop him.

“What are you doing?”

He pulled the handcuffs out of his backpocket that he was supposed to reserve for Bender and slapped them over her wrists.

“Ace!” She tried to squirm out from his hold.

He took the scarf from her neck and used it to gag her. "I'm sorry, Rhea. I can't let you do this. You're right. Someone has to go in there. But by God, it won't be you."

Picking her up, he carried her to a locker and set her inside even while she fought against him.

Rhea was furious. Ace could see it plainly in her brown eyes as he shut the door and locked it. But it was better she be pissed than dead.

"All right, Krux," he said to himself under his breath. "It's time to do the nasty."

Personally, he'd rather be dead, but what was a little dignity compared to Rhea's life?

"Well, it worked for Tim Curry." Ace surveyed himself with a critical eye. He definitely wouldn't win a beauty pageant. With any luck, Bender might even be half-blind.

Or half-drunk.

It was dark in the rooms... maybe Bender wouldn't notice much.

Maybe.

"I am so fired," he muttered. But it would be worth it.

He hoped.

Pulling his garter belt straight, he headed down the hallway to the room where Bender should be waiting.

Sure enough, the man was there. He had on a long, black PVC coat with buckles and straps that looked strangely close to a straitjacket. At least the man did have on a pair of glasses. Maybe he would be blind as a bat.

“Who are you?” Bender asked in German, curling his lip as he surveyed Ace with a disgusted look.

“Latex... Bettie.” Ace tried not to cringe at the latter as he kept his voice high and singsongy in an effort to mimic some kind of European accent while he spoke German. Hell, he hadn’t been born in Hollywood for nothing.

He would just remember that this was to save Rhea and all the other innocent victims Bender intended to prey upon.

Bender cocked his head. “You don’t look like Bettie Page.”

Ace put his hands on his hips and feigned indignation. “And you don’t look like Brad Pitt, but notice I’m not complaining.”

Bender gave him an arched glare. “You are uppity. I like that in a woman. Now show me your tits.”

Yeah, right.

“How about first we see yours?”

Before Bender could leave or call for help, Ace seized him, ripped his coat, and pulled it down on his arms so that he was bound and unable to move.

“Ah,” Ace said with a tsk in his faked accent. “You have not been working out, Herr Bender. What do you do that you are so weak in the arms?”

“See here, I—”

“Shh,” Ace said, cutting him off. “Bettie will take care of you, Schatz.” Provided “Bettie” didn’t toss her cookies in revulsion. “Tell her what you want done to you.”

Hopefully it involved a bullwhip and this guy’s ass on the floor.

Bender shouted furiously, “Let me go!”

“Nein, nein. You have paid for the hour of domination and an hour you will get. Now tell Bettie what she wants to hear.”

Rhea was ready to choke the life out of Ace by the time the door to her locker was opened.

She looked out to see Retter, who whistled low.

“Nice outfit, Rhea.”

She glared at him as he removed her gag.

“Where the hell is he?” she snapped.

“Up shit creek.”

“Good. Now give me the paddle so I can beat him with it.”

Retter laughed as he unlocked the cuffs.

Rhea rubbed her sore wrists as she continued to glare at Retter. At six-four, he was every bit as handsome as Ace, but nowhere near to dying as Ace was at the moment.

Just wait until she got her hands on him.

“He blew it, didn’t he?” she asked.

Retter set the cuffs aside. “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean yes and no?”

“I think your boyfriend has quite a future as a dominatrix.”

Rhea frowned, but Retter didn’t elaborate. Instead, he handed her his jacket, then led her out into the hallway where there were several German agents along with Joe and members of the CIA and Interpol.

“What’s going on here?” she asked Joe. “Where’s Ace?”

“In custody.”

Her stomach clenched. “Custody? Whose? For what?”

“Ours,” Retter said. “For being the ugliest transvestite in the history of humanity. I swear, we ought to be allowed to kill Bender for sheer, blind stupidity alone.”

Rhea was even more confused. “What?”

“Ace went in as you, or rather as Latex Bettie,” Joe explained.

Her heart stopped beating at the thought of Ace trying to pose as a woman. Yeah, right! Ace would never pass as a female. He was far too masculine.

“Oh, no. Did Bender get away?”

“No,” Joe said. “We got him, along with a full confession.”

Rhea gaped. “How?”

Retter let out a deep, evil laugh. “Latex Bettie wields a mean whip. He had Bender spilling more guts than a kosher butcher.”

“So why is Ace in custody then?” Rhea asked.

“Mostly for pissing me off by not following orders,” Joe said in a surly tone. “He’s lucky I don’t let the German authorities keep him.”

Retter gave a crooked grin. “I can arrange that, if you want.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Can I see him?” Rhea asked.

“Trust me,” Retter said. “You don’t want to see him. Think Frank-N-Furter gonebad .Real bad.”

Why was it every time Retter spoke, he only confused her more. “Frank-N-Furter?”

“Rocky Horror Picture Show.” He shuddered.

“C’mon,” Joe said, leading her away from Retter. “I have Ace in a room down here.”

She followed Joe down the garish hallway to a small room where Dieter sat with a cold pack held to his jaw while Dagmar stroked his hair.

Dieter glared at them. “I’m going to kill him, Joe.”

“I know, Dieter, hang around and I might authorize it.”

“If you don’t,” Dagmar snapped, “I will. How dare he hit myDieter. I want his testicles cut off.”

Rhea had a bad feeling Dagmar meant testicles, but in the mood the Czech woman was in, Rhea wasn’t about to correct her.

Joe opened another door in the rear of the room, which led to one of the theme rooms. It was a garish red, gauzy place that looked even tackier under the bright fluorescent lights that were only turned on for

cleaning.

Ace sat on a bench with his back to her. His hands were cuffed behind him.

And he looked awful.

“Oh, good grief,” Rhea said as she surveyed the mess that was Ace dressed in a PVC teddy and fishnets. The black wig on his head did nothing for his features, which were outlined in grotesque, overdone makeup. He looked like a cross between Gloria Swanson and Bozo the clown. “If Bender thought for one minute that you were a woman, I am seriously offended on behalf of every member of my gender.”

Ace turned around to see her. “You okay?”

“Her?” Joe asked disgustedly. “It’s your own ass you should be worried about, Krux.”

Still, Ace’s concern for her made her strangely weepy.

Ace’s intense blue gaze never left hers. “Before you fire me, shoot me, or hand me over to German custody, could you give me a few minutes alone with her, Joe?”

“Sure.” He walked out and shut the door.

Part of Rhea wanted to kill Ace for what he’d done. “Why did you do this, Ace?”

He frowned at her. “Don’t you know?”

“No. I can appreciate the fact that you didn’t want me hurt, but this is what I do. It’s what we do. You can’t just go off half-cocked and pull a stunt like this. What if Bender had gotten away?”

Ace let out a tired breath. "Look, Rhea, I never wanted to feel like this about anyone. But there was no way on earth I could have stood there and let that bastard hit you. I don't care if they lock me up for the rest of eternity, I will never allow another man to hurt the woman I love. So I figured it was either this or I kill him."

Rhea couldn't breathe as she heard those words. It couldn't be true. "You don't love me, Ace. How could you?"

He looked aghast at her. "Look at me, Rhea. Do you think anything other than love would ever have me in this godforsaken outfit?"

Tears welled in her eyes as she closed the distance between them. "Really?"

"Yes, baby, really. You're all I've ever wanted."

How could any woman ever hold that against a man? Cupping his face in her hands, Rhea kissed him soundly. She broke off the kiss a few seconds later, laughing.

"What?"

"You have no idea how confusing it is to kiss a man dressed as a woman."

He grimaced at that. "I don't know how you wear this stuff. The hose alone are killing me."

Laughing, she pulled the wig off his head and unlocked the cuffs.

Ace seized her then and held her close as his tongue explored every inch of her mouth. Rhea sighed at the kiss and held him tight.

She laughed again. "You look so ugly as a woman."

He joined her laughter. "Yeah. This stuff definitely looks better on you."

The door to the room swung open.

"Ugh!" Joe snapped. "I'm blind and repulsed."

Rhea tried to move away, but Ace held her close.

"What do you want, Joe?" he asked gruffly.

"I only wanted to remind you that this room is wired and we're still recording everything the two of you are saying."

"Did you hear?" Rhea asked.

"Everyword, and I have to say that in all the years I've known Ace, I've never known him to say that to another living woman, except for his mother." He shook his head at them. "Fine, Ace. Since we got Bender, I'm going to let you off this time. But if you ever do this stunt again..."

"I know. You'll cut off my testicles."

Rhea laughed at Ace's imitation of Dagmar.

"Exactly. Now as you two were. Just don't forget you have a debriefing in an hour and a plane to catch

in three.” Joe started out of the room.

“Hey, Joe,” Ace called.

Joe paused.

“Thanks,bud. I owe you.”

Joe nodded,then quietly left.

Ace gave her a devilish grin. “So, we have an hour...”

Cocking her head with attitude, Rhea stepped back and seized a whip.

“What are you doing?”

She cracked the whip near him. “I want to make an honest woman of you, Ace.”

“Huh?”

“Get on your knees and propose.”

Ace laughed. “You’re not serious?”

“Are you?”

He sobered. "Yeah. For the first time in my life, I am." Without hesitating, he got down on his knees. "Rhea, will you marry me?"

"I dunno. Now that you're proposing, I really have to think about this. . . . Transvestites really aren't my thing." She walked over to him and brushed his hair back from his forehead. "Do you promise to never again interfere with my job?"

"I can only promise that I will do my best. I know you're capable, I do. But you have to understand that emotions don't always think before they act."

That was true enough. Rhea doubted if she could ever stand by and let him be hurt either. She would have done the same exact thing had their roles been reversed. "Okay, we'll take it on a case-by-case basis."

"Thank you."

Rhea shuddered as one of his false eyelashes came free. "Can you at least promise me that you'll never, ever wear that outfit again?"

"Definitely."

She nodded. "Then fine. I can marry you."

Ace grinned and rose to his feet. He lifted her up in his arms and headed for the door.

Before he could open it, Rhea stopped him. "By the way, just for the sake of clarification, I will be the one in the wedding dress, correct?"

"No doubt about it. Now I have to go get out of this outfit before we hit debriefing."

Rhea gave him a playful look. "So does this mean I get to see you naked?"

"Yes, ma'am, it certainly does."

The End.